Rape Testimony in Contemporary Memoir
Amanda Spallacci


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Abstract

In this paper, I investigate how first-person rape stories published in contemporary North American memoir can help us understand what we call rape beyond a re-telling of the event. Survivors of sexual violence hesitate to disclose the crime within legal contexts because legal testimony adopts an 'event-centered approach' (Byford 201) that requires the survivor to provide a testimony of the event as a form of evidence in trial. Additionally, legal testimony is predicated on coherence, linear narrative structure, and comprehensive language—all of which must relate to the event—and this form of testimony is nearly impossible given the effects of trauma on the mind. A survivor's inability to provide an 'adequate' legal testimony, as well as rape myths that include blaming tactics and misinformation about rape, are exploited by defense attorneys in order to discredit and suppress the survivor's testimony. In recent years, survivors have begun to publish memoirs, in which they testify about their rape—alongside the story of their life—and these memoirs not only challenge official notions of truth, but also expose the social structures that disempower women who want to disclose experiences of rape. Apart from comments on social media, some popular news coverage, and blog posts, contemporary memoirs about rape have yet to receive any critical treatment.

Just as some survivors choose not to disclose their experiences of rape within judicial contexts, and have found different mediums, such as memoir, in which to testify about their experiences, as scholars, we must nuance our methodology concerning how we read narratives about trauma. In this article, I follow scholars such as Karyn Ball (2000), Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002), and Susanna Radstone (2007) who advocate for a turn from trauma studies to memory studies in order to account for the ways in which memories of trauma are not simply traces of the event, but are also negotiations and mediations informed by embodied experiences and culture. I adopt a reading of melancholia and affect studies to describe how a survivor's embodied subjectivity informs the way in which she negotiates her experience and chooses to transform her memories into narrative form. I argue that the rape testimonies as they appear in Lena Dunham and Jessica Valenti's memoirs conclude with an optimistic tone—a manoeuvre that allows the authors to present a linear narrative of progression—coinciding with Freud's concept of mourning: Dunham and Valenti's testimony demonstrates that the authors overcome their trauma and begin to
move past it. Conversely, Sil Lai Abrams and Roxane Gay’s testimonies can be described as melancholic because their narratives refuse the same narrative closure or resolution, and I argue that this version of melancholia is not a pathological form of mourning, but, rather, a form of resistance that challenges post-feminist discourses about rape in the wake of the #metoo movement that suggest that rape laws and political advocacy about rape have resolved the high numbers of sexual violence against women. Testimonies about rape in memoirs demonstrate that memoirs about rape unsettle and dismantle hegemonic narratives, as well as create alternative ways of talking about and understanding testimonies about rape.
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In her memoir, *Sex Object* (2016), Jessica Valenti asks:

we still don’t have a name for what happens to women living in a culture that hates them [...] what about those of us who walk through all of this without feeling any of it—what does it say about the hoops our brain had to jump through to get to ambivalence?¹

Sigmund Freud conceptualizes ambivalence in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917) as repressed aggression towards the lost object, and this inappropriate response to loss prevents the subject from completing the work of mourning.² Mourning, for Freud, is a healthy response towards the lost object that allows the subject to eventually overcome the loss. Conversely, Freud describes the subject who represses their aggression towards the lost object, resulting in a state of ambivalence, as being psychically stuck and unable to get over the loss; unlike mourning, the subject is melancholic.³ With reference to rape testimonies as they appear within memoirs, specifically *Not That Kind of Girl* (2014) by Lena Dunham, *Sex Object* (2016) by Jessica Valenti, *Black Lotus* (2016) by Sil Lai Abrams, and *Hunger* (2017) by Roxane Gay, this article suggests that the history of rape laws in the United States, certain conventions of legal testimony, rape myths, and intersecting systems of oppression that make certain groups of women more vulnerable to acts of sexual violence—and their testimonies that are met with suspicion if they choose to report their rape—can produce a state of melancholia for these American authors. Furthermore, adopting Ruth Leys’ claim that trauma and affect theory tend to ‘espouse’ an anti-mimetic or ‘materialist position’, which ‘amount to a single logic’, these tendencies in trauma and affect theory can produce a

narrow reading and analysis of rape testimonies.⁴ I argue that memoirs, particularly those that feature a rape testimony embedded within a life story, require nuanced frameworks that can account for the complexity of these traumatic testimonies. I propose a framework that incorporates Anne Anlin Cheng’s (2000) theory of melancholia, as well as Ruth Ley’s (2007) theorization of guilt and Elspeth Probyn (2005) and Sara Ahmed’s (2003) work on shame, and I argue that memoirs can serve as sites of political activism in which women can expose the limits of legal testimony in situations of rape, they can debunk and refute rape myths that undermine women’s testimonies, and finally, these memoirs seem to demonstrate that melancholia, for African American authors, Abrams and Gay, is not a pathological form of mourning, but rather a state or site of resistance.⁵

Rape Laws and Discourses of Equality + Disproportionally High Rates of Rape in America = Melancholic Women

