

Chapter 4

Shifting the Rape Script*

Introduction

The experience of being raped is often said to be *unspeakable* – a trauma so damaging that it cannot be articulated through language. But the very notion that rape is something ‘unspeakable’ serves to normalise rules governing the permissibility of speaking about rape, tacitly enforcing the shame that surrounds sexual violence and maintaining victim-survivors’ silence. The unspeakability of rape is also perpetuated by the criminal justice system through its power to define what is and is not rape, thereby denying recognition and permission to claim their experience as rape for those whose experience falls outside sociocultural assumptions as well as legal definitions and interpretations of ‘real rape’.

This chapter examines the ways experiences of rape are articulated in the case studies of online anti-rape activism. I explore how these online platform vernaculars (see Introduction) constrain and enable the articulation of the scripts that govern the ways victim-survivors speak about rape and its associated trauma. In this chapter, I suggest that the vernaculars of these online spaces facilitate the possibility of ‘coming out’ and claiming an experience of rape in ways that reconfigure the parameters of permissible speech surrounding rape, creating a platform for the telling of experiences that push the boundaries of legally and therapeutically ‘approved’ rape testimonies. Moreover, these online spaces enable the possibility of ‘peer-to-peer’ witnessing, specifically victim-survivor to victim-survivor, and shift power configurations with respect to who has the authority to provide recognition.

However, I also point to some of the limitations of these spaces, specifically with respect to the transformative potential the enunciation of experience has beyond an individual’s claim to their own experience. Furthermore, these

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online spaces demonstrate the affective labour involved in witnessing, and thus the pressure placed on digital campaign moderators to provide support to victim-survivors when they might not feel equipped to do so. In addition, the challenging of the boundaries of the rape script is not universal; platform vernaculars vary in how and what victim-survivors can express about their experiences. For instance, some are able to speak freely and on their own terms, while others are required to take a more structured approach to recounting trauma, in order to adhere to what counts as a comprehensible and authentic narrative. Therefore, in this chapter, I also reflect on some of the restrictions that seek to regulate victim-survivor speech acts in online anti-rape activism and discuss the paradoxes of these disruptive speech acts, given the pressure placed on activists and victims to articulate their narratives in particular ways. In this sense, the capacity of digital spaces to challenge the boundaries of the hegemonic rape script is dependent on three interlocking conditions: first, the parameters of the platform vernaculars, secondly, the regulatory conditions of the online spaces themselves and thirdly the capacity to facilitate the possibility for witnessing.

Unspeakable Stories

The claim that rape is inherently unspeakable is a fallacy; rather, it is the parameters of permissible speech within the law, the confession and wider society that enforce its (un)speakability (Henry, 2010). To speak is to acquire 'a subject position within a discourse and to become subjected to the power and regulation of the discourse' (Weedon, 1997, p. 116). Accordingly, one who speaks about rape is required to present their testimony of sexual violence within the parameters of permissible speech as well as within the given discursive setting in order to make themselves and the speech act both authentic and comprehensible. In this sense, there are hegemonic 'scripts' governing the ways in which rape and rape-trauma can be articulated, and these can and should be disrupted through strategic interventions. In describing the 'rape script', I am borrowing from Marcus' (1992) argument about fighting rape, specifically her discussion about the gendered grammars of violence that govern the ways in which individuals 'audition' for the roles of rapist and victim, to explore grammars and performative elements controlling the ways in which an experience of rape can and cannot be articulated in online spaces. In shifting the rape script, victim-survivors claiming their experiences in digital spaces have generated a new 'genre' of speaking out via 'new modes of telling, understanding, hearing and reading' accounts of rape (Serisier, 2018, p. 8).

Within literature, women have been writing about experiences of rape since 'taking up the pen' (Catty, 2016, p. 2). There is some creative licence, then, assigned to telling stories of rape, though this has not been at the cost of representing the realities of women's lived experiences (Catty, 2016). The stories told in these online spaces are autobiographical rather than fictional accounts of rape; nonetheless, both literary and non-fictional accounts of sexual violence attempt to capture the ways women negotiate and challenge the 'ideological circumscriptions and associations' of rape (Catty, 2016, p.4). 'Sexual stories', especially those

involving rape and sexual violence, are the feature of many epic poems and songs stretching back to antiquity (Plummer, 1995). However, the increasing media flows, such as the influx of daytime television, coupled with the ascendancy of therapeutic culture, changed the medium through which stories about rape are told, as well as influenced the dissemination and proliferation of such stories. In other words, ‘sex ... has become the Big Story’ (Plummer, 1995, p. 4), and therefore, speaking out about an experience of rape in these online anti-rape campaigns is nothing new. What these spaces bring into stark relief is tension between wanting to give victim-survivors the opportunity to tell their stories in ways that are authentic to their experiences, and the pressure, influence and power of a variety of testimonial discourses that seek to constrain what can and cannot be said, and by extension, their transgressive and transformative potential.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, since the 1970s, feminist activists have sought to ‘break the silence’ surrounding women’s experiences of rape. Public speak outs to break the silence emerged from consciousness-raising sessions, particularly (but not exclusively) in the United States, the first of which was organised by New York Radical Feminists. In this seminal speak out conference, 10 survivors spoke out about their experience to a collective of women and reporters from popular and influential magazines (Serisier, 2018). Through these speak outs, survivors sought to challenge the normative narrative tropes that have constrained, depoliticised and mainstreamed the ways experiences of rape can be spoken about in various public and private settings. Speaking out about sexual violence was and continues to be perceived as a way to convince society of the widespread prevalence of rape and the existence of ‘rape culture’ and use this as impetus for future prevention (Serisier, 2018), and through the expression of pain and suffering women can ‘move towards healing themselves through the catharsis of recognition’ (Heberle, 1996, p. 64).

Second-wave feminism, along with the ‘therapeutic turn’¹ in Western culture brought about a significant shift in the way the trauma caused by rape was clinically, socially and legally understood. Activists sought to provide a variety of platforms for rape victim-survivors to speak out about their experiences, to bring to light the physical and emotional impact rape has on women’s lives (Gavey, 2009). The traumatic impact of rape is foregrounded not only in activism but has become normalised within a variety of cultural and political fora, such as daytime television talk shows (Alcoff & Gray, 1993), truth and reconciliation commissions (Ross, 2003), and more recently public inquiries (Wright, Swain, & McPhillips, 2017). The law too is a site in which there is now an expectation that the trauma commonly associated with rape ought to be routinely rehearsed in victims’ testimonies in order to be registered as an ‘authentic’ experience. Here, rape victim-survivors are caught in a bind whereby they are expected to contain their testimony in a logical, coherent way – but they must nonetheless demonstrate that the experience was traumatic.

¹A time in which the expression of emotion became excepted in public discourse and used for political affect, and talking about stress, trauma and counselling became part of everyday life (Furedi, 2004).

These ideas persist despite significant efforts on the part of feminist activists to challenge such assumptions; however, in some ways, feminist activists seeking to improve legal responses to rape have also been complicit in perpetuating these assumptions. In the 1970s, for example, feminist activists drew on the increasing availability (and permissibility) of psychological discourses that flourished and multiplied in the wake of this shift towards a more ‘therapeutic’ society in order to obtain more widespread recognition of the trauma of rape (Gavey, 2009). The incorporation of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) into the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) as a term for classifying common responses to traumatic experiences in the early 1970s was particularly instrumental for feminist activists. Specifically, it offered activists a medical and scientific language (therefore lending feminist claims greater legitimacy) to bolster claims about the traumatic nature of rape in order to get the law and public discourse to take rape seriously (Herman, 2001, pp. 28–32). Burgess and Holmstrom (1974) developed the term ‘rape-trauma syndrome’ as a way of classifying the ongoing impacts of rape as a life-threatening ordeal associated with a constant fear of violence, coupled with symptoms of numbness, nausea and insomnia. Significantly, Burgess and Holmstrom also noted that these are not exclusive symptoms, indicating that many victims are unemotional and do not always present as distressed. In addition, they also established that victim-survivors often freeze during sexual assaults, yet these responses do not feature as part of cultural and social understanding of rape-trauma.

