

Rape and Social Death
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Abstract:

Rape that does not involve life-threatening physical violence, is committed by someone known to the victim, and is not reported to law enforcement (called, here, *commonplace rape*) raises two questions: “Why didn’t she fight back or run away?” and “Why didn’t she say anything at the time?” Recently, research on “tonic immobility,” based on animal predation studies, has provided a physiological explanation for experiences of immobilization during sexual assault. The juxtaposition of animal predation with commonplace sexual assault raises the question: How is it that a response reserved, in animals, for lethal, no-way-out scenarios is present in modes of violation where the victim does not report fear of death or extreme physical harm? Neither does this research help explain why women fail to report. This philosophical exploration of the meaning of tonic immobility in sexual assault helps to justify the juxtaposition of life-or-death scenarios with less-than-life-threatening violation, and sheds light on the reason for women’s silence after sexual assault. Rape is accompanied by deep historical meanings that can be encapsulated in the notion of “social death,” associated in the U.S. with colonial conquest, enslavement, and impoverishment. The specter of social death haunts commonplace rape, producing life or death responses.

One: Prelude

One cool morning, at dawn, I made my way from the house, through the field, to our poultry coop. Before I opened the door to the fenced run where the duck flock was housed at night, I already felt something was wrong. Our dog had barked fiercely and run down toward the coop from the house half an hour before, but I had not thought much about it until I heard the quiet.

Ducks are exuberant creatures. Usually the excited quacking starts as they hear me exit the house some fifty yards away. As I approach, it crescendos, and often enough they throw themselves up against the wire in anticipation of being let out for the day. When I open the door,

I am met by an exhilarated wave of wings. Truth be told, while there are many reasons to keep ducks on a farm, it is their particular duck enthusiasm that makes me grateful to live in close proximity to them.

On that morning there was no quacking. No one was scrabbling at the door to get out. ‘Hey, where are my ducks?’ I called as I opened the door. I saw a number of ducks standing, barely swaying back and forth, in the near darkness. ‘What is wrong with you guys?’ I asked as I started setting up their feeder. ‘Are you sick?’ Then I looked closer. They all stood in a row, eyes closed. I looked around, ‘What happened?’ ‘Were you poisoned?’

Then I saw the two dead ones, so oddly positioned. Their bodies lay next to one another in perfect parallel as if they had been laid out by a coroner. Oddest of all, the dead ducks’ heads were under the wall of the chicken coop which borders the wire run. It took me a few more moments of confused questioning, looking back and forth between the dead ones and the frozen-in-place ones in the barely-there light, before I realized that a predator had entered the run by tunneling under the coop, then tried to drag the dead ducks by their heads back under when it left.

Weasel.

The dog, I now understood, had interrupted its attack. Weasels are known for killing entire flocks, going from bird to bird until every last one is down, then dragging off the bodies to cache for later.

There were my ducks, immobilized, as if waiting for the weasel to come back and finish the job. There was no need to dart in to catch each one through a wild flurry of noise and wings as I normally would, I simply reached down and picked them up where they stood. There was a

single bite wound on each one, at the back of the head or neck. The apparently barely-living creatures offered no resistance when I carried them, two by two, up to the house.

I penned the ducks up in the garage with food and water and expected they would either die of their injuries, or spring back from their stunned state to duck-life in a few hours. I was wrong. They did not eat or drink. They did not move or make a sound. Realizing that their necks were sore from the wounds, I put their food up on a little platform so they did not have to bend to reach it and filled a water bucket to the top so they could just dip their beaks in and drink. But still they stood, hour after hour, as if they could not find their way back from the other side of the line between life and death.

When the drake died two days later, I believed it was from dehydration, not bite wounds. The wounds were significant, but they were not *mortal* injuries. I started pulling each duck out twice a day, pumping water and electrolytes into them with a syringe and spooning a duck-feed gruel into their bills. I bathed them each day, to see if that most happy and necessary of duck activities would bring them back to life. Slowly, they started to ease their way back over the line, showed some interest in food and water and sound and movement, but it was months before they were themselves again.

The only conclusion I can draw is that, having survived a near-death trauma, they had been pulled, indeed, over the line (psychologically--spiritually?). Getting back was hard. It took time. It took care from another creature.

Two: Introduction

When a rape comes to public attention there are two questions that arise relentlessly, especially when the assault does not involve life-threatening physical violence, when it is committed by someone who is known to the victim, and when the victim does not report it—in other words, when the sexual assault is of the most common variety. I will call this *commonplace* sexual assault.¹ The first question is ‘Why didn’t you fight back or run away?’ The second question is ‘Why didn’t you tell someone?’² However genuine they are for the inquirer, these questions animate an atmosphere of suspicion around the victim and her story. Perhaps worse, especially when she ‘just froze,’ they tap into the victim’s own sources of shame. In other words, these questions are often the very questions she poses to herself in acts of psychological self-condemnation. Research shows that women who report ‘freezing’ during a sexual assault are more prone to self-blame and guilt after the assault (Marx et. al. 2008: 83), are more likely to face condemnation by others, and more likely to suffer from PTSD or other forms of psychological distress after the violation (83-84).

The purpose of this essay is to provide an interpretive framework in which to understand the ‘freeze response’ during sexual assault, and women’s silence after sexual assault. It is a framework that I hope might help to alleviate some of the harms associated with commonplace rape. I will suggest that the two questions, ‘Why did you not fight back or run away?’ and ‘Why did you not tell someone?’ have a common answer, which can be found in the deep historical connection between rape and social death.

