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NARRATING VICTIMHOOD: RAPE IN THE 21ST-CENTURY FRENCH IMAGINARY

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***NARRATING VICTIMHOOD:
RAPE IN THE 21ST-CENTURY FRENCH IMAGINARY***

Jenna April Liuzzi

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Advisor: Christy Wampole

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Dissertation Abstract

Narratives featuring the figure of the female rape victim have existed for centuries throughout French literary and cinematic history, often reinforcing prevalent misconceptions about what constitutes victimhood. However, recent works of memoir, fiction, and film have attempted to disrupt public perceptions of victimhood by deviating from normative expectations and dismantling entrenched stereotypes that surround the victim. While the general topic of rape in French literature and cinema has been addressed in scholarship, representations of the female rape victim in contemporary French works have not been specifically examined. My dissertation, “Narrating Victimhood: Rape in the 21st-Century French Imaginary,” fills this critical lacuna by juxtaposing and analyzing multiple representations of the victim in formally experimental works by authors such as Virginie Despentes, Gaspar Noé, Hélène Duffau, Loulou Robert, and Vanessa Springora. In so doing, this interdisciplinary project participates in an emerging conversation about the ways in which female rape victims are portrayed in French literature, cinema, and media and is therefore a timely and necessary study as rape, incest, victim blaming, domestic violence, harassment, and consent are increasingly urgent matters in contemporary socio- and biopolitical discourse.

I argue that the works I examine subvert audience expectations by offering unconventional—sometimes shocking—narratives that not only dispute common tropes about rape (e.g., that it is always violent and forceful) but also dismantle popular myths that surround the victim (e.g., that she is always weak/passive and that her behavior causes her attack). These writers and filmmakers, I assert, notably deploy a wide variety of aesthetic and rhetorical techniques in order to render a nuanced and dynamic portrait of victimhood. I ultimately emphasize the ways in which writers and filmmakers who reject formulaic approaches to representing rape victimhood successfully build new narratives that draw attention to the complexity of victimhood and survival.

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“It is very tempting to take the side of the perpetrator. All the perpetrator asks is that the bystander do nothing. He appeals to the universal desire to see, hear, and speak no evil. The victim, on the contrary, asks the bystander to share the burden of pain. The victim demands action, engagement, and remembering.”

—Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (7-8)

“Rape is not just a word, it is a whole story . . . Just the sound of the word makes one want to put this book down and read something else...”

—Mithu Sanyal, *From Lucretia to #MeToo* (4)

Introduction

“La bonne victime, c’est celle que vous pouvez imaginer sans effort.”

—Giulia Foïs, *Je suis une sur deux* (10)

The female rape victim is a fixture in French literary and cinematic history. Yet, in the stories in which she appears, rape and its aftermath have typically been treated as minor plot details, with the victim frequently portrayed in fixed and limited ways. In recent years, however, primarily driven by a cultural shift that amplifies the victim’s voice, the depiction of rape in literature and film has broadened significantly, placing the victim at the center of the narrative and thereby inviting a nuanced exploration of her experience and path to recovery.

One film in particular illustrated for me the rich critical potential of a project centered on female victimhood in contemporary French media. In *Elle* (2016), director Paul Verhoeven begins the story in an unconventional, even shocking manner. A black screen leaves viewers with only sound as a narrative cue. At first, the audience hears what seems to be a passionate sexual encounter set against incidental chamber music. Glass shatters at the moment of apparent climax between a couple. The screen then yields its first image—a housecat watching the still-unseen spectacle unfold, only to scurry away as if bored by the display. Verhoeven then changes perspective, positioning his camera just outside a doorframe, placing the audience at a detached distance where they are now able to view the aftermath of what has transpired. A masked man lies atop a motionless and stunned, semi-naked woman. Wordlessly, the man wipes the woman’s blood from his body, redresses himself, and swiftly exits through a broken window. It becomes immediately clear to the viewer that what just happened was not a moment of passion but rather a violent home invasion and rape. While indeed jarring as this image is unexpected, especially given the original soundscape, what transpires next is perhaps even more startling. The victim, badly beaten, bruised, and marked by her own blood, sits silently for just a

moment, and then suddenly picks herself up from the floor to begin cleaning up the scattered pieces of broken glass. She then throws her ripped clothes into the trash, takes a bath, and calmly orders sushi.

This extraordinary opening sequence disorients and unnerves the viewer whose expectations are almost certainly frustrated by this protagonist. An affluent, middle-aged woman, Michèle Leblanc, has been violently attacked and injured in her home, and yet she displays no discernable emotion, nor does she call the police. Even more bewildering is that, later in the film, Michèle seeks out her attacker and eventually engages in a consensual sexual relationship with him. Perhaps unsurprisingly, viewers are baffled by this figure, and countless responses to the film (both French and American) have designated Michèle as deviant, perverse, and unbelievable.¹ Furthermore, certain critics and scholars have described her reaction as fantastical, even aberrant.² For Bidisha SK Mamata, the film is “sick,” “toxic,” and “a slap in the face for survivors,” and she argues that Michèle is “complicit” in her abuse, “wanting it, engineering it, deliberately provoking it” (“Rape Fantasy *Elle*”). Others have gone as far as to say that she is “untraumatized,”³ even unphased, by her attack. For film scholar Lucy Bolton, Michèle’s “response [to her rape], so unsettling, is hard to fathom, and her inscrutability. . . makes it difficult to decide whether she is traumatized, in denial, unperturbed, or something else” (153). In Dennis Lim’s estimation, *Elle* is “about one woman’s rather unusual response to a rape” (66).

But, one might ask, what exactly is *hard to fathom* or *unusual* about it? Although it is true that Michèle is a complex, enigmatic character, the fact that numerous critics have deemed her reaction to her own personal trauma as unsettling and unusual reveals much about the unspoken expectations and common conceptions of victims of assault that exist within the public imagination. While the film

¹ I offer an in-depth review of these critiques of *Elle* in the second chapter where I focus on the film.

² See Bidisha SK Mamata, Guy Lodge, Raphael Abraham, A.O. Scott, Jo Fishley, and Pascal Merigeau.

³ See Murielle Joudet.

(and Isabelle Huppert's performance as Michèle in particular) has been generally well-received, a close examination of the criticism and scholarship dedicated to the film not only highlights a deep lack of empathy for and understanding of this fictional victim but also illustrates the extent to which audiences have internalized the stereotypical, unnuanced, and ungenerous ideal of the unimpeachable "perfect victim" with an immaculate past, who immediately reports her attack and would never willingly put herself "at risk" again. To be sure, this protagonist upsets the established patterns of representing rape victimhood. She neither withers nor seeks revenge as one might expect, leaving many viewers confused, offended, and critical. What is noteworthy is that these commentators and scholars are so consumed by Michèle's non-conformity to rape victim stereotypes that they overlook numerous important filmic details that patently establish her distress and search for agency, which renders many of their criticisms (e.g., she desires her own abuse, and she is untraumatized) baseless.

As the reception of the film attests, audiences often exhibit inflexible expectations of the victim and her behavior in the aftermath of assault. In fact, these expectations have long been identified by victimologists, psychologists, and sociologists who study the relationship between victim blaming and Rape Myth Acceptance (i.e., "the acceptance of false beliefs, stereotypes, and statements about rape, victims, and perpetrators" [Hahnel-Peeters and Goetz 1]).⁴ As Rachel Condry explains in the *International Handbook of Victimology* (2010),

[R]ape stereotypes and myths that involve derogatory beliefs about rape victims are deeply embedded in our [Western] culture. These myths include a restrictive definition of what constitutes "real rape" (an attack out of doors on a stranger using force, with the victim actively resisting), normative expectations about how rape victims behave (e.g., reporting an offense

⁴ See also Carol Murray, Carlos Calderón, and Joaquín Bahamondes' "Modern Rape Myths: Justifying Victim and Perpetrator Blame in Sexual Violence" (2023); Sofia Persson and Katie Dhingra's *Rape Myths: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing* (2022); and Rael J. Dawtry, Philip J. Cozzolino, and Mitchell J. Callan's "I Blame Therefore It Was: Rape Myth Acceptance, Victim Blaming, and Memory Reconstruction" (2019).

immediately), and other misconceptions about the offense and the victim's role. Victim-blaming myths are prevalent. There is a substantial body of research that shows wide acceptance of . . . [these] myths. (242)

Further victim-blaming myths of which Condry writes include, for example: Women who dress provocatively are always inviting sex; women who are intoxicated while they are raped are responsible for their victimization; and women who do not “fight back,” who avoid going to the police, and/or who maintain contact with their attackers are not actual rape victims. What therefore makes *Elle* a fascinating case study is that it specifically disrupts expectations by deviating from these commonly held “derogatory beliefs” and stereotypes while inviting audiences to question normative assumptions about victimhood.

The debates, criticisms, and questions surrounding *Elle* and its curious protagonist were in fact the first sources of inspiration guiding this dissertation. As I reflected on comments made about the protagonist, I noticed how the public (i.e., scholars, critics, readers, and film audiences) speaks about and characterizes fictional victims like Michèle inadvertently reveals prevalent conceptions about victimhood. I remarked how discussing artistic representations of rape victims can disclose ideologies about actual rape victims. This idea has been established by Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver who boldly announce in their 1991 work *Rape and Representation* that “the politics and aesthetics of rape are one” (1). Likewise, as Diane Wolfthal keenly observes in *Images of Rape: The “Heroic” Tradition and Its Alternatives* (1999),

Images of rape often involve other issues—political concerns, sexual desire, or ethnic, class, and gender difference—and this complexity enriches our understanding of such depictions. *But . . . despite other layers of meaning, these representations are also about “real rape.”* (4-5) (emphasis mine)

I agree that the image of rape is inseparable from the actual crime and its consequences, with the one informing the understanding of the other. More concretely, this means that films like *Elle* not only offer counternarratives that destabilize common modes of victim representation in works of art but also provoke commentary about the crime itself and the victimization it causes.

Considering this inseparability, I began to explore the image of the female rape victim in other works belonging to the French collective imagination, paying particular attention to representations produced within the last twenty-five years, a moment marked by a monumental shift in the language and logic used to describe victims of rape, as well as a time in which a number of high-profile cases have raised public awareness about the pervasiveness of sexual violence against women (e.g., the industry-shaking Weinstein trial that catalyzed the #MeToo movement, and the 2024 Gisèle Pelicot case in France). Examining these recent works, I set out to answer the following broad questions: What kinds of stories—literary and cinematic, both fictional and nonfictional—are specifically told about female rape victims in contemporary France? What, if any, are the common themes that current filmmakers and writers exhibit with regard to rape and victimhood? Are these contemporary authors and directors aware of the long-standing tropes, clichés, and myths that surround the figure, and if so, are they actively challenging them? By extension, in what ways do their aesthetic and rhetorical techniques address the condition of victimhood?

In investigating these questions, I discovered that the figure of the victim plays a significant role in recent literary and cinematic works. As I will show throughout this study, this surge in artistic focus reflects a broader societal reckoning with sexual violence, driven by the growing visibility of survivors' voices and the demand for narratives that challenge silence, complicity, and stereotypes. These works seem to intentionally disrupt cultural misconceptions and myths by commenting on them explicitly and challenging them in more subtle ways. Primarily conveyed through memoir, fiction, and film, these stories transcend statistics by offering emotional depth and complexity. While data and raw

numbers may outline the scope of suffering, these literary and cinematic formats capture the unquantifiable impact, giving voice to survivors and making their experiences tangible.

I. Historical Patterns of Figuration and Dissertation Overview

As noted, the figure of the female rape victim has consistently appeared throughout the history of French literature and cinema. However, despite her enduring presence in some of the most celebrated and popular works (both high- and low-brow), many of these narratives not only treat rape and its aftermath as tangential parts of the story but also tend to portray the victim in fixed ways, which have, in turn, become tropes. She features, for example, in canonical works such as Jean de Meun's medieval text *Le Roman de la rose* (ca. 1270-80) in which the beautiful, feminine rose is besieged and sexually assaulted by the chivalric figure known as *Amant* in the final part of the story. In this portrayal, the female victim is presented as helpless, passive, and speechless. A figure who ceases to flourish, she withers away and finally expires—metaphorically or literally—in the wake of assault. Of equal note is Charles Perrault's seventeenth-century tale of "Le Petit chaperon rouge" (1697) in which the author puts forth the (still widely held) belief that a girl is "asking for it" if she does not follow society's code of conduct laid out for young women. In this representation, the victim is marked as culpable—someone who brought her attack upon herself for having stepped outside the boundaries of what is considered "correct" behavior for a woman. Likewise, in Charles Baudelaire's celebrated collection *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), one encounters the poem "À celle qui est trop gaie," a text in which the speaker proudly announces that he plans to penetrate an unsuspecting woman's body, inflicting "a wide and gaping wound" as "punishment" for her "insolence" (l.21-36).⁵ Framing his silent *femme-*

⁵ Baudelaire writes, "Et le printemps et la verdure / Ont tant humilié mon cœur, / Que j'ai puni sur une fleur / L'insolence de la Nature. / Ainsi je voudrais . . . châtier ta chair joyeuse . . . meurtrir ton sein pardonné, / Et faire à ton flanc étonné / Une blessure large et creuse" (l.21-32).

fleur as deserving of harm for her behavior, the poet suggests that women invite violence by stepping outside gendered norms. As a result, like de Meun's rose, she fades away, losing all vitality. A more modern version of the female rape victim appears in Émile Zola's nineteenth-century novel *La Bête humaine* (1890) in which young Séverine is repeatedly raped and further abused by her guardian before becoming romantically involved with a sexually motivated murderer. In this version, the victim is presented as trapped in a cycle of violence and trauma after rape, eventually resulting in her death.

In French cinema, rape and female victimhood appear notably in Luis Buñuel's *Belle de jour* (1967)⁶ through the protagonist who experiences repeated flashbacks of abuse that she endured as a child. In this instance, the victim is presented as unable to heal, with her traumatic memories leaving her frigid and withdrawn. In other films such as Robert Enrico's *Le Vieux fusil* (1975), Gérard Pirès' *L'Agression* (1975), and Jean Becker's *L'Été meurtrier* (1983), rape victims are present as side characters whose abuse is merely ancillary to another's story. The victim in these films is generally used as a convenient plot device that solely functions to spur another (often male) into action, thereby shifting all narrative focus away from her. She is moreover presented as someone who might desire or consent to her own abuse, as suggested by Pirès' film in which rape is portrayed as a type of seduction.⁷ Most recently, Coralie Fargeat's action film *Revenge* (2017) confronts viewers with a woman who hunts down her rapist and kills him, ultimately emerging triumphant. While this version grants her more centrality in the plot, it nevertheless reflects a persistent cinematic trope dating back to the 1970s in which revenge—rather than her subjectivity—actually takes the focus of the narrative, thereby overshadowing the victim's psychology and the complexities of her life after trauma.

⁶ *Belle de jour* is based on the 1928 novel of the same name by Joseph Kessel.

⁷ See Alexandra Heller-Nicholas' *Rape Revenge: A Critical Study* (2011).

These select cases exemplify a consistent and conspicuous transhistorical narrative tendency, which is to portray the female rape victim in firmly entrenched ways. In so doing, these works, alongside many others from the broader Western canon, have arguably trained audiences to recognize the female rape victim in predictable, narrow terms. A victim's emotional or psychological response to sexual assault, if included in the story at all, is most often characterized as violence inflicted on the self (e.g., self-injury, suicide, and withering away) or violence inflicted on others (e.g., bloody revenge) (Robson, "An Encounter" 432). In short, these pervasive modes of representation have essentially become the standard for portraying rape victimhood and have generally remained uncontested.

However, as discussed, some contemporary French writers and filmmakers have begun to demonstrate a keen interest in the image and status of the victim, placing her and the experience of rape victimhood at the center of their narratives. In recent works of memoir, fiction, and film, authors and directors, such as Virginie Despentes, Gaspar No  , Philippe Djian, Paul Verhoeven, and Vanessa Springora, are actively elevating the figure of the victim by making her their explicit object of study. Through this analysis, I determined that these *auteurs* (and others) are well-versed in the common modes of artistically rendering female rape victims, as they often openly critique those representations while boldly reinterpreting them. By transgressing established patterns of female victimhood, they offer unconventional and often subversive narratives that not only dispute common tropes about rape (e.g., that it is always violent and forceful) but also dismantle popular myths regarding the victim (e.g., that she is always weak, passive, damaged, helpless, and withdrawn). Moreover, I observed that while there is not one dominant method of representation that these authors and filmmakers follow to depict the figure of the victim, their works share consistent, discernible features that most notably include a heightened focus on the psychological experience of rape (both during and after) as well as the embodied (i.e., somatic/corporeal) impact of the assault. Furthermore, they tend to portray divergent notions of victimhood in the sense that they introduce women whose responses to violence

neither fit established narrative patterns nor adhere to popular notions of victimhood. Finally, they generally thematize the ways in which victims seek to reclaim and reassert agency, both during rape and in the immediate/long-term aftermath.

It seems, therefore, that authors and filmmakers have taken notice of the ways that the female rape victim has remained culturally neglected as a subject, with little narrative attention paid to her experience of suffering and survival. To counter this disregard and these incomplete representations, the writers and directors I examine in this study appear to pose and explore three broad questions which allow them to confront both the victim and victimhood in depth: First, what is the experience of a rape victim? Second, how does an in-depth examination of the figure introduce turbulence into prominent social narratives (e.g., victim-blaming myths and the misconception that rape is a rare occurrence)? And finally, can the rape victim be reimaged in order to renegotiate certain long-standing, conventional narrative boundaries?

In this dissertation, I argue that by raising and responding to these questions through the mediums of film and literature (both fiction and nonfiction), these contemporary writers and directors redefine the image of the female victim, offering innovative—even iconoclastic—representations of this perennial figure. More precisely, I establish how these works strategically utilize narrative, formal experimentation, as well as various aesthetic and rhetorical devices to render a nuanced and dynamic portrait of victimhood, thereby reshaping the contours of what is permissible to say and show regarding rape victims through works of art. I emphasize the ways in which these authors and filmmakers who reject formulaic approaches to representing rape victimhood ultimately build new narratives that draw attention to the complexity of victimhood and survival.

II. Significance of the Research to the Field

The urgency of this project derives from the fact that rape is a very real threat to women every day. More unfortunate is how the rape victim is arguably the least respected type of victim when compared to those who survive other violent crimes (e.g., battery and hate crimes). As victimologist Callie Rennison asserts, “Rape is the only crime in which victims have to explain that they didn’t want to be victimized” (qtd. in Brody, “The Twice-Victimized”). Furthermore, as Michelle Bowdler explains in her work *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation, and a Manifesto* (2020), “[T]here is a striking disproportion between the severity of the crime’s lifelong consequences for survivors and the seriousness with which it is treated by society” (5). Bowdler moreover holds that rape is dismissed “largely because the victims are overwhelmingly women, children, and persons from marginalized populations,” and thus rape is consequently “underinvestigated, trivialized, and excused” (1-4).

This disregard of rape and victimhood likewise extends to research in French Studies. While the general topic of rape in French literature and cinema has been addressed in scholarship,⁸ representations of the female rape victim in contemporary French works have not been specifically considered. More precisely, a project that juxtaposes multiple representations of the victim and highlights the artistic innovations that rework understandings of victimhood and survival in contemporary French literature and film does not exist. My dissertation fills this critical lacuna and is therefore a timely and necessary study as rape, incest, victim blaming, domestic violence, harassment, and consent are increasingly urgent matters in contemporary socio- and biopolitical discourse. I aim to cultivate new ground and begin a discussion about this underinvestigated area of study by examining works that neither trivialize the experience of the rape victim nor excuse the severity of the crime and its impact on the life of the survivor. This project underscores the ways in which art can provoke

⁸ See Kathryn Robson, Heller-Nicholas, Shirley Jordan, Alexandra West, Alison Young, and Tim Palmer.

audiences to question what they know and think about rape and victimhood, thereby expanding the cultural vocabulary for conceptualizing and discussing victimhood. My work thus fits into broader scholarship within the fields of gender and sexuality studies, victimology, and trauma studies.

III. Terms and Methodology

I frequently make use of certain terms throughout my dissertation that require definition. First, I use the terms *victim* and *survivor* in context and interchangeably. Regarding *victim*, I find Trudy Govier's definitions particularly helpful: "[V]ictims are persons harmed . . . by forces they do not control. There is damage to one who is a victim[,] and the cause of that damage is something outside that person's agency" (xi). She further clarifies that victims are injured "through no fault of . . . [their] own, by an external force or the wrongful act of another" (19). For the purposes of this dissertation, I define *victim* as a person who has suffered, been hurt, or even killed as a result of another's harmful actions that are either accidentally or maliciously intended; victims are injured by forces out of their control. The word does not, to my mind, suggest any sort of "weakness," "guilt," or "blame" ("Victim or Survivor"). By *survivor*, I mean anyone who has been a victim of a crime or other life-threatening, harrowing experience and has endured despite great suffering. As a term, I do not consider *survivor* superior to *victim*. However, I acknowledge that there are some who do not accept the term *victim* and prefer *survivor* in its place because it can seem more empowering or imply healing and resilience.⁹ On the other hand, there are some who prefer the term *victim* because it carries an implicit acknowledgement that some external force, factor, or agent has inflicted injury and harm to the extent that it has caused victimization and can be pursued within a criminal justice setting. In courts of law, victims have specific rights, benefits, and protections *qua* victims, which they do not necessarily have

⁹ See "Victim or Survivor: Terminology from Investigation Through Prosecution."

as *survivors*.¹⁰ That said, I always prioritize self-definition and the author's preference, if stated. I recognize that there is no objective experience of victimhood and survival, by which I mean that not all victims and survivors will have the same experience, even if elements of the crime are shared.

As for the term *rape*, the French penal code designates the crime as: "Tout acte de pénétration sexuelle, de quelque nature qu'il soit, ou tout acte bucco-génital commis sur la personne d'autrui ou sur la personne de l'auteur par violence, contrainte, menace ou surprise est un viol" ("Code pénal, Article 222-23"). I define *rape* as a criminal act, a non-consensual sexual invasion, an assault on the body, and an event that produces a victim. It is, moreover, both a forced penetration of the body as well as a psychological injury, an embodied experience of violation.

Much of my understanding of rape comes from Ann J. Cahill's *Rethinking Rape* (2001). She writes, "Every experience of rape is unique, but each is bodily" (Cahill 9). I further agree with Cahill's assertions that "rape need not involve the penetration of the vagina (it can happen through other orifices), nor need it involve the use of the penis (other objects, bodily and otherwise, can perform the penetration)" (11). Furthermore, I join Cahill in rejecting arguments that do not "account for the particularly sexual aspects of rape or reduce rape to a subset of assault" (184). I do not agree that rape is merely assault, or "only violence, not sex," as some have argued (e.g., Susan Brownmiller; Michel Foucault).¹¹ While this position is a stance that many feminists took in the 1970s for valid reasons,¹²

¹⁰ See "Rights of Crime Victims to Have Access to Justice—A Comparative Analysis, Country Report France 2017."

¹¹ See Mithu Sanyal for an explanation of the views of Brownmiller and Foucault (28). "Foucault and Brownmiller had talked about entirely different aspects of the complex tangle that is rape. While he—from the point of view of the (presumed male) perpetrator—tried to minimize the power of the discourse about sexuality as an instrument of social and political control, she—and with her the second wave of feminism—wanted to exculpate (presumed female) victims from any guilt for the crime against them. Moreover, the aim of Brownmiller's redefinition [i.e., that rape is violence not sex] was to make it easier for women to talk about having been raped without being sexualized in the process" (29).

¹² See Cahill's chapters "Feminist Theories of Rape: Sex or Violence?" and "Rape as Embodied Experience" in *Rethinking Rape*.

and although I agree that rape is indeed *not* sex, I follow Cahill in arguing that “the particular violence of rape is sexual, and that the sexuality inherent in it is violent” (9). It is, in other words, a “sexual and sexed assault on the personal, subjective, and bodily integrity of the victim” and a “denial and destruction of a person’s sexually specific intersubjective being” (194). It is an attack that “eclipse[s] the victim’s agency in a particularly sexual manner” and engenders harms that negatively impact one’s quality of life (132). These harms include (but are not limited to) destroying one’s sense of safety, “increasing fear, limiting mobility, tainting the meaning of touch, [and] imposing mental and physical damage” (196).

I therefore disagree (as Cahill does) with Michel Foucault who argued in 1977 (during a roundtable discussion about his work) that “when one punishes rape one should be punishing physical violence and nothing but that” and that “there is no difference in principle between sticking one’s fist into someone’s face or one’s penis into their sex” (qtd. in Cahill 144).¹³ I understand that Foucault was concerned about institutions policing sexuality; however, this assessment fails to consider the psychic damage that rape specifically engenders. Cahill writes, “few women would agree that being raped is essentially equivalent to being hit in the face or otherwise physically assaulted” (3). She continues, “To penetrate the body of an unwilling other is by definition a more invasive, more destructive act than any that stops at the surface of the body,” as a blow to one’s face does (11).¹⁴ Cahill further explains, “Rape cannot be defined or understood as . . . mere assault,” arguing instead that “it is a sexually specific act that destroys (if only temporarily) the inter subjective, embodied agency and therefore

¹³ Cahill explains, “Foucault’s comments were made during a 1977 roundtable discussion concerning, among other matters, his work in *Discipline and Punish* . . . and were inspired by questions posed to him by a French commission concerned with the reform of the penal code” (Cahill, “Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body” (2000).

¹⁴ Of course, as Cahill writes, “This in no way diminishes the horrific ramifications of . . . sexual assaults” that do not involve penetration (e.g., molestation) (11). Rape via penetration though is, for Cahill, the more harmful version of sexual violence.

personhood of a woman” (13). Defining rape only as an attack, without taking into account its sexual specificity, “veil[s] aspects of the crime which impinge directly on women’s experience and bodies” (Cahill, “Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body” 46), assertions that I support.

Furthermore, although the French penal code states otherwise, rape can indeed occur in the absence of overt force, violence, constraint, or threat. In fact, as I will show extensively in my third chapter, rape often comes in insidious and subtle forms where consent is either coerced or not given (i.e., absence of consent and/or coercion indeed constitute rape). Lastly, I frequently substitute *rape* for the term *sexual assault*. I recognize that *rape* is the most specific term in that it signifies a particular criminal act (i.e., non-consensual sexual penetration), whereas *sexual assault* can be understood in a broader sense, encompassing any kind of unwanted, non-consensual sexual encounter, including rape.¹⁵ Therefore, because *rape* counts as a type of *sexual assault*, I use both terms almost equally, providing further specificity when needed. Finally, related to both of these terms, and one that I frequently use, is *sexual violence*, which refers to any non-consensual sexual acts, including those in which a person cannot consent due to age, disability, or intoxication.

By *consent*, I mean the process by which individuals agree to engage in sexual activity. Furthermore, for consent to be considered valid, the participants must have, to borrow Leigh Gilmore’s words, “an equivalent understanding of the consequences of sex” (*The #MeToo Effect* 159). Age must therefore be factored into *consent* in the sense that the parties involved must have the legal and mental capacity to tender that consent. This aspect of *consent* becomes particularly significant when I discuss Vanessa Springora’s *Le Consentement* (2020) in which the author highlights how children can be “coerced into sex” but can never grant consent, for they do not actually understand to what they

¹⁵ In addition to rape and attempted rape, sexual assault can encompass, for example, molestation, inappropriate touching, incest, voyeurism, indecent exposure, and sexual harassment.

are agreeing (Gilmore 159).¹⁶ Further, as Gina Messina-Dysert insightfully writes, “[I]t must be recognized that in order to consent, one cannot be coerced, threatened, or be under the influence of any substance,” and moreover, “submission or non-resistance do not equate to consent” (63). This idea will figure prominently in my discussion when I analyze Loulou Robert’s *Zone grise* (2020), a text in which the author shows that non-resistance or passive submissiveness are often falsely understood as consent.

The term *trauma* is generally unavoidable when speaking about rape, for it appears in most primary and theoretical sources that address the subject. While the vast history of trauma¹⁷ is outside the scope of this dissertation, I offer here some clarifications on the term and justify my use of it. In its original Greek meaning, *trauma* signifies “wound,” referring to bodily harm, and the term is still applied today in medical settings to designate physical injuries. However, in the late nineteenth century, the term also came to describe psychological injuries. As Cathy Caruth writes in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), “In its later usage, particularly in medical and psychological literature, and most centrally in Freud’s text [*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*], the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind” (3).¹⁸ While I acknowledge that trauma

¹⁶ Of note, France did not have an official age of consent until 2021. Regarding the passing of the law: for many years prior to 2021, activists had stressed the need for an age-of-consent law in France, especially since 2018 when two high-profile cases involving 11-year-old girls did not result in rape charges for either male defendant (McKirdy, “France”). However, it was not until the publication of Springora’s account in 2020, along with the national outcry triggered by the release of Camille Kouchner’s *La Famille Grande* in 2021 (a text in which she accuses her stepfather Olivier Duhamel, professor at Sciences Po, of sexually abusing her twin brother while an adolescent), that the general public began to demand legislative change.

