

**SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
IN THE LITERATURE OF CANADIAN WOMEN**

**SHATTERING THE SILENCE:  
SEXUAL VIOLENCE  
IN THE LITERATURE OF CANADIAN WOMEN**

By

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## ABSTRACT

Women's experiences of sexual violence have long been excluded from the public realm by a patriarchal code of silence which facilitates the very violence which it publicly ignores. Recently, Canadian women writers such as Karen Augustine, Beatrice Culleton, Susan Glickman, Beth Goobie, Joy Kogawa, and Libby Scheier have begun the process of shattering the silence, as they attempt, through their literature, to describe, define and recover from the violence perpetrated against women. It is essential for criticism like this thesis to join with the literature in the feminist project of identifying, discussing, and, ultimately, undercutting the unified suppressing forces of literary, sexual and political hierarchies -- for to leave the literature unstudied only reinforces the misrepresentations and attitudes which it opposes. This thesis, through chapters which investigate theoretical, technical, racial and sexual issues, illuminates the emerging feminist discourse on sexual violence. The Canadian women writers studied in this paper write from various feminist theoretical foundations, employ a fresh style and tone, use metaphors to elucidate their experiences, grapple with the trap of the confessional structure, follow the *écriture féminine* style to "write the raped body," confront the racist and heterosexist elements of sexual assault, and struggle to avoid being subsumed back into the dominant patriarchal discourse. In writing about sexual violence, these women bravely disobey the patriarchal edicts of silence and, through this challenge, threaten the continuation of the code which they defy.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Shattering the Silence: Introduction and Theory

"'Rape isn't something you talk about'"  
(Culleton 188)

With these words, April Raintree encapsulates the patriarchal code of silence on the issue of sexual violence. Although rape and other forms of sexual assault occur with startling violence and frequency, they remain topics "protected" within a shroud of secrecy. For women to speak or, even more daring, to write about these (largely) misogynistic acts<sup>1</sup> is to contravene strictly enforced patriarchal edicts. Toni McNaron and Yarrow Morgan, editors of a book on incest, explain the reasons underlying the rule of silence:

We believe that there is not a taboo against incest [and, I would add, sexual violence in general], merely against speaking about it. And the reason for this taboo...is clear: if we begin to speak of [sexual violence], we may realize its place as a training ground for female children [and adults] to regard themselves as inferior objects to be used by men....By beginning to speak about it, we begin to threaten its continued, unacknowledged presence. (Alcoff and Gray 262)

Recently, feminist writers have begun this process of shattering the silence. They have begun to insist that their voices be heard, that their representations and interpretations of sexual violence be given the attention, credibility and respect that they deserve. The women writing this "literature of sexual violence,"<sup>2</sup> according to their own testimony, find their work to be helpful and therapeutic; the writing can help them reclaim power, identity and self-expression through language, all of which have been stolen from them

by the perpetrators of the violence. But this literature is not "just" personal therapy. These women writers view what they do as "public work," "political action," "revolutionary writing," as writing, for the time being, for the countless women who are still silenced (Ford 42).

There are many ways in which this female-authored literature of sexual violence differs from its masculine counterpart. A brief look at two "classical" male-authored representations of sexual abuse will serve to highlight the polarity between the male and female literary perspectives on this issue. For although the female voice on rape has been suppressed, male writers have been writing for centuries about sexual violence with relative impunity. Not surprisingly, the result is that literary history has recorded the male perspective on rape and other forms of sexual abuse: the male concept of what constitutes this abuse, the male diagnoses of the effect of the abuse, male judgements on whose "story" of the abuse is believed, to name just a few gender-biased issues. As Higgins and Silver explain,

representations of rape after [and, I would argue, during] the event are almost always framed by a masculine perspective premised on men's fantasies about female sexuality and their fears of false accusation, as well as their codified access to and possession of women's bodies. (2)

The forms that these male-authored representations of violence take are countless, containing varying degrees of explicitness and serving various male-oriented purposes. Some representations, like those of the Marquis de Sade, are depicted graphically, for titillating effect, as the author plays without guilt or conscience in what Susanne Kappeler terms the "literary sanctuary" (133). Authors of these depictions use the claim of artistic freedom to assert their "right" to write in this pornographic manner.

Other assaults, like the rape in "Leda and the Swan," are depicted less graphically, but exhibit no less of a male-biased viewpoint. In Yeats's poem, the rapist



swan is a heroic figure, a "feathered glory" (6) with "great wings" (1); even the description "brute blood of the air" (12) has a majestic ring. The rape scene is convoluted by the male poet, described not as an attack, but as a gallant seduction. Zeus "caresse[s]" (2) Leda's thighs; Leda is "laid" (7), not held down, in the swan's "white rush" (7). The image of Zeus "hold[ing] her helpless breast upon his breast" (4) intertwines the two in a lovers' embrace. The repetition of "breast" draws the two together in similarity; it seems almost as if the swan is Leda's protector, not attacker, that she is "helpless" against the world, not against him. The "romance" of this encounter is heightened, as Leda surrenders in stereotypically "feminine" fashion. Her thighs loosen, and she is "so caught up" (11) -- the implication being that she has been "swept off her feet" by the glorious swan, not assaulted by him. Indeed, the poem asks rhetorically, how could she deny him? The questions asked in stanza two are silently answered by the tone and movement of the poem: of *course* her fingers cannot push away this "feathered glory" (6); of *course* her body, although being raped, cannot help but feel Zeus's "strange heart beating" (8).

The third stanza deals briefly with the "outcome" of the rape, that is, the fall of Troy and the death of Agamemnon. Classical history has deemed that these events constitute what is important, or significant, about Zeus's rape of Leda, not Leda's experience and emotions during and after the attack. Perhaps, then, Yeats's poem could be commended for depicting the woman's response and allotting the historical "result" only three lines. However, any praise that is deserved must be significantly qualified by the immensely narrow-minded, male-oriented prejudice evident in Yeats's imaginings of Leda. This prejudice goes so far as to suggest that Leda *gains* something from this encounter, that she in fact *wins* power, and perhaps knowledge, from being raped. To the feminist reader, this suggestion is ignorant and repugnant, not to

mention doubtful. For the poem's final image, both physical and symbolic, of the swan's "indifferent" (14) beak letting Leda "drop" (14) throws her acquisition of these "rewards" into question. Furthermore, even if Leda obtained *some* power by mothering several historically significant children of Zeus, this does not mean that she either deserved or desired to be, or enjoyed being, raped by him, as the romantic portrayal of the "seduction" intimates. What the poem does not consider are the victim's *losses*-- her loss of power, security and innocence. Clearly, this male poet's attempt to present the woman's perspective on the experience of rape must fail in the eyes of feminist readers.

Another level of representation of sexual violence occurs in E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, in which the alleged assault on Adela Quested is, at least initially, not described at all. While this absence of representation eliminates the problem of the voyeuristically titillating properties of a more graphic depiction, it creates other difficulties for feminist readers. For although Forster thus avoids exploiting a description of sexual violence, he proceeds to exploit the non-description purposefully. He utilizes this gap, the alleged sexual assault and the confusion and upheaval surrounding it, as a metaphor for the inscrutability of India; the author himself explains that he "tried to show that India is an unexplainable muddle by introducing an unexplained muddle" (Furbank 125). Taking advantage of a descriptive account of sexual violence is surely reprehensible, but exploiting the disbelief and the confusion Adela feels (as a result both of her experience and of the turmoil surrounding her accusation) and appropriating these elements of the situation for the author's use as a textual metaphor, is no less exploitative of and insensitive to the woman's experience of sexual assault. To feminists, who encourage society to place the onus of proof on the male suspect's shoulders rather than on the woman's (where it has always rested), who

insist that the female victim be given as much control as possible over what happens after the assault on her has occurred, this confusion, disbelief and upheaval are not things to be toyed with in the "literary sanctuary."

Furthermore, even when this gap in description is filled in, when Adela relates what she believes happened to her in the Marabar cave, Forster's treatment of her experience is no less male-biased. As Higgins and Silver comment in their introduction to *Rape and Representation*,

Even when the rape [or sexual assault] does not disappear, the naturalization of patriarchal thinking, institutions, and plots has profound effects: just as victims of rape often end up blaming themselves, the texts [male-authored texts containing sexual violence against women]...present women telling stories that echo or ventriloquize definitions of rape that obliterate what might have been radically different perceptions. (3)

For by the time Adela does tell her "story," she has become the patriarchal model of the disbelieved female accuser. Forster has already, earlier in the novel, depicted Adela as being sexually repressed (thus it becomes all the more likely, in the eyes of some, that she could have entirely hallucinated the attack she describes). But by the time she actually describes the incident in the cave, Adela is stereotypically hysterical, has erratic mood swings and constantly changes her mind about what happened in the cave. She is believed only by the British elite -- in other words, by those who have an interest in oppressing the native Indians, of whom the alleged perpetrator, Dr. Aziz, is one. Thus, the reader's sympathy, along with that of the positively portrayed British characters in the novel, Mr. Fielding and Mrs. Moore, is directed at the "wrongly accused" man, who functions as the symbol of an oppressed race.

But although Aziz does not seem capable of sexually attacking Adela, and surely does not deserve the hostility and unfair persecution he receives from the ruling elite,

neither does Adela warrant the disrespect, disbelief and antipathy accorded her by Fielding, Mrs. Moore, and, most likely, the unresisting reader, whom Forster encourages towards this attitude. The author only allows Adela compassion when she "admits" her own delusions: "'Ronny, he's innocent; I made an awful mistake'" (Forster 207). Only after these intermittent "realizations" is she relieved of the punishing echo sounding in her head, which has been causing her severe distress. She also occasionally believes the patriarchal myth that what occurred "was her crime" (Forster 200), and that it has rendered her "unworthy of Ronny" (Forster 200); she voices much more concern for her fiancé than for herself, asking, "'What can I do to make things easier for you? It's you who matter'" (Forster 203). Considering the staunchly patriarchal society in which Adela lives (which, however, I must note again, is much complicated by the race issue), she has made a daring move by voicing her allegation; however, she is rapidly subsumed back into her position as woman, with her hysterics, vacillating behaviour and apologetic retraction. Although Forster creates a politically conscious and compelling argument against racism in *A Passage to India*, he does so at the expense of Adela, who is created to function as the sacrificial lamb for the race issue. In terms of sexism at least, Forster seems to feel he, too, is writing within a literary sanctuary.

Clearly, there are numerous misrepresentations and gender prejudices evident in the male writings of rape and other forms of sexual assault. A fundamental goal of feminist writings of sexual violence is to point out and, ideally, to correct these patriarchal biases and assumptions concerning the subject. In so doing, the works also fulfil a second (but not secondary) purpose, which is to reveal and promote women's perspectives on rape and sexual abuse. There are several theoretical foundations upon which the Canadian women writers examined in this thesis base their writings,

principles which greatly distinguish the feminist works from those of the sample male writers discussed above.

A central belief evident in women's writings about sexual violence is that "[w]riting, for the feminist critic, necessitates political consciousness" (Kappeler 146), and that, to carry it one step further, the "politics and aesthetics of rape are one" (Higgins and Silver 1). Therefore, feminist writers and critics have no tolerance for those male authors who claim that the concept of a "literary sanctuary" justifies their writing in an anti-feminist, or at the very least, irresponsibly male-biased, fashion. For of course, this claim to an apolitical haven is *itself a political* claim, one which only a politically privileged group, such as male authors, could attempt to declare. As Susanne Kappeler asserts,

the conception of the literary as separate, as aesthetic, as non-political sanctuary, as the pure field of desire, is a political conception, an ideological cornerstone of patriarchal culture....Feminist critique challenges the spurious division of labour which leads to the author's abrogation of responsibility, of critical, political responsibility for his writing. (146-7)

Thus, the women writers discussed below ensure that they are politically responsible to the subject about which they are writing, the subject about *whom* they are writing -- the former of which is often their own experience, the latter of which is often themselves. In fact, one female writer posts the telephone numbers of rape and incest crisis centres before doing her public readings; speaking of writing literature about sexual abuse, she explains that "you have to do it with responsibility" (First Speaker, "Violence Against the Feminine: Workshop Discussion" 44). This political responsibility means attempting to close the gap between real life and literature -- to explain and discuss the experience as directly and honestly as possible. As opposed to Yeats's twistedly heroic "seduction" scene, women's works such as Libby Scheier's "A

Poem About Rape," Laura Vyvyan's "she," Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree* and others struggle to relate the experience and resulting emotions of rape as clearly and genuinely as the writers are able. The difference between this literature and the representations written by men lies in the fact that the women writers' purpose is to elucidate rape to their readers, to help them to "grasp the experience" (Scheier, "A Poem about Rape" 52). Conversely, the male writers examined above confuse the experience, rework it for their own patriarchal purposes (in Yeats's case), or appropriate and utilize it as a metaphor or symbol for textual (albeit, in Forster's case, commendable) purposes. Because employing rape as a metaphor constitutes a separation of the signifier from the signified, a gap between reality and literature, most of the women writers analyzed in this paper do not use sexual abuse as a metaphor (with one notable and complex exception, Joy Kogawa's *Obasan*, which will be discussed in chapter 3). Although they may use metaphors to help explain or understand rape, to employ sexual abuse itself as a textual technique would be to minimize or slight the visceral reality of the victim's experience; as Beth Goobie comments simply but compellingly, "i've never heard a woman / use rape as metaphor" (Goobie, "looking for the second face" 38-9). Indeed, far from "us[ing] rape as metaphor," Higgins and Silver argue that women writers must restore rape "to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence -- the physical, sexual violation" (Higgins and Silver 4). This recuperation, or re-appropriation, of the violence to the body is particularly notable in Vyvyan's "she" and "Blitzkrieg," and in Goobie's "story hour."

A result of the feminist project of bringing art and experience together, of injecting reality and political responsibility back into rape literature, is literature of sexual violence which tells women's perspectives on this abuse: women's concepts of

what constitutes such abuse, women's explanations of the effects of the abuse, and women's accounts of the abuse without the interference of male judgements on credibility (although there are exceptions to this last statement, which will be explored below in chapter 4). This telling of the female perspective is essential because it constitutes a reclamation of power through naming the violence. It is also essential in that it provides a *female* definition of sexual assault, which can counteract, or at least balance, the dominant discourse revolving around the male definition. For in order to engage in an effective discourse about women's perceptions of sexual abuse, that abuse must be definitively named. Teresa de Lauretis argues, in her article "The Violence of Rhetoric: Considerations on Representation and Gender," that the *concept* of family violence did not exist until the *term* "family violence" was established and its meaning defined; she hastens to add that this does not mean that *actual* family violence did not exist before the term, but rather, that there was no discussion of it (246). Similarly, until women delineate their own meaning of the *term* "rape," the only discussion of the *concept* of rape will be based on what we have had for centuries, that is, the male concept and term of rape. And similarly, this does not mean that *actual* rape, as women perceive it, has not existed for centuries, but just that it has been silenced, non-defined. Moreover, as brief incursions into the work of the Marquis de Sade, Yeats's "Leda and the Swan," or Forster's *A Passage to India* show, the male concept of sexual violation is generally quite different from most women's perceptions. Catherine MacKinnon makes a useful argument (the inclusion of which draws the art of literature together with "real" experience, because MacKinnon argues from a legal standpoint) which highlights why a "new" women's definition of rape is so imperative:

The crime of rape -- this is a legal and observed, not a subjective, individual, or feminist definition -- is defined around penetration. That seems to me a very male point of view on what it means to be sexually

violated. And it is exactly what heterosexuality as a social institution is fixated around, the penetration of the penis into the vagina....What women experience as degrading and defiling when we are raped includes as much that is distinctive to us as is our experience of sex....Women who have been raped often do resent having been penetrated. But that is not all there is to what was intrusive or expropriative of a woman's sexual wholeness. ("Sex and Violence" 87)

Clearly, the issue of definition revolves around the question of who is speaking. Some male writers, like Yeats, have clouded this issue of the speaker by attempting, or pretending, to represent sexual violence from the woman's point of view. The strategy has often worked, as unresisting readers unthinkingly accept the woman's perspective, woman narrator or woman speaker, although her part has been created by a man. Higgins and Silver point out that "[w]hether in legal or literary criticism, unmasking the privilege accorded masculine points of view reveals how patriarchal perspectives have prevented courts as well as texts, authors, and critics from asking who is speaking, who is hearing, and in what circumstances" (Higgins and Silver 2). The authors answer Beckett's question, "What does it matter who is speaking?" by stating,

[f]or feminist literary critics confronting the entanglement of rape with representation...who is speaking may be *all* that matters. Whether in the courts or media, whether in art or criticism, who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as "truth" determine the definition of what rape *is*. (Higgins and Silver 1)

In short, it must be women who speak, who shatter the silence and find ways to express, define and explain the violence that has been done to them, if we ever hope to hold effective, productive discussions between women and men on the issue of rape and sexual abuse. The Canadian women writers studied below have bravely begun this process; they pursue the endeavour with various styles and techniques, and confront diverse and complex topics. But before turning to these elements and issues, I should make one personal explanation.



Just as it is "hard to write a poem about rape" (Scheier, "A Poem About Rape" 1), it is difficult to write a thesis about sexual violence. In writing academic criticism about this literature, in interpreting and analyzing it, one treads a theoretical minefield, one which is a replica of that which the writer herself must negotiate. A fundamental problem within sexual assault therapy is that the "victim" almost invariably reveals her experience to an "expert" in the field -- a mediator, a facilitator, a therapist, or a psychologist, to name just a few possibilities. Immediately, an unequal power relationship is established, wherein the "expert" possesses the role of interpreting, judging and diagnosing the victim's "story" and psyche -- in effect, explaining the victim's feelings and experience back to her. While admittedly this situation can be somewhat helpful and therapeutic, Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, in their article "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," hold that it severely diminishes any reclamation of power and validation of experience that the woman should derive from breaking her silence. For this reason, the authors advise that the dangerously powerful position of "expert" be eliminated from sexual assault therapy, thus allowing the "victims" to claim control over their own experiences, to be the acknowledged experts on themselves. The literature discussed in this paper constitutes disclosures, or breaking of silences (whether the narrators' or the writers') similar to those encouraged in therapy. Thus, in writing an essay which analyzes and draws conclusions from these works, I run the risk of setting myself up as the "expert." Partially in order to avoid this, then, I include two of my own poems (written at an earlier date and not for the purpose of this thesis, copies of which can be found in the Appendix) in the analysis. While I hesitate to include myself in the ranks of admirable Canadian writers such as those discussed below, I will include myself with them as a member of a group of survivors. I thus hope to abdicate the undesirable role of "objective" interpreter of the

sexual assault experience, and instead, position myself solely as an expert on my own experience.

Two other theoretical issues convinced me to include my own poetry in this paper. The first concerns the production of a hierarchy within the category of sexual violence; this hierarchy is reflected in the specific subject matter of the literature discussed below. The dominant (patriarchal) discourse has aggressively attempted to silence survivor speech about sexual assault. However, since this has become increasingly difficult, strategies have changed, and the discourse has begun to grant validity and legitimacy to discussions of *certain* crimes. Stranger rape (rape by a stranger) has been the first violation to be acknowledged as credible, although even within this sub-category, women of different classes, races and appearances experience different levels of difficulty in attaining acceptance of their accounts. Since the dominant discourse recognizes stranger rape as a valid sexual trauma, one can find more literary discussion about this issue than about other forms of sexual violence; five of the works discussed in this paper are about stranger rape. However, in order to suppress as much survivor speech as possible, the dominant discourse dictates that "incest accounts and reports of acquaintance rape have...less credibility than accounts of stranger rape" (Alcoff and Gray 266). By establishing such a hierarchy, the patriarchy can utilize the "divide and conquer" technique, splitting sexual assault victims into different levels, with the horribly ironic result that victims in different categories feel inferior to others in terms of the rankings of pain, violence, legitimacy and other criteria. The hierarchy also ensures that the more strictly taboo subjects (more strictly taboo because they are more abhorrent, and ironically, more common) are stifled by the code of silence, remaining in/uncredible, unbelievable, and therefore, largely unreported. Incest and the sexual abuse of children are beginning to emerge

from this silent vault, and are entering discussions and gaining recognition as prevalent, legitimate forms of trauma. Consequently, there has been a recent proliferation of creative writing concerning these topics; Susan Glickman's "The Man Next Door" and Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* deal with sexual violence against female children (again, I should note that I do not include analyses of incest works due to space limitations). However, date (or acquaintance) rape, and sexual assault perpetrated by the use of mental abuse and coercion rather than physical force, (most often the two are intertwined), have only recently gained society's attention and tenuous acceptance as forms of sexual violation and domination. Not surprisingly, I have not discovered any poetry on this topic -- except my own. Therefore, another reason for including "she" and "Blitzkrieg" is to incorporate the issue of date rape into the literary discourse, in an attempt to subvert the destructive (to survivors, that is) sexual crime hierarchy.