¹ I am concerned in this essay, almost exclusively, with the rape of women by men, which is the dominant form of rape in our society. While the meanings I discuss here may well apply to both cis and trans women—there are undoubtedly other meanings at work, as well, in the epidemic levels of sexual violence against trans women that are not captured here. I do not discuss the rape of men or children in this essay, though I think some of the meanings discussed here will be closely related to meanings that accrue in those cases.

² See Dewan, ‘Why women can take years to come forward with sexual assault allegations.’

Recent developments in the understanding of the physiology of freeze responses, more technically, tonic immobility (TI),³ do little, I suggest, to satisfy a rape survivor's need for meaning. This research tells us that the response is physiological and involuntary, that it is caused by the perception of a mortal threat under conditions of perceived entrapment (Marx, et. al. 2008: 74). What it does not explain is the nature or meaning of the fear and its attendant perceptions.

For that, we need to understand these physiological responses as embedded in deeply sedimented historical and cultural meanings that attach to rape, which can be encapsulated in the notion of 'social death.' I take up and develop some feminist work on the theme of rape and social death, taking this work further than it has previously gone. I claim that the meaning of rape as social death appears on the scene as a *lived, affective awareness* that is animated, for the most part, on a pre-reflective level. It is so confusing and unsettling precisely because it does its work—the production of life-or-death fear in a physically non-lethal situation—beneath the level of conscious belief and cognition.

As the social meaning of rape does that work, it also wreaks havoc with what phenomenologists call *lived time*. The temporality of trauma has received a great deal of attention, as trauma theorists argue that 'people lose their sense of time and become trapped in the moment, without a sense of past, present, or future' (Van der Kolk, 2014: 69). But here I think beyond this basic insight, with Native American trauma theorists, to thematize the role of deep historical meanings in the disruption of temporal life during and after trauma—a theme that is absent from mainstream trauma theory. This richer and more nuanced account of the temporal

³ The term 'freeze response' in popular parlance includes both what scientist studying animal defense behavior call a 'freeze response' and what they call 'tonic immobility,' which are strictly differentiated in the scientific literature (see below). Here I am using the popular term, later I will differentiate the two.

disturbance at the heart of traumatic experience associated with rape gives us a way to contextualize and disclose the meaning of the fear that gives rise to the physiological responses that render many rape victims immobile during an assault, while also helping to explain their silence afterwards.

Three: Freeze

Freezing is a brain-based response to detecting danger, especially a predator's attack... Freezing occurs when the amygdala—a crucial structure in the brain's fear circuitry—detects an attack and signals the brainstem to inhibit movement. It happens in a flash, automatically and beyond conscious control.

James W. Hopper

Recent empirical research purports to have made some headway in providing an answer to the first question that emerges after a sexual assault becomes public: 'Why did she not fight or run?' Animal behavior researchers have long studied 'tonic immobility,' as part of the flight-fight-freeze range of reactions animals exhibit during predatory attacks. While in popular parlance the 'freeze' response is not differentiated from tonic immobility, in the scientific literature these are two distinct phenomena, both part of what is called the 'defense cascade,' the stages of self-protection an animal passes through during a life-or-death attack. For the scientist, the 'freeze' response is something that occurs at the first moment of danger and prepares the animal to fight or flee.⁴ Tonic immobility, on the other hand, comes at the end of the 'defense

⁴ The merging of tonic immobility with the freeze response under the moniker of 'freezing' in popular parlance leads to some confusion, since the freeze response is often experienced at the first moment of danger, and may be experienced by humans in many less-than-lethal situations. This 'get-ready-to-respond' moment might happen when one experiences a relatively minor danger, being yelled at by a stranger on the street, or having a neighbor

cascade' when possibilities for escape or self-defense are perceived to have closed, and death appears imminent (Marx et. al. 2008). This research 'has resulted in the widespread acceptance of ...the fear hypothesis,' Marx, et. al. report, which 'stipulates that fear on the part of prey is an integral antecedent condition' to TI (2008: 77). The more intense the fear, the more likely TI will result, when (and only when) it is accompanied by the perception of restraint or entrapment (78). This research has been deployed to offer an explanation for sexual assault victims' experiences of immobilization (Möller et. al. 2017, Marx et. al. 2008). Discussions of 'freeze' responses now appear in popular media treatments of sexual violence. Translating directly from animal studies, the subtitle of one such piece, by trauma therapist Devon MacDermott proclaims, 'Neurobiology explains why many women can't just "tell him to stop"' (2018). It is clear that researchers are trying to give women who have experienced involuntary immobilization during a sexual assault, and the people who surround them, a way of accounting for their response.

Certainly there are instances where the comparison between life-or-death predation events and rape is absolutely appropriate, where lethal physical violence or the threat of it under conditions of entrapment or restraint is the core reality of the assault—at the extreme are rape-murders (or attempted rape-murders).⁵ But we know that the most common forms of sexual violation involve less severe, often much less severe forms of coercion, incapacitation and manipulation.

The nature and frequency of commonplace rape have recently inspired Germaine Greer to

make an aggressively rude remark, for example. It may also be experienced at the beginning of a sexual assault or incidence of sexual harassment. Think of a squirrel freezing for a moment in the path of an oncoming car, but then scrambling to safety. This is different than the tonic immobility reported by many victims of rape or sexual assault, which is experienced by humans much less frequently, and is usually associated with extreme trauma events (being trapped in a car after a severe accident, for example).

