

Female Voices

A Prized Writing Curated Collection

Green (2020-2021)

Let's Talk About Sexual Harassment, Baby (Sing It) (2019-2020)

Scarves of Survivors (2018-2019)

Women's Health and Women's Silence (2016-2017)

Rape and Victim Blaming: A Critical Examination of the Tendency to Blame Victims and Exonerate Perpetrators in Cases of Rape (2011-2012)

"The girls she would always love and hate": Female Jealousy, Desire, and Power in *Are You There God? It's Me, Maragaret and Gossip Girl*" (2011-2012)

For so many years, women in the United States and around the world have struggled to be heard at their most vulnerable times. This collection, made possible by the contributions of UC Davis students, features writing that demands to be heard. These empowering stories teach us about the pressing issues that women face everyday, as well as the strain of culture that has pulled down female voices in the past. There is a deep amount of bravery shown in each of these pieces, with every one providing its own entry into the conversation of sexual assault and/or women's oppression.

Green

JENNIFER HEATH



WRITER'S COMMENT: I wrote the beginning of this essay one month after my sexual assault because I wanted to remember what had happened, or at least, what I could recollect. Deep down, I knew writing down the events of the attack would help me find justice, even if I wasn't sure it would ever happen. And when justice did come a year later, it reopened all my old wounds, shook up the foundation of my relationships, and gave me strength because I made sure he couldn't hurt anyone else. The original piece was much shorter and didn't dive into the aftermath of the assault. It wasn't until I enrolled in Professor Zinzi Clemmon's Creative Writing Nonfiction class that I returned to "Green" as a spoken word piece and turned it into the most personal essay I'll ever write. Vulnerability never gets easy, but its impact ripples outward, touching the lives of women and men I'll never meet. I hope this essay allows survivors to feel less alone. I see you. I hear you. I'm here for you.

EDITOR'S COMMENT: Jennifer's essay provides a powerful reflection of a traumatic event. Incredibly relatable and impactful, she not only describes the sexual assault and the details surrounding it, but also includes how her (now ex-) boyfriend, mom, supervisor, and close friends responded. Similarly, she adds details about the assailant's mother and the incarcerated individuals she's worked with, knowing that some of them are serving sentences for the same crime, demonstrating the multifaceted struggle she and many other survivors have endured. All this works to complicate the stereotypical, straight forward narrative that readers may expect from those who have been sexually assaulted, further speaking to Jennifer's bravery in telling her

story. Like Jennifer, I hope her essay helps to empower survivors while increasing awareness, empathy, and allyship in others.

—Jillian Azevedo, University Writing Program

Content Warning: *This essay includes details regarding sexual assault and its subsequent long-term affects. We ask that you remain aware of any feelings that may arise as you read it and consider contacting UC Davis’s Center for Advocacy, Resources, & Education (CARE) for further resources.*

I was standing in front of my bathroom mirror, wearing a black-and-green striped dress. Green for St. Patrick’s Day. Green for my eyes. Green for my favorite color. I had finished the final touches of my makeup—heavy and dark, night shades for the night ahead. I already drank one tall can of Mike’s Hard Lemonade. I could handle it. It was my pregame.

My friends and I arrived at the bar and drank more in the parking lot. It was St. Patrick’s Day, the day we all drink. When we first entered, it was practically dead, too early for late-night revelry. So, we invaded the upstairs VIP area and talked lively among ourselves. I was happy. I was confident. The world was my oyster—or a five-dollar can of Guinness.

More of my friends arrived, and we went outside for a game of giant Jenga, then a game of giant beer pong with garbage cans and volleyballs. I played, I tossed, I served the ball as if I were back on my eighth-grade volleyball team. I drank more Guinness. We went back inside the bar crowded with bodies. My friend was there waiting for me, and we took shots of Jameson. She told me how much she liked the book I wrote.

The night got fuzzy as people started to leave. My boyfriend, Mike, asked me if I wanted to go to a house party, but I declined. I wanted to stay at the bar a little longer and then get an Uber home. I was almost done with the night. A few friends stayed, and I indulged in one more drink, something sweet and dangerous. I was at the bar, ready to close my tab, contemplating a late-night Taco Bell order, when the man beside me complimented my dress, my hair, my freckles, my smile. Kindly, I smiled in return, asking his name and if he was enjoying the evening. He gave me small talk and a look I recognized as predatory. But I wasn’t worried. I was headed home. I closed out my tab—

I was running, sprinting, gasping for air as I tried to think of something, anything.

Where am I? Why am I on Greenback? Why is that traffic light staring at me?

Green. Green like my dress. I was running, fleeing. *From who?*

I tripped and fell, tumbling into the grass next to the sidewalk. My ears rang as a man ran up to me, cursing.

“Oh my god! Baby girl! What the fuck!”

My mind was a swirl of adrenaline and fleeting glimpses of consciousness. Pain and fear. He helped me up, but I fell again, my knees unable to work, and the back of my head smacked against the concrete. He cursed again and left once I screamed at him to go away.

I woke up behind the Beach Hut Deli on the corner of Fair Oaks and Greenback. His bloodshot eyes were before me. His fingers were inside me. I couldn't register what was happening as I lay with my legs spread apart on the rough concrete, ass bare and cold, my throat hoarse, aching. I told him to stop and tried to crawl away. He continued to penetrate me with his fingers, and I realized he wasn't going to stop, so I lay there, uncertain of whether or not I should put up a fight.

“Your pussy's so good, girl. So tight.”

“I don't want this. Stop. It's not turning me on.” He removed his fingers and shoved them in my mouth, smearing my own scent under my nose.

“You seem to like it, girl.”

“No, I don't! I have a boyfriend!”

“He ain't here! Why ain't he here?”

I was sobbing. “Stop, please! PLEASE! FUCKING STOP!”

I slapped him.

He hit me back, slapping me across the face. Once. Twice. I tried to scream, but he wrapped his hand around my throat and held me until I was quiet and lying still. I was scared. I realized I could die. He could kill me if he wanted to.

I lost consciousness and gained it again as a sharp rock embedded itself in the sole of my foot. I was barefoot, and my panties were missing. He was walking me across sharp rocks alongside a street I grew up on.

“You raped me,” I said to him.

“Are you kidding me? I didn't rape you.”

“You put your fingers in me when I didn't want them. You slapped me.”

“Okay, okay. I’m sorry I hit you, and I’m sorry I ripped your panties off, okay, but I got kids, so you need to shut the fuck up.”

I woke up on a couch I had never been on before. It was quiet, the gray sky bleeding through the overhead window. I sat up, the images and feelings from the night before rushing back to me. I tasted blood and ran my tongue over my swollen lip. My knee looked like roadkill and felt like it. I noticed my phone connected to a charger beside the pillow—the only miracle of the night. All my belongings were safe, save for my shoes and my panties.

I limped to the bathroom, the feeling of his fingers inside me as real as they were a few hours before. I knew nothing else had happened. Peeing in a stranger’s bathroom would have hurt ten times worse if it had. I left the bathroom, collected my things, and called an Uber.

The Uber arrived, and the driver was a woman—thank God! Once we pulled out of the apartment complex, I realized where I truly was—less than a mile from my childhood home. My parents were just down the street, probably enjoying their morning coffee. I wished I was there instead, eating Eggos with peanut butter, watching the new episode of *Inuyasha* my dad had recorded for me on a VHS tape the night before. Those mornings before high school were long gone, but I hadn’t realized how special they were.

We drove in silence until we were a few miles from my apartment. She asked, “Rough night?”

“I think someone hurt me?” I said to her quietly, my voice faint and uncertain. I wasn’t entirely sure yet. The haze of the alcohol and the shock from my injuries left my mind spinning, trying to grasp the collection of memories from the night before. She gave me as much comfort as a stranger could and dropped me off. I stumbled inside my apartment and took a shower, shaking and stunned. Speechless.

I tried calling my boyfriend, but he wasn’t answering. I noticed a missed call from my mom and put off calling her back. I needed to compose myself. My boyfriend only lived a mile away in another apartment complex. With my car still parked at the bar, I decided to walk to his place and tell him what had happened, desperate for someone to comfort and care for me.

I don’t know how I walked a mile with a swollen knee and road rash covering half my legs. My shoulders, arms, and butt were darkly bruised as well. I limped to Mike’s place, but he wasn’t there. No one was, not even his roommates. I called him again and walked around the building

to knock on his window. I then called a friend who lived at the apartment where the house party was, and he picked up. I asked if Mike was there, and he handed the phone to him. Mike had been sleeping and was angry he'd been woken up.

"Something bad happened last night," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his voice more alert. I tried to explain everything I could remember without giving him all the gory details. I told him someone assaulted me last night, and I woke up at his place. I had to get an Uber home.

"Well, babe, you just drink too much!" he barked, as though I had hooked up with some random guy while I was drunk. As if I had hurt him.

My mouth fell open, and I yelled at him for blaming me and not the man who had hurt me. He didn't want to talk about it and hung up the phone. My mom called me shortly after, and I picked up, hoping she would comfort me better than my boyfriend had.

My younger brother was taken to the hospital for emergency surgery to remove his appendix the night of my attack. That's why she had called me so many times. She could tell something was wrong, and, after pressing me to tell her what was going on, I spilled it all, just as I had done with Mike over the phone.

"Well, honey, don't you think this is a sign to stop drinking so much? You could have been seriously hurt!"

I was floored. The two people I trusted most blamed my assault on my drinking. I had never felt so low. I couldn't yell back at her, so I clammed up and told her everything would be okay—that I was fine and just needed to rest. We hung up, and I cried as I limped back home. I texted my best friend, Marie, and told her what had happened. She called me right away and asked if I was okay. I retold the story I had so naively given my mom and Mike, but Marie cried with me on the phone instead of getting mad.

I spent the rest of that day laying on my couch, injured and hungover, watching reruns of *How I Met Your Mother* with his voice in my head, his eyes in front of my face, and the smell of my own scent stuck in my nose. My other best friend, Jackie, who was in town at the time, dropped all her plans and came to my apartment to spend time with me. She fed me and let me talk about what had happened, allowing me to work through what I could remember and what I couldn't.

Mike distanced himself from what had happened to me. I don't even think he believed me. Meanwhile, my mom had tried to convince me that I'd just made a mistake and went home with the guy because I was drunk. It felt like I was all on my own and, though I didn't realize it at the time, I was broken. Not only was my body injured, my mind and soul had ruptured. The very core of my being had changed, and I wouldn't realize it for another eighteen months.

At first, I was desperate to deny the assault had even happened, but it was nearly impossible to forget since my entire body was bruised, my legs rubbed raw from falling on asphalt, and my knee was the size of a softball. My eyes were swollen from sobbing during my attack, my bottom lip busted, my vagina raw and irritated. Was I being overdramatic? Maybe I was just drunk and fell hard. Was I actually trying to hook up with him? Had I really been raped? He hadn't penetrated me with his penis, but he had penetrated me—removed my clothing and forced me to do things I wasn't conscious enough to consent to. And when I screamed, he hit me, choked me.