Cheng’s work on adapting Freud’s psychoanalytic theory of melancholia to include denial and exclusion — by positing melancholia ‘as a kind of consumption’ that denies and excludes the ‘Other’— has shown a strong link between melancholia and conceptions of racial and cultural identities.⁶ For Cheng, the racialized subject in the United States unconsciously experiences melancholia in order to live in a nation that purports a rhetoric of equality that denies the problematic and ongoing history of racism in America, maintaining a ‘national topography of centrality and marginality’ sustained by the ‘exclusion-yet-retention of racialized others’ to produce ‘a dominant standard, white national ideal’.⁷ Critics of psychoanalysis argue that the theory tends to universalize testimonies and subsequently fails to account for differences among subjects; however, Cheng challenges these critics by claiming that ‘the psychoanalytic subject is universal only insofar as it posits every subjective

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⁶ Cheng, p. 9.
being as historical beings, embedded in time, family, and sociality', and, thus, rather than inscribing essentialism, psychoanalysis ‘alerts us to context’. By adopting Cheng’s theory of melancholia in the context of rape in the United States, the following section outlines how the authors of the memoir may be forced into an unconscious state of melancholia.

Literary scholars and activists Jacquelyn Dowd Hall (1983), Saidiya Hartman (1997), and Valerie Smith (1990) contextualize contemporary discourses about rape through a historical investigation of rape laws in the United States as well as with an analysis of cultural discourses that link racial and gender oppression. Dowd Hall argues that, as women are able to earn financial capital, they also begin to postpone marriage, live alone or as single heads of households, and, as a result, become 'easier targets for sexual assault'. This capitalistic influence in particular, as Dowd Hall suggests, generates a sense of liberation contingent on a false promise of equal opportunity for women, and rape is used as a weapon to ensure that women are cast as marginalized in order to re-establish white men's dominant position in the center. This relationship of exclusion and retention of women within the public sphere can produce a melancholic female subject. According to Angela Davis (1983) and Valerie Smith, rape laws were constructed and established in the United States to protect the property of white men; since women were seen as property, any assault against a white man's daughter or wife was an assault against his property. The rape of an enslaved black woman could enter the law if the slave owner claimed damage of property; or, if the enslaved woman fought back against the rapist, who was usually the slave owner, then criminal charges could be made against the enslaved woman. The repression of legal recognition of rape of black women 'was essential to the displacement of white culpability that characterized both the recognition of black humanity in slave law and the designation of the black subject as the originary locus of transgression'. This historical context helps to

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8 Ibid, p. 28.
10 Dowd Hall, p. 342.
12 Hartman, p. 79 - 80.
explain black women’s intersectional embodied experiences and the material practices that give credence to Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s claim that ‘rape is an overwhelmingly intraracial crime, and the victims are more often black than white’. Rape laws in the United States as well as the repression of their historical conception are meant to conserve and protect patriarchal power, yet they also deny this historical account by allowing women to bring forward allegations against men for sexual violence.

Referencing both her frustration with the criminal justice system’s inability — which often seems like a refusal — to prosecute rapists as well as society’s acceptance that ‘some men do horrible things’, Valenti claims that ‘living in a place that has given up on the expectation of your safety means walking around in a permanently dissociative state’. According to Valenti, women often believe that rape laws are in place to protect them, and they accept the narrative that violence against women is inevitable because to actually engage with these cultural narratives ‘would be self-destruction’. From a melancholic standpoint, Valenti seemingly suggests that, by promising women a false sense of safety and security, rape laws in the United States invite women into the public sphere where they are assaulted by men, creating a relationship of exclusion-but-retention that reaffirms white men’s dominant position in the centre and women’s place in the margins; furthermore, discourses like ‘some men just do bad things’ denies that violence against women is a serious problem. Valenti adopts the term ‘dissociative’ to name the psychic process into which women force themselves so that they can somehow live ‘in a culture that hates them’.

A state of ambivalence, which Valenti uses interchangeably with the term dissociation throughout her memoir, appears to be equally apt in naming this phenomenon for the reader. If women believe that rape laws will protect them, they may choose to report their rape to the criminal justice system, and if the case is deemed serious enough, the survivor may have to testify about the rape in a courtroom in front of a judge, jury, defense lawyers, and the rapist in an experience that can re-traumatize the survivor.

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13 Dowd Hall, p. 334.
14 Valenti, p. 16.
16 Ibid, p. 16.
Memoir as ‘Alternative Jurisdiction’

A rape testimony — delivered by a survivor in a juridical setting — is evaluated as evidence, and due to the relationship between testimony and the law, the court will deem the survivor’s testimony as truthful if it adheres to the conventions of legal testimony, an often-impossible occurrence given the effects of trauma on memory. The survivor is required to provide a coherent, linear narrative, using comprehensive language; yet, following a traumatic event like rape, a survivor can experience effects of trauma such as denial, repetition, and dissociation that might cause the survivor to deliver a fragmented and non-linear testimony about the rape. Selma Leydesdorff and Nanci Adler (2013) claim that the survivor’s testimony — constructed by her memories of the event, which might not be accessible or completely intact because of the effects of trauma on the mind — becomes the ‘proof for the legal truth’. Defense lawyers can, and often do, exploit these effects of trauma and their impacts on the survivor’s testimony in order to undermine and ultimately discredit the survivor’s rape allegation.