⁵ For a brilliant philosophical account of just such an attempted rape-murder, see Susan Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*, but also see her article 'Why I Spoke Out about One Rape but Stayed Silent about Another,' comparing the situation of commonplace rape and rape-murder. Cathy Winkler describes and analyzes her experience of near lethal rape in *Rape as Social Murder*.

propose that the legal penalties for rape be vastly reduced, and that women's word be taken as sufficient for conviction (2018: 28). While Greer's too-flippant tone is misplaced, on my view, her claim that 'rape is not a rare and catastrophic event or an extraordinary act carried out by monsters; from the banal to the bestial rape is part of the tissue of everyday life,' is certainly right when we consider commonplace rape (3). She suggests that the psychological trauma from such 'banal rape' results more from the aftermath (especially the trauma of reporting) than from the rape itself (57). Yet, and in seeming contradiction to this statement, Greer sites 'a startling Swedish study,' which 'shows just how normal it is for victims of sexual assault to experience a temporary paralysis that keeps them from fighting back or screaming.' In the study, 'seventy percent of the women said they experienced significant "tonic immobility," or involuntary paralysis during the attack' (42). Greer does not attempt to explain how it is that such a supposedly 'banal' event would have such a dramatic physiological effect, essentially short-circuiting the victim's subjective capacities. Other researchers confirm the experience of tonic immobility in commonplace rape (Möller et. al.: 2017).

Tonic immobility research on animals explains how this happens physiologically, but it fails to give an account that satisfies our need for meaning. What explanation would enable a victim of commonplace rape to connect the responses of an animal attacked by a predator intending to kill and eat it to her own experience? What would explain the *physiological similarity* of these responses, given the *dissimilarity* of the situations? As cognitive scientist Karin Roelofs suggests, 'despite the potential relevance of freezing for human stress-coping, its phenomenology and neurobiological underpinnings remain largely unexplored in humans' (Roelofs 2017: 1). She calls for a research agenda that encourages 'translational animal-human research' (6). Similarly, Marx et. al. call for 'the development of an explanatory framework for

human TI' (2008: 85). Comparing animals to humans, they suggest that we cannot simply apply the same framework to both. 'For instance, although fear is a primitive emotional response, whether or not organisms experience fear—and more importantly what they do about it—may depend on the perceived meaning or significance of the situation' (81-82). They suspect that 'advanced verbal-cognitive capacities can broaden the effects of various contexts and stimuli to occasion and influence the perception of restraint and inescapability' (82). Noting that the *perceptions* that give rise to mortal fear and a sense of entrapment are 'strongly influenced by preexisting memory networks' (82), they call for precisely the kind of inquiry I am engaged in here.

Moreover, this new research does not help at all with the second question: Why do women so often remain silent about sexual violation, for so long? Yet, a close examination discloses the link between the two questions. If 'the perceived meaning and significance of the situation' can be uncovered by tracing the historical connection between rape and social death, as I propose here, then both questions will have the same answer. If the fear of social death is intense enough to elicit a life-or-death physiological response, it can also explain a decades-long silence.

Four: A Commonplace Rape

I have spent a good deal of my life thinking and teaching about sexual violence, spent years when I was young advocating for women who had experienced intimate partner and/or sexual violence. But it is as a victim of commonplace rape that I find myself questioning the equation between these violations and animal predation.

In a New York Times op-ed published in 2018, during the Kavanaugh hearings, I told

this story publicly for the first time:

I was gang raped by my sister's boyfriend and his friends at what was supposed to be a party. I was 19, a sophomore in college. They were in their 30s, graduate students at another institution. My sister's boyfriend, whom I considered a trusted friend, and his roommates had invited us to their home. They immediately started pushing shots of tequila on us ('hurry up,' 'drink more'). I had so little experience with alcohol at that point, I had no idea how fast I could be incapacitated.

When we were drunk enough, my sister was escorted away to sleep and I remember the image of her departure and the fear that cut like a knife through the fog. My memories are broken and choppy after that. They are mostly still photographs, even today in sharp focus. At certain points there is a short video burned into my brain; these memories are surrounded by periods of blackness. I don't know everything that happened that night. I know enough...

When I pulled my sister out of her boyfriend's bed and insisted we leave immediately, the sun was just coming up. We found a bus stop. She was my closest friend, but I didn't breathe a word about having been raped on that bus ride, or when we got home, or for years after that, to her or anyone else. Why? Because shame was a living, aggressive, willful, enormous thing, set loose inside my body. In the next days and weeks, I waged an internal battle to contain it. This battle was so viscerally urgent, so physical in its immediacy, reporting the rape to the police didn't even occur to me.

I never forgot what those men did to me, but I forced the memories down into a tiny, locked compartment. 'This will not matter,' I swore to myself over and over. My life was not derailed. Silence enabled that victory. Had I been dealing with the misogyny, with the outraged, aggressive sympathy for men that erupts when women disclose sexual assault in a hostile epistemic world — I knew this intuitively even at 19 — the shame would have been fed and grown. It would have taken me down.

Was I afraid they would kill me? The possibility did not even occur to me. Did I 'freeze' during those moments of consciousness, and especially later, when the alcohol wore off enough so that I stayed conscious? Yes.

Years later, when a martial arts instructor told me, 'fear, defined physiologically, is restricted breathing,' I remembered what it felt like to be locked in, *to my own body*. I remembered the moment I broke through the immobilized state. My body, and especially its

vocal apparatus,⁶ had become heavy and inert—my subjective capacities were unable to gain expression in my physical being. It took a Herculean, desperate effort to force my voice/breath through my stone body to the outside. The frantic, thundering ‘NO!’ that exploded inside me, squeezed under extreme pressure through a pin-hole, sounded like a tiny child’s whimper when it came out, the voice of a stranger I did not recognize. That thin ‘no’ stopped the assault. As my stone body became flesh again, it was flooded with the shame-horror that is the common affective aftermath of rape.

I kept a near-complete 35-year-long silence.