¹⁷ For the history of trauma as a field of study and diagnosis, see Judith Herman; see also Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandell’s *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Trauma Theory, Research, and Practice* (2020); Ruth Ley’s *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000); and Allan Young’s *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1995).

¹⁸ Note that it was Pierre Janet, influenced by the work of Jean-Martin Charcot, who first introduced the concept of psychological trauma. See van der Kolk: “In 1889 . . . Janet published the first book-length scientific account of traumatic stress: *L’automatisme psychologique*” (180). Van der Kolk also explains that

can have both human and non-human (i.e., natural) causes, in this dissertation, I refer only to trauma caused by humans and inflicted on other humans—female rape victims, in this case. My understanding and use of the term *trauma* is most influenced by definitions and explanations provided in the fifth edition of the American Psychiatric Association’s (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V)*, Jerrold R. Brandell’s chapter in *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Trauma Theory, Research, and Practice* (2020), Burness E. Moore and Bernard D. Fine’s *Psychoanalytic Terms and Concepts* (1990), Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992), and Bessel van der Kolk’s *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014), all of which I cite and discuss (below).

The *DSM-V* defines trauma as “[e]xposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence,” either as victim or witness (APA 143). Brandell explains trauma as “an enduring adverse response to an event” (68). Moore and Fine explain the term as, “the disruption or breakdown that occurs when the psychic apparatus is suddenly presented with stimuli . . . that are too powerful to be dealt with or assimilated in the usual way” (199). From this, they write, “[a] state of helplessness results, ranging from total apathy and withdrawal to an emotional storm accompanied by disorganized behavior bordering on panic” (199). Similarly, Herman describes trauma as “an affliction of the powerless” in which the victim is “rendered helpless by overwhelming force” (33). Trauma, she further clarifies, “involve[s] threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death” (33). It moreover “confronts human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke[s] the responses of catastrophe” (33). These events, therefore, “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning,” Herman explains (33). Following exposure to a traumatic event, symptoms such as, for example, flashbacks, amnesia,

“[i]n 1893, Freud and his Viennese mentor, Josef Breuer, cited both Charcot and Janet” in a text addressing traumatic memory (183).

intrusive thoughts/memories, insomnia, hypervigilance, and dissociation can occur, and may lead to a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) (33-35).¹⁹ Finally, van der Kolk adds to these understandings, arguing that “trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, body, and brain,” which “has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present” (21). Not only can trauma radically “reorganiz[e] . . . the way mind and brain manage perceptions” (21), he argues, but it can also become “encoded” in the body, down to its viscera (88). Trauma “changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think,” he argues (21).

With these clarifications in mind, I understand and use the term *trauma* to signify a psychological and physical wound—pain and suffering recorded by mind and body. It is, furthermore, a reaction to an event that exposed an individual to severe (even life-threatening) danger, which is, in this case, rape. Trauma, such as sexual assault, can disturb a life to the extent that one can feel both defenseless and helpless, yielding a wide range of negative emotional, psychological, and physical impacts. Its effects remain within the material body, posing serious repercussions for survivors. I realize that there is no singular experience of and response to trauma and, by extension, that there is no universal (or “normal”) response to the traumatic event of rape specifically. As I show throughout this project, the trauma of rape is experienced by individuals who react to the event *qua* individuals and thus in distinct ways. I also acknowledge that not all victims who live through trauma will experience PTSD.

I further recognize that, to some extent, the term *trauma* has become popularized and perhaps overused within recent years, especially as van der Kolk’s work has become a mainstream bestseller

¹⁹ The diagnosis of PTSD appeared for the first time in the third edition of the APA’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-III)* in 1980. Herman explains that after the Vietnam War, veterans displayed a wide range of symptoms of trauma, which led veterans, advocates, medical, and mental health professionals to advocate for the recognition of this condition and the development of a diagnostic criteria (25-28). See also Ringel and Brandell (9).

and as social media platforms (e.g., X/Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok) have become increasingly more prominent as forums to connect and share experiences. For example, in her article “How Trauma Became the Word of the Decade,” Lexi Pandell writes that as of 2022 on a certain social media platform “#Trauma ha[d] 6.2 billion” views (“How Trauma”). She further explains,

Over the past 18 years, Google searches for “trauma” have steadily risen, peaking in 2021. Books have caught onto that trend, too, with a boom in references to trauma since the 1980s. Many invoked the word after the Trump election, during the height of the Me Too movement in 2017, and in connection with the long history of killings of Black people by police, along with other major world events. (“How Trauma”)

Citing clinicians and scholars, Pandell argues that the term is becoming “watered down” due to overuse. While I agree with her findings that the term *trauma* and its various iterations (e.g., #Trauma, traumatized, traumatic) are currently used to describe a wide range of events and are often misused or misapplied, the term is appropriate for the events and situations I describe and analyze in this dissertation, especially considering that the *DSM*’s definition explicitly includes sexual violence.

Moreover, I employ *trauma* as a key term because it appears frequently in the works I examine, further justifying my use. The term features most conspicuously in the title of Hélène Duffau’s work, *Trauma* (2003), which I discuss in my second chapter. Furthermore, trauma as well as the diagnosis of PTSD figure notably in the non-fictional works I examine: For example, Loulou Robert writes, “Le traumatisme se répand en moi” (80); Giulia Foïs speaks at length about “[c]ette mémoire traumatique” (122); Adélaïde Bon discusses both her diagnosis of “un état de stress post-traumatique” as well as her experiences of “mémoire traumatique” (137); and Virginie Despentès calls rape, “ce trauma crucial, fondamental” (43). In short, I apply the term in its proper context and especially when the author uses it.

I use the terms *woman* and *female* interchangeably and, to be clear, my definition of *woman* and *female* thereby considers all who identify as such, including transgender women. I focus on female victims since they are at disproportionate risk of sexual violence and harassment, as the World Health Organization (2024), the United Nations (2023), and researchers have determined that 1 in 3 women globally have been subjected to sexual violence.²⁰ In France alone, “it is estimated that one woman is raped every seven minutes” (Jordan 181). Moreover, even though my project focuses on rape victims who identify as female, I acknowledge that others including, for example, males, male-identifying individuals, queer, and non-binary individuals, are also victims of rape. Further, I clarify that while my project focuses on females victimized by males, I recognize that females can also be sexual abusers and that the vast majority of males are not.

Finally, I use the expression *French imaginary* in my title to signify a collection of circulating cultural images, ideas, tropes, clichés, histories, and fantasies that exist around a certain concept which is, in this case, the female rape victim. By *aesthetics*, I mean all stylistic devices, creative choices, and artistic techniques that work together to create a certain effect, mood, impact, and experience (e.g., in literary texts: the use of language, narration, and elements such as polyphony, alliteration, and irony; in cinematic works: the use of editing, cinematography, and direction).

A guiding framework for my dissertation is provided by the field of victimology. A term first coined in the mid 1940s by Romanian-born Israeli lawyer Benjamin Mendelsohn, victimology describes the scientific study of crime victims. A subfield of criminology, victimology examines the causes, conditions, and consequences of victimization, making it particularly pertinent to the concerns of this dissertation. Furthermore, the science of victimology studies not only the ways in which the

²⁰ See “Violence Against Women” (World Health Organization) and “Facts and Figures: Ending Violence Against Women” (United Nations Women). See also “Sexual Violence Against Women Remains Problematic and Highly Prevalent Around the World,” by L. Li, X. Shen, G. Zeng, et al.

criminal justice system handles victims but also how society and culture in general (including the media) interact with and represent victims. On the origins of this field, Carolyn J. Dean explains, “It is perhaps not a coincidence that it was a Jewish refugee from Romanian anti-Semitism who, in the immediate aftermath of the Holocaust,” endeavored to investigate the victim “as a complicated social and psychological figure with specific propensities and sufferings not always acknowledged” (33).²¹ Mendelsohn was, according to Dean, “the first scholar to study victims as complex cultural constructions at a time when scholarship focused only on the criminals, by whose acts victims were created” (33).

In an attempt to theorize victimization, early victimologists, such as Mendelsohn and Hans von Hentig, sought to interrogate common characteristics that define victims and victimhood by creating typologies that not only classified victims but also offered rationales for why they came to be victims in the first place. These typologies, especially that of Mendelsohn which is based on the question of the victim’s guilt or involvement in their own victimization, have perhaps created or (at the very least) reinforced many of the stereotypes that various forms of media have proliferated about victims. As Helen Eigenberg and Tammy Garland explain, “Mendelsohn argued [that] the goal of victimology” was to ascertain how to “produce fewer victims, thereby introducing the concept of victim prevention” (23). However, Eigenberg and Garland note that “his views . . . also allowed for determining culpability of the victim,” thus encouraging the idea of “victim precipitation,” a term that signifies how a victim bears responsibility for or causes their victimization due to (for example) provocation or negligence (21-35). “Most research in the field of victimology until the mid 1970s,” Dean explains, “emphasized how victims contributed to crimes perpetrated against them, and . . . focused largely on women and rape” (33). It was only later (i.e., early 1980s) that victimologists began

²¹ See Jan Yager’s *Essentials of Victimology: Crime Victims, Theories, Controversies, and Victims’ Rights* (2021).

to abandon this kind of victim-blaming framework in favor of examining how to better empower and assist crime victims emotionally, psychologically, and physically (33).

Other important research in the field of victimology that informs this study is Nils Christie's conception of "the ideal victim," first developed in 1986. Christie was especially interested in what makes individuals and groups deny victimhood or, in other words, how some individuals can be "successfully distanced, dehumanized, and constructed as 'non-victims'" (David Scott xiv), which speaks both to victim blaming as well as which victims deserve attention and compassion.²² Christie argues that an ideal victim is one who embodies certain attributes that make others more likely and more willing to sympathize with and support them.

"By 'ideal victim,'" Christie writes, "I have . . . in mind a person or a category of individuals who—when hit by crime—most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim" (12). He identified at least five characteristics that constitute the ideal victim:

- (1) The victim is weak. Sick, old or very young people are particularly well suited as ideal victims.
- (2) The victim was carrying out a respectable project [...].
- (3) She was where she could not possibly be blamed for being—in the street during the daytime [per his example].
- (4) The offender was big and bad.
- (5) The offender was unknown and in no personal relationship to her.

In short, the ideal victim is innocent, in the sense that she is perceived as completely blameless and thus bears no responsibility for her victimization. She is obviously vulnerable, making her susceptible to victimization. She conforms to socially acceptable ways of behaving and working (i.e., carries out a

²² Of note, Scott argues that Christie's interest in victims stemmed from his research on the Holocaust: "For his masters' thesis, he investigated the attitudes of Norwegian guards who had worked at Nazi camps holding Yugoslavian partisans in Norway during the Second World War. [...] Christie found that those guards who had treated prisoners worst had been able to deny their captives' common humanity (xiv)." He "noted that the prisoners had been successfully distanced, dehumanized, and constructed as 'non-victims' by the guards" (xiv).

respectable project). She does not frequent “bad” locations at inappropriate times of day. And the offender is an overtly malicious stranger. Christie also writes that an ideal victim “put[s] *a reasonable energy into protecting herself* (and in rare cases himself) against becoming a victim” (13). These ideal victims attain the status of “real victims” (14).

Of note, although Christie does not explicitly comment on race and socioeconomic status when explaining his theories, current research shows that white women are seen as prototypical, ideal victims and thus more likely to be believed (if they come forward) than women of color.²³ Furthermore, women of low-socioeconomic status are, statistically speaking, more likely to be victims of abuse and yet routinely viewed as “less harmed” by sexual violence than affluent women.²⁴

In essence, the ideal victim is a convenient fiction. Christie explains, “As already hinted at, ideal victims do not necessarily have much to do with . . . *real victims*” (19). Rather, he states, “real victims are . . . the negation of those who are most frequently represented” as ideal (19). His work is notable in that he spotlights how socio-cultural perceptions frequently influence who receives recognition, empathy, support, and acceptance after victimization, and he highlights how those who do not fit this schema may be received with disbelief and blame, leading to further marginalization.

While I do not attempt to assume the role of victimologist, I make occasional reference (implicit and explicit) throughout this project to these key concepts (and others, if appropriate) that have been theorized and investigated by this social science. I occasionally cite victimologists in this study to support my arguments and close readings as they relate to the literature and films studied.

²³ See “Narrow Prototypes and Neglected Victims: Understanding Perceptions of Sexual Harassment,” by J. X. Goh, B. Bandt-Law, N. N. Cheek, S. Sinclair, and C. R. Kaiser (2022).

²⁴ See “People Believe Sexual Harassment and Domestic Violence are Less Harmful for Women in Poverty,” by N. N. Cheek, B. Bandt-Law, and S. Sinclair (2023).

IV. Periodization and Corpus Criteria

Regarding periodization, the majority of the works studied in this dissertation were released at a time that roughly coincides with two watershed moments that sparked significant commentary about sexual violence against women in France: The Dominique Strauss-Kahn case in 2011 and the #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc movements that emerged globally in 2017. I examine works leading up to these events as well as those made directly after.

Arguably the most important recent cultural moment in France that brought questions of sexual violence to the fore occurred in 2011 when former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) was accused of raping West African hotel maid Nafissatou Diallo in New York City. Leigh Gilmore persuasively argues that the DSK case “prefigure[es]” the #MeToo movement and was instrumental in increasing awareness of and public discourse about the urgent problem of violence against women in France (*The #MeToo Effect* 155-156).²⁵ However, the lawsuit against DSK “fell apart,” Gilmore explains, “not because . . . [he] seemed innocent but because his accuser did not seem innocent enough” (*Tainted Witness* 138). A woman of marginalized status (i.e., low-socioeconomic standing), Diallo was not an “ideal victim,” and eventually her legal testimony was discredited (138). Nevertheless, Gilmore clarifies, “The case resounded in France, spotlighting a permissiveness toward sexual harassment, assault, and even rape as sexual freedom” (*The #MeToo Effect* 156). As a result of the case, many women took the occasion to openly announce that they had also experienced rape and abuse, thus foreshadowing the influx of tweets that arrived with #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc (*The #MeToo Effect* 156).²⁶

²⁵ On the DSK case, see Jalil Lespert’s documentary *Room 2086: The Accusation* (2020). See also Gilmore’s chapter on Diallo’s testimony in *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (2017).

²⁶ Author Tristane Banon also accused DSK of rape but could not press charges against him due to the statute of limitations (*The #MeToo Effect*, 156). Additionally, other women, including “immigrants like Diallo” rallied with her, “protest[ing] . . . against the routine sexual harassment” that women encounter in their daily lives (156).

The phrase “Me Too” refers to the movement started in 2006 by African American activist Tarana Burke, who coined this term while working with victims of rape. Burke brought the term to social media (i.e., Myspace) in order to spotlight the prevalence of abuse and systemic sexual violence against women and young girls (Noel xv). When the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker* published articles in October 2017 detailing the “multiple accusations of sexual assault by Hollywood producer Harvey Weinstein,” actress Alyssa Milano went to Twitter, urging women to post “me too” if they had ever been subjected to sexual violence, harassment, and/or assault (she later credited Burke for originating the term) (xvi). The hashtag “MeToo” eventually went viral, quickly sparking over 12 million posts globally (xvi).

In France, #BalanceTonPorc became the French way of expressing #MeToo. #BalanceTonPorc was coined by journalist Sandra Muller who revealed her own experience with harassment and abuse using this hashtag.²⁷ While there was an “outpouring of tweets” and support after Muller put forth the hashtag, the #BalanceTonPorc movement “triggered very ambivalent reactions in France,” as Marie Mercat-Bruns shows (108). Some criticized the movement for what they saw as a focus on individual denunciations rather than systemic change.²⁸ There was concern over public shaming overtaking the role of the justice system and due process (112).²⁹ Some saw these methods as an attack on men,³⁰ while others saw the movement as importing American conservative,

²⁷ Of note, Muller’s accuser, TV producer Eric Brion, whom she named in her tweet, sued Muller for defamation and eventually won. See Mercat-Bruns.

²⁸ See “Rachel Holman’s “More Than 50 Percent of French Believe #MeToo Had No Impact” (2018).

²⁹ For example: At the height of #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc, President Emmanuel Macron warned against “a culture of informers” (qtd. in Mercat-Bruns 109), and journalist Eric Zemmour compared the hashtag #BalanceTonPorc to “the practices of Vichy informers” (112). Alain Finkielkraut argued, “[T]his movement is the end of the presumption of innocence required for defendants at trial” (qtd. in Mercat-Bruns 112).

³⁰ For instance, in January 2018, over 100 French female celebrities (including actress Catherine Deneuve and authors Catherine Millet and Catherine Robbe-Grillet) “published an open letter in the newspaper *Le*

politically correct sensibilities regarding gender dynamics that did not reflect the culture of sexual liberation and progressiveness in France (114). Despite these criticisms, #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc have nevertheless been crucial in broadening the dialogue about the ubiquity of rape and sexual abuse and, as I will show later in chapter three, instrumental in paving the way for further publications by rape victims. As French publisher Caroline Laurent states, “In the #MeToo era, readers want the victims’ stories” (qtd. in Macdonald). And although “[t]he initial response to #MeToo in France was unenthusiastic,” Fleur Macdonald explains, “a wave of books,” many of which I study in this project, has “given fresh momentum to the movement” (“Readers Want”).

I am not suggesting that women did not speak of their experiences of rape and abuse prior to 2011 and 2017; women activists have indeed sought to raise consciousness about the prevalence of sexual violence and abuse by sharing their stories publicly, most notably since the 1970s (Herman 29; Allwood 99). Rather, in agreement with Gilmore,³¹ I highlight that the DSK case paved the way for #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc, and thus I have chosen to examine works made in France around this time. The period studied therefore is roughly between 2000 and the present.³²

Concerning my criteria for selecting specific works to examine, I have limited my discussion to narratives appearing in film, long-form fiction, and memoir. Although female rape victims have appeared in other artistic formats such as painting and poetry, I am especially interested in narratives that describe the arc of a victim’s experience; and cinema, long-form fiction, and memoir generally

Monde, harshly criticizing the ‘denunciation campaign’ against men” (Mercat-Bruns 113). They denounced #BalanceTonPorc: “We defend the freedom to be bothered, essential to sexual freedom, trying to pick up someone with insistence is not a crime or a misdemeanor, gallantry is not a chauvinistic assault” (qtd. in Mercat-Bruns 113). See Elena Barton’s “Why the French are Balking at the #MeToo Movement” (2018).

³¹ See *The #MeToo Effect* (155-156).

³² The one exception is the novel version of *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentes, which was published in 1993. However, I discuss the work in tandem with the film version of the book, made in 2000.

rely on narrative for their force. The contemporary works that I examine offer, in their own unique ways, nuanced and multi-dimensional stories of female rape victims, which is a relatively rare phenomenon. As Susan J. Brison explains in her work *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002),

We are not taught to empathize with victims. In crime novels and detective films, it is the villain, or the one who solves the murder mystery, who attracts our attention; the victim, a merely passive pretext for our entertainment, is conveniently disposed of—and forgotten—early on. We identify with the agents’ strength and skill, for good or evil, and join the victim, if at all, only in our nightmares. (10)

Instead of privileging the perpetrator—a common occurrence in news sources as well as in many cinematic and literary productions (of past and present)—each of the works I examine “join[s] the victim” (to borrow Brison’s phrasing) by providing robust narratives that revolve specifically around them while offering reflections on topics such as victim-blaming, consent, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I chose these works because each represents what one might think of as a “victim-centered” story, as those who have been wronged and injured are given narrative priority. Moreover, the works distinguish themselves from others in that they do not make use of rape as a device merely to provide motivation or background for a character and then conveniently dispose of that backstory as the narrative progresses, a common occurrence, especially in film.³³ In these selected films and texts, rape is treated with the seriousness and focus that it deserves. It is thoughtfully interrogated rather than trivialized or sensationalized, and the works highlight the various ways in which recovery from such experiences is fraught with difficulties.

³³ For example, see Jill Gutowitz’s “I’m Tired of Male Screenwriters Using Rape as a Convenient Backstory for Women” (2018).

The reader will notice that this dissertation juxtaposes both fiction and non-fiction, as I have two chapters on fictional works and one final chapter on memoirs. I recognize that these formats can achieve different things and have certain limitations. To my mind, fictional accounts are not restricted by the constraints of “reality,” meaning artists are free to create imaginary scenarios and experiment with situations that can provoke audiences to question their perspectives and firmly held beliefs, as in the case of *Elle*. However, fiction does not generally claim to offer privileged, real-life insight into the condition of victimhood, whereas non-fiction can and often does. That said, I recognize that both formats employ aesthetic devices and artistic choices that create a certain effect on the audience. In fact, all of the works studied in this dissertation—the real-life as well as the fabricated—self-consciously call attention to their artifice in some way, using that overt stylization to further the narrative.

To be clear, I read memoirs slightly differently than I read fictional works. Memoir is, in my estimation, a genre of vulnerability in the sense that victims expose themselves to great risk by telling their personal stories under their own names, and moreover, by often communicating the identity of the person(s) who abused them. That said, although I acknowledge that the memoirs examined present authentic, true-life accounts, I understand that they nevertheless represent one person’s point of view and that they are creative works in which the author has made deliberate narrative selections that influence how audiences interpret the work. Writers working in nonfictional formats, such as memoir, navigate between their past point of view and their current perspective; memoirs are, by nature, necessarily subjective accounts that rely on one’s memory. These aspects of memoir are, however, what make it particularly well suited for telling one’s story of rape. If rape represents a fundamental loss of choice in the sense that the victim is denied agency during her attack, personal narrative can offer the survivor a creative outlet in which she can confront and share her past traumatic experience by telling the story in ways that give her a sense of ownership over that experience. In other words,

victims can give their accounts in ways that may empower them. For instance, they can experiment with temporality, beginning the story anywhere they want and lingering on details they wish to emphasize—a liberty not given to them through the format of legal testimony (Gilmore, *The #MeToo Effect* 13).

Of course, I recognize that survivors can also achieve this to some degree through fiction, albeit in different ways. Fiction, if victims choose to use this format, can provide a protective shield in the form of distance as authors may entirely change names, places, and details. However, I give more weight to the words of a writer sharing her lived experience of victimhood (i.e., nonfiction) than I give to authorial experimentations (e.g., *Elle*) by writers and filmmakers who do not openly claim to have any personal experience with rape. Nevertheless, I treat the fictional and the nonfictional artifacts that I examine as works of art that do not present objective truths about victimhood (although, it bears saying, that I do believe that the authors who write the memoirs I analyze are telling the truth of their experience as they remember it).

Of note, and on the subject of personal narrative, there are many who believe that publishing's "current obsession with memoirs about trauma and healing" is creating an "overcrowded marketplace" (Roy, "The Persistence") and, more specifically, that "the genre of victimhood is already so crowded" (qtd. in Febos 5). However, I agree with Melissa Febos who asserts, "The resistance to memoirs about trauma is in many respects a reiteration of the classic role of perpetrator: to deny, discredit, and dismiss victims in order to avoid being implicated or losing power" (16). Although the trauma memoir may be a highly populated genre, I believe that there is always room to acknowledge and listen to one more victim of abuse, and that these personal texts broaden the cultural vocabulary for discussing rape while illustrating the lived, felt experience of the crime.

Regarding the genders of the writers and filmmakers examined in this study, the reader will also notice that most of the works I have selected are created by women while a few are produced by

men. Some might argue that because women have more experience (statistically) with rape, they are better able to render a nuanced portrait of sexual violence than are men. While it is true that rape disproportionately affects women, I do not think this precludes men from offering coherent and dynamic representations of female victimhood. It cannot be determined from the fact that they are men that they know nothing about victimhood; rape indeed affects and happens to men (most frequently before the age of 25).³⁴ Therefore, when examining fictional works about rape, I do not give preference to those created by women over those produced by men.

I further recognize that the racial representation in the works I examine is highly limited. However, I am constrained by what has been published and produced in France within the last 25 years. While the United States has begun to offer a wide variety of victim narratives that concern minorities (e.g., Chanel Miller's memoir *Know My Name* [2019]; Michaela Coel's *I May Destroy You* [2020]), France does not yet offer broad racial representation in victimhood narratives.³⁵ Thus, I acknowledge that although the works I examine are dispelling various victim blaming myths, they still, for the most part, present a certain idealized image of victimhood that is largely upper middle class (aside from *Baise-moi*), young (aside from *Elle*), and white.³⁶ Yet, I am optimistic that representations of victimhood in literature and cinema will expand in France, especially as the conversations about rape and who is disproportionately affected by sexual violence³⁷ grow.

³⁴ See "Intimate Partner Violence, Sexual Violence, and Stalking Among Men" (CDC).

³⁵ Although *Dans l'enfer des tournantes* (2002) by French-Algerian Samira Bellil and *Journal intime d'une féministe (noire)* (2022) by French-Cameroonian Axelle Jah Njiké are two exceptions (the only that I found in terms of memoir), I discovered through my research that the vast majority of memoirs and texts that deal with rape victimhood are either written by, or exclusively represent, white Europeans.

³⁶ The only exception is the character of Manu from *Baise-moi*, who is a French woman of North-African descent.

³⁷ See Jameta Nicole Barlow's "Black Women, The Forgotten Survivors of Sexual Assault" (2020).

One might be curious to know if the phenomenon that I examine in this dissertation is limited to works belonging to so-called High Culture, or if this tendency appears in more mainstream, popular works. The three films I examine, *Irréversible*, *Baise-moi*, and *Elle*, were not “blockbusters” at the time of their release. Rather, they are arthouse, experimental works that seem to have a specific, learned audience in mind. Regarding the texts I study, the works generally appear to be for a smaller, literary audience as they are, like the films, unconventional in their approaches. To my knowledge, the only works that achieved bestseller status are that of Despentès and Springora. The popularity of Despentès’ *King Kong Théorie* (2006), I believe, can be traced to its provocative yet unapologetic writing that speaks to and critiques the condition of contemporary womanhood, anticipating to some degree many of the conversations that would culminate at the height of the #MeToo movement. Regarding Springora’s *Le Consentement* (2020), I suspect her work attained bestseller status not only because her account painstakingly illustrates the effects of childhood abuse, but perhaps because her story cannot be contradicted, as her famous abuser has freely admitted his deeds against her in his own published writings.³⁸ I believe this aspect of irrefutability in her work has contributed to its commercial and social success.

In short, this expansion of victim representation seems limited to intellectual works directed at a sophisticated audience. Popular culture, on the other hand, continues to offer representations of victimhood that rely on and reinforce the clichés that I outlined at the beginning of this introduction (e.g., Coralie Fargeat’s *Revenge* [2017]; Julien Leclercq’s *Sentinelle* [2021]). However, I expect that this might evolve over time, as it has in the United States.

As I have stated, I have noticed the emergence of certain narrative tendencies, such as thematizing a victim’s search for agency, representing the corporeal and psychological impacts of rape, and illustrating unfamiliar responses to rape. These patterns are conspicuous and appear too frequently

³⁸ See Gabriel Matzneff’s *La Prunelle de mes yeux* (1993).

to ignore. Thus, questions arise: Why is this particular type of victim portrayal happening now? Aside from the cultural conditions I have outlined above, are there other contributing factors that motivate this expansion of representation in film and literature?

First, I see third-wave feminism of the 1990s as an important instigator for advancing more diverse and multifaceted kinds of female representation. While third-wave feminists did not have “an entirely different set of issues or solutions to longstanding dilemmas [e.g., violence against women],” R. Claire Snyder elucidates, the third wave nevertheless “foregrounds personal narratives that illustrate an intersectional and multiperspectival version of feminism” (175). Rebecca Walker, a self-proclaimed third-wave feminist (at least, at the time of her writing), expounds, “For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories” (qtd. in Snyder 176).

This lack of complexity extended to media representations of women, of which feminists such as Virginie Despentes took note. In *King Kong Théorie* (2006), Despentes writes of how, in the immediate aftermath of her rape in 1986, she lamented the dearth of literature that spoke to the experience of rape and survival:

Prison, maladie, maltraitances, drogues, abandons, déportations, *tous les traumas ont leur littérature*. Mais ce trauma crucial, fondamental, définition première de la féminité . . . *ce trauma-là n’entraîne pas en littérature*. Aucune femme après être passée par le viol n’avait eu recours aux mots pour en faire un sujet de roman. Rien, ni qui guide, ni qui accompagne. (43)

Despentes points out that, as there was no extant bibliography of rape narratives available to her at the time, she did not see her experience reflected in any piece of literature. What she craved was a text that would share in and perhaps even explain her pain, which impelled her to write her own, *Baise-moi*, in 1993 (43).

Despentes, along with other third-wave feminists of the time, thus emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and validating the experiences of marginalized people (e.g., rape victims). They moreover give voice to the lived experience of womanhood while prioritizing “personal experience” in order “to provide knowledge about how the world operates and to trouble dominant narratives about how things should be” (Snyder 184). While I am speculating to some degree, I consider the beginning of the narrative trend that I discuss in this project to stem from these third-wave concerns.