Similar to the effects of trauma on memory and testimony, defense lawyers can also appeal to rape myths—which are misconceptions and misinformation about rape that circulate publicly and that Americans perceive as fact—and displace the blame of the assault away from the rapist and onto the survivor, using blaming tactics involving ‘inappropriate’ dress, substance use, the survivor’s relationship to the perpetrator. Rape myths ‘enter the law and permeate everyday life’, and, according to Leigh Gilmore (2016), are used as a weapon to generate doubt about rape allegations in legal contexts, the media, and society against any woman who testifies about rape. While rape laws and discourses about rape oppress all women in the United States, and can relegate them into a state of melancholia,

Sil Lai Abrams, an African American author, demonstrates how rape laws and rape culture produce even more dangerous circumstances for black women.\(^{20}\)

Rape testimonies receive negative reception and criticism from a variety of institutions in the United States; however, a survivor’s position of power in society, marked by race, class, gender, age, sexuality, and ability ‘influence whether one is seen as credible or authoritative’.\(^{21}\) In her memoir, *Black Lotus*, Abrams, a survivor who testifies that she was raped on two separate occasions by different men, confesses that she feels conflicted about her rape, and not because she does not accept that she was raped, but because she knows she will never receive justice, and expresses ‘anger at the knowledge that if I were to come forward today, I would have to come armed with over fifty other women sharing a similar story — and would most likely still be branded a liar by society’.\(^{22}\) As Abrams points out in her memoir, rape survivors experience trauma not only because of the violence of the act, but also when they attempt to navigate the criminal justice system because survivors are often not believed, especially black women. Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1996) note that black women who have been raped by white men are much less likely to be believed than white women reporting rapes by men of oppressed races because, as Valerie Smith writes, ‘a variety of cultural narratives that historically have linked sexual violence with racial oppression continue to determine the nature of public response’ towards black women who disclose that they were raped.\(^{23}\) Abrams demonstrates that African American women experience disproportionately high rates of sexual violence because of their embodied subjectivity, and are more likely to be silenced and disbelieved when they attempt to bring a perpetrator to justice.

Many survivors of different atrocities have historically refrained from testifying about their trauma in legal contexts and have used a variety of mediums such as memoir in order to circulate their account in the public sphere. Rape survivors experience injustice and are at

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\(^{22}\) Ibid, p. 241.

risk of being re-traumatized if they decide to testify within the criminal justice system; conversely, memoir, due to the genre’s testimonial qualities, provides a creative medium for survivors to assemble their memories into a narrative — beyond a testimony of the event — and helps survivors to combat the ongoing problems that they encounter in the public sphere: conventions of legal testimony and rape myths. Life writing scholarship about testimony and human rights uses the legal rhetoric of forming an ‘appeal’, Meg Jensen (2014) argues; similarly, Leigh Gilmore (2001) classifies testimony as an ‘alternative jurisdiction’, while Cynthia Franklin and Laura E. Lyons (2004) suggest that delivering a testimony in the public sphere, outside of the legal system, is a ‘profoundly political act’.24 Abrams, Dunham, Gay, and Valenti never report or testify about the rape within the legal system; instead, they form an ‘appeal’ by testifying within an ‘alternative jurisdiction’: in this case, a memoir that circulates in the public sphere. Through a history of rape laws in the United States, and by outlining the negative effects that the conventions of legal testimony, rape myths, as well as patriarchal and white supremacy have on rape survivors, this section attempted to illustrate that rape survivors encounter a variety of barriers if they decide to speak about their rape in the public sphere. While memoir offers the survivor a medium to present their own story in the public sphere, the following section will explain how trauma and affect theory do not offer a sufficient reading, or, in other words, do not do justice to the rape testimonies in these memoirs.

From Trauma Studies to Memory Studies: Socio-political Contexts

Just as legal testimony is meant to uncover the truth of the event, trauma theory is also preoccupied with the traumatic event. Outlining the symbiotic relationship between trauma theory and the event, Allen Meek (2009) suggests ‘that trauma theory seeks to establish some privileged or exceptional link between testimony, witnessing and the trauma event’.25 Ruth Leys (2000) explains that the debate between the mimetic and anti-mimetic models of

trauma, which resulted in a turn to the anti-mimetic model in contemporary trauma theory, is responsible for the concern with the traumatic event. For Leys, the practice of hypnosis—during which the patient’s mind leaves their body and they lack any control of responsibility—demonstrated the ‘psychical dissociation from the self’ that causes the survivor to involuntarily identify with the aggressor that occurs during trauma and played a major theoretical role in the conceptualization of the mimetic model of trauma. Like hypnosis, the photograph’s ability to capture and present a traumatic event, then to reproduce and circulate its image, peeked the attention of clinical psychologists such as Elizabeth Brett and Robert Ostroff along with Bessel van der Kolk, to name a few, who were responding to changes in the fields of neurobiology and psychology — in particular, the turn away from psychoanalysis — and the traumatic image became a means of understanding trauma as an anti-mimetic phenomenon. The anti-mimetic model purports that memories of a traumatic event do not include a subjective or cultural mediation at the conscious or unconscious level, but, instead, that trauma is the result of an external event that traumatizes a sovereign autonomous subject, and ‘the record of [the] unassimilable event is dissociated from memory’. Leys (2007) argues that the conceptualization of the ‘traumatic image, conceived as an “iconic” memory that haunts the victim in the form of flashbacks, dreams, and other intrusive repetitions [...] has come to dominate American discussion of trauma’.  