Silence. Fear. Shame. What is their relation? *Shame was what I was afraid of*, before I could even grasp what had happened as an event, the shame was monstrous.⁷ I moved about my life as if everything were normal, while the internal battle was so viscerally urgent, so physical in its immediacy—I felt with the certainty of a cataleptic impression that it was a battle for the meaning of my existence

Silence was not weakness. It was an expression of determination. It was the one weapon I had against the humiliation. It was a way *to deflate the social meaning of rape*. The force of that percipient meaning was close to overwhelming. I set my will against it. I won.

Fear was central to the assault and the aftermath of the assault, but I wasn’t afraid of literal, physical death. I was afraid of the annihilation of the meaning of my life as I understood and claimed it. Writing these words nearly 4 decades later, the shame perks up, threatens to come back to life, its aspiration to take over the meaning of everything stirs. I say no, again.

⁶ Marx et. al. note that ‘suppressed vocal behavior’ is a characteristic of tonic immobility (2008: 75).

⁷ For a much more extensive discussion of shame in feminine identity formation, see my ‘Femininity, Shame and Redemption’ (2018).

Five: Annihilation

*Why suffer through the annihilation if it's not going to matter?*⁸

Dr. Christine Blasey-Ford

In September of 2018, Christine Blasey-Ford, a psychology professor and researcher, testified before the US Senate Judiciary Committee and millions watching on television that Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted her at a gathering of high school students more than three decades earlier. It was called ‘the most riveting and consequential congressional testimony in years,’⁹ though Kavanaugh was confirmed a few days later by a Senate vote of 50-48. After President Trump suggested that if the assault had been ‘as bad as she says,’ then Blasey-Ford or her parents would have reported it to the police at the time, a new hashtag emerged to accompany the #MeToo movement: #WhyIDidn’tReport.¹⁰

The other question, ‘why did she not fight or run?’ had, in Blasey-Ford’s case, been preempted by her testimony that she was pinned to the bed and Kavanaugh was on top of her holding her down. As soon as she was able, she *did* run away. She also reported fearing that Kavanaugh would accidentally suffocate her, since he had his hand over her mouth to prevent her from screaming. In that respect, the fear of physical death that Blasey-Ford experienced goes beyond what is typical of a commonplace sexual violation—though the setting, the presence of alcohol, the fact that Blasey-Ford and Kavanaugh knew one another and the complicity of Kavanaugh’s friend in the assault are all typical.

In an interview with the Washington Post, more than thirty years after she was assaulted, Blasey-Ford explained her reluctance to come forward unless it would change the outcome of

⁸ See Anna North, 2018.

⁹ See Dylan Scott, 2018.

¹⁰ See Mahita Gajanan, 2018.

Kavanaugh's confirmation hearing, 'Why suffer through the annihilation if it is not going to matter?'¹¹ She worried about the cost to her family, the loss of privacy and the possibility of renewed physical danger.¹² But looking ahead to all of this, she implied that these concrete dimensions of annihilation could be faced if it *mattered*. This suggests another meaning is carried in the fear of annihilation, and persists long after, even decades after the physical violation has ended.

If the annihilation *mattered* (was in the interest of some larger purpose), it would not be an annihilation in the deepest sense. When facing the disruption of one's wished-for life, even when facing physical death, human beings are comforted by the possibility of meaning. One can even face literal dying, one thinks, if it *means something*. If this annihilation did not matter, then it would be a double annihilation—the annihilation of Blasey-Ford's social world, of her and her family's physical and emotional well-being, and the annihilation of the *meaning* of her action. Her existence itself as tied to the ability to act, might mean nothing.

There is a term for this sort of annihilation that is well-established, though it has only rarely been applied to the trauma of rape. The term is 'social death.' Not only may it help us give a meaningful account of a life-or-death physiological response experienced in a non-lethal situation, it may also explain why the silence that follows that violation can last a lifetime. I suggest that the prospect of social death, in a human life, is so grave that it can account for physiological responses that are otherwise associated with imminent physical death. Not only

¹¹ See Sweetland Edwards, 2018.

¹² See Maggie Astor, 2018. Again, in this case, because of the extreme power of the men Blasey-Ford challenged (Kavanaugh, Trump, Republican Senators), because of the explicit death threats that ensued, I am not suggesting that fear of physical death played no part in Blasey-Ford's pronouncement. It is clearly the case, however, that the reference to 'annihilation' is perfectly understandable in this case even were there no fear of physical assault or death.

that, but the fear of social death persists after the assault, is productive of women's silence, and often lasts a lifetime.

Six: Living Legacies

Rape is the experience of social death.

Cathy Winkler

There are three references to social death in the feminist literature on rape that I am aware of, though the connection is, even in these works, not always explicit and never fully developed. It is explicit in the work of anthropologist Cathy Winkler, who describes herself as a 'victim-investigator' of the meaning of rape. She claims that 'rape is the experience of social death' (1991: 14) but does not provide an account of what that means, or how rape comes to have that meaning. Susan Brison notes that the trauma of rape 'severs the sustaining connection between the self and the rest of humanity' (2003: 40), which describes a key element of social death. And Catherine MacKinnon describes what amounts to social death when she considers rape in genocide; with 'the use of sex to destroy a people,' the meaning of the act is the destruction of 'the idea and meaning of [the group] within and between those whose relationships compose it' (2006: 225). In a stunning move, she extrapolates from genocidal rape to everyday rape, arguing that 'what is done in genocides is routinely done to women everywhere everyday on the basis of their sex' (225). In other words, rape is the destruction of women *as such*. My work here fills out and extends the work of these earlier feminist thinkers, making explicit the fear of social death at the heart of rape and providing a more developed explanation for what that means.