I didn't want to report it because I knew I'd been too drunk that night to give a complete statement. I worried that the police would blame me as well, just like the people I trusted most had blamed me. But two days after the assault, I found a strange business card in my wallet. I realized it was his business card. I could now name my attacker. I knew where he worked and where he lived.

I told Marie about the business card, and she convinced me to go to the police.

She said, "It could have been me. It could have happened to any one of our friends. We all go to that bar."

I called my boss that night and explained what had happened. She told me about her sister's attack outside of a Chili's in the 1980s and how she understood the kind of pain I was in. She told me to take as much time as I needed. Due to my injured knee, I had to take the entire week off. I worked for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and we had a big event coming up that week at San Quentin. It wasn't my first time inside a male prison. It wasn't even the second, but I'd had good experiences working with the men who were graduating from our coding program, the first of its kind ever to be taught behind bars. These were the kind of men who wanted a second chance. I felt safe knowing they wouldn't repeat their former offenses

because they had their minds set on the future. But there was no way in hell I'd be able to look felons in the eye, not after what I'd been through. Not that soon, at least.

The following day, Marie picked me up and took me to the police station, where I filed a report. An officer interviewed me, and I tried to give him as many details as possible, fiddling with the paper Dixie cup they'd given me. The tap water left me feeling thirsty. Since I had been drunk and couldn't remember when or how I left the bar, I was embarrassed and worried they wouldn't believe my story. But I had his business card—I wasn't making this up. The officer looked up his name in their system. He already had a record. They printed out a lineup of faces, and I picked him out immediately. I couldn't forget those bloodshot eyes.

After the officer took pictures of my numerous injuries, Marie and I left the police station to relax at her place. Later, we saw the live-action *Beauty and the Beast*. It was the first time I'd felt happy in nearly seventy-two hours. I cried in the movie theater.

* * *

It was exactly one year before I heard back from the police.

I stayed with Mike and didn't talk to my mom about the assault ever again. I was very good at denying the emotional damage I'd endured.

One day, Mike told me a detective knocked on my door while I was at work. He said maybe it was a fluke, but I knew exactly why a detective was looking for me. A private number called me, and I answered it while on break at work. The man asked if he could talk with me in an hour. I told him to come on my lunch break.

I dodged raindrops as I jogged to his unmarked Charger parked in the visitor spot of my building. He greeted me and asked me to repeat the statement I made to the police nearly a year prior. I explained the worst night of my life the best I could and apologized for not remembering everything. He looked into my eyes and said, "You should be able to go out and drink with your friends and get home safe. This isn't your fault."

He showed me another lineup of faces, and I pointed him out again. Seeing his face after a year was jarring, but I was used to burying those emotions by then.

The officer left, and I told my supervisor I'd taken a long break to speak to a detective about my assault case. She was sympathetic. I didn't even tell Mike what had happened at work; I knew he wouldn't care.

By June, I got a call from one of the California Assistant Attorney

Generals. I took time off work to drive downtown and met with him in his windowed office to describe the event of my assault again. He said that there were two other victims, and they had physical evidence related to my case. I asked what kind of evidence, but that was undisclosed information needed for the court proceedings. Was it the black cotton panties he tore from me? Was it the security cameras the first officer said he'd check after I gave my statement?

I imagined how it looked—me screaming and fighting my attacker while I lay on the concrete, drunk and terrified. I wondered how my dad would react if he ever saw footage like that. What if he had killed me, and they had searched for my body like those forensic crime dramas? There was a creek a few yards away from where the attack had happened. He could have easily dumped me there. I knew I'd have been bloated and unrecognizable when they found me. My mom would have come to the coroner and identified me from the tattoos she hated. Mike probably would have missed the call.

Before breaking up with Mike, I had cheated on him with Alex, a mutual friend I'd met on Facebook. It felt like I had reached another shamefully low point in my life—like I couldn't get my shit together. I started to believe I was the type of girl who cheats, the kind of girl who gets too drunk and winds up on her back in a parking lot. Despite the guilt and self-loathing, something wouldn't let me walk away from the affair. There was something about the way Alex treated me that lifted the veil I'd been living under, and I realized my infidelity wasn't unfounded. Mike had betrayed my trust by blaming the assault on my drinking and ignoring it entirely after the fact. I realized I could never trust him again. He'd dropped the fragile egg I'd become, and he never apologized for it, even when I explained to him how hurt I was.

I guess I can't blame him entirely because I hid how broken I was. In the end, he was wrong, but I never really showed him how wrong he was. But how could I show someone the pain inflicted by an assault? Even when I felt okay enough to have sex, Mike thought I was just frigid; he didn't understand the element of the assault, how brutal it was. I never explained the details of it, but was I supposed to?

How do you explain the fear of dying to someone who thinks you brought it upon yourself? All he cared about was working, working out, and drinking. Everything in between was inconsequential. When I broke up with him, some friends told me how often he cheated on me. How

was I with him for another eighteen months after the assault? I don't know. Stupidity? Denial? Naiveté? Was I as green as the dress I wore that night?

His sentencing hearing was scheduled for December 2018, and I just had upended my life by breaking up with Mike. I knew there was no point in asking Mike or my family to attend the hearing with me. I called Jackie and asked if she could be there for me, and she and her sister picked me up at seven o'clock that morning. We sang to BTS on the way there, and when we walked inside the courthouse, I noticed his mother sitting on the bench across from us.

I walked into the courtroom and saw him sitting at the table before the judge in a blue denim jumpsuit. He was tall, and his hair was cut short, his face thin as his head hung forward, long dark hands clasped together in front of him. I had worked with men like him. They weren't so bad, but now I'd experienced firsthand what it took to go to prison. My sympathy had worn thin.

There were two other victims. One hadn't shown up to the hearing, but the other did, and she brought her father with her. She was younger than me. He had assaulted her in her own home. The Assistant Attorney General read a letter she wrote for the court to hear. In it, she explained the loss she felt and how he had robbed her peace of mind. She explained how she tried to get it back by installing an expensive security system in her home after the assault; even then, she still couldn't sleep at night. I don't know why I didn't say anything to her after the hearing was over.

He was sentenced to nine years in prison for varying degrees of sexual assault; his probation would last another eight. He was also mandated to register as a sex offender. A part of me felt guilty. He'd become another Black man tossed behind bars. I couldn't deny the facts, though. I remembered his face before mine while he assaulted me with his fingers. I remembered his voice. He'd given me his business card. He lived down the street from my parents' house, and I later found out he was the brother of my current boyfriend's godfather. I met him—Alex's godfather—in April of 2019. He looks identical to the brother I helped send to prison, although the look-alike brother is a stand-up gentleman. Allegedly, the man who assaulted me had molested his nieces. I learned that no one in his family liked him. They were happy he was in prison.

I still wondered if I deserved it. I didn't go home when I should have, didn't listen to my friend when she asked if I was okay in his company.

In the ether of my happiness and confidence, I didn't see him as a bad man. He reminded me of the inmates whose hands I shook on stage after giving them their diplomas. I didn't want to see anyone in a bad light that night, not Mike nor my friends who had left me drunk and alone in a bar. Little did I know that blind trust could land you flat on your back in the middle of a parking lot with your panties torn off and another man's fingers inside you—or around your throat.

I haven't celebrated St. Patrick's Day since. Green isn't my favorite color anymore.

I sit here writing about the worst experience of my life, rubbing my temples and listening to Alice In Chains. No one will understand what I went through exactly. Some will empathize—women are assaulted in outstanding numbers, reported and unreported—and many more will sympathize. Still, no one will understand the terror I felt running down a street I vaguely recognized, only to trip and fall, injuring my knee to the point of scarring. I still can't feel the small patch of skin on my kneecap. Whenever an ocean wave hits it, it feels like the skin is being taken away by the tide. It's permanently numb.

I didn't tell my therapist about the assault until six months later—that's how in denial I was, although I did get an STD test one month after the assault. I was due for another Pap smear, and I needed to explain to my doctor what had happened. Fortunately, she was understanding and told me no one should experience what I'd been through. But I went through it. I went through the whole damn thing, blacked out or not. I went through Mike and my mom blaming me for what had happened, emotionally scarring me.

You just drink too much.

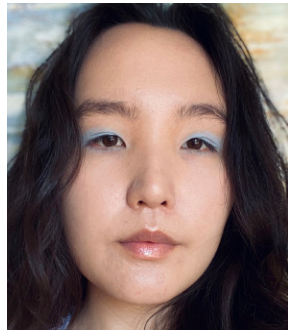
Well, honey, don't you think this is a sign to stop drinking so much?

I'm drunk now. Alcohol eases my anxiety. I don't take medicine. I drink.

I just don't go to bars alone anymore. I'm not green anymore.

Let's Talk About Sexual Harassment, Baby (Sing It)

ENHSARUUL ZORIGT



WRITER'S COMMENT: The prompt was how a lifestyle change was implemented after a significant experience, and I knew I had to write about some of my experiences with sexual harassment. Notice that I wrote "some," not "all." Too many have had to deal with this, especially young girls and women, and I was tired of being just another number in a statistic. As I watching season 2 of Sex Education, Aimee's character arc made me revisit traumatic memories that were locked away. But this time I was able to put them to use. It's all too easy to forget the massive toll that sexual harassment and assault can have on someone. I wrote about what it was like for me during and after my worst experiences (so far) for two reasons: to educate those who haven't experienced sexual harassment and/or assault and to let other victims know that they're not alone. If you get angry or disgusted while reading this, good. Me too.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I've read my share of heartbreaking student essays. I would call it a hazard of the job if it weren't such a privilege to be entrusted with students' precious and private selves. Still, I wasn't quite prepared for the emotional charge of Enhsaruul's lyric-meets-slam essay on how sexual harassment led a 14 year-old to symbolically cram her kick-ass young self into a drawer and to cloak herself in layers of shapeless, colorless clothing. The emotional charge is not just because such things happen. It's that Enhsaruul's gift for specific detail makes each incident ping for the reader off their own experiences. I won't give away how she realized that she should be angry and not ashamed. But the fact that she did realize is clear in every line. From the title to the final sentence, this is supercharged, confident, audacious writing. Pure kick ass. Sing it.

—Amy Clarke, University Writing Program

No combination of words thrown on an indifferent page can accurately describe the tenebrous mixture of emotions that consumes your body when you're sexually harassed, but I can sure try. The fear that threatens to paralyze you like a deer in headlights strangles your heart until the beats are frenzied, the wave of rage at being objectified crashes over you at a breakneck speed, and the hot, prickly feeling of shame creeps up the nape of your neck. The worst part? I was fourteen when I was first catcalled (and mere weeks later, groped).