However, medico-scientific discourses carry a substantial amount of ideological and therefore disciplinary power and subsequently shape and reinforce what PTSD in the context of rape ought to look like. Moreover, the medical and clinical model often fails to account for the social, cultural and intersectional conditions that facilitate rape and focusses exclusively on the ‘violence’ of individual, isolated experiences (Wasco, 2003). This focus on the individual trauma of rape in activism has been criticised by some for internalising and pathologising injury rather than analysing the structural conditions which enable rape to occur and at the same time has the effect of maintaining popular assumptions about authentic ‘real’ rape victims and trauma (Mardorossian, 2002).

Adding to the limitations of a scientific approach to understanding rape PTSD, is that it can be as a seemingly Western, white, middle-class concept. Gilfus (1999), for example, suggests that the trauma paradigm of rape reflects a privileged ‘white, middle-class, never-victimised worldview’ of the lives of women for whom safety and bodily autonomy is taken for granted. Rape-trauma in this context is perceived as a single event that disrupts one’s life, rather than an experience along a continuum of various forms of violence routinely punctuating women’s lives in particular sociocultural situations, who may not see their experience as traumatic given the extent to which trauma marks their very existence (Gilfus, 1999; Wasco, 2003). Examples of this include the intergenerational trauma and violence experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Australia as a result of the violence of colonisation (and other First Nations Women in post-colonial contexts), and African American women who are also subjected to multiple intersections of violence and oppression from the enduring legacies of

slavery and segregation. Such standpoints complicate perceptions and attitudes that rape-trauma is an exceptional trauma inflicted upon survivor's bodies and minds because of the compounding nature of multiple experiences of violence in trauma that are not only interpersonal but are also systemic and institutional in nature. However, feminists have been successful in deploying the psychological language of trauma to the extent that many lay individuals acknowledge that rape *is* a traumatic experience that will have a significant impact on victim-survivors' perceptions of themselves, and that the trauma will require professional help in order for them to recover (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). Combined, these elements exercise a hegemonic power that influences perceptions about appropriate rape testimony and rape-trauma and thus confine the rape script within an extremely narrow form.

Drawing on the work of Jeffrey Alexander (2004), what I want to suggest is that 'events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution' (p. 8). The pathologisation of trauma, through the influence of psychology on modern life, has culturally codified and embedded particular perceptions not only of *what* traumatic experiences ought to look like but *how* one should speak of them. Yet the contradictory unwritten rules governing the *what* and the *how* of giving testimony routinely place victim-survivors of rape, in particular, in an impossible double bind. On the one hand, rape victims have been targeted for lying about being raped because they have remembered the experience differently to how it actually played out (Conley & Barr, 1998). Additionally, in defence of victims who are unable to construct such an account, psychologists urge the courts to accept that the inability to remember is an effect of trauma. On the other hand, the influence of rape-trauma theory and the assumption that rape is an *unspeakable* trauma means that those who give a coherent, unwavering and detailed story of violence are also subject to scrutiny.

From a cultural perspective reading the truthfulness of rape-trauma, what seemingly makes an account of rape truthful is its 'factual unreliability, its confusion, its inconsistency' (Humbert & Wynne, 2010, p. 3). However, rape victims who choose to share their stories publicly regularly find themselves having to construct an account of their experience that fits within a recognisable sociocultural and legal script in order to be rendered credible (Roeder, 2015; Serisier, 2018). In the neoliberal context, this includes not only accounting for the trauma of one's experience but also illustrating one's propensity for 'sexual safekeeping', such as the steps they took to prevent or resist being raped in addition to displaying an inappropriate level of trauma (Gotell, 2008).

The law is thus a site full of conditions and contradictions that simultaneously constrain and enable the articulation of testimony and the construction of 'truth' (Smart, 1989). The experience of giving testimony in the courtroom is often noted as disempowering for many victim-survivors, due to the structured scripts surrounding not only the ways speaking about rape and rape-trauma is and is not made permissible (no matter how contradictory those scripts might be) but also the scripts governing the legal process. Thus, being able to speak about rape and rape-trauma in a less-prescriptive way, such as the ways some victim-survivors do in these online anti-rape spaces, enables the possibility

of regaining some control ‘over events that confound us’ (Jackson, 2006, p. 17). It is worth recalling Cathy Caruth who claims that what *confounds* is not simply the attempt to reconstruct a factual account from the confusion of details that necessarily affects the recollection of traumatic experience. Rather, it is the reliving of an experience, the exposure to a ‘second wounding’ occasioned by the effort to make comprehensible a violence that ‘has not yet been fully known’ (Caruth, 1996, p. 9).

To speak out about rape requires piecing together a story of experience and functions as a mediator between private and public worlds, as well as provides a mechanism for fostering agency under disempowering circumstances (Jackson, 2006, p. 15). What the rape victim-survivor needs is someone to bear witness to her story who does not carry preconceived judgements (Herman, 2001). In other words, victim-survivors of rape want to be ‘believed’ in the sense that they need to place their trust in a listener who is capable of ‘listening to another’s wound’ (Caruth, 1996, p. 6). Giving testimony therefore becomes a ‘ritual of healing’, of reintegrating painful experiences as part of the self while at the same time making a public statement about the harms of their experience (Agger & Jensen, 1990). Testimony is thus both therapeutic and political, giving voice to private suffering, bringing the private into the public sphere to be *witnessed*. Giving testimony through storytelling, such as those enunciated in these online anti-rape campaigns, can create an opportunity to construct a new way of speaking and witnessing that goes beyond the frameworks through which rape and trauma are normatively articulated. The impact that perceptions about rape and trauma have on victim-survivors whose experiences do not reflect these hegemonic norms narrows the scope through which any claims for recognition are acknowledged. By ‘coming out’ online, the participants in this study provide an opportunity to explore testimonies that do not fit within the parameters of what rape ought to look like, and whose trauma is incongruent with the cultural and legal construction (and perpetuation) of rape-trauma. These spaces also open up the capacity for others to witness their testimony, specifically peers (or other victim-survivors), which enables victim-survivors to become both witnesses and theorists of their own experiences (Alcoff & Gray, 1993).

Speaking Out Online

Given the sociocultural assumptions about rape’s unspeakability, giving it a voice is an affront to the discourses that seek to silence or regulate it and generates the epistemic injustice I mentioned in the previous chapter (Alcoff, 2018). Society seems to resent the self-assurance and assertiveness of victims who speak of their suffering or remind us of their trauma, since ‘we prefer to avert our eyes from those who persist in reminding us of the wrongs they have suffered’ (Jacoby, 1983, cited in Van Dijk, 2009, p. 13). With varying degrees of awareness of the cultural conditioning that positions rape-trauma as something that is ‘unspeakable’ and the epistemic injustice caused by failing to listen to survivors, the case studies in this project resisted these notions in a variety of different ways. Not only did they

'speak' – for example, Kelly called her blog 'Yes, we speak' and Katie called hers 'These Are Not My Secrets: drowning out the silence on sexual violence', in protest to the idea that victim-survivors of rape should remain silent – participants also challenged the notion that their story had to fit within the paradigms of acceptable rape testimonies. In this way, these online campaigns are developing a new rape script that challenges the normative discourses regulating the ways rape, and its associated trauma, is and is not unspeakable.