Another potential causal factor of the tendency I describe is the increase in memoirs that took place in the late 1990s, leading the genre to become one of the most in-demand, highly profitable types of publication (Gilmore, *The Limits* 17). In *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (2001), Gilmore writes, “[T]he memoir has become *the* genre in the . . . period around the turn of the millennium. [...] [It] is now dominated by the young . . . whose private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment” (1). Gilmore calls this era (which has arguably persisted into the present), “‘a culture of confession’ and a culture of testimony” (2). This influx of memoirs was made possible, Gilmore explains, “by social and political movements of the last thirty years” in which “a broader range of people” were able to publish their stories (16). Marginalized people, such as “women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence,” including rape victims, “have contributed to the expansion of self-representation by illuminating suppressed histories and creating new emphases” (16). The increase in memoirs is also related to the rise of the media confessional as well as other forms of “real life” media that put forth “a naturalized speaker who is simply telling his or her story” (Gilmore references *The Oprah Winfrey Show* as an example) (17). This wave of memoirs was not limited to the U.S. In France during this same period, writers such as Christine Angot and Annie Ernaux published numerous personal narratives (e.g., Angot’s *Inceste* [1999] and Ernaux’s *L’Événement* [2000]), exposing traumatic aspects of their private lives. As Kathryn Robson explains, women at the end of the twentieth century in France had increasingly “begun to write explicitly about

their sexual fantasies and desires, as well as about various forms of violence” (e.g., rape) (431). From my research, it is apparent that this “culture of confession” has only increased with time, especially with the advent of social media which has further fostered interest in stories of victimhood.

As suggested, another contributing factor motivating the narrative tendency I describe is the rise of social media and journalism that continues to amplify the voices of those who experience various forms of interpersonal violence. In particular, there has been a push toward identity-based inclusivity, focusing on the experiences of marginalized groups with an eye toward addressing systemic oppression and routine victimization. For this, social media has been especially significant in creating a global network in which anyone, anywhere, can share their perspective and, in turn, see their experience reflected back to them in a matter of minutes. Platforms such as X/Twitter and Instagram allow individuals to bypass traditional, gatekeeping media outlets—which have historically underrepresented and even misrepresented the marginalized (including rape victims)—and share the intricacies of their lived experiences.

As I have indicated, #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc were especially influential in promoting stories by and about individuals experiencing sexual harassment and assault. As Gilmore writes, “Millions of #MeToo tweets created a global jurisdiction of survivors, confounding the categories through which sexual violence has been organized for the purposes of minimizing knowledge about its ubiquity and harm” (*Tainted Witness* ix). These outlets enable individuals and groups to raise awareness about the harms of sexual violence (and other injustices) while calling attention to and dismantling the misconceptions about rape that the media and other institutions (e.g., the government) continue to proliferate. The works studied in this dissertation therefore present narratives that align with this identarian turn which has allowed victims to appear more prominently than ever before in social settings and cultural artifacts.

V. Primary Critical Resources

In each chapter of this dissertation, I offer an extensive overview of the extant scholarship devoted to the works studied in that chapter. I also generally present an overview of the critical writings that informed the topic of each chapter. There are, however, certain texts that were most influential to the overall development and writing of this study, which I list here.

On the topic of rape, I am most indebted to Cahill's *Rethinking Rape* (2001), as her work lays out a framework for understanding and defining rape while addressing the complexities and specific harms of the crime (i.e., the various ways that rape degrades and dehumanizes the victim). Likewise, Michelle Bowdler's *Is Rape a Crime?: A Memoir, an Investigation, and a Manifesto* (2020), which confronts societal perceptions of and responses to rape, has been invaluable in that it broadened my understanding about the general lack of sensitivity that victims routinely face from the media and other institutions (e.g., the criminal justice and health-care systems). This dissertation was further informed by Mithu Sanyal's *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (2019) in which the author offers a comprehensive overview and analysis of the historical, cultural, and societal attitudes toward rape and rape victims. I furthermore assert that this work could not have been written without Susan J. Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (2002), a work in which the author outlines how the self responds to traumatic events while imparting rich reflection on the process of survival and recovery after rape. Georges Vigarello's *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century* (2001) is another vital resource that presents the various ways in which rape has been understood and dealt with—both legally and societally—in France since the Renaissance. Likewise, Joanna Bourke's *Rape: Sex, Violence, History* (2007) has been an invaluable text that supported my research by offering a substantial overview of the history of rape, as well as an extensive analysis of longstanding victim-blaming myths. Additionally, Gisèle Halimi's *Viol: Le Procès d'Aix-en-Provence* (1978) is a critical work that supplies court documents and other resources outlining the precedent-setting legal case in France

(that Halimi herself argued and won) that resulted in France amending its penal code for the first time since 1810, revising its definition of rape to designate it as a crime distinct from other forms of sexual violence that engenders strict penalties (Vigarello 210-211). Gill Allwood's *French Feminisms: Gender and Violence in Contemporary Theory* (1998) provides two helpful chapters on rape in France, "Feminism and Male Violence" and "Gender and Violence." Other significant works that theorize and analyze rape and may be of use to future scholars are: Susan Brownmiller's landmark text, *Against Our Will: Men, Woman, and Rape* (1975), Jody Raphael's *Rape is Rape: How Denial, Distortion, and Victim Blaming are Fueling a Hidden Acquaintance Rape Crisis* (2013), Kathryn Robson's "The Subject of Rape: Feminist Discourses on Rape and Violability in Contemporary France" (2015), Kate Harding's *Asking For It: The Alarming Rise of Rape Culture and What We Can Do About It* (2015), Linda Martín Alcoff's *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (2018), Germaine Greer's *On Rape* (2018), and Véronique Le Goaziou's *Viol: qui fait la justice?* (2019).

Although the extant literature on trauma is vast, there are a few works that have substantially contributed to the development of this dissertation. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (1992) is the text that most shaped my understanding of trauma, offering both the history of the diagnosis of PTSD as well as outlining the ways in which survivors are treated by society and how advocates can better help survivors during the healing journey. As rape is an embodied form of violation, I rely upon several texts that discuss trauma in tandem with the body. These works stress that trauma is not only a psychic wound but also a somatic injury. On this subject, this dissertation was most notably informed by Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score* (2014), Babette Rothschild's *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (2000), Robert Scaer's *The Body Bears the Burden* (2001), Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain's *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* (2006), Peter Levine's *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (2010), and Janina Fisher's *Healing the Fragmented*

Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation (2017). Other noteworthy texts that will be of use to other scholars interested in trauma include Cathy Caruth's *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) and *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Allan Young's *The Harmony of Illusions: Inventing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder* (1995), Ruth Ley's *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000), and Shoshana Ringel and Jerrold R. Brandell's *Trauma: Contemporary Directions in Trauma Theory, Research, and Practice* (2020).

On victimology, *The International Handbook of Victimology* (2010), edited by Shlomo Giora Shoham, Paul Knepper, and Martin Kett, has been most useful. Other works on this topic that were crucial to this study include Nils Christie's "The Ideal Victim" (1986), Trudy Govier's *Victims and Victimhood* (2015), *Controversies in Victimology*, edited by Laura J. Moriarty, and *Rape Myths: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing* (2022), by Sofia Persson and Katie Dhingra. Other important works on victimology include Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman's *L'Empire du traumatisme* (2007), and Carine M. Mardorossian's *Framing the Rape Victim: Gender and Agency Reconsidered* (2014).

Lastly, several texts that examine rape in literature, art, and cinema have proved significant. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver's *Rape and Representation* (1991) and Alison Young's *The Scene of Violence: Cinema, Crime, Affect* (2010) greatly influenced how I approach works that present rape visually and textually. Other notable works on this topic include Laura E. Tanner's *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (1994), Sarah Projansky's *Watching Rape* (2001), Tanya Horeck's *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004), Rennie Yotova's *Écrire le viol* (2007), Kathryn Robson's "Spaces of Violation: Refiguring Rape in Contemporary French Women's Fiction" (2013) and "'An Encounter with Death?': Life After Rape in Contemporary French Women's Writing" (2007), SORCHA Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson's *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation* (2010), Dominique Russell's *Rape in Art Cinema* (2010), and Régine Michelle Jean-Charles's *Conflict Bodies: The Politics of Rape Representation in the Francophone Imaginary* (2014).

VI. Note on Watching and Reading Rape

Although perhaps obvious, it bears explicitly stating that reading and watching works that deal with rape engenders certain issues, notably voyeurism and the role of the bystander (i.e., one who is present at an event yet does not take part/intervene). To some extent, any time rape is represented, especially in visual formats such as cinema, even if intended to outrage the audience, there is a potential for objectifying the victim, trivializing trauma, and eroticizing violence. Works of art that depict rape and trauma indeed risk creating literary and cinematic “rubberneckers”—those who gaze at and essentially eavesdrop on the spectacle out of morbid curiosity. The expressions “trauma porn” and “misery porn” exist and are sometimes used to describe works on the subject of rape. Further, I acknowledge that watching cinematic representations and reading descriptions, to a certain degree, force audiences into the role of the bystander who witnesses and yet is helpless to intervene in any way. The potential ramifications of this include (re)traumatizing some viewers and even desensitizing audiences to violence.

However, I maintain that representing rape and victimhood, provided it is done with sensitivity and care, is vital, for it draws attention to a serious matter that affects women daily and thus concerns the global citizenry. Films and literature are not only forms of entertainment but can be informative in many ways, for they shed light on issues such as the experience of rape and the various forms under which it can appear. As I highlight in chapter three, rape does not always “look like” or conform to popular ideologies about and common imagery of the crime, and because of this, many individuals (e.g., those described in my third chapter) have no idea that what has happened to them is, in fact, a rape. For example, Loulou Robert explains in *Zone grise* (a subject of chapter three) that had she not seen a film in which the abuse depicted mirrored that of her own experience, she may never have understood and interpreted what happened to her as rape. Thus, while Desportes lamented that, in the past, there were no representations that could “guide” or “accompany” her during her time of

need and isolation (*King Kong Théorie* 43), these newer depictions offer viewers (victims and non-victims alike) avenues to discover and discuss the complexity of victimhood and survival. While I acknowledge that some illustrations of rape and victimhood are exploitive and use the crime for spectacle, the works mentioned here, I argue, present a variety of multifaceted victims that do not adhere to conventional tropes. They moreover portray rape (textually and cinematically) in ways that, to my mind, emphasize the brutality and inhumane nature of the crime, drawing attention to the magnitude of suffering and trauma that it causes.

VII. Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, “Violence After Violation: Dismantling the Tropes of the Rape-Revenge Genre,” I examine the ways in which Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi, and Gaspar Noé experiment with a well-established, yet contentious narrative genre known as rape-revenge. To begin the discussion, I offer a definition of the term *revenge*, and I show how it persists as a central theme in works of literature and film. I then narrow my focus, demonstrating how revenge and rape have come to coexist in their own narrative category known as rape-revenge. Although its prototype is European (i.e., Ingmar Bergman’s *Jungfrukällan/The Virgin Spring* [1960]), the genre became especially popular in American cinema during the 1970s and 1980s, and its features are relatively simple and stable: The story generally begins with a rape (or rapes) and ends with an act (or acts) of vengeance, carried out either by the victim herself or an agent (usually male) acting on her behalf (e.g., Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* [1972] and Meir Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave* [1978]). I summarize the history and development of this narrative genre, outlining the particularities of its structure as well as its habitual iconography (e.g., a virginal woman who transforms after rape into a provocative *femme fatale* with a gun) and frequent motifs (e.g., castration). In these films, rape scenes are often extended and graphic, which has led critics and academics alike to classify films of this type as exploitive and offensive. I present an overview of these ethical objections as well as a review of the primary critical sources on

these works, which allows me to lay a foundation for my discussion of more recent French artistic offerings that experiment with this genre.

I analyze Desportes' novel *Baise-moi* (1993), her film of the same name (2000) co-directed with Trinh Thi, and Noé's film *Irréversible* (2002), and I show how these controversial works appropriate an essentially readymade genre only to blatantly reject and reinterpret many of its most established features. I argue that *Baise-moi* (both the film and the novel) and *Irréversible* mobilize a variety of experimental methods and artistic choices (such as reverse narration, innovative camerawork, and explicit imagery) in order to interrupt the conventional patterns that audiences have come to expect and, more importantly, investigate (even refute) societal (mis)understandings regarding rape victimization. *Baise-moi*, both novel and film, notably challenges traditional notions of how rape survivors are expected to act, while *Irréversible* spotlights the loss that rape represents for victims of rape (e.g., loss of choice, loss of peace, and even loss of life). Through close readings, I show how these works emphatically distance themselves from the fantasy of justice that audiences have come to expect from rape-revenge stories, as the attackers are not pursued in *Baise-moi* and as *Irréversible*'s assailant is not held accountable. Whereas rape-revenge works typically put forth the idea that vengeance reestablishes order and a sense of agency to a wronged person, *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* suggest otherwise. While revenge is a response to rape, it can never restore the way things were.

In Chapter Two, "Aberrant Fictions: On Control, Ritual, Risk, and Reclaiming the 'Lust for Life,'"³⁹ I investigate an emerging thematic tendency within French fiction and narrative cinema in which the turbulent psychological process of reclaiming one's autonomy and will to live in the aftermath of rape is meticulously scrutinized and presented as the central matter of narrative importance. I argue for the trend's novelty and significance, demonstrating that works exemplifying

³⁹ This refers to Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life" (1977), a song that appears in two of the works studied in the chapter.

this new tendency present stories in which a victim's reaction to rape is so atypical that it disorients and bewilders not only those in her world, but also the audience that observes her story as it transpires. While I show that there are several recent French works that follow this pattern, I spotlight H       Duffau's 2003 novel *Trauma*, Philippe Djian's 2012 novel "*Ob...*," and Paul Verhoeven's 2016 film *Elle* (the adaptation of Djian's text) as they are most representative and thus ideal case studies.

I explain how the majority of cultural depictions of rape victims have conditioned audiences to anticipate a certain kind of victim that is most frequently portrayed in one of two ways: Either she is a woman who swallows her pain, turns her suffering inward, and resorts to self-harm or suicide; or she is someone who outwardly expresses her rage in the form of explosive violence and revenge directed at her attacker(s). I moreover clarify that these depictions to which audiences have become accustomed generally reinforce the notion that rape is a kind of symbolic death. This image of rape-as-death took hold especially in the 1970s when the crime began to be understood in terms of the psychological anguish, disruption, and trauma that it causes (Robson, "An Encounter," 433; Vigarello 209). Mirroring the legal and social discourses of the era, numerous films and works of literature (from the 1970s-present) rehearse this association between death and rape (presenting it literally or metaphorically), so much so that the theme has consequently become routine, even expected (e.g., Virginie Lou's *  loge de la lumi  re au temps des dinosaures* [1997],   lisa Brune's *La Tournante* [2001], and Marie-Ange Le Boulair's *Le Viol* [2002]).

However, the works by Duffau, Djian, and Verhoeven short-circuit this pattern and instate a new kind of story with a new kind of victim. I show how the protagonists in these works turn to rituals, risk-taking, and even games to forge a path toward recovery and thus regain a sense of autonomy. I argue that in so doing, these depictions of victimhood reject the pervasive cultural propensity that favors associating rape with literal or symbolic death and, instead, exhibit innovative representations of victims who assert their desire to live in the aftermath of rape. I argue that through

formal and aesthetic experimentations (e.g., the use and repetition of pronouns; and the borrowing of song lyrics), Duffau's *Trauma* not only calls attention to the complicated process of survival post rape but also explores the ways in which recovery from this psychological and physical injury (i.e., rape) necessitates the creation of imaginative and experimental remedies (e.g., ritualized cleaning; and the preparing and ingesting of sperm stolen from anonymous sexual encounters). Regarding Djian's "Ob..." and Verhoeven's *Elle*, I demonstrate how these works analyze the search for power and control after rape by spotlighting the unorthodox method (i.e., a ritualized game in which the protagonist Michèle consensually "battles" and engages with her rapist) that allows the victim to strategize a route back to autonomy after an experience of helplessness.

These stories are unconventional and thus have sparked controversy, eliciting strong—often negative—reactions from the public, especially in the case of *Elle*. I do not deny that the survival strategies (e.g., rituals and games) represented in these fictional works may seem strange (at best) or even disturbing. But again, I ask, what is a *usual* response to rape? To my mind, this is precisely the question that the works of Duffau, Djian, and Verhoeven provoke and investigate. These stories, I argue, neither present disquieting reactions to rape for mere shock value nor do they argue for any sort of ideal. Rather, they are compelling in that they contravene the conventional modes of fictionally portraying rape and its aftereffects and offer stories that, to my knowledge, audiences have not previously encountered on the page and on the screen.

Chapter Three, entitled "I Believe the Word You're Looking For is *Rape*: What the Body Remembers in Three Contemporary French Women's Memoirs," examines first-person narratives that address rape, survival, and language (both verbal and corporeal). I explain that rape memoirs have become exceedingly prominent within the last 25 years, especially with the advent of #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc in 2017. In this chapter, I offer an overview of the most recent examples of the genre (i.e., the rape/sexual abuse memoir), I outline the general features of this type of work, and I

reflect on the possible reasons for which so many victims select the specific genre of memoir to talk about their experiences. Although each of these recent texts contemplates and communicates both the immediate experience of rape and its aftermath, I have selected Vanessa Springora's *Le Consentement* (2020), Loulou Robert's *Zone grise* (2020), and Adélaïde Bon's *La Petite fille sur la banquise* (2018) for analysis as they share distinct thematic and aesthetic particularities that have not yet been examined in scholarship and thus demand attention.

I determine that these startling works formulate and respond to the following questions: Can one be raped and not know it at the time of the event? If so, how does the body intervene in order to make its internal wound known? And, finally, how does putting language to this experience foster healing? I investigate how these non-fictional, subversive documents not only broaden readers' awareness and understanding of the ambiguous forms that rape often takes, but they also underscore the grave physical and psychological disruptions rape can impose upon victims, especially if their attack does not adhere to cultural norms about "real rape."⁴⁰

I rely on journalist Giulia Foïs' concept of "le bon viol," which refers to rapes that conform to the dominant, pervasive cultural myths about the crime that circulate within the public imagination (e.g., rape by a monstrous stranger, immediately reported and believed). In accordance with victimologists, Foïs argues that although these kinds of rapes happen, they are the minority. Rape, she argues, comes most frequently (according to verified statistics) in subtle and insidious forms, and most often are perpetrated by trusted individuals. Using Foïs comments to lay a foundation for my readings of the works of Springora, Robert, and Bon, I call attention to how these authors initially avoid calling what they lived through "rape" because the experience mirrors neither conventional understandings of the crime nor the traditional iconography used to depict it (i.e., "le bon viol"). I ultimately show

⁴⁰ See Condry. See also Persson and Dhingra's *Rape Myths: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing* (2022).

how these works highlight the ways in which the word, idea, and even memory of rape can remain entirely out of reach for the victim in the aftermath, sometimes for many years later.

I analyze this lack of language that Springora, Robert, and Bon spotlight, showing how in instances where verbal communication remains inaccessible (for a variety of complex reasons), the raped body itself endeavors to convey its distress and communicate its suffering through somatic (i.e., non-verbal) language. For example, Springora places particular emphasis on the physical manifestations of pain (e.g., systemic inflammation) engendered by her experiences of repeated sexual abuse endured as a 14-year-old girl. On the other hand, Robert's work spotlights the ways in which she "freezes" during her rape, unable to stop the attack, which results in prolonged shame as well as severe corporeal dysregulation (e.g., digestion issues) for years after. A most extreme version of this theme is found in Bon's work in which she describes the devastating, long-term impact of sexual abuse that occurred at the tender age of nine. These effects include amnesia, dissociation, chronic breathlessness and voicelessness, extreme hunger, suicidal ideation, and a complete loss of sensation in her pelvis (to name a few of her symptoms). In these works, the authors employ various artistic techniques (e.g., multiple pronouns to delineate dissociation; and blank space on the page) to aesthetically represent their inner turmoil and insist upon the challenges inherent to finding the words to name their experiences.

I am not suggesting that these memoirs posit the trauma of rape as "unspeakable" but rather I show how they draw attention to a widespread, well-documented phenomenon recognized by victimologists, psychologists, and social scientists as "unacknowledged rape," which refers to experiences that meet the legal definition of rape and yet are not perceived or named as such (likely because they do not conform to the image of "le bon viol"). I thus establish how these works illustrate processes that have remained largely invisible (outside of medical and psychiatric literature), and I

emphasize the ways in which these authors articulate the importance of finding precise language so that they can finally come to terms with their victimization.

Chapter One:

Violence After Violation: Dismantling the Tropes of the Rape-Revenge Genre

“Depuis tant d’années, je tourne en rond dans ma cage, mes rêves sont peuplés de meurtre et de vengeance. Jusqu’au jour où la solution se présente enfin, là, sous mes yeux, comme une évidence: prendre le chasseur à son propre piège, l’enfermer dans un livre.”

—Vanessa Springora, *Le Consentement* (10)

I. Introduction

Justice for victims of rape takes many forms. In the passage above, which makes up the final lines of the prologue from Vanessa Springora’s captivating 2020 memoir, the author shares her dreams of retribution for the sexual abuse committed against her as an adolescent by “le chasseur,” a man she later calls “G” in her text (10).¹ Springora describes herself in animalistic terms, as though she has magically transformed into a captured beast who slowly paces the four corners of her “cage” while she contemplates “murder,” “vengeance,” and her unique, retributive “solution,” which will presumably provide some sense of justice (10). The solution at which she arrives is rather extraordinary: “prendre le chasseur à son propre piège, l’enfermer dans un livre” (10). What Springora proposes here is a kind of literary revenge, a settling of the score in which she imprisons her rapist within the pages of a book. While perhaps curious at first glance, the reader later discovers that, in the past, Springora’s “chasseur” (a famous French author) had not only abused her sexually but also used her likeness within his own literary creations, effectively transforming her into “un personnage de fiction” and trapping her within “un prison de mots” (171). Looking back as an adult, she writes, “Je me surprends maintenant à le [i.e., “G”] haïr de *m’enfermer* dans cette fiction perpétuellement en train

¹ Identified as celebrated writer Gabriel Matzneff.

de s'écrire, livre après livre" (134) (emphasis mine). One remarks here that Springora notably repeats the verb in her revenge plan to describe what was done to her (i.e., "enfermer" [134]). Although her sexual abuse cannot be undone (as she affirms throughout the work), Springora nevertheless discovers a way to reclaim her power and control through a literary version of what is known as "eye-for-an-eye" justice, wherein she inflicts on her abuser that which has been done to her: Using the very weapons used against her—words and books—Springora frees herself from her "cage," flips the narrative on her abuser, and writes her revenge (10).

In this chapter, I examine narratives that (like Springora's) focus specifically on rape and revenge, placing special importance on the depiction of the female victim. I define revenge and briefly explain how it has been (and continues to be) a persistent theme in works of film and literature. I then focus my discussion on the rape-revenge genre itself, outlining the history of this narrative type, its structure, its established and recognizable iconography, its diversity and breadth, as well as the ethical objections that numerous critics and scholars have raised regarding these kinds of stories. After offering an overview of the principle critical writings on rape-revenge narratives, I analyze three contemporary French works: Virginie Despentes' novel *Baise-moi* (1993), her film of the same name co-directed with Coralie Trinh Thi (2000), and Gaspar Noé's film *Irréversible* (2002). Although belonging to this well-established, "tried and true" narrative genre, I demonstrate that these divergent works ultimately reshape and renew the rape-revenge story. Through close readings, I argue how these experimental works dismantle and rearticulate the rape-revenge genre using formal and aesthetic innovations, which ultimately disconcerts audiences and invites a reevaluation of commonly held (mis)conceptions about rape and female victimhood. That is, I show that by reworking many of the genre's central features and tropes, these narratives refute entrenched myths about rape while giving voice to different notions of victimhood.

II. Defining Revenge

In “Can Revenge Be Just or Otherwise Justified?” (1986), Gilead Bar-Elli and David Heyd write that revenge is “a universal pattern of behavior . . . [and] an ineradicable feature of our emotional lives” (68). But what exactly is revenge? As defined by *The Cambridge Dictionary*, revenge signifies “harm done to someone as a punishment for harm that they have done to someone else” (“Revenge, N.,” *Cambridge*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* further clarifies that revenge is “[t]he action of hurting, harming, or otherwise obtaining satisfaction from someone in return for an injury or wrong suffered at his or her hands” and “the desire to repay or obtain satisfaction for an injury or wrong” (“Revenge, N.,” *Oxford*). In both definitions, one remarks the economic, transactional language associated with revenge. Alexander C. Loney writes, revenge is a “reciprocal exchange . . . of harm for harm” (13). It is, Marguerite A. Tassi confirms, “a reckoning, a calling to account for an outstanding balance” (227). From these definitions and explanations, it can be understood that revenge is a type of “payback” that ostensibly brings matters back to even.

In addition to the transactional aspects of vengeance, one also notices from the above the reactive qualities of revenge. Offering clarification, Bar-Elli and Heyd write,

Revenge is an act of hate, an infliction of harm or pain. But it is not just a blind expression of an emotion . . . it is based on reasons, and these relate to the badness of a past action. Revenge is thus reactive in its nature. It is a response to some kind of injury or to an act which is conceived as wrong or unjust. It is always propelled by the offensive act of some other person. And this necessary link between revenge and the past offense endows it with a rational and moral status. [...] Revenge is personal in the same way as resentment. [...] [It] is necessarily emotionally charged. (70-72)

The personal and emotional dimensions of revenge that Bar-Elli and Heyd emphasize are what make it unacceptable from a legal and criminal justice standpoint. Because vengeance is personal—

idiosyncratic in nature—it is therefore neither “governed by rules” nor “universalizable” (77). What I understand Bar-Elli and Heyd to mean is that although revenge is driven by emotion, it is nonetheless logical—a framework I find useful.

The term *punishment* (which appears in *The Cambridge Dictionary* definition) is often associated with revenge, but this relationship demands consideration. Karina Schumann and Michael Ross explain in “The Benefits, Costs, and Paradox of Revenge” (2010) that penalization should be differentiated from revenge: “Whereas revenge is motivated by a yearning to see a transgressor suffer, punishment is motivated by a desire to improve a transgressor’s future behavior. Unlike revenge, punishment need not be preceded by anger” (1194). As Bar-Elli and Heyd affirm, “A neutrally situated third party can punish the wrongdoer but can never take revenge” (72). In other words, penalization, the “institutional expression of moral indignation,” is impersonal and impartial (72). It is ultimately this “suppression of . . . [the] personal features in criminal justice” that “makes it inadequate to the vengeful mind,” Bar-Elli and Heyd clarify (77). The “intention to see the transgressor suffer” is a cornerstone of vengeance (Schumann and Ross 1194). Revenge, therefore, is quite distinct from punishment.

Although the above differentiates between punishment and revenge, it is important to note that the reason these terms are so often associated (as they are in the *Cambridge* definition) is because many early societies adhered to the principle of retaliation—the code of an “eye for an eye” (commonly known as *lex talionis*)—to restore order and deter future criminality (Fish 62).² *Lex talionis* (also called *talion*) was “developed in early Babylonian law and present in Biblical and early Roman law,” positing “that criminals should receive as punishment precisely those injuries and damages they

² A Biblical commandment in Exodus 21:23-27.

had inflicted upon their victims” (“*Talion*”).³ *Talion* remained a pervasive principle that appeared throughout much of human history in a variety of writings, such as religious texts and historical documents.⁴ This longstanding tradition has allowed for the association between the terms to remain, although they are now understood as distinct.

With these various clarifications in mind, I define revenge as an emotionally charged reaction to injustice in which retaliation matches or exceeds the violence of the original offense and from which the victim derives gratification as the perpetrator suffers. Although revenge will never undo the original harm, it is a cathartic effort to restore not only some sense of justice but also the balance of suffering between victim and perpetrator.

III. Revenge as a Genre

Despite the codification of revenge in many early legal codes and sacred texts, public attitudes toward acts of reprisal are nevertheless mixed.⁵ “There is a certain air of paradox in our attitude to revenge,” Bar-Elli and Heyd explain (68). “On the one hand we usually tend to condemn acts of

³ “Legal systems dating back to The Code of Hammurabi in 1790 BCE,” Schumann and Ross explain, “seek to curb unbridled or personal vengeance by prescribing socially acceptable forms of punishment” (1193). *Talion* was intended to prevent people from retaliating on their own for fear that their version of retribution would exceed the original crime (Schumann and Ross 1193).

⁴ The principle is discussed in Hebrew law and the Talmud. It is also referenced in early Islamic law. See Schumann and Ross who further explain that blood feuds in the Middle Ages were both well-documented and even considered “customary, often persisting for generations” (1193).