June 2014, a muggy dog day of summer, one where you could see wavy lines in the distance. I was walking along the sunlit Ohlone Greenway underneath the BART tracks, heading to my high school's gym to sing at graduation. Bubbling over with excitement because I was one of two freshmen to have gotten into the a cappella group earlier that year, I was itching to perform, so much so that I couldn't keep down the wide, goofy grin forming. On top of that giddy superiority high was the confidence boost from wearing my favorite semi-formal dress: a black, white, and teal mid-thigh-length bodycon with lace accents, paired with black lace sneaker wedges. Basically, I thought I was hot shit.

But then I could feel someone staring at me from inside their parked car and immediately went into no-direct-eye-contact, walk-quicker-but-don't-make-it-obvious-you-want-to-run mode.

"You want a ride?" I heard on my right, ten feet away from me.

"No," I forcefully replied, putting up a cold façade to combat the tears already welling up and threatening to overflow, to show weakness in front of that vile creature. I only saw his face for two seconds, and yet I still can't forget it six years later while he probably forgot me after five minutes. You want a mental image? Think Al, the toy collector from *Toy Story 2*: rotund, dark balding hair, and glasses. I can't forget that horrid upward curl of his lips, the wandering beady eyes, and the greasy lascivious tone of his proposition, the double meaning of which I was too young to comprehend. All flight and no fight, I barreled on to school while tugging my dress down every few steps, only stopping to process what had happened once I reached the safe haven of the choir room. I put on a brave face and didn't break down before the performance.

The minute I got home I peeled off my dress and cried in the shower as I scrubbed myself raw, trying to rid myself of the filth of the world and preserve what pure remnants of childhood innocence were left. *It was the dress' fault that happened to me*, I remember thinking. *The dress was too*

form-fitting, too short, it made me look too mature for my age. Said dress was washed and hung up, to be unworn for years, and I made up my mind to dress more conservatively. Maybe then I wouldn't solicit unwanted attention.

Okay, so let me backtrack for a moment. For those of you not really in the know about sexual harassment, in which case lucky you, “[s]exual harassment is generally defined as unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature[.] . . . It may consist of words, gestures, touching, or the presence of sexual material” (Gutek 13987). I was catcalled, and “[c]atcalling is a form of sexual harassment . . . [and] may be accompanied by whistles, winks, or grabs. It involves brief, one-sided interactions in public places . . . [and] has no clear purpose other than to call attention to a woman's body or sexuality” (Fisher et al. 1495).

I knew that it was sexual harassment when I was catcalled, but I didn't realize until years later that I was intentionally groped. A few weeks after The Incident, my fellow French students and I were off on our big trip to France, chaperoned by our teachers, of course. This being my first time visiting Europe, I was wide-eyed and bushy-tailed when we finally reached Charles de Gaulle Airport, despite it being early in the morning. Walking over to security while chatting with my friends, suddenly there were two hands squeezing my breasts. The perpetrator, a fast-walking, short, bald, white man wearing a blue T-shirt, had crashed into me and muttered “Sorry, sorry” with some kind of European accent as he hurriedly rejoined the rest of the passengers who had just gotten off of the people mover.

At the time, I brushed it off as being an accidental touch because he looked as if he was running late and ended up stumbling into me because he wasn't paying attention to his surroundings. However, I eventually came to terms with the fact that I had been targeted and groped. It happened in a wide open space and I was in the middle of the entire group, not on the outskirts, which means he had to have aimed for me. And besides, no one really walks with their arms bent at chest level and hands angled outwards like an old-timey cartoon villain, do they? I had been viewed and treated as public property, something that anyone could use and discard at any moment in time. I was objectified.

The objectification theory is where “women are constantly sexually objectified [which] socializes [them] to internalize an observer's

perspective on their own body and, as a result, experience more body image dysfunction and mental health consequences” (Fisher et al. 1499). And objectify myself I did after those two scarring incidents.

I became more and more paranoid about how others viewed me, always feeling surrounded by unblinking eyes judging my every move and scrutinizing my outfits. I wanted to look my best so that I could be viewed as attractive in the eyes of those I was interested in and acceptable for everyone else. You know, as you do in high school. But simultaneously, I desperately wanted to hide my body so that attention wouldn't be drawn to my breasts or hips, which had developed early on during puberty. So, I came to the conclusion that if I didn't wear clothes that accentuate those features, then I wouldn't receive any unwanted attention. With my new mindset in place, I was ready for the next year of high school.

Sophomore year was a nothing year. In terms of outfits, I had creatively stifled myself. Having always taken pride in my sense of style, I had never really been afraid to wear some “out of the box” choices before that fateful summer. That year, the most skin I dared to show other than via knee-length dresses was my arms, upper back, and very rarely my thighs if it was too hot to wear anything other than shorts, but none of these options combined. Was I a little miserable with the mundane, basic choices I would repeat? Try really miserable. But for all intents and purposes, I hadn't been sexually harassed again, so the plan had worked in the end. Well, it had worked until summer came around again. Man, summer is just not my season, huh?

Walking to a doctor's appointment with my mom in the middle of July on a weekday, the last thing I was expecting was for my mom and me to both be catcalled. She was wearing jeans and a button-down shirt while I was in jeans, a t-shirt, and a jacket. The unwanted and unappreciated comment was something along the lines of “like mother, like daughter” in reference to our hips, and the fury I felt boiling inside me at that moment has been unmatched since. How dare he bring my mother into this? Why does the world tolerate this kind of uncouth, piggish behavior? I didn't feel that hot wave of shame anymore like I had that first time, not when all I could see was red.

A 2011 study conducted by the American Association of University Women found that out of the 1,965 students surveyed, 48 percent had experienced harassment but only 9 percent had actually reported the incident. They also found that women were more sexually harassed than

men: 56 percent to 40 percent (Hlavka 337-338). Sexual harassment is dishearteningly prevalent all around the world, including the United States, and being sexually harassed is terrifying, no matter what gender you identify as. Just focusing on the experience of women harassed by men, though, too often it goes unreported because of a “presumption that men’s sexual aggression is simply ‘boys being boys’” (339). We’re taught to accept that we *will* be catcalled or otherwise harassed at some point in our lives because it’s simply inevitable, and, pardon my language, that’s just all kinds of fucked up.

We can’t change the world instantaneously and my honest opinion is that objectification and sexual harassment aren’t going away anytime soon, but we can try to decrease the prevalence of these incidents, starting with better sex education in schools. Education that doesn’t just focus on the scientific aspects (although those are still topics of the utmost importance), but the emotional and psychological aspects of consent, going through puberty, et cetera. All of us benefit from having a more educated world, especially when it comes to big societal issues like these. We cannot sweep this problem under the rug—we need to discuss it and then take steps to change.

I was enraged when my mother was catcalled because I felt that she deserved so much more respect, and that she shouldn’t be treated as an object. Then, a couple of weeks later when I was fuming over it again and thinking of retorts I should have made, a moment of epiphany sprung into existence: *I* didn’t deserve to be treated like that either. I was blaming myself for being harassed because of how I dressed and how my body was naturally developing, instead of blaming the deplorable and indecent actions of those men. In short, I had victim-blamed myself. I had become ashamed of my own body and hid it to avoid attention, but I got it anyway, because catcallers and skeezy perverts don’t care about you. All they care about is the feeling of domination and satisfaction they experience when objectifying people.

And so, a month before junior year started, I decided to go back to wearing whatever I wanted after a year of subduing my appearance, but with a few boundaries if I was headed somewhere I’m not fully comfortable. Part of me is still a little paranoid that my body is going to be used against me, because unfortunately it could still happen anytime, but there’s no point in living in fear. I’m still aware of how I look in other people’s eyes because objectifying yourself is a hard habit to knock, but

I've become less ashamed of my body as the years pass by. I've gotten comfortable in my own skin again, and a good part of that comes from loving what I wear and being able to experiment with my style.

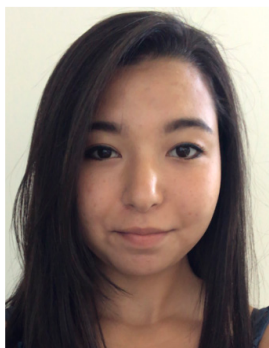
Now as a junior in college, I'm still going strong with wearing whatever makes me feel confident and happy. Those crusty cretins may have taken a year away from me, but they're not taking away my entire life because I refuse to let them still have that power. In fact, as my metaphorical middle finger, I wore that pivotal dress outside again a couple of months ago, after five-and-a-half years of it hanging in my closet. It was time.

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Scarves of Survivors

ISABELLA BLOOM



WRITER'S COMMENT: When I first saw the scarves from the organization Conscious by Kali, I was struck by their ingenuity and beauty, but what really gripped me was the brief message on each tag: "This garment was handcrafted with renewed hope and purpose by a sex trafficking survivor." When Professor Andersen assigned our UWP 104C term project prompt, I knew immediately that I'd write about Kali Basi and her organization. I saw this as an opportunity to learn about global sex trafficking, a topic about which I knew embarrassingly little. In the process of researching, interviewing for, and writing this article, I became appalled by the realities of global human trafficking, particularly in the U.S. I was privileged to meet via Skype some of the girls working with Basi and the reality of their struggles at such a young age pushed me to work hard on my article. I see journalism as a valuable way to share important stories that unveil key societal issues that we must mend.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The capstone project for my UWP 104C Journalism course is the term feature article, which requires students to work as reporters exploring one significant story in great depth throughout the term. For this sizeable project, students conduct several face-to-face interviews as well as extensive secondary research. Isabella's article is a powerful and troubling exploration into the dark world of human trafficking, a fast-growing, multibillion-dollar global criminal industry. Throughout this piece, Isabella does an excellent job of painting a clear mental picture of the tragic lives of

girls swallowed up into this world; she does this while simultaneously featuring Conscious by Kali, a nonprofit organization focused on providing survivors of human trafficking with opportunities to begin anew. Isabella's clear and concise journalistic writing, her vivid descriptions, and her effective use of pertinent, reliable sources combine to make this a feature article that informs readers while also inviting them to act on behalf of those who need a great deal of help but whose voices are so often silenced.

—Ken Andersen, University Writing Program

At only 13 years old, Amara's mother brought her to a children's shelter home in New Delhi, India. Amara was uneducated, pregnant, and about to have to look after her three younger siblings. When she spotted the cookies in my hands, she smiled, her eyes squinting.

India is the most dangerous country in the world to be a woman. Sexual violence and slave labor contributed to the 83 percent rise in reported crimes against women from 2007 to 2016, according to a 2018 report from the Thomas Reuters Foundation. (This same report named the United States the 10th most dangerous country for women; the only Western nation in the top 10 ranking, the U.S. comes in third—tied with Syria—for sexual violence.)

Until four years ago, Amara worked as a house maid, a position in which young children frequently work for a family in return for food, shelter or wages. Although promised wages, Amara never received them and she was sexually abused by her employer. When she became pregnant, her employer sent her back to her family. Amara had no community to turn to for support; her rapist faced no retribution.

Amara's mother placed her in a shelter home operated by Prayas, a national-level organization with 50 children's shelters that seeks to provide basic needs for and rebuild the lives of marginalized children in India.