Survivor-activists involved in this project described claiming one's experience of rape online as a truth-telling exercise and a process of 'coming out'. They articulated ways in which speaking out ought to be truthful and authentic; to resist the pressure to editorialise or gloss over the details of their experience regardless of whether or not those narratives fitted in with the dominant discourses of 'real' rape and 'real' trauma. Yet, as the following quote from Maya shows, this process is imbued with risk, particularly a fear about not being read as having had an 'authentic' experience of rape, and therefore how people will react to her story:

I remember the first time that I shared that I was a survivor on Facebook and it was like a *coming out*. It's scary and I'd say it's somewhat exhilarating, frightening ... it's all the fear of really being who you are authentically and how that's going to be received [and it] is a really, really scary experience. (Maya – my emphasis)

As I outlined previously in this chapter, speaking out about an experience of rape is required to replicate cultural visions of what 'real rape' looks like – typically something violent and perpetrated by a stranger (Estrich, 1987; Stanko, 2002). Experiences that do not fit within this mould are cast as 'just sex' through the cultural scaffolding of rape, whereby the processes through which society is conditioned to understand what rape, and an authentic rape victim, looks like manifest through a very narrow discursive and performative lens (Gavey, 2005, also see Kelly, 1988, and MacKinnon, 1989). Modes of 'authentic rape' include signs of violence, coercion, innocence and trauma, as I outlined above in my discussion above. Those that do not map neatly onto these discourses are often subject to questions of legitimacy at the level of the social, and within the criminal justice system. Such assumptions perpetuate 'rape myths' and have the effect of refuting claims about victim-survivor's experiences. The cultural denial of rape when it looks like sex has implications not only at the level of the law when it comes to reporting crimes but also whether or not women choose to claim or perceive their experience as rape (Gavey, 1999, 2005). No wonder speaking out and claiming one's experience as rape is such a frightening experience, as described by Maya – especially when these narratives challenge the boundaries of what 'counts' as rape.

The bloggers involved in this project spoke of wanting to create spaces not only for themselves to speak out but for others as well, which suggests, importantly, that some of the case studies presented here were, to varying degrees, conscious of their political potential to foster solidarity and transform attitudes about rape. In this way, these spaces enable survivors to come out to other survivors with a

shared commitment to truth-telling and dismantling the cultural scaffolding of rape by complicating popular assumptions about authentic rape victim-survivors and ‘real’ rape through what I discuss later in this chapter as witnessing (Oliver, 2001). Maya suggested that speaking out can help encourage other survivors to ‘come out’, and that sharing one’s experience can make it seem more ‘real’ or ‘true’ to those who have not experienced sexual violence. Specifically, Maya said:

[The more survivors] come out, the more [other] survivors will feel more comfortable. [And it’s when] they share with other people that they’re survivors and they say ‘oh my god I had no idea’, all of sudden this becomes real to them. It feels a little bit more real than something that happens in a back alley with a stranger.

In this sense, victim-survivors do important political work in terms of challenging popular assumptions about rape, and this commitment to ‘truth-telling’ and challenging assumptions about ‘real’ rape was particularly evident in one of the submissions to the blog *These Are Not My Secrets*. Specifically, the post describes an incident of the victim having a ‘sobbing orgasm’ while being raped.² While this is only mentioned in passing, such an admission is sure to raise eyebrows in a public forum and rape apologist responses, as it runs counter to the traumatic violence narrative associated with rape due to an admission of ‘pleasure’ – even though it was not actually pleasurable. In particular, it challenges the claims made by some anti-rape activists and scholars that victims of rape often ‘freeze’ as a valid form of resistance in a traumatic situation, in response to victim-blaming rhetoric, which postulates that women can and simply should resist or get themselves out of danger (Cambell, 2012; Galliano, Noble, Travis, & Puechl, 1993). The admission of ‘pleasure’ in this example may also complicate perceptions about consent. Recent rape law reforms in Victoria, Australia for example, have sought to shift the focus from the victim and the actions they took to communicate their non-consent, towards the (alleged) perpetrator and the steps they took to establish consent. However, most Western legal jurisdictions exonerate accused perpetrators who ‘reasonably believe’ consent was given (Larcombe et al., 2016). As I highlighted in the previous chapter, there is confusion surrounding consent in the context of rape. Having a victim come before the court to testify she was raped, only for the accused to claim she had enjoyed it because she had an orgasm, would (potentially) indicate to the judge and jury that the accused had a reasonable belief that consent was given – and conjure up the assumption that the victim-survivor was lying.

In light of the potential issues surrounding the believability of the story, the correspondence between the author of the post and Katie (the blog’s moderator) reveals that the author told her to ‘feel free to remove the section about having [had] such a physical response’, because she was afraid it might look like sex rather than rape. The author felt that her experience of rape went against the script of assumed responses to rape and consent to the extent that it might not

²<http://notmysecrets.blogspot.com.au/2015/01/submission-from-female-reader-aged-24.html>

be read as ‘real’ rape. However, Katie described in her interview that she felt that it was important to be ‘as truthful as possible because *I want people reading the blog to get an idea of the reality of sexual violence – even if it’s squeamish and difficult*’ [to read or understand] (my emphasis), and subsequently didn’t take the part about the orgasm out. Katie’s blog therefore provides a space to claim one’s experience and privileges the survivor’s voice and experience as the source of truth. In doing so, the blog space is able to highlight the complexities of victim-survivors’ experiences and the impact that assumptions about rape and consent have on women claiming unspeakable truths.

This approach taken by Katie to telling stories that are ‘squeamish and difficult’ is also reflected on Hypatia’s blog, who describes in detail the complexities and contradictions in her own rape story in her first post: ‘How I became a rape victim’.³ In the post, Hypatia articulates how she felt complicit or responsible for being raped, specifically for allowing herself to be separated from her friends by the perpetrator, the self-blame for not ‘spotting that he was a rapist’, as well as not resisting his advances by waiting for him to finish. Hypatia goes on to say that in her state of shock, she took his phone number and gave him hers – he eventually called to ask her out on a date, to which she stated on the blog post:

[I said] ‘Yes’ ... afraid he would tell everyone what a slag I was, but also because if I went out with him and was his girlfriend then that meant it couldn’t be rape ... It would make that Saturday night OK, the beginning of a romance, not what it still felt like – an attack on my autonomy.

The above comment clearly highlights how the violent stranger-as-perpetrator myth undermines survivors labelling their experience rape, as Hypatia noted being her rapist’s girlfriend would make it not rape, and I return to this issue shortly in relation to marital rape. However, in addition to claiming her experience as rape, Hypatia also noted in her interview with me how the trauma discourse narrows perceptions of the ways victim-survivors are expected to experience and respond to rape:

I was supposed to come out of this screaming and sobbing and generally having an hysterical attack. That’s how rape victims are supposed to behave and if you haven’t behaved like that then you can’t be a rape victim. You can’t have been raped because he didn’t upset you very much – and taken my number afterwards and walked me to the cab so that I would be safe!

Like the story on the blog *These Are Not My Secrets*, Hypatia’s story also goes against the grain of popular scripts of ‘real’ rape, given that she did not scream or appear to be emotionally or physically traumatised by her experience.

³<http://herbsandhags.blogspot.com.au/2012/06/how-i-became-rape-victim.html#!/2012/06/how-i-became-rape-victim.html>

However, she also acknowledges and warns us of these paradoxes in the claiming of her experience, stating, ‘you, Dear Reader, will note what care I have taken to try and explain my behaviour, to pre-empt the questions and criticisms and scepticism’. Such a comment indicates Hypatia anticipates resistance to her labelling her experience as ‘real’ rape, which, to the average reader, might look more like bad or regretted sex. Hypatia also noted that she knew she would ‘get people coming on [the blog] and telling me that wasn’t rape’, however she

Wanted to [show] when other people came on [to the blog] and saw that I was saying look ... it was rape when it happened to me and what happened to you was very similar, so it was rape when it happened to you too. Don’t let anyone tell you that it’s not rape because we have the right to define our own experience and we’re not going to let men sit there and tell us it’s not rape.