⁵ See Schumann and Ross (1193-4) and Bar-Elli and Heyd (80). Despite prominence in early legal codes, many societies “consider[ed] revenge to be an irrational act that has no place in any civilized society” (Schumann and Ross 1194). Bar-Elli and Heyd explain, “Plato rejects any form of return of an evil for an evil . . . Spinoza condemns revenge because it brings more hate to the world . . . [and] Hobbes . . . sees no reason in taking revenge” (80). Conversely, Schumann and Ross explain that numerous ancient Greek texts “suggest that many . . . [Greeks] believed that revenge was natural and sanctioned by the gods” (1193-1194). Religious texts harbor conflicting perspectives concerning revenge: “In most of the major world religions,” they note “Revenge is both mandated (e.g., the principle of ‘an eye for an eye’; Exodus 21:23) and forbidden (e.g., ‘[...] If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also’; Matthew 5:39)” (1194). In addition to appearing in Christian thought, the principle exists in Jewish and Islamic law.

revenge and disapprove of the vengeful character; yet, on the other, we consider the very classification of an act as ‘revenge’ to provide not only *a reason* for the action but also a *justifying* ground” (68). There is, in essence, a complex tension between justice and payback, and it is this tension—or ambiguity—that has likely made revenge such a fertile topic for works of art, literature, and film—so much so that it has become its own genre.

Just as the principle of an “eye for an eye” is ancient, narratives of vengeance are as old as storytelling itself, appearing in the earliest epics, legends, fables, and fairy tales. In fact, Springora’s prologue (from which I quoted earlier) recalls the longstanding motif of revenge in these types of stories. Her articulated desire for revenge (i.e., “prendre le chasseur à son propre piège, l’enfermer dans un livre” [10]) arrives just after a curious yet rich meditation on the wisdom of children’s tales (9-10). Referencing the *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* and other fantastical stories, such as *Cinderella*, *Little Red Riding Hood*, and *Snow White*, Springora reminds readers that these fanciful stories are about transformation and, more importantly, justice. She moreover highlights that these tales are known for their brutal endings in which villains get their just rewards as recompense for their abuses toward the (usually child) victim-protagonist. In this way, Springora calls attention to how these ancient folktales frequently conclude with justice in the form of violent reprisal (even murder) pursued outside legal venues.

Revenge has indeed become part of the canon. It is a genre to which great works of world literature, such as Homer’s *The Iliad* (8th Century BCE), Euripides’ *Medea* (431 BCE), Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1599-1601), and Alexandre Dumas’ *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* (1844), belong. Likewise, films (both high- and lowbrow) have heavily relied on the theme of retribution in classics, such as François Truffaut’s *La Mariée était en noir* (1968), Brian De Palma’s *Carrie* (1976), Ridley Scott’s *Thelma & Louise* (1991) and, more recently, Quentin Tarantino’s *Kill Bill* (2003) and David Fincher’s *Gone Girl* (2014).

In these narratives, the structure seems simple: There is an injustice (often traumatic) followed by a retaliation. However, as filmmaker Tony Zhou explains in his video essay “The Ethics of Revenge” (2021), narratives of vengeance have an additional, essential component that is often overlooked. He posits:

I would argue that there’s a third element. Revenge isn’t an instantaneous tit for tat. The hero has to stew for a little bit and then make a choice. Built into the idea of revenge is the possibility that this person could walk away, but they choose not to because of one ideal: justice. [...] Most of us live our lives within the parameters of modern society. If you have a serious grievance, you’re supposed to take it to the police, to the courts, to the newspapers. These institutions are there to civilize us and to keep violence in check. Revenge stories, on the other hand, are about wild justice, about what would happen if we let loose and took matters into our own hands. (00:02:03-00:03:09)

This clarification is helpful not only because it explains the three-part structure of revenge tales—grievance, contemplation/choice (what Zhou calls “stew[ing],” and what I think of as transformation), and retaliation—but also because it touches on the fantasy element intrinsic to this story type. What would happen if the victim of a crime bypassed the civilizing forces already in place (because they know or assume those institutions will fail them) and transformed into an avenger in pursuit of justice? In other words, revenge invites imagination and creativity to the point that the revenge-seeker becomes a kind of “maker of fiction,” engineering their own desired outcome. One can see this idea (i.e., revenge-seeker as creator) encapsulated quite neatly in the example of Springora. The author not only casts herself as a protagonist in her own Grimm-like tale and transforms herself into a caged, primal beast that contemplates a course of action (i.e., “je tourne en rond dans ma cage” [10]), but she makes her tormentor a character in her book. In so doing, she effectively ensnares him and settles the score. Although some works belonging to this genre are cautionary tales that show the damaging

effects of chasing revenge, a large majority embrace these tantalizing fantasy aspects, presenting viewers with a contained world in which the “bad guy” does not get away with his crime, the balance of power is restored, and a sense of closure is attained. The outcome is rewritten.

IV. Rape-Revenge as a Genre

Although revenge narratives are pervasive, there is a specific and enduring sub-category of the genre that I examine in this chapter, which is that of rape-revenge. Prevalent in (but not exclusive to) cinema, the rape-revenge narrative surfaced in the United States as its own distinct category within the second half of the twentieth century. On the timing of its emergence, Carol Clover writes in *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992),

[R]ape—real, threatened or implied—has been a staple of . . . cinema more or less from the beginning. Until the early 1970s, however, rape was typically a side theme. [...] In the 1970s, rape moved to the center stage and the rape-revenge story as a drama complete unto itself came into its own. (In folkloric terms, what had been a motif graduated to a tale-type). (137)

Although, as Clover remarks, rape has been used as a device since the advent of cinema (both American and international),⁶ this specific type of retaliation narrative came to prominence around the time that second-wave feminists were protesting violence against women. Prior to the energetic engagement of the women’s movement of the 1970s, rape had largely been shrouded in stigma and silence. It was understood to be a rare occurrence, as hardly any survivors came forward. However, the public conversation around rape gained ground throughout the 1970s, thanks in part to activists such as Susan Brownmiller,⁷ who vociferously argued on behalf of women to end the silence around rape and show it for what it really is—a violent crime (as opposed to a “misunderstanding” or “a

⁶ Projansky dates the first instance of cinematic rape to 1903, if not earlier (243).

⁷ See *Against Our Will* (1975).

husband's right,"⁸ for example) that happens far more frequently than previously thought. As Clover explains,

[I]t may be the feminist account of rape in the last two decades [i.e., 1970s and 1980s] that has both authorized . . . film[s] like *I Spit on Your Grave* and shaped its politics. The redefinition of rape as an offence on par with murder together with the well-publicized testimonials on the part of terrified and angry victims must be centrally responsible for lodging rape as a crime deserving of the level of punishment on which revenge narratives are predicated. (152-153)

In other words, it is unsurprising that the arrival of rape-revenge films coincides with the moment⁹ that rape becomes reexamined (both legally and socially) and finally seen as a serious offense that not only undermines women's bodily autonomy but also engenders lasting consequences for victims.

⁸ This was once a commonly held understanding. Until the end of the twentieth century (in Western countries such as England and France), "a husband who forced his wife to have sex was not considered to have 'raped' her—even if . . . considerable violence was used. By definition a husband could not rape his wife," historian Joanna Bourke explains (307). Emily J. Sack further clarifies, "For most of . . . history, the law did not consider rape by a husband of his wife a crime. In fact, the phrasing of this statement does not accurately characterize the historical view of marital sexual relations, since at that time, one could not conceive of any sexual act by a husband with his wife as a 'rape.' Though we commonly refer to the 'marital exemption' to rape, historically the law would not consider a husband 'exempt' from prosecution; his behavior simply was not recognized by the law as potentially criminal. [...] [A] specific rationale for the marital rape exemption . . . [was that] . . . [since] a husband and wife were one legal entity, a man could not be charged with raping himself. Further, because a married woman had no autonomous legal existence, she was considered the property of her husband. Rape was conceptualized not as a crime of violence, but as a property crime. Committed against a single woman, it violated the property interest of the woman's father, and the rape of a married woman was a violation of the property rights of her husband. A husband could not legally rape his wife, because he could not be convicted of 'stealing' or causing harm to his own property" (549-550). See also Vigarello's Chapter 10.

⁹ In France, marital rape was recognized as a criminal offence for the first time in 1990 (Leprince, "Devoir conjugal contre viol conjugal"). See also Vigarello (221). Regarding rape in the U.S. at this time: Until the 1970s, it was legal for husbands to rape their wives, and it was not until 1993 that all 50 states eliminated this marital rape exception. In 1978, the first Take Back the Night rally occurred, and the Privacy Protection for Rape Victims Act became law. Protest groups (e.g., Women Against Pornography and Women Against Violence Against Women) condemned films portraying women as helpless victims. Rape crisis centers, hotlines, and other victim supports emerged at this time.

Cinema essentially synchronizes with this urgent topic of the moment by incorporating rape and, more specifically, rape-revenge into its narratives more prominently.¹⁰

Concerning the structure and basic elements of rape-revenge narratives, Alexandra Heller-Nicholas, author of *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011), sees works of this genre as maintaining a two-part structure: “Surely a definition of rape-revenge is simple: a rape-revenge film must immediately feature both a rape (or many rapes, or an attempted rape) and an act of revenge” (3). She continues,

At its most basic level, a rape-revenge film is one whereby a rape that is central to the narrative is punished by an act of vengeance, either by the victim themselves [sic] or by an agent (a lawyer, policeman, or most commonly, a loved one or family member). (3)

Likewise, in *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (2014), Claire Henry states that there is a “standard two-part structure” that “most critics identify (rape followed by revenge)” (4). In accordance with Zhou, however, I prefer to read these works as tripartite: A woman (typically demure and innocent) is brutally raped (Part I). After rehabilitating herself, she enters a (usually brief) period of contemplation, recuperation, even transformation (Part II). Finally, intuiting that the legal and criminal justice system will neither defend her nor hold her perpetrator(s) accountable, she seeks revenge on her own behalf, often castrating or killing her rapist(s) (Part III). There is an alternative, yet equally popular version of this pattern, which involves an agent acting on behalf of the victim: Following the brutal rape (and/or murder) of a woman (Part I), another individual (usually male, such as a partner, father, or friend) eschews police intervention (Part II) and pursues vengeance on behalf of the victim (Part III).¹¹

¹⁰ See Clover’s chapter “Getting Even.”

¹¹ Rape-revenge narratives rarely feature male victims. John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972) is the most frequently cited example of a male-centered rape-revenge film, although Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp Fiction* (1994), Barry Levinson’s *Sleepers* (1996), Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River* (2003), Ana Kokkinos’ *The Book of*

Regarding this second version, some have argued that the victim tends to become deprioritized in the narrative when an agent acts on her behalf, as little attention is paid to her emotional and physical healing. For instance, in *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (2001), Sarah Projansky holds,

In these films, sometimes the revenge is taken by a man who loses his wife or daughter to a rape/murder, and sometimes the revenge is taken by women who have faced rape themselves.

The films in the first category depend on rape to motivate and justify a particularly violent version of masculinity, relegating women to minor “props” in the narrative. (60)

Keeping in mind that rape has historically been conceived of as a crime against a man’s property,¹² it is unsurprising that husbands and fathers seeking vengeance on behalf of their wives and daughters would become a pervasive motif (unsurprising in the sense that men would essentially be defending/avenging themselves because women would be considered an extension of them). Thus, in this version of the rape-revenge tale, men often maintain the focus of the films while the victim, treated as a narrative catalyst, recedes into the background. While there is truth to what Projansky asserts (especially in the cases of films such as *The Virgin Spring* and *The Last House on the Left*), there are other films such as Gaspar Noé’s *Irréversible* (2002) (discussed later in this chapter) in which although the victim is not the agent of her own revenge, she is still arguably the primary focus of the feature and not a mere prop.

Revelation (2006), Jon Hewitt’s *Acolytes* (2008), and Justin Kurzel’s *Snowtown* (2011) are other films that notably feature the themes of male rape and revenge (none of which are French productions). See Claire Henry’s “The Shame of Male *Acolytes*: Negotiating Gender and Sexuality Through Rape-Revenge.”

¹² Kayla Bishop explains, “The Code of Hammurabi, one of the earliest sets of written laws, considered the rape of a virgin as property damage against her father. For a long time, the rape of a woman was considered a property crime against the victim’s husband or father” (“A Reflection on the History of Sexual Assault Laws in the United States”). See also Emily J. Sack (relevant quote cited in Footnote 8). See also Kersti Yllö: “Early rape laws defined the assault as a property crime against the husband or father whose wife or daughter was ‘defiled’” (“Marital Rape in a Global Context: From 17th Century to Today”).

As mentioned, rape-revenge films experienced heightened popularity during the 1970s and 1980s in the United States. Emily Brick explains, “[A]lthough there are examples of prominent rape revenge narratives in European cinema such as Ingmar Bergman’s *Jungfrukällan/The Virgin Spring* (1960) . . . they have not been explicitly linked to a historical moment and feminist movement in the same way as American cinema” (94). Thus, while most scholars consider Bergman’s film to be the loose prototype of this genre, the canon of rape-revenge works is largely American. The most (in)famous examples of the genre are Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971), Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972),¹³ Michael Winner’s *Death Wish* (1974), Lamont Johnson’s *Lipstick* (1976), Meir Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978) (considered the quintessential example of this genre), Abel Ferrara’s *Ms. 45* (1981), and Clint Eastwood’s *Sudden Impact* (1983).¹⁴ When one thinks of classic rape-revenge from which most others stem, it is these American works that define the genre, providing the basic narrative pattern (described earlier) and iconography that viewers have come to recognize. By iconography, I mean the imagery that viewers repeatedly encounter in classic rape-revenge films that includes (but is not limited to) typically white, semi-naked victims.¹⁵ The rape scenes themselves are generally prolonged and graphic in their depiction. Furthermore, the victim is often portrayed post-rape covered in dirt, as though to outwardly signal that she now bears the stain of rape. It is common, moreover, for these films to highlight the woman’s transformation from victim to avenger sartorially: Whereas before the rape she is usually dressed demurely, after the rape she is eroticized and

¹³ *The Last House on the Left* is a loose interpretation of Bergman’s *The Virgin Spring*.

¹⁴ These films are frequently remade for new audiences. Craven’s film was remade in 2009. *Death Wish* spawned five sequels between 1982 and 1994 and was itself remade in 2018. *Straw Dogs* was remade in 2011. Zarchi’s film was remade in 2010, which spawned three more sequels.

¹⁵ Henry confronts the genre’s longstanding neglect of non-white victims, noting that the genre typically excludes women of color and thus “[codes] . . . the sympathetic victim as always and necessarily white” (80). Heller-Nicholas agrees: “[W]hile there are other rape-revenge films that do feature Black survivors . . . they are undeniably rare” (161).

accessorized with provocative clothes, lipstick, guns, knives and other weapons of castration and destruction. Her sexuality, too, often becomes part of her arsenal of assault, and in this way, she can be considered a *femme fatale*—an alluring woman who embodies both desire and death.¹⁶ As I will show, these classic examples (especially *I Spit on Your Grave*) are often directly or indirectly visually referenced in the contemporary French works that I analyze later in this chapter.¹⁷

Despite these recognizable visual and thematic features, scholars and critics alike now acknowledge that the genre is far from homogenous. It is enormously elastic, allowing for much narrative diversity, as Heller-Nicholas shows: “[T]here is no singular or consistent system, method, or approach that unifies every single rape-revenge example” (8). She further insists that the genre is highly “diverse,” “broad,” and “[offers] a multitude of representations of—and reactions to—sexual violence” (8). Likewise, Philip Green argues that rape-revenge “is far from being either stylistically or ideologically monolithic,” and so even if a film belongs to the genre, it may be wildly different in its tone, aesthetic, and “psychopolitics” (qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 5). There are, for example, legal thrillers, horror films, arthouse dramas, and westerns that all fit the rape-revenge generic structure, and yet all can be radically unique in their methods, ideologies, and focuses. Although it is, as Henry notes, “far from a cohesive genre . . . the genre’s diversity, and its frequent hybridity with other genres, does not discount that rape-revenge can be considered a genre in its own right” (3). Thus, to call (or downgrade) it to a subgenre of horror, as many have, is to discredit the breadth and variety within the genre.¹⁸

¹⁶ See Heller-Nicholas’ chapter “The Rape-Revenge Film Canon.” In addition to *I Spit on Your Grave*, this imagery is especially prominent in *Ms .45* and *Lipstick*. See also Creed’s “The Femme Castratrice: *I Spit on Your Grave*, *Sisters*” for a robust discussion of *femme fatale* imagery in rape-revenge movies.

¹⁷ This imagery appears prominently in *Baise-moi*, and the victim in *Irréversible* (while not the avenger of her own assault) is seen bloodied and dirtied.

¹⁸ The genre’s breadth and diversity are the subject of Heller-Nicholas’ work. Henry and Jacinda Read also argue for the genre’s magnitude in their respective works.

Although these films, at their height, were primarily produced in the United States within a certain time (1970s-80s), it is now recognized as a growing international genre. While “[i]t is undeniable that the popularity of North American rape-revenge films during this period had a strong influence on global production,” Heller-Nicholas asserts, “any suggestion that rape-revenge films are specific to the United States in the 1970s . . . neglects a range of intriguing texts” (103). Certainly, there are numerous French examples of this genre made around the same time as films such as *I Spit on Your Grave*, which makes sense considering that France also experienced its own increase in both public awareness and intolerance of rape at this time.¹⁹ French examples include René Clément’s *Le Passager de la pluie* (1970), Roberto Enrico’s *Le Vieux fusil* (1975), Gérard Pirès’ *L’Agression* (1975), Yannick Bellon’s *L’Amour violé* (1978), and Jean Becker’s *L’Été meurtrier* (1983).²⁰ These films, however, are far less violent and gruesome than their American counterparts (although, as I will show later, this is not the case for more contemporary French rape-revenge works made in the 1990s to the present, which are shockingly violent and, overall, more extreme and explicit than their American predecessors).

In this section, I have shown how the rape-revenge narrative becomes its own distinct category within the second half of the twentieth century and how this emergence occurs during an era in which awareness about sexual violence against women is heightened. These films, I have shown, maintain a recognizable narrative structure and a recurring—often controversial—visual lexicon (e.g., girls with guns, extended rape scenes, graphic violence)—elements that later filmmakers such as Desportes, Trinh Thi, and Noé will inherit yet retool, as I will show later.

¹⁹ In 1978, a precedent-setting, four year-long case in Aix-en-Provence “was the first in French legal history in which rape victims succeeded in being heard by the *Cours d’Assises*, the criminal court that judges serious crimes.” Before this, although it was considered “a felony under French law,” rape (if it went to trial at all) was “treated as a misdemeanor” (“France Jails Rapists After Pivotal Case”). See also Gisele Halimi.

²⁰ See Heller-Nicholas’ chapter “The Rape-Revenge Film Around the World.”

V. Ethical Objections and Criticism of Rape-Revenge

As one might expect, films belonging to this genre have been the subject of enormous criticism and public condemnation. Notably, in the early 1980s, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) labeled certain rape-revenge films “video nasties,” which meant that these films contained inappropriate or obscene content that must be edited or removed, according to the BBFC. Many video nasties (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave* and *The Last House on the Left*) were targeted and the film’s producers were “prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law” (Logan Rose, “The Evil Inside”). A large number of these works were eventually banned (e.g., *Straw Dogs*) (Maguire 21-22).²¹ Furthermore, critics and scholars alike have denounced the rape-revenge genre on the grounds that it is inherently misogynistic. As Kristal Cooper asserts, “[T]here’s no denying that rape fetishists might in fact be the main audience seeking out these types of films” (qtd. in Maguire 4). Likewise, Peter Lehman boldly argues in “Don’t Blame This on a Girl’: Female Rape-Revenge Films” (1993) that these works “are a licensed form of violence in which a woman acts out male desires for the erotic satisfaction of a predominantly male mass audience” (114). He contends that these films “are nearly always made by men and for men” (106). Unsurprisingly, a recurring question posed about these films is whether they run the risk of eroticizing images of violence against women, even if women do ultimately triumph over their torturers. More specifically, is the graphic and prolonged description of a female character’s horrific rape inherently misogynistic? Or is it necessary to reveal the brutal inhumanity of the act as well as to justify her subsequent ruthless revenge? According to David Maguire in *Cultographies: I Spit on Your*

²¹ “The Video Recordings Act [of] 1984 made it a requirement for feature films to be classified by the BBFC before release, and edited or banned if deemed appropriate” (“The Video Nasties Controversy”). See also Lindsay Hallam: “In the early 1980s Britain was besieged by a moral panic, with the coming of VHS leading to previously unclassified [i.e., unrated] films flooding the market. That these videos were available unrestricted for all ages was seized upon by press and parliament alike, who saw in them the potential corruption of the young. These films were termed ‘video nasties’, with the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP) creating an ever-changing list of films that were to be charged [i.e., prosecuted] under the Obscene Publications Act” (“Where to Begin With Video Nasties”).

Grave (2018), “[T]he main area of conflict has been generated by those who find it difficult to marry these films’ supposedly anti-patriarchal sentiments [i.e., anti-rape sentiments]” with works that have “traditionally overflowed with gratuitous images of sexually exploited women” (4). In other words, most objections to the genre concern the way the female victim is depicted, which calls into question the ethics of how her rape is filmed and whether these works illustrate the grotesque sexualization of male violence against women, thus eroticizing violence.

It is understandable that these films have been (and continue to be) maligned and viewed as problematic as many do feature offensive material. More specifically, these works are frequently accused of not only being exploitive and excessively violent (often bordering on the pornographic), but also of assuming the rapist’s point of view, which places the spectator in the attacker’s position, thereby glossing over (or entirely ignoring) the victim’s perspective and all that it entails (e.g., experience and psychological state during and after). This is true in many cases (e.g., *The Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*) in which the camerawork allows the audience to gaze at the victim from the perspective of those who attack her. Moreover, in many of these films, the rape sequence is gratuitously long (e.g., in *I Spit on Your Grave*, Jennifer, the protagonist, is gang-raped in a scene that lasts approximately 30 minutes).²² Another objection to the genre is the morality of the revenge act: If retribution replicates the same dynamic—countering violence with violence—then what does this narrative ultimately offer? Some argue that although the moral logic embedded within these films (i.e., that the evildoer must be hunted down and made to suffer) might be thrilling, it provides no real “solutions” to address and end sexual violence (Miller 27).²³ As a result of these and similar allegations,

²² Of note, Linda Ruth Williams writes, “[T]he less seen of . . . [the] rape the better, one might think; but this may have the curious effect of making the revenge less defensible, since less of the rape is evident” (“Less Rape, More Revenge” 70). Moreover, Heller-Nicholas notes that it is possible that “any censoring of the revenge component . . . risks letting the rapists off the hook to some degree” (36).

²³ Miller writes, “These films expose the failings of the justice system, which correlates with Brownmiller’s findings about women’s experiences during the 1970s, but they do not contribute anything to the feminist

many have condemned these kinds of works, classifying them as pure “exploitation films,” which are works generally characterized by a low-budget and/or those that seek to gain financial success through the (mis)use of graphic, violent, titillating, and often explicit content for no other purpose than sensationalism.

How rape-revenge came to be associated with exploitation films is no coincidence. Graphically violent rape-revenge films arrive not merely, as discussed earlier, alongside the women’s movement, but also at the time that pornography goes mainstream with the theatrical success of films like Gerard Damiano’s *Deep Throat* (1972) and Just Jaeckin’s softcore porn films *Emmanuelle* (1974) and *Histoire d’O* (1975) (Maguire 12).²⁴ It is unsurprising then that cinematic works might begin to absorb (or exploit) not only feminist issues currently circulating within public discourses but also traits of newly and more readily accessible (and highly profitable) pornographic works.²⁵ Strengthening this relationship between rape-revenge and exploitation films is the fact that many of these works (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave*) received X ratings and played exclusively in midnight-movie cinemas where only pornography and other exploitation films were screened. Thus, rape-revenge works came to be associated with extreme adult entertainment, even though no hard-core sexual activity is shown (only suggested).²⁶ As

ideal of eliminating rape from society. In order to expose those failings, the films rely on extraordinary women who are able to get revenge through extraordinary means, meaning that they do not offer any real world solutions to rape” (27).

²⁴ *Deep Throat* star Linda Lovelace maintained that she “made the film under duress” (Maguire 12). “Every time somebody watches that movie,” she said, “they’re watching me get raped” (qtd. in Maguire 12).

²⁵ Maguire clarifies: “Depictions of rape and sexual violence had been a mainstay of less reputable cinemas throughout the 1960s in the form of ‘roughies’—films which focused on male brutality towards women, particularly involving kidnapping, bondage, sexual assault and murder. In the 1970s these developed into loops played in porno theaters, short films of ten to fifteen minutes involving hard-core simulated sex with no narrative” (15).

²⁶ Although Zarchi “always insisted that he made *I Spit on Your Grave* with a pro-feminist aim, i.e., to highlight, as he put it, the true degrading horror of rape, the fact that it was marketed as exploitation, playing in drive-ins, grindhouses and the midnight movie circuit, meant that any noble intent was quickly buried” (Maguire 15).

Maguire writes, “[I]t was this association . . . with hard-core pornography, with slasher films and their willfully misogynistic violence, with exploitation films that reveled in torturing and killing women and with the climate of anger on American streets around rape and sexual violence” that encouraged critics to brand films of this genre scandalous, reprehensible, tasteless, and even irresponsible (17).²⁷

However, while there are narrative films of this category that may misuse and even trivialize rape to provide lurid content for select audiences, the rape-revenge genre is too broad for this to be categorically true, as Heller-Nicholas shows throughout her work which seeks to reevaluate these films that have been largely dismissed. “Many of the female centered rape-revenge films . . . are undeniably sensational attempts to profit from the ugly desire to watch sexual violence,” she explains (4). But to disregard these films entirely would be an oversight for, as she explains, “at their most powerful, rape-revenge films can expose and collapse our simplistic assumptions about the ethics of rape and its representation on screen, and remind us that what we are seeing is only a brief glance through a small, controlled window into the true horror of rape and sexual violence” (4). It is, furthermore, false and dismissive to assume that these works are for a primarily male audience (and made by males) as countless women consume, enjoy, and even make rape-revenge films, which Tammy Oler clearly asserts in her 2009 essay “The Brave Ones” (31). Oler, like Heller-Nicholas, argues that despite “the conventional wisdom” that strongly endorses a collective rejection of rape-revenge as “nothing but misogynistic schlock designed to titillate male audiences . . . feminists and film critics alike now grudgingly recognize that the films are doing more complicated cultural work” (31). Clover mirrors this thought, arguing that the genre can be “a premier processing site for the modern debate on sexual violence in life and law,” and that “the fantasy of female revenge . . . brings with it, [and] is indeed predicated on, detailed and sometimes trenchant analysis of quotidian patriarchy” (144, 151). Despite

²⁷ In a particularly scathing review, Roger Ebert referred to *I Spit on Your Grave* as “[a] vile bag of garbage . . . a movie so sick, reprehensible and contemptible . . . a film without a shred of artistic distinction . . . [that] lacks even simple craftsmanship . . . told with moronic simplicity” (“I Spit on Your Grave”).

their flaws and controversies, many of these films do offer complex and uncomfortable commentaries on the brutality of rape and its effect on victims, without glamorizing the crime (or its equally gruesome depiction of revenge).

Regardless of the variety of rape-revenge films produced globally, it is one of the more academically neglected genres, likely because of its association with low-brow exploitation films and pornography. Analysis that does examine it is typically focused on American films of the genre. Approaches to rape-revenge are generally psychoanalytic (relating the works to visual pleasure and viewer identification), or socio-political (linking the works to feminist ideas). Specifically, Clover, Barbara Creed, Jacinda Read, Heller-Nicholas, and Henry are among the few scholars who have seriously dealt with the topic.

In “Getting Even,” a chapter from *Men, Women, and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (1992), Clover examines independent horror films produced in the 1970s and 1980s, arguing that rape-revenge films such as *Ms .45* and *I Spit on Your Grave* “explicitly articulate feminist politics” (151). Clover specifically stresses viewer identification with the victim and spectator engagement: “[B]ecause rape is the most quintessentially feminine of experiences . . . these films are predicated on cross-gender identification of the most extreme corporeal sort” (154). Clover believes that these films demand a high level of imaginary participation in the feminine experience of being raped and tortured: “[T]he only way to account for the spectator’s engagement in the revenge drive,” she asserts “is to assume his engagement with the rape avenging woman” (152). “[A] film like *I Spit on Your Grave*,” she continues, “is literally predicated on the assumption that *all* viewers, male and female alike, will take . . . [the victim’s] part and . . . ‘feel’ her violation” (159). She further clarifies that “the revenge phase of the drama can make no sense” if that identification is not present (159). Thus, for Clover, the viewer identifies with the victim regardless of their gender expression, experiencing both the powerlessness of being raped and the empowerment of seeking revenge (152). While I generally agree with her point

that many rape-revenge films do invite viewers (of all genders and expressions) to identify, at least some of the time, with the raped woman onscreen, her overall argument relies heavily on psychoanalytic theory, which I do not consider a particularly useful framework for approaching rape-revenge; rather, I am more interested in how rape-revenge can provoke audiences to think critically about the intricacies of victimhood by confronting viewers with the reality of the crime, which is not the focus of Clover's work.