Amara's family was poor; her mother owned a tiny shop that sold scrap metal and newspapers. When several villagers brought an item to the shop, believing it was stolen, Amara's mother refused to take it. In the dispute, Amara's mother was injured and taken to the hospital. She died two months later.

Last May, Amara (whose name has been changed to protect her identity) began receiving support at a center in New Delhi from the nonprofit organization Conscious by Kali. The center, entirely run and funded by the nonprofit, provides vocational training and mentoring for survivors of sex trafficking. Now, at age 16, Amara is a success story.

“She’s got a long ways to go, but she’s fulfilled her dream,” said Kalvindar (Kali) Basi, the founder of Conscious by Kali. When Amara came to Basi, she told her that her dream was to be trained and then make money so she could help her older sister, an 18-year-old divorcée, look after their three younger siblings. “She is now back living with her sister, earning money that is helping to put food on the table.”

Each morning after Amara gets her younger sister and two younger brothers ready for school, she proudly announces she is going to her “office.” There, Amara is learning a skill: how to create handcrafted apparel.

“She’s not a fully qualified seamstress or anything, but she’s pretty good,” Basi said. “We’re paying for her transport here, and she brought her sisters to see it. The next day she came, she said her sister told her, ‘Don’t even wash the dishes. Go to office!’”

Conscious by Kali aims to provide training and employment for survivors of human trafficking by teaching them textile design and construction. As a nonprofit organization, Conscious by Kali uses the sales of survivor-crafted products, along with donations, to fund a rehabilitation program that instills confidence and prepares the survivors for an independent life.

Born in New Zealand and currently living in Seattle, Basi founded Conscious by Kali in 2016. Merging her East Indian heritage with western fashions, Basi helped a craft center at a shelter home in Kathmandu, Nepal teach the shelter women the art of textiles.

Last May, Basi opened her own center in New Delhi, where she could decide how to mentor the girls without oversight.

“We now have a platform where we can mentor the girls, and we have control of how we want to do it,” said Basi. Having her own center allows Basi to look at each girl individually and work with several shelter homes, mainly Prayas and Global Trust, to most effectively help them.

“Each one is an individual,” Basi said. “Each one gets individual teaching.”

In India, these girls have no community to turn to because of the stigma attached to sex slavery. If the girls' parents don't accept them, they have few options. Dowry is still very important and very prevalent, despite being illegal in India since 1961.

"You have the Dalit class, or the untouchables, you know, the lowest of the low," said Basi. "They still have a community. They have each other. This lot has no one. They are so dishonored that they are lower than the lowest."

At her center in New Delhi, Basi focuses on mentoring the girls. "If you cannot get them out of the victim state, it doesn't matter what you throw at them—they're never going to succeed other than being laborers," Basi said. Basi does not run her center like a factory focused on churning out products for sale. Instead, her goal is to mentor the girls so that they can become the guides and inspire other girls to fight for themselves as well. She wants to create leaders.

"That is my main focus," Basi said. "The impact from a survivor who's standing on her own feet saying, 'Look. This was what's done for me, look at me now,' is just incredible."

Along with mentoring the girls, Basi's center trains them to develop a skill. This way, these girls have hope for a future. Without an education, developing a skill creates the prospect of future work and the ability to support themselves.

Basi works alongside a master tailor to teach the girls at the New Delhi center how to felt, screen print, and paint silk scarves. In addition, they make dresses, vests, cushions and are starting to create recycled jewelry out of bike tires. A recent order of cushions overseas to Australia was met with high praise from the buyer. "She's blown away how beautiful they're done," said Basi.

The products that these girls create are not only beautiful, but inventive. The girls use silk saris for patchworking and even screen print freehand. "I'm always looking for a twist," said Basi.

After a girl has trained and worked at the center for a few months, Basi pays them a small wage so they can start saving and learning to manage money.

"Our main thing is to mentor them, train them and promise them that, even if she's not a good enough worker, we'll find something for her to do," Basi said. "As soon as she's 18, she's got work so she can start

dreaming her dream.”

The shelter homes provide the girls with lodging, food, and medical care until they are 18 so the problem arises after that. Basi explains how, in India, once these girls turn 18 there isn't much for them in way of employment. They can go to a shelter home for older women, but there is no training for employment there—or at least, she said, most of the training is inadequate. As most of these girls have never sewed, the master tailor at Basi's center has them first sewing straight lines on paper.

In addition to the master tailor, Basi employs someone as “center in charge” to escort the girls to and from the shelter home if they can't leave the shelter home on their own. Because some of the girls are underage or threatened by their assailants, the center in charge will transport them to and from the shelter home. Basi also employs a director who previously worked for the the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA), which works with underprivileged artisans throughout India. When he heard about Basi opening up her center in New Delhi, he offered his services.

A big obstacle the nonprofit faces is cultural: ingrained in these girls' minds is that marriage is the only way they will survive. Teaching them a skill and providing them with employment gives them another option; changing their perspectives is considerably more challenging.

“I had a couple of girls on very good wages and as soon as the first guy who came into Kathmandu says ‘I love you,’ the girls fall for it,” Basi said. To combat this, Basi uses a seemingly simple method of mentoring.

Basi introduces three scenarios. She explains to the girls that in the first scenario, she could have a happy marriage. In the second scenario, her husband could die or his family could kick her out. In this scenario, the girl would be left without anything, including skills. In the third scenario, the girl could learn a skill and get a job. She could become independent, and then if she wanted to get married, she could, but she'd still have something to fall back on. “You give them options and you make them think,” Basi said. “And they'll opt in for the third.”

Now, one young girl is pushing back against her parents' pressure to marry. “She's not really strong but her voice is coming out,” Basi said. “She's getting a voice, saying, ‘I want to be trained for something. I want to stand on my own feet before I get married.’”

When Basi first meets these girls, she says they are confused and don't have many options. Basi works to give them the confidence and the voice to fight.

“You have these girls whose childhoods have been totally taken away from them,” said Basi. Stigmatized, traumatized, rejected by their communities and kicked out of their homes by their parents, these young girls do not have the luxury to lightheartedly play outdoors or even focus on their studies. They’ve already been through a lifetime of hardship. They’re working like adults, but in their entire makeup, they’re still children. They bustle into the center at 10 a.m. and line up for hugs and kisses from Basi, who they call Mummy.

Currently, Basi has 20 girls at her center in New Delhi. Three of these girls were 13 years old when they had babies. All of her girls are survivors of rape and sex trafficking.

All of her girls are also under 21 years old. The reason, Basi explains, is that when police are doing raids at a brothel, they can pull out any children that are under age, no questions asked. However, if someone is over age, police cannot pull them out unless they voice their protest and say, “I’ve been held against my will.”

“And they don’t have a voice,” Basi said. “They’re scared stiff.”

The same policy applies in the U.S. Sex trafficking is defined by the U.S. Department of State as an adult engaging in a commercial sex act through force, threats of force, fraud, coercion or any combination of these means. Because trafficking of minors does not require force, fraud or coercion to be illegal and prohibited, consent is an important aspect of identifying adult trafficking victims.

“You have to prove that you were essentially a slave and you have to be willing to testify,” said David Kyle, a UC Davis professor and co-author of *Global Human Smuggling*.

Most people are tricked into trafficking because they think they’re hiring smugglers, Kyle said. Traffickers typically promise impoverished women and girls employment in other countries, later manipulating them into sexual labor. Sometimes this work is phrased as payment for a debt, but the game of debt never ends. These crimes are organized, relying on victims’ awareness that they are breaking a law by hiring the smuggler. Increasing criminalization of undocumented migration in turn increases the victim’s fear of persecution. They also fear putting their families—whom traffickers often use as leverage—at risk.

“Because they’re undocumented or because they don’t have the protections of states, because they’re away from their home, they’re in a particularly weak position,” said Kyle. Even if law enforcement receives

a tip and shows up at an establishment, victims often do not speak up.

As an estimated \$150 billion-a-year global industry, human trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal enterprises, according to California Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

The U.S. is no exception.

“In America, they have the ability to earn half a million per girl a year,” Basi said. “If they can break her.” If traffickers can get their victims to submit to force or coercion, the victims are that much more valuable to them.

“Our children are now the hottest commodity in the world and have been for a long time because you can sell them over and over again,” said Basi. “It’s not like coffee, it’s not like oil, it’s not like drugs where you use it once and it’s gone.”

It’s a myth that human trafficking only or primarily occurs in developing countries. According to the Polaris Project, human trafficking grows out of greed and profit not only in underground industries, but also in formal sectors including restaurants, factories, cleaning services, and construction.

A report released by the Bureau of Statistics in the Department of Justice in 2011 analyzed confirmed trafficking victims in the U.S. from January 2008 through June 2010. The report reveals 83 percent of sex trafficking victims were identified as U.S. citizens while 67 percent of labor trafficking victims were identified as undocumented immigrants.

The U.S. Department of State estimates trafficking of 14,500 to 17,500 people into the U.S. each year, with populous border-state California as one of the top four destinations.

“It’s really hard for us to say what trafficking looks like in the states with certainty—really anywhere in the world with certainty—because it’s such a hard population to get data on,” said Rachel Robitz, a physician and researcher at the UC Davis Medical Center in Sacramento.

The International Labour Organization estimates 40.3 million people globally living in modern slavery at any moment in 2016. Of these victims, the organization estimates 4.8 million are trapped in forced sexual exploitation. One in four victims of modern slavery are children.

Robitz says that although anyone with any socioeconomic status or from any ethnic group can be and are trafficked, certain populations are at an increased risk.

“We know that, for example, homeless youth are at an increased risk of being trafficked for sex,” said Robitz. “LGBT youth who have been kicked out of their homes and don’t have a lot of support at home are at an increased risk. We know that migrant workers, folks who are crossing borders, are at increased risk of being trafficked for labor. There are a whole variety of factors, and really anything that makes people vulnerable puts them at risk.”

Robitz researches the physical and mental health needs of human trafficking survivors. Previously, Robitz provided psychiatric care, including evaluation and medication, for trafficking survivors. Now, she is conducting a qualitative study on the relationship between survivor leaders and the organizations they work with to understand how this impacts the survivor leaders’ well-being.

The physical health impacts of trafficking on survivors is threefold, according to Robitz. The first is trauma or traumatic injuries either inflicted by a trafficker, someone else in the trafficking situation—such as a buyer of commercial sex—or self-inflicted traumatic injuries. The second includes occupational risks. Trafficking victims often have little to no access to personal protection equipment to treat or prevent injuries or diseases such as STDs. Third, victims often have issues related to poor living conditions including malnutrition, dehydration, and skin conditions. Trafficking victims also face mental health impacts such as depression, PTSD, anxiety, and self-injurious behavior including suicide.

While human trafficking is often viewed from a criminal justice or human rights perspective, Robitz says it’s also important to address the issue from a public health perspective.