Similar to Katie, in addition to creating a space to claim her own experience of rape, Hypatia is also encouraging others to take ownership of their stories even if they do not fit within the ‘Madonna box’ (Hypatia’s term for describing the popular identity of the ‘rape victim’). The production of these alternative rape scripts produce what Butler (2005, p. 24) might refer to as a ‘crisis in the norms that govern recognition’, insofar as their experiences are ‘unrecognisable’ within the parameters of permissible discourses about rape, which enable the possibility of obtaining recognition. This crisis of recognition is reflected in a number of the comments from her followers, who claimed to have been raped under similar circumstances; who say that because of the way Hypatia has claimed her experience, they no longer blame themselves for what happened and feel comfortable calling their experience rape. One commenter posted this in response to reading Hypatia’s story:

I did something similar in the late 1980s, only I married my rapist. Somehow being his wife made it not rape ... *I could never call it rape, because somehow I felt like I’d asked for it* ... he told me no one else would ever want me ... [and] I believed him ... *Thank you for being brave enough to write this, you’ve helped me be brave enough to write what I’ve written just here.* (slightlytwysted – my emphasis).

This response from slightlytwysted sticks out in particular, not only because the commenter has used Hypatia’s blog to ‘come out’ but also because it captures the way ‘rape myths’ influence the parameters of what ‘counts’ as rape, and the extent to which victim-survivors themselves internalise these cultural narratives. Ultimately, this determines whether or not one can (or will) label their experience as such. The statement ‘somehow being his wife made it not rape’, for example, highlights how certain rape myths, namely that women cannot be raped by their husbands, are internalised by victim-survivors themselves – despite the criminalisation of spousal rape in many Western countries. More specifically, it also reveals how perpetrators of sexual violence in intimate relationships emotionally manipulate their victims into believing they cannot be raped. Given the ways in which

male perpetrators exercise multiple forms of power to undermine victim-survivors' capacity to claim their experiences – as encapsulated by the comments from slightlywysted – rape in intimate relationships remains cultural codified as 'just sex'.

Ultimately, what the prevalence of rape in intimate relationships reveals is that women give up their right to say 'no' once they enter into a relationship with a man. Yet what these digital spaces generate is an opportunity to challenge, or at the very least question the cultural conditions that deny women the opportunity to claim their experiences as rape. On the web campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*, comments under the 'have your say' section pertaining to 'relationships' asks:

Is it marital rape if I do not wish to have sex with my husband, but I am forced to do it because of the psychological pressure that, as a wife, I have to satisfy him sexually because of social, cultural and religious beliefs that define my marriage? (Salome)

There are numerous other comments from women in this part of the comments section that ask similar things, such as:

For years I thought it was normal for my ex-husband to force himself into me when I didn't want it ... I thought it wasn't rape because I put up little resistance ... Not all the rapes were physically violent or painful, does that mean it wasn't rape? To this day he still thinks that what he did was not rape because we were married. And people over the years that I have tried to tell made unhelpful comments that made me feel that as his wife I had no right to say no or fight back ... *Those attitudes are what stop women like me from coming forward. We are made to feel ashamed and that what we've experienced doesn't matter.* (Sarah – my emphasis)

What both Salome and Sarah's comments point to is the way the hegemonic rape script of 'real rape' – and indeed rape apologists – impacts the ways women and other survivors interpret their sexual autonomy in intimate relationships; they cannot say 'no' to their husbands, partners or boyfriends. As Kersti Yllo (1999) highlights, rape in marriage and intimate relationships presents a 'cultural contradiction' that is not present in any other form of violence that speaks to persistent attitudes that women – specifically wives – are the property of men. These attitudes remain despite substantial changes to laws that have made rape in marriage a criminal offence in most jurisdictions. Our cultural scripts surrounding marriage continue to invoke romantic scenes of love, sex and intimacy that erode any possibility of violence, and even feminist activism on the issue of rape in marriage has been relatively ignored focussing more on acquaintance rape or date rape (cf the groundbreaking work of Diana Russell (1990)). Rape in marriage is positioned as something too intimate, too private to interfere with or is rendered consensual sex through the marital contract (Yllo, 1999).

Yet, as Sarah's comment above highlights, the privatisation of rape in marriage makes these victim-survivors feel their experiences are not valid, which in turn stops them from speaking out. Thus, Hypatia emphasised the importance of having a space in which women can claim their experiences as rape, which is why she set up the blog in the first place (see Chapter 3):

One of the things I'm doing is speaking to other women and speaking to other rape victims who haven't had the permission to call what happened to them rape, and *giving them permission to do that*. (Hypatia's emphasis)

The use of the word 'permission' is important here. As I discussed earlier, the law is the typical site in which recognition and 'justice' is imparted upon victims and provides significant authority and *permission* for survivors in calling their experiences rape. The law is, of course, grounded in masculinist, patriarchal authority – as I discuss further in Chapter 6 – and therefore legal definitions and interpretations of rape are validated through the perspectives of men (at least historically, reflected in the enduring legacy of Sir William Hale whose claim that 'rape is an accusation easily to be made, hard to be proved, and yet harder to be defended by the party accused, tho' never so innocent' has had a long standing impact on assumptions that survivors routinely lie about being raped to cover up their sexual transgressions. See Gavey, 2005.). This is clearly noted by Hypatia, who states on her blog, 'the discourse of rape has been defined by men – by the potential perpetrator rather than the potential victim'. Subsequently, having the space and *permission* to claim an experience when it has been denied legitimacy and recognition because it does not 'fit' within the normative legal and therapeutic framework of rape disrupts the hegemonic rape script. In this way, those who blog about their own experiences are creating opportunities for others to speak out and enable victims-survivors of rape to become theorists of their own experiences.

Peer-to-Peer Witnessing and the Politics of Recognition

Through creating digital spaces for victim-survivors to speak out about their experiences, these anti-rape activists generate a culture of peer-to-peer witnessing. Survivors who had shared their experiences on online and completed the survey indicated they had done so to help support other victim-survivors and to highlight that rape is not something to be ashamed of. As one respondent to the survey stated:

I read a comment from an individual who was really struggling [and] I wanted to help her. I am not ashamed of my experience. As I get older, I no longer feel I need to keep it secret. If I can offer help in any way to another person who is experiencing difficulties, I will. (Survey – anonymous)

These online spaces thus generate a form of affective solidarity (Keller et al., 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019), through the ways victim-survivors feel

compelled to share their stories in order to help other victim-survivors. In this sense, speaking out to peers or other victim-survivors facilitates a culture of mutual support and does not require someone with 'expert knowledge' to impart recognition. Through claiming experience, these online anti-rape spaces are able to reconfigure the power structures with respect to who is listening to and *witnessing* these testimonies.

The notion of witnessing:

Calls for action – a 'not-turning away' from seeing and hearing. It demands attentiveness to the interplay between words, silence and absence and awareness of social and cultural conventions that intervene in and shape them. (Ross, 2003, p. 22)

Witnessing demands an audience; it demands recognition of violence, and it demands critical reflection on the conditions under which recognition is offered. In this sense, it is not enough to see; one must respond or speak back (Tait, 2011), and 'speaking' online through autobiographical storytelling and testimony enables the possibility of this kind of witnessing.