In "The Femme Castratrice: *I Spit on Your Grave, Sisters*" from her work *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (1993), Creed relates rape-revenge tales to the myth of the monstrous woman—specifically, the castrating woman. Like Clover, Creed takes a psychoanalytic stance, relying on Freud's theories of castration anxiety. She argues that the monstrous feminine is its own subgenre of horror films that confronts female transgression through the portrayal of women as dangerous *femme fatales* (e.g., castratrices). She argues that the "ideological purpose" of rape-revenge is "to represent woman as monstrous because she castrates" and, furthermore, that "[m]an must be ever on the alert . . . whenever signs of the deadly femme castratrice are present" (130, 138). Within rape-revenge, she argues that woman is blamed for the human condition and is therefore punished—raped in a masculine effort to divest her of her powers (real or imagined) before she can unleash them on men (130-131). Creed views films like *I Spit on Your Grave* as "misogynistic" because the revenge scenes are "deliberately eroticized" (129). "Woman, pleasure and death are intimately related," offering "the spectator the promise of an erotic pleasure associated with the desire for death," Creed argues (129-130). For Creed, these films reflect male anxieties about the threatening, destructive force of women. While I find Creed's points fascinating, I reiterate that I do not find the psychoanalytic framework particularly helpful when examining rape revenge works.

Read's *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity and the Rape-Revenge Cycle* (2000) is considered the first full-length study of rape-revenge and also a response to many of Clover's and Creed's respective

arguments. Rejecting psychoanalytic approaches, Read argues that rape-revenge is neither its own genre nor a sub-genre of horror, as Clover and Creed assert. Rather, for Read, it is a historically-specific cycle as well as a narrative structure that can be mapped across film genres. Although she does not disagree with Clover that viewers masochistically identify with the female victim, Read believes that female avengers are not masculinized in their pursuit of revenge but rather eroticized (35). The notion that vengeance is aligned with the masculine must “[arise] from a more deep-seated conviction that sexiness is inimical to the feminist story” (35). She further asserts that rape-revenge can be understood as “one of the ways in which Hollywood has attempted to make sense of feminism and the changing face of heterosexual femininity in the post-1970 period” (241). Thus, for Read, the cycle is historically specific (10). Moreover, she contends, “That there have been no new articulations of the rape-revenge structure since *Eye for an Eye* [1996] and *A Time to Kill* [1996] would seem to suggest that the cycle has run its course” (235). Essentially, Read maintains that the rape-revenge cycle is confined to one historical moment and has since been exhausted. Like Read, I also reject the psychoanalytic approaches of Clover and Creed. However, I strongly disagree “that there have been no new articulations of the rape-revenge structure” since the late 1990s. In my view, the rape-revenge genre is quite diverse and ever-growing. Moreover, especially since the early 2000s, there have been numerous fresh and experimental iterations of the narrative type, such as those I examine in this chapter, as well as films like Patty Jenkins’ *Monster* (2003), Clint Eastwood’s *Mystic River* (2003), David Slade’s *Hard Candy* (2005), Tom Ford’s *Nocturnal Animals* (2016), Emerald Fennell’s *Promising Young Woman* (2020), and even television shows such as HBO’s *Big Little Lies* (2017-2019) and BBC’s *I May Destroy You* (2020). These examples alone refute Read’s bold assertion.

Heller-Nicholas’ work *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study* (2011) follows Read in moving away from psychoanalytic readings of rape-revenge, but she nonetheless disagrees with Read in other ways. Heller-Nicholas rejects the ideas of Clover and Read that rape-revenge is historically confined to the

era of second-wave feminism (especially the years between 1975 and 1990), a holding with which I agree. She further rejects the assertion that rape-revenge works are limited to a handful of feminist-/postfeminist-era films and dismisses Read's claim that the narrative structure exhausted itself once second-wave feminism peaked. Rape-revenge existed before then and is exceptionally active today, as she shows (155). She further argues that there is a "cultural confusion" about "how to tackle rape-revenge films," which she believes is the result of "the films themselves reflect[ing] . . . broader cultural confusion about rape more generally" (4). In her view, this is why "these films have proven so difficult for critics to lump together," as so many of these works are "united only through their ability to demonstrate that conflicting attitudes toward rape have and continue to co-exist" (4). In essence, Heller-Nicholas argues that films of this genre do not reflect a cohesive ideology about rape, making it difficult for critics to speak about them in terms of a unified genre. Heller-Nicholas ultimately argues that the prevalence of rape and revenge in cinema today invalidates "any suggestion that rape-revenge is historically or generically specific" (155). I strongly agree with Heller-Nicholas and believe that the genre is not as homogeneous as once thought. Although the iconography and structure may be similar within the genre, the ideologies reflected within the individual works can vary greatly from film to film. Where I differ from Heller-Nicholas is that my emphasis is mainly on how the genre reworks misconceptions about victims and common victim-blaming tropes, which is not the focus for Heller-Nicholas.

Building upon Heller-Nicholas' work, Henry's *Revisionist Rape-Revenge: Redefining a Film Genre* (2014) examines the revitalization, diversification, and evolution of recent rape-revenge films that alter and "[challenge] the conventions and ideologies of classic American exploitation films" (169). Like Heller-Nicholas, Henry argues that these films are not historically specific (as Read suggests), since the genre continues to be popular today (169). On the significance of these works, she argues that "contemporary rape-revenge films hold great critical value for opening up questions about various

social, political, and ethical attitudes toward rape, representation, and response” and are “cultural key[s] that can help to reveal and interrogate the meanings of rape and the political, ethical, and affective responses to it” (3, 8). Examining recent films of the genre, she dubs these works (as indicated by her title) “revisionist rape-revenge,” as they display an increasing ambivalence toward the revenge fantasies of earlier films. Yet, unlike Heller-Nicholas who is less invested in theorizing whether rape-revenge is a genre or a pattern (for which Henry criticizes her), Henry is intent on the question of genre, contending that rape-revenge is indeed its own distinct category. The strength of her work, in my view, is that she confronts the genre’s historic racism by examining newer works that feature women of color. “Rape-revenge’s canon formation replicates a racist hierarchy—common in cinema and media discourses, as well as in law,” she argues, “in which the aggravated rape of white women by strangers is considered ‘real’ rape, the type of rape that gains attention, is taken seriously, and is viewed as deserving of punishment” (79). Thus, Henry’s main contribution to the genre is that she widens our collective understanding of the racial implications of rape-revenge films and offers a discussion of underexamined, contemporary works that feature women of color. I find Henry’s work immensely influential as it helped me to formulate my own ideas for this chapter. I strongly agree that the rape-revenge genre has become revised and thus revitalized within the last few decades. However, while my work here extends that of Henry in the sense that I also examine revisions of the genre, she neither focuses on *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible*, nor does she focus specifically on the representation of victims, which is thus how my work distinguishes itself from hers.²⁸

With this past scholarship in mind, I now turn to my own readings of three recent French rape-revenge works. Specifically, I show how Desportes’ novel (1993) and film (2000) *Baise-moi* (co-directed with Trinh Thi) and Noé’s film *Irréversible* (2002) shrewdly appropriate a historically vilified,

²⁸ In Henry’s work, *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* are mentioned but not examined in-depth.

readymade genre well-known for (at times) exploiting rape for spectacle and profit and transform it into a broader vehicle that confronts viewers with the reality of the crime, as well as deeply rooted (and commonly accepted) victim-blaming tropes. In so doing, these works force viewers to break their established patterns of reading rape-revenge works and invite audiences to reflect on the condition of victimhood. In essence, I demonstrate how *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* mobilize their humble (and maligned) heritage as rape-revenge films to disrupt misconceptions about rape and victimization, while simultaneously engaging with ethical questions such as violence as a form of justice.

VI. *Baise-moi*: Refusal of Victimhood

A controversial novel written by Desportes, often called a wild, punk fantasy, *Baise-moi* is based on the real-life gang rape that the author endured alongside her friend in 1986.²⁹ She later adapted *Baise-moi* into a film with Trinh Thi (also a survivor of rape). It begins with dual-narrative focus, telling the story of Nadine, a sex worker, and Manu, an occasional porn performer. The two, both aimless, bored, and without prospects, meet by chance after each experiences extreme violence. In response to claustrophobic living arrangements and her roommate's constant criticism, Nadine strangles her roommate in a sudden outburst of rage. Later, she is shocked to find her closest friend murdered. Manu, on the other hand, experiences trauma when she and her friend Karla are both kidnapped and brutally gang-raped by a group of men (Karla is ultimately murdered by the group). Manu chooses not to seek revenge on their attackers and, instead, murders her brother for harshly shaming her in the aftermath of assault. The respective narratives of Nadine and Manu converge when they meet and subsequently embark on a road trip together to complete a drug deal. On this journey, the duo enthusiastically commits multiple acts of armed robbery, engages in sex with men they pick nightly,

²⁹ Desportes discusses this event and how it inspired *Baise-moi* in *King Kong Théorie* (2006).

and murders multiple people (of all ages and genders) for money as well as the general amusement. The trip ends in tragedy for the two, however, as Manu is killed during an attempted robbery at a convenience store, and Nadine, suicidal over the loss of her partner in crime, is ultimately arrested.

As the protagonists flagrantly reject societal norms for women, and the violence they enact is fantastically gratuitous, *Baise-moi* met with controversy and hostility, particularly after it was transposed to film. While the novel has multiple, extended written descriptions of fornication and pornography, the film displays explicit, unsimulated scenes of rape and sex and features graphic, Tarantino-like, stylized violence. Consequently, the film was censored by the *Conseil d'état* in France, given an X rating, and banned from French cinemas—the country's first ban on a film since 1973.³⁰ Moreover, “around the world,” notes Heller-Nicholas, the film “met with censorship scandals . . . [and in some places] the police were even called in to shut down screenings” (164).³¹

Although now mostly legitimized by scholarship as an art film worthy of intellectual discussion, numerous critics at the time of the film's release found the hardcore sex scenes vulgar, likening them to pornography.³² “Its [*Baise-moi*’s] reputation is built on the extreme sexual and violent content, and it was not given a release certificate in numerous countries,” Emily Brick reports (96). Continuing, she explains, “[A]ll reviews [of the film] discuss it in relation to censorship. Graphic sex and violence form key aesthetics” (96). Some suggest that perhaps “the film merely brings the rape-

³⁰ Many French intellectuals and filmmakers (e.g., Catherine Breillat and Jean-Luc Godard) successfully protested the film's censorship and X rating. See Lisa Downing's “Pornography and the Ethics of Censorship” (2009). See also Leila Wimmer's “‘Sex and Violence from a Pair of Furies’: The Scandal of *Baise-moi*” (2013). In *King Kong Théorie*, Desportes also discusses having the film removed from cinemas (48).

³¹ Desportes has remarked that “the explicit representation of rape [in *Baise-moi*] . . . got more censure than most rapists do” (qtd. in Witt).

³² See Janice Loreck in *Violent Women in Contemporary Cinema* (2016) for an overview of the criticism that *Baise-moi* faced and an analysis of how Desportes uses explicit language in her text to create “a specific milieu” (61).

revenge genre to a predictable ‘nadir’ by showing the sex of rape unsimulated, amounting to a dubious innovation on an already-objectionable genre” (Loreck 66). Lisa Nesselson holds that “the movie . . . is stuck between porn and wannabe art,” criticizing it for being “[a]esthetically and emotionally ugly,” nothing more than “[a] couple of sexually active and nihilistically disgruntled young women on a free-form rampage [who] screw a lot of unfortunate men and blast a lot of people to kingdom come” (“*Baise-moi*”). One hostile critic exclaimed that *Baise-moi* was “not cinema,” that its aesthetic was “dirty,” and “a slap in the face to the world by woman’s will” (qtd. in Conway 472). Lisa Downing asks, “An empowering revenge film or sheer exploitation?” (80). Williams, less critical (although not particularly impressed), calls the film “*Thelma and Louise Get Laid*” and its central duo “a marriage made in exploitation-cinema heaven,” ultimately arguing however that the film is a hybrid of genres, “neither a horror film nor a porn film” (“Sick Sisters” 28). She articulates well what is potentially so jarring to many viewers: “What’s unusual is the conjunction of real sex and unreal violence, the confusion of authenticated pornographic fantasy and simulated violent spectacle” (“Sick Sisters” 28).³³

In fact, this convergence of explicit sexual content and violence is characteristic of the transgressive cinematic trend now known as New French Extremity with which *Baise-moi* is now generally associated.³⁴ This term, first coined by James Quandt in a 2004 *Artforum* article, refers to “the growing vogue for shock tactics in French cinema over the past decade” and the “recent tendency to

³³ Of note, co-director Trinh Thi, as well as both main actresses, Karen Lancaume and Raffaëla Anderson (both survivors of rape), had all worked in pornography prior to *Baise-moi*; Desportes had previously made a living as a sex worker.

³⁴ While I have not come across any interviews in which Desportes and Trinh Thi explicitly associate themselves with New French Extremity, many scholars and critics (e.g., Tanya Horeck and Tina Kendall; James Quandt; Heller-Nicholas; and Alexandra West) argue that the film version of *Baise-moi* reflects an important trend in contemporary French cinema known as New French Extremity. West clarifies in her book *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity* (2016) that “Quandt (originator of the term) rages against . . . [a] perceived disparity between the high art meant to be achieved by such filmmakers of promise [e.g., Desportes, Trinh Thi, and Noé] and the viscera-ridden films that were being produced from this emerging subgenre” (5). See also Aaron Michael Kerner and Jonathan L. Knapp.

the willfully transgressive” (126-132). According to Quandt, New French Extremity refers to stylistically and thematically diverse French films of the early 2000s that feature explicit violence and graphic sexual content; it does not denote a cohesive group of films with a particular shared mission. In essence, this term is typically applied by critics and scholars (not necessarily filmmakers themselves) to categorize certain experimental films (including *Baise-moi*) of the early 2000s that depict the unsettling intersection of arthouse, horror, slasher, and exploitation films. To be clear, Quandt’s term was originally pejorative in nature and reflects his shock and dismay at the state of French cinema which has “suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement” (“Flesh and Blood” 126-132).³⁵ In short, while they initially sparked controversy (and still do), films associated with New French Extremity are now generally granted scholarly attention.

However, in this particular film of New French Extremity, *Baise-moi*, I suspect that it is actually more than just the fantastical violence combined with the hardcore scenes that have rendered it so notorious and shocking. Its infamy, I believe, is largely due to its visceral depiction of two unrepentant women who not only enjoy foul language, sex, and mass-murder but also (and maybe most

³⁵ Another term often used in relation to New French Extremity (and used to describe films like *Baise-moi*) is *cinéma du corps*, coined by Tim Palmer. *Cinéma du corps* refers to “a spate of recent French films that deal frankly and graphically with the body and corporeal transgressions whose basic agenda is an on-screen interrogation of physicality in brutally intimate terms” (Palmer, *Brutal*, 57). See West for an in-depth discussion of New French Extremity. See also Palmer’s “Style and Sensation in the Contemporary French Cinema of the Body” (2006) and *Brutal Intimacy: Analyzing Contemporary French Cinema* (2011) for more about *cinéma du corps*. See Guy Austin who equates New French Extremity with *cinéma du corps*, explaining that “James Quandt . . . detected in 2004 what he called a ‘new French extremity,’ which he attributed variously to a form of economic and aesthetic desperation, a mixture of shock tactics, and an attempt to ensure export sales to North America. As reported in a recent collection on the influence of such French extreme cinema, other terms coined around this phenomenon include ‘*cinéma du corps*’ (Tim Palmer), ‘cinema of sensation’ (Martine Beugnet), ‘*cinéma brut*’ (Dominique Russell), and ‘extreme realism’ (James Williams)” (278).

importantly) refuse victimization, thus testing the limits of what is permissible feminine behavior.³⁶ In other words, to my mind, *Baise-moi* shocks as much if not more for its ideological content than its imagery.

While Desportes has said that “obviously . . . [*Baise-moi*] can be considered a rape-revenge movie” (qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 158), the film nevertheless throws away the central tenets of the genre. In *King Kong Théorie*, which is in many ways an illuminating companion text to *Baise-moi*, Desportes writes that Craven’s *The Last House on the Left*, Ferrara’s *Ms .45*, and Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave* are all attempts to put onscreen “[la] sensibilité d’hommes, dans un corps de femme,” a statement that clarifies her awareness of the genre and its conventions while attesting to her ultimate choice (with Trinh Thi) to work outside of those pre-established limits (49).

The women of *Baise-moi* are not upper-middle class white women, which most (if not all) heroines of traditional rape-revenge stories are. Although white, Nadine is a sex worker; and Manu, also a sex industry performer, is of North African descent. Both women thus maintain marginal status outside the “French bourgeois mainstream” (Wimmer 133).³⁷ Indeed, as Heller-Nicholas rightly points out, “Nadine and Manu continually joke about how they do not fit the ‘typical’ image of the female

³⁶ The women in *Baise-moi*, it should be noted, ultimately do little more than Travis Bickle does in Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), and he is generally considered to be an antihero. Likewise, Nadine and Manu kill just as indiscriminately as Arthur Fleck does in Todd Phillips’ *Joker* (2019), yet critics often sympathize with him. In essence, it seems that violent male characters are permitted more leniency than aggressive women. See Conway who cites Noël Burch as he explains that “the objections to *Baise-moi*” are the result of “its sexual violence . . . carried out by women and . . . directed at men” (474).

³⁷ On race in *Baise-moi*, Wimmer writes: “*Baise-moi* thus constructs a specific imagining of national identity as the inter-ethnic female bonds that develop between Manu and Nadine emphasizes the hybrid nature of Frenchness. Racism is alluded to . . . [and Manu is] the one most clearly marked racially . . . But despite [instances of racism in the narrative], the major issues are gender and class, rather than cultural difference. Manu and Nadine’s symbiotic friendship is cemented largely because of their difference as marginal young women who are outside the French bourgeois mainstream” (133).

avenger, acknowledging an awareness of their own heritage as . . . female avengers” (166).³⁸ Moreover, *Baise-moi* establishes the protagonists as far from demure women. In addition to being a confident sex worker, Nadine is a porn junkie (the film begins with her defiant, confrontational gaze at the camera while wearing a dominatrix-style collar; the book opens with her watching pornography), while Manu is an unapologetic slacker who makes adult films. Immediately with these characterizations, Desportes and Trinh Thi discard the rape-revenge trope of the wholesome protagonist, thus rejecting any notion that only “good girls” can be the subjects of these films. What is further demolished is the idea that only respectable women are rapeable: Even marginalized, so-called depraved, primal, “bestial”³⁹ women in the sex industry can be raped, *Baise-moi* posits.⁴⁰

The other noticeable (perhaps most important) way that *Baise-moi* transforms the rape-revenge structure is how the gang rape endured by Manu and her friend is hardly the catalyst for the revenge. Although the rape is essential to the story because it is what ultimately allows Manu and Nadine to meet, it is treated as a minor detail in Manu’s life. In other words, the rampage that the duo enacts is not particularly related to the rape; they neither hunt down the rapists nor ever talk about the event as a formative or motivating experience. It is indeed never mentioned again. They kill indiscriminately, taking down all who stand in their way. In so doing, Desportes and Trinh Thi greatly loosen the tight cause-and-effect pattern realized in most rape-revenge films. This consequently makes it particularly challenging for the audience to endorse their homicidal impulses or identify with their cause. The behavior of the two women is thus at odds with the classic rape-revenge paradigm in which only

³⁸ See *Baise-moi* (142). In the film, the women comment on the absence of “witty lines” to pair with their acts of violence, indicating their awareness that female avengers in fiction are supposed to be witty.

³⁹ In *Baise-moi* (novel), Desportes frequently employs animalistic terms to refer to her protagonists (e.g., “loup” [101], “monstre” [108], and “bestial” [149]).

⁴⁰ In *King Kong Théorie*, Desportes’ chapter on rape is entitled “Impossible de violer cette femme pleine de vices.” The title suggests that there is an assumption that only some women—the *non-depraved* women—can be rape victims (e.g., the “good girls” who don’t make or watch porn, or engage in sex work, etc.).

rapists and would-be attackers are targeted, thereby imbuing the classic avenging heroine with a sense of righteousness. The revenge this duo seeks, on the other hand, appears to be the result of numerous and cumulative (micro and macro) aggressions and traumas they have experienced throughout their lives because of systemic issues, rather than the result of one singular event. More specifically, their rampage seems to be partly the result of being made to feel ashamed, at fault even, for their social (mainly sexual) transgressions. And as both are already “at the bottom” of the social hierarchy due to their low socio-economic status and careers as sex workers, their “killing spree” is “as much about class rage as male abuse,” notes Brick (98). Thus, what used to be the fulcrum of rape-revenge is now radically relegated to “minor event” status.

Moreover, the girls enjoy each other’s company, which highlights that it is not rape that unites them in their mission; rather, what joins them beyond their friendship is their refusal to no longer be disrespected by men or society. Furthermore, they are portrayed as sharing an inclination and appetite for sex. In typical rape-revenge works, the victim may transform into a sexy avenger, but she only enlists her sexuality as part of her plan of attack (e.g., *Ms .45, I Spit on Your Grave*). Here, Manu and Nadine have sex for pleasure, without any thought to how it plays into their plan (because they do not have one). Finally, the ending of the film is anticlimactic, as Manu dies, and Nadine is arrested. Traditional rape avengers usually go forth unpunished and triumphant, but in *Baise-moi*, the directors suggest that women who embrace rage, violence, and casual sex must be removed from society (whereas rapists are still allowed to remain free). Although exaggerated, the violence that erupts in Manu and Nadine is ultimately transgressive because anger and rage are not responses that women are traditionally permitted.

In essence, although the narrative contains all the conventional elements of rape-revenge, the emphasis is no longer on the rape. These divergences ultimately allow Desportes and Trinh Thi to break down the rape-revenge film, manipulate its elements, and ultimately refashion it as a means to

talk about more than physical violence against women (e.g., acceptable female comportment). While much has already been written about the protagonists' flagrant enjoyment of sex and violence, as well as the ethical dilemmas raised by the mayhem they cause and the inclusion of hardcore sexual content, what remains less explored is what the film articulates and theorizes about victimhood—or rather, the rejection of victimhood—which is a subject not typically considered in rape-revenge films. Essentially, the narrative's underdiscussed strength is how it reflects on (and invites reflection about) the ways in which rape is often considered a (if not the) defining moment in the survivor's life and, additionally, how it presents the possibility of rejecting that paradigm. These are the themes to which I now turn.

The gang rape scene in *Baise-moi* is undoubtedly horrific and attests to the brutality of the crime by suffusing it with a harsh, matter-of-fact aesthetic. In the novel, Manu and Karla are accosted by three men who verbally assault them with perverse remarks and insults in an apparent effort to humiliate and dominate. They repeatedly strike the girls, leaving them bloodied, bruised, and covered in dirt and filth (60-66). They compare the girls to garbage (“un vide-ordures,” “l’ordure”) and pigs (“ces truies”) while insinuating that the girls are diseased and that they (i.e., the rapists) “should have worn condoms” to protect themselves from girls who “let themselves get raped” (“On aurait dû ramener des capotes, on sait jamais... Avec des filles qui se laissent violer...”) (62-64). In this section, the text—graphic in its depiction—contrasts greatly with other sexually explicit descriptions within the novel (e.g., the hardcore pornography that Despentès describes at the start of the novel [9-10]) in that, during the rape scene, the women's genitals and eroticized sexual penetration are not the focus as they are in earlier pornographic depictions (9-10). Rather, the focus is on Manu's internal experience, as well as her point of view as she witnesses Karla's experience.

The film version of this scene has a documentary patina, made possible by natural lighting and a perpetually shaky camera (00:09:45-00:12:50). The film rapists make fewer (but similar) cruel

remarks, allowing Desportes and Trinh Thi to emphasize the sensorial, visceral, and corporeal terror of rape. “It’s horrific,” Desportes explains in an interview, “so I don’t see why I shouldn’t treat it [rape] this way” (qtd. in Williams “Sick Sisters” 28-29). Trinh Thi confirms, “We have the right to show how awful can be rape [sic]” (qtd. in Heller-Nicholas 212). As the men mock Karla’s screams and criticize Manu for being an unparticipative “zombie” (00:12:25), the camerawork highlights the physical invasion with one stationary, closeup shot of penetration (00:11:10). In fact, this is the only instance in which the camera is held steady for any length of time in this otherwise kinetic and chaotic scene. Although it could be viewed as simply pornographic and gratuitous, I argue that the closeup shot of penetration ultimately acts as the thesis of the sequence. By co-opting this porn aesthetic, Desportes and Trinh Thi boldly force the viewer to bear witness to this embodied experience of violation, exposing its brutality and severity. This closeup shot, in other words, attests to the stark reality of rape: a forceful breach into another person’s body. Moreover, Karla’s screams, echoing against the backdrop of the dirty, abandoned building, create the soundtrack of the chilling scene and help prevent any sense of eroticism from entering into the harrowing sequence. According to Desportes, porn is the realm of fantasy where women simulate pleasure; it is above all, a reassuring “lieu de sécurité” in which women enjoy whatever happens and always climax as a rule (*King Kong Théorie* 110).⁴¹ Although the scene presents hardcore imagery, Desportes and Trinh Thi go to great lengths to actively avoid incorporating any reassuring and titillating aspects of pornography (e.g., no hint of female gratification is portrayed, only one closeup is given, and the men become turned off and never climax). *Baise-moi* is thus unquestionably grisly in its characterization of rape.

⁴¹ See *King Kong Théorie* (97, 110). Porn, she explains, is meant to be masturbatory material (112). She and Trinh Thi clarify that *Baise-moi*’s rape scene is meant to be “brutal and hard to watch because rape is horrible” (Brick 97).

This scene sets up a fascinating ideological dispute between Manu and Karla about victimhood. Throughout the entirety of the rape, Karla is distraught; she cries, fights back, and resists. Her protests, however, only appear to please and empower the rapists (63). Conversely, Manu is seemingly passive, her expression illegible throughout the whole experience, which frustrates and confuses not only her attackers but also Karla (62-66). She asks Manu, “Comment t’as pu faire ça? Comment t’as pu te laisser faire comme ça?” (64; 00:13:07). Manu, realizing how her unemotional response to rape disgusts (“dégoûte”) Karla, replies, “Après ça, moi je trouve ça chouette de respirer. On est encore vivantes, j’adore ça. C’est rien à côté de ce qu’ils peuvent faire, c’est jamais qu’un coup de queue...” (65). This notion that “all they did was fuck us”⁴² and that she’s just glad to be alive, shocks Karla into a breakdown as she cannot understand how Manu can be so casual, impassive, and distant regarding something so horrible. Through her rejection of Manu’s assertion, it is implied that Karla believes (like many) that rape is worse than death. A passage in *King Kong Théorie* helps to illuminate this: “Une femme qui tiendrait à sa dignité aurait préféré se faire tuer. Ma survie, en elle-même, est une preuve qui parle contre moi. [...] [I]l faut être traumatisée d’un viol,” Despentès argues (42). Thus, through Manu, *Baise-moi* counters the conventional idea that rape is a fate worse than death for women.⁴³

⁴² This is Bruce Benderson’s translation of the sentence from the English language version of the text, “c’est jamais qu’un coup de queue” (*Baise-moi* [*Rape Me*], 52).

⁴³ This is a persistent, commonly held conception. See Gina Messina-Dysert’s *Rape Culture and Spiritual Violence* in which she writes, “The idea that rape is a fate worse than death is one that has long existed. [...] [and] continues to exist in our culture today” (83). There are even victims, Messina-Dysert writes, for whom “physical death is preferable,” and she cites actual victims who have expressed this (1). See also Mithu Sanyal’s “A Fate Worse Than Death: Honor and Honesty” in *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (2019) where she examines the roots and impact of this belief. Sanyal argues that “[t]o understand this, one has to understand the concept of honor” (37). Historically, “[a] woman’s honor was located in her body: in her virginity or in her state as an honorable wife or widow. Thus a woman—and only a woman—possessed something that could be stolen or destroyed by rape” (38). Sanyal points to the ancient Roman tale of Lucretia as one that “epitomizes” the idea that a woman’s honor is lost through rape (38).

Offering clarification, Manu explains, “C’est comme une voiture que tu gares dans une cité, tu laisses pas des trucs de valeur à l’intérieur parce que tu peux pas empêcher qu’elle soit forcée. Ma chatte, je peux pas empêcher les connards d’y rentrer et j’y ai rien laissé de précieux...” (65; 00:13:51). In essence, Manu has decided that this experience takes nothing from her. The rapists have not stolen anything “precious” (such as her dignity) because she left nothing for them to steal. Manu’s resistance is thus her compliance as well as her nonchalant attitude of “this changes nothing for me.” She thus bypasses the traditional rape-revenge element of “transformation.” She refuses to allow this experience to alter or metaphorically disfigure her in any way. To be clear, her response in no way diminishes or trivializes the severity of the crime. Instead, it allows Manu to decide for herself what role this event plays in her life rather than letting society’s conventional understandings of rape victimhood inform her experience. It is ultimately her defiant response that discourages the rapists from continuing since her lack of reaction denies them not only gratification but also (most importantly) power.