Due to the fraught relationship between rape and the law, and to the fact that, in most cases, a survivor will never be able to provide material evidence for the rape, trauma theory’s commitment to trauma as bound up in the external event is problematic for reading rape testimonies. In particular, some trauma theorists in the humanities, most famously Cathy Caruth, argue that the flashbacks or nightmares that a survivor experiences after the event are ‘traces’ of the event, or, as Susanna Radstone (2007) calls them, ‘traceless traces’. Caruth’s popular claim that the traumatic nightmare is defined as an unclaimed experience — as a ‘literal’, unmediated, and unassimilated trace of the trauma, that is beyond representation — authenticates survivor testimonies because it links the concept of

28 Leys, *From Guilt to Shame*, p. 50.  
‘unclaimed’ traces or experiences to a real, external traumatic event.\(^{30}\) More simplified, this theory deems these unassimilated traces proof of the traumatic event.\(^{31}\) This theory has undoubtedly helped scholars to read survivor testimonies — especially Holocaust testimonies — and to prescribe survivor testimonies as valid historical accounts by connecting them to their traumatic origin. Caruth’s theorization of trauma, especially her formulation of belatedness and repetition, is important for understanding rape testimonies because it explains why some survivors do not report their rape immediately following the event and why conventions of legal testimonies, that are predicated on coherence, linear narrative structure, and comprehensive language, are impossible conditions that rape survivors are forced to meet in the criminal justice system.

After Dunham is raped by a man from college named Barry, she casually offers the details of the previous night to her friend Audrey who, startled by the news, grasps Dunham’s hand and sympathetically classifies the event as rape.\(^{32}\) At her friend’s suggestion that she is a victim of sexual assault, Dunham’s only reaction is to ‘[...] burst out laughing’\(^{33}\). While this reaction could be read as a form of denial for psychological protection, it also indicates Dunham’s inability to comprehend this encounter as rape because it deviates from dominant narratives of rape that imagine violent strangers in dark alleys. Such ‘rape myths’ are culturally pervasive, and they regulate social, as well as legal, discourses of what ‘counts’ as sexual violence.\(^{34}\) As a result, Dunham finds the comparison between the two extremely contrasting experiences / ideas laughable. Trauma theory asserts that trauma is not always registered at the time of the traumatic event, but returns to haunt the survivor later in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, and hallucinations, and while this conception of belatedness can explain why Dunham does not initially agree with Audrey that she was raped, it does not account for the complexity of Dunham’s testimony beyond the event. While trauma theory can explain the effects of trauma on the mind and testimony, in the context of rape, it does not account for the rape myths that survivors have internalized nor the survivor’s subject position and the role that these cultural influences play in mediating traumatic memories.

\(^{30}\) Caruth, p. 4.  
\(^{31}\) Ibid.  
\(^{32}\) Dunham, p. 61.  
\(^{33}\) Ibid.  
Conversely, memory studies accounts for the cultural context in which survivors negotiate their trauma and explains how traumatic memories are contingent on mediation in both the private and public spheres.

Memory studies is a multidisciplinary field that combines concepts from anthropology, literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. Cultural memory includes a vast spectrum of memory practices as possible objects of cultural memory studies, such as post memory (Marianne Hirsch: 2008), multidirectional memory (Michael Rothberg: 2009), transcultural memory (Dominick LaCapra: 1994, 2011), and prosthetic memory (Allison Landsberg: 2001), among others. Cultural memory is defined as the ‘interplay of the present and past in sociocultural contexts.’ In other words, memory implies a relationship to an event that took place in the past; however, memory studies are concerned with the ways in which a memory of the past is negotiated and remembered in the present given specific sociocultural contexts. Yet, a definition of culture—as the term is understood in cultural memory studies—is equally valuable. According to Astrid Erll (2010), culture is defined by a three-dimensional framework comprising ‘the social (people, social relations, institutions), material (artifacts and media), and mental aspects (cultural defined ways of thinking, mentalities),’ and all three dimensions are involved in the ‘making of cultural memories.’ With respect to testimonies of rape as they appear in memoir, scholars should account for the way that survivors select specific memories and transcribe these memories into narrative forms (memoir) within the current socio-political context, in which the social (institutions such as the criminal justice system), material (the media), and mental aspects (rape culture) try to suppress, silence, and discredit survivors’ testimonies.

Dunham’s testimony, about a sexual assault that begins as consensual with an acquaintance, problematizes dominant discourses about rape and points out that not only

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38 Ibid, p. 4.
must she mediate these rigid cultural narratives about rape, but also that having to navigate these rape myths is traumatic as well. By presenting flashbacks of her childhood throughout her rape testimony, Dunham demonstrates that these past moments, in which she 'learned' about rape throughout her life, return to haunt her after the rape and become a part of her trauma. At age seven, Dunham learns the word ‘rape’ and recalls that she pronounced it ‘rabe’ like the playwright, using it with ‘reckless abandon’.\(^39\) Ironically, the word ‘learned’ displays a complete misunderstanding of the language and definition of rape. Similarly, years later, Dunham consents to sex with a man named Barry, and as she slips in and out of consciousness, she notices that even after numerous requests that Barry wear a condom, he continues to remove it. Dunham consents to sex with a condom, and Barry’s refusal to do so undermines Dunham’s agency; yet, her level of intoxication harms her autonomy and her capacity to actively consent to any sexual act with Barry. Even though Dunham is in excruciating physical and emotional pain the following day because the sex with Barry was ‘terribly aggressive’, her friend Audrey’s assertion that Dunham was raped makes Dunham laugh, and while this response might be a form of psychological denial, it also indicates Dunham’s inability to comprehend this encounter as rape because it deviates from dominant narratives of rape. According to David Lisak (2008), who researches sexual assault, when people hear the term ‘rapist’, many of them think of a ‘guy in a ski mask, wielding a knife, hiding in the bushes,’ and while this image is frightening and does happen, well over 80% are actually non-stranger rape.\(^40\) Dunham’s understanding of rape has been shaped by these misconceptions, and like her seven year old self, after she was raped by Barry, Dunham lacks the language and ability to define this experience as rape. While memory studies can account for the socio-political context of rape myths that most women in America must navigate, which compounds the trauma from being raped, affect theory can attend to the subject’s identity and the relationship between rape trauma, identity, and remembering.