Claims for recognition are often bound up in 'hierarchies, privilege and domination', reinforcing the powerlessness of the oppressed group insofar as recognition is often sought from the oppressors (Oliver, 2004, p. 79). This happens on both a political and cultural level when it comes to victim-survivors of rape seeking recognition of their experiences. At the level of political and legal discourses, testimony is expected to conform to the narrow parameters of 'good victimhood' in order to be receive recognition, where the victim is expected to demonstrate the steps she took to protect herself, as well as take responsibility for her recovery (Stringer, 2014). Relying on the state and the law to confer recognition of injury can reify the power of the state to perpetuate particular norms and subjectivities, with respect to *who* can seek recognition and *how* recognition ought to be sought. This reliance subsequently codifies and entrenches existing social relations, rather than transforming them (Brown, 1995).

Similarly, within some psychological/psychiatric disciplines and confessional discourses reside problematic power relations when it comes to recognition. Both, for example, are conventionally regulated by an 'expert mediator' who, through the 'policing of statements' is called on to prescribe, diagnose and treat victim-survivors of rape and sexual violence (Foucault, 1978, cited in Alcott & Gray, 1993, p. 271). This focus on the therapeutic and therapy discourses/techniques, according to some scholars, fosters a culture of individualism and narcissism or functions as a regulatory mechanism that seeks to pathologise human behaviour (Furedi, 2004). I noted earlier in this chapter, however, that there has been a significant shift in psychological discourse surrounding the nature of sexual trauma and its impact on women and other survivors' lives, having achieved this recognition because of efforts made by some second-wave feminists. Perceptions about seeking psychological support for experiences of violence have significantly shifted over time, with therapy seen as an appropriate, and indeed necessary, method of treatment for victim-survivors of rape (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). At the level of

the social, therapy culture has helped to provide a platform and a language for experiences normally relegated to the private sphere (McLeod & Wright, 2009; Wright, 2008). In particular, the ‘therapeutic’ has the capacity to foster a culture of ‘talking things through’ and open communication between individuals, helping to make people ‘feel better’ (McLeod & Wright, 2009). Importantly, ‘talking things through’ does not necessarily occur in a clinical encounter or in the mode of confession, it also takes place among peers, which helps individuals to make sense of their lived experiences (McLeod & Wright, 2009).

Nevertheless, the clinician (be they a psychiatrist or therapist), in the context of the legal system, is still called upon to assess, diagnose and treat the rape victim-survivor who ought to conduct herself in accordance with culturally approved assumptions about sexual trauma and recover from her experience (Gavey & Schmidt, 2011). As such, recognition of injury is underscored by discourses of power. It is through *witnessing* that we can move beyond these problematic power dynamics within political and cultural ‘recognition’ (Oliver, 2001). Witnessing is about the structure of subjectivity itself, fostered through ‘agency and responsibility that are constituted in the infinite encounters with otherness’ (Oliver, 2004, p. 82). Subjectivity and recognition is thus founded on the possibility of addressing, and a response from, others, and there is an *ethical obligation* to respond to, or witness, the suffering of others, in order to render their experience intelligible.

Through the #MeToo movement, and a plethora of other digital spaces created for the purposes of speaking out about and sharing experiences of sexual violence, the internet has become an archive of victim-survivor testimonies, creating a collective memorialisation of experiences. These online spaces and campaigns also project a collective enunciation of violence and, as I discuss below, work hard to ensure the safety of those who choose to ‘come out’. However, memory – and thus memorialisation – are sites of political contestation, meaning the act of speaking out and claiming one’s experience in public exposes victim-survivors to the possibility of having their testimony contested or challenged, overlooked, dismissed or ignored. It is not enough to be able to speak or write about one’s experiences – the place from which one speaks must be taken into account, as well as the direction of that speech act (the audience), the content of the testimony, the identity of the speaker and who is witnessing and judging the testimony.

The politics of witnessing in these online spaces and campaigns thus requires paying particular attention to the tensions that arise when creating spaces to ‘come out’. As Alcoff and Gray (1993, p. 264) note, ‘speech is an event involving an arrangement of speakers and hearers; it is an act in which relations get constituted and experiences and subjectivities are mediated’. What is significant about these online spaces is that the power relations between the speaker and the listener (respondent or witness) are broken down. Unlike the confession described by Foucault as witnessed by the priest, the judge in a court of law or a psychiatrist in a clinical encounter or therapy session, in the online space, the witness is more likely than not to be a fellow survivor. As discussed in Chapter 3, the participants claimed their target audience was for ‘anyone’ (Hypatia) or the ‘normal person who would not necessarily know about the cause’ (Angela). However, they also noted the way survivors have ‘flocked to their campaigns’ (Angela), which was

not necessarily intended but is indicative of the need for survivor networks and the affective political work being done through survivors supporting other survivors (Keller et al., 2016; Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019).

Lynn noted, for example, that although the Rape Crisis Scotland campaign websites *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* and *Not Ever* were not intended to be a discussion forum for victim-survivors, she stated:

One of the most gratifying aspects of that campaign for us was the fact that ... we saw a lot of survivors on there [the campaign websites] just saying: ‘thank you so much for doing this – I blamed myself, now I know it was not my fault’.

Other digital spaces were designed specifically for survivors and therefore actively encouraged their participation; as Anna said, ‘We encourage all survivors of sexual assault and domestic/emotional violence to participate – men and women of any age and sexual orientation’.

While creators and moderators of these campaigns might feel they have positioned their digital spaces to target the average person, as I suggested in the previous chapter, the survey data indicated that the majority of people participating in these spaces were victim-survivors, with 85% of respondents indicating that they were survivors of sexual violence. Many of these respondents revealed that they had experienced the continuum of sexual violence, from unwanted sexual advances or sexual harassment (77%), to unwanted physical contact of a sexual nature (70%), and rape (31%).

Given that these spaces are as much about providing victim-survivors with a voice (the personal) as they are about claims making and challenging ‘rape culture’ (the political), it is unsurprising that there are a significant amount of victim-survivors participating in these spaces. The following majority of survey respondents found these online anti-rape campaigns useful in terms of helping them to make sense of their experiences (53%) and provided them with emotional support or connected them to support services (33%). Although I suggested above that these online spaces are survivor networks, only 23% claimed these sites helped them to connect with others who have also experienced sexual violence. The creation of survivor networks thus seems to be an indirect, but nonetheless important, feature of online anti-rape activism.

In addition to providing support to survivors, a comment left in response to the question ‘why do you participate in these online anti-rape campaigns?’ suggests that non-survivors have also found online campaigns helpful for learning how to support survivors. Specifically, the respondent stated that the blog *Herbs and Hags* helped her to ‘learn how to be sensitive to the possibility that people I interact with are rape victims’. These online anti-rape campaigns therefore have the potential to provide ‘everyday’ people with the tools to support victim-survivors by bearing *witness* their ‘coming out’ offline and online, even when their experience might not ‘fit’ within the preconceived notions of what rape looks like, or if someone fails to be a ‘safety-conscious victim-in-waiting’. As Hypatia said to me in her interview, ‘anyone can become a rape victim’, and there is no ‘correct’ way to experience rape or rape-trauma.

I therefore interpret the relationship between victim-survivor participation and victim-survivor support in these online spaces as ‘peer-to-peer witnessing’, which seeks to dissolve the power relations between the ‘professional’ or institutionalised knowledge and the victim and enables survivor-to-survivor witnessing as a form of recognition. This is also reflected in the work of Rentschler (2014), who interprets the use of digital media campaigns such as *Hollaback!* and participation in some Twitter hashtags, as peer-to-peer witnessing, given that they create the possibility of response – what Oliver calls ‘response-ability’, in which the self is able to be recognised by infinite others (Oliver, 2001). It is not just simply ‘seeing’, ‘hearing’ or ‘listening’ but also requires a *response*. Fileborn (2014, 2016) too suggests that buttons like ‘I’ve got your back’ on the *Hollaback!* website function as a system of recognition insofar as they provide an opportunity for others to ‘speak back’ in solidarity with victims of street harassment. Thus, not only do these online spaces enable women to speak out and claim their unspeakable experiences but also they foster an ethical culture of response and support. As I showed in the previous section, Hypatia’s ‘coming out’ not only prompted supportive comments from those witnessing her claiming of experience but also created a space in which others could claim theirs as rape too. Thus, the affective work done in these online spaces constitutes important political work through the ways in which *witnessing* fosters a sense of solidarity as well as recognition.