Karla remains utterly disturbed by this response and vows to make the rapists pay for their crimes, shouting at them as they leave the scene: “[F]aut pas croire que j’suis comme ça [...]!” (66). Although “comme ça” might seem ambiguous, it is likely that Karla is insinuating that she rejects Manu’s perspective, thereby distancing herself from Manu. Karla is, in her mind, not the kind of girl who “allows herself” to “get raped” (64). To her and to the rapists, therefore, not fighting back/not showing emotion during rape is not only considered undignified but also unwomanly: “Elle a même pas pleuré . . . c’est même pas une femme, ça,” says one attacker of Manu. In short, this section of *Baise-moi* exposes the unspoken expectation that a woman is supposed to fight and defend her integrity. If she survives without having fought, it may then be assumed that she was in some way inviting and even enjoying it: “T’as pas l’air de détester ça, hein?,” as one attacker states (61). Desportes summarizes this thought well in *King Kong Théorie*, “Et, de toutes façons, comment peux-tu en [i.e., le

viol] être sortie vivante, sans être une salope patentée? [...] [D]ans le viol, il faut toujours prouver qu'on n'était vraiment pas d'accord" (42, 48). It's a sentiment that victimologists such as Callie Rennison affirm: "Rape is the only crime in which victims have to explain that they didn't want to be victimized" (qtd. in Brody). The exchange between Karla and Manu thus combats the strictures of traditional notions of victimhood and ultimately serves as a vehicle that presents Desportes' (inspired by her readings of Camille Paglia)⁴⁴ radical, controversial assertion that rape does not have to be the most debilitating experience of a woman's life as society would have one believe.⁴⁵ It moreover exposes common victim-blaming tropes that are often directed at those who do not respond to rape as expected.

Baise-moi's commentary on expectations of rape victims continues in a scene with Manu and her brother (which only happens in the film) (00:20:01). The brother, intuiting that something has happened to Manu based on the bruises on her body, bluntly asks if she was raped (00:20:30). Retrieving a pistol, he emotionally demands to know who attacked her, which only enrages her because, as she says, he never stops to ask how she feels (00:20:40-00:21:22). Rather, he focuses on how her violation makes him feel (i.e., angry, enraged, etc.). This scene underscores how rape often

⁴⁴ For Paglia's views on rape, see "Antihero," a two-part interview with Paglia conducted by Celia Farber which appeared in the September and October 1991 issues of *Spin* (this is where Desportes first encounters Paglia's ideas [Desportes, *King Kong Théorie*, 45]). Paglia also discusses rape in *Sexual Personae* (1990), as well as in *Sex, Art, and American Culture* (1992), *Vamps & Tramps* (1994), *Free Women, Free Men: Sex, Gender, Feminism* (2017).

⁴⁵ In *King Kong Théorie*, Desportes puts forth this idea inspired by Camille Paglia. Desportes argues that Paglia is the first person to essentially suggest that rape does not have to mean a life sentence of misery. This does not dismiss the crime of rape. Explaining Paglia's stance, Desportes clarifies that one can be impacted by it, but not necessarily paralyzed by it (44-46). Desportes clarifies: "Pour la première fois, quelqu'un [Paglia] valorisait la faculté de s'en remettre, plutôt que de s'étendre complaisamment sur le florilège des traumatismes. Dévalorisation du viol, de sa portée, de sa résonance. Ça n'annulait rien à ce qui s'était passé, ça n'effaçait rien de ce qu'on avait appris cette nuit-là. . . . Elle proposait de penser le viol comme un risque à prendre, inhérent à notre condition de filles. . . . Elle était la première à sortir le viol du cauchemar absolu, du non-dit, de ce qui ne doit surtout jamais arriver. Elle en faisait une circonstance politique, quelque chose qu'on devait apprendre à encaisser. Paglia changeait tout: il ne s'agissait plus de nier, ni de succomber, il s'agissait de faire avec." (44-46).

incites aggression and rage in male family members or other individuals who feel responsible for avenging a woman's virtue after she has been "tainted" (as if the woman is damaged property to be defended), a common feature in classic rape-revenge works. The brother finally declares "T'as pas l'air trop traumatisée, là. . . putain . . . tu me dégoûtes, salope" (00:21:24), reiterating Desportes' remark that if one lives through rape and does not appear to be affected, it is suspected that perhaps the woman enjoyed it, hence her survival is damning evidence against her testimony (*King Kong Théorie* 42). Like Karla who is "disgusted" by Manu's response, the brother is also sickened by her, insinuating that a raped woman should show outward signs of distress.

The scene, furthermore, accentuates how rape changes people's perceptions of a survivor and how potentially revictimizing or, at least, disempowering this can be. As Desportes writes in *King Kong Théorie*, "du moment qu'on appelle son viol un viol, c'est tout l'appareil de surveillance des femmes qui se met en branle: tu veux que ça se sache, ce qui t'est arrivé? Tu veux que tout le monde te voie comme une femme à qui c'est arrivé?" (42). In other words, Desportes suggests that once a woman shares that she has been raped, other people will see that woman differently, imposing their own judgements and ideologies onto her, just as the brother does with Manu. In short, this scene subtly underscores that there can be a loss of agency in revealing one's rape, as others will project their own expectations, experiences, and narratives onto the raped woman. Manu's brother now sees her differently than she sees herself because of this event. Yet, as established, she defiantly refuses to conform to others' assumptions about what rape victimhood must look like and decides to shoot him (00:21:31). Killing him is thus symbolic, suggesting that avenging a woman's honor is outdated (and therefore unnecessary) and that survivors alone have the power to decide what the event means for them and how it fits into their lives. It is not simply her brother that she is killing; rather it is the conventional wisdom and ideology that he represents.

Baise-moi further spotlights the possibility of outright rejection of meek and quiet victimhood in the ways that it depicts unapologetic women not only pleasuring themselves but also pursuing men for casual sex. Even though the women have each undergone sexual trauma (i.e., Manu's rape; Nadine's sexual assault and abuse, which leaves her physically disfigured⁴⁶), they are still sexual beings who masturbate and seek intercourse. This is a major departure from classic rape-revenge works in that sexuality is typically used in the revenge, but sex for pleasure is hardly on the avenger's mind. As Desportes notes in *King Kong Théorie*, "Car il faut être traumatisée d'un viol, il y a une série de marques visibles qu'il faut respecter: peur des hommes, de la nuit, de l'autonomie, dégoût du sexe et autres joyeusetés" (42). The protagonists of *Baise-moi* flagrantly reject these "rules." They fully embrace their autonomy and their identities as night prowlers who satisfy their sexual urges while exhibiting no fear of men (on the contrary, men are usually afraid of these women). In essence, *Baise-moi* does not merely present the woman's body as a rapeable, vulnerable vessel; rather, it shows women's sexual enjoyment even in the aftermath of great violence, which communicates that desire and eroticism do not necessarily disappear after rape, nor does sexuality have to become a weapon used solely in service of revenge.

It is important to note that after Desportes herself was gang raped, she turned to books for identification and comfort only to discover that, at the time, a literature about rape did not exist (*King Kong Théorie* 43). She discovered rape-revenge films (e.g., *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Ms .45*), but did not identify with these male-created portrayals (48). The story of *Baise-moi* is thus a response to this lack of literature and a rebuttal of those unrelatable rape-revenge stories. Together, Desportes and Trinh Thi destroy the rape-revenge playbook, rework many of its central features, and ultimately create a

⁴⁶ This scene only appears in the novel. In it, Nadine explains how she was restrained by a client, unable to see what he was doing. "Il s'est servi d'elle comme il l'entendait . . . et gloussé de contentement en l'entendant crier. Tous pouvoirs sur elle" (118). Despite begging him to stop, he refuses. This attack leaves her with permanent scars on her body that she likens to storytelling hieroglyphs (115).

unique film that allows them to collapse misconceptions about rape victims while expanding and giving voice to alternative notions of victimhood. While it might seem strange to call *Baise-moi* a life-affirming story (especially since the women not only engage in a fantastical yet unethical killing spree but also end up either dead or in police custody), there is something perhaps optimistic to be gleaned from *Baise-moi*. Without condoning their horrific crimes, the story's strength lies in the ways it actively challenges conventional notions of how a trauma survivor is expected to act. Furthermore, *Baise-moi* progressively proposes that survivors can choose to reject the cultural narratives that insist that rape is the most stigmatizing life event for a woman.⁴⁷ In the world of *Baise-moi* (written and produced by real-life female rape survivors), women who experience sexual trauma are allowed to be more than one thing (i.e., a victim) and permitted to respond in more than one way (and in ways that make sense to them) without offering explanation—concepts rarely considered in classic rape-revenge works.

VII. Irréversible: “Le Corps Parle”⁴⁸

Two years after *Baise-moi* shocked filmgoers, writer and director Gaspar Noé released his equally arresting *Irréversible* (2002), a film that methodically scrutinizes the topic of rape, the pursuit of revenge, and the impact that rape has on the life of the victim.⁴⁹ Friend of Desportes and Trihn Thi and maker of numerous confrontational cinematic pieces, Noé is “no stranger to controversy” (Heller-Nicholas 167). His work, Alexandra West explains, “draws considerably from [violent] American cinema of the 1970s . . . most notably Martin Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver* (1976), as well as Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* (1971) and John Boorman’s *Deliverance* (1972)” — films that all feature rape and revenge to

⁴⁷ To reiterate, this does not minimize or dismiss the impact of rape. In *King Kong Théorie*, Desportes highlights only that this mindset may allow some survivors a sense of agency.

⁴⁸ A line from *Irréversible* (01:14:00).

⁴⁹ In addition to writing and directing *Irréversible*, Noé is also the editor of the film as well as co-cinematographer (along with Benoît Debie).

some degree (49). Noé's debut works *Carne* (1991) and *Seul contre tous* (1998),⁵⁰ both of which inscribe themselves within the revenge genre, helped to establish him early in his career as an aggressive auteur of "shocking and extreme cinema" as each contains graphic portrayals of unrelenting violence and includes themes such as misanthropy, racism, incest, rape, and "misdirected vengeance" (Heller-Nicholas 167). However, while sexual violence and retribution feature in *Carne* and *Seul contre tous*,⁵¹ rape and revenge assume the central role in *Irréversible*, which has subsequently acquired a reputation as one of the most polarizing dramas in recent film history.

Arguably the principal film of New French Extremity⁵² and frequently deemed "unwatchable" by many for its intense, violent opening revenge sequence and its nine-minute-long rape scene,⁵³ *Irréversible* focuses on one tragic day in the life of three individuals: Alex (an Italian woman living in France), Marcus (her boyfriend), and their friend Pierre (Alex's ex-lover). Unfolding in reverse chronology through roughly a dozen narrative episodes, the film starts with the credits/copyright

⁵⁰ Desportes and Trihn Thi explicitly reference *Seul contre tous* in *Baise-moi* as it plays on Nadine's television at the beginning of the film.

⁵¹ The Butcher, the disgruntled and disillusioned vigilante/antihero, is the protagonist in both of these films. *Seul contre tous* is considered the sequel to the short film *Carne*. In the same article in which he coins the term New French Extremity, Quandt calls *Carne* "a studiously repugnant short film about a horse butcher who takes revenge on a man he suspects of raping his autistic daughter. . . . [*Carne*] is perhaps the *ur-text* of the New French Extremity. The butcher reappears as the jobless and embittered protagonist of *I Stand Alone* [*Seul contre tous*], spewing hatred against immigrants, homosexuals, [and] women" (126-132). According to Noé, *Seul contre tous* is "about a man and his moral and existential problems" (qtd. in Judell). The Butcher also appears in the first scene of *Irréversible*.

⁵² See Footnotes 34 and 35. See also West's chapter "Time Destroys All Things: Gaspar Noé's *Carne* (1991), *I Stand Alone* (1998), and *Irréversible* (2002)" in *Films of the New French Extremity: Visceral Horror and National Identity*. See also Douglas Keesey's article "Split identification: Representations of Rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* and Catherine Breillat's *A ma sœur! / Fat Girl*" (2010).

⁵³ "Unwatchable" appears frequently as a key term in the film's reviews and criticism. For example, see Roger Ebert's review of the film, A. Grønstad's *Screening the Unwatchable: Spaces of Negation in Post-Millennial Art Cinema* (2011), and *Unwatchable*, edited by Nicholas Baer, Maggie Hennefeld, Laura Horak, and Gunnar Iversen, all of which include *Irréversible* in their respective discussions of unwatchable cinema. Peter Bradshaw writes about the "nine deeply unwatchable minutes" in *Irréversible* (i.e., its rape scene) (331).

information scrolling in reverse.⁵⁴ “Obviously[,] this does not mean that the film literally shows the action occurring in reverse, but rather that the narrative is broken into segments,” explains Alison Young, “with the final section of the story being shown first, followed by the penultimate, and so on, with the final part of the film’s running time consisting of the opening segment of the story” (63). To summarize, after the credits roll, *Irréversible* begins its narrative with a monologue from The Butcher (of *Carne* and *Seul contre tous*), who discusses his sordid past and asserts that “le temps détruit tout” (00:05:04). The camera then shifts its focus to the commotion outside of The Butcher’s apartment: Marcus and Pierre are shown outside of a hellish nightclub known as The Rectum,⁵⁵ with police escorting a handcuffed Pierre into a patrol car as Marcus is wheeled toward an ambulance. The film then cuts back to a prior scene during which Marcus and Pierre frantically search the nightmarish club for a man called Le Tenia, whom they know has viciously attacked Alex, nearly beating her to death. Marcus assaults a man he (mistakenly) believes is Le Tenia.⁵⁶ When Marcus is severely injured in the fight, Pierre intervenes and bludgeons the presumed rapist to death with a fire extinguisher. Once again, the film then cuts to the previous scene in which Marcus and Pierre first discover that Alex has been raped, beaten, and is now not only disfigured but also comatose. After speaking with the police, Pierre and Marcus are encouraged by a gang of onlookers to take justice into their own hands, and the duo begins their frantic search for the rapist, ultimately finding their way to The Rectum. Rewinding again, the next scene shows Alex as she leaves a party alone. When she cannot find a taxi, another

⁵⁴ See Palmer’s *Irréversible* (2015) for a full breakdown of each segment (xx-xxiv).

⁵⁵ Many accused Noé of homophobia for his portrayal of The Rectum, a gay S&M club; he defended himself against these allegations during the film’s press tour. See West’s chapter on *Irréversible* for more.

⁵⁶ The viewer discovers later that this man whom Marcus and Pierre believe is Le Tenia is *not* Alex’s rapist. The real Le Tenia is indeed at The Rectum and looks on as Marcus and Pierre savagely assault the man whom they believe is Le Tenia. See Heller-Nicholas who explains that there are other rape-revenge films such as “*Night of the Sunflowers*, *The Bravados*, and *Act of Aggression*, where mistaken identity results in the wrong person being punished for a rape” (168).

pedestrian advises her to take an underground tunnel. The camera follows Alex into the tunnel where she sees Le Tenia abusing a prostitute. Noticing Alex, Le Tenia shifts his attention to her, and what follows is a lengthy and chilling sequence of sexual violence that lasts over nine minutes. The film again jumps back in time to Pierre, Alex, and Marcus traveling to the party, which is then followed by an earlier scene that focuses on the blissful relationship between Marcus and Alex. In this sequence, Alex is overjoyed to discover that she is pregnant. The film's final scene—and therefore first scene of the story—depicts a serene Alex reading (ironically) J. W. Dunne's *An Experiment with Time* (1927)⁵⁷ as young children run happily about the park and Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 in A, Opus 92, plays in the background. *Irréversible* thus ends with its beginning, ultimately highlighting a world that has been irrevocably lost as a result of this violent crime.⁵⁸

By employing this reverse narration, Noé carefully dismantles the rape-revenge storyline only to reapproach and reorchestrate it from an experimental yet highly structured angle that allows him to defamiliarize and, at the same time, comment upon a well-known genre.⁵⁹ At the start, his audience consequently “enter[s] the film’s world disoriented . . . [as] events are presented with little context” (Taylor 121), thus proposing a very different spectatorial experience than is customary. As established, rape-revenge stories typically unfold in linear order and therefore “share a basic structural trajectory,” offering a highly legible, “preconfigured raw structural blueprint” to audiences “with even the barest familiarity of [the genre]” (Heller-Nicholas 168). That is, viewers are generally aware that within this type of story, the rape (or attempted rape) is consistently followed by some act of revenge. There is

⁵⁷ See West who discusses Dunne's text in relation to *Irréversible*.

⁵⁸ In 2023, *Irréversible* was “re-released in chronological order, which Noé dubbed the *Irréversible* Straight Cut” (Gadre, “The Backward Marching of Time: *Irréversible*’s Straight Cut Reverses [and Ruins] its Chronology”). Like Gadre, I believe that reversing the order of *Irréversible* neutralizes its narrative force, rendering the film conventional.

⁵⁹ Tim Palmer discusses the structure at length in part four of his book *Irreversible* (2015).

always a clear, given context for the revenge. However, No  flips this dynamic entirely, “reversing this process from rape-revenge to revenge-rape,” Heller-Nicholas observes (168). Tim Palmer calls this unusual structure “an effect-cause narration” in which the audience “see[s] an action or its aftermath . . . [and then] hunt[s] to discern its motivating source” (*Irr versible* 69-72).⁶⁰ While it is apparent at the start that Marcus and Pierre seek revenge (revenge is explicitly specified), it remains unclear for an extended duration why and for what purpose they pursue it.

However, while the context for vengeance is not made immediately clear as a result of the film’s inverted structure, No  nevertheless prominently comments on the act of revenge (as well as the revenge genre) from the very beginning through the character of Pierre. More specifically, No  uses Pierre as a vehicle to not only call explicit attention to the revenge genre but also to suggest that revenge is a base act—or sickness—that even animals do not undertake, which is a critique rarely encountered in rape-revenge films. Chastising Marcus early in the film, Pierre exclaims, “Arr te-toi! . . . m me les animaux ne se vengent pas . . . T’es malade . . . Tu me rends malade” (00:15:08-00:27:54).⁶¹ Soon after these words, Pierre relates Marcus’ actions to that of a character in a trashy exploitation work: “C’est quoi cette vengeance de s rie B? Arr te ces niaiseries,” Pierre shouts (00:30:24). Thus, through Pierre’s voice, No  indicates that Marcus’ erratic behavior is that of someone in a low-budget, low-quality feature. These remarks therefore communicate early on to audiences that No ’s film self-consciously makes (re)use of the revenge genre and, furthermore, that it neither condones nor praises revenge. The pursuit of revenge is the stuff of vulgar entertainment, *Irr versible* hints, which is not what

⁶⁰ Palmer offers a concise overview of the history of the inverted narrative in part four of his book *Irreversible* (2015). “[W]riters, artists, playwrights and film-makers,” Palmer argues, “are perennially drawn to backwards chronology” (69). Regarding contemporary examples that employ this structure, Palmer cites Philip K. Dick’s novel *Counter-Clock World* (1967), Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* (1969), Harold Pinter’s play *Betrayal* (1978), Martin Amis’ novel *Time’s Arrow* (1991), and Christopher Nolan’s film *Memento* (2000) as notable examples.

⁶¹ Pierre repeats multiple times in subsequent scenes that Marcus is an animal who makes Pierre sick, adding that Alex would be ashamed of his behavior if she were there.

this film propounds (as No   suggests through Pierre’s dialogue). These observations, delivered through the voice of Pierre, are simultaneously a nod to *Irr  versible*’s heritage and a rejection of it.

Irr  versible further differentiates itself from typical rape-revenge films by increasingly distancing itself from the violence as the story progresses, thereby subverting audience expectations. Because of No  ’s inverted, uncommon structure in which the “film has its two climactic acts of violence in the opening section of the film,” *Irr  versible*’s second half is rendered, “by contrast[,] almost banal” (Heller-Nicholas 168). That is, as the film progresses and moves further away from any violent content, it allows the audience a reprieve. Heller-Nicholas explains, “[E]verything after these [violent] events [of the first half of the film] grants the spectator a strange sense of amnesia,” as the link between violence and revenge has been significantly weakened due to the reverse composition (168). Consequently, many (including No  ) have claimed that the film nearly has a “happy ending” because, as the violence recedes, the story becomes increasingly peaceful—even Edenic—in its second half. This tranquil conclusion ultimately codes the film as a tragedy, however, as the happier moments presented after the visceral scenes “are all tainted because the characters do not know their fate but the audience . . . does” (West 52). As David Andrews asserts, “because of the backward structure, . . . every frame is fraught with knowledge of the coming violence” (174). *Irr  versible*’s configuration thus casts a shadow of despair on the film’s beatific final moments, thereby underscoring the destruction and irretrievability of this once peaceful world.

In addition to its unconventional configuration, the film is (in)famous and has been widely criticized for its unrelentingly violent and controversial first half, which has been called “a grueling spectatorial experience” (Young 63). In his (mostly favorable) review, Roger Ebert writes, “*Irr  versible* is a movie so violent and cruel that most people will find it unwatchable” (“*Irr  versible*”). So disquieting is the film’s first half that many audience members made their objections known early on as the film premiered. Andrews confirms, “*Irr  versible* . . . made quite an unmistakable impact on its

audience, an impact first registered through the scores of viewers who walked out of the film's Cannes premier" (Andrews 159). Andrews attributes the mass walkout not only to the scenes of revenge at the start but also to the film's main scene of inhumane violence, which is its lengthy rape sequence. This scene, he writes, leaves an "indelible impression" as the audience is forced to watch a "sexual assault that plays out in real time, running more than 11 minutes, much of which is recorded by a static camera that faces the victim on the ground" (159). Unsurprisingly, Palmer confirms, "[b]efore the film was half finished, approximately 250 of the festival crowd had already left the theatre, many of them exiting noisily, doing their best to disrupt proceedings. Booing and catcalls periodically broke out inside the screening room, the angriest cries during the film's most violent sequences, especially the rape" (*Irréversible* 2). Specifically, continues Palmer, "there was a "10% walkout contingent [and] 20 people actually required emergency first aid, with fire wardens called upon to administer oxygen to overcome viewers who had either passed out or else suffered severe nausea" (a reaction, it must be noted, that Noé specifically sought)⁶² (2). Furthermore, an official present at Cannes stated, "In my 25 years in my job I've never seen this at the Cannes festival . . . The scenes in this film are unbearable, even for us professionals" (qtd. in Palmer 2). International news sources swiftly caught onto the controversy at Cannes and "took every opportunity to gather sound bites from the unhappy

⁶² There are strategic cinematic elements in the film's first half that are specifically designed to be nauseating. The film begins with sirens blaring on a Parisian Street, an immediate assault on the senses, and as the audience witnesses the hellish opening sequence at The Rectum, Noé's camera spins, whirls and "twists in uneven and dizzying motion, catching glimpses here and there of the characters under red light and heavy shadow . . . [t]he soundscape is similarly chaotic, a repetitive series of crescendos and decrescendos, unrelenting waves of mechanical noise" (Taylor 121). Regarding this disorienting soundtrack that has been playing in the background since the film's start (i.e., when the credits begin to roll backwards), Palmer explains: "[F]or [the first] sixty minutes of its running time," Noé "uses . . . a barely perceptible but aggravating bass rumble that was recorded for . . . his purposes at 27 hertz, the [exact] frequency used by riot police to quell mobs by inducing unease and, after prolonged exposure, *physical nausea*" (Style and Sensation" 29) (emphasis mine). Palmer continues, "The total effect, as Robin Wood argues, is an ingeniously crafted soundscape of pure noise, registered by the audience as 'ominous, ugly, threatening' [Wood 5], a queasy range of pulsing textures that intensify our malaise over events on the imagetrack. Especially in the opening scenes . . . we approach sensory overload, sheer aural chaos" (29). *Irréversible* is, in essence, designed from the start to make its audience uneasy and unwell.

walkouts,” Palmer writes (2). Another filmgoer “was interviewed by Reuters and declared that Noé’s film was, in a line widely reproduced among accounts of the festival, ‘disturbing and incredibly violent—not just the graphic violence and the language . . . [for] the camerawork made my stomach churn’” (qtd. in Palmer 2). “Even select celebrities were polled to gather negative press,” continues Palmer (2). “Pascal Gentil, a French Olympic medalist for Tae Kwon Do (hence implicitly a tough personality), complained: ‘When I see a film like that I find it hard to imagine what people must have inside them that they are able to make such a thing—I found it sickening’” (2). “Tempers continued to rise, and momentum against *Irréversible* grew,” Palmer explains, and the film “unsurprisingly . . . [won] no awards” (2). The BBC headline, “Cannes Film Sickens Audience,” became the “sentiment widely adopted” among critics and press toward the film (Palmer 2).

Aside from the violence and aggressive, nausea-inducing aesthetics,⁶³ the film has been further criticized for its portrayal of the female victim, Alex. Some have argued that her rape scene is gratuitous and/or emotionally manipulative; that her character functions as a mere catalyst for the male avengers’ story; that the camerawork in the rape scene objectifies her; that Noé implicitly blames his victim for her rape; that the feelings of the victim are never revealed and therefore ignored; that Alex is denied subjectivity; and that Noé invites an exploitive, sadistic gaze upon Alex that replicates the gaze of the man who assaults her.⁶⁴

⁶³ See Footnote 62.

⁶⁴ For these accusations, see Bernadette Wegenstein’s “Feminist Counter-Cinema and the Critique of Sexual Violence” in *Radical Equalities and Global Feminist Filmmaking* (2022); Kathleen Scott’s “Bearing Witness to the Unbearable: Ethics and the Phallic Gaze in *Irréversible*” in *Sensational Pleasures in Cinema, Literature, and Visual Culture: The Phallic Eye* (2014); Steven Rea (2008), James Hoberman (2003), Michael Sragow (2003)—all quoted in Jerome P. Schaefer’s chapter “*Irréversible* and The New French Extremity” in *An Edgy Realism* (2015); David Edelstein’s “Irreversible Errors: Gaspar Noé’s Cinematic Rape” (2003); Elvis Mitchell’s “Rape, Violence . . . It’s O.K. to Look Away” (2003); Peter Bradshaw’s “*Irréversible* Review” in *The Films That Made Me . . . Essays and Reviews from The Guardian* (2019); and James Quandt’s “Flesh and Blood: Sex and Violence in Recent French Cinema” (2004).

At first glance, these accusations might appear valid. However, I argue that to read the film in these ways overlooks and even dismisses how Noé (like Despentès and Trinh Thi) invites audiences to question what they know and think about rape and victimhood through *Irréversible's* structure, camerawork, and its characterization of Alex. More specifically, because of the film's experimental construction (i.e., its reverse chronology) and the camera's unflinching commitment to capturing the brutality of the crime, Noé presents a powerful anti-rape and anti-victim blaming statement that upends a vast range of assumptions, ultimately provoking viewers to reexamine commonly held conceptions about rape and victimhood. To be more precise, *Irréversible's* specificity is such that it not only underscores the impact that rape has on the victim but also calls attention to the ways in which audiences tend to create cause-and-effect associations regarding a woman's rape. Because Alex's rape is decontextualized (i.e., shown before the viewer meets her in her everyday life), the viewer cannot read anything that she does prior to her rape as a reason/cause for it. In so doing, Noé emphasizes that rape is not the result of anything Alex does, wears, or says. It is a random crime for which she bears no responsibility, the film posits. Furthermore, by progressively distancing itself from the avenger's storyline as the film develops, *Irréversible* deemphasizes revenge as a central narrative aspect and, instead, allows Alex to occupy central narrative importance, as her story becomes the focus while her avengers' story quietly recedes into the background. In this way, Noé avoids a classic rape-revenge pitfall, which is relegating the victim to the status of a mere narrative tool that serves the avengers' storyline (as opposed to that of the victim). Ultimately, as it distances itself from violence and revenge, Noé's film emphasizes (and grieves for) not only a world that has been lost and that which can never be restored but also the weight that such a tragic event (i.e., rape) has on the lives of those it touches.

Between the revenge and rape sequences (and before the audience sees Alex for the first time), the film presents a scene of conversation between Pierre and a police officer, which allows Noé to address the concept of victim blaming (00:34:11). In this scene in which Noé closely focuses his

camera on the faces of the officer and Pierre (thereby keeping the audience intently focused on their dialogue rather than background commotion and activity), the officer asks questions that casually insinuate ways in which Alex (whom he never calls by name) may have brought her attack on herself. “Et la victime, les [drogues] prenait-elle?” (00:34:32). This question suggests that her choices (to take drugs, if she did so at all) may provide a reason for which she was targeted and harmed. The officer continues to interrogate Pierre, asking not only about what “the victim” may have ingested but also if she spoke to “certain people” or engaged in arguments with others: “A-t-elle parlé à certaines personnes? S’est-elle disputée avec quelqu’un?” (00:35:26). This entire exchange, though short, is notable because it marks the first instance in which Noé emphasizes how others (including but not limited to police and other law enforcement agents) are quick to suggest ways in which a victim bears responsibility for her own rape. Sherry Hamby clarifies that victim blaming is promoted by what is known as “the just-world hypothesis . . . [the] idea that people deserve what happens to them. There’s . . . a really strong need to believe that we all deserve our outcomes and consequences” (qtd. in Kayleigh Roberts). And as victimologist Condry further explains,

Something in our culture tends to distrust the victim. Victims are taken to be somehow unsavory . . . [and there is a] need to believe that victims of misfortune deserve what happens to them—what [Melvin] Lerner (1980) called . . . ‘belief in a just world.’ We are left asking whether something a victim did could have contributed to his or her misfortune, not wanting to believe that the same could happen to us. (244).