\(^{39}\) Dunham, p. 55.
From Trauma Studies to Affect Theory: Embodied Subjectivity

The position that a survivor occupies in society makes them more vulnerable to certain forms of violence, like rape, and their testimonies are more likely to be met with suspicion and disbelief. Testimony, within the field of trauma studies and particularly through the work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub (1992) and Cathy Caruth, carries an ethical dimension: as Caruth argues ‘that the history of trauma, in its inherent belatedness, can only take place through the listening of another’. In other words, the survivor cannot bear witness to the event without witnessing oneself, and so they require another person to bear witness to the testimony of trauma; yet, Amber Dean (2015) notes ‘how overdetermined the language of *bearing witness* has become,’ especially as this language is used to ‘describe an empathetic or compassionate response to violence, suffering or loss’. Leys criticizes Caruth’s notion of bearing witness because she assigns victimhood not only to the survivor, but also to those who bear witness, and these witnesses are ‘always marked by the difference and division that characterizes the traumatized subject’. Like Leys, Dean argues that the notion of bearing witness ‘stops short of a reconsideration of how we are ourselves implicated in the violence or suffering experienced by others’. Trauma theory does not always account for embodied and cultural differences that make some subjects more vulnerable than others to certain forms of violence and disbelief surrounding their testimonies; instead, it homogenizes critical differences of subjectivity by positioning the witness as so empathetic that they can *know* the victim’s experience, which has serious implications for rape testimonies. Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002) argue that witnessing violence in any form requires ‘empathy as well as distance — being able to say “it could have been me” but at the same time asserting that “it was not me”’. With respect to rape, Leydesdorff and Adler argue that ‘courts seek testimony, but they do not want life stories’, and, as a result, ‘judges

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43 Leys, *Trauma*, p. 297.
44 Dean, p. 23.
do not bear witness to the whole trauma’.\textsuperscript{46} If rape is presented as a ‘simple report’ instead of a narrative about a life, a potential to ‘essentialize experience and often identity […] by obscuring the way in which experience itself is discursively mediated’ manifests itself.\textsuperscript{47} Affect theory, through the frame of the body, refuses essentialism by accounting for the embodied subject position of survivors.

Affect theory accounts for this tension because it focuses on individual subjectivity; according to Teresa Brennan, affects enter individuals, meaning ‘[p]hysically and biologically something is present that was not there before’.\textsuperscript{48} Brennan argues that ‘it is not genes that determine social life; it is the socially induced affect that changes our biology’, and poses the question: ‘to whom is affect directed?’.\textsuperscript{49} Affect for Brennan, then, is not about what happens in the body, but about exchanges between bodies. In the context of rape, Jane Caputi adopts Brennan’s framework and the transition of affect that she renames as “dumping” to explain that, through rape, negative and toxic affects are transmitted to the other. Rape and the subsequent affectual dumping is a process marked by power, and negative affects are more likely to be directed towards ‘women, the poor, those stigmatized by racism, sexuality, age, and so on’.\textsuperscript{50} Cultural labels and assumptions about certain groups of women make them increasingly vulnerable to sexual violence. Furthermore, by theorizing trauma through affect, Meera Atkinson and Michael Richardson (2013) acknowledge that feminist and critical race theorists have always focused on the body, and specifically those bodies most ignored, malign, and exploited, whether in social, political or theoretical realms.\textsuperscript{51} Narratives about trauma may sensationalize trauma—a process which creates distance by placing the reader in a voyeuristic role—or incite an empathetic reading, which can depoliticize and universalize violence against women. Affect theory, however, intersects with feminist and critical race theory in order to account for the different ways in which women from different subject positions choose to represent their testimonies in their memoirs. While Dunham demonstrates that she has to navigate and try to refute rape myths

\textsuperscript{46} Leydesdorff and Adler, p. 10.
\textsuperscript{47} Alcoff and Gray, p. 283.
\textsuperscript{49} Ibid, p. 2 and p. 48.
in order to come to terms with her rape, Abrams explains that she not only has to navigate rape culture, but also the cultural discourses and beliefs about her body and identity that make her more vulnerable to violence, and that her testimony is more likely to be met with suspicion.