As the co-chair for the direct service committee for the organization HEAL Trafficking, Robitz advocates to human trafficking advisory councils, encouraging them to involve medical providers in the process of treating survivors.

HEAL Trafficking works to improve public policies and support anti-trafficking efforts. It also facilitates collaborative research projects, including investigating the effectiveness of healthcare screening and response protocols. Identifying patients in health care agencies at risk for trafficking may help prevent or allow for intervention in trafficking.

While many notable agencies and organizations combat human trafficking, each person involved—including consumers—is vital in the fight against this growing criminal enterprise.

Although Conscious by Kali does a lot for traffic survivors, the organization needs more funding. Basi says she wants to move the center to a better place. Every time it rains, it floods; the girls have to walk through the flooded streets to get to the center. It's not a safe neighborhood; just the other day a shooting took place right outside the center. Some potential buyers refuse to come.

"I'm struggling; we've got to move out of here. It's in the slums," Basi said. "The ultimate dream is to have our own place, land, grow our own food, have our own center where the girls can stay, have a place for their children."

Basi's organization has a donation page on its website, www.consciousbykali.com. The bulk of their funding comes from what they make and what Basi can sell overseas. However, donations allow Basi to focus on training and looking at different ways to improve rather than worrying about where she's going to get the money to pay the next bill.

To donors, Basi says, "You're actually helping a survivor stay alive, get her dignity back and stand on her own two feet." One hundred percent of donations goes into providing for these girls and Basi hopes that soon the organization will become self-sufficient through the sales of products made by the girls.

"When I'm thinking about where I'm going to get the funds to pay for our rent or to keep the center going, I remember their stories and that keeps me going," Basi said. "No way will I let my girls down."

Women's Health and Women's Silence

MEKALEYA TILAHUN



WRITER'S COMMENT: I've always loved finding similarities and differences between my family's experiences growing up in Ethiopia and my time as an adolescent in the United States. The culmination of these dichotomous beliefs has shaped my perspective and inspired me to take a different path, giving a modern twist on the tradition I have known. Writing about "women's silence" for my UWP 104F assignment was risky business. On one hand, I felt powerful—my words became an incredible tool that allowed me to speak for those whose voices were taken away from them. But on the other hand, I am telling deeply personal stories of those who may not want to be heard. I believe that this is the first step of a longer conversation that will, hopefully, make us all listeners.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Sometimes good ideas begin when you're not focused on finding them. The idea for this essay appeared in an offhand conversation in the middle of an in-class drafting workshop. Students were tracking the different kinds of voices they were using in their reflective essay drafts: the voice of the patient, the voice of the trained scientist, the family's voice, the author's voice. Mekaleya was writing about both her mother and her grandmother but, she told me, neither had provided adequate narrative. In asking what to do without it, Mekaleya felt the first stirrings of the ideas that have ended up in this essay. As she found herself explaining the cultural practices surrounding such women's silences, she began to speak for those women, and thus for herself.

— Laurie Glover, University Writing Program

“Have you been sexually active?”

My mother had just left the room as my doctor asked me this question. When my mother walked back into the room, she eyed me cautiously as I squirmed around on the table.

Most of my childhood memories at the doctor's office resembled this one. I never lied to my doctor, mostly because there was nothing to hide, although my mother was still curious to know more details of my conversations with my physician. She would ask, “What did you talk about? Is there anything I should know?” I would just shrug and hold my embarrassed silence during the car ride home.

My parents emigrated from Ethiopia in the '80s, beginning a life in the US that was vastly different from their life in their homeland. This informed many of their decisions about how to raise me, including the one where they forbade me to participate in seventh-grade Sex Ed; when I was in ninth grade, they enrolled me in Sex Ed after having a difficult time giving me “the talk” themselves.

My grandmother never allowed her heritage to be influenced by American beliefs. Having a powerful relationship with God is a central aspect of life in Ethiopia; therefore, she stayed faithful to her Orthodox Christian religion throughout all of her years of living in the US. She followed all of the customs meticulously and gave me a strong connection to my culture. On my own, I learned the misfortunes of many young women in rural Ethiopia, including my grandmother. These women suffer a number of disadvantages: lack of literacy, health care services and basic human rights. My grandmother was only in school until the second grade and was “married off” by her family at 15 years-old. Shortly after, she had her first child, dedicating the rest of her teen and young adult life to raising her nine children.

In the Tigray region of Ethiopia, close to where my grandmother grew up, women achieve social worth from giving birth. Motherhood is essentially a requirement to becoming a “real” woman, the only exception being if the woman suppresses her femaleness to advance her spirituality and become a nun. Traditionally, women attend church more frequently than men, partly because there is more at stake for a woman who is not religious. Her religious participation is directly correlated with pregnancy, childbirth and childcare. The Orthodox Church interprets this to mean that it is Saint Mary who has authority in the matters of pregnancy and contraception; therefore, women need divine protection in reproductive

matters. Moreover, the church does not accept the use of contraceptives that interfere with a woman's hormones, such as pills, implants, IUDs and birth control shots. In rural Ethiopia, girls who marry very young, like my grandmother did, are not physiologically developed enough to have a safe delivery. The lack of obstetric and gynecological services in those rural regions further contributes to pregnancy complications. Harmful traditional practices, such as female genital cutting and child marriage, also disproportionately affect rural women and girls (Mjaaland 202-206).

While there is political will and commitment to address gender inequality and other reproductive injustices in Ethiopia, the country has only a limited capacity to fund and implement community-based interventions targeting vulnerable women; moreover, the services have been skewed toward the wealthy living in urban areas, and adult men in general. The Ministry of Health recently prioritized family planning by funding it through community health programs. However, church and state policies on contraception are still in conflict, making women feel guilty for their decision to pursue birth control methods that are deemed "unnatural" by the church (Gaestel & Shelley 2014).

Silence can be a powerful strategy. By keeping quiet, women can guard themselves against the interference of any authorities, including husbands, on the issue of reproductive choice. This secrecy plays an important role in a woman's ability to fight the political powers constricting her reproductive freedom. However, the submissiveness and passivity that silence implies, with regard to female sexuality, can also work against women. It is this tactic of silence that prevents women from forming social networks, even within families. My mother got her period for the first time when she was 12 or 13 years old. She remembers being so scared to tell her mother that her sheets were stained crimson red, so instead, my mom scrubbed her underwear multiple times a day, hiding behind closed doors. One day, her sister, a then-annoyed teenager, discovered a pair of soiled underwear. Appalled at my mother's lack of knowledge, she nonchalantly left a cotton cloth on my mother's bed, never speaking a word of it again.

Many years later, after both my sister and I were born, my mother was diagnosed with uterine fibroids, non-cancerous growths on the uterus. She was worried, but immediately decided that unless the mass was cancerous, she would not pursue any of the treatment options that her gynecologist offered. Her reluctance to speak about the fibroids with me

prevented a conversation about the consequences of her diagnosis. Until I begged the question, she never would have initiated this conversation with me, or with anyone else for that matter. To this day, I am still unsure of her reasons to forgo treatment.

My grandmother reacted in a similar way when she was diagnosed with uterine cancer years ago, resulting in her hysterectomy. She turned her head away from the tests, the doctors, and her family, deciding that she would rather not know anything regarding her illness until her full recovery. She did not speak a word about her diagnosis to anyone except her son—because he was both one of the eldest sons and one of the only doctors in the family, he took my grandmother to all of her visits and made many of the necessary medical decisions himself.

The time gap between when my mother and my grandmother were diagnosed with their respective illnesses and when I found out about them is incredible. Without conversation about their medical histories, and without knowing what was happening to them, I was left without any information about my own body. I've tried comprehending what my grandmother was going through at the time of her diagnosis, but I can't confidently say what influenced her silence. In the face of cancer, she was stripped of the only life she ever knew and the only role that was ever available to her: being a mother to her nine children. Surely—if only for a split second—this devout Orthodox Christian must have questioned God's will.

While my family was silent as I approached my teen years, I was not. When I got my period, my grandmother, mother and aunt celebrated the occasion with a tea party. It was at this event that my mother told me the story of her embarrassing discovery on her mother's sheets. Tears formed in my aunt's eyes as she laughed hysterically, remembering the fear on my mother's face as she desperately washed her underwear. My regal grandmother sat and smiled proudly as she watched this scene, offering me modest advice about womanhood. In that moment the silence was broken. I grew up with a strong social network of three generations of women in a way that they didn't—and in a way that I wish to take forward with me for the rest of my life.

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Rape and Victim-Blaming: A Critical Examination of the Tendency to Blame Victims and Exonerate Perpetrators in Cases of Rape

SONNEN ANDREA MICHELE
JOEDEMAN BROWN



WRITER'S COMMENT: *I chose this subject because I have found that even the most educated people tend to be ignorant of the reality of rape in America. My goal was to provide an abundance of information to try to help people see the whole picture. It was very difficult to write on this topic because of my personal experience, but it is too important to ignore. I had trouble keeping the length down because there is so much to be said on the topic of rape. In the end, I had to narrow my topic down to victim-blaming. Eliminating victim-blaming is the best way to help rape victims and to reduce the rate of victimization. The primary cause of victim-blaming is acceptance of popular myths about rape, so teaching people about the reality of rape is imperative to eliminating rape.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *In UWP 102: Writing in Sociology, my students were asked to pick a topic they felt strongly about and develop the topic throughout the quarter by writing a problem statement, a critical analysis, and a literature review, leading to an in-depth discussion of the subject in their final paper: a long report. Sonnen accomplished this task admirably in the paper she submitted, and I congratulate her on being able to sustain her intellectual energy and develop her ideas clearly on a topic she felt invested in. It was a pleasure to work with Sonnen.*

—Poonam Sachdev, University Writing Program

INTRODUCTION

Rape is a puzzling crime because most Americans consider it to be heinous in the abstract, but in specific incidents of rape, it is often the victim rather than the perpetrator who gets blamed and shamed by society. There is a sharp disjuncture between the populace's conception of rape and the reality of rape.

The shift of the blame onto the victim is largely a result of people's preconceived notions about rape. People are less likely to believe a victim and less likely to hold her assailant accountable when she reports being assaulted in a manner that is not consistent with stereotypes. Most people are unaware of the frequency of rape in America and have expectations about victims and perpetrators that do not match reality. The expectations are based on rape myths that are perpetuated by the media, the criminal justice system, and "rape prevention" tips. The acceptance and perpetuation of rape myths and the lack of real knowledge about rape result in widespread denial of the problem of rape.

My study focuses on the rape of adult women because this is the most prevalent form of rape in our society. I do not use the legal definition of "adult." I focus on rapes wherein the victim and perpetrator are either both legal adults, are in adult situations (such as drinking alcohol), or are of similar age. Thus, I may consider the rape of a 16 year old girl by a 17 year old boy, but not the rape of an 8 year old child by a 14 year old boy.