Noé’s police officer, although perhaps well-meaning in his questioning, seeks the “cause” for the “effect” (her rape), never allowing for the reality that Alex’s attack is a random crime for which another bears full responsibility. His questions, instead, shift the burden of blame onto her as though she were the prime actant in the event, as evidenced by his repeated questioning about what *she* did, what *she*

said. She is, in essence, always the subject of his inquisition, which signifies that her violation and subsequent injuries are the direct result of her own actions and somehow avoidable.

What ultimately illuminates the absurdity of the officer's questioning (even if considered standard procedure) appears in the next sequence where the audience is first introduced to Alex. Wheeled toward an ambulance, she is markedly bloodied, bruised—disfigured even—and in a coma (00:39:45). The startling image of her bleeding face and battered body emphasizes the extent to which she could not be responsible for this attack. For the audience, it is arguably incongruous to witness the appearance of Alex in such an exceedingly mutilated condition and, at the same time, assign sole blame to her for this state. Indeed, this is clearly the “work” of another and, more importantly, there is nothing that Alex could have done to warrant such a violent indignity upon her person. In essence, Noé presents a most brutalized image of his protagonist Alex to underscore the severity of her rape and arguably communicate that this is neither the result of a mere dispute, nor the result of her taking drugs (etc.), as the officer suggests.

Noé's anti-victim blaming argument is made most apparent in the extended rape scene (00:40:47-00:53:48). In this sequence, the camera follows Alex closely, allowing the audience to walk with her or, possibly, even as her. By filming her so closely from behind, it reads as though Noé is inviting viewers to imagine themselves inhabiting and identifying as Alex (almost like an avatar) as she walks out into the Parisian nightscape alone. This effectually creates a sense of suspense and dread since the viewer has already beheld her wounded body and battered face caked in blood. Although the audience knows how this sequence will end (i.e., in her destruction), Noé nevertheless asks the viewer to join Alex and witness how she came to be that way. The camera hovers closely behind her, and viewers surely take note of Alex's backless dress—a detail that reads as Noé's way of tempting his audience to interpret the grounds for her victimization. In other words, the quick—almost automatic—assumption on the part of the viewer might be to construe Alex's sartorial choice as

though she is “asking for it.” But it has nothing to do with her dress, *Irréversible* argues. Rather, it is about being in the wrong place at the wrong time—a random victim of a crime of opportunity.

With no success in hailing a taxi, Alex is advised by a pedestrian to take an underpass to the taxi stand across the street (as that would be faster) and, in a split-second decision, Alex takes the advice, leading her to encounter her attacker, Le Tenia. Had the chance encounter with the pedestrian not happened, perhaps Alex would not have traversed the underpass, and perhaps her night would have ended differently, Noé suggests. As Alex descends into the tunnel, the camera continues to follow her from behind as though to show, from her perspective, the length of the tunnel and to emphasize how short it is. The end of the tunnel is near, *Irréversible* taunts, and one can see how the character of Alex might think nothing of walking down this shortcut to reach her destination. Suddenly, however, two individuals enter from the other side. It is Le Tenia and a sex worker who appear to be engaged in a dispute—one that quickly turns violent. Alex, momentarily stunned by this unfolding assault (during which the sex worker flees), attempts to escape the dangerous situation, which in turn becomes sexually aggressive (00:42:32-00:43:26).

Before I discuss the rape sequence, it is necessary to note here that later in the film (in a scene that chronologically occurs before the rape, yet is revealed only after the crime), Alex discusses how “le corps parle” (01:14:00). The body has its own way of speaking, and not everything can be expressed or explained in spoken language, she reflects. These remarks highlight what I consider a key aspect of the rape sequence, which is the way in which Alex uses her body to communicate when her voice is (literally) silenced. In so doing, Noé establishes a protagonist that indeed asserts her point of view, which is an aspect of the character that many have overlooked. Bernadette Wegenstein, for example, has argued strongly against *Irréversible*, contending that its rape scene is particularly “disturbing”

because Noé's character is "deprived of her subjectivity" and has "no point of view" (15-17).⁶⁵ It is true that Alex, up until this point, has had limited dialogue; but that does not necessarily indicate that the film fails to reference her subjectivity during this extended violation. Throughout this sequence, Alex's corporeal gestures and facial expressions signify her persistent non-consent and increasing fear, which Noé captures with his static camera—the first time the camera is static during the film, in fact. With this stationary camera, "it is," as Andrews writes, "as if the auteur is instructing the viewer to see and hear every detail of the rape" (163). In my reading, the "instruction" is not only to note the brutality of the crime but also to recognize that even though Alex is immobilized and deprived of speech during most of her attack, her body nevertheless assumes the responsibility of articulating and resisting nonverbally on her behalf. Her struggle proves futile and the audience does not "hear from" Alex after this event, yet her inner world at this moment is consistently made manifest through her movements, which plainly display her subjectivity.

During her assault, Alex mainly speaks through hand gestures to assert her subjectivity, which Noé highlights through his camera positioning, thus keeping the audience's attention on Alex's upper body.⁶⁶ When Le Tenia begins his assault, Alex, pressed against the wall of a tunnel, forcefully pushes him away and cries for help (00:43:04). When he brandishes a knife, Alex is silenced as she frantically looks to the right and to the left, as if seeking help (00:43:15). Her hands remain steadily in front of her chest, as if to create a barrier between her body and the attacker (00:43:29). As Le Tenia threatens

⁶⁵ Wegenstein has a particularly harsh view of *Irréversible*, arguing that the film "rapes women who watch it" and that Noé is "a perpetrator-filmmaker" (16-17). See also Footnote 64.

⁶⁶ Andrews' chapter also emphasizes Alex's hand gestures in the rape sequence, but his arguments differ from mine in that his are focused on how the hand gestures are significant and repeat throughout the film: "These hand gestures are integral to a larger system of hand gestures that help tie the movie together through doublings that communicate a decidedly fatalistic vision. [...] Noé's hand choreography is one of the film's most fundamental interpretive keys, something that makes it possible to understand the tragic philosophy of the film as a whole" (160).

to cut her face (“Tu veux un beau sourire? Espèce de salope...”) (00:43:34), asking if she is “excitée,” she begins to sob (00:43:40). Holding a knife to her throat, he instructs her to lift her skirt, to which she responds by pushing her hands down (out of the camera’s frame), using them to speak for her and signal her active resistance (00:44:14).

As Le Tenia forces Alex to the ground, Noé’s camera follows and becomes motionless, forcing the audience to join Alex in this horrific experience. The camerawork in this scene merits particular regard, as many have suggested that the way Noé shoots this scene is exploitive and sadistic.⁶⁷ Wegenstein even goes as far as to say that, in this sequence, “Noé [gives] it to us like porn” (15). However, as noted, the camera remains static, at a slight distance, focused on the hands and faces of the two individuals (i.e., not their genitals). His camera in fact is positioned to take on the most objective point of view possible so that it neither eroticizes the scene (even accidentally) nor takes on the point of view of the rapist, as other classic rape-revenge films, such as *The Last House on the Left* and *I Spit on Your Grave*, have done in the past (00:44:38).

As the attack becomes even more violent, Alex makes three significant, communicative gestures with her hands. First, she repeatedly (i.e., at least a dozen times by my count) uses them in order to remove his hand from her mouth so that she can breathe and yell for help (00:44:49-00:46:09). When this is unsuccessful, Alex then enacts a second gesture, which is to obstruct his penetration, similar to the way she tried to keep her dress down earlier (00:46:09). Finally, when these gestures have failed to prevent him from violating her, and as he verbally demeans her, comparing her to swine and various putrefying animals, she enacts a most distressing gesture, which is to reach out into the space in front of her for the help that the audience knows will not come (00:47:13). Andrews writes, “The most heart-rending of these motions features Alex’s outstretched hand unfolding in the air, as if to

⁶⁷ See Footnote 64.

scratch it . . . a hand reaching toward the camera, fingers rigid and apart . . . a dramatic sight, indeed” (166).

Thus, while Desportes and Trinh Thi use the close-up shot of penetration as their method to show the horrors of rape, Noé’s approach is to “[focus] on the victim’s agonized hands and face rather than on her violated lower half” (Andrews 163). This language of the body that Alex uses to communicate indeed strengthens what I consider Noé’s thesis: That rape is not only depraved but also dehumanizing, ultimately a crime of opportunity and a perverted assertion of power for which the victim bears no responsibility. Rape, *Irréversible* shows, is not the result of a misunderstanding, a dispute, or taking drugs, nor is it because she wore a backless dress and danced sensually at a party (as the viewer sees later). Although her verbal articulations (i.e., her cries for “help”) are economical in this violent scene, the choreography of her hands abundantly conveys her physical and emotional distress. At the same time, her gestures affirm Noé’s anti-victim blaming stance (i.e., she clearly does not “ask for” this) that has already been established via his scene with Pierre and the police officer.

Another important way that Noé addresses victim blaming and victimization in general are expressed through the words he gives to Le Tenia. Specifically, the rapist verbally assaults her, going so far as to suggest ways in which she “asked for” this attack. First, Le Tenia insinuates that Alex’s clothing choice is provocative and therefore a cause for this attack. Furthermore, and perhaps most disturbing, is how the attacker tries to create the illusion that Alex is in fact a compliant participant who enjoys her violation: “Tu aimes ça, non?” (00:46:11). Le Tenia furthermore instructs her throughout the assault to repeat his words, “Dis, ‘c’est bon, papa!’” (00:49:02), as though he wants affirmation that this is pleasurable for her. “Je vais m’occuper de toi,” says Le Tenia, insinuating that this is an act of “care” (00:44:30) Noé’s script, in essence, stages what Judith Herman considers the “perpetrator’s goal,” which is the “enslavement of his victim” (75). Herman explains that the attacker “appears to have a psychological need to justify his crime, and for this he needs the victim’s

affirmation. Thus, he relentlessly demands from his victim professions of respect, gratitude, or even love. *His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim*” (75) (emphasis mine). In essence, in order to shift the burden of blame onto his victim, Le Tenia endeavors to create a fiction that Alex indeed desires him and is eager to be “taken care of” by him.

The fantasy that a woman enjoys her rape is one that reportedly upsets Noé, and thus it makes sense that he would address this in his work. As Angelique Chrisafis writes: “Noé confessed that he couldn’t bear to watch the four-minute rape scene in Sam Peckinpah’s *Straw Dogs* . . . because he said it condoned the male myth that ‘women really like it,’” she explains. “Noe was infuriated by the scene where Susan George’s character is violently raped by her ex-lover and then, at gunpoint, by his friend, while the audience is allowed the thinking space to believe that she might just be enacting a distant fantasy and enjoying herself” (Chrisafis, “Why Should We Be Regularly Exposed to Graphic Scenes of Murder, But Be Spared Rape?”). It is unsurprising therefore that Noé goes to great lengths to construct a scene in which he makes clear that Alex’s rape is unprovoked and undesired. Andrews affirms, “What Noé is doing [in this scene] is ripping away any possibility of reading ambiguity [i.e., that she “asked for it”] into this rape . . . This is a horrifying scene filmed by an auteur who wants no question about his feelings or those of his heroine,” assertions with which I agree (166).

Before concluding, it is important to mention an additional detail in the rape scene that has not received enough attention. During the attack, Noé’s static camera briefly picks up the silhouette of a figure who enters the tunnel and witnesses the attack (00:45:55). The figure watches at a distance, lingers for a moment, and then ultimately walks away without intervening. The individual is, in essence, Noé’s subtle reminder that this *is* hard to watch. Noé acknowledges through this figure his awareness that viewers might want to escape the scene, even though they have the privilege of observing the unfolding trauma from a comfortable distance. But his camera asks his viewer to watch the unwatchable, to not turn away, even though it may disgust and agitate. It is indeed filmed with the

intention to be “unwatchable,” as No   himself has stated in an interview with *The Guardian*: “Because the subject of the movie was a rape, I said it has to be as powerful as it can be, to be disgusting enough, to be useful” (qtd. in Macnab). The utility of this scene, in my view, is the way it encourages the audience to join the victim in her suffering, without eroticizing or aestheticizing the experience, in order to provide a glimpse of what the experience of rape entails while reminding the audience that it is never something that is chosen or brought on by the victim.

In one of the final moments of the film (i.e., chronologically before the rape), Alex mentions that she is not an object (“Je ne suis pas un objet, tu sais...”) (01:19:05) and that it is she who gets to decide what she does with her life: “C’est moi qui ai tout fait. C’est moi qui ai tout d  cid  ,” she affirms (01:19:10). In a way, these casual remarks are imbued with deep significance because the audience already knows the outcome of this evening. That is, the audience recognizes that she will not be given the opportunity to “decide” in the Parisian tunnel on this fateful night. Her rape is an act that (likely permanently) disempowers her from “deciding” and choosing. By moving away from revenge as the film progresses and, instead, focusing on Alex’s last few blissful hours, No   ultimately underscores the irrevocable, critical losses—loss of choice, loss of peace, loss of a sense of safety, even loss of life—that rape victims experience. Rather than ending on a note of revenge which might impose the impression of triumph on the viewer, No   prefers to present and mourn a lost world that can never be restored to its former beauty.

VIII. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described how *Baise-moi* (both novel and film) and *Irr  versible* implement an array of experimental methods and aesthetic choices, such as reverse narration and explicit imagery, that allow the respective creators, Desportes, Trinh Thi, and No  , to interrogate and upend misconceptions about female victimhood and victimization. While these films inscribe themselves

within the rape-revenge genre, they deconstruct and reformulate the familiar contours of that genre and, in so doing, subvert audience expectations. I have argued that these works masterfully rearticulate the rape-revenge story, thereby disproving Jacinda Read's premature claims that "there have been no new articulations" of the rape-revenge story "since *Eye for an Eye* [1996] and *A Time to Kill* [1996]," and that "the cycle [of rape-revenge] has run its course" (235). Indeed, *Baise-moi* along with *Irréversible* present narratives that not only disrupt established patterns of reading rape-revenge works but also articulate new and even radical visions of victimhood as they simultaneously investigate societal (mis)understandings regarding rape victimization.

Moreover (and perhaps most importantly), *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* distinguish themselves from other rape-revenge tales (even recent ones)⁶⁸ by emphatically distancing themselves from the fantasy of justice, as the attackers are not pursued in *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible's* assailant is never apprehended. While the majority of rape-revenge works share the premise (or fantasy) that vengeance reestablishes a sense of agency and justice to a wronged person, both *Baise-moi* and *Irréversible* assert (albeit in differing ways) that revenge restores nothing when it comes to rape. For the avenging duo in *Baise-moi*, violence is an expressive, communicative act that outwardly and loudly conveys the women's rage, but Desportes and Trinh Thi in no way suggest that any of the ensuing brutality effaces the trauma of rape. Likewise, in *Irréversible*, the violence that Pierre and Marcus enact indeed signals their anger, but Noé, through his inverted structure, notably spotlights the abiding consequences and permanent losses that rape causes. The messages offered by Desportes, Trinh Thi, and Noé resist the triumphant and satisfying endings that viewers have come to expect from the rape-revenge story. These filmmakers cultivate a different message that strongly recalls the final lines of Cormack McCarthy's 2006 post-apocalyptic novel *The Road* in which the narrator illustrates a world that has

⁶⁸ Coralie Fargeat's *Revenge* (2017) and Julien Leclercq's *Sentinelle* (2021) are two recent French rape-revenge films. As they are not particularly experimental in their approaches, they are not included in this discussion.

since been lost to disaster: “Of a thing which could not be put back. Not be made right again” (306).⁶⁹ Describing a cataclysmic event, these words resonate with and illuminate the respective arguments of Desportes, Trinh Thi, and Noé, which is that while vengeance is a response to violence, it is not a restorative act. Revenge can neither reverse the damage nor redress the crime of rape.

Although revenge is the predominant feature in chapter one, elements of violence and agency will reappear, albeit quite differently, in my second chapter, “Aberrant Fictions: On Control, Ritual, Risk, and Reclaiming the ‘Lust for Life,’” which examines Hélène Duffau’s *Trauma* (2003), Philippe Djian’s *Oh...* (2012), and Paul Verhoeven’s film adaptation of Djian’s novel, *Elle* (2016). Specifically, I investigate narratives that depict victims whose responses to rape challenge audiences perhaps even more than the murderous duo of *Baise-moi*. While tackling difficult subjects such as rape reenactment, consent, and autonomy, as well as the seemingly strange and dangerous rituals that some survivors enact in the aftermath of assault, these potentially disturbing narratives dramatize how audiences expect a victim’s story to be presented in such a way as to make the listener or viewer comfortable—a notion flatly dismissed in these unconventional works. Most importantly, as I will show, these fictions invite audiences to reflect upon the challenges inherent to the rape recovery process as well as the unexpected ways that this journey can look.

⁶⁹ Alison Taylor also invokes McCarthy’s final passage while discussing *Irréversible* in her 2017 work *Troubled Everyday: The Aesthetics of Violence and the Everyday in European Art Cinema*. However, Taylor refers to McCarthy’s passage to highlight the artistic “decision to look backwards at the everyday that is lost at the outset” (121) and the tension that is created between violence as it “irrupts” within the context of “the everyday” in *Irréversible* (121). Her use of *The Road* does not offer commentary on the consequences of rape or the condition of victimhood.

Chapter Two:

Aberrant Fictions: On Control, Ritual, Risk, and Reclaiming the “Lust for Life”¹

“Dear Sister, [...] Each person you encounter will expect an emotional performance based in their belief of how a rape survivor behaves and feels. [...] [W]hen you try to find a way to deal with the rape on your own terms, someone will step forward to correct your decision, once again reminding you that your body is not your own. This feels like another violation. [...] What you need to know, and what no one will be willing to say, is that it is okay to stop trying to put this behind you. [...] Time will pass and one day you will wake up and realize that you have put this beside you and not behind you. [...] [D]eciding how you are going to survive rape will give you back the autonomy that you thought you had lost.”

—Renée Martin, “Letter 6: Putting It Beside You” (39-42)

“Power is a game...”

—Robert Greene, *The 48 Laws of Power* (xxi)

I. Introduction

Popular depictions of rape and its aftermath have conditioned readers and filmgoers to expect a certain kind of victim. Most commonly in fictional works, audiences encounter either a vengeful figure who pursues her attacker(s) and seeks bloody retribution (e.g., Coralie Fargeat’s *Revenge* [2017]), or a protagonist who turns her suffering onto herself, engaging in various forms of self-destruction and even suicide to soothe her emotional pain (e.g., Virginie Lou’s *Éloge de la lumière au temps des dinosaures* [1997], Elisa Brune’s *La Tournante* [2001], and Marie-Sabine Roger’s *Un simple viol* [2004]). Kathryn Robson confirms, “The most common response to rape in contemporary French fiction is extreme violence, directed either against others or onto the self (through self-harm and suicide)” (“An

¹ Here, I reference Iggy Pop’s album (and song of the same name) *Lust for Life* (1977) which features in two of the works I examine in this chapter.

Encounter” 432). Consequently, many of these familiar depictions, especially those of the second category (i.e., those with victims who self-harm and/or end their lives), present rape as a total destruction of the self and ultimately reiterate the longstanding idea of “rape as a kind of death” (a paradigm that took particular hold during the 1970s and one that remains prevalent even today, as I discuss later) (433). Fictional stories that culminate in violence and/or the rape victim’s death (either literal or metaphorical), have become expected, even commonplace.

However, in this chapter, I address another kind of victim that subverts these established categories, that of the woman whose reaction to her attack is so atypical (from a narrative standpoint) that it causes disorientation and confusion not only to those in her world, but also to the audience that observes her story as it unfolds. In the works that I analyze in this chapter, the protagonists turn to rituals, risk-taking, and even games to forge a path toward recuperation and thus regain a sense of agency. In so doing, these depictions of victimhood deny the pervasive cultural notion that equates rape with death and, instead, portray victims who assert their desire to live in the aftermath of rape. Before I expound on these arguments, however, a brief reflection on the importance of control as it applies to rape recovery is essential in order to set a foundation for this discussion.

For many victims, rape is experienced as a loss of power. The victim’s capacity to choose not only what she does but also what happens to her has been greatly reduced and, more often than not, done away with altogether. The crime thus disrupts—even devastates—one’s sense of autonomy, leaving many survivors with enduring feelings of vulnerability, helplessness, and terror (Herman 33-34). Both a psychological wound and physical trauma, rape profoundly damages one’s ability to maintain a sense of security and agency (Brison xii); furthermore, it gravely violates one’s corporeal integrity (Cahill 10). But even more than disempowering the victim by attacking her wellbeing and

destroying her sense of safety, rape fundamentally undermines her subjectivity and denies her personhood (Cahill 132).²

Rebuilding a sense of control as well as autonomy over one's own body, choices, and actions therefore becomes the challenge at hand for the rape survivor. In *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), Susan J. Brison explains, "One of the most serious harms of trauma is that of loss of control" (73). Continuing, she writes, "Whether or not such total loss of control is constitutive of trauma, a daunting, seemingly impossible, task faced by the trauma survivor is to regain a sense of control over her or his life" (73). Mithu Sanyal likewise declares in *Rape: From Lucretia to #MeToo* (2019), "Where rape takes agency away from victims, healing is about regaining agency" (81).

However, it is not always clear how these feelings of powerlessness and perceptions of lost control should be addressed. Brison writes that the "goal of the survivor" is neither "to transcend the trauma" nor "solve the dilemmas of survival, but simply to endure," which she admits is difficult, even impossible for some (84-85). For the survivor, enduring means both learning how to cope and discovering how to inscribe the traumatic event within her life (i.e., "[integrate] it into one's life story," as Brison says [103], or "put . . . [it] beside you and not behind you," Martin writes [41]) in order to not only live through it but also with it.³

Integrating rape into one's life story (to borrow Brison's words [103]) is a theme most often found in women's memoirs (as opposed to fiction). There are in fact numerous real-life accounts by and about women that relate their traumatic experiences of sexual violence and share the survival strategies (e.g., participating in support groups, attending therapy, meeting with spiritual leaders,

² In *Rethinking Rape* (2001), Ann J. Cahill writes, "[R]ape constitutes a physical, sexual (and sexed) assault on the personhood of the victim" (192). Cahill's sixth chapter, "The Ethical Wrongs of Rape," is most pertinent here as it offers an in-depth discussion of how and why rape destroys the victim's personhood and subjectivity.

³ Despentès also speaks of living *with* rape in *King Kong Théorie* (2006): "Il s'agissait de faire avec" (46).

writing, meditating, taking self-defense classes) that have promoted their personal recovery processes, allowing them to reinstate that necessary sense of agency.⁴ Narrative fiction and cinema, on the other hand, have generally treated the victim's attempts to inscribe the event within her life in conjunction with her psychological search for agency after rape as peripheral concerns (at most), rarely delving expressly into the topic.

More recently, however, that has changed. I have discerned an emerging, innovative trend⁵ within contemporary French fiction and narrative cinema in which the turbulent and complex psychological process of reclaiming one's power, control, and will to live in the aftermath of rape is not merely described but in fact carefully scrutinized and emphasized as a topic in and of itself. That is, authors and filmmakers are more recently placing the rape victim's psychological quest to endure and reclaim power at the center of their narratives rather than relegating these aspects to the margins of the story. This new narrative pattern is particularly significant in that instead of portraying victims who seek to recover agency in the form of radical violence against their attackers, and rather than showing victims who choose to end their lives (motifs that audiences have come to anticipate), writers and filmmakers are presenting protagonists whose approaches to healing and recapturing agency are unexpected, even potentially shocking and disturbing, thereby taking the audience by surprise. In so doing, these writers and filmmakers simultaneously create new narratives and widen the cultural

⁴ See, for example, Alice Sebold's *Lucky* (1999), Bellil's *Dans l'enfer des tournantes* (2002), Brison's *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (2002), Desportes' *King Kong Théorie* (2006), Banon's *Le Bal des hypocrites* (2011), Karyn L. Freedman's *One Hour in Paris: A True Story of Rape and Recovery* (2014), Bescond's *Les Chatouilles: Ou La Danse De La Colère* (2015), Flament's *La Consolation* (2016), Bon's *La Petite fille sur la banquise* (2018), Miller's *Know My Name* (2019), Robert's *Zone grise* (2020), Bowdler's *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation, and a Manifesto* (2020), and Springora's *Le Consentement* (2020).

⁵ On the term *trend*, I do not mean fad. Rather, I rely on *Collin's Dictionary* definition which describes the term as "a change or development toward something new or different" ("Trend, N."). As Amy Ninetto confirms, "A trend is a pattern that is observed to develop over time. Trend can also refer to the overall direction of such a pattern" ("Word for Word: Tendency or Trend?"). With these clarifications in mind, I use the term to describe an emerging, discernable pattern within contemporary French cinema and fiction that may remain or evolve over time.

dialogue about female victimhood. While it cannot be determined exactly what has prompted this development and why these authors and directors are motivated to present such unusual depictions of female victimhood (as their intentions remain unclear from my research),⁶ the works, I argue, conspicuously manifest a concern for the condition of victimhood and demonstrate an investment in expanding the literary and cinematic inventory of victims, offering stories of abuse and survival that (to my knowledge) have not yet been told.

As this dissertation is primarily interested in the ways in which contemporary French works actively deviate from common assumptions and misconceptions about victimhood that have been reinforced by the media, the trend is therefore vital to this discussion because it concerns protagonists whose portrayals (including their responses to sexual violence and methods of recuperation) frustrate and upend the expectations of readers and viewers. This new narrative tendency therefore offers uncommon yet necessary portraits of what the survival and aftermath process can entail. That is not to say that these works are necessarily pedagogical, and to be clear, these works are neither autobiographical nor testimonial (and therefore do not purport to contain real-life perspectives on the experience of rape). Rather, they are authorial deviations from fixed narrative formulas (i.e., tropes, clichés) that ultimately offer new, subversive interpretations of female victimhood, expanding what is sayable and showable about the crime and its aftermath through fiction and film.

⁶ In the introduction to this dissertation, however, I do speculate and offer my thoughts on why there has been, in general, an increased interest in offering more nuanced artistic depictions of victimhood. These reasons include the advent of third-wave feminism and the arrival of social media/journalism that seeks to amplify the experiences and voices of marginalized, under-represented populations (e.g., rape victims). Memoirs and other personal narratives that share complex accounts of victimhood have also become increasingly popular within the last two decades. These factors have perhaps created a demand for a wider variety of victim representation in works of art.

This tendency is observable in several recent works of French fiction and film, most notably in Christine Angot's novel *Inceste* (1999),⁷ Catherine Breillat's film *À ma sœur* (1999),⁸ Michael Haneke's film *La Pianiste* (2001),⁹ Hélène Duffau's 2003 novel *Trauma*, Philippe Djian's 2012 novel "Ob...", and Paul Verhoeven's 2016 film *Elle* (the adaptation of Djian's text). Each of these works, to my mind, investigates what the rape survival process can look like and, in so doing, transgresses conventional and predominant approaches to portraying victimhood. While all of these works are unique and worthy of close study, I have chosen to limit my discussion in this chapter to the works of Duffau, Djian, and Verhoeven, which I consider to be the most compelling examples of this trend because the aftermath of rape and the search to reclaim agency and vitality are explored at great length and in depth (and in atypical ways from an aesthetic and storytelling viewpoint), making them ideal case studies.

In analyzing Duffau's *Trauma*, Djian's "Ob...", and Verhoeven's *Elle*, I highlight the ways in which these works experiment with portraying the aftermath of rape by veering away from the prevailing narrative patterns that audiences know well. In addition to radically upending conventional rape narratives and familiar renderings of female victims, these works, which I call narratives of control, urge audiences to think critically about the inherently untidy nature of the trauma recovery process. To this end, these innovative narratives place special emphasis on the idiosyncratic rituals, behaviors, practices, and even games (some mundane, some potentially dangerous) that anchor and sustain the protagonists by providing them with a sense of comfort and control, making their survival

⁷ Regarding the genre of Angot's work: It is unclear if *Inceste* is fiction or a testimonial account, as the author often blends the fictional with the autobiographical. See Gill Rye's "Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot's Incest Narratives" (2010) and Ruth Cruickshank's "Christine Angot: Trauma, Transgression, and the *Write to Reply*" (2009).