It is not just through commenting on blog posts that peer-to-peer witnessing happens in these online spaces. As I discussed in the previous chapter, people can distribute stories on social media by re-blogging or sharing them on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Tumblr. Such forms of witnessing are often accompanied by seemingly low-impact activism techniques such as liking or retweeting posts, as well as sharing petitions. Although such practices have been subject to criticism – specifically that they do not contribute to any meaningful or lasting change (Morozov, 2009); due to the experience of many rape victim-survivors and feminist activists as being targets for online harassment, low-involvement features can be meaningful for victim-survivors (Rentschler, 2014, p. 78). Campaigns, such as *Project Unbreakable*, utilise these low-impact forms of witnessing. The pictures submitted to *Project Unbreakable* cannot be extensively commented on, but they can be shared on personal Tumblr pages where they can be ‘liked’ or briefly commented on. While these are low-engagement forms of witnessing, it can be seen that having just a small number of people ‘like’ or share a story, or make a statement about supporting victims of rape, can provide victim-survivors with a sense of camaraderie, especially if they have struggled to obtain support offline. In an environment in which the legal system and broader society fails to ‘hear’ experiences of rape and disempowers victim-survivors, having the capacity to speak out, claim one’s experience and have it validated by peers is significant. Indeed, a number of the posters on *Project Unbreakable* highlight the extent to which the law failed to respond to their claims but assert that having the capacity to share what happened to them in a non-judgemental space, and the support they receive, makes them ‘unbreakable’; having the space to be seen, heard and believed is important. This was reflected in my interview with Anna, the website administrator, who said that she feels the ‘two primary benefits [of the campaign] are a place

to share your story and a community of people who truly understand and can be there for one another’.

In this sense, the notion of ‘witnessing’ illustrates that the power and potential of connecting victim-survivors with others to claim their experience or ideas is significant. Witnessing in these online spaces cuts across and challenges the institutional hierarchies that historically had, and have, the power to witness and judge experience (such as a priest, a judge or a psychiatrist). What disclosing or speaking out to another victim-survivor does is mitigate the perception that ‘the arbitrator of the confession be neutral and objective, and their assessment derived not from personal experience but from “abstract knowledge”’ (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 280). Significantly then, the speakers and hearers in these online spaces and campaigns – those testifying and those witnessing (and subsequently passing judgement) – construct a different kind of power relation: one based on shared experience, knowledge and response-ability, rather than seeking out an authority to impart recognition upon them. In this way, the speaking arrangements have been transformed so that victim-survivors ‘[are] both witness and experts, both reporters of experience and theorists of experience’ (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 282).

Managing Negative Witnessing

Not all witnessing, however, is productive, and several of the participants in this study mentioned the problems they have with so-called ‘trolls’. ‘Trolling’ is ‘the act of deliberately posting inflammatory or confusing messages on the Internet in order to provoke a vehement response from a group of users’ (Cassandra, 2008, p. 5), and is one example of a number of practices, such as cyberbullying, cyberstalking and cyberhate, which fall within the field of ‘e-bile’ (Jane, 2014). Trolling is thus an additional silencing technique that seeks to deny the logics of rational and critical debate in the ‘public sphere’, and women who seek to challenge the logics of masculine knowledge are popular targets (Jane, 2014, 2016; Shaw, 2013). The moderators of many feminist online spaces, including the ones in this research project, work tirelessly to ensure they remain a safe space for people to speak out, claim their experiences and foster peer-to-peer witnessing. However, as Wazny (2010) notes in her discussion about Jezebel (a once popular feminist online forum and blog), the desire to create ‘safe’ spaces is in direct tension with the principles of the ‘public sphere’ and ‘free’ spaces in which rational, critical debate can take place. Nonetheless, practices of moderation seeking to curtail the potential for trolls to derail conversations create the potential for more productive (feminist) dialogues to flourish (Shaw, 2013; Wazny, 2010).

It is important to note the varying forms of ‘trolling’ that happen in these spaces, because conceptualising e-bile, and subsequently trolling, in broad terms can result in certain modes of interaction online being misclassified (Jane, 2014). In the previous chapter, I suggested that these online spaces created an opportunity for activists to engage in consciousness-raising and develop and test out their ideas. Indeed, in some ways, they help to change people’s minds about rape and rape culture, similar to the ways in which consciousness-raising in the 1960s and 1970s were instrumental in transforming individual’s perspectives on rape.

However, the shift from consciousness-raising to social, cultural and structural transformation of preventing rape through the recognition of contributing factors such as rape culture via speaking out has not occurred. The discussion I had about the campaign *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*, in particular, demonstrated the enduring resistance to rape culture and reluctance to reconfigure victim-blaming attitudes from men in particular, – although there were also examples of attitudes being shifted through their interactions with these online spaces.

Of course, there was also resistance to the recognition of particular experiences as genuine rape in these digital spaces; however, given the highly regulated nature of some of these spaces – primarily to minimise harm to victim-survivors – it makes more sense to classify these responses in terms of ‘negative witnessing’ carried out by ‘rape apologists’ rather than strictly ‘trolling’. While some of the comments on the website *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me*, for example, denied certain experiences as rape and were supportive of ‘rape myths’ or reinforcing women’s responsibility to prevent rape, they did engage with the substance of the campaigns, with many acknowledging at least the importance of the message. As I suggested in Chapter 3, discussion in this form as a type of witnessing was ‘welcomed’ to the extent that it provoked discussion, fostered debate and encouraged a sense of response-ability among those participating in the space. This was particularly clear through the ways participants in the forums on *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* responded to points of contention or defamatory comments that sought to undermine the campaign’s messages relating to challenging rape culture. Such an approach offers an additional reading of Carrie to Rentschler’s (2014) notion of ‘response-ability’; that the use of ‘testimony, advice giving and culture of support’ enabled by online spaces, like social media, provide people with the ability to respond (p. 68). Rather than having the campaign managers or blog authors tell people what to think, those participating in these spaces are active in responding to negative commentary and supporting victim-survivors whose experiences are challenged in the campaign’s forums.

Fortunately, the negative witnessing on *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* does not explicitly attack victim-survivors – partly because those comments are removed from the website. Instead, the negative witnessing that happens on *This Is Not an Invitation to Rape Me* attempts to silence, ignore or refuse the campaign’s messages about the influence and impact of rape myths and victim-blaming. For example, this statement from Alan fails to demonstrate any level of engagement with the substance of the campaign:

What a horribly sexist campaign. The implication of your advertisement is that all rapists are male and all victims are female. This is demonstrably false and it’s about time such chauvinistic attitudes were changed. (Alan)

The negative witnessing expressed by Alan further exhibits an agenda associated with men’s rights activists and their ‘not all men’ stance typically directed at feminist discourse in the public sphere (Zimmerman, 2014). Zimmerman (2014) suggests that the ‘not all men’ argument invoked by people, such as Alan, is

routinely employed to derail a conversation and shift the focus of the discussion rather than engaging with it. Crucially though, the ‘not all men’ rhetoric does attempt to show some concern or acknowledgement that ‘rape, sexism and misogyny are real issues – just not, you know, not real issues that the speaker would be involved with’ (Zimmerman, 2014, n.p.). Here, Alan’s attempt to dispel the ‘myth’ that *all men* are rapists shows he is not denying rape to be a serious problem, but he is also distancing himself from contributing to the perpetuation of ‘rape myths’ and being labelled a perpetrator of rape. Rape is something perpetrated by ‘other’ men, and this is reflected in many comments on the campaign’s website, which reinforce societal assumptions that rape is abhorrent but is perpetrated by very few individuals or ‘not all men’. A comment from RDM, for example, does this by saying:

Nice idea to raise awareness, too bad it portrays a false image of not only ‘all rapists are men’, but that ‘all males are rapists’. ... It seems a bit unfair to lump all men into one category as dangerous sexual monsters.