Second, I admit that I felt hesitant about including my poems, due to their personal, and what some might criticize as "emotional" nature. Surely many women writers have experienced, and succumbed to, the pressure of the patriarchal code which dictates that the personal is not, and has no place in, the classical, or the universal, or the academic. In fact, many women writers have been told as much by the literary establishment. In her article in the *Language In Her Eye* collection, Libby Scheier tells of a male reviewer who deridingly informed her that her poetry was too personal; he *accused* her of using her work as therapy, and *lamented* that she was not sufficiently "disengage[d]...from the material to shape it artistically" (Scheier, "Chopped Liver" 234). In retaliation, Scheier criticizes this attitude, typical of the "white-male literary tradition," for its emphasis on "disconnectedness" and "alienation" in "high art" (Scheier, "Chopped Liver" 234). Consequently, while I often question whether my work is deserving of (my) academic criticism, I feel prodded to assert that it is, in

keeping with the larger feminist project of gaining the acceptance of the inclusion of the personal in literature, whether it be scholarly articles or creative writing.

In 1931, Virginia Woolf imagined the female writer confronting her own imagination. The writer struggles to control and repress it, explaining,

My dear you were going altogether too far. Men would be shocked. Calm yourself....In fifty years I shall be able to use all this very queer knowledge that you are ready to bring me. But not now....I cannot make use of what you tell me -- about women's bodies for instance -- their passions -- and so on, because the conventions are still very strong....

Very well says the imagination, dressing herself up again in her petticoat and skirts....We will wait another fifty years. But it seems to me a pity. (Woolf quoted in Froula 622)

Not surprisingly, Woolf's tale displays incredible foresight. For, in the 1980's and 1990's, women's literary creativity about such "queer knowledge" has resurfaced and is demanding attention. The Canadian feminist writers discussed below have bravely tapped into their imaginations and the result, their literature of sexual violence, reveals women's true and multi-faceted experiences of rape and sexual abuse. Chapter 2 of this thesis investigates various stylistic aspects of the poetry of sexual violence; chapter 3 examines the different perspectives that women of colour and lesbians can bring to this discourse, as well as the dilemmas and difficulties they face in writing of sexual violence. But I should note that these foci represent only two areas within an extremely complex body of work. As a whole, this literature constitutes an integral part of what is, for many women, what Virginia Woolf guessed would be "the most interesting, exciting and important conversation that has ever taken place" (Woolf quoted in Froula 622).

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Invading the Fortress: The Styles and Techniques of the Poetry of Sexual Violence**

"It's hard to write a poem about rape"  
(Scheier, "A Poem About Rape" 1)

After one has thought through all the theoretical dilemmas, how does one actually write literature about rape? This undertaking seems particularly difficult for the woman poet, because it means combining a strongly woman-oriented issue with a form of literature traditionally reserved for men. Historically, poetry has been the literary genre most resistant to the feminist project; as Cora Kaplan explains, "the language most emphatically denied to women is the most concentrated form of symbolic language -- poetry" (Kaplan 68). Of course, this makes it all the more important that women invade this patriarchal fortress, and write poems about sexual violence, an experience about which they feel so strongly, and which needs so desperately to be discussed from a woman's perspective. Another consideration affecting this endeavour is whether a poet can effectively translate such a brutal and violent event into poetry. Traditional poetic styles and structures seem inadequate for capturing the essence of such an atrocity. Consequently, the women poets discussed below strive to find a different poetic discourse capable of communicating women's complex experiences of sexual violence. As Cathy Ford explains, writing about sexual abuse "demands an absolute sensibility to style and technique....It's very painful and demanding work" (Ford 42).

### (a) A Fresh Poetic Style and Tone

Libby Scheier's "A Poem About Rape" deals self-consciously with the question of whether a poem can truly speak about rape. The poet-speaker regrets that "I don't feel that I can tell you / anything about rape in a poem about rape"; she attempts, but fails, at the conventional poetic formula of constructing a "list of clever symbols" or a "well-crafted image" that leads to a "strong but subtly suggestive ending" (21-24). She discovers that several other problems are inherent in writing a poem about rape, not the least of which is bridging the gap between art and experience. She appears to have accepted the patriarchally-imposed division between art and personal writings, for she believes that her "expressions of emotion" about the rape are *only* "noisy," "honest" and "frustrated" (14-15). Although she insists that these true communications of her experience are "scarcely art" (13), paradoxically, she desperately repeats her desire that the reader "grasp it [rape], finally," "grasp the experience" (26, 52). The poet also believes that an effective poem about rape must eliminate the chasm between theory and the actual experience -- a binary pair wherein the former is valorized for being aloof, disinterested and analytical, while the latter is admonished for the subjectivity of engagement. Objective and removed, "experts," or "dry theorists of psychology or medicine" (7) cannot hope to evoke vividly the sensation of, or reaction to, rape. Bringing sexual violence into the political-social sphere is generally perceived by feminists to be a positive, progressive movement, but Scheier believes that even this politicization of rape produces a distancing from, and a deferral of, the intensely-felt experience. She seems to feel that the "outraged tracts about rape" (4) only amount to political posturing. Furthermore, an effective poem about rape must avoid the pitfall of being voyeuristically titillating; the poet considers several methods of bringing the rape

experience into readers' living rooms, but discards them because they "usually excite you anyway / which is not my purpose" (60-61).

In order to overcome these obstacles and succeed in directly transmitting the experience of sexual violence to the reader, Scheier must create a new mode of poetic discourse. Ironically, it is at the point where she insists that

I don't think a poem can do that.  
 Certainly this poem is not doing it.  
 This poem is definitely a failure  
 in bringing the experience of rape  
 into your living room. (53-57)

that she succeeds in doing *just* that. These very lines reflect the mentality of a rape victim: her sense of failure, guilt, helplessness, remorse and frustration. It is ironic that this multitude of emotions can be captured in such a seemingly flat and detached voice. Indeed, the tone and attitude of the speaker throughout the poem are relatively calm, detached and wryly cynical; this subverts the traditional notion that any survivor discourse, or indeed, any female self-expression, is hysterical and potentially mad. Moreover, the poem does escape being titillating or perversely entertaining by refusing to recount the actual rape scene explicitly. In the last stanza, the repeated assertions that the various alternatives to poetry are "not the answer," and that, in fact, "There doesn't seem to be any answer. / There doesn't seem to be any answer," (63-64) convey the victim's frantic search for the answer to why the rape occurred, and why it happened to her -- a question that is never satisfactorily answered. The repetition of the word "rape," combined with the incessant use of the negative ("doesn't," "don't," "can't," "cannot," "no longer," "not") hauntingly echoes the victim's repeated pleas to her attacker to stop. The fundamental tenet of the poem itself reflects the sense of powerlessness that a victim feels -- this is a poem about a poet who believes she cannot

write a poem about her experience. Although she is convinced that she fails (although she does retain hope for the future, specifying that "[t]here doesn't seem to be any answer / ...*right now*" (64-5, my emphasis)), in fact she succeeds by creating a new poetic style and tone -- a fresh discourse which can relate the rape experience. This conclusion symbolically offers the hope that victims can overcome such sexual traumas, although they often believe that they cannot.

As Higgins and Silver insist, "who is speaking may be *all* that matters....who gets to tell the story and whose story counts as 'truth' determine the definition of what rape *is*" (Higgins and Silver 1). Beth Goobie confronts this issue in "'victim' takes a passive verb," as she, like Libby Scheier, struggles to reach a new poetic style and tone which are capable of expressing the poet's feelings about sexual violence. The style Goobie uses to convey the sexual battle is itself combative; the poem is a series of grammatical and punctuative skirmishes between passive and active verbs, between a detached reporter's voice forcefully established by quotation marks and ironic feminist whispers captured in parentheses. The different tones of the two voices reveal entirely different perspectives on the rape and murder; the voices' constant, battling juxtaposition and opposing punctuative formations highlight this difference, as well as the power dynamics between the two viewpoints.

The quoted words of the report expose many of the problems and misrepresentations in the common discourse of sexual violence. The voice describes the crime in a seemingly objective, observational, factual manner. The underlying definition of rape that this attitude betrays is that sexual violence against women is a prevalent, everyday occurrence -- which, of course, it is, but the reporter's calm, factual tone suggests, and consequently encourages (whether intentionally or not), the acceptance of the regularity, the "normality" of such an event. In Scheier's "A Poem



About Rape," the speaker's relatively detached, calm voice serves the positive purpose of proving that survivors', and women's, speech is not hysterical, as the patriarchal stereotype would have us believe. Scheier's speaker's rational, although frustrated, voice helps her to establish some measure of control over the violence that has been perpetrated against her. However, in "'victim' takes a passive verb," the factual tone of the report only highlights just how numbed society is to violence, how we have learned to accept it calmly. Although journalists are taught to report objectively, without the "interference" of emotion, Goobie points out (particularly through the contrast with the parenthetical voice, which will be discussed below) that this only naturalizes the act, creating an atmosphere of tired capitulation. Along with emotion, the actual violence of the crime has been omitted from the report, which promotes the ideology of what Higgins and Silver call "rapability" (the concept that every woman is "rapable"), because the brutality that would anger and appall, and incite people to action, has been deleted from the description. This artificial separation of the signifier from the signified removes the rape from its repulsive reality, allowing readers to distance themselves from the actual sexual assault, to become apathetic, and to abdicate their responsibility to work against this violence.

Furthermore, the dangers of this attitude of calm detachment are made all the more apparent by Goobie's method of punctuation; she places the comments in quotation marks, suggesting that they are quoted from either a spoken or a written report. When contrasted with the feminist comments enclosed in parentheses, this tactic exposes the power relations between the two perspectives. Generally, one assumes that words or ideas that have been quoted are significant, important; one also usually assumes that such phrases represent the truth. Thus, once placed within

quotations, the remarks in "'victim'" become authoritative; they are accorded more credibility and respect than the parenthetical comments.

Ironically, though, words which hide behind a façade of impartiality are rarely unprejudiced. In fact, the words of the report are not *objective* at all -- they *objectify*. The voice invades the privacy, independence and subjectivity of the raped and murdered woman by describing her, particularly in such a coolly distant tone; it controls her by manipulating what details about her are revealed. Although feminists often view anonymity as beneficial, as a protective and liberating option in rape and sexual assault cases, the namelessness of the woman in this poem has a negative effect, in that it allows the voice to objectify her. She is repeatedly held in the reporter's gaze as, and only as, the object "victim." She is "hooked," manipulated and captured by the quoted voice, much as the opposing voice suggests she is "hooked" (29) and manipulated by fate, and captured by her attacker. Admittedly, the problem of objectification is perhaps inevitable, for the woman has, after all, been murdered and cannot speak for herself. Nevertheless, the resisting reader's eyebrows will rise at the one comment wherein the quoted voice does reveal a prejudice: the point at which the reporter sagely notes that the "victim" "displayed no abnormal tendencies" (8). The feminist reader must critically challenge why it is necessary to assure readers that the woman was not peculiar or strange -- because that reassurance reinforces the stereotypical assumption that she must have been so. Indeed, one must ask: why *would* she display abnormal tendencies? What is *meant* by "abnormal tendencies?" Promiscuity? Dressing in "provocative" clothing? (The idea that this is perhaps precisely what is meant by the term is strengthened by the lines following line 8, in which the reader is further reassured that the "victim" was a model "young lady"; she was popular, and "enjoyed ice skating, girl guides" (11).) And what does it matter

even if she *did* display abnormal tendencies? To the critical reader, this line provides an almost hidden clue to the possibility that the voice was hoping to locate the blame for the attack in the woman herself, to discover what she may have done to provoke it; the comment is the admission that no such evidence was found.

Through her quoted speaker, then, Goobie reveals many of the problems inherent in the discourse of sexual violence, including the artificial removal of the actual violence from the description, the assumption of a falsely detached, unemotional and "objective" tone and attitude, and the credibility accorded such representations. It is the contrasting foil of the opposing speaker which exposes the shortcomings of the reporter voice, as the former's feminist comments jab after every factual remark in the authoritative quotation marks. Her words are subversive whispers, trapped within parentheses. Again, the punctuation Goobie uses indicates the power dynamics between the two perspectives and voices; the brackets symbolize the fact that such subjective, "emotional" speech is usually silenced, oppressed and disregarded. The voice does have the capacity to interrupt the reporter constantly, but this is more of an insidious, rebellious transgression than an outright assertion of power. In effect, all this parenthetical voice can do is to determinedly chip away at the detachment and artificiality of the quoted speaker. But although she never breaks out of her parenthetical cage, in the end, her method is effective, as we shall see below.

The tone of this parenthetical speaker is at times cynically ironic, at times bitterly sarcastic in her mocking mimicry of patriarchal attitudes. She counters the detachment of the reporter's voice by bringing emotion back into the discussion through her own anger, which seethes barely below the surface of her ironic tone. This hostility occasionally boils over into comments such as her response to the statement that the raped woman was nominated (for an unspecified award); the parenthetical speaker

mimics a lewd patriarchal tone and whispers lecherously, "(boy, was she ever)" (14). The speaker also reinvolves emotion, striving to reunite the signifier and the signified, through her attempt to comprehend and appreciate the assaulted woman's feelings and thoughts about her life, rape and death. In speculating about this, the parenthetical voice repeatedly articulates the idea that every woman (for the nameless "victim" symbolizes everywoman) is fated, or doomed, to be sexually assaulted (because, the argument goes, in the patriarchy's eyes, every woman is "rapable"). In fact, she refers to this idea so incessantly that the reader quickly finds it grating, nagging. But the ironic result of the annoyance of this repetition is that the technique has subversively and effectively caused the reader to experience what women live with every day; however, women's is a grating, nagging experience of a different kind, for they constantly carry the burden of the knowledge of their own rapability. As Donna Smyth explains, female children "internalize at an early age our fears of personal violence"; mature women "know it in our bodies; we carry this intimate knowledge with us all the time" (Smyth 41).

The parenthetical speaker, then, struggles against the authoritative quoted voice, and does seem to gain some battleground. After the first five paired comments, the feminist voice begins to speak more extensively, overshadowing the terse statements in quotation marks, giving her interruptions more force. But although she does speak the last three lines, she still has not broken out of her parenthetical cage. And although she apparently has made the assertive grammatical shift from having "victim" take a passive verb to insisting that it take an active verb, this victory is significantly qualified by the active verb that she gives to the noun. Although "to deserve" is grammatically more active than "to be assaulted" (the verb in line 1), the former is hardly a proactive, liberating verb itself. "To deserve" implies not the taking of action, but the provoking

of action (whether good or bad) against its subject. Furthermore, one cannot ignore the negative connotations attached to the word in the context of sexual violence -- the patriarchal assumption that when one "deserves it," one has acted wrongly and deserves punishment.

Clearly, the reader must question the success of Goobie's parenthetical speaker. However, for the resisting reader, there is yet one more possibility within the poem for a more positive, proactive conclusion. The repetition of the idea of women being doomed to a violent fate does more than just convey women's experience of gnawing fear for their personal safety. The incessant insistence, in the speaker's wryly ironic tone, that women are fated to be sexually violated causes the resisting reader to react against this pessimistic, self-defeating concept. Just as the feminist voice battles against the quoted speaker, the resisting reader finds her/himself struggling against the feminist voice. While this may mean that, at first, the reader comes away from the poem dissatisfied and frustrated, Goobie may have crafted the style and tone of her poem to elicit this exact response. It seems probable that the cynicism and irony of the voice and the ideas it espouses are intended to jolt the reader out of the apathy epitomized by the detached reporter's voice. Throughout the poem, Goobie draws this response gradually out of the reader. To use myself as an example, by the second half of the work, I was becoming more defensive against the feminist speaker's comments and the patriarchal attitudes which they parody. When the voice mimics patriarchal attitudes and calls the woman "irresponsible" for choosing to take her car rather than a bus, the twinges of doubts I had felt earlier became stronger, and I reacted more negatively, more openly, thinking angrily to myself that all women know that taking the bus is equally as dangerous as going alone to one's car in a parking lot. To the comment, "there was no real reason / why she had to use her car / that day, / why she chose to

use her car / that day" (36-40), my mind responded that she should not need a "real reason" to use her own car, and that "choosing" to use it should be her right, not her privilege, as the choice of words suggests.

In effect, the more the feminist voice cynically insists that the woman was fated to this end, the more she parrots patriarchal assumptions, the more vehemently the resisting reader finds her/himself reacting against these ideas. So although, on the page, it may seem as though Goobie has left her poem and readers stranded in a hopeless and pessimistic state, the poet has in fact succeeded in conveying a new perspective on rape. Like Libby Scheier, Goobie taps into a unique use of style and tone in order to create a fresh poetic discourse that is powerful enough to communicate her feelings about sexual violence. For, in the end, although the feminist speaker remains enclosed in the parentheses, the reader has been goaded into rebelling against the passive and fatalistic acceptance of sexual violence. Although in the last lines, the voice cannot give the "victim" a truly active verb, the words have incited at least intellectual action in the reader. And as the speaker whispers with bitter irony, "(we know we deserve it)" (53), the reader is convinced that we do not.

### **(b) The Use of Metaphors**

Although some critics insist that the use of art as therapy "lower[s] the artistic level of the work," Libby Scheier holds that this position is a fallacious, condescending construct of the "white-male literary tradition" (Scheier, "Chopped Liver" 234). She points out that

Black writers, Native writers, many women writers, and some white male writers, know that art can be healing...that good artists can be healers through their art -- sometimes healing themselves, sometimes others. (Scheier, "Chopped Liver" 234)

Indeed, the poetry analyzed here does have healing potential, for both the writer and the reader. In their work, many poets use the therapeutic technique of distancing themselves from their horrible experiences. Styles of diction and tone (as we have seen in Scheier's "A Poem About Rape" and Goobie's "'victim' takes a passive verb") are employed to give the mind space and separation from the injured body, in order to comprehend and understand intellectually, and potentially resolve, the trauma. Indeed, it seems that some amount of distancing from the event is a prerequisite to writing about the experience at all; Scheier explains that she "could not / write about rape until recently. / My brains no longer knock against / my skull when I think about it" ("A Poem About Rape" 33-34). Metaphors are another distancing technique which survivor poets use to help understand and resolve their traumas. The metaphors function almost as a transparent box, into which the poet can place her experience and the pain and confusion connected with it. From her relatively detached vantage point, then, she can safely examine, from all angles, what is in the metaphorical box. She can direct anger at its contents without being angry at herself (hence the frequent use of violent metaphors, such as war (in "Dwarfs and War" and "Blitzkrieg") and beasts (in "Limits of the Werewolf")). The survivor poet may not be reaching the core of the box's contents, but this is only one step in the process of recovery.

In "Dwarfs and War" and "Blitzkrieg," both speakers distance themselves from the (date) rape experience through the use of metaphors. In Scheier's poem, the speaker insists that her discussions of dwarfs and war are entirely separate from her rape; she declares that dwarfs are "very far / from my personal experience" (2-3), and denies knowledge of the military, asking "What do I know of war?" (35). In fact, she does not acknowledge any thoughts of rape until the last three stanzas of the poem; she then quietly and calmly inserts the fact of her assault in a "once upon a time" narrative

format. Nevertheless, the reader recognizes the parallels between the "small, misshapen" dwarfs who apparently incur "nothing special" when making love, and the psychological and emotional (and perhaps physical) "smallness" (51) of the rapist who clearly finds only perverse pleasure in forced sex. The use of this metaphor affords the poet the latitude to give intellectual and verbal vent to her visceral and immediate feelings of repulsion and disgust towards her attacker.