⁸ See Douglas Keesey's "Split Identification: Representations of Rape in Gaspar Noé's *Irréversible* and Catherine Breillat's *À ma sœur/Fat Girl*" (2010).

⁹ Based on the 1983 Austrian novel of the same name by Elfriede Jelinek.

possible. In so doing, the works make legible experiences and processes that audiences do not ordinarily encounter in fiction and cinema as they (i.e., experiences/processes) have routinely been kept hidden—left off the page and off the screen.

As these stories are quite unconventional, it is perhaps unsurprising that they (especially *Elle*) have elicited very strong—often negative—reactions from the public. Even a cursory glance at the critiques, reviews, and scholarly writings on *Trauma*, “*Ob..*,” and *Elle* (which I discuss in depth later) reveals that most generally fixate on the characters’ individual reactions to their rapes and categorize those reactions as strange, perverse, fantastical, and unusual (etc.)¹⁰ which suggests that even when watching films and reading novels, audiences have expectations about what the aftermath of rape entails and often project those fixed ideas onto the works. To be sure, from an audience perspective, the survival strategies illustrated in these fictional works may read as peculiar (at best) or even alarming. But what is a *usual* response to rape? Can there be such a thing? Or as one critic of *Elle* succinctly asks, “What are the expected modes of behavior for a victim?” (Heliotis, “Review: We Need to Talk about ‘*Elle*’). These are, in my estimation, precisely the questions these works pose.

With this in mind, I argue that these unorthodox narratives do not present unsettling responses to sexual violence for mere shock value. Rather, by calling attention to these peculiar coping practices, the works illustrate both the search for autonomous living and the process that Brison calls “the remaking of the self” (xii). Furthermore (and perhaps most importantly), by interrogating and articulating paths of survival and the unexpected ways that this journey can take, I assert that the selected stories are successful in addressing, disentangling, and ultimately rejecting the relationship that has been drawn (culturally) between rape and death.¹¹ That is, upon careful inspection, one

¹⁰ See Kathryn Robson; Bidisha SK Mamata; Dennis Lim; Raphael Abraham; and Ben Dickinson.

¹¹ I address this in my section on *Trauma*, specifically in my review of the scholarship.

discovers that these works actively argue against the persistent notion that rape is a kind of symbolic death by highlighting how the coping mechanisms enlisted are all in service of (re)learning how to live and recuperating one's desire to exist (or, as emphasized by the Iggy Pop song featured throughout Verhoeven's film and referenced in Duffau's novel, recapturing one's "Lust for Life").¹²

II. A Note on Frequently Used Terms

In this chapter, I periodically use certain terms (some of which appear in my title) that require clarification. First, I rely on Merriam-Webster's definition of *aberrant*: "deviating from the usual or natural type" and "straying from the right or normal way" ("Aberrant N."). I use this term not to suggest or imply any form of judgement on the behaviors depicted in the works that I study. Rather, I include the term because the characters engage in practices that, from an outside (i.e., reader/viewer/critic) perspective, are unexpected, seemingly unusual and transgressive when compared with common popular depictions and thus potentially shocking and disturbing to witness.¹³ In fact, words like *aberrant* as well as related terms such as *odd* and *bizarre* (etc.) appear quite frequently in criticism related to *Trauma*, "*Oh...*," and especially *Elle*, as I will show.

Furthermore, I make frequent use of the term *ritual*. According to *Merriam-Webster*, *ritual* generally signifies "an act or series of acts regularly repeated in a set precise manner" ("Ritual, N."). However, for my purposes in this chapter, I will rely on Francesca Gino and Michael I. Norton's definition, which specifies rituals as the "behaviors we perform before, during, and after meaningful event[s] . . . [which can] take an extraordinary array of shapes and forms . . . at times involving fixed,

¹² Iggy Pop's "Lust for Life" (1977) features in two separate instances during *Elle*; Pop's lyrics from "Some Weird Sin" (1977) appear in *Trauma* as an epigraph. Both songs derive from the same 1977 album entitled *Lust for Life*. I discuss the inclusion of these songs and lyrics later in this chapter.

¹³ As I show later in this chapter, critics of *Elle* in particular make habitual use of terms similar to *aberrant* when describing the protagonist.

repeated sequences of actions, [and] at other times not” (“Why Rituals Work”). They further clarify the grounds for such behavior: “People facing situations that induce anxiety typically take comfort” in ritualized activities which may “[induce] a feeling of being back in control and reducing uncertainty” (“Why Rituals Work”).¹⁴ In the context of this chapter, I consider rituals as the various routines, practices, habits, and/or games that are performed regularly, often (but not always) in a systematic way. Adding further nuance, I think of *rituals* as “concrete, observable *resource[s]*” that, when carried out habitually, offer “relief” to traumatized individuals (Rothschild, *The Body Remembers* 93). These rituals, as I will argue, function as survival strategies for the female figures within the works, encouraging the impression that some control has been reclaimed.

Regarding the term *control*, I mean exercising power, authority, and “[direct] influence” over situations and/or circumstances (“Control, N.”). This chapter specifically operates on the assumption that maintaining complete control within one’s life is not possible. However, according to research in trauma studies (both theoretical and clinical), it is accepted that individuals generally rely on the sense that they maintain at least some control over their world and experiences. As trauma is “all about losing control,” clinician Babette Rothschild explains, “it makes a lot of sense to prioritize reclaiming and increasing . . . [one’s] sense of control over his or her body, mind, therapy situation, and life” (*Revolutionizing Trauma* xxiii).¹⁵ Offering further clarification, Cynthia Hess writes,

¹⁴ “In the late 1910s,” explain Gino and Norton, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski “suggested that people are more likely to turn to rituals when they face situations where the outcome is . . . uncertain and beyond their control” (“Why Rituals Work”).

¹⁵ Rothschild’s full quote in *Revolutionizing Trauma Treatment*: “Loss of control is at the core of PTSD. No one develops the disorder who was in control of the circumstances: able to stop the car or the tsunami, not be in the wrong place at the wrong time, avoid the perpetrator, and so on. Further, people with PTSD have a multitude of highly distressing mind and body symptoms that characterize the disorder and appear beyond their control, including intrusive memories in the form of visual, auditory, or somatic flashbacks that come unbidden and rock their stability. PTSD is, really, all about losing control. Therefore, it makes a lot of sense to prioritize reclaiming and increasing a client’s sense of control over his or her body, mind, therapy situation, and life” (xxiii). See Herman; see Hess.

[H]uman beings need a *sense* of control to function well in the world . . . [even though] most of us know on a conscious level that we cannot completely determine the direction of our lives and that sometimes things happen that we cannot predict or prevent. Yet, on a deeper level, at the very core of our being, we tend to believe that we are in control of what happens to us . . . [and] [t]his conviction serves an important function: It enables us to go about our daily lives without being overwhelmed by all the things that could go radically wrong. (47)

(emphasis mine)

In essence, the explanations of Rothschild and Hess provide helpful and succinct frameworks for thinking about what is at stake when someone loses that important perception of control or, to put it another way, what the pursuit of control means for victims of rape. Rituals, as I will show, create a sense of order for the protagonists in these fictional works, and that sense of order ultimately allows them to feel that they have regained some control and authority over their lives and their bodies.

Finally, the term *risk* means, according to *Merriam-Webster*, the “possibility of loss or injury” (“Risk, *N*”), and “to expose to hazard or danger” (“Risk, *V*”). The traumatized characters in the tales I examine in this chapter arguably imperil themselves in their pursuit of control. To be clear, I do not judge the methods and actions of the protagonists in these works, and I also point out that engaging in risky behavior is in fact a fairly common symptom of PTSD¹⁶ (a condition presented in the works studied). Yet, it is important to acknowledge that these characters compromise their safety by creating and implementing rituals that could lead to further interpersonal violence—both physical and psychological—and thus further traumatization (e.g., engaging with one’s rapist and/or having anonymous sexual encounters).

¹⁶ See Tull, Weiss, and McDermott (3).

“The first principle of recovery is empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery.”

—Judith Herman (133)

III. “Je suis un cas chronique”¹⁷: Seminal Encounters in Duffau’s *Trauma*

Composed of short, numbered chapters (thirty-two in total), *Trauma* is a first-person narrative (and Duffau’s first novel) that documents the daily life of a woman who endeavors to regroup and reorient her life after surviving a gang rape—an experience which she resists recounting in full.¹⁸ That is, rather than focusing on the violent event itself, the spotlight in *Trauma* is instead placed upon the grueling processes of survival and convalescence. Over the course of (what appears to be) one month, the reader follows the recovery journey and everyday struggles (both physical and mental) of this unnamed narrator who speaks frankly, as though writing within the protective privacy of her diary. Beginning each chapter (or entry) with a short epigraph (consisting of song lyrics)¹⁹ that helps to convey more fully the narrator’s current emotional state, and communicating in unembellished, terse sentences, Duffau’s narrator describes in great detail how the trauma of rape lives within her body like an infectious disease or growth (i.e., “la tumeur” 24) which has subsequently invaded every aspect of her life to the point that she rarely leaves her home and generally avoids interacting with others (24). However, even though she speaks often of death (and this is what some critics have focused on, as I will show) and how this experience should have killed her (“J’aurais dû mourir” 21), she nevertheless maintains her resolve to live (“J’ai choisi de vivre” 24), a sentiment which is repeated throughout the text.

¹⁷ These are lyrics that appear in *Trauma*; Duffau attributes them to the artist La Strada (7, 132).

¹⁸ See chapter XIV (59-62) in which she offers fragmentary details of her memory of the attack.

¹⁹ It appears that most of the epigraphs in *Trauma* are song lyrics by known artists (e.g., Iggy Pop, Marianne Faithful, and Limp Bizkit). However, there are others in the text that are of unclear origins (perhaps even fabricated by Duffau as they did not appear in any of my internet searches).

Moreover, *Trauma*'s reader is invited to follow this narrator as she discloses her personal coping strategy (which she explains in painstaking detail), and although perhaps "strange" to readers ("bizarre," Robson says [441]), one discovers that this method anchors her and thus attests to her will to exist. In so doing, the unique life-affirming ritual that she performs regularly along with certain techniques of narration she employs throughout the text ultimately allow her to reaffirm her subjectivity, rehabilitate herself, and find a new way to live after enduring a dehumanizing and devastating violation. In essence, through formal and aesthetic innovations and experimentations (e.g., the use and repetition of pronouns and the borrowing of song lyrics), *Trauma* not only calls attention to the turbulent process of survival but also explores the ways in which recovery from this psychological and corporeal wound (i.e., rape) can necessitate the creation of unorthodox remedies.

a. Scholarship/Criticism on *Trauma*

Before I expound upon my own reading of *Trauma*, I offer here an overview of the extant (albeit minimal)²⁰ scholarship on this text and briefly comment on these contributions, describing how I position myself regarding this previous research and how my interpretations differ.

Most recently, Duffau's novel received a cursory and, in my view, inaccurate reference in Johan Michel's *The Repairable and the Irreparable: Being Human in the Age of Vulnerability* (2022). Speaking of autobiographies that function as therapeutic outlets for writers, he states: "The literary autobiography becomes a psychotherapy in its own right . . . to exorcize the memories of rape (Helene Duffau [sic], Édouard Louis) [...]" (82).²¹ Michel does not mention Duffau's text again in his work nor does he

²⁰ *Trauma* has been granted very little scholarly attention. Perhaps this is because it is a relatively recent work.

²¹ Michel's full quote reads: "The literary autobiography becomes a psychotherapy in its own right, to triumph over shame (Christine Angot, Annie Ernal [sic]), to exorcize the memories of rape (Helene Duffau [sic], Édouard Louis), or to heal the wounds of heartbreak (Yves Charnet)" (82). As an aside, by "Ernal," I assume Michel means Annie Ernaux.

leave a reference or citation regarding his claim that *Trauma* is an autobiography. I have found no references that list this work as autobiography. On the contrary, I have only seen Duffau's text described as a *roman* (i.e., novel) in my research, including on Duffau's personal website where she has compiled a selection of positive reviews and critiques of *Trauma*—all of which characterize the work as a novel (Duffau, "*Trauma*"). Accordingly, I consider and treat the work as fiction.

Aside from our differing views on the work's genre, I further disagree with Michel's comment that *Trauma* is about "exorcising the memories of rape" (82). To exorcize signifies, according to *Merriam-Webster*, "to expel" or "to get rid of," which I do not interpret as the narrator's goal ("Exorcize, N."). Rather, as I will later show, I read her actions as her way of living and coping with her pain by creating order (i.e., control) through rituals. Exorcize, in my estimation, is too strong a word and therefore inappropriate for the given context.

Duffau's heroine makes a brief appearance in Jean Streff's work on human sexuality and fetishism entitled *Traité du fétichisme: à l'usage des jeunes générations* (2005). *Trauma*, referenced in his chapter "Sperme, cyprine et femmes fontaines," is barely given a passing mention as Streff simply uses a quote from Duffau's narrator to open his very general discussion about how civilizations and certain thinkers have conceived of and intellectualized sperm (and other bodily fluids). Aside from citing the quote, he does not comment upon Duffau's text itself and does not explain the context in which Duffau's reference to the fluid belongs (i.e., rape). *Trauma*'s heroine is briefly invoked once more in the chapter when Streff discusses another text that describes fellatio, arguing that it includes a scene that "would delight" Duffau "without a doubt."²² This is, in my view, an imprecise comment and

²² All translations that appear in this chapter are my own unless otherwise stated. For reference, Streff's full quote reads: "Dans *Tout feu, tout femme*, Gilles Derais décrit une scène de fétichisation du sperme qui sans nul doute ravirait Hélène Duffau" (294).

mischaracterization of *Trauma* as it is explicitly not about delighting in sexual acts. Rather, Duffau's heroine uses the substance to recapture agency after victimization, as I will explain in detail later.

The only scholarly works that treat *Trauma* in depth are those by Kathryn Robson, who offers significant commentary on the text in two separate articles published in 2007 entitled "Spaces of Violation: Refiguring Rape in Contemporary French Women's Fiction" and "'An Encounter with Death?': Life after Rape in Contemporary French Women's Writing." Although I build upon her work and support many of her claims, we ultimately read and interpret Duffau's novel very differently. In her articles, Robson "focus[es] on culturally prevalent discourses on rape" and how those discourses play out in contemporary fiction ("Spaces" 66).

In "Spaces of Violation," Robson shows how some contemporary French works (one of which is *Trauma*²³) "refuse to reiterate" the notion that rape is an exclusively interior wound as has been theorized by feminist scholars since the 1970s (60). She argues that in *Trauma*, "the violation of rape is not contained inside the body" but is rather "displaced from the bodily interior to its boundaries" (57-65). Robson interprets the behavior and rituals of Duffau's protagonist as "attempts to rewrite" her trauma that "fail" (65). While Robson recognizes how the narrator's actions might offer a "means of regaining control," she ultimately interprets these behaviors, choices, and rituals as "compulsive rather than controlled," arguing that they essentially "[highlight] . . . [the narrator's] lack of control over her own body" (64). "She seems bound to repeat the invasion of the rape," Robson writes, "rather than overcoming it" (64). I do not read an attempt to "overcome" in *Trauma* and, moreover, while they may be compulsive acts, I do not interpret what the heroine does as a "fail[ure]" to "rewrite" her experience (64-65). I read the rituals and behaviors as the means by which she

²³ The other is Virginie Lou's *Éloge de la lumière au temps des dinosaures* (1997).

attempts to live with (or “endure,” as Brison states, 85) her trauma rather than an effort to completely vanquish it.

In “‘An Encounter with Death?’: Life after Rape in Contemporary French Women’s Writing,” Robson is interested in interrogating the prevailing cultural notion that equates rape with death and how that is reflected in contemporary French fiction. We share this interest and, furthermore, before encountering Robson’s work, I had independently noticed how theoretical and even personal writings about rape almost always include at least one instance in which rape is compared to or associated with death.²⁴ I have observed that this phenomenon often occurs in fictional works as well.

Robson discusses the history of the “rape as a death” paradigm that developed in public discourses in the late twentieth century. “Rape,” writes Robson, “was one of the key items on the feminist agenda in France in the 1970s, part of a renewed focus on (the liberation of) the female body” (434). It was within this period that activists mobilized to protest sexual violence against women and call attention not only to its pervasiveness but also its deleterious effects. For this analysis, Robson

²⁴ Examples of this phenomenon in theory/personal writings: Cahill writes that rape represents for the victim “a walking social death” (132); Cathy Winkler considers rape “a social murder” (14); in the landmark Aix-en-Provence case of 1978 (the first case in French legal history in which rape victims succeeded in being heard by the *Cours d’Assises*—the criminal court that hears serious crimes), the two victims characterized themselves during court proceedings as “mortes vivantes” when speaking about the aftereffects of their rapes (qtd. in Halimi 9); the two victims in this case further argued, “The rape was a devastation, it was the destruction of our very selves” (qtd. in Vigarello 209); their lawyer, Gisèle Halimi, also made use of this death/rape comparison, stating that her clients “have to live with this death that entered into them forever on one day of violence” (qtd. in Vigarello 209; see Halimi 9); family members of the victims in the Aix-en-Provence case stated, “They have died a slow death for four years and I am dying with them (qtd. in Vigarello 209). Gina Messina-Dysert, writing about rape in wartimes, states, “[Rapists] don’t even need to use . . . weapons. Rape kills her [i.e., the female victim]” (45); Séverine Liatard asserts, “Le viol est un meurtre symbolique, accompagné parfois d’un meurtre réel” (“Comment le viol est devenu un crime”); Brison claims that “the victim’s inability to be—and to assert—her self in the context of a rape constitutes at least a temporary social death” (46), and she furthermore speaks of feeling that she “perhaps did die” during her rape and attempted murder in France (9); in *Le Viol*, Marie-Ange Le Boulaire recounts her rape and speaks of herself as a corpse (“un cadavre”), one of the “living dead” (“un mort vivant”) (38). Regarding narrative literature that links rape with death, see the works by Delphine de Vigan, Lou, Brune, and Roger. Robson explores the texts of Roger and Lou (along with Duffau) in “‘An Encounter with Death?’” (437-442).

relies chiefly on the work of Georges Vigarello, a historian who has carefully outlined the rise of this now highly prevalent cultural association between rape and death.

In *A History of Rape: Sexual Violence in France from the 16th to the 20th Century* (2000), Vigarello argues that *prior* to the mid-1970s, discourses surrounding rape typically neither described nor considered the crime in terms of psychological trauma (Vigarello 207-214). Yet, it was during this period of feminist protestation (and, I would add, of renewed medical interest in exploring and theorizing post-traumatic stress disorder [PTSD] more generally) that “rape first became seen as a psychological trauma,” and as a result, “allusions to trauma as a form of death of the self . . . becam[e] popularized” (Robson 433). Vigarello explains that although “a handful of scholars at the beginning of the [twentieth] century” made “reference to an inner trauma” when discussing rape, it was in the mid-1970s that this idea became “one of the main criteria for asserting the gravity of the crime” (209). Subsequently, public discourses about rape (and other traumas) began to place emphasis on the idea of a “death” (244). “The consequence of the crime is . . . psychic death,” he writes (244). It is “the shattering of [one’s] identity, an incurable wound to which the victim seems doomed,” Vigarello concludes (244).

In essence, Robson summarizes, “[T]he notion of rape as a traumatic destruction or ‘death’ of the self took hold in France and elsewhere [at this time] . . . and remains culturally prevalent today” (433). She is right to point out that these references that link rape with death are still present today and are indeed observable in contemporary French discourses as well as fictional and nonfictional works. However, it is also relevant to note that while Robson is only speaking about a specific time period in which this notion became particularly prevalent within public discourses and was used (especially by feminists and activists) to express the magnitude of the crime and the lifelong consequences it causes for victims, cultural representations of rape victims prior to the 1970s also tended to portray the rape victim as either literally deceased, or present her as symbolically dead, as

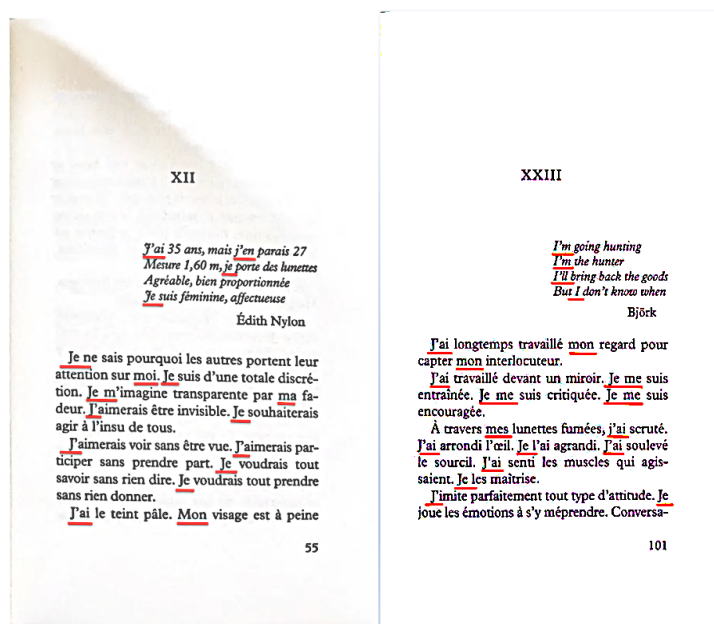
evidenced by the examples I gave in the introduction to this dissertation (e.g., Perrault's "Little Red Riding Hood," Baudelaire's *femme-fleur*, Zola's *Séverine*). To be clear, these past works are not ones that give attention to the rape victim as a subject, for they neither focus on her experience of victimhood nor do they argue for the severity of the crime. However, they nevertheless present rape as a type of death in the sense that the crime often represents the end of a woman's social existence and/or value. In short, rape-as-death has endured conceptually throughout the ages; however, it was in the 1970s that this idea acquired new meaning as a result of public discourses that sought to establish the gravity of the offense and the trauma it can engender.

Returning to Robson, she concludes that the works she examines, including *Trauma*, do not go against the established "rape as death" concept and in fact ultimately reiterate it. In the case of *Trauma*, I disagree with this reading. In both of her articles, Robson groups *Trauma* with narratives that end in suicide, which I consider inappropriate as it ends with the protagonist asserting, "Je puis continuer de vivre" (Duffau 132). Robson furthermore characterizes the behavior of *Trauma*'s narrator as "bizarre" and "odd" which are terms I avoid in describing her actions as they are normative and imply that there is a "standard," or more correct, way to respond to rape ("An Encounter" 441). While Robson and I certainly share some points of agreement, and I continue to cite and interact with her articles when appropriate, we nevertheless approach and interpret the text quite differently, for I read Duffau's novel as a rejection (as opposed to reiteration) of the "rape as death" notion.

b. Close Reading of *Trauma*

Trauma begins with a forceful imposition and assertion of the self, and this insistence upon the self continues throughout the text. Within the first chapter alone (scarcely five pages) the pronoun *je* appears sixty-four times, and versions of the personal pronouns *moi*, *me*, and *ma/mon* appear forty-two times (7-11). *Je* is the first word uttered by the narrator; *je* begins the last sentence of the chapter

(11); and *je* heads the final sentence of the entire novel (132). Nearly every chapter begins and ends with a form of *je* or *moi/mon/me*, and the vast majority of the text is made up of *je* statements. Only six chapters (of the thirty-two) begin with something other than “*je*”/“*I*.” The effect is even visually startling, as nearly every page (133 in total) is saturated with these pronouns, producing the impression that the entire textual architecture is built upon the “*je*.” In so doing, the narrator weaves her *self* into the fabric of the page, with the body of the text nearly becoming the narrator’s body and the “*je*” functioning as the skeletal structure that upholds the narrator and supports her convalescence. Below (figs. 1 and 2) are some examples (from two different chapters) that I have selected for their ability to sharply illustrate this phenomenon that occurs throughout *Trauma* (on nearly every page).



Figures 1 and 2, Hélène Duffau, *Trauma* (55 and 101)

Additionally, the majority of epigraphs (all but nine) that introduce the chapters contains an “*I*”/“*je*”/“*me*” statement (Figures 1 and 2 also illustrate this). I view these epigraphs as an additional device that the narrator employs to impose and assert the self while fortifying her voice within the text. Although she neither formally introduces herself to the reader nor offers biographical details about her life (which in turn reinforces the sense that one is reading a personal journal written in real

time), these epigraphs arguably read as supplemental information (i.e., in addition to the main text) provided by the narrator to suggest her mental state and mood (or what she is listening to) and attest to her need to make herself and her struggles known. If one reads these epigraphs (i.e., those with “je”/“I” statements) sequentially, the impression of a sort of patchwork self-narrative via lyrics and various voices begins to emerge. For example:

“Je suis un cas chronique”²⁵ (7); “I stand at the world’s edge / I’m trying to break in”²⁶ (13); “Now stop and realize, / The pain I have inside”²⁷ (17); “I’m gonna lose / My god damned mind”²⁸ (21); “[J]e suis ici et j’ai le / choix de / Vivre”²⁹ (25); “My name is Luka / I live on the second floor”³⁰ (29); “But it’s not easy to be alive / So don’t be wasting none of my time”³¹ (35); “J’ai 35 ans”³² (55); “I wanna walk feeling tall”³³ (59); “I hate the way you want me to be”³⁴ (75); “I’m going hunting / I’m the hunter”³⁵ (101); “I’ve come to the conclusion / That

²⁵ Lyrics attributed to the band La Strada (from a song I could not identify in my research).

²⁶ From Iggy Pop’s “Some Weird Sin.”

²⁷ From The Godfathers’ “Halfway Paralyzed.”

²⁸ Lyrics attributed to the artist Arno (from a song I could not identify in my research).

²⁹ From Akhenaton’s “Le Calme comme essence.”

³⁰ From Suzanne Vega’s “Luka.”

³¹ From Limp Bizkit’s “Livin’ It Up.”

³² From Édith Nylon’s “Mariage dernier délai.”

³³ From Dolly’s “U Can’t Hide.”

³⁴ From The Cure’s “Trap.”

³⁵ From Björk’s “Hunter.”

people / Need People”³⁶ (105); “Life is hard . . . I should have known better”³⁷ (109); and, finally, “Je suis un cas chronique.”³⁸ (133) (Note: the first and the last epigraph are the same)

Although these are just a few examples of the musical epigraphs included, and although they are not written by Duffau herself, they work in harmony when juxtaposed and read together, constructing a narrative of a person in deep crisis who nevertheless fights to survive despite her “chronic” condition (7, 133), paralleling the narrator’s own story. To be clear, while the lyrics are indeed separate and likely never originally intended to be in direct relationship to one another,³⁹ Duffau’s artful selection and conscious arrangement ultimately produce a plurality of voices that, when taken together and in context, arguably creates the sense of one consolidated voice that loudly proclaims the heroine’s internal conflict. As the narrator of *Trauma* has undergone a shock and consequently seeks to reassemble herself, it follows that, in addition to imposing her “je” upon the page in the form of repeated pronouncements of her subjecthood, she would call upon, collect, and compile multiple voices to buttress her own. In so doing, Duffau’s narrator mobilizes an army of voices that comingles and unifies with her own, ultimately forming the impression of a more substantial and perhaps even more authoritative voice that commands the reader’s attention.

Keeping in mind Cahill’s contention that rape is fundamentally “the destruction of the other’s [i.e., the victim’s] subjectivity” and that the crime is, more specifically, a “denial and destruction” of a woman’s “full personhood” (193), the reader of *Trauma* begins to sense as early as the first chapter that this narrator aggressively seeks to reinstate, reassert, and rebuild her personhood and subjectivity

³⁶ Lyrics from Day One’s “I’m Doin’ Fine.”

³⁷ Lyrics from Seal’s “Whirlpool.”

³⁸ Lyrics attributed to the band La Strada (from a song I could not identify in my research).

³⁹ What I mean is that these songs are written by different artists, at different times, and in different languages and thus have no relationship that is apparent to me (outside of *Trauma*).

through these various yet recurring proclamations of the self. Duffau's text is almost entirely composed of sentences that avow the presence of a human subject who persists in emphasizing not only her autonomy and self-sufficiency but also her conscious and intentional choice to endure: "*Seule, je me comprends*" (18); "*J'existe*" (19); "*Je ne compte plus que sur moi*" (19); "*J'ai dû vivre*" (21); "*J'aimerais . . . vivre*" (24); "*Par-dessus tout, je vis . . . Je suis déterminée*" (54); "*Survivre, n'est pas assez. J'ai choisi de vivre*" (24); "*Je suis ferme. Je suis définitive*" (54); "*Mon corps est mien*" (56); "*Je me connais*" (73); "*Je puis continuer de vivre*" (132) (emphasis mine).

Through these insistent repetitions of self-determination and the will to live, along with the inclusion of the aforementioned lyrics that appear to assist the narrator in reconstructing her person, narrative, and voice in the aftermath of an identity-shattering event, the text successfully communicates at length the idea of "Here *I* am; *I* am here; this is *my* story; listen to *me*," and imposes it upon the page. Although the narrator never addresses the reader directly, the message is made abundantly clear: She