It also leads to some important conclusions about the *temporal* structure of women's existence in relation to sexual trauma. In this and the next section of the paper I am inspired by

and thinking with Megan Burke. Burke describes their work as ‘not...about acts of sexual violence or the experience of surviving assault or rape,’ but rather concerned with sexual domination more broadly, and how ‘feminine existence is denied an experience of time as a dynamic and open gestalt’ (2019: 11). My work here is explicitly and directly about the experience of sexual assault and its aftermath. Nevertheless, Burke’s exploration of ‘how collective and individual pasts constitute how gender and time are lived as an embodied inheritance of and in the service of racialized sexual domination’ is in the background (and sometimes in the foreground) of what I explore here (11).

I understand the notion of social death, when considered in relation to rape, to include a set of historical meanings which attach to heterosexual sex, sometimes also when it is consensual but always when it is not. These meanings include: *degradation, despoliation, disposal, and acquisition* (the establishment, reinforcement or renewal of the property relation).¹³ This is to say, along with the historian Riva Seigel, that ‘sex between men and women is part of the semiotics of status between men and women,’ so that sexual violation will have ‘dignitary meanings and distributive consequences’ (2004: 22).

Acts of sexual use and sexual violation produce a generalized condition of shame that I call shame-status.¹⁴ Shame is generalized when it is not contained in its attachment to a specific event or action but expands to enshroud one’s whole existence. This abject status, in turn, is productive of an elevated status for the one with the power to inflict social death on others.

To understand these claims, we have to consider specific histories. The notion of ‘social death’ has been used in historical and ethical studies to explain the essential harm of slavery (Patterson 1982), solitary confinement (Guenther 2013), ‘racialized rightlessness’ (Cacho 2012)

¹³ While I see these as the most prominent meanings, this is not meant to be an exhaustive list.

¹⁴ Mann, Bonnie. 2018. Femininity, Shame and Redemption. *Hypatia*, 33:3, 402-417.

and genocide (Card 2003). Though these studies are not focused on sexual violation, my investigation requires that we attend to how various modalities of historical injustice are entangled with and accomplished (in part) through sexual violation. Here, I want to briefly describe three that are most salient in the context in which I live and work, the United States: colonial conquest and its aftermath, enslavement and its aftermath, and impoverishment and its aftermath. These modes of domination have been and remain, in each case, entangled with gender subordination. The analysis hinges on recognizing that sexual violence was, historically, *integral* to genocide, enslavement, and class abjection. One cannot understand the living legacy of rape in the U.S. context without attending to such histories, since they both inflect and intensify the meanings of rape in different ways for different women, even as they leave a generalized legacy of social death as the ‘ghost’ which ‘haunts’ contemporary experiences of rape for those living downstream from this history.

In reality, all of us who live in the United States live downstream from this history, albeit differently (with very different levels of historical awareness or ignorance, with these histories offering us very different levels of entitlement or disenfranchisement). The meaning of sexual violation is always unfolding in the wake¹⁵ of these histories, no matter who the particular players are and how inflected a particular assault is with individual meanings as well. Rape is part of the degradation of women in the context of sexism generally, including between men and women of the same race and class—but its efficacy as a tool of degradation is dependent on and entangled with the *whole interpretive horizon* in which it takes place, which encompasses these historic forms of degradation. It is important to recall these histories, then, when attempting to give an account of the meanings that attach to rape.

¹⁵ This is the term used by Christina Sharpe to describe ‘the ways our individual lives are always swept up in the wake and produced and determined, though not absolutely, by the afterlives of slavery’ (2016: 8).

Enslavement entails the social murder of those who are enslaved. In his landmark comparative study of enslavement, Orlando Patterson famously defined social death as a generalized status of dishonor involving a 'raw, human sense of debasement inherent in having no being except as an expression of another's being' (1982: 78). The 'other' here is the master, whose authority and status are secured by holding the slave in a state of social death. 'What was universal in the master/slave relationship,' he writes, 'was the strong sense of honor the experience of mastership generated' (11), 'the honor of the master was enhanced by the subjection of the slave' (79).

Social death entails the destruction of significant relationships with others. The legacy of slavery is carried on through the mass incarceration of Black people in the United States (Alexander, 2010). In Lisa Guenther's phenomenological exploration of prison life, she describes what it means to be cut off from the relationships with others that constitute one's social world. the 'feeling of living death' experienced by inmates in solitary confinement (2013: xvii), when one is 'dead to the rest of society' (xx). 'To be socially dead,' she writes, 'is to be deprived of the network of social relations...that would otherwise support, protect, and give meaning to one's precarious life as an individual,' it is to be 'blocked from forming a meaningful relationship, not only to others in the present but also to the heritage of others in the past and the legacy of the future beyond one's own finite, individual being (xxi).'

The history of slavery is always also a history of sexual violation. 'To the slave masters,' Darlene Clark Hines writes, black women were 'remunerative slave breeders and vulnerable sexual objects' (1994: 4), or as McDaniels-Wilson puts it, they were 'identified as a resource for the sexual exploits of the slave-owning class' (2013: 194). Sexual violation perpetrated by white men was a vehicle for the abjection of slave women, the destruction of the bonds between black

women and men, and the creation of mother/child relations that were utterly vulnerable to being torn apart on the decision of the white master alone. The sexual violation of enslaved black women also served to break any possible alliance between slaves and ‘white plantation mistresses’ who ‘were equally powerless in the face of their husband’s brutality,’ but could (and often did) exercise power in myriad, often cruel ways toward ‘the abused slave women’ (Hines, 4). One way the legacy of slavery lives on is in the suspicion that surrounds black women’s sexuality (12-13). This legacy is re-animated among white people when a black woman makes a sexual assault public, while for the victim such attacks ‘echo powerfully across the generations back to the enslavement of women and girls of African descent’ (McDaniels-Wilson, 191), affectively recalling ‘violence, sexual trauma, exploitation and evidence of forced breeding’ (193), as well as ‘the terror of separation from family’ (194).