The image of warfare is a particularly apt metaphor for sexual violence. Moreover, despite protestations, the speaker obviously connects the two occurrences in her mind; she moves directly from the self-effacing question "What do I know of war?" (35) to explaining, unwittingly, that she knows, precisely and intensely, about such combative struggles. The fact that her rape was the first time she "felt real fear," and that this anguish "comes back sometimes, unexpectedly" (38-39) echoes the experience of many soldiers involved in wars. Once the reader discovers the speaker's rape, s/he can review the earlier stanzas concerning the evolution of warfare in a new light, exposing similarities that the speaker has (seemingly) subconsciously drawn between the two. Historically, the "early days" of sexual abuse of women can be likened to the First World War, in that they possessed a commensurate sense of frustration, repression and entrapment. The image of the weary, "beaten down" soldier "folding in on [him]self" (13) for survival symbolizes the abused woman drawing her body into the protective, or cringing, fetal position. The poet's description of the man who designed trench warfare reveals an impressive intellectual patriarchal figure, surrounded by brilliant "diagrams and drawings," holding "dry afternoon discussions / with the other men" (18-20). The Second World War, "less personal" (26) and more immensely destructive and annihilating, reflects the more recent massive attack launched on women, whereby the frequency and violence of sexual attacks are drastically



increasing. The soldiers' "million bodies / transformed into jigsaw chunks" (30-31) chillingly symbolizes the abused and often dismembered bodies and minds of the female victims of the misogynist war. While the speaker denies having any feelings in her body similar to the soldiers', she may begin to understand and deal with her reactions to her experience through her analysis of the military events which she connects so closely with her rape. The metaphor provides an accepted and conventional outlet for the poet to express such emotions, while safely distancing herself from the actual sexual trauma. However, in order for the therapy to progress towards recovery, the speaker must realize the connection she is making between the two, the event and the metaphor, and resolve the issue; this movement is initiated by the confusion in the last stanza of the poem, where the causalities of memories, events and thoughts are conflated.

In "Blitzkrieg," the military metaphor is overtly connected to the sexual abuse experience, giving the poet an avenue through which she can conceive of and interpret her otherwise "absurd" and abnormal feeling that seduction and sexual interaction is war. A kiss sets off the alarm, and infiltrating spies in the form of hands, breath and legs indicate that an attack is about to begin. Like the traumatized soldier in "Dwarfs and War," the woman attempts to fortify herself against the onslaught, by curling into a self-protective fetal position. It is only within this metaphorical context of war that the besieged victim can conceive of "the possibility / of rebellion" (26-27), briefly threatening to revolt. However, "reality and self-defense crash in / and crush the spirit" (32-33), causing the woman to surrender rather than risk aggravating further assault. What the reader realizes is that, in the wartime environment, pragmatic and strategic self-defense in the form of surrender is often the logical and commendable choice. Sadly, although the woman in the poem follows the military metaphor through

to a great extent, even discussing a post-war "insurrection" and the "self-hatred" and "degradation" of the conquered, she does not reach the above recognition; the speaker views her capitulation with disgust, denigrating it as a "pathetic survival instinct" (63). Unfortunately, the metaphor used here is not as completely therapeutic as it could be.

However, it should be noted that the war metaphor in both "Dwarfs and War" and "Blitzkrieg" is effectively subversive in conveying its indictment of sexual violence, in that the poets are utilizing the "language of men," appropriating a typically patriarchal realm -- one which is traditionally spoken of, engaged in and written about by only men -- in order to indict a patriarchal crime. This, it seems to me, is what Alicia Ostriker terms "revisionist mythmaking" at its most clever. It is also an effective way to force a male audience to grasp and identify with an otherwise female experience.

Another interesting use of metaphor as therapy occurs in Scheier's "Limits of the Werewolf," where the metamorphosed character of the predatory wolf is used to give vent to a woman's inner frustration, hostility and anger. This poem provides a fascinating twist on the other rape poems discussed, for in this case, the potential attacker/rapist is female. The poem does elicit some sympathy for the wolf, even before she releases her victim. She is not described as an horrific, disgusting, corrupt and vile demon (as is often the case in other "werewolf literature," if one can say there is such a genre). Instead, the wolf is stealthy, powerful and supernatural; there is no lust or viciousness in her stalking, only a natural carnivorous instinct. However, lest one be tempted to think that this poem constitutes a revision of the rapist figure, wherein the poet is suggesting that all rapists are victims of their incarnations and natural urges, it must be strongly noted that the werewolf in question is, most explicitly, *female*. It is essential that the poem be read in this gendered context, which

sheds new light on the wolf's motives and actions. Rather than being resistant prey to her own transformation, the woman seems to find power and liberation in her animal guise; she does not fight it or regret it (regretting only the fear of her victim). Thus for the woman in the poem and the poet herself, the wolf transformation or metaphor provides a vehicle to express the anger, aggression and hostility which society deems unacceptable and "unlady-like" in women. But although she launches an attack on prey, similar to a man stalking and attempting to rape a woman, this *female* werewolf aborts this assault when she is faced with the fear in her victim. Ironically, she is the one who seems physically assaulted, as she is "knocked / back" by the smell of fear, and "falls" (24-25). Her slinking retreat home, and her sickness at the stench, reflect her symbolic injury and her shame. As Scheier has suggested before, women lowering themselves to the patriarchal practice of raping and assaulting is no way to "teach men a lesson" or to reclaim female power; "[r]aping you is not the answer" ("A Poem About Rape" 62). However, the shewolf's lover wears his beard, which is symbolic of *his* aggression, anger and animalistic tendencies, at all times; the reader is left to assume that the man, as a *male* werewolf, would not be stopped in his attack by his victim's fear.

### **(c) Problematics of the "confessional" structure**

I have discussed briefly the dilemma of the "victim" and "expert" power imbalance in sexual trauma therapy. Michel Foucault terms this situation the "confessional," and traces its origins back to the Catholic ritual of the confession of sins in return for absolution. The "expert mediator," or the person to whom one confesses, is accorded the power to interpret, evaluate and legitimate (or invalidate) the confessor's "story;" thus the "confessor [is] by definition dependent on the expert's

interpretation of the real truth of her actions, experiences, and thoughts" (Alcoff and Gray 271). Foucault concludes that "although confessional modes of discourse may appear to grant survivors an empowering 'permission to speak,' they give the expert mediator the power to determine the legitimacy of survivor discourse" (Alcoff and Gray 271). The expert relates the victim's experience back to her in terms of the dominant discourse, thereby normalizing her situation and eliminating any transgressive or disruptive effect her "speaking out" might have on the patriarchy. Thus, confessional discourses provide an effective method for the dominant discourse to defuse the survivor speech that it has not been able to silence, to rechannel it into a form that is non-threatening and disempowered. The essential feature of the confessional structure is that it is predicated on the assumption that the confessor, or in religious terms, the "sinner," has something to confess; this locates the focus of blame, responsibility and guilt directly and unfairly on the victim. In "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," Alcoff and Gray analyze the confessional in the context of its use in the medium of television, where shows such as *Phil Donahue*, *Geraldo* and *Sally Jessy Raphael* exploit and sensationalize this mode of discourse, thus firmly appropriating and re-subjugating it under patriarchal dominance.

In terms of literature, I have not found much confessional rape poetry. This may be because by the time most writers, or speakers, actually write or speak about their experience, they have reached the stage in their recovery where they no longer feel consumed by guilt and self-blame. However, the issue of the type of sexual violence becomes important here, because victims of incest and date rape tend to experience higher levels of guilt than stranger rape survivors. Not surprisingly, then, much of the poetry about incest is in the confessional style, perhaps because of the fact that the victim's psychological growth has been severely traumatized, if not arrested, at an early

stage. In particular, the poems wherein the speaker assumes the persona of a child, in order to delve into the experience fully, have a much higher incidence of expressions of guilt and self-loathing, because this is likely how the speaker felt as a child during the time of the sexual abuse. For example, Diane Mattiussi's collection of incest poetry, *Out of Incest* (which is not otherwise discussed in this paper, due to my decision not to include the literature of incest) traces her experience entirely, from childhood abuse to recovery in adulthood. The poems in the book where her child-self speaks are saturated with a consuming sense of guilt, sin and self-recrimination.

We find a similar confessional style in the child-speaker of Susan Glickman's "The Man Next Door." The little girl in this poem is not a victim of incest, but has been sexually abused by an adult male neighbour; thus she falls prey to much of the guilt and self-blame experienced by incest survivors. Beginning with the poem's startling first line, the girl firmly asserts her own culpability in the act: "When he touched me I knew it was my fault" (1). She is clearly agonizing over her sense of guilt, and spends the rest of her narrative emphasizing the neighbour's innocence, insisting on his "niceness" through to the very end of the poem. She attempts to justify his behaviour, taking great care to explain that "he's lonely, because / he doesn't have a family or a dog or anything" (9-10); the man is "just sad because he has / no children" (17-18). Initially, she expresses disbelief, hoping that the touch was a "mistake" (19). In fact, she cannot find him at fault for anything except a "funny" (24) look on his face. Even at the conclusion of her speaking section, she does not understand what has gone on; the only thing she is sure of is that she "did something wrong" (26), something she feels the need to confess in order to expiate her guilt. In keeping with the confessional mode, the young girl feels obliged to reveal her experience to an authoritative, patriarchal figure in the hopes of obtaining absolution:

"I told my Dad so it wouldn't be / my fault" (3-4). By telling her father, the speaker remains firmly and non-threateningly within the dominant discourse, for her father is accorded the power to evaluate and act upon her "story." Admittedly, there are not many other options open to a young child (although it is significant that her mother does not figure in the poem); and surely a father could handle this situation in a way that is beneficial to, and supportive of, his daughter. However, the poem is written at a point after her disclosure to her father, and yet the girl is still caught in the throes of guilt and self-blame; although she has confessed her "sins," she evidently feels no sense of absolution or forgiveness. Although many victims of sexual abuse still experience feelings of guilt even after they have been assured that they are not to blame, we must also consider the possibility that the father has not made a concerted effort to convince his daughter that she is innocent in this matter. In particular, the child's linking of the two phrases "Later I told my Daddy. I know I did something wrong" (26) suggests that the latter scenario may be the case.

Similar confessions to patriarchal figures occur in sections II and III of "she," a poem about date rape; these instances reveal the devastatingly negative effects of an expert's misinterpretation of a victim's experience. As Alcoff and Gray explain:

In a discursive structure in which an individual woman transmits her feelings as reports of "raw data" to an expert entrusted with the task of interpreting the truth of her experience back to her and prescribing diagnosis and treatment, we see how dangerous the confessional model can be. (Alcoff and Gray 273)

In section II, the woman has gone to a doctor for treatment of the physical manifestations of her stress due to the sexual abuse she continually receives from her boyfriend. Although the reader does not know whether the patient has related any of her sexual victimization to the physician (and therefore cannot assume that she has), the

doctor does not seem to question why she is experiencing such severe stress reactions. The woman offers her physical symptoms as testimonial, a sort of silent confession, and the figure she looks to for help authoritatively dismisses her, denying the legitimacy and scope of her experience with the comment: "In other words, it's all in your head" (56). Due to her weakened position, she is forced to accept his misguided ministrations and superficial cures meekly, while he objectifies her as "the female" (75), and belittles her by condescendingly peering over his glasses and suggesting that she "try to relax" (77). Once again, the "expert" forces his opinion on the victim, his opinion being that her dilemma is of her own making.

In section III, the confessional structure is established for a second time, with a different authority figure. This time, the woman's involuntary shudder forces a physical confession of her "sin" of not enjoying sexual intercourse. Although her partner is "confused [and] hurt" (105), he nevertheless quickly recovers in order to assume the role of expert counsellor, self-confidently advising the woman that she "should see a doctor," that she "need[s] help" or therapy to "solve [her] problems" (117-119). Ignoring the possibility that he, or someone else, could be factors in the problem, her lover effectively locates all the responsibility and blame within the woman. This tactic succeeds in silencing her, for her mind can only whisper and retreat into feeling "in need of repair, dysfunctional, abnormal, destroyed, / guilty and alone" (124-125). Clearly, from this oppressed situation, she presents no challenge or threat to patriarchal discourse.

Obviously, a fundamental problem with the confessional format is its insistence on focusing on the victim, using her as a repository for the guilt and blame involved in the sexual violence. We have seen above that the little girl in "The Man Next Door" falls into this patriarchal pitfall. However, it should be noted that the poem includes an

interesting twist, for its second section tells the story from the male abuser's point of view. This is an original tactic, one that could theoretically aspire to right the wrongs of the confessional discourse forced upon the victim. However, the abuser in the poem does not, as the victim "must," assume any responsibility for his behaviour; instead, he blames a "vacancy, a mineral deficiency" (29), his father, "everybody" (33), even "his own heart" (32). He does not feel obliged to confess to any authoritative expert, for he does not believe that he has any sins to confess; his telling is not appropriated or interpreted back to him by any superior figure. In fact, far from assuming a confessing role himself, he sets the stage for the feelings of guilt that must be confessed by the young female speaker later (chronologically); he speaks on behalf of the patriarchal establishment when he asserts that the children's legs "teas[e] him" (56), that the little girls desire sexual attention from him. Although the reader may begin to feel some sympathy for the man, seeing that he is also trapped within the patriarchal system, in that he himself has been mentally and physically abused by his father, the reader rapidly loses any sympathy once the man's true misogyny (whether a product of socialization or not) begins to surface. He bemoans his own beatings, but not his mother's, for she is only a "useless / woman" (52-52); he injects his story of the beatings directly into the description of the young girls, thus indicating the intertwining of the two in his mind, an interconnection which becomes explicit in the poem's last line, "they're really going to get it" (67) (a phrase which usually refers to physical beating, but which is used here to indicate the impending sexual abuse). This section may assist the reader in understanding the mentality of the sexual abuser, but because he has not accepted any responsibility, or expressed remorse or guilt for his behaviour, the shift in focus from the victim to the victimizer has not negated, or balanced out, the harmful effects of the confessional's tendency to emphasize the victim.



(d) *L'Ecriture Féminine*

Clearly, writing poetry about various forms and effects of sexual violence involves a re-visioning and revising of conventional poetics. The new subject matter brings with it a new speakerly tone and attitude, use of metaphors, and set of power relations, to name just a few changes. As these women poets search for an effective way to express their experiences of men abusing, violating and raping women's and young girls' bodies, the question of whether they arrive at any new form of "*l'écriture féminine*" in order to write this (initially) bodily experience becomes an increasingly important issue. Proponents of *l'écriture féminine* may exhort women to write their body, from their sexuality, asserting that their sexual drive is the source of women's imagination and creative potency; but what does this mean to a raped woman, whose sexual body has been violently appropriated from her, abused and denigrated? Hélène Cixous locates the source of woman's writing ability in her sexuality, for "[h]er libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. [Therefore] [h]er writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings" (Cixous 345); then, does a woman whose libido has been (temporarily or indefinitely) crushed and annihilated by sexual assault *not* possess as great and far-reaching an unconscious as the libidinous woman's? Does this victimized woman *not* have the ability to write as fluidly, as experimentally, as daringly as the sexually fulfilled female writer? Luce Irigaray theorizes that "two lips" of the vulva create women's language. Because of the constant contact between the sexual lips, "in what she says...at least when she dares, woman is constantly touching herself," her speech "set[ing] off in all directions leaving 'him' unable to discern the coherence of any meaning" (Irigaray 353). Here again, woman's language arises from the diverse

pleasure of her sexual *jouissance*. But what can this theory mean to a woman whose "lips" have been violently separated by a male intruder?

Admittedly, many of the *l'écriture féminine* scholars do discuss the sexually abused woman, but they do so largely in a highly theoretical context, wherein patriarchal language and writing intrude upon and attempt to dominate female discourse. However, to a woman who has physically endured a sexual attack, who has feared for her safety, even her life, this abstract theorizing holds little applicable relevance. As well, the idea of *l'écriture féminine* seems particularly at odds with the above discussion about the therapeutic separation of mind and body, wherein the mind distances itself from the horrible physical experience, and attempts to understand and resolve the trauma through intellect, not through physical instincts. However, it seems as though the intellectual, introspective method represents only a partial movement towards recovery from a sexual crisis; once the mind has had a brief interlude of thought, and, one hopes, conclusion, the next step is to reintegrate the now disparate parts of the person -- body and soul/mind. Furthermore, the theorists of *l'écriture féminine* would argue that perhaps the sexually abused woman is the very subject most likely to benefit and experience therapy from "writing the body," for to "write from the body is to recreate the world" (Jones 361). As Cixous insists,

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been more than confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display....Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth....To write...will give her back her...immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; it will tear her away from the superegoized structure in which she has always occupied the place reserved for the guilty. (337-8)

Clearly, though, this "writing of the body" is by no means a simple or pleasant task for the woman writer whose body (supposedly her creative source) has been raped and

abused; instead of images of reintegration, reunion and resolution, the poetry is peppered with images of deferred, fragmented, numb or injured bodies. When these poets "write the body," they explicitly "write the *raped* body." The way in which various poets choose to express this body is perhaps partly influenced by what extent of resolution that have reached in the process of recovery from the trauma.

Ironically, sometimes "writing the raped body" means not writing about it at all. Scheier's "A Poem About Rape" does not refer to her body. This surely bespeaks her attitude towards her violated body -- an attitude about which other readers can only speculate. Perhaps the poet feels, as many rape victims do, that her body has been defiled and contaminated by the experience, and thus, in an act of empowerment, she refuses to write of such a thing. It is probably more likely, though, that her negation and denial of her body is caught up in the poem's overall movement of negation and refusal which was analyzed above in section (a). In "Dwarfs and War," Scheier can only write her body from a safe metaphorical distance, within the context of war imagery (as examined above in section (b)). From this displaced symbolic vantage point, her raped body "fold[s] in on itself" (13) in rain-drenched World War I trenches, with "mud in the mouth" (12), or lies in a World War II apocalyptic atmosphere, exploded into "jigsaw chunks" (31). Although in the second to last stanza, the speaker insists that she has "no sense of [her] body" (43) being in either of these wartime situations, my previous analysis of the poem throws that assertion into question. In fact, she does associate herself closely with these scenarios and experiences, and thus it is not unlikely that she could feel her body

wetting through with rain and dirt  
or blood, or my body flying apart while  
The eyes watch in the last living seconds.

(44-46)

Indeed, rape victims often experience the sensation of their bodies being dishevelled, dirty and rotting. Others speak of the sensation of watching the ordeal from a distance, a sort of "out of body" experience, and feeling bodily fragmented and ripped apart.

An interesting aspect of the "writing of the raped body" in "Blitzkrieg" is the exposure of the wilful misinterpretation of the woman's body by men. In the first stanza, the victimizer "interpret[s]" (8, 11) the woman's negative reactions as pleasurable responses; his body then begins to "demand" (19) and "command" (20) an "acceptable" response from hers. Even after the "raid" (43), he interprets her physical reactions to his own benefit and self-aggrandizement; and in his final action of licking her tears away, "[i]nterpreting them as / Tears of joy and gratitude" (70-71), he exemplifies the patriarchal assumption that the man has done the woman a favour in forcing himself upon her, because, of course, she "wanted it" anyway (echoing the sentiments of the sexual abuser in "The Man Next Door"). Ironically, when this woman "writes her body," she writes of her boyfriend's response to it, or indeed, his control over it. This, although sad, is understandable, because she has been taught that *his* feelings about and interactions with her body are more important than her own relationship with her body. To continue the metaphor, one might say that the boyfriend *misreads* what her body is trying to express, but I believe that that interpretation is inaccurate, casting the boyfriend in a passive role as "reader." In fact, he actively "writes," or, to put it more strongly, "authors," his own version of the woman's body, as he edits out her physical responses to his "attentions," and forces his ideas and intentions upon her body.

"she" is a more explicit example of "writing of the raped body," tracing the progress of physical reactions to the continued experience of sexual abuse, and its aftermath. In the first stanza, barely suppressed chaos rages through the body of the

woman as she anticipates another sexual attack. Every vein, body cell and hair follicle is excruciatingly delineated by the tenseness. In contrast to the other poems discussed, in "she," the body takes some measure of control; the "Shudder" physically expresses what the mind has decided, or has been told, it cannot express -- the repulsion about and rejection of the unwanted sexual contact. In fact, because the mind has evidently been forced into submission, and no longer argues against this forced sexual interaction, the body becomes the only vehicle through which the woman can vent her anguish and anger. Therefore, in contrast to "Blitzkrieg," where the mind takes control and chains the body into acquiescence, "she" describes the body rebelling violently, forcing the mind to "[reel] off-balance" and "[jolt] inside her head" (31, 32). One can assume, because of the abusive situation that is conveyed in the poem, that the body is unable to strike out against its dominant attacker; therefore, its angry rebellion turns inward and becomes self-destructive, "the insides of the stomach / churn[ing] / like a lawnmower / shredding / the tender lining" (26-30). The lines, which are short and choppy, are themselves little shudders, and reflect the jolting and shredding of which they speak. Enjambed, the words run into one another in a jarring fashion, mirroring the chaotic, panicked frenzy and loss of control occurring internally in the victim. Furthermore, her body is injured by the man's "burning fingers" which "sear her raw skin" (42), and his "tongue of fire / [which] scalds her helpless ear" (43-44). As the woman herself points out, these physical reactions ironize the discourse of "love," which often speaks with metaphors of heat and fire, of "burning desire" and "flame[s] of passion" (45).