In her memoir, Abrams describes how she had to construct a counter-narrative to the ‘repetitive messages that black is dirty, coarse, violent, hypersexual, irresponsible, and ugly.’ Responding to the negative images and discourses about black women in mainstream contemporary culture, bell hooks (2015) argues that these representations of black womanhood originate from slavery and tend to objectify and over-sexualize black women. One way to negotiate these cultural narratives for Abrams involved sleeping with white men in order to garner ‘the white man’s stamp of approval’, but, looking back, Abrams realizes that as she was trying to elevate her self-esteem, these white boys were ‘satisfying an urge’ for a ‘taste of the exotic.’ Through an analysis of representations of African American women in pornography, Patricia Hill Collins (1993) concludes that these images represent ‘the continuation of the historical treatment of actual bodies’ because these black women are often depicted in a submissive posture in a violent position of slavery, as opposed to images of white women in pornography. These cultural narratives and representations speak to the continued oppression, specifically sexual violence, that black women experience in contemporary society. One particular night, Abrams wakes up and is being raped by a white man. She is eventually able to fight him off and runs into the kitchen for a knife. The friends in the surrounding rooms ask Abrams to leave, rather than the rapist. She confesses that no one in the room believed her when she said that she was raped because the boy ‘was too good looking and popular.’ Years later, as Abrams writes her memoir, she remembers that she blamed herself for being raped, but now she knows ‘what this phenomenon is called: rape culture’. Not only is Abrams raped by a white man who feels entitled to her body, but her friends also do not believe her testimony because her allegation is against a white man, and, because she has no recourse, Abrams begins to blame herself.

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52 Abrams, p. XII.
54 Abrams, p. 205.
56 Abrams, p. 205.
57 Ibid, p. 338.
The complexity of this passage and the layers of racialization, racism, and its internalization that Abrams must unpack in relation to her rape throughout the testimony requires much more than the empathic reading that trauma theory provides. Namely shame, examined through the lens of affect theory, theorizes the intersections of the body, identity, and trauma.

Affect scholars are interested in shame because, as they argue, shame serves as a site of resistance to cultural norms associated with identity, and as Probyn claims, sexuality is an ‘area ripe for shame’. Shame is part of identity because it goes to the ‘heart of who we think we are’ and coincides with embodied politics because it signals ‘considerations of why one feels ashamed’: as survivors share their life stories of trauma and their experiences of shame in the public, we begin to ‘question of value systems’. According to Sara Ahmed, ‘the way in which pain of shame is felt upon the skin surface, at the same time as it overwhelmed and consumes the subject, is crucial’. Shame, for Ahmed, becomes a part of identity, and stems from the relationship between trauma and the body. Shame is a social affect, meaning that feelings of shame are born out of socio-cultural contexts, and, as a result, has the ability to change; it depends on a spectator and is performative, making shame a productive site of resistance against cultural norms and possible healing from these oppressive norms. Gay and Abrams represent their testimonies about rape with a serious tone and use the word shame more often: Gay forty-six times, and Abrams twenty-one times, whereas Dunham and Valenti’s testimonies embody a humorous tone and they use the word shame far less frequently (eight times each). By adopting affect theory to analyse the body and shame, and by noting the number of times the word shame appears in each memoir, I can account for the reasons why women feel ashamed after a traumatic experience such as rape and how their embodied subjectivity is part of this shame.

While studying a rape testimony as it appears in memoir, reading through the body and the affect of shame seems like a logical methodology. Leys, in an analysis of shame and guilt, argues that shame adheres to the anti-mimetic model—like the trauma theory developed by Cathy Caruth—and that guilt is an affect theorized through the mimetic model of trauma and through melancholia. Similarly to Cheng’s conception of racial melancholia,
Leys claims that under extreme instances of trauma, the survivor experiences hostile impulses out of fear that are repressed and turned against the ego and experienced in the form of guilt. 62 Conceptualizing guilt through mimesis was problematic for scholars who believed that psychoanalysis cast all survivors into the same mold, and that the mimetic model implied a sense of complicity between the survivor and perpetrator. 63 As a result, scholars turned away from psychoanalysis, which analyzed behaviour, and towards affect, which analyzed subjectivity; subsequently, discussions of shame replaced those pertaining to guilt in trauma and affect studies. 64 Yet, Gay admits that after she was raped, she often clung ‘tightly, desperately, to [her] secret and [her] guilt and [her] shame’. 65 Like Gay, the authors of the memoirs use the terms ‘guilt’ and ‘shame’, often in the same sentence, indicating that the theoretical shift from guilt to shame, due to the shift from psychoanalysis and mimesis to materialism and anti-mimesis, ignores the real and lived experiences of both guilt and trauma in the memoirs. These memoirs require a framework that not only accounts for shame through affect, but that also considers guilt and the unconscious.

Memory, Affect, and Psychoanalysis

In the context of rape trauma, memory studies accounts for the socio-political contexts that include the rape culture and myths that survivors must navigate in order to mediate their rape; affect theory, through the body, accounts for a survivor’s subject position and that certain groups of women are more vulnerable to being raped, and, through shame, considers the impact of trauma on identity; however, theory still has to account for the unconscious and the relationship between guilt and trauma. Rather than adopt the ‘event-centered approach’, which considers a ‘sovereign, yet passive’ subject, as the anti-mimetic trauma theory proposes, Radstone advocates that theories of trauma ought to account for the work in the humanities that conceptualizes ‘a de-centered subject who is caught up in processes of symbolization, desire and fear that lie partly beyond the reach of consciousness’. 66 While affect undoubtedly accounts for a trauma survivor’s subjectivity,