Enslavement cuts a person off from her past, whether in her lifetime or prior to it, from the time before a generalized dishonored status was in place. She is also cut off from a future in which she might imagine another status either for herself or her heirs. Patterson calls this ‘natal alienation’ (1982: 5), an ‘inability to make any claims of birth or pass on such claims,’ which is imbued with a ‘fear of separation’ from loved ones in the present (6).

While mainstream feminist trauma theory thematizes the victim being cut off from her past, my claim is that this cutting off from a *personal* past is in part the effect of the reanimation of a *historical* past that bursts in to displace and replace it. In other words, the ‘cutting off’ from the past that social death entails, is the *animation* of a past when such ‘cuts’ defined and destroyed a people whose history is key to the legacy in which one stands. Living legacies are *booby-trapped* with historical meanings.

This is essentially what is claimed by theorists of trauma who work in the legacy of genocide against Native American peoples. Duran and Duran point out that for native communities, the separation ‘not only from loved family members but also the Earth, another close relative’ (1995: 31) through displacement, genocide and the kidnapping and confinement of Native children in boarding schools, has resulted in what they call ‘intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder’ (30). According to Baveheart-Jordan and DeBruyn, any effort to address current issues in native American communities has to come with an understanding of the background condition of ‘historical trauma and subsequent grief’ related to ‘traumatic “cut-offs” due to death, boarding school placement, alcoholism and displacement and separation of extended family networks’ (1995: 359). But it is precisely these temporal cut-offs that create the pressure points between the past, present and the future that allow the past to explode into the present and future in association with traumatic events.

Feminists who are centrally concerned with the history and living legacy of colonial conquest show that this history is deeply structured by sexual violation and cannot be understood apart from it. Writing in the South African context, Coetzee and Du Toit argue that ‘racial inferiorization in the colonial conquest,’ is achieved in part through ‘the imposition of sexual shame and associated dehumanization’ (2018: 216). In the American context, Andrea Smith claims in her essay ‘Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide,’ that the ideology of conquest entails a structuring definition of women of the debased group as *rapable* (2007: 423). She notes that ‘if sexual violence is not simply a tool of patriarchy but also a tool of colonialism and racism, then entire communities of color are the victims of sexual violence,’ so that ‘when a Native woman suffers abuse this is an attack on her identity as a woman and an attack on her identity as Native’ (422). ‘The use of sex to destroy a people,’ to adapt MacKinnon’s phrase, is

so deeply embedded in this history, that sexual violation of those living downstream from this history will pull it into the present, recharging it (2006: 219). Because, as Sarah Deer notes, ‘rape played such a significant role in past attempts to destroy indigenous nations’ (2015: xvi), and this is a ‘history of violence reaching back centuries’ (x), ‘native women experience the trauma of rape as an enduring violence that spans generations’ (xi). The notion of ‘historical trauma’ helps to capture the compressed volatility of the past as it erupts into the present. The ‘effects of systematic genocide are currently being felt’ (1995: 6), Duran and Duran explain. They introduce the terms ‘soul wound’ (10), and ‘intergenerational post-traumatic stress disorder’ (30), as ways of naming the way the past explodes into the present for those living downstream of the history of conquest.

Another site (which crosses and overlaps with the two already discussed) where we find U.S. history booby trapped by sexual violence is in the production and reproduction of class stratification. As historian Riva Siegel puts it in ‘A Short History of Sexual Harassment,’ ‘the social history, social structure, and social meaning of the practice of sexual harassment’ (2004: 16) is part of ‘the political economy of heterosexuality’ (6). In this economy, ‘sex between men and women is part of the *semiotics of status* between men and women’ because it is burdened by a history in which ‘women...have been required to exchange sexual services for material survival’ (MacKinnon, 1979; cited in Siegel, 2004: 9).

While Siegel’s analysis focuses on how economic dependency engenders sexual vulnerability (2004: 6), and further, on how that vulnerability is the precondition for sexual harassment as a wide-spread, centuries-old social practice (1), it is also important to note how sexual violation engenders, affirms or reproduces a degraded economic status not only between social classes as they are commonly understood, but also within the ‘same’ class between men

and women. The ‘semiotics of status’ at work in sexual violation is productive of and a living reminder of *who owes what to whom*, including what sorts of free labor women owe to men in the context of heterosexuality.

If we try to summarize the meanings that circulate in relation to these three lines of history (enslavement, colonization and impoverishment), we are left with these general categories: *degradation, despoliation, disposal, and acquisition*. These are the meanings that infuse and infiltrate sexual violation and sexual use in a heterosexualized world built on these histories, so that social death is portended in acts of sexual violence.

‘Degradation’ names that aspect of rape that is always and in an immediate sense, the enactment of status itself—where the degradation of the status of the victim is at the same time and in the same act productive of the elevated status of the rapist as *sovereign*. Patterson notes that, in enslavement, it is important for the master to demonstrate that he is ‘capable of exercising, with impunity, total power’ over the abjected person (1). This demonstration of sovereignty is both the affirmation of and the enactment of status differentiation. Sometimes it is punishment for being ‘uppity’ or ‘arrogant’ or ‘a bitch’ or generally stepping out of one’s ‘place’—so in that sense it is *restorative* of a status hierarchy that is threatened or shaken. When a woman who has been raped becomes a ‘slut’ while the man who rapes her becomes a ‘player’ this meaning is at work—this shows that the line between rape and consensual heterosexual sex, when it is understood as an act of degradation/elevation by the man, his peer group or the broader community, is blurred.