Section II also ironizes the dominant discourse, bringing our understanding of the word "abused" into question. The description in lines 63-70 certainly creates an image of an abused body, although she insists that the man "would never hit her" (73). In

fact, the mental abuse that she has been subjected to has, as in section I, caused her body to rebel self-destructively. The body feels that it has been abused, and expresses this experience through "the pounding pain of her mind," "the puffiness of the swollen right eye / and upper lip," and the "itch that caused her to rake / her back with her nails, / in her sleep, / raising welts" (63-70). Not able to express herself any other way, she is "writing" her abuse on her body.

The body imagery in section III raises the issue of the problem of recovery from such sexual trauma. Although the woman is in a different sexual situation in section III, lines 87-96 echo the description of her physical reactions in section I. Thus, her "heart beat[ing] faster, / causing her blood to flow more rapidly" (87-88) is physically only marginally different from the negative image in section I of her "blood cours[ing] and boil[ing] in her veins" (4); "her skin quiver[ing] at his touch, / causing the soft hairs on her arms and the back of her neck / to rise up in excitement" (89-91) is dangerously similar to "[h]er shivering skin...feel[ing] every particle / that grazes the uplifted, goose-pimpled hair follicles" (6-7); in section III, her muscles flex, whereas in section I, they cramp. Evidently, there is a fine and confusing line between pleasure and pain; the difference lies in the mental coercion and unwillingness which the reader discovers has been present in section I. Although this manipulation and coercion is revealed only gradually and subtly in the poem, in many actual abusive relationships, the abuse is inflicted in the same way, making the recovery process all the more treacherous and difficult. Because of the insidious subtlety with which she has been abused in the past, the woman is confused by the similarity between the two situations, and unwillingly experiences the same physical reaction as she did previously. Her body betrays her, and what she originally "thinks" (87, 89) are pleasurable sensations in lines 87-96 "[hurtle her] back through time" (98) and twist into the convulsive "Shudder."

Section IV also deals with the problem of recovering from such an insidious and complex style of victimization. The woman has isolated herself, particularly sexually, from anyone "who could make her / Shudder" (129-130), although ironically she discovers that even that is not the solution. Her body, like a rebellious teenager "gone wild," has almost completely taken over, powerfully reclaiming the control stolen from it before; even non-sexual physical contact, or sexual jokes can call forth the "Shudder." However, the last lines of "she" offer hope; although expressed tentatively ("perhaps now / She can begin to learn" (146-147)), it seems that the woman will attempt to reunite her body and mind, reclaim and reintegrate her body within a newly unified self. She intends to bring the shudder under control; the fact that, at this point, the word has lost its dominating, threatening capitalization bodes well for her success. It is significant also that the woman is not attempting to (theoretically) eradicate her body through *eliminating* the shudder; instead, she wants to control it, thereby incorporating it within her self. Victims of sexual abuse realize that they will always feel the effects of their abuse, but they can learn to control negative reactions, in order to become survivors. To inject some self-conscious analysis here: in retrospect, I wonder whether this poem represents my effort to "write the body" in order to understand and reclaim it. Certainly, in writing "she," and in analyzing it, I have begun to "recreate [my] world" (Jones 361).

"she" reveals, in frightening detail, how the body of a sexually abused woman can revolt in an attempt to reclaim its power, rebelling violently against even (and in fact, most often) the woman herself. Beth Goobie's "story hour" shows the other side of this coin, as it describes a raped girl's mind twisting and rebelling against her own body, which she then consciously, and with chilling determination, tries to destroy. In a distorted parody of the *écriture féminine* concept, instead of writing the body with

pen and paper, the girl writes *on* her body with shards of glass, which she calls "silver thin penis[es]" (4). The comparison to the art of literature is even more striking when the speaker calls her pen of glass an "artist" which "sketches" (13-14). Like feminist writers, she writes her body to express to others, and to herself, how she feels about her experience of sexual assault. Sadly, though, because of her method, this act entails self-destruction. Primarily, the girl feels that the rape constituted her death, or murder; she expresses this conviction in writing (on her body) by attempting to take her own life. The first line of "story hour" draws the girl's mental connection between the rape and death; the reader is told that the raped girl is "reenact[ing]" (1) the sexual assault, and then discovers that she is committing suicide. The last stanza indicates that although others have told her that she need not view her rape as a "wound," she does view it as such, and writes this on her arm with a pen of glass, as proof which others cannot deny. Similarly, she feels responsible for the assault, although others have told her she is not; to express this, she intentionally "rapes" herself, thus symbolically insisting that she *is* responsible for the act.

Just as survivor poets use their writing to regain control over their bodies, their experiences and their lives, the young girl's actions in "story hour" represent her misguided attempt to use her "writing" for the same purpose. She believes that her body is out of control; "the face in the mirror" (2) is no longer her own face. She calls it "the" face, making it abstract and distanced, and feels it is an unmanageable, unrealistic size. Her solution is to seize control aggressively and annihilate her body: "she takes the face in the mirror, / smashes it to more realistic proportions" (2-3). Ironically, the fragments of the reflected face have become "silver thin penis[es]" (4), but at least they now reflect "a minute of *her* life, / *her* face" (5-6, my emphasis). Similarly, her life has become unbearable, as the minutes and hours that the rape took



spiral into agonizing years. Her experience of sexual assault will never be "over," because the trauma has "erased the line between / it's over and / time has unbuttoned itself" (10-12). Even time itself is dangerously out of control, as it ominously "unbutton[s] itself" into infinity -- an image chillingly reminiscent of a man unbuttoning himself (or his victim) before raping. Again, sadly, the girl's solution is to seize time and arrest it, by attempting to end her life. Finally, the girl feels powerless over her experience of sexual violence. Of course, she had no control over the attack on her; she violently reclaims power over this situation by reenacting the scenario on her own terms. *She* "hunt[s] / ...down" (19-20) her own vagina; she "is...penetrated" (22) by a glass penis directed by her own hand. Others' misunderstanding, or disagreement with her over her reaction to the rape (as mentioned above) only exacerbates this feeling of powerlessness; she feels she must vindicate herself by producing a wound for which (she believes) she is undeniably responsible. Thus, slashing her arms is not only an attempt at self-expression, but is also a desperate grasp at power and control over her own experience.

Regrettably, any power which the girl reclaims is severely qualified by the violently self-destructive nature of her actions. Furthermore, her acquisition of any power at all is highly doubtful. Even though she holds the sliver of glass in her hand, she still calls it a penis; it is still *the penis* which "is an artist" (14) sketching her vagina; it is still *the penis* "hunt[ing] / ...down" her "body / of hidden vaginas" (19-20, 17-18). And as Audre Lorde advises, "[t]he master's tools will never dismantle the master's house" (Lorde 113). Moreover, Goobie's grammatical style indicates that the girl has not regained any active control. The poet uses the grammatical technique she employed in "'victim' takes a passive verb," and significantly uses a passive verb to describe the wound on the girl's arm; the girl does not actively penetrate, but "is again

penetrated" (22). And although her suicidal actions symbolically represent her attempt to claim responsibility for the wound of her rape (because she believes that she is undeniably responsible for the reenacted "rape"), the reader recognizes that the girl is hardly responsible for the suicide attempt. Her desire for self-destruction is surely the product of her experience of sexual violence, and of the pain and consuming guilt that accompany that assault; the wound, like the rape, is the fault of the rapist, not the survivor. Essentially, the girl has gained nothing from her desperate grasp at self-expression and control, except, one hopes, the attention of someone who can counsel and help her. Ironically, the one thing that the girl has accomplished in her "writing" is what Higgins and Silver encourage feminist writers to strive for in their literature; she has, undeniably, "restor[ed] rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence" (Higgins and Silver 4).

Clearly, as Libby Scheier comments, "[i]t's hard to write a poem about rape" (Scheier, "A Poem About Rape" 1). The poets discussed in this chapter utilize many techniques in their efforts to discover a new poetic discourse(s) which will do justice to women's experiences of sexual violence. Some of the poems use a unique style and speakerly tone; others employ metaphors to help understand the trauma. Some poets and/or speakers get caught in the trap of the confessional framework; others attempt to "write the body" in order to express themselves. But these are only four aspects of the various styles and techniques used in the poetry of sexual violence. And these poems, although they are the only ones that are reasonably accessible, should not be taken as "representative" of all poetry of sexual violence. I am certain that there is much more of this material in existence -- hidden in a small collection on a top shelf in an obscure bookshop, or tucked away, unpublished, in a housewife's bedside table drawer, or even

formulating in the mind of a young girl just learning to deal with her experiences of abuse. Taken together, these poems are an integral component of the feminist literary project, illuminating a significant aspect of female life, an aspect which is itself multifaceted. To further explore the complexity of women's experiences of sexual violence, the following chapter investigates the unique perspectives of women of colour and lesbians.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **The Double Wound:**

#### **The Perspectives of Women of Colour and Lesbians**

In some ways, being sexually attacked is the same horrific experience for every woman; the woman's fear, anguish and anger seem to be common elements of any sexual assault. But in many significant ways, each experience of sexual violence is painfully individual, bringing with it its own specific trauma and path to recovery. Caught in the middle of this spectrum of communal to individual experience are several groups of women whose members often experience sexual violence in a way that is particular to their unique group. For many women of colour and lesbians (class and age are defining characteristics of other possible groups), rape is experienced within the context of their ethnicity or homosexuality. For a woman of colour who is raped by a white man, her perception<sup>3</sup> of the experience may be that the assault is not only an attack on her gender, but also on her race. Similarly, a lesbian who is raped by a man may feel violated not only as a woman, but also, more specifically, as a homosexual woman. Clearly, a lesbian woman of colour who has been sexually assaulted finds herself in an even more complex situation. Of course, it must be recognized that not every woman of colour will relate her experience of sexual assault to her race, nor will every lesbian connect her rape to her homosexuality. Furthermore, not all rapes are inter-racial (in fact, few are (MacKinnon, "A Rally Against Rape" 81)), or inter-gender. Clearly, the critic must tread a fine line between appreciating the specific dilemmas connected to the rape of women of colour and of lesbians, and the tendency to blindly categorize, or pigeon-hole, these women's experiences according to their

race or sexuality. Thus, the works discussed in this chapter are not intended to represent the views of all women of colour (or even that of all Japanese Canadians or native Canadians), or of all lesbians. They do, however, reveal the experiences of a few individual authors, theorists and/or speakers who have unique perspectives on sexual violence.

**(a) Joy Kogawa's *Obasan***

Traditionally, rape and other forms of sexual assault of women have been viewed as essentially sexual battles -- the male, with his aggressive sexual drive, imposes physical contact on a female, regardless of her desires or protests. Only recently has public consciousness begun to consider sexual violence as a political power struggle rather than something inherently or solely sexual; we now realize that the male aggressor often *uses* sexuality to establish and/or prove his domination over the female, and even over other males. Furthermore, when the rape or abuse is perpetrated by a male of one race or ethnicity against a female of a different race or ethnicity, this sexual-political aggression can take on more complex dimensions, and become a racial struggle. Indeed, the current war between the Serbians and Croats has forced the horrific reality of sexual violence into the spotlight of international attention, with the discovery that Serbian soldiers employ rape as a coldly calculated military strategy -- not only for the political aim of psychologically debilitating their opponents (male and female), but also for the racist goal of "ethnic cleansing." In fact, sexual violence as a political racist tactic has been widely utilized, albeit less overtly, for far longer than anyone would like to imagine. For many women of colour who have endured sexual violence at the hands of white men, what they have suffered is more than "just" a sexual violation; it is also a political and racial assault. These women are doubly

vulnerable and doubly victimized, because they belong not only to the oppressed gender, but also to a "minority" race. In the North American context, black women in particular have been raped and assaulted by white men for centuries; for them, this belated analysis of rape as a political and racial act rings all too true. bell hooks holds that, historically, "[r]ape as both right and rite of the white male dominating group" has been a cultural norm (hooks 57); although hooks is referring specifically to white versus black racial antagonism in the United States, clearly the conflict in the former Yugoslavia proves that her statement applies equally in a global context.

Joy Kogawa's novel *Obasan*, which contains several incidents of sexual abuse inflicted upon a young Japanese Canadian girl by an older white Canadian man and a young white Canadian boy, indicates that the same extreme expression of racism can happen, and has happened, in Canada. Although Kogawa does not explicitly investigate the political racism inherent in the sexual violations themselves, she connects the two by drawing unmistakable parallels between the sexual abuse and the xenophobic abuse inflicted upon Japanese Canadians during and after World War II. While bell hooks postulates that "[r]ape [is]...an apt metaphor for European imperialist colonization of Africa and North America" (hooks 57), Kogawa's *Obasan* reveals the unpalatable truth that the sexual assault of Japanese Canadian women and girls by white Canadian men and boys functions as a metaphor for the internment and subsequent relocation of Japanese Canadians from 1941 until 1949. According to Kogawa, white Canadian males have been no less guilty than their American counterparts of performing the "rite of rape," where "men of the dominating group sexually violate the bodies of women who are among the dominated" (hooks 57) in order to assert their racial and sexual power.

*Obasan* is most often analyzed as a "minority" text, authored by an Asian Canadian writer. A key issue within the academic criticism of the novel is the silencing, and consequent claiming of speech, of Naomi Nakane, the novel's "minority" protagonist; scholars generally interpret Naomi's tense silence as a result of the racial oppression (most explicitly manifested as wartime internment) enforced upon Japanese Canadians by white Canadians. However, the incident which Naomi pinpoints as the primary cause of her movement into negative silence is the sexual abuse she suffers at the hands of Old Man Gower, a neighbour. Before this harassment begins, Naomi shares a bond of positive, almost pre-Oedipal silence with her mother. This non-verbal communication between mother and daughter is so strong that Naomi feels directly attached to her mother through flesh and blood; her mother's blood is "whispering through my [Naomi's] veins....I am her thoughts" (Kogawa 64). Before the abuse, she believes "[t]here is nothing about me that my mother does not know, nothing that is not safe to tell" (Kogawa 60); however, once her experiences with Old Man Gower begin, she must admit that "there is one secret thing that emerges" (Kogawa 61), a secret that severs the mother-daughter bond, causing the young girl to become a parasite on her mother's body, "no longer of her mind" (Kogawa 64). The sexual violation, then, is the catalyst which throws Naomi into her descent into negative, guilt-ridden silence, as Gower lecherously instructs her: "Don't tell your mother" (Kogawa 64).

However, it would be simplistic and naïve to assume that it is the sexual violation alone that initiates and perpetuates Naomi's silence. For this is not simply a case of an older male assaulting a young girl -- it is most specifically a white, likely Anglo-Saxon (given the last name "Gower") male wielding power over a Japanese Canadian female. The act therefore symbolizes what bell hooks calls the interconnected "complexity of our experience in a racist sexist society" (hooks 62). For within Old Man Gower's

repeated act of sexual abuse, racist and sexist oppression are horribly and inextricably intertwined. This is not surprising, for "racism and sexism are interlocking systems of domination which uphold and sustain one another" (hooks 63). In order to highlight the dangerous mutuality of the two brands of victimization, Kogawa uses Naomi's experience of and reaction to sexual abuse as a metaphor to explore the Japanese Canadian situation and consciousness during wartime internment. Indeed, many of the elements of Naomi's physical violation reverberate throughout her community's experience of racial victimization; the former incident provides a microcosm through which one can investigate the latter. And although the author's method of employing sexual violence as a metaphor can be criticized (as it will be, below), it is instructive first to examine the positive result of Kogawa's technique -- the exposure of the insidious, mutually reinforcing similarity between sexual and racial abuse.

A key aspect in the description of Old Man Gower's abuse is Naomi's sense of being surrounded, enclosed, unable to escape. Even in the haven of her bedroom, Naomi can see Gower's house through her window. As a next door neighbour, his proximity to her increases his access to, and power over, Naomi, just as it augments both her sense that he is omnipresent and her feeling of vulnerable exposure. Clearly, the Japanese Canadians in the novel, surrounded by a hostile majority of white British Columbians, find themselves in a similar predicament. Naomi's vulnerability is so severe that she is not even safe in her own garage or backyard (as Gower intrudes through the bushes). Similarly, the Japanese Canadians cannot find refuge within their own homes; Aunt Emily comments that the RCMP "can search our homes without warrant" (Kogawa 85). Furthermore, the abuse assaults Naomi from all directions, closing in like a trap. It is not just the older authority figure of Old Man Gower who is free to exhibit his dominance over her, but also the younger, and thus less empowered,



Percy, who sexually harasses her a few years later. A similarly encompassing attack is launched against the Japanese Canadian community, as they are forced to endure discrimination from the authoritarian government, as well as the disdain and racial slurs of the ordinary, less powerful citizen. Indeed, the ordinary citizens seem more wrathful and overtly cruel in their attacks, perhaps because of their uneasy sense that they hold only tenuous superiority over the Japanese Canadian minority; the venomous and condescending letters to the editor and the white children's taunts represent some of the attempts of the relatively disempowered to assert dominance over the only other groups lower than themselves on the social, political and cultural totem poles. Likewise, Percy, who essentially represents Old Man Gower writ small and less powerful (significantly, Percy's surname is Bower), desperately strives to claim dominance in a similar fashion, and physically wounds Naomi, as the rock that he forces her against cuts her shoulder.

The sense of being surrounded by violence is intensified by the presence of physical enclosures, in the cases of both Naomi and the larger Japanese Canadian community. The young girl is encircled by Gower's arms as he lifts, carries and holds her. She is surrounded by grapes and vines in the arched bower in the man's garden. This is anything but a protective enclosure; rather, it hides her from the sight of anyone who might rescue her. At other times, she is trapped within Gower's dark, curtained bedroom, or locked in his bathroom. The traditionally comforting images of the human embrace, of the natural environment, and of the personal bedroom are destroyed by the presence of sexual violence. Instead, in these situations Naomi experiences only a suffocating, frightening sensation of entrapment. Similarly, Aunt Emily describes the Japanese Canadians' confinement: "Not a single person of the Japanese race who lives in the "protected area" will escape" (Kogawa 85). Initially, the people are confined to

their own houses by an enforced curfew; ironically, even this cannot give them a sense of security, because (as mentioned above) the privacy of their homes is not respected. The victims of racial abuse are then herded into animal enclosures, segregated into separate buildings and stalls; they are "forbidden to step outside the barbed wire gates and fence" (Kogawa 91). Although the government declares that this "housing" is in the Japanese Canadians' own best interests, to protect them from rising hostilities among British Columbians, clearly the internees are in the same position as Naomi -- enclosed in order to be violated.

Given the prevalence of enclosures, which always seem to become cage-like traps, it is not surprising that both Naomi and the Japanese Canadians feel that they are being treated like animals. Old Man Gower acts as if Naomi is something to be toyed with, a sexual *pet*. He handles her like a lap dog, "caress[ing] [her] head as if [she] were a small animal" (Kogawa 63). He holds the waistband of Naomi's skirt when she attempts to get away from him in the garage, thus restraining her by the criss-crossing straps pulling across her shoulders, like a leash or harness. Consequently, the young girl begins to react like a frightened animal. Her sense of feeling like a "punished dog," consumed by "abject longing, wretchedness, fear, and utter helplessness" (Kogawa 62) is revealed in her dreams of the captive Asian women (the description of these dreams is interjected into, and is closely associated with, the account of Old Man Gower's abuse); she believes that "[t]o be whole and safe I must hide in the foliage, odourless as a newborn fawn" (Kogawa 63). The internees are treated as animals in a more political manner; they are relegated to the status of domesticated livestock, "herded into the [Hastings Park] grounds and kept there like animals" (Kogawa 77), "bedded down like livestock in stalls" (Kogawa 88). In a discussion with Naomi about the Fraser Valley Relief Fund, Aunt Emily expresses the way in which she feels similar

to the "punished dog" that Naomi relates to her sexual abuse. Emily explains that, although the Japanese Canadians donate money to aid farmers who possess their confiscated farms, the former are still treated like "cringing dogs" (Kogawa 188). Some rebel explicitly against this "animalization" of the Japanese Canadians, as Fumi does, yelling, "'Are we cattle? Are we pigs?'" (Kogawa 99); some make the metaphorical connection between the Japanese Canadians and animals, as Aunt Emily does: "We are the billygoats and nannygoats and kids -- all the scapegoats" (Kogawa 88). As Naomi takes her cue from Old Man Gower and reacts like a timid, frightened animal, the Japanese Canadians also contribute to their oppression by remaining passive. Naomi often pictures them metaphorically as victimized chickens, or chicks. Aunt Emily comments that, due to the curfew, "[a]t sundown we scuttle into our holes like furtive creatures" (Kogawa 88). To an even more self-destructive extent, the community reacts like a "bunch of sheep....Polite. Meek. All the way up the slaughterhouse ramp" (Kogawa 38).