THEORY

I am primarily drawing on theories of Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) and victim-blaming. Researchers measure participants' levels of RMA using a variety of surveys that ask questions designed to assess the individual's acceptance of rape stereotypes. Rape Myth Acceptance has been linked to higher rates of victim-blaming in numerous studies (Basow and Minieri 2011, Belknap 2010, Bieneck and Krahe 2011, Dellinger 2010). I address the connection between RMA and victim-blaming, as well as some of the causes for RMA, in the body of the paper. Victim-blaming refers to the tendency to hold rape victims accountable for their actions and coincides with perpetrator exoneration. People are less likely to hold a perpetrator accountable for his actions if they believe that the victim is responsible for preventing the rape.

METHODS

I draw on both primary and secondary research. This includes scholarly articles on the subject of rape and victim-blaming, articles and books on gender violence, Stanley Cohen's theories on denial (2001), and the National Crime Victimization Survey. I also draw on personal experience and anecdotal evidence gathered from my own research on this subject. I use my research and experience to supplement the existing work on the subject and to describe the victim's experience in more detail than is possible when using only statistics.

I am writing on this topic because I have experienced victim-blaming firsthand. I had to drop out of high school because of the burden of victim-blaming following a rape by a friend. I later worked for a police department and saw how male officers regarded women in general and rape victims in particular (I lost my job after reporting an assault by one of those officers). I have been studying rape and victim-blaming from a scholarly standpoint for the past six years. I have been privy to the stories of dozens of women who were willing to share their experiences with me. I draw on those anecdotes in my explanations of the victim's experience of rape.

WHAT CONSTITUTES VICTIM-BLAMING?

Victim-blaming is a term used to describe the tendency to hold rape victims rather than perpetrators accountable for an incident of rape. When a woman reports a rape she will likely be questioned about her actions and her choices, revealing the assumption that women somehow invite or precipitate rape. Questions such as "What were you doing out that late at night?" or "How much did you have to drink?" can seem innocent but serve to shift the focus from the perpetrator's actions onto the victim. Victims also face denial and disbelief from third parties, which results in the woman being publicly shamed and humiliated. The phenomenon of victim-blaming is unique to crimes involving sexual violence (Bieneck and Krahe 2011).

Many people question the victim's choices when she reports a rape. Even if the assailant is a trusted friend, the victim is questioned for choosing to be alone with him. Third parties, such as friends, family, police, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and juries, focus on what the victim was wearing, whether or not she was drinking alcohol or using drugs, whether or not she was sexually active prior to the incident, if she has made any allegations of rape before, etc. These questions reflect the

beliefs that a woman puts herself at risk and that her choices have caused the incident.

Women are especially at risk of victim-blaming when they delay reporting. It is widely believed that a “real” rape will leave significant physical evidence (Dellinger 2010). Women are expected to be beaten and bruised. This is not the case for the majority of rapes. The only physical evidence they may have been able to provide is DNA from seminal fluid; however, even this is not present in all cases. When a woman delays reporting, any physical evidence will be gone before law enforcement gets involved. This gives law enforcement and other third parties the ability to deny that any wrongdoing even occurred. The belief that a woman who has been raped will immediately call police also fuels the assumption that delayed reporting is because the accusation is false.

Even in cases where there is physical evidence—but especially in cases with no physical evidence—third parties and perpetrators can deny that a rape ever occurred. There is a mistaken belief in this society that women frequently claim to have been raped when they have not been. People believe that women will claim to have been raped as an act of vengeance against a man. Research shows that only 0.005% of rapes are false allegations, but many people believe that women are more likely to lie about rape than to have actually been raped (Belknap 2010). To deny the incident requires disbelieving the victim. The victim gets labeled a liar and a whore, worsening the feelings of guilt and depression that rape causes (Brown 2004). People who believe that false allegations are easy to make severely underestimate the psychological and social costs to a woman for admitting victimization (Belknap 2010).

THE REALITY OF RAPE IN AMERICA

The Frequency of Rape

Exact figures on rape in America are unknown due to the massive underreporting of this crime. The government estimates that actual incidents of rape may be as much as ten times what are reported to police. Some sources project even higher numbers. One national survey estimates that about 22% of women report a man forcing them to have sex at some point in their lives (Laumann 335). Some women experience forced sex multiple times throughout their lives. Yet only a fraction of these crimes is reported to police and successfully prosecuted. This leaves

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rape relatively invisible, keeping most people from realizing its prevalence in society. Due to underreporting, rape appears to be a relatively rare crime rather than a commonplace form of violence.

Defining Rape

The perception and awareness of rape is hindered by the varying definitions of rape (Laumann 333). Some conceptions of rape include penetration of any orifice of the body while some only include vaginal penetration. Broader definitions also allow for penetration by any foreign object, while more narrow definitions only allow for penetration by the penis. The use of force in defining rape is also controversial: some scholars include any type of coercion that results in a person having any sex against his/her will, while many legal definitions are restricted to the use of physical force or use of a weapon. Because of these disagreements, many women may not realize that an incident is considered rape and often perpetrators do not realize that their actions constitute rape. This adds to the perpetrator's denial of wrongdoing and decreases the likelihood of the crime being reported to law enforcement.

Victims

Other than domestic violence, rape is the only violent crime whose victims are predominantly female (Jackman 1999). About 95% of rape victims are female. Males are most at risk for sexual crimes as children, but female children are still victimized at about three times the rate of male children (Laumann et al. 1994). Adult males are extremely unlikely to be victims of sexual violence.

Women are most at risk between the ages of 16-25 (Laumann et al. 1994). These are the high-risk behavior years, when women are most likely to be going on dates and drinking alcohol. Women are extremely at risk in college, especially those involved in social activities on campus. Rapes are frequent at parties involving alcohol, such as fraternity "keggers" (Campbell-Ruggard and Van Ryswyk 2001). One out of every four female college students will be raped at least once during her time in school. High school students are also at risk, especially those who attend alcohol-fueled parties.

One of the most at-risk groups is women in the military. Various studies have found that as many as two out of every three women in the military are victimized. This number could be higher due to non-reporting,

While men tend to fear that our female soldiers will be raped by enemy troops—it is often used as a reason for keeping women out of combat—it is our own soldiers who are raping our female soldiers. Women who report sexual harassment or sexual violence to their commanding officers are frequently given dishonorable psychological discharges or transferred to different units (Martin 2012). This punishment of the victim rather than of the perpetrator, combined with the extremely male-dominated misogynistic culture of the military, puts women serving in the military at extremely high-risk of rape and victim-blaming.

Another extremely at-risk group is women with mental or physical disabilities who rely on others for their physical care (Jackman 1999). Women who are physically dependent, including women in nursing homes and those with mental illnesses, are extremely likely to be raped or sexually abused because they are either unable to report the crime, depend on the person who committed it and cannot afford to lose their caretaker, or are not believed by third parties if they do report it (this is especially true when the victim has a mental disability, such as autism, down's syndrome, schizophrenia, etc.). The primary mode of victim-blaming that these women face is denial of the crime; people do not believe that someone who is considered “crazy” could really understand rape, or that someone would want to have sex with a “crazy” person.

One of the causes of such denial is the hyper-sexualization of rape victims. Rape victims are expected to be physically attractive and rapes are often portrayed as erotic. Movies and T.V. shows tend to film rape scenes and sex scenes with the same techniques, making rape seem like another form of sex (Gruner 1994). Thus people expect that rape victims will be physically attractive and tend to disbelieve women who are not. Women who meet society's standards of beauty and thinness are significantly more likely to be believed by third parties than are socially awkward women, physically unattractive women, or overweight women.

While most rape myths posit white women as the victims of rape, white women are among the least likely to be victimized. Women of color, especially African American women and Native American women have the highest rates of victimization (NCVS 2008). This is primarily because of their lower status in American society. The risk of victimization is greater within relationships, familial settings, and employment settings. African-American women tend to be in the lowest-status jobs and at the lowest-paid positions, which puts them at the most risk of being raped by an employer or coworker. Native American women are nearly invisible

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in our society and have even lower status than African American women. Indian reservations are governed by tribal law, but men who are not members of the tribe are not subject to sanction by the tribal law. This makes Native American women especially vulnerable to white men who are nearly immune to the law. Still, all women, regardless of age, race, socioeconomic status, level of disability, etc. are at risk simply because they are women.

Perpetrators

Almost all perpetrators of rape are male. Men tend to victimize women of lower status. Men are automatically given higher status because we live in a patriarchal society. But there is a limit to this. A poor black man cannot easily get away with raping a middle-class white woman, for example, but a middle-class white man can easily get away with raping a poor black woman. Many women exhibit signs of mental illness following victimization, such as depression, thoughts of suicide, and self-mutilation, which lowers their social status and believability. Women are unlikely to be believed when accusing a man of higher status, but most perpetrators are of higher status than the victims.

The most important thing to know about perpetrators is that they are not insane. They often are not otherwise criminally inclined. As a society, we want to believe that actions are representative of the character of the person committing them. Thus, if someone were to commit rape, we would know he is not a good person because he would not be good in any other aspect of life. The fact is, most rapists are not mentally insane or unstable. They often have no criminal record and are seen as normal members of society. Men who have committed rape typically believe that they have done nothing wrong. Men tend to believe that women desire sexual interaction when the women do not (Basow and Minieri 2011). Thus, many men who commit rape believe that they were simply having sex with a willing partner. There is no psychological or moral difference between men who force sex and those who do not. The rapist is the guy next door, the business owner, the police officer, the father and husband, etc. We want to believe that there is an easy-to-distinguish line between good people and bad people, but there isn't. Most people do not believe rape victims simply because they cannot imagine that their friend, brother, coworker, or neighbor is capable of committing rape.

RAPE MYTHS

Rape Myth Acceptance

Rape Myth Acceptance (RMA) is used to describe the adherence to inaccurate beliefs about rape. Many studies have linked high rates of RMA to high rates of victim-blaming, suggesting that it is not only victims who are unable to recognize their experience as rape (Maurer and Robinson 2007, Basow and Minieri 2011). Police officers, judges, juries, and other third parties are much less likely to perceive an incident as a “real rape” if it does not involve physical injury, if the rapist and victim were intimately involved prior to the rape, if the victim was willingly alone with the perpetrator, etc. (Dellinger 2010, Temkin and Krahe 2008). Additionally, third parties are much more likely to justify the perpetrator’s actions and to blame the victim when the rape does not match stereotypes.

The prevalence of rape myths prevents victims, perpetrators, and third parties from recognizing most incidents as rape. RMA leads to higher rates of rape in the population, causes victims to be blamed for the crime, and keeps perpetrators from facing punishment. Rape myths are prevalent in movies and television shows, rape prevention tips, and are even exacerbated by news stories and crime statistics. Thus, it is not only victims who should be educated on the reality of rape, but society as a whole.