‘Despoliation’ is rape enacted as a practice of ruination, especially in contexts in which the status of women is connected to notions of purity, or to the honor of the men in the family, or where the rape victim might be considered to enter the event with an elevated status which is

then destroyed. This is rape used to bring someone down a peg, even when/if their previously elevated status is affirmed culturally. When women defined socially as virgins are intentionally targeted for rape, the meaning of rape as despoliation is animated. 'Disposal' names the closely related meaning of rape as an act which ends in the victim being garbage, refuse, in her own eyes or the eyes of her community, such that ejection from her own life-world is the logical consequence. These two meanings are so closely tied together that they can only be analytically separated. Despoliation is the meaning of the act itself, disposal is what follows as a consequence. However, in some cases, the victim is considered of such low status already that despoliation is not needed and rape is itself the enactment of disposal (rapes and rape-murders of sex workers fit this last category).

Acquisition names the relation of rape to the establishment or reaffirmation of the victim's status as property and the rapist's status as owner. When rape is part of the enslavement of a people it has this meaning (among others). But it also has this meaning (differently and with vastly different status and 'dignitary' consequences) in traditional marriage. In marriage, the meaning of sexual violation and consensual heterosexual sex overlap and blur. While sex often means acquisition in relation to important social institutions like slavery and marriage, it also means a violation of those institutions when sex or rape are read as acts of theft, i.e., as violations of institutionally established property relations between men.

For the most part, these meanings overlap and interweave. They are analytically but not necessarily practically separable, and they all portend, if they do not immediately enact, social death. How these meanings accrue to a particular experience of rape will depend on where the person who is raped stands in relation to the rapist and where both stand downstream of these histories. It is important to emphasize that this is not precisely a linear relation, in other words,

that it will not always be predictable how and in relation to whom particular meanings are animated. Sometimes, on the other hand, it will be all too predictable and the animation of historical meaning may even be part of the consciously intended purpose of the violation. The relation between lived experience and historical meanings is often messy, even opaque, but sometimes devastatingly clear.

What is certain is that the past is getting into the present as the *spectre* of social death. The past does not stay in the past but ruptures through to the present, the present looks to a future that is already possessed by the past. All of which points to the need for an account of the *temporality* that undergirds the looming threat of social death in the aftermath of commonplace rape.

Seven: Time

The threat of rape is efficacious as a disciplinary force...because of its temporal structure: spectrality... Feminine existence is a gendered existence that is haunted by rape.

Megan Burke (2019, 205-106)

Temporality, for me in this context, refers to the way that time is *lived*.

Phenomenologists distinguish between time that can be measured, or ‘clock time’ (sometimes called ‘objective time’), and time as it is experienced—the same amount of clock time, for example, might be experienced as flashing by or slowing to an unbearable pace, depending on the circumstances of my living it. *Lived time* refers to the embodied awareness I have of being *in* time, without that awareness having to be consciously reflected on or cognitively grasped. It is a

thick notion, that encompasses at once my moment-to-moment experience of time, my lived relation to my own past and future, and my lived relation to histories and futures that extend beyond my individual life. Lived time is not bound to linearity, like clock time—an entanglement of or even infusion of past, present and future is common in phenomena like anticipation or regret. Temporality is so entangled with existence itself that it is sometimes considered co-extensive with it.

Because my focus is on commonplace rape, I am concerned with the *anticipation or fear of social death*. Fear is forward-looking. Even if the complex meanings that give rise to it are forged in the past, and renewed in the present, its temporality is futural. It is *affective*, not cognitive, fundamentally aesthetic and visceral, sometimes wholly closed-off from conscious awareness and explicit articulation, sometimes not. The anticipation that produces the mortal fear that occasions the freeze response physiologically and silence socially does not require that it be fulfilled to have these effects. A more technical way of saying this (again, following Burke) is that I'm focused on the fear of social death as *a gendered temporal structure of pre-reflective life*. But this forward-looking fear is fed by the past that anchors it. What it anticipates is what has already been enacted. The past meaning of rape as social death is present as a living legacy *portended* in the event of rape. It structures the victim's visceral anticipation of what comes next. In other words, the past pushes in to occupy the future, to finish it off, to make it what has already happened.

We might say that rape is 'haunted' by the past and define 'haunting', with Avery Gordon, as 'one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive nature is denied (as in free labor or national security)'

(1997: xvi). These meanings renew themselves *through* the contemporary social practice of rape—creating ‘an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely’ (xvi). Using Raymond William’s famous phrase, Gordon calls ‘haunting’ a ‘structure of feeling,’ that ‘does not “have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before[it] exert[s] palpable pressures”’ (201).

Trauma theorists and philosophers of trauma have long suggested that the very temporal structure of experience, in fact the temporality of the *subject* of experience, is reconfigured by traumatic events. The relation of past, present and future break their narrative line—they scramble (Brison, 2003: 444). But in mainstream trauma theory, this breaking of the narrative line of individual experience is not connected to the re-animation of historical meanings.

In order to draw this connection more clearly, I want to further consider a notion of time that has already been noted in Burke’s work, but is also found in that of Jennifer McWeeny. Both thinkers draw on Merleau-Ponty’s account of ‘anonymity.’ McWeeny argues that ‘the body carries in its subjectivity a layer of “anonymity,” of all the meanings that have been lived by others and that therefore shape the contours of the present world’ (2017: 248-249). Burke puts it this way: ‘Anonymity is a generative past that shapes but that is invisible in the present,’ and, ‘the presence of a subject is bound to, indeed is generated by a temporality that cannot be consciously perceived’ (2019: 98). This means that history exists *in the body* so that the subject is historical not only in the sense of standing in the stream of history, but in the sense that history runs through the subject in a way that ‘elides direct perception’ (Burke, 99; see also McWeeny, 250-252).