To a large extent, these docile, passive responses to abuse and oppression, both sexual and cultural, arise from an almost animalistic instinct towards self-preservation. Naomi wants to hide like a fawn, because "[i]f I am still, I will be safe" (Kogawa 62). Thus, she does not respond to Gower's words and actions, but she also does not actively fight him, hoping (like the female speaker in "Blitzkrieg") that passive acquiescence will bring a quicker end to the abuse. Similarly, the majority of Japanese Canadians obeys the governmental directives, hoping that their show of Canadian loyalty will precipitate an end to the discrimination against them. In fact, the Nisei with whom Aunt Emily is associated seem to go to great lengths to support the very government that is treating them so poorly: "All of us Nisei are intent on keeping faith and standing by....we're doing Red Cross work, buying War Savings bonds, logging

for the war industries and shipyards, benefit concerts" (Kogawa 81). After relocation, Uncle Isamu and Obasan specifically do not send Stephen and Naomi to Japanese classes, even after regular day school, because they feel that would appear overly suspicious. Many of the Japanese Canadian students at Naomi's school shorten and Anglicize their given names, in order to assimilate more easily, to be accepted by and to submit to the dominant culture. Also, the acquiescence of Naomi and her community to their victimizations is partly a result of ingrained Japanese social behaviour principles. Naomi feels forced to respect the age seniority of Old Man Gower, for she comments, "I do not resist. One does not resist adults" (Kogawa 63). Similarly, most Japanese Canadians feel obliged to yield to the greater political authority of the government. The headline of the *New Canadian* newspaper, a Japanese Canadian publication, exhorts its readers to "Have Faith in Canada" (Kogawa 81), and Aunt Emily follows this directive by clinging to her faith in the RCMP as long as possible.

Clearly, there are logical and pragmatic reasons underlying the actions of Naomi and the majority of Japanese Canadians as they accommodate the demands and oppressions of the dominant figure or group. And undeniably, neither Naomi nor her community deserve the abuse inflicted upon them. Yet both of these victims take upon themselves the shame that should, in a just world, be the burden of the victimizers. As much as Naomi wants Stephen to rescue her from Gower's bathroom, she does not cry out, because "I am ashamed. If Stephen comes he will see my shame" (Kogawa 64). Likewise, the Issei in particular are said to be "ashamed" of the Pearl Harbour bombing. Both parties feel this shame, one of the "typical symptoms" (Gottlieb 45) experienced by the rape or sexual assault victim, because both "blame themselves and...both believe that violation is somehow deserved" (Turner 92). Naomi's self-

blame and guilt are complex, manifesting themselves in several ways. Initially, she feels guilty because of the possibility that she enjoys the sexual contact with Gower, which she senses is unnatural and wrong. She shamefully guards her secret that she "go[es] to seek Old Man Gower...clamber[s] unbidden onto his lap" and finds his hands "pleasurable" (Kogawa 65). What the frightened child, and the still-confused adult Naomi cannot see is the more objective knowledge that any pleasure she may derive from the abusive experience is nevertheless not her fault; the physical sensations are uncontrollable, and therefore innocent, responses to stimuli. Moreover, Naomi's dream of the captive Asian women indicates her subconscious evaluation of the possibility that any coyness, seductiveness and eager sexuality she feels as a child in connection with Gower is in fact part of a complex power struggle forced upon her, a sexual-political battle that she tries to take control of and win, in order to extricate and save herself from Gower's dominance. In the dream, "three beautiful oriental women lay naked in the muddy road, flat on their backs, their faces turned to the sky" (Kogawa 61), prisoners of white soldiers. Stifling a "whimper or sob," one of the women uses "the only weapon she had -- her desirability" (Kogawa 61-62) and tries to seduce the soldiers. The ploy fails, and the soldiers, seeing the women as "sport," begin to shoot at their prisoners' appendages. As Erika Gottlieb notes, "The dream acts out the mutually corrupting relationship between victim and victimizer. The victim would like to win over the aggressor, to seduce him. The process is humiliating and self-destructive" (Gottlieb 45). Clearly then, Naomi is not simply engaging in a sinful activity with relish; she is the confused victim of sexual, political, racial and mental abuse, abuse so pervasive and effective that she ironically and erroneously blames herself for it. However, Naomi does not make any of these connections or conclusions consciously, and thus cannot expiate her sense of guilt. Furthermore, this translates

into another form of self-punishment, as Naomi's self-blame causes her to believe that her "complicity" in the sinful activity has severed her from her mother, has caused her mother to abandon her. Before the abuse, Naomi is a branch attached to her mother's tree trunk; however, "in Mr. Gower's hands I become other -- a parasite on her body...My arms are vines that strangle the limb to which I cling" (Kogawa 64).

Shortly after the harassment begins, Naomi's mother leaves for Japan, causing the young girl to make the incorrect assumption that there is a direct connection between her sexual activity and her mother's departure. Naomi's resultant guilt, confusion and self-loathing swirl like a whirlpool in her consciousness, from the time of her mother's departure into Naomi's adulthood. She has lost the pre-Oedipal, non-verbal communication with her mother, and descends into what she believes is a self-protective muteness, because "[i]f I speak, I will split open and spill out" (Kogawa 63). Of course, this guilt-ridden aphasia is a negative, gnawing silence that she feels saws her legs apart.

The Japanese Canadians also experience the victim's "typical symptom" of unwarranted shame, which in turn causes them to believe that their racial violation is somehow deserved or justified. Aunt Emily indicates that many of the Japanese Canadians feel "betrayed [by] and ashamed [of]" (Kogawa 80) the Pearl Harbour bombing. Their shame and fear of complicity, or "guilt by racial association," dictates the majority of their responses to the wartime situation. Rather than express anger or resentment at the treatment that internees receive, Uncle Isamu speaks with reverent appreciation: "In the world, there is no better place...This country is the best. There is food. There is medicine. There is pension money. Gratitude. Gratitude" (Kogawa 42). Furthermore, as Margaret Turner points out, "when the Fraser Valley floods, the Japanese Canadians from whom the land was confiscated contribute generously to the

relief fund" (Turner 92). The community seems eager to prove its loyalty in order to expiate its sense of responsibility and self-blame; the Japanese Canadians feel the need to make retribution for a deed committed by their race, an act for which they are not accountable. Moreover, Naomi seems to believe that the Japanese Canadian community is partly to blame for -- and thus should feel shame for -- its own victimization. Just as Naomi colludes in her own oppression by remaining silent, by not calling out to Stephen, the Japanese Canadians crowd together like a flock of sheep, leaving themselves vulnerable to attack. She describes the people as a group of chickens congregated in a yard, flapping, squawking and lunging for safety from a diving hawk (Kogawa 188-9). Marilyn Russell Rose notes that "[t]he implication is clear: some victims are naturals; they flock together, emphasizing their visibility, and invite death from the sky; they ask for it, silly creatures that they are, and hence *in their own eyes* have no right to complain" (Rose 223). Apparently, Japanese Canadians must shoulder the blame not only for the bombing of Pearl Harbour, but also for the discriminatory treatment which they themselves endure at the hands of the Canadian government. Ironically, (but not surprisingly,) Naomi's attitude is likely a product of her frustration with her own silence, vulnerability, self-blame and shame; sadly, rather than deal with her anger with herself, Naomi transforms that emotion into a condescending anger at her race.

The power of language and surface appearances to disguise and distort "reality" provides another link between Naomi's personal sexual abuse and Japanese Canadians' communal racial oppression. Both parties are tricked by deceptions, and also must watch, from their captive state, while the distortions deceive others as well. Naomi's first experience with this trickery is the metaphorical hoax of Old Man Gower's garden. The yard may, superficially, seem to be the typical "Edenic" pleasant garden, filled

with "bushes, flowering trees...and flowers"; it is furnished with an almost religious temple formed by grape vines, which contains a crude altar made of a "wooden slab across two stones" (Kogawa 62). At the very least, it would seem that this garden should be a safe, relaxing haven, if not an overtly religious place. However, Naomi discovers that the garden is a "jungle" that also breeds "weeds" (Kogawa 62). As explained above, neither the garden nor the temple-like bower creates an atmosphere of safety for Naomi; the only thing they protect her from is rescue. What goes on in Gower's backyard is anything but pleasant, religious or relaxing for Naomi -- clearly, appearances and pre-conceptions are dangerously misleading. Also, Old Man Gower turns language into an instrument of domination. He tells Naomi that he must take her to his house in order to treat a scratch on her knee; although Naomi realizes this is a lie, she cannot argue with the words of authority. Later, Gower uses his assertive statement "'She's hurt her knee...I'm fixing it'" (Kogawa 64) to deceive Stephen, Naomi's potential rescuer. Although the terrified Naomi knows that this statement severely distorts the truth, she must sit quietly while Stephen believes the story and is fooled by the appearance of a kind old man giving him money to buy candy. While Gower's imperative dictate "'Don't tell your mother'" does not specifically deceive Naomi, the silence that it enforces fools others into thinking there is nothing amiss, and also throws her into many subsequent self-deceptions throughout her life.

Old Man Gower's use of language to conceal his assault is echoed in Aunt Emily's words, "'With language like that you can disguise any crime'" (Kogawa 34). Emily, however, is referring to the government's "dialect," which is constructed of phrases crafted to conceal the discriminatory nature of the internment policies. For example, what Emily labels "prisons," the government terms "'Interior Housing Projects'" (Kogawa 34). Naomi eventually discovers that "Sick Bay" is not a body of



water, and the "Pool" is not something in which one swims (admittedly, these terms probably would not have fooled an adult, but their ambiguity does play a part in Naomi's childhood confusion). Of course, the white media's written language often distorts the Japanese Canadian "truth" as well; the most glaring instance of this occurs in the newspaper clipping that calls the Japanese evacuee beet workers "[g]rinning and happy" (Kogawa 197). As Naomi comments, "That is one telling. It's not how it was" (Kogawa 197). The deception ensconced in the language used by both Gower and white Canadians is a strategy which leads to power over, and confusion of the victimized groups; the victims' confusion and subsequent lack of confidence and knowledge perpetuate their position of subjugation.

Perhaps the most pervasive and painful result of the sexual and racial victimization is the consequent splintering of families. Furthermore, this fragmentation of the family contributes to the dominant entity's (whether the entity be Gower or white Canadians) goal of increased and sustainable control; by disrupting the basic social unit of the victim, the victimizers ensure that the subordinate group lacks the unity and communal support required to foster effective resistance to the oppression. Because Naomi has been ordered by Gower not to reveal the sexual abuse, and because she feels that the intimate bond with her mother is severed by her "betrayal" of her mother's love, she is determined to guard her secret, and the guilt and shame attached to it. She thereby denies herself any opportunity for familial support and help in recovering from the sexual trauma. Consequently, she allows herself to remain Gower's physical victim for what must have seemed a long period of time in her childhood, as well as his psychological victim well into adulthood. The Japanese Canadian situation is somewhat different; whereas Naomi's isolation from her family is probably not Gower's conscious objective, the Canadian government specifically sets out to separate families and break

up communities, in order to guarantee that the Japanese Canadian population will remain permanently scattered throughout Canada (or preferably, from the government's point of view, that those of Japanese origin will return to Japan). Subject, then, to a much more organized force with a focussed agenda, the Japanese Canadians in *Obasan* are also forced to suffer the extreme splintering of both family and community units. In Naomi's experience, her mother is essentially coerced into remaining in Japan, her fraternal grandparents are separated from the family, her father and Uncle Isamu disappear and reappear with little or no warning, and Aunt Emily and Grandfather Kato seem to desert the rest of the family to live in Toronto. The only constant figures in the little girl's life are her aunt, Obasan, and brother Stephen. On the larger communal scale, much of Emily's diary entries, which form the centre of the novel, are taken up with descriptions of searches, losses and a few fortunate discoveries of family and friends. Naomi highlights the destruction of social ties and sense of ominous pressure inflicted on the Japanese Canadians by the government when she comments,

The fact is that families already fractured and separated were permanently destroyed. The choice to go east of the Rockies or to Japan was presented without time for consultation with separated parents and children. Failure to choose was labelled non-cooperation. Throughout the country, the pressure was on. (Kogawa 183)

This traditional "divide and conquer" strategy of fragmenting the community does thwart any concerted and effective attempt at Japanese Canadian protest or rebellion. Emily laments that "morale would be high[er]" if everyone could be "*together*" (Kogawa 91). Indeed, Emily's sadly perceptive analysis of the experience applies both to the splintering of Japanese Canadian communities and to the severing of Naomi's ties with her mother: "To a people for whom community [or a mother-daughter

relationship] was the essence of life, destruction of community [or of that mother-daughter bond] was the destruction of life" (Kogawa 186).

In *Obasan*, Joy Kogawa shows the reader that racism and sexism are inextricably linked forms of abuse. This becomes obvious as one investigates and compares the aspects and emotions that are connected with both Naomi's experience of sexual assault and with the Japanese Canadian population's racial victimization. In fact, the crimes are frighteningly similar in how and why they are committed, by whom and against whom they are committed, and how the survivors react to the trauma. The abuse young Naomi suffers at the hands of Old Man Gower encapsulates the essential pains, dilemmas and repercussions of both sexual and political-racist oppression; in fact, this incident captures the important issues so well that it is appropriated for use as a metaphor for the racial discrimination faced by Naomi's cultural community. Earlier in this thesis, I criticized E.M. Forster for exploiting the uncertainty surrounding an accusation of sexual assault and using it as a metaphor for the unfathomable mystery of India; it seems, now, that Kogawa is guilty of similar appropriation of an actual incident of sexual abuse. To some extent, this is true; however, I do not find the technique quite so offensive in Kogawa's novel as in Forster's. This is because, at least initially, the result of Kogawa's method is that Naomi's narrative highlights the mutuality and similarity of sexual and racial abuse, the symbiotically sustaining relationship that the two can have; Forster's purpose, on the other hand, is merely to exploit the issue of sexual violence in order to serve his racial argument. And although Kogawa does sacrifice sexual concerns to racial ones, at least the latter are Naomi's *own* racial concerns. Conversely, in *A Passage to India*, the repudiation of sexual issues means the rejection of the woman's (Adela's) perspective altogether. However, while it is surely important to draw attention to the interconnected nature of these two

forms of victimization, (which *Obasan* effectively does, by linking the aspects of and reactions to the crimes so closely), the danger lies in "valorizing" *either* sexual or racial abuse (albeit negatively) as being more repugnant and/or traumatic, or, more specifically, in identifying one or the other embodiment of oppression as being more dominant in a given crime. For in so doing, one risks establishing yet another hierarchy, a ranking which dictates which sort of discrimination, racist or sexist and so on, is more prevalent, or more violent and painful, or more deserving of attention. bell hooks holds that it is this brand of "dualistic thinking that helps reinforce and maintain all forms of domination" (hooks 62). hooks questions "[w]hy must people decide whether this crime is more sexist than racist, as if these are competing oppressions?", and instead insists upon working towards a "critical awareness of...racism and sexism...[as] interlocking systems of domination" (hooks 62).

Indeed, by utilizing Naomi's sexual assault as a metaphorical microcosm functioning to reflect and highlight the "larger" issue of racial domination, and by thus denying the gender-oriented issue of sexual violation full narratological development and exploration, Kogawa grants the racial concerns more validity and importance in her text, at the cost of devaluing and denying the specificity of the very female experience of sexual domination. While it is surely extreme to suggest that employing the sexual abuse metaphor to comment on racial victimization is similar in essence to using sexual abuse to inflict racial victimization, the hierarchical ordering of oppressions is undeniably present in both cases. In *Obasan*, the sexual trauma is subsumed within the larger rubric of the political oppression of Japanese Canadians; the former is described explicitly only once, and then, as a subject in its own right, is left behind, arrested in narratological growth. If Kogawa had allowed a psychological recovery from this physical assault to evolve parallel to Naomi's development of racial consciousness, the

novel could have provided a liberating example of how, although racism and sexism may be intertwined, a doubly marginalized subject of the "minority" woman of colour can successfully overcome both these obstacles. Instead, *Obasan* indicates that one must choose which battle to fight, leaving one or the other of the elements of one's being to atrophy.

For although it seems that Naomi makes an incredible recovery from her past traumatic experiences, ultimately integrating and coming to peace with her previously confused, disparate character, upon close inspection, one discovers that any recuperation Naomi achieves is solely in relation to her racial identity. Indeed, a recreation of her injured sexual identity is not explored as a possibility at all. She recalls the abuse, as she recalls many other incidents in her life, but the self-healing movement through which she progresses with regards to her racial consciousness (which can be simplistically categorized as denial, remembering, anger and resolution/reintegration) does not occur with regards to sexual recuperation. Although Naomi has learned (through her experience of telling Penny Barker about her (Naomi's) father's death,) that she must tell someone, or verbally express, a traumatic event before she can begin to deal with the reality and aftermath of it, she never tells anyone about her abuse at the hands of Old Man Gower and Percy Bower.

Furthermore, at the outset of the novel, the reader discovers that the thirty-six year old Naomi is, according to her own admission and her students' accusations, an "old maid" and "spinster" (Kogawa 8); she has no confidence in her sexual attractiveness, asserting that she is "no bargain on the marriage market" and has "the social graces of a common housefly" (Kogawa 7-8). While one certainly does not need to be married to prove a healthy sexuality, it seems that Naomi's unmarried status is not her own choice, at least not consciously. Unabashedly self-denigrating, she

sarcastically comments that her family must have "crone-prone syndrome", and that she and her aunt should "hire [them]selves out for a research study" (Kogawa 8). Aunt Emily, the other "crone" in the family, appears quite content with being single, dismissing the subject of marriage with a snorting "'knh' through her nose" (Kogawa 216), whereas Naomi bitterly dislikes her spinsterhood. Noticeably uncomfortable with talk of marriage and romantic love, Naomi lacks the authority and self-confidence to end the discussion with her students, and, significantly, loses control of her classroom to a red-headed boy named Sigmund (one cannot miss the allusion to Freud). Sigmund aggressively interrogates Naomi about her marital status, symbolically questioning her sexuality. Naomi's tenseness, lack of self-control and uneasiness about the issue most likely stem from her unresolved sexual trauma. However, this possibility is not explored within the text, and, therefore, is not resolved. Ironically, Naomi only gains control over the discussion, and Sigmund, by being forced to leave (or escape) the classroom to receive a telephone call. Moreover, Naomi only describes one instance of romantic involvement, which is a date with the widowed father of one of her students. This attempt at a relationship is shown to fail because of her ethnicity, and the widower's social ineptitude and ignorant curiosity about her "Japanese-ness." It is possible that Naomi is nervous and seemingly unattractive (she considers herself to be so) because of deeply ingrained fears of becoming involved in relationships and potential physical contact, fears which arise out of her unresolved memories of sexual abuse. This avenue is not investigated, however, as the text's racial considerations take precedence over gender issues once again.