RDM goes even further to distance himself from being labelled a rape apologist by suggesting his comment is not as offensive as others on the website. Specifically, RDM said, ‘some of the male comments here are simply looking for some glory or trying to shock and offend’, yet viewed his own comment about how the campaign sought to make ‘monsters’ out of men as a ‘critical’ response to the campaign’s modes of representation. Lynn said the kind of responses from people like Alan and RDM is ‘not even the half of it ... You should see some of the stuff that doesn’t get through, honestly it’s shocking’. The level of negative witnessing is subsequently dependent on the regulatory features of the platform vernacular.

All the online anti-rape campaigns in this project had differing processes for vetting conversations in their digital spaces. Some, which function as sites of speaking out about experiences as discussed above, have few rules governing what contributors and survivors can and cannot say. Other which seek to foster consciousness-raising about rape culture, in particular, curate their campaigns in particular ways meaning there were strict rules governing what could be posted and how they managed negative witnessing. Although some academics have interpreted the monitoring of digital spaces as a form of censorship that regulates free speech (see e.g. Mendes, 2015), those managing many of the online campaigns regularly employed certain strategies in order to avoid the silencing of women’s voices. For example, the Rape Crisis Scotland campaigns, which received some negative witnessing on their campaign websites but was filtered out during the submission moderation process, meaning very little actually found itself on the campaign pages. Others sought to prevent negative witnessing by being more mindful about what was posted and how the message was framed. For instance, Angela said the *Pixel Project* has been attacked but ‘not as much as others ... because we are progressive and we don’t antagonise people’. I return to this issue of ‘progress’ and ‘antagonism’ in relation to feminism in Chapter 5; however, what is worth noting here is the processes and strategies used by the *Pixel Project*

to eliminate negative witnessing. Specifically, Angela described the campaign's policy for dealing with being 'attacked' as blocking and banning people on Facebook and Twitter, and instead of engaging with abusive emails or correspondence, the *Pixel Project* has a policy whereby they forward the emails to their 'male allies'. These 'male allies' are campaign members or affiliates who support the work of the *Pixel Project*, such as White Ribbon.

Hypatia described a more engaged and assertive approach to addressing the negative witnessing she gets on her blog:

I do understand that people who are actually genuinely decent reasonable people are all also full of these rape myths and just because somebody is a rape apologist doesn't mean that they're a bad person and they're not worth talking to ... So I will be quite patient with somebody who is spouting rape myths. Unless I think you're just an out-right sodding troll, piss off. And that is a call you make depending on the post. [I get] lots of people post saying 'well I don't understand why you didn't do this or why you didn't do that' and I will explain why I didn't do this or why I didn't do that. Or I'll direct them to a bit of the post that says 'well I did explain that to you, I said [that] up there. Did you not read that bit? I've explained this'. Or I'll direct them to another post where ... like somebody did spark a post off – I actually did a whole new post because there wasn't enough space on the blog to reply to her. I realised, actually, you're raising a really good point and if I were reading this and I had never been raped and I didn't know anything about it, I'd also question that, and it's a reasonable question to ask given the crap our society fills us with ... I thought [it] was a reasonable question, which came from a place of trying to understand because I don't mind answering any questions which come from places of trying to understand. [But] I'm not interested in engaging with people who I think are out and out trolls.

Here, Hypatia reveals the complexities and decision processes involved in engaging with and managing negative witnessing. Moreover, the kind of witnessing Hypatia is describing by engaging with 'rape apologists', as opposed to 'outright sodding trolls', is revealing of the power of some of these online spaces to help shift people's consciousness about rape and its associated discourses, and to be able to 'talk things through'. However, the latter part of this discussion, where Hypatia is talking about reasonable questions about rape 'given the crap our society fill us with', is indicative of the amount of effort required of victim-survivors who are called upon to provide an account of their experiences. However, her comments also how instructive listening to survivors recount their experiences can be in helping to transform people's understanding of rape. As the above quote highlights, the digital space enabled Hypatia to be incredibly reflexive in thinking through what a non-survivor might know or understand

about sexual violence and taking the use her platform as a way of shifting consciousness. Furthermore, the above quote also reveals the strategic ways in which she decides whether or not to engage with ‘rape apologists’ (see also Mendes, Ringrose, et al., 2019, p. 93).

Interestingly, some of the participants perceived trolling or negative witnessing as not inherently bad. Rather, it was perceived as something that occurred once you had ‘gone viral’ or had been impactful. For example, Katie, who had little experience in dealing with negative witnessing, joked about how being trolled was a marker of the success of your activism, suggesting that it meant you had at least been ‘seen’ and ‘heard’ – but not necessarily believed. Katie claimed that she ‘had not received any [trolling] yet, but then it’s still really small – the blog ... I’ll know that I’ve really made it when I start getting hate mail’. Angela stated that sometimes she jokes with her fellow activists about trolling: ‘I’m like “wow, you know, I’m not really, you know, minted until I get a death threat”’.

Others spoke more about the negative aspects of witnessing. For instance, Kelly was targeted on another blog because of a post she wrote:

There was an article I wrote a few years ago ... where people were posting all sorts of victim-blaming stuff [in response to it] ... [and] so at the time I was just like ‘oh my god! Why did I do this? This is horrible! *Why does anyone ever speak out!*’. (Kelly – her emphasis)

But Kelly also noted the bind victim-survivors and activists are in if they do not speak out and challenge the discourses that govern the ways rape can be spoken about, stating that ‘if we speak out then we ... are going to have that kind of reaction from other people. But if we don’t then we’re not changing anything’. From Kelly’s perspective, not speaking out because of a fear of being harassed or experiencing negative witnessing simply perpetuates the techniques used to try and keep rape victim-survivors, and women more broadly, quiet about the injustices they have suffered. In other words, trolling and negative witnessing function as a silencing of free speech rather than an element of free speech. The need to push against the dominant attitudes about rape by speaking out was identified by Maya, when she was trolled by someone on Twitter. To cope with being trolled she reached out to other victim-activists, whose advice echoed what Kelly said above:

[...] She [the fellow activist] shared ... that idea that when someone feels threatened, that’s where that [trolling] comes from ... don’t allow that to keep you from doing what it is that you’re doing in this world because what you’re doing is very important. (Maya)

So in addition to monitoring and regulating the type of speech that can be articulated on these digital platforms, reaching out to fellow activists for support and response reinforces the importance of the networking fostered through consciousness-raising and witnessing and the power of these online social movements to offset the harms of, and even prevent, negative witnessing.