Physical Injury

People tend to judge the severity of rape based on the severity of physical injuries, although the primary injuries of rape are typically psychological. According to Mary R. Jackman, psychological injuries from rape can be long-term and include “fear, anxiety, loss of control, betrayal of trust, self-blame, low self-esteem, embarrassment, humiliation, shame, depression, and alcoholism” (1999). The damage multiplies when friends and family begin blaming the victim by questioning her motivations and choices rather than the actions of the perpetrator. The focus on the physical impact of rape rather than the psychological impact is also damaging if the victim tries to report the crime.

Police have been telling women for decades that if they are sexually assaulted they should avoid resisting physically to minimize physical injury. However, many conceptions of rape, such as that proposed

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in recent abortion legislation by Republicans in the U.S. House of Representatives, require physical evidence of use of force to qualify as a rape (Baumann). This means that any time the victim does not resist, even if it is because of fear of injury, much of society will not consider the incident to be rape, or may not consider it to be severe enough to merit prosecution. Victims who do not resist physically tend to face even greater amounts of guilt, loss of autonomy, and self-blame.

Without physical injuries, police and third parties claim that there is less evidence to substantiate a claim of rape. Rather than accepting that a traumatizing act of violence took place, people begin to see things as a subject of gossip, a sort of “he said, she said,” which reduces the perceived severity of the violence and converts it to an argument or a source of drama rather than a heinous crime. This disparity between what police advise potential victims to do and what they expect from actual victims, the focus on physical rather than psychological damage, and the tendency to blame victims who cannot offer physical evidence of injuries to substantiate allegations of rape causes more trauma to the victim, reduces the likelihood of legal and social repercussions for the perpetrator, and causes the public’s expectations of rape to vary significantly from the reality of most cases of rape.

Stranger Danger Myth

The major disjuncture between abstract conceptions of rape and the reality of rape is the relationship between the victim and perpetrator prior to the rape. The stereotype of rape usually involves a woman being accosted by a stranger late at night, either because of a home invasion or because the woman is walking by herself after dark. The reality is that about 96% of incidents of coerced sex are committed by someone the victim knows (Laumann et al. 1994), often someone who is known intimately, such as a close friend, partner, or family member (Jackman 288). Rape prevention tips focus on protecting yourself from rape by a stranger, feeding the public’s belief that stranger-rape is the norm.

The relationship of perpetrator to victim has serious consequences for the victim. When the perpetrator and victim know each other prior to the incident, they tend to travel in the same social circles. The perpetrator is typically well known to the victim’s friends and/or family. In almost all cases, the perpetrator will deny any wrongdoing, leaving family and friends with the burden of deciding whose story to believe. It becomes easier to

believe that nothing happened or that the victim encouraged or provoked the incident somehow than to hold the perpetrator accountable. This leaves the victim without the support of friends and family. She is often discouraged from seeking legal action. This exacerbates the psychological damage to the victim, increasing feelings of despair and guilt. It also reinforces the stereotype of the stranger-rapist because rapes that are not committed by a stranger are much less likely to be reported to the police.

The myth that rape is committed by strangers leaves women unprepared for the reality. Women are taught to check the backseat before getting into their car when the true danger is the person opening the car door for them. They do not recognize the danger in drinking alcohol with friends because the rape prevention tips focus on protecting your drink from strangers with date-rape drugs. Women are significantly more likely to be raped when they are with someone they trust than when they are alone or with strangers. Most people are not aware of this. Thus, when an intimate partner continues trying to convince a woman to have sex after she has turned him down, she does not expect him to force sex. Women who face this type of rape are often unaware that what they have experienced even qualifies as rape. Most will refer to the incident as “something bad” or will say that “*something* happened” but find themselves unable to use the word “rape” to describe the situation.

DENIAL

It is obvious that perpetrators have a motive for denying rape, but victims and third parties also tend to deny rape. Third parties caught between two people that they know will tend to deny rape because the burden of choosing between the two stories is too great (Cohen 2001). Victims of intimate partner rape tend to deny the severity of the incident because recognizing it as rape will cause dramatic change in their social lives and relationships. Denial of rape allows all parties to maintain life as it was prior to the incident. However, this strategy tends to fail for victims, who eventually succumb to the psychological effects of rape.

Denial by Society

Just world theory can be used to understand motivation for denial as well. People want to believe that we live in a just world wherein good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people (Bal and Van Den Bos 2010). This causes people to try to blame the

victim and not the perpetrator. People want to believe that the victim did something to precipitate the rape or that she somehow deserved it. This enables them to feel as if they can prevent themselves from becoming victims.

Similarity to the victim or perpetrator can also motivate denial (Bal and Van Den Bos 2010). If a person feels that he is similar to the perpetrator, he will want to exonerate the perpetrator. He wants to believe that he is incapable of committing such a crime; therefore people similar to him must also be incapable of it. When people are similar to the victim, they tend to blame her because they want to believe that they are not at risk, therefore the victim must have done something to put herself at risk.

Denial by Victims: Self-blame

Victims tend to deny the incident and blame themselves for the same reason. Rape causes victims to feel a significant—if not total—loss of control over their lives. Many victims try to understand what they did wrong to believe that they can prevent such incidents from happening again. To believe that they did nothing wrong and thus could not have prevented this rape would be to accept that they cannot prevent another rape.

CONCLUSION

Victim-blaming is a serious social problem. It not only causes significant harm to victims of rape and sexual assault, it also creates a culture wherein rape can be committed without consequences for the perpetrator. The prevalence of myths about rape increases victim-blaming and prevents perpetrators, victims, and third parties from understanding this type of violence. American society should be educated about the reality of rape to reduce the acceptance of rape myths and thus reduce victim-blaming. Special efforts should be made to educate men about what constitutes rape. Perhaps most importantly, the media and police must stop focusing on stranger-rapes and be more realistic in their depictions of rape. If such efforts are made, change will still be slow and hard-won. As long as the majority of society is unaware of the reality of rape, no change can occur.

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“The girl she would always love and hate”: Female Jealousy, Desire, and Power in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *Gossip Girl*

KAILEIGH SNYDER



*WRITER’S COMMENT: Any woman who grew up with today’s overwhelming presence of colorful commercials and glossy magazine covers knows what society expects of them: women must be beautiful, thin, and desirable. Of course, this message becomes most apparent to women in their adolescent years when their appearance certainly varies from these images of “ideal” beauty. While visual images play a large role in developing a sense of society’s views on beauty, Adolescent Literature can also form these expectations. When reading two novels for ENL 183 – Adolescent Literature, I was surprised by the similarities in two books set decades apart: Judy Blume’s *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*. While the similar images of “ideal” beauty surprised me, I was even more interested in the increasing lack of a voice challenging these ideals in the more recent text. Intrigued by this disturbing acceptance and even enforcement of “ideal” beauty, I chose to write a research paper exploring the ways body image has remained the same for young women in these two texts, and also the alarming way body image has changed in a society that is constantly bombarded with images and texts demonstrating “ideal” beauty.*

INSTRUCTOR’S COMMENT: It is relatively rare, I presume, for a student to distinguish herself in a class of 140 based only on the merits of her written work, but this is precisely what Kaileigh Snyder did in my course on Adolescent Literature, English 183, this past Fall quarter. I remember taking note of her name after reading one of our short reading responses, which the students took to calling “Howlers,” in homage to the Harry Potter series. Throughout the quarter, she engaged with the texts in a way that was deeply attuned to the complexities of the genre of Young Adult fiction and the historical and social considerations that have changed it over time. Her final paper, published here, addresses the way that adolescent girls are conditioned by society to have a love/hate relationship with their bodies. Snyder’s work exemplifies the importance of a course such as Adolescent Literature, which illustrates the need for careful consideration of the way popular literature both challenges and undergirds social mores.

—Sarah Lauro, Department of English

In Cecily von Ziegesars's *Gossip Girl*, Blair Waldorf experiences conflicted feelings for Serena van der Woodsen, who is "her best friend, the girl she would always love and hate. The girl she could never measure up to...The girl she'd wanted everyone to forget" (23). Blair feels both "love and hate" (23) towards Serena because she admires her beauty, her confidence, and her natural "coolness" (17), yet she also realizes it is something she may never be able to achieve. As a result, Blair attempts to tarnish Serena's confidence and challenge her natural place in the spotlight. Similarly, in Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the eponymous character and her friends meet after school to discuss boys and share gossip. This gossip frequently slanders Laura Danker, a girl in their class who closely fits the girls' image of "ideal" feminine beauty. While the desire to attract male attention partly motivates the jealous girls in both *Gossip Girl* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, the young women in both novels are primarily interested in competing with other female peers and asserting their own power. In response to their jealousy, they react with false disgust and perpetuate rumors to injure the character they envy in an effort to hide their own feelings of insecurity. As a result, the "ideal" female body in both of these novels becomes a highly conflicting image and ultimately serves as a symbol of both power and desire.

In Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, Laura Danker seems to have an "ideal" body type, and Margaret's group of friends both desire Laura's body and frequently ridicule it. The "ideal" female body in this novel is developed, like the "naked girl in the middle" (71-72) of Margaret's father's *Playboy* magazine with "huge" (72) breasts that are nearly "out of proportion" (72). A classmate named Laura Danker seems to fit this image, and when Margaret first sees Laura, Blume writes, "There was this girl, who I thought *was* the teacher, but she turned out to be a kid in our class. She was very tall...with eyes shaped like a cat's. You could see the outline of her bra through her blouse and you could also tell from the front that it wasn't the smallest size" (25). Margaret is not the only character who observes and thinks about the female body, since her group of friends meets often after school for their club, "The Pre-Teen Sensations," to talk about boys and female bodies. Strangely, the girls frequently insult the very traits that they desire. After they look at a model in *Playboy* and laugh at what Laura Danker might look like at eighteen, with even larger breasts, the "meeting ended with fifty rounds of

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‘*We must – we must – we must increase our bust!*’” (72). Nancy also believes “When you grow...you’ll want everybody to see you. Like those girls in *Playboy*” (71). Yet despite confessing their desire to have large breasts for “everybody to see” (71), the girls berate Laura for wearing a form-fitting sweater and even spread a rumor in their small group claiming that their teacher noticed her revealing outfit: “Laura Danker wore a sweater to school for the first time. Mr. Benedict’s eyes almost popped out of his head. Actually, I didn’t notice Mr. Benedict’s eyes, but Nancy told me” (62). After she recalls Laura’s fitted sweater, Margaret laments, “Even if I stuffed my bra with socks I still wouldn’t look like Laura Danker” (62). Margaret then quickly shifts her thoughts to a rumor of Laura Danker going “behind the A&P with Evan and Moose” (62). Since Margaret is attracted to Moose, her tendency to shift quickly to this rumor directly demonstrates how her disgust actually forms from her jealousy and desire to look like Laura Danker to attract boys like Moose.