If one is to believe that Naomi recuperates from her sexual trauma at all, one must assume that this recovery is subsumed under, and included in, her general resolution of her racial identity and past. Again, this is rather a grand assumption

which elides and discounts the specificity of her gender-based experience. The only area where the reader may find hope for Naomi's genuine sexual recovery is in the protagonist's reintegration with the spirit of her mother. This reunion could indicate some degree of rehabilitation, because as a young girl, Naomi believed that her sexual interaction with Old Man Gower was the cause of her mother's departure. And although the mature Naomi realizes that her childhood assumption was incorrect, the guarding of her guilty secret over the years has caused a mental, psychological rift between Naomi and her mother, in Naomi's mind. Thus, the protagonist's almost prayer-like communion with her mother's spirit at the conclusion of the novel would seem to offer some hope that Naomi has absolved herself of the shame and guilt she has felt since the age of four. Since it was this guilt that severed the bond with her mother, only the resolution of that emotion would allow Naomi to re-establish a strong maternal connection, if only in spirit. However, in the section where she communes with her mother, there is a negative reference to the sexual assault, indicating that Naomi has not truly healed. The protagonist dreams of a small child with a wound on her knee; given the previously-told story of the assault, the reader recognizes that the child represents Naomi during her period of sexual abuse. But the child bears more than just a scratch on her knee:

The wound on her knee is on the back of her skull, large and moist. A double wound. The child is forever unable to speak. The child forever fears to tell. I apply a thick bandage but nothing can soak up the seepage. I beg that the woundedness may be healed and that the limbs may learn to dance. But you stay in a black and white photograph, smiling your yasashi smile.

Gentle Mother, we were lost together in our silences. Our wordlessness was our mutual destruction. (Kogawa 243)

Evidently, neither Naomi's recovery from the trauma of sexual abuse nor her reintegration with her mother is complete. She clearly feels doubly wounded -- both physically and mentally (in the context of the novel as a whole, the "double wound" could refer to the two injuries caused by the two types of victimization to which she falls prey). The wound on the back of her skull represents the psychological injury that the abuse caused; it is not even a "psychological *scar*" (which would suggest some amount of healing), but is an actively gaping, seeping wound. The dream child, symbolizing the hurt child still within Naomi, indicates that Naomi, to some extent, is still "unable to speak," still "fears to tell" (Kogawa 243). The sense of communion with the mother becomes qualified here, because the mother cannot, or will not help, even spiritually; she remains frozen and smiling benignly in an old photograph. Thus, the connection that Naomi can forge between herself and her mother does not entail a cathartic breaking of silence, but rather a gentle acknowledgement and understanding of their "mutual destruction" in "wordlessness" (Kogawa 243). The communion Naomi comes to share with her is the sense that they both were deluded by the concept that silence is the best method of dealing with, and protecting others from, traumatic experiences.

But perhaps this criticism falls too heavily into the trap of accusing Kogawa of being non-feminist because she places her racial concerns foremost. Admittedly, the author does appropriate the sexual assault of Naomi for use as a comparative metaphor; she does devalue this specifically gender-oriented experience by treating it only as an instructive adjunct to the issue of the racial victimization of Japanese Canadians and by thus not granting it validity and significance as a subject in its own right -- and these non-feminist tendencies should not be ignored. Conversely though, Kogawa's project in *Obasan* is intensely, daringly and truly feminist, in that she brings to light the



particular plight of the "minority woman," a figure excluded from feminist practice and discourse for too long. Her text is significantly influential, for she is one of the first Canadian authors to address the dilemma that Trinh Minh-ha identifies as the female "minority" writer's three conflicting identities: "Writer of color? Woman writer? Or woman of color? Which comes first? Where does she place her loyalties?" (Minh-ha 6). While interlocking racial and sexual abuse can have negative critical results (particularly where one brand of victimization is accorded more status than the other), revealing the interconnectedness of race and gender challenges the "dangerous totalizing tendenc[y] of academic feminism" (Goellnicht 120) to define "'female' from the assumption that the experience of white females is the 'standard' female experience, from which all others (negatively) deviate" (Sondra O'Neale, quoted in Goellnicht 130). As *Obasan* investigates how racism and sexism are linked oppressions, Kogawa's novel opens the door to explore how anti-racism and feminism can be mutually supportive liberations.

**(b) Beatrice Culleton's *In Search of April Raintree***

Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* stands as a compelling indictment of Canada's treatment of Japanese Canadians, proving that our country is not a model of multiculturalism and protector of human rights, as it often likes to present itself in international circles. In fact, Canada's history of racial intolerance -- indeed, racism -- reaches far back before World War II. Since the first European arrived on Canadian soil, Europeans and their Canadian descendants have abused and victimized, both systemically and physically, the original inhabitants of this country, as well as the land to which the native peoples feel so intimately connected. In Beatrice Culleton's novel *In Search of April Raintree*, this violent imperialism twists together with patriarchal sexism and takes a horribly

concrete form, as two white men abduct, assault and rape April Raintree, a young Métis woman. In the cause of the attack, in the rape itself and in its aftermath, the reader is shown how sexism and racism mutually support, and in fact encourage, each other. However, as the introduction to this chapter mentions, no rape or sexual assault is, or should be, easily categorized. To analyze April's rape solely from the angle of her ethnicity would elide and underestimate the full complexity of her experience, for in some ways, April's experience is similar to, and she perceives it as being similar to, the trauma suffered by any raped woman, native or non-native.

Culleton puts a subtle, interesting twist on the issue of sexual violence, for the attack on (but not the rape of) April is actually requested by another woman. Court proceedings reveal that the rapists mistook April for their intended victim, her sister, Cheryl; further testimony reveals that Sylvia Gurnan, angered by Cheryl's involvement with Sylvia's boyfriend, asked her brother, Stephen Gurnan, to "scare" Cheryl. Although Sylvia did not request the *rape*, she clearly initiated the attack -- and thus must bear partial responsibility for the chain of events which she precipitated. This scenario provides a sad example of how patriarchal society can pit women against one another, causing them to betray each other in the struggle to retain even an unworthy man (in this case, Mark DeSoto, an abusive pimp), because they are taught that a man makes them worthwhile, makes them whole -- that without him, they are vulnerable and powerless. Caught at the bottom of the patriarchal hierarchy, women like Sylvia fight viciously against other women in order to protect the (qualified) power and status they believe that they have obtained through their relationship with a man. Ironically, Sylvia has manipulated the very violence<sup>4</sup> which can also threaten her, in order to protect herself from being "manless" and hence, in her perception, vulnerable to that violence herself (although we know that she is subject to sexual violence even when --

and perhaps to an even greater extent when -- she is in a relationship with a man). However, this is not only, or even primarily, a gender-based issue of a woman "stealing another woman's man," for it is significant that Sylvia venomously addresses Cheryl as a "squaw" (Culleton 222), and then repeats the slur, insisting that, not only does she "share [her] man with no one," she "[e]specially" does not share him with "no squaw" (Culleton 222). Cheryl's race compounds the power relation between the two women. Sylvia, possibly in a powerless and abused position in her relationship with Mark (he abuses Cheryl, so he probably abused Sylvia), and certainly trapped in an inferior position within the patriarchal hierarchy, takes out her rage and frustration upon the one person lower than herself in that hierarchy -- a non-white woman -- using her relative position of power over Cheryl to do so. But the conflict is *also* not only, or even primarily, a race issue, with Sylvia being prejudiced solely against Cheryl's race, for Sylvia is (or at least thinks she is) in a relationship with Mark, who is "as much an Indian as [Cheryl is]" (Culleton 222). In fact, it is the intimate combination of Cheryl's gender and her race<sup>5</sup> that angers and offends Sylvia, causing her to be so vengefully defensive. As Adrienne Rich explains, "women...are trained to identify with men....Identification with women *as women*," within or across race boundaries, "is still profoundly problematic" ("Disloyal to Civilization" 287). Sylvia and Cheryl are in similar situations in their struggle as women, but they occupy different positions in the patriarchal racist hierarchy. Because the patriarchy declares that "*from [our] difference we [women] each must turn away; that we must also flee from our likeness*" (Rich, "Disloyal to Civilization" 310), they are pitted against each other -- which causes Sylvia, ironically, to use the same tool her oppressors wield over her, to oppress another.

During the actual rape, sexism and racism against April are again intimately and insidiously intertwined. Again, it must be noted that the men were not instructed by Sylvia to actually rape April (Cheryl), but only to "scare" her. As much as Sylvia triggered the chain of events, then, it is still the men who ultimately decide to violate April sexually. Although it is not overtly mentioned in the scene, the conscientious reader must question whether the fact that April is Métis influences that decision. As a woman in a patriarchal society, April is "rapable;" but does her race make her any *more* rapable? Clearly, white men do constantly rape white women as well. But bell hooks's assertion that "[i]n a white supremacist sexist society all women's bodies are devalued, but white women's bodies are more valued than those of women of color" (hooks 62) leads one to believe that the odds of the men raping April, whom they know is a Métis woman, are far greater than if she had been white. Indeed, when the leader of the attackers first makes reference to the fact that he intends to rape her, the comment comes directly after (and is thus likely connected to) a lecherously condescending remark about her race: "'So, you're a real fighting squaw, huh? That's good 'cause I like my fucking rough.' He laughed at that" (Culleton 140).

Admittedly, what the men do to April, although it is degrading and brutal, is no different from the humiliation and pain that many white rapists inflict upon many white women. However, it is quite probable that the attackers feel that they have license to be so vicious *because* April is of a "minority" race. Not only does hooks's statement indicate this possibility, but the lead rapist's repeated verbal attacks on April's race also lend credence to the argument, for he continually calls her a "little savage" (Culleton 142). In fact, the men's final words to April, as they speed off, leaving her slumped on the roadside, are "'Fucking squaw!'" (Culleton 145). And although the leader of the rapists expresses many attitudes towards April that any white rapist might have

towards a white victim, he twists the (clearly self-serving) ideas even further, connecting them with the fact that his victim is part Indian. Thus, he combines his ignorant, but common, sexist concept that April should be grateful with his own equally ignorant racism:

"Hey, you guys, we're going to have to teach this little Indian some manners. I'm trying to make her feel good and she pulls away. The ungrateful bitch." (Culleton 141)

He merges his repugnant, but typical, sexist idea that his victim is only pretending to fight him off, that in fact she actually wants him to rape her, with an equally ludicrous racist notion:

"You little savages like it rough, eh?...Hey, she likes this, boys. These squaws really dig this kind of action. They play hard to get and all the time they love it." (Culleton 142-143)

There is no way of telling exactly why the white men feel that they can "get away with" more because April is Métis: perhaps they believe that a native woman, because of her low position in a "white supremacist sexist society" (hooks 62), is less likely than a white woman to tell anyone about her rape, or to seek or receive legal support against the white rapists; perhaps they think that a native woman who does tell is less likely to be believed than a white woman; perhaps they assume that, even if she is believed, they are less likely to be punished for their crime than if they had abused a white woman; perhaps they do not think at all, but simply hear the insidious whisper of racism reassuring them that what they are doing is, if not sanctioned, at least ignored by the white majority. Most probably, it is a combination of all of these reasons. But whatever their reasoning, it is clear that April's white rapists abuse and rape with the purpose of violating not only her gender, but also her race.

After the rape, April experiences many of the typical reactions that any survivor of sexual violence must face. She is afraid, even to the extent of a momentary fear when she is back at the location of the crime with the police, that the RCMP officers will attack her. She feels that her own body is dirty, sullied, and constantly enacts a "ritual of trying to exorcise the evil within [herself] by bathing" (Culleton 160); she scrubs herself desperately and vigorously, hoping to "get rid of the smell of their awful slimy bodies, the awful memories" (Culleton 160). When this attempt at self-cleansing fails, April feels an intense anger and desire for vengeance: "I wanted them to feel my anguish. I wanted to gouge their eyes out. I wanted to whip the life out of them. Mutilate them. Kill them. Because bathing never worked" (Culleton 161). Clearly, any concept of being racially violated is not foremost on April's mind, as she displays the traumatic gender-based reactions of any victim of sexual assault.

Happily, the justice system treats her "fairly" (by which I mean, as fairly as it treats any female survivor of sexual violence), in that her accusation and case are handled without regard to her race. Although April "expected that [the RCMP officers] would insinuate [she] had somehow provoked the rape" (an insinuation that could arise just as easily from a prejudice against her race as from one against her gender), the police implied nothing of the kind, and were "soft-spoken and kind" (Culleton 147). Although testifying at the preliminary hearing and trial of Oliver Donnelly is intensely difficult for April, such an experience, unfortunately, is not unusual for any rape victim; the fact that she is Métis never becomes an issue in the courts. Even when April distrusts the justice system, she is not expressing any fear that it will discriminate against her because she is native. As a raped woman, though, her despair is no less poignant: "I sighed at the hopelessness of so-called justice. Mostly because there was

nothing for the victim. Nothing, especially for victims of sexual assaults, except humiliation in and out of the courtrooms" (Culleton 153-154).

Indeed, April does not seem to feel that the sexual attack on her has anything to do with her race; she insists that "[she] tried to fathom why they would do such a thing, but [she] couldn't. It was beyond reason" (Culleton 148). Although she does frequently wonder why her attackers repeatedly called her a "squaw," she is attempting to solve the mystery of how they knew she is Métis (her shamefully guarded secret), rather than drawing the connection that they may have raped her because she is Métis:

I began wondering for the hundredth time why they had kept on calling me squaw. Was it obvious? That really puzzled me. Except for my long black hair, I really didn't think I could be mistaken as a native person. Mistaken? There's that shame again. (Culleton 161)

But perhaps her refusal to regard her race as a factor in the rape is actually a subconscious denial of what she knows is a possibility. Indeed, that possibility would be a difficult one for April to ignore, given her attackers' incessant racial slurs against her. She does, on a limited number of occasions, indicate that she has considered her race as an element of her sexual assault experience. In two brief instances, she identifies herself with other raped *native* women: when she questions, "[w]hat would I and other 'squaws' get out of my going to court?", and when she laments that she is a "victim of my own sister's folly. A victim of Sylvia's revenge. Another victim of being native. No matter how hard I tried, I would always be forced into the silly petty things that concerned native life" (Culleton 153, 183). In fact, it is probable that her refusal to acknowledge that race may have caused, or at least compounded, the sexual violence perpetrated against her is caught up in her overall denial of her own identity. For April, being Métis is a complex and overwhelmingly negative position:

It would be better to be a full-blooded Indian or full-blooded Caucasian. But being a half-breed, well, there's just nothing there....what have the Métis people got? Nothing. (Culleton 156-157)

Her native identity is something she often attempts to hide from others; she denies to herself and everyone else that she has any connection to, or caring for, Métis or native people. Thus, it is not surprising that she would reject the idea that that part of her directly or indirectly caused, or at least affected, the abuse inflicted upon her.

One positive connection between April's rape experience and her native identity occurs when the Indian Pow Wow which April and Cheryl attend helps to rejuvenate her, relieving some of the pain and anguish that she has recently endured. At this point in the novel, April draws strength and healing from her native background:

I was impressed by all the sights and sounds. It went deeper than just hearing and seeing. It felt good. I felt alive. There were stirrings of pride, regret and even an inner peace. For the first time in my life I felt as if all of that was part of me, as if I was a part of it. (Culleton 166)

However, this positive connection is short-lived, for once she returns to the harsh reality of the city, "the scenes [she sees]...on Main St. gradually made that weekend's emotions disappear" (Culleton 173). She returns to her "original evaluation of these people," insisting that she feels "no affection towards any of the native peoples" (Culleton 173). Clearly, April refuses to draw upon the strength and positive qualities of her native background which could help her heal the double wound -- for it is both a gender and a racial attack -- left by the sexual assault; in the end, it is Roger<sup>6</sup> whom she believes assists her in overcoming the traumatic aftermath of her experience. Sadly, April's experience of rape and her Métis identity do not work together -- for if they did, they could, ironically, be mutually beneficial. But she does not allow the native community or native spirituality to help her heal, and the sexual assault does not precipitate her reintegration with her Métis heritage, except for a brief weekend. What



causes April to turn back to her race, to "accept [her] identity" (Culleton 228), is her sister Cheryl's tragic suicide, and the promise for the future (and April's responsibility for it) embodied in Cheryl's young son, Henry Lee.

### **(c) The Lesbian Perspective**

When I originally envisioned this section of chapter 3, I imagined that it would work well as a companion piece to the section concerning race, revealing yet another important facet of women's experience of sexual violence -- an entirely different, but equally significant, perspective on the issue. After reading and researching, though, I realized that this section would have to be much more brief than the discussion of race, because, quite simply, there is next to no (accessible, or unencoded) Canadian lesbian writing on rape and sexual abuse, other than literature dealing with incest. In fact, I discovered only one work about rape, a poem written by Karen Augustine, a lesbian of colour. Surely this lack of material is not because lesbians are not sexually assaulted by men<sup>7</sup>; in fact, I will show below, it is quite likely that they are. It seems more probable that the dominant patriarchal discourse, although it is now allowing accounts of heterosexual stranger rape and incest to surface, is still not prepared to face or understand the sexual violation of homosexual women, and thus suppresses literature on the subject.

But although lesbians are generally silenced on this issue, I believe that they possess perhaps the most revolutionary and "radical" perspective on it. Because, at least in their private lives, lesbian women live, in a sense, outside of the restrictive, sexist dictates of the patriarchy, they may have the most assertive, self-liberating and self-respecting definition of sexual violation. Because lesbians openly admit ("openly" being a relative term -- they may openly admit only to themselves, or perhaps to a

circle of close friends, or perhaps to everyone) that they do not desire men's sexual attention, they can confidently define sexual violation as *any* unwanted sexual contact forced by a man. Conversely, heterosexual women, directly faced with the "rights" of men within the patriarchy, and with men's scathing derisiveness towards women's "radical feminist notions," feel more unsure about where to "draw the line" of violation; they frequently feel that they must endure a certain amount of what they would otherwise prefer to define as sexual abuse. For many heterosexual women, this is compounded by the fact that, as Catherine MacKinnon explains, there is only a fine line of distinction between sexual assault, rape and ordinary heterosexual sexual relations ("Sex and Violence" 88). Clearly, we have returned to the issue of the *definition* of sexual violence. In the first chapter of this thesis, I suggest that women's writing of sexual abuse is essential, in order to establish and promote a feminist definition of, and discourse of, that abuse. I think it is worthwhile to recall Catherine MacKinnon here:

The crime of rape...is defined around penetration. That seems to me a very male point of view on what it means to be sexually violated. And it is exactly what heterosexuality as a social institution is fixated around, the penetration of the penis into the vagina....What women experience as degrading and defiling when we are raped includes as much that is distinctive to us as is our experience of sex.... [penetration] is not all there is to what was intrusive or expropriative of a woman's sexual wholeness." ("Sex and Violence" 87)

As MacKinnon points out, the common definition of rape is not only sexist, but is also heterosexist. And while it is essential that all women define our own interpretation of sexual violence, it is equally important that lesbians in particular delineate their understanding of the term as well, because theirs will be different. Indeed, heterosexual women could probably benefit and learn from the lesbian example. Karen Augustine's poem reveals one example of a broad, assertive lesbian definition of sexual

violation, for although the piece is entitled "*Joe/Rape Poem*" (my emphasis), the speaker's attacker does not actually penetrate her with his penis. But even though he "only" abuses her with his hand, the pain, "humiliation/degradation/violation" that she endures is significant enough for her to define it as "sexual violence / called rape" (44, 46-47). Many heterosexual women would probably agree with this liberating (in that it gives women power to establish what violates them, thus, in a sense, giving them control over their own bodies, ) definition, but it is the lesbian poem that implicitly delineates this definition. Presumably then, the literature of lesbian women survivors, written from their unique perspective of homosexuality, could elucidate another interesting, and potentially liberating definition of sexual violence, opening up a fresh and more expansive discourse on that topic. So although the majority of this section is extrapolative, and founded almost solely on theory and not actual literature, I feel that it is essential to include my speculations in this thesis.