63 Ibid, p. 83.
64 Ibid, p. 137.
65 Gay, p. 68.
66 Radstone, p. 18.
Nathan M. To and Elena Trivelli (2015) argue that the complexity of psychoanalytic and the unconscious is absent from affect studies, even though, ‘in the transmission of trauma, bodies and psyches intertwine, sharing and enacting many stories of history’. Similarly, and with respect to trauma, Brennan asserts that trauma is directly linked to the transmission of affect because ‘some of its victims testify with extraordinary activity concerning the experience of something infiltrating their psyches as well as their bodies’. In this sense, trauma theory both within and beyond the humanities must account for the ways in which the personal, cultural, and traumatic, or rather how the ‘inter-intra-subjective processes through which meanings are conferred, negotiated and mediated’. According to Cheng, psychoanalysis allows for a reading beyond a ‘single logic,’ to borrow from Leys, because of the ‘possibility that intra-subjectivity exists as a form of intersubjectivity and that intersubjectivity often speaks in the voice of intra-subjectivity: a mutually supportive system.’ Indeed, Cheng does not advocate for scholars in the humanities to revert back to psychoanalysis, but rather, and through an analysis of texts by African American Authors while using the melancholia of race as her framework, Cheng demonstrates that perhaps scholars never stopped using psychoanalysis. I suggest a reading practice that involves affect to account for embodied subjectivity, and psychoanalysis through melancholia in order to merge the psyche and body together in a theorization of trauma. As Jonathan Flatley (2008) argues, ‘the aesthetic production of the melancholic may be an attempt precisely to combat depression, not, as one might assume, by way of an escape into aesthetic pleasures but precisely by directing her or his attention toward melancholy itself.’ This process defines the process at work in these memoirs, but for the authors’ of these memoirs, melancholia does not stem from depression; rather, melancholia asserts itself as the survivors of rape trauma must navigate their memories through the trauma of rape, rape myths, and their own identity. Borrowing from Flatley, I argue that these memoirs invite a reading of melancholia through the formal elements of the text.

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68 Brennan, p. 121.
69 Radstone, p. 18.
70 Leys and Goldman, p. 677; Cheng, p. 28.
In her memoir, *Sex Object*, Valenti explains that she was raped while she was unconscious at a party and states:

I have never called this assault. I’m not really sure why. As a feminist writer I’ve encouraged others to name the thing that happened to them so our stories can be laid bare in a way that is inescapable and impossible to argue with. And I realize, and I realized then, that by definition penetrating someone while they are unconscious—even if you’ve had sex before with this person—is rape. I just have never wanted to call it that.\(^\text{72}\)

Here, Valenti contests the public understanding of rape as something that everyone can or should easily name and explain, and indirectly exposes how the criminal justice system, an institution that is supposed to support and protect survivors, places unrealistic expectations onto the survivor and their legal testimony and creates favourable conditions for perpetrators, abusers, lawyers, and the public to discredit testimonies about rape. The title of the chapter in which this passage appears is ‘Grilled Cheese’, and the chapter begins with the following sentence: ‘THE DAY AFTER HE FUCKED ME WHILE I WAS UNCONSCIOUS, I HAD Carl buy me a grilled cheese sandwich and French fries’.\(^\text{73}\) An unmissable signpost to readers, the beginning of the opening sentence of Valenti’s chapter appears in bold letters and foregrounds the assault, while the second half of the sentence is not bolded and describes the way in which Valenti responded to the rape. Valenti draws attention to discourses of disbelief and suspicion that surround rape testimony, especially when rape survivors display behaviours that defy the cultural expectations of how a rape victim should and would act following an assault. As Rennison notes, rape is the only ‘crime in which victims have to explain that they didn’t want to be victimized’ because of the belief that the number of false allegations of rape is high, when in reality, the occurrence of false allegations is low, between 2-4 percent.\(^\text{74}\) The second half of the sentence appears to be

\(^{72}\) Valenti, p. 112.
\(^{73}\) Ibid, p. 109.
much less significant than the first half, implying that, for Valenti, the fact that she was raped is much more important than the way in which she responded to the event, and this formal inversion demonstrates Valenti’s struggle to understand her rape because she has consumed the cultural rape myths that prevent her from understanding her assault while simultaneously knowing that she was victimized. This internal struggle with her rape trauma, represented in the formal aspects of the chapter, demonstrate an unconscious melancholia.

Similarly, in a less humorous tone, Gay testifies about her rape and repeats the phrase “something terrible happened” and the word “consume” throughout the following passage:

Something terrible happened. That something terrible broke me. I wish I could leave it at that, but this is a memoir of my body so I need to tell you what happened to my body. I was young and I took my body for granted and then I learned about the terrible things that could happen to a girl body and everything changed.

Something terrible happened, and I wish I could leave it at that because as a writer who is also a woman, I don’t want to be defined by the worst thing that has happened to me. I don’t want my personality to be consumed in that way. I don’t want my work to be consumed or defined by this terrible something.  