The girls in the “Pre-Teen Sensations” especially desire the onset of their periods, and seem envious of peers who have already experienced menstruation. The group prepares diligently with supplies and agrees, “the first one to get her period had to tell the others all about it. Especially how it feels” (33). This also plays into the girls’ jealousy of Laura Danker, since they claim, “she’s been wearing a bra since fourth grade and I’ll bet she gets her period” (30). Yet instead of including Laura and discovering what it actually felt like to be more mature and developed, the girls instead decide to wait for their own development and to ridicule and gossip about Laura Danker in the meantime. Overall, the “ideal” female body is sexually mature, and because all of the girls in the “Pre-Teen Sensations” are eager for their menstrual cycles, Laura Danker seems to have the “ideal” female body in both shape and maturity, and she ultimately represents what the girls most desire. Yet the “Pre-Teen Sensations” downplay their admiration for Laura Danker’s “ideal” image through vicious and insipid rumors, while simultaneously attempting to become the ideal that they mock.

While the other girls, particularly Nancy, spread rumors about Laura Danker’s body and sexuality, Margaret is the first to realize that their envy and disgust for Laura is actually misplaced desire to be her, and she begins to question the view that she and the other girls have of “ideal” beauty. After Margaret confronts Laura with the vicious rumors the “Pre-Teen Sensations” have been circulating, Laura denies the

rumors, becomes very angry, and then runs out of the library. Margaret pursues her, apologizes for believing the false rumors, and even confesses to Laura, “If you want to know the truth... well, I wish I looked more like you than like me” (117). After this confession, Laura replies, “I’d gladly trade places with you” (117). Because of this exchange between the two girls, Margaret begins to question the “ideal” of feminine beauty and subsequently loses the desire to gossip about Laura and ridicule the image she formerly desired.

This same envy and desire disguised as disgust is especially prevalent in Cecily von Ziegesar’s *Gossip Girl*, as Serena van der Woodsen is also both incredibly idealized and subsequently also slandered. When von Ziegesar first introduces Serena, she describes her beauty as “magnetic, delicious” (16) and “gifted with the kind of coolness that you can’t acquire by buying the right handbag or the right pair of jeans. She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be” (17). Although she is Serena’s best friend, Blair Waldorf also realizes that when her “magnetic, delicious” (16) friend was gone “it soon became apparent how much easier it was to shine... Suddenly *Blair* was the prettiest, the smartest, the hippest, most happening girl in the room. She became the one everyone looked to. So Blair stopped missing Serena so much” (21-22). As a result, when Serena returns, Blair refuses to give up the place in the spotlight that she claimed in her absence. To maintain her newfound reputation, Blair and her friends begin to spread or encourage rumors about Serena. Like the girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the girls in *Gossip Girl* perpetuate rumors that frequently attack Serena’s sexuality. On her first day back at school, Serena arrives looking slightly disheveled, sporting messy hair and an unstylish new school uniform. Yet as she observes Serena, Blair thinks, “That was one of the things that always infuriated her about Serena. She looked good in anything” (45). As the girls recognize that Serena still looks beautiful, they quickly react with gossip, and one of Blair’s friends remarks, “Maybe she’s just tired... I heard she got kicked out for sleeping with every boy on campus. There were notches in the wall above her bed” (46). While Serena is an “idol” (47) to many of the girls, her “ideal” beauty also frightens them because it diminishes their own beauty in contrast. Like the “Pre-Teen Sensations” of *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the vicious and privileged girls of Constance Billard School also abuse this image, likely because they worry that they will never be able to achieve it. Although these two

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novels are set many years apart, with *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* originally published in 1970, and *Gossip Girl* published in 2002, these two novels demonstrate the continuing struggle adolescent women face over idealized feminine beauty.

While the “ideal” female body is frequently ridiculed and subject to malicious gossip, it is also a symbol of power in both of the novels. In Blume’s novel, Nancy seems to be the leader of the “Pre-Teen Sensations” from the first time Margaret meets her. The girls are playing outside and Nancy proclaims, “Follow the leader!” (11), and Margaret thinks, “I guessed Nancy was the leader” (11). Throughout much of the novel, Nancy attempts to hold this position in the group and frequently critiques the other girls’ bodies to assert the superiority of her own body and her power. In Beth Younger’s article, “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature,” she explores the presence and meaning of the “ideal” female body in adolescent literature. As she addresses body image and the depiction of the “ideal” adolescent female body in various Young Adult texts, Younger writes,

Young Adult fiction encourages young women’s self-surveillance of their bodies....Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a default for race; that is, when the race of a character is not specifically delineated, white is assumed. In these Young Adult literature texts, an unacknowledged weightism functions similarly. (47)

Similarly, in both *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* and *Gossip Girl*, thinness is “ideal” and even assumed unless otherwise mentioned. Although the girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* mostly envy Laura Danker because of her large breasts, they also hold thinness as an ideal. Being thin or more “ideal” is a means of asserting power, and Younger also states, “Thus, confident, assertive, and responsible, thin characters in Young Adult fiction do more than simply display themselves as models of appropriate body type; they also perform body assessments on themselves” (48-49). In fact, Nancy not only assesses her own body, but also the bodies of the other members of the “Pre-Teen Sensations.” Blume particularly depicts thinness as a desirable trait that Nancy assesses when she writes, “We sat around on the porch and Nancy brought us cokes and cookies. When Gretchen helped herself to six Oreos at once Nancy asked her how much weight she’d gained over the summer.

Gretchen put back four cookies and said, ‘Not much’ (30). By reminding Gretchen about her struggle with her weight, Nancy asserts her power over Gretchen, and shames her for not being as “ideal” as Nancy is.

Nancy not only establishes her authority over Gretchen because of her weight, she also critiques other undesirable traits on the other girls and stresses her own superiority in development. Nancy mocks Margaret for being “still flat” (6) and quickly adds, “‘I’m growing already,’ Nancy said, sticking her chest way out. ‘In a few years I’m going to look like one of those girls in *Playboy*’” (6). After Nancy’s confident remark, Margaret feels somewhat defeated and confesses, “I was beginning to feel like some kind of underdeveloped little kid” (7). Overall, Nancy holds her power over the other girls in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret* by frequently reminding them that her body is more “ideal” and making them feel insignificant and lacking in contrast.

While thinness as an ideal is mentioned briefly in *Are You There God? It’s Me, Margaret*, the girls of *Gossip Girl* seem to think about weight much more often. Blair Waldorf seems to be the leader of her small group and fits Beth Younger’s claim that “thin characters appear responsible and powerful” (46). Blair participates in advanced classes, volunteers, and plans very large, organized events. Overall, Blair is very organized and controlled, and this element of her personality extends to her weight, as she often binges and purges in an attempt to control her own body. Younger’s article also explains, “it is the thin and sleek figure that allows young women to attain a sense of power and control of their own destinies” (51). Blair’s bingeing and purging seems especially triggered by Serena’s presence, as Blair feels the growing need to be more beautiful and powerful than her stunning friend. When Serena first returns, von Ziegesar writes, “[Blair] had forgotten how pretty Serena’s hair was. How perfect her skin was. How long and thin her legs were. What Nate’s eyes looked like when he looked at her – like he never wanted to blink. He never looked at Blair that way” (21). It is also during Serena’s first visit that we learn about Blair’s eating disorder. Serena immediately seems to reclaim her place in the spotlight, and “had the table’s attention” (34) at dinner. As Serena captivates the other guests, Blair quickly binges on the array of food, “tuning out Serena’s voice as she spooned it into her mouth” (34). Quickly after, “her stomach rebelled, and she shot up suddenly... running down the hall to her bedroom, straight into its adjoining bathroom....Blair kneeled over the toilet and stuck her middle finger as

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far down her throat as it would go. Her eyes began to tear and then her stomach convulsed” (34). Blair realizes her actions are “disgusting and horrible, and she knew she shouldn’t do it, but at least she’d feel better when it was over” (35). When Blair has to share a table at brunch with Serena and her family, this again triggers her bingeing and purging. After she learns about Nate’s fling with Serena, the brunch still stirs her feelings for Nate, and she thinks, “Sexy Nate. Her Nate. God, she wanted him” (160). However, Blair “had her pride” (160), and she “clacked away in her heels to stick her finger down her throat in the ladies’ room” (160) in an effort to maintain control over herself.

While Blair feels that bingeing and purging gives her power, she is actually making herself weaker and exhibiting lack of control and loss of power. Younger writes, “For many young women controlling food intake provides a sense of power, but that sense of power is false, since deliberately reducing one’s body size usually diminishes physical strength” (51). This is especially true as Blair nearly loses control at the Peregrine Falcon fundraiser. As she runs to the restroom to vomit, a woman stops her from the “Central Park Save the Peregrine Falcon Foundation” (180), and Blair realizes that she might lose control of her body in front of the prestigious woman: “She couldn’t hold on any longer. Her eyes darted around the crowded room, desperately seeking help” (180). In this instance, Blair loses her power and control and instead needs Nate to come and rescue her from the potentially disastrous social situation, and allow her to escape to the restroom.

Blair is not the only character who feels the need to assert her thinness (and subsequently her power) as “Gossip Girl,” the nameless and often omniscient entity that reports gossip on the novel’s adolescents, also frequently assesses her own body and the bodies of other young women. On her gossip blog, “Gossip Girl” chides two girls for eating fast food and notes, “I and K are going to have a little trouble fitting into those cute dresses they picked up at Bendel’s” (38). Later she triumphantly notices that the girls had to return their dresses and snidely says, “oh dear, are they getting too fat?...Too bad it’s not a toga party” (82). In contrast, “Gossip Girl” establishes her own thinness when she claims, “I had a great time at *Kiss on the Lips*. I must have lost fifteen pounds dancing – not that I needed to. Needless to say, I’m feeling good” (198). Overall, Blair Waldorf and “Gossip Girl” desire control and power, which they believe they can achieve by maintaining a thin, “ideal” body. This lack of

change in Blair's thoughts and behavior, and additional support of this view from the narrator, shows an unchanging view of "ideal" feminine beauty in *Gossip Girl*. This ultimately differs from Margaret's changing ideal in *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, as Margaret comes to realize that "ideal" beauty is not the same for every young woman.

Throughout Cecily von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* and Judy Blume's *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* the female characters in the novel frequently feel jealousy and insecurity about their own bodies and beauty, and disguise their desire to be like their more "ideal" peers by perpetuating rumors about the girl they envy. While the two novels share many similarities in exemplifying the pressure adolescent women face to fit idealized images of beauty, these two novels diverge when examining change in characters throughout the novel. While her discussion with Laura Danker changes Margaret's view of beauty and her behavior towards Laura, Blair Waldorf never changes her need for social influence, her jealousy of Serena, and her desire for control over her body. Even "Gossip Girl," the author of the incredibly influential social website, includes assertions of her own thinness and frequently comments on the flaws of other girls, particularly when it relates to their weight. Published more recently in 2002, *Gossip Girl* reveals the overwhelming pressure that young women face in today's society to fit an "ideal" image of beauty and thinness. Unlike Margaret's healthy and maturing view of appearance, the girls of *Gossip Girl* have a disturbingly static view of beauty, and Blair still seeks today's "ideal" image in a way that seems powerful but in reality weakens her body in her quest to become like Serena, "the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be" (17).

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