As Catherine MacKinnon points out throughout her article "*Sex and Violence: A Perspective*," to discuss rape and sexual assault only as abuses of power, not of sexuality, does not allow for a critique of sexuality *as* a power hierarchy. Clearly, in a patriarchal society, sexuality *is* a power structure itself -- a heterosexist hierarchy in which heterosexual males are located at the top, and homosexual females are forced to the bottom. Once we seriously consider the sexuality of rape and other forms of sexual abuse, the heterosexism present in almost all discourse, patriarchal or feminist, about sexual violence becomes apparent. For, generally speaking, it is assumed that, although a raped woman may feel that her gender has been abused, or that her race has been attacked, and although she will clearly feel that she has been violated sexually, her *sexuality*<sup>8</sup> has not been challenged or attacked. We assume this because we also tend to assume, however subconsciously, that all raped women are heterosexual. So while the

concept of a (white) man employing sex as a political tool to dominate a woman's gender and/or race is commonly analyzed, what is rarely discussed is the possibility of a heterosexual man using sex as a political tool to dominate -- indeed, punish -- a homosexual woman. In this scenario, sex and politics are intimately intertwined; *sexuality* is the political issue, as opposed to gender and race, the political issues in the other instances. The possibility of this scenario occurring within a heterosexist society seems more than likely, for many men, particularly sexist, narrow-minded men lacking in self-confidence (whom, by no coincidence, are often the type of men who rape), view lesbianism either as sick deviance, or as an aggressive challenge to their masculinity and patriarchal safety -- both of which are often viewed by these men as deserving punishment. Adrienne Rich explains the ideology of compulsory heterosexuality (which is to heterosexism what white supremacy is to racism) as "the enforcement of heterosexuality for women as a means of assuring male right of physical, economical, and emotional access. One of many means of enforcement is, of course, the rendering invisible of the lesbian possibility" ("Compulsory Heterosexuality" 155). I would add that the use of the sexual abuse of lesbians by heterosexist men as a punishment for, or deterrent of, or insult to, their sexuality, is merely a more severe method of "rendering invisible...the lesbian possibility." Much as the literature of women of colour can perceptively reveal the connections between race and sexual assault, presumably, lesbian survivors' writings could produce a unique literary discourse on sexual violence, based on their experience of interlocking sexuality and politics (which is seen by lesbians as a positive, healthy, liberating connection, but ironically, is used as interlocking forms of oppression and domination by heterosexist rapists).

Admittedly, not every sexual attack on a lesbian woman is intended by the perpetrator as a heterosexist assault or punishment. Obviously, a rapist does not always know the sexuality of his victim. However, whether the rapist intends his actions as an attack on homosexuality or not, it is probable that most lesbians would *experience* them as such, and hence their trauma remains the same as if the rape had been purposefully heterosexist.

Recently, society has come to regard rape and sexual assault as primarily political acts -- that is, a man may use forced sex as a political tool to dominate a woman, a white man may use forced sex as a political tool to dominate a woman of colour, and men of colour. But although this analysis surely adds essential, long overdue insight into sexual violence and hopefully provides an organizing principle around which society can begin to solve the crisis, the problem with the theory of rape as political domination is that it tends to forget or elide the undeniable sexuality of the act. Significantly, it is this abuse of sexuality that is so central to the lesbian's experience of being raped or assaulted by a man. The removal of gut-wrenching brutality from depictions of rape was criticized earlier in this paper, because that erasure tends to vastly misrepresent, and anaesthetize society to, the true experience of sexual violence. The denial of the sexuality of rape can be similarly criticized. Removing the violence makes it "easier," less unpalatable and repulsive for us to talk about the subject; similarly, the elimination of the graphically sexual descriptions of forced sexual contact, which many find distasteful or disgusting, makes many people more comfortable with discussing the topic. But why should we let ourselves feel "easy" and "comfortable" -- indeed, numb -- when speaking about sexual violence? Discussing the issue *should* be somewhat difficult; it should evoke some emotions, take some effort; otherwise, we are forgetting or belittling the true magnitude of the experience. Just as

Higgins and Silver insist that feminist writers and readers must restore rape "to the literal...restoring, that is, the violence" (Higgins and Silver 4), we must also remember, and not underestimate, the sexuality of the act. I suggest that many lesbian writings of sexual violence would, or do, restore and emphasize the sexuality of the crime, because it is against that very forced heterosexuality that the lesbian victim rebels (I do not mean to suggest that the non-lesbian rape victim does not recoil from her attacker -- instead, I suggest that she does not rebel specifically against the heterosexuality that is being forced upon her). In contrast to the poems discussed in chapter 1, in which rape and sexual abuse are described abstractly, obliquely, metaphorically, or at least not violently and graphically, in which any graphic violence is self-imposed by the woman, "Joe/Rape Poem" reinjects graphic brutality back into the rape itself. One cannot help but shudder when the lesbian narrator speaks of her rapist's "hand shoved / up my raw / bleeding cunt / creat[ing] gashes / in my endometrium" (1-5); she is "[r]ammed through the ache / and the groan and the grunt" (11-12), caught "[b]etween the scream / in [her] jugular veins / Above the tear on the / pupil of my eye" (13-16). The final image she gives of the rape is her vaginal blood dried on the rapist's hand. Just as Goobie's use of explicit violence in "story hour" forces the reader to recognize the full brutality of what the rapist has done to his victim, Augustine's ugly depiction of the rape act exposes the extreme violence of (hetero)sexuality in that act.

Another dilemma for lesbians who are survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by males is the assumption made by many heterosexuals that the women "switched" to lesbianism after such a traumatic heterosexual experience. Lesbians deeply resent this suggestion, not only because it (like the terms "sexual preference" or "sexual orientation") minimizes their experience, making their lesbianism seem like a desperate

last choice, but also because it leads to the misconception that once they have recovered from their sexual trauma, they will return to the heterosexual fold. Even more dangerous and offensive, the concept also leads to the misinterpretation of lesbianism as a "disease" which can be "cured." This issue surfaces in lesbian writings as the women attempt to explain that their sexuality is a healthy, positive alternative to heterosexuality (whether they view it as a choice or an innate quality), not a confused, traumatized, temporary retreat from heterosexuality. I will make one brief incursion into lesbian incest poetry here, because I believe that the situation and dilemma in this poem is similar to that of victims of non-incestual assault. In "Just Listen," by Inga-Britt, the poet/speaker pleads, "Don't say: You're lesbian because... / Don't. Just don't" (41-42). She then goes on to declare:

No trauma 'makes' someone  
homosexual.  
I'm not lesbian because of...  
I'm not lesbian in spite of...  
I am lesbian.  
It is that simple:  
I am lesbian because I am lesbian. (61-67)

Problematically, "Joe/Rape Poem" does not fit neatly into this theoretical mould. The last stanza of the poem, lines 49-66, describes the survivor's relationship with her lesbian partner. The relationship can be, and likely should be, read as a positive, mutual, restorative and affirming situation. However, the danger lies in a reader viewing it as the survivor *using* lesbianism, and her lesbian lover, as therapy to help her recover from her trauma -- the implication being that once she has "recovered," she will "return" to heterosexuality. Unfortunately, the poem does lend itself somewhat to this kind of interpretation, for the relationship does seem rather one-sided, with the lesbian lover making all the effort to help the rape victim become a survivor; indeed,

the rape victim speaker explains that her lover's "strong voice / defines me as / survivor" (55-57), that her lover "shoves through / **your** [the rapist's] self-defined systems / **your** destructive institutions," making her "stronger than ever" (61-63, 66). However, surely in any healthy relationship, homosexual or heterosexual, a traumatized person should be able to depend on his or her partner for support and strength in the recovery process.

Clearly, most women of colour and lesbians perceive their experiences of sexual violence differently than white heterosexual women. I do not suggest that these women's traumas are *more* severe than their white, heterosexual counterparts'; I do, however, believe that their viewpoints are of a different complexity, and that the literary expression of their perspectives is essential to the feminist discourse on sexual abuse because it expands the scope and veracity of that discourse. Sadly, women of colour and lesbians who experience sexual assault fall prey to what Joy Kogawa calls a "double wound"; it is not only their gender that is injured, but also another fundamental aspect of themselves. For these groups of women, their race or sexuality may be a cause of the attack on them; they will probably feel that not only their gender, but also their race or sexuality has been violated; their relationship with, or attitude about, their race or sexuality may affect their recovery process. And this analysis only scratches the surface of the dilemma. Clearly, a sexually abused lesbian woman of colour finds herself in an even more complex situation. Karen Augustine touches on this issue briefly in "Joe/Rape Poem," when she identifies her rapist's hand as being white, as opposed to her "brown vaginal folds" (24), and later when she rages against his act of defining her by his race (48). Unfortunately, rape and other forms of sexual violence evidently have the capacity to inflict triple, and perhaps even more multiple, wounds.



## CHAPTER FOUR

### Conclusion: Liberation or Subordination?

Libby Scheier's "A Poem About Rape" raises many theoretical questions discussed earlier in this thesis, relating to how a poet can write about rape. However, Michel Foucault's theory, as expressed in Alcoff and Gray's article "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?," casts a negative light on the entire project of the literature of sexual violence. Foucault holds that bringing sexual abuse into discourse is not always liberatory; in fact, it can lead to the speaker's own subordination. Alcoff and Gray explain that this is so because "bringing things into the realm of discourse works also to inscribe them into hegemonic structures and to produce docile, self-monitoring bodies who willingly submit themselves to (and thus help to create and legitimate) the authority of experts" (Alcoff and Gray 260). Foucault describes the evolution of discourses about sex, from the Catholic system of the confession of sins to gain absolution, to psychotherapy, which is "the confession of trauma for diagnosis and treatment" (Alcoff and Gray 260). Within sexual discourse, then, "the speaker discloses her innermost experiences to an expert mediator who then reinterprets those experiences back to her using the dominant discourse's codes of 'normality'" (Alcoff and Gray 260).

Are the women writers discussed above, and others not addressed here, then, bravely speaking out only to find themselves reinscribed into the patriarchy? In order to answer this question, one must ask whether Foucault's analysis of the "confessional" applies to written literature. In the context of the works discussed in this thesis, I would suggest that, for the most part, it does not. The act of *writing* one's responses

to, and thoughts and emotions about sexual violence liberates the writer from the structure of the confessional, from the idea of confessing one's sins to an authoritative, patriarchal figure who will legitimate and reinterpret one's "story." With the exception of the two works which deal with the sexual abuse of children, none of the works analyzed here carries the tone of a guilty confession, nor do they seem to be asking for validation of the experience they describe; the only sort of confession involved may be a personal admission to the self, of feelings previously buried and ignored. The role of the mediator/expert is eliminated, as the writer speaks directly to her readership, and must be taken as the sole expert on her own sexual abuse. Foucault also highlights, as a negative aspect of the confessional, the fact that the presence of the "expert" leads to a binary division between theory and actual experience; the victims become the transmitters of "raw data" and the experts theorize about this information. However, the thought involved in the very act of writing about sexual violence intimately intertwines theory and "raw data"; the writers necessarily become theorists of their own experience. They retain complete authority over their experience because they decide what will be included in the telling, and how it will be told -- as opposed to the typical confessional, where an expert sitting across the table from the survivor insists on the disclosure of the "whole truth," and may judge the legitimacy of the "tale" by how the survivor tells it (that is, whether she is "overly" emotional and "hysterical," or perhaps "overly" non-emotional and coldly detached). Foucault holds that the transgressive power of the disclosure is subverted because "[t]he confessor's disclosure was always pleasurable to hear because it paralleled the 'entire painstaking review of the sexual act in its very unfolding'" (Alcoff and Gray 272); however, the writer's control over how much of the experience will be told and how it will be told decreases this danger of the disclosure being perversely titillating to its audience/reader.

Still, there is a significant difference between writing privately and personally, and putting the written product on the market for mass consumption. Alcoff and Gray list two of the benefits of "speaking out" as being the "educat[ion] of the society at large about the dimensions of sexual violence and misogyny" and the "reposition[ing] of the problem from the individual psyche to the social sphere where it rightfully belongs" (261). Certainly it seems that one must publish one's writing in order to achieve these two goals, and it is in the publishing that a writer begins to lose power over her own experience and the telling of it. Foucault explains that the dominant discourse preserves itself by excluding certain other discourses, not accepting them as valid, and thus silencing them. And while the private writer, sitting at her desk with pen to paper, cannot be silenced, she can be excluded when she attempts to have her work published, and thereby, in a sense, legitimized and acknowledged. Literature, and particularly poetry about sexual violence, usually written by lesser known (female) writers (and the patriarchal publishing world and academia dictate who is lesser or well known), is extremely difficult to gain access to, for it is generally published by smaller printing houses, remains in print for a only limited period of time, and is stocked, in a limited fashion, only by specialized bookstores. Surely this is an effective silencing technique, when students and avid readers must conduct an extensive search in order to obtain this material. Furthermore, when the literature is published, the confessional structure is re-established, for the writers subject themselves to the discriminating criticism of reviewers, critics and academics, who position themselves as "experts." The male reviewer (mentioned above) who criticized Libby Scheier for not being sufficiently "disengaged" from her work, for writing too personally and for using her poetry as therapy, was, by analogy, assuming the role of the "expert," refusing to grant

her work any legitimacy or value essentially because of its subject matter, and making Scheier feel like "chopped liver" (Scheier, "Chopped Liver" 234).

In cases where the survivor speech cannot be silenced, Foucault explains that the dominant discourse will attempt to "recuperate" it, by "subsuming it within the framework of the [dominant] discourse in such a way that it is disempowered and no longer disruptive" (Alcoff and Gray 268). Alcoff and Gray point to television "talk shows," such as *Geraldo* and *Donahue*, as examples of this recuperation. The topic of sexual violence surfaces with incredible frequency on such shows; and this, coupled with the strongly established confessional structure of the shows, numbs the audience to the horror of the crime, thereby subverting the otherwise transgressive power of women making such public disclosures. Commensurately, a literary technique for recuperating survivor speech and "channel[ing] it into non-threatening outlets" (Alcoff and Gray 268) is the much-debated issue of "tokenism" in literary anthologies and literature courses. Although including a rape poem or short story within an anthology is beneficial, in that it increases the chances that the work will be read and studied, the inclusion also encloses the literature safely within the dominant discourse, eliminating the possibility of it posing a threat from the outside. This gives the impression that the problem has been solved and "taken care of" by the dominant discourse, which has generously decided to include such a poem or short story in its anthology. A poem or short work of fiction (or creative non-fiction) trapped in such a collection will be much less subversive and threatening (and is much more likely to be studied) than an entire book about sexual violence, such as Diane Mattiussi's *Out of Incest*. The same theory applies in the case when an individual novel about sexual abuse is included on the reading list of a broader, "general" literature course.

Clearly, the problems inherent in bringing rape, incest and other forms of sexual violence into the realm of discourse are manifold and daunting. But, as speech is, as Foucault suggests, the "critical site and object of conflict" (Alcoff and Gray 287), the fight to "speak out" must continue. Furthermore, as Christine Froula explains,

Metaphysically, the woman reader of a literary tradition that inscribes violence against women is an abused daughter. Like physical abuse, literary violence against women works to privilege the cultural father's voice and story over those of women, the cultural daughters, and indeed to silence women's voices. (633)

And clearly, this literary battle against the abusive "cultural father" is intimately intertwined with the larger effort beyond the literary realm to end the sexual violence that women face in daily life. Higgins and Silver suggest that "rape and rapability are central to the very construction of gender identity and...our subjectivity and sense of ourselves as sexual beings are inextricably enmeshed in representations" (3). Thus, writers and readers alike must continue to challenge patriarchal assumptions, attitudes and misrepresentations, for to leave them unchallenged only reinforces the dominant ideology of women's literary *and physical* rapability. Similarly, though, one can hope that women's shattering of the literary silences and promotion of our viewpoint through writing will not only help to end the misrepresentations and misunderstandings evident in rape in literature, but will also contribute to the elimination of the concept of women's rapability as it actually exists in society today.

The literature of rape and sexual abuse discussed in this thesis bravely sets the precedent for challenging the patriarchal authority, subverting the dominant discourse, and witnessing the sexual violence in ways that cannot be recuperated or naturalized. The works discuss and illuminate such diverse issues as: the fresh discourse crafted by survivor poets, the metaphors used by these poets in an effort to capture their

experiences, the problems and effects of the "confessional" structure, and the "writing of the raped body" that occurs in such poetry. Works by women of colour and lesbians reveal the authors' unique perspectives on sexual violence, expanding the scope of the discussion and adding new depth to issues such as the political, racist and heterosexist elements of sexual abuse. Also, the literature's very existence, and conversely, its relative inaccessibility, comments on Michel Foucault's theory that bringing such sexual issues into the realm of the dominant discourse can lead, ironically, to the repression and subjugation of the brave speakers.

An element that draws these diverse works together across the range of perspectives and feelings that they elucidate is the anger that they express. Adrienne Rich has said that "[a]s separate individuals, women have rarely been in a position to use our pain and anger [about women-hatred] as a creative force for change. Most women have not even been able to touch this anger, except to drive it inward like a rusted nail" ("Disloyal to Civilization" 309). Certainly, this is often the case. However, the women writers analyzed here, and other feminists who are insisting that women and men discuss the issue of sexual violence, *have* begun to use their anger as a "creative force for change." They are pulling the rusted nail out of their bodies, their consciousnesses, and are splashing the hydrogen peroxide of anger over the wound to clean it, and help it to heal. This anger seeps through in the speakers' frustrated, ironic and wryly cynical tones in Scheier's "A Poem About Rape" and Goobie's "'victim' takes a passive verb." It is revealed in the combative style of the latter poem, and in the violent images of warfare in "Dwarfs and War" and "Blitzkrieg" and of werewolves in "Limits of the Werewolf." Although the child speaker in "The Man Next Door" does not express anger, this is largely because she is still confused and guilt-ridden; other works by survivors of childhood sexual abuse indicate that the little girl's anger

will surface later in the process of her recovery. Naomi Nakane's anger about her experience of sexual abuse is partly transformed into, partly intertwined with, her complex hostility both towards her race and towards the treatment Japanese Canadians receive. April Raintree's fury is evident as she scrubs her body raw, and rages, "I wanted those [rapists]...dead. By my hand....I'd castrate them. Then I'd watch them bleed to death, in agony" (Culleton 150). The rage of the lesbian speaker of "Joe/Rape Poem" is clearly displayed through her violent description of the brutal attack, and when she screams at her rapist, "MISOGYNIST don't define me by your status/race/class" (Augustine 48). The anger that victims of sexual violence feel is perhaps most poignantly and painfully expressed in the poems that "write the raped body," in which the women's bodies ("she"), or what they do to their bodies ("story hour") reveal the self-destructive anger seething inside of them. Surely the "abused," shuddering body of the woman in "she," and the slashed arms of the girl in "story hour" bespeak an internal rusted nail; the poems represent the peroxide, cathartic anger which helps heal the wound that the nail leaves.

With this expressed anger comes not only catharsis, but also power -- what Donna Smyth describes as a liberating "surge of woman power" (Smyth 41). The feminist writers discussed here are harnessing and using their anger constructively in order to achieve this power; as Adrienne Rich explains, "[t]here is fury here, and terror, but there is also power, power not to be had without the terror and the fury" ("Disloyal to Civilization" 310). Through writing and reading the literature of sexual violence, women can seize the power to shatter the silence, to tell, to indict, to incite action, to survive, and to recover.

## Notes

- 1 This essay deals only with the sexual abuse of women and girls by men. It must, however, be noted that there are also male survivors of sexual violence, and female perpetrators. These men and boys encounter a different kind of enforced silence on the issue, largely due to society's concept of machismo ("taking it like a man") and homophobia. To my knowledge, there exists very little literature written by men about their own sexual abuse.
- 2 For the purposes of this thesis, my term "literature of sexual violence" includes works dealing with rape and other forms of sexual assault (of women and female children), but *does not* include incest narratives or poems. Unfortunately, because of the space restrictions of a Master's thesis, I chose not to discuss incest literature. Although incest has much in common with other sexual violence experiences, it is also, in some ways, vastly different. Works such as Liza Potvin's *White Lies (for my mother)*, Sylvia Fraser's *My Father's House: A Memoir of Incest and of Healing*, and Diane Mattiussi's *Out of Incest: A Book of Hope* display a much stronger and more anguished sense of guilt and betrayal than writings of non-incestual sexual assault; they also contain other distinguishing elements, such as more detailed discussions of the rapist figure (usually the father), involved treatments of the survivor's confused relationship with her mother and representations of survivors' multiply-splintered personalities. Given the limitations on length, I felt that I simply could not give these works and the experiences they describe the proper attention and in-depth analysis that they deserve.
- 3 By using the word "perception," I do not mean to imply that the woman may be incorrect, or may judge the experience erroneously. It is her perception of what happened, whether factually correct or not, that is important, because it is that perception that she must work with in the recovery process.
- 4 Again, although Sylvia does not directly cause the rape, in asking Stephen and his male friends to "scare" Cheryl (and one must also question the deliberate vagueness of this term, and wonder what she was implying), she is asking them to use the "attributes" of their gender, both physical and psychological, to threaten her. It is clearly their masculinity which she hopes will frighten Cheryl, as Sylvia's own attempts at psychological and physical intimidation have failed.



5 To a lesser extent, Cheryl's class, or rather, Sylvia's perception of Cheryl's class, is also a contributing factor, for Sylvia believes that Cheryl is a prostitute (although, in fact, she is not, until after she has begun living with Mark).