The repetition conveys Gay’s rape as a deeply traumatic experience — one that continues to affect her life — that readers should take seriously. Furthermore, the repetition of the word ‘consumption’ represents the process of melancholia. Cheng, adapting Freud, describes melancholia as a consumption, in which the subject is in an endless condition of self-impoverishment. Even though Gay was raped when she was twelve years old, she confesses that she continues to Google her rapist. Gay claims:

I Googled him when I wrote this book. I don’t know why. Or I do. I sat for hours, staring at his picture on his webpage on his company’s website. It nauseates me. I

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75 Gay, p. 45.
76 Cheng, p. 8.
can smell him. This is what the future brings. I think about tracking him down the next time I’m in his city.\(^{77}\)

The continuous consumption of images and information of her rapist indicates that Gay is in a melancholic state, and understanding melancholia as a consumption of self-impoverishment that, Cheng argues, ‘is also nurturing’, provides scholars with a framework to analyze these sections of Gay’s text, rather than ignoring them because they denote a sense of mimetic identification.\(^{78}\)

**Melancholia as Resistance**

Combining affect theory and psychoanalysis in order to analyze testimonies of trauma, through frameworks of mourning and melancholia with their related affects of shame and guilt, allows scholars to study rape testimonies as they appear in contemporary memoir. According to Leys, shame ‘has been consistently theorized as a specular affect that has the fantasy of visibility and disclosure built right into it’.\(^{79}\) As a result of this ‘spectatoral’ dimension, shame is a ‘self-conscious action’ which, I argue, designates shame as a performative affect. Melancholia and its related guilt are theorized as a failed sense of mourning, in which the survivor can never overcome their grief. Conversely, shame is aligned with mourning, in which a subject can overcome loss. The melancholic subject is stuck, while the mourning subject is about to triumph over the trauma. The following section analyzes the authors’ choices to end the rape testimonies in particular ways; specifically, Dunham and Valenti choose to end the chapter by testifying that they have overcome the rape trauma, aligning their trauma with mourning, while Gay and Abrams do not indicate that they have moved on from the rape trauma, aligning their trauma with melancholia. In order to reach an understanding beyond the modern categories of knowing, a Black feminist poetics requires a suspension of these modern categories because ‘blackness knowing and studying

\(^{77}\) Gay, p. 84.
\(^{78}\) Cheng, p. 8.
\(^{79}\) Leys, *Trauma*, p. 133.
announces the End of the World as we know it. Gay and Abrams deny readers a happy ending by not performing that they have conquered the trauma, and rather than conceptualize melancholia as a state of pathological mourning, these authors demonstrate that melancholia can be a state of resistance.

Dunham and Valen, perhaps unconsciously, perform a sense of healing from their rape. At the end of her chapter about her rape, Dunham accepts that she has been sexually assaulted, and after an emotional conversation with her partner, she looks in the mirror and concludes the chapter by saying: ‘I look alright. I look like myself’. Similarly, Valen ends her chapter by declaring: ‘I never saw Carl again. We never spoke after I left his apartment after eating my grilled cheese and French fries. He did give me cab money, though. And I know that I took it’. Unlike Gay, who testifies that she continues to Google one of the men who raped her, Valen tells readers that she never saw nor spoke to her rapist again after she ate her meal and took money from Carl for her cab ride home.

By contrast, Abrams concludes her rape testimony by proclaiming ‘oh how the mighty have fallen’, and Gay concludes by confessing to readers that ‘those boys treated me like nothing so I became nothing’. While the lack of closure through a performance of mourning might demonstrate a sense of pathological mourning, I suggest that the decision not to provide a happy ending for the reader is a state of resistance. In her analysis of Paul Gilroy and Saidiya Hartman, Cheng reminds readers that, even during slavery, outsiders might view suicide as a sign of defeat; however, in a system in which survivors are devoid of will, suicide is a chance for survivors to reclaim a sense of agency in a capitalist system that is contingent on slave labour. In other words, ‘under extreme conditions’, the management of grief ‘exceeds our vernacular understanding of agency’. My argument does not suggest that racialized women cannot or do not move on from the rape trauma; instead, I do not take melancholia as a pathological form of mourning, but as a form of resistance that demonstrate Abram and Gay’s resilience.

81 Dunham, p. 66.
82 Valenti, p. 118.
83 Abrams, p. 335; Gay, p. 53.
84 Cheng, p. 21.
85 Ibid.
Abrams concludes her memoir by saying: ‘[i]t is my belief that the things that can destroy you can also rebuild you’. She demonstrates resilience, having experienced oppression based on her Chinese and Black identity, and her feminine identity. As Cheng argues, reading race is a precursor to femininity because femininity comes to acquire its social and aesthetic values under the signs of racial difference. Affect and trauma facilitate the impact of official narratives on such stories and people who narrate them, and in order to understand the complexity of rape trauma, and trauma more generally, scholars must expand their frameworks beyond dichotomies between the anti-mimetic and mimetic models of trauma, shame and guilt, the body and psyche, and between affect and psychoanalysis to account for aspects of trauma that may not have been previously considered. Reading practices in the humanities are important because, for a testimony to be accepted or recognized as collective memory, Maurice Halbwachs argues that the memory must ‘be functionally related to the achievement of the group goals of a community, and the content and structure of the memory have to exhibit meaningful relationships to these goals’. Personal testimony and political activism about rape have begun to saturate popular culture across a variety of mediums, and these discourses expose issues such as the suspicion and disbelief with which rape testimony is often met in the juridical settings and the public sphere. Relatedly, rape testimonies, as they appear in memoir, demonstrate the complexity of trauma and demand more nuanced reading practices. More scholarship thus needs to be generated on memoirs that depict rape: we need to continue to explore forms of memory that challenge the conceptions of trauma and official historical accounts.

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86 Abrams, p. 566.
87 Cheng, p. 21.
88 To and Trivelli, p. 306.
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