McWeeny’s radical reading of Beauvoir’s account of heterosexual initiation suggests that the very pre-reflective structure of subjectivity is altered by the ‘anonymous social meanings’

that attach to heterosexual sex and create ruptures in the lived temporality of the girl/subject (2017). Burke further develops the insight gleaned from clinical experience that traumatic experience ‘destroys or threatens the structures of the world that give life meaning and secure one’s existential and physical integrity’ (2019: 118). She argues that feminine existence itself is haunted by the fear of sexual violation.

On the one hand, we are talking about a general feature of human existence. The ‘historicity’ of a subject is the temporal structure of the subject-world relation that enables everyday existence. On the other hand, we are talking about a highly specified and differentiated feature of human existence for particular groups. As feminists adopt and adapt Merleau-Ponty’s insight, they recognize ‘how subjects embody ideological gendered temporalities’ (Burke, 2019: 98) that impact not only the ‘content of consciousness, but also... its pre-reflective structure’ (McWeeny, 2017, 265). In other words, the feminist version of anonymity has to recognize that ‘the structure of subjectivity’ is historically variable (266). However, as Burke notes, despite its variability, it is often experienced as ‘recalcitrant,’ as ‘difficult to interrupt,’ (133) and is ‘lived as heaviness’ (142).

Burke gives us an account of the future-oriented nature of the *fear* of sexual violation: ‘Spectrality refers to the way the present is marked by...that which is not yet here, by that which may arrive’ (2019: 107), she writes. The specter of rape as what might happen haunts women’s existence in a way that ‘produces deep, existential fear’ (112) and generates ‘practices of vigilance’ among women and girls (133).

But rape, for so many of us, has already happened. It could always happen again, of course—and I have experienced lesser forms of sexual violation over the course of my life as most women have—but I have to say that my own relation to sexual violation is not primarily

anticipatory—an achievement that was won already in my 20s after martial arts and self-defense training, and that solidifies with age. Yet the ‘residual promise of a woman’s non-existence at the heart of her existence...that one’s future might be impossible’ (117) that Burke describes, strikes me as something that hangs around long after a rape is over. This, I think, explains the visceral, life-or-death level commitment that so many women have *to silence* in relation to sexual violation.

Eight: Silence

What is the fear in commonplace rape a fear of? Why would a commonplace rape, absent lethal violence, evoke the kind of fear that, for humans and other animals, otherwise comes at the doorway to physical death? How is the fear that is experienced in a commonplace rape carried forward into the future, so that decades of silence follow? These are all questions about time.

Feminist accounts of ‘anonymity’ give us a way of thinking about how the past gets into the present through sexual violation. If rape means degradation, despoliation, disposal or possession in the arc of history in which one lives, if these meanings are carried in the body, invisible, imperceptible, barely sensed in ‘normal times,’ if moments of trauma animate these meanings as the specter of social death—then the fear of social death must be so significant, in a human life, that it is capable of generating life-or-death physiological responses. The tonic immobility that so many women experience, also during commonplace rape, must be the pre-reflective, viscerally lived, physiological response to the fear of annihilation in the form of social death that is animated in the historical body. If social death is not the immediate consequence of rape, though, the fear of it persists after the rape, as a portentous, if suspended, possibility.

In my own case, as I write this, I am grateful to my younger self for having had the good sense and instinct for self-preservation that resulted in that decades-long silence. I am as consciously certain today as I was viscerally, unreflectively certain then, that going public with that story of rape would have meant annihilation in the form of social death—or would have meant, at least, a much more protracted, much more traumatizing fight for my social life.

Silence is a solitary weapon in a thin arsenal, the only one I had at the time to defend myself from the pressurized shame-horror that signaled the possibility of social-death as the end of the meaning of a life I cherished. I shielded the meanings of this wanted-life by not allowing the event of the sexual violation to appear in my world at all. Living my way into those wanted-meanings depended on silence, was nourished by silence—even as I lived out loud. Silence was, then, the very thing that made way for a voice that would say something else, address other things, attend otherwise. Silence was not a passivity, but the active thwarting of the advent of finished meaning, swaddled in hostility too lethal to survive.

The point I am making here is both inspired by and has resonances with Martina Ferrari's work on what she calls *deep silence*. Ferrari's claim that, often, 'silences...are eviscerated of their complexity and ambiguity, read as instances of complacency and or submission' (2020: 124), provides an important caution. She suggests that we too often respond to silence in a way that 'eviscerates deep silences of their depth and complexity, flattening them to a transparent, mono-dimensional phenomenon indexing ontological absence' (125). If we ever become capable of responding to women's silences about sexual assault not as symptoms of damage, but as a defense of the wanted-meanings of one's life, we will have taken real steps toward understanding the relationship between rape and social death.

Nine: In summary

There is certainly a disjunct between events of predation like the weasel attack that sent my ducks to the threshold of death's door, and what I call here 'commonplace rape.' Yet the space between these two kinds of events narrows when we understand the existential depth and power of the threat of social death in human life. It narrows when we consider how a gendered pre-reflective temporality is constituted historically, so that the past gets into the present, when we consider how it occupies and closes the future at crucial moments in relation to experiences which mean degradation, despoliation, disposal or acquisition. These meanings are renewed and refreshed through sexual violation. Understanding the fear of rape, and the fear that persists after rape, as a fear of social death rather than physical death, allows us to explain why such a dramatic death-close physiological response is a frequent dimension of commonplace rape, and why decades-long silences often follow.

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