6 I should note that Roger's assistance (which itself is dubious) is severely qualified by his patronizing attitude towards April. Roger is quite similar to the boyfriend in part III of my poem "she," in that he presents himself as the "caring" expert interpreter of and advisor to April's trauma. As the boyfriend in "she" condescendingly counsels the woman, conveniently absolving himself of responsibility and locating all the blame in her, Roger accuses April of enjoying "feeling sorry for [her]self" (Culleton 189), and declares that "[t]he big tragedy now is not that you've been raped. It's that you refuse to let yourself heal" (Culleton 190). Furthermore, Roger's patronizing attitude may have just as much to do with April's race as it does with her gender, for he has little respect for either. He lies about having a brother who is Ojibway, in order to trick April into thinking that he understands her situation; he admits off-handedly, "[h]eck...I was going to tell you I had a sister who had been raped. So I could say I did understand how you felt, even though I was a man" (Culleton 194). Clearly, this arrogant assumption that he, a white male, could truly understand April's emotions reveals a monumental disrespect for, and constitutes a conceited belittlement and underestimation of, the full complexity of April's experience as a raped Métis woman. Upon reading about Roger's character, the feminist reader cannot help but recall Hélène Cixous's warning against the "new old men":

Luring [women] with flashy signifiers, the demon of interpretation  
[possessed by the new old men] -- oblique, decked out in modernity --  
sells them the same old handcuffs, baubles, and chains....Beware, my  
friend, of the signifier that would take you back to the authority of the  
signified! (347)

7 Because the focus of my study is *inter*-gender sexual violence, I looked only for works concerning lesbians assaulted by *men*. It should be noted, though, that many lesbians are sexually abused and battered (which can be considered a kind of sexual abuse) by their female partners; there is some literary material written on this intra-gender subject, including *Naming the Violence: Speaking Out About Lesbian Battering*, edited by Kerry Lobel (Seal Press, 1986).

8 I use the term "sexuality" to denote what others call "sexual preference" or "sexual orientation" -- that is, whether one is heterosexual or homosexual. I avoid the use of the latter terms because many lesbians feel that the phrases belittle the fullness and complexity of their experience, and imply a casual, perhaps even temporary, choice. "Sexuality" seems to suggest something much more fundamental, permanent and definitive to one's identity.

## APPENDIX OF POETRY

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**Joe / Rape Poem**

Your white hand shoved  
up my raw  
bleeding cunt  
creates gashes  
in my endometrium  
I a womon gone mad from the repulsion  
am bruised  
to the deepest blues  
at the central point  
of my swollen uterus

Rammed through the ache  
and the groan and the grunt  
Between the scream  
in my jugular veins  
Above the tear on the  
pupil of my eye  
Caught in this core of pain  
I am witness

straddled on your bed  
legs forced apart  
arms held down: your  
    fucking hand  
    fucking violently  
inside brown vaginal folds  
to  
the palest pink

ripped apart  
one long evening in November

You remain with me  
in the circumference of  
my vaginal discharge  
in the crimson paste  
dried  
on the palm of your hand

Your male attempt  
     to confuse me with images  
     in fashion magazines

Your male attempt  
     to use my sexuality  
     as a device to jerk off

Your male attempt  
     to measure your self worth  
     through  
 humiliation/degradation/violation  
 within your perverted orgasm  
 of sexual violence  
 called rape

MISOGYNIST don't define me by your status/race/class

Here  
 on this very dark pinch of skin  
 directly beneath the spit  
     her warm tongue  
 defines me as  
 lesbian  
     her strong voice  
 defines me as  
 survivor  
     her pulse  
 thumping against  
 the weight of our struggle  
 shoves through  
**your** self-defined systems  
**your** destructive institutions  
 blood-staining me in a  
 vocal muscular chord:  
     stronger than ever

- Karen Augustine

## The Man Next Door

I.

When he touched me I knew it was my fault.  
I thought about it all day and then I told  
my Dad, I told my Dad so it wouldn't be  
my fault.

He was nice, it was nice the way he touched me;  
I was wearing my new bikini, I went  
to show him. I felt grown-up. I thought he would  
understand, he's the only grownup who really likes  
to watch us. Maybe because he's lonely, because  
he doesn't have a family or a dog or anything.  
So I showed him my bikini.

The first one I ever had,  
the first bathing suit I got to pick out, my mother let me.  
Yellow and black, like a butterfly.  
When I showed him he said "You look just like  
a butterfly," and I was so happy, because he understood.

He's a nice man really, just sad because he has  
no children. So he touched me. At first I thought it was a  
mistake, he was reaching for his paper, over my lap.  
Then he did it some more, kind of slow, like rubbing on calamine  
lotion. It tickled. I said it tickled and he said do you like it little  
butterfly and I thought he was trying to be nice so I  
said yes. But then I got scared.

I don't know why I got scared, except he looked funny. His face  
was different. I don't know. So I went home.

Later I told my Daddy. I know I did something wrong because  
he was a nice man, he used to watch us playing.  
And then he moved away.

## II.

It is a sort of vacancy, a mineral deficiency that leads a man to eat dirt. In spite of himself. To spite himself; to prove that the scornful tattoo he can feel on his pulse is true: *Loser*, it proclaims *loser*, his own heart running him down the way everybody did, even his Dad, saying he'd never make anything of himself, it was in his blood. So here he is now in a basement apartment at 50 listening to the family upstairs. Those kids running up and down the hall --- some days it drives him crazy, when he's watching TV, when his team has a chance of winning. Other times he likes to sit outside on the steps and watch them play, little boys and girls, their plump unscarred legs pumping away. The way the socks bunch up around their ankles. The way their tongues hang out when they run. Anyhow, they don't mind if he watches, they think he's OK --- that's the main thing. Sometimes they even ask him to keep score, "Hey Mister" they say; he likes when they call him "Mister." To them he is a grown-up just like their fathers, he is someone who can drive a car. What he'd really like though is to be "Sir." He thinks about it sometimes, those white panties flashing as they run, those legs, his father used to beat him and he had to say Sir, Yes Sir, and his mother cried. She cried when she was beaten too, she cried all the time, useless woman. But these girls now --- no one's ever laid a hand on them, he knows, he lives downstairs, he hears everything. Not that he wants to hurt them, he'd never really hurt them. No. It's just those legs, so pink, teasing him from under their uniforms, he'd like to stroke those legs. He's like to undress them and see if they're soft all over and he'd like to stroke them a little, make them squirm, make them call him Mister, Sir, Yessir, please do it some more. He knows they'd like it, he sees the way they're always touching themselves, and the girls, the way they look at him, "Hi Mister," with big eyes,

flirting, all soft, they want it, they want it, one day  
they're really going to get it.

- Susan Glickman

**"victim" takes a passive verb**

"the victim was assaulted..."

(by fate, I suppose  
and by our assumptions)

"the victim grew up,

an average child..."

(did she know this would be  
her fate?)

"displayed no abnormal tendencies..."

(but of course, on some level,  
she knew...)

"enjoyed ice skating, girl guides..."

(putting in time)

"was nominated for..."

(boy, was she ever)

"was known for her outgoing,

positive outlook..."

(even though she knew she was moving,

was being drawn toward

the car in the parking lot)

"and had recently begun work

as a CBC radio broadcaster..."

(unusual -- kind of feminist

for a rape victim.

denial interplay --

the last, weak struggles

to escape...saw fate coming)

"after the victim left her apartment..."

(here victim gets an active verb,

moves like a fish, hooked,

toward fate)

"she went to her car

where the serial killer waited..."

(irresponsible, really --

she could've taken the bus,

called a friend.

there was no real reason

why she had to use her car



that day,  
why she chose to use her car  
that day)

"the victim's car was found..."  
(it always was the "victim's" car.  
that's why she bought it)

"the victim's bedroom window  
overlooks the parking lot..."  
(giving her an appropriate perspective  
on her future --  
she must've memorized every inch  
of the set up,  
knew her lines)

"this tragic end..."  
(she knew she deserved it)

(we know we deserve it)

(victim takes an active verb)

-Beth Goobie

**story hour**

the raped girl reenacts.  
she takes the face in the mirror,  
smashes it to more realistic proportions.  
now each silver thin penis  
reflects a minute of her life,  
her face...  
that minute, that hour,  
that took on the clock,  
years,  
that erased the line between  
it's over and  
time has unbuttoned itself.

the glass penis  
is an artist.  
it sketches the bright red vagina  
that runs, wrist to elbow.  
the raped girl is a body  
of hidden vaginas;  
the glass penis will hunt  
them down.  
on the forearm's canvas,  
she is again penetrated,  
as she was penetrated.

this is the truer rape.  
nobody can say it is not  
a wound, or  
that she is not responsible.

-Beth Goobie

### A Poem About Rape

It's hard to write a poem about rape.  
Surprisingly,  
having been raped doesn't make it any easier.

You can read many outraged tracts about rape,  
by women who have been raped,  
by anti-rape activists,  
by dry theorists of psychology or medicine.

What would be the purpose  
if I wrote a poem about rape?  
I told my friends and lovers  
how I felt after it happened.  
These expressions of emotion  
were scarcely art.  
They were mainly noisy and honest.  
They were frustrated because  
who knew where the rapist had gone  
and only a personal act of violence  
would have been balm to my emotions.

I don't feel that I can tell you  
anything about rape in a poem about rape.  
I can't think of a well-crafted image  
that runs from the poem's first line  
to its strong but subtly suggestive ending.  
I can't think of a clever list of symbols  
that would throw a new light on rape  
so that you might grasp it, finally.

In fact, it is now so many years  
(seven, I think it's seven)  
since I was raped that my anger  
has waned and cannot feed a poem.  
On the other hand, I could not  
write about rape until recently.  
My brains no longer knock against  
my skull when I think about it.  
I even said to a demonstrator yesterday

(she was shouting: Castrate rapists!)  
 well, I don't agree with that  
 as a general political slogan, although  
 when I was raped I wanted to personally  
 murder the guy and castrate him too.  
 The order of events was unimportant.  
 I still feel that would have been  
 an act of justice.

How can I explain rape to someone  
 who does not find a midnight streetcar ride alone  
 frightening, only boring  
 who does not worry about who gets on  
 the streetcar, who looks at you,  
 who gets off when you do.

It's hard to write a poem about rape.  
 I don't want to write a political tract.  
 I want you to grasp the experience.  
 I don't think a poem can do that.  
 Certainly this poem is not doing it.  
 This poem is definitely a failure  
 in bringing the experience of rape  
 into your living room.

A dramatic re-enactment is not the answer.  
 A film about rape is not the answer.  
 These usually excite you anyway  
 which is not my purpose.  
 Raping you is not the answer.  
 There doesn't seem to be any answer.  
 There doesn't seem to be any answer  
 I can hand over to you right now.

- Libby Scheier

## Dwarfs and War

My mood today was to write about dwarfs,  
something small, misshapen and very far  
from my personal experience. I thought  
I'd list details about their large heads,  
short trunks, bowed stumpy legs,  
then surmise about dwarfs making love  
(though I could think of nothing special  
that might occur when dwarfs make love).

Instead the September rain got on my nerves,  
my muscles ached and all I could think about  
was trench warfare, days of rain in gutters  
of the Great War, mud in the mouth and the  
body trying to fold in on itself,  
hovering over the warmth of its own  
internal organs and circulation of blood.

Who do you suppose was the great genius  
designer of trench warfare? Just imagine  
the diagrams and drawings littering his desk  
and the dry afternoon discussions  
with the other men, no dwarfs in sight.

After the war he left the military  
for a career in highway design.  
He became very bored with this  
and offered his services in the maneuvers  
in middle Europe before the Second War.

The Second War was less personal.  
It's hard to think of just one body  
soaking in the mud. What comes to mind  
are skies become smoke and cloud  
shading from the sun a million bodies  
transformed into jigsaw chunks,  
many eyes become white stones.

Why it's easier for me today to write  
about war than dwarfs I don't know.

What do I know of war?

Once a small man with a knife raped me,  
took my money and tried to kill me.  
I felt real fear for the first time.  
It comes back sometimes, unexpectedly.

The man who raped me cut my hand.  
Later I licked it and tasted blood.  
I always liked the taste of my own blood.  
But I have no sense of my body  
wetting through with rain and dirt  
or blood, or my body flying apart while  
the eyes watch in the last living seconds.

This muscle-ache of rain  
made me think of war.  
What made me think of dwarfs  
was a poem I just read about dwarfs  
and remembering the smallness  
of the man with the knife.

- Libby Scheier

### Limits Of The Werewolf

at the full moon, at midnight  
her face gives out its secret  
beard, her teeth  
grow long as the moon rises  
and her hands  
clench and flex their  
hairy joints  
she slides slowly  
outdoors  
her skin open to the air  
her night-animal  
senses awake as they never were  
in her human guise  
she is drawn by a fleshy  
smell, edges down a street  
sees a solitary figure  
a man walking  
she closes in on him slowly,  
crouches  
leaps  
he turns  
eyes two full moons of fear  
his body gives out the stink  
of fear, she is knocked  
back by the stench, falls,  
watches her prey run  
into shadows  
she slinks home, sick  
with the smell of fear  
the moon fades in the morning  
sky, the month has its second  
day, she wakes smooth-faced  
and calm to her lover's kiss  
on her cheek, his  
beard brushing  
her face softly

- Libby Scheier

## Blitzkrieg

### BEFORE

From the gentle doze the mind flashes ALERT  
 The safe cocoon of sleep is ripped  
 And the eyelids snap open  
 The first brush of the lips has set the alarm off,  
 The seduction has begun.

The blood courses and rages in objection as  
     the insistent hand snakes across the back  
     raising goosebumps that are interpreted  
     as peaks of delight.

The hot breath brands the neck and as  
     the hackles raise, the shudder is interpreted  
     as a shiver of excitement.

The knees draw together and up  
     in a mute gesture of self-defense and fear  
     but are ignored as a leg wedged between  
     rips them open.

A shift away is a tactical mistake  
     now trapped against the wall.

The bruising kisses begin to demand a response  
 The grasping hands are commanding a reaction  
 The pressure of the body asserts its intention  
 An imperious glance asks only if it will be a  
     fight this time or not.

A brief moment passes  
 where the mind entertains  
 the possibility  
 of rebellion:

But I was just lying here quietly,  
 Breathing deeply, dreaming softly, relaxing gently,  
 Sleeping safely, the mind whimpers.  
 Why?

But reality and self-defense crash in  
 and crush the spirit  
 the eyelids close



and the mind hurries to chain the nerves down  
 so they cannot repulse, convulse, shudder  
 and give away the secret.  
 But before it can lock all the doors,  
     a soft helpless moan escapes  
         through a keyhole  
             and is interpreted as a sound of desire.  
 The battle has been lost  
 and the raid begins.

#### AFTER

The empty core of the body  
 Shakes in the aftermath of the assault --  
     The other smiles, believing these to be  
     post-shattering orgasmic shivers.  
 The skin has achieved such a state of numbness  
     that it does not feel the kisses  
     that condescend on the back  
         or the heavy hand  
         that possesses the thigh.  
 The mind begins to unlock the vaults  
 and the nerves and muscles mount a small insurrection,  
 shifting the body further to the edge of the bed  
     The other smiles, believing this to be  
     an attempt to move off the wet spot  
     it so proudly created.  
 But while the body lies silent,  
     recovering from shock, playing possum,  
 The mind screams      and rails  
 Bangs its tin cup, crashing, along the bars of its separate prison  
     Rages  
 With self-hatred,    internal accusations,    remorse  
     anger at the pathetic survival instinct  
     that allowed this to happen

The final degradation --  
 The tears of betrayal and humiliation

Escape from the mind and physically  
Expose the soul  
And the other smiles and licks them away  
Interpreting them as  
Tears of joy and gratitude.

- Laura Vyvyan

she

It begins slowly and builds gradually  
 She knows it will come and she waits  
     in anxious trepidation.  
 The blood courses and boils in her veins--  
     barely suppressed emotion.  
 Her shivering skin can feel every particle  
     that grazes the uplifted, goosepimpled hair follicles.  
 Her leg muscles cramp and nails bite into  
     her own flesh.  
 The hot breath on her neck and insistent pressure  
     warn of what is about to occur.  
 Her body tenses in preparation  
 She closes her eyes to guard against the  
     impending explosion.  
 She almost whimpers  
 And it happens -- it rips through her body  
     and shatters her mind:  
 The Shudder.

The convulsion, the repulsion  
 she can feel each body cell  
 rebel  
 collapse in upon itself  
 in an effort to  
 shrink  
 from the touch  
 the insides of her stomach  
 churn  
 like a lawnmower  
 shredding  
 the tender lining  
 her mind reels off-balance  
 jolts inside her head  
 panicking  
 screaming  
 as The Shudder  
 possesses her.  
 If she could control it, she would  
 but it comes,

every time,  
 when the burning fingers reach out  
 to grasp, to take hold  
 and sear her raw skin,  
 when the tongue of fire  
 scalds her helpless ear,  
 burning desire? flame of passion?  
 she knows what these really mean,  
 her body answers in contortion  
 Shuddering.  
 her knees draw up involuntarily,  
 her arms cross her breasts,  
 a shivering fetus --  
 "Someone walk over your grave?"  
 He whispers, smiling self-confidently, into her ear.

## II

"Just physical manifestations of stress."  
 The Doctor says authoritatively.  
 "In other words, it's all in your head."  
 he adds, with a laugh, just a joke.  
 "I'll prescribe antidepressants for your nerves,  
 Fiorinal for the migraines,  
 antihistamines to take down the swelling,  
 and a salve for your back."  
 she nods meekly, willing to do anything  
 to stop the pounding pain of her mind  
 preparing to explode,  
 to end the puffiness of the swollen right eye  
 and upper lip,  
 to relieve the itch that caused her to rake  
 her back with her nails,  
 in her sleep,  
 raising welts.  
 she laughs at her own silliness, how ridiculous!  
 she actually looks abused -- how absurd --  
 He would never hit her.  
 "Unfortunately," the Doctor adds, peering over his glasses,  
 "In the female, the mind and the body are  
 inseparably linked.

I would suggest you try to relax."

### III

Years later,  
 Independent, restored, self-assured, a new woman,  
 She assures herself that she has escaped, overcome  
 She believes she has found happiness.  
 He is different from the rest,  
     she thinks to herself.  
 He is gentle, kind, thoughtful.  
 He is one who makes love slowly,  
 Lets the heat build gradually.  
 She thinks he makes her heart beat faster,  
     causing her blood to flow more rapidly  
 She thinks her skin quivers at his touch,  
     causing the soft hairs on her arms and the back of her neck  
     to rise up in excitement  
 Her body is taut, muscles flexed,  
     awaiting a motion from him that will throw it into action  
 She closes her eyes luxuriously,  
     in anticipation  
 She murmurs softly,  
 And then it happens.  
 She hurtles back through time --  
 Alarms sounding, lights flashing --  
 A scream tears from her throat --  
 And she convulses in  
 A Shudder.

Shaking in the aftermath,  
 she cries at her own self-betrayal  
 He is confused, hurt  
 How can she expect him to understand?  
 she can't tell what triggered it --  
     a certain touch  
     a specific movement  
     a particular word  
 It all happened so quickly and unexpectedly.  
 It's not as if she had a clear flashback,  
     suddenly picturing the other one's face above her.

That's what makes it excruciatingly hard --  
 she sees only his loving eyes  
 that she has uncontrollably rejected.  
 "You should see a doctor" he counsels,  
 "You need help."  
 "Perhaps therapy would solve your problems" he advises  
 sagely.  
 "Maybe you just don't like sex" he suggests  
 pragmatically.  
 Just making her feel worse,  
 in need of repair, dysfunctional, abnormal, destroyed,  
 guilty and alone.  
 no her mind whispers, retreating,  
 her tears blur her vision of his face.

## IV

Now, by herself,  
 she doesn't have anyone who could make her  
 Shudder.  
 she doesn't need anyone --  
 she can do it all on her own.  
 The Shudder  
 sometimes comes as she gets jostled on a crowded street  
 others breathing down her neck,  
 Or it sometimes comes when she's at a bar and  
 someone tells a dirty joke,  
 And it sometimes comes when an old friend  
 gives her a sudden, enthusiastic hug.  
 Someone walking over her grave, indeed.  
 The brush of a hand  
 can knock her reeling.  
 But at least now  
 It's her own shudder  
 Individual  
 So perhaps now  
 She can begin to learn  
 How to control it.

- Laura Vyvyan

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