However, a further challenge to the transformative potential of these online spaces through victim-survivors speaking out are the ways some seek to contain the rape script through their platform vernaculars. Although these approaches to contain the rape script are designed to prevent negative witnessing, they effectively regulate and structure how victim-survivors are able to articulate their experiences. Although, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, some online anti-rape campaigns adopted a vernacular that encourages an open-ended and pragmatic approach to the ways people could claim their experiences – for example, choosing to post other people’s stories without editing and including information that might make the experience look like ‘sex’ rather than rape. However, other spaces are far more structured and prescriptive. An example of this is the *Pixel Project*, which provides victim-survivors with a ‘structured platform’ to prevent their narratives from ‘gushing out’. If victim-survivors want to submit their story to the website, Angela said they have to fill out a question sheet, which

Flows nicely from answer to answer and it helps give survivors a way to structure their stories because it’s very important to structure a story carefully because you want the message ... and your story to get across to the widest possible audience, yes? And sometimes we have to turn down stories and you know they didn’t make the cut because ... they don’t fill in the form [properly], [or] just everything just gushes out. (Angela)

Angela was concerned about the ‘damage’ caused by radical feminist ‘shock’ tactics, specifically the use of triggering images and language to incite action. As a result, she and her fellow activists have sought not to ‘antagonise people’ by confronting them with radical views or traumatic experiences, which might put people off from engaging with their campaign, hence the desire to curate these experiences in particular ways. Combined, this line of reasoning underscores the complexities involved in seeking to make the personal political. Specifically, Angela’s approach to containing the rape script (while well-intentioned) highlights the risks that are taken in seeking, with an emancipatory intent, to disrupt the dominant discourses, as opposed to inadvertently reinforcing them by being too careful and attempting to immunise themselves against public criticism and negative witnessing and trolling.

Therapeutic and Emotional Labour in Witnessing

Creating and maintaining spaces for survivors to come out, as well as monitoring and regulating the practices of witnessing takes a considerable amount of effort and time. As I highlighted in Chapter 3, there is a significant amount of labour involved in creating and maintaining these online anti-rape campaigns, and this is compounded by the investment required in creating a space for victim-survivors of rape to speak out and claim their experiences or to engage others in witnessing the testimony of survivors. Bloggers like Katie, who had a very small readership, struggled to obtain witnesses beyond the survivors who had spoken out on her

blog. Thus, Katie's position highlights the extent to which some of these online spaces are caught in a quandary between the personal and the political: while they may be personally empowering, they may not be politically transformative because of the lack of engagement by non-survivors. Katie described her frustration with her friends, whom she felt were not taking rape seriously. Specifically, she stated:

I feel so strongly about this topic [rape] I was kind of expecting all my friends to also feel the same – to also feel so strongly – and obviously they don't!

However, Katie also stated how pleased she was 'that women have used putting it [their story] on the blog to almost "come out" as having experienced sexual violence', making her feel that the emotional labour and work involved in maintaining the blog was worth doing.

Therapeutic and emotional labour was a theme that also emerged from the interviews with managers and creators in relation to supporting survivors and the process of witnessing. Some of these online spaces avoid doing any therapeutic or emotional labour themselves. Anna from *Project Unbreakable* said that 'the project was created and runs primarily for survivors to have a place to share their story and heal within a community'. However, on the *Project Unbreakable* website, there is a caveat that states 'we are not qualified to give certified advice', and then lists the contact details for RAINN 'if you are struggling'. The *Pixel Project* also sought to distance themselves from doing any emotional or therapeutic labour. In her interview, Angela emphasised that the project is 'not frontline', and they do not have the expertise to provide victim-survivors with emotional support. To add emphasis to this point, Angela said three times that the *Pixel Project* is not frontline:

A lot of survivors have a phase they go through where they are very aggressive and they lash out because they're in so much pain. But we're not specialists in that ... What we do is we refer ... Like we get people reaching out to us on Twitter sometimes and saying: 'my friend is going through this, I don't know how to help her' ... Where possible we give them a website, a phone number and email so that they can get the help they need. Because we're not frontline, you know, *we're not frontline* ... We're not frontline therapists, but a lot of people don't understand that. (Angela's emphasis)

While the *Pixel Project* acutely seeks to avoid providing (professional) emotional support for victim-survivors, they do perform a significant amount emotional labour in connecting victim-survivors with appropriate support services. Many of their posts on Twitter, for example, provide information for victim-survivors to connect directly with their local rape crisis services.

Overall, however, this resistance to doing therapeutic labour reveals a clear tension between the political work being done through the fostering of community

and the personal work involved in recovery from trauma. Moreover, the above account from Angela highlights the porous boundary between the political and the therapeutic in these online anti-rape campaigns. Angela's account of the work of the *Pixel Project* and way *Project Unbreakable* survivors' unbreakability indicates resistance to the focus on the therapeutic and demonstrates that the anti-rape movement and survivors are not 'irremediably and unidirectionally shaped by the traumatic experience of rape' (Mardorossian, 2002, p. 768). Instead, there is greater emphasis on maintaining collective solidarity with respect to the cause of ending violence against women and girls and healing within a supportive community as a powerful political response-ability.

Although it is not always clear how socially and political transformative the testimonies in online anti-rape activism can be, it would be unfair of me to suggest that they *ought* to be transformative. Moreover, I do not believe it is the responsibility of survivors themselves to transform political, cultural and legal assumptions about rape. Ultimately, what these differing approaches to shifting the rape script demonstrate is the tension between the personal and the political in storytelling through witnessing. Storytelling in social movements is precarious insofar as they are 'always at risk of being defined as personal rather than political ... evocative rather than authoritative' (Polletta, 2006, p. 28). The extent to which one's story may be read as 'personal' rather than 'political' is the social context in which it is told (Polletta, 2006). As such, an arrangement of speakers and hearers comprised of predominantly victim-survivors is likely to result in an echo chamber, and while having a fellow victim-survivor impart recognition or witness someone speaking out may be significant *personally* for healing, this particular context may not be conducive to *political* change. Nonetheless, the centring of survivors voices as the authority over, and theorists of, their own experience is significant and powerful in the face of enduring resistance to the ways they expose not only the fallacies inherent in rape myths and victim-blaming, but the power and privilege of masculine sexual entitlement that seeks to keep them silenced. Being able to speak out and claim one's experience and have this witnessed is therefore a significant political act – even if only on a personal scale.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by highlighting that maintaining the position that rape is 'unspeakable' fails to account for the ways in which speaking about rape *is* made possible within legal, psychiatric/psychological and social discourses and the dynamics that seek to regulate and contain testimony. Feminist activists since the 1970s have sought to 'break the silence' that surrounds women's experiences of rape by highlighting not only the pervasive nature of rape but also the (potentially) devastating physical and psychological impact it can have on survivor-victims' lives. As such, much social activism and cultural and political discourse has sought to capture the emotional cost of rape, with a strong focus on rape-trauma. Combined, these approaches have both reified particular assumptions about trauma – trauma that is now expected to accompany rape testimonies; and to contain the speakability of that trauma in such a way that it does not disrupt

the flow of patriarchal speech. Testimony is therefore expected to be contained, logical, rational, yet not too calculated, in order to be rendered authentic and credible. Therein lies the paradox that both constrains and enables the possibility of speaking about rape, maintaining the power within those discourses that govern the hegemonic rape script and denying recognition to those testimonies that fail to reflect or abide by those rules. I used these theoretical frameworks as a way to explore how some online spaces have become sites that seek to challenge the dominant discourses that govern the ways rape and trauma can be spoken.

Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how some victim-survivors use online spaces to speak out claim their experiences and illustrated the ways in which differing platform vernaculars regulate and enable survivor speech. Some of these online anti-rape campaigns complicate popular assumptions about truth-telling and rape-trauma; specifically, they challenge the dominant legal and therapeutic scripts through which rape victim-survivors are expected to articulate their experiences. I have argued that challenging such perspectives is further enabled via systems of witnessing. However, I have also pointed to some of the limitations of these online campaigns, which at times can reinforce the normative logics that govern the ways rape-trauma is expected to be articulated. Additionally, I have highlighted the amount of labour involved in witnessing, not only the level of negative witnessing that needs to be diffused in these online spaces but also in providing support to victim-survivors who speak out. This labour – or lack thereof – seeks to place boundaries between politics and therapy and, by extension, points to the tension (and limitations) between individual healing and collective memory as a form of political activism thereby complicating the opportunities for social, political and legal change. In the next chapter, I draw further on the regulatory functions of these online platforms to examine some of the complexities associated with feminism in relation to the modes of representation within these online anti-rape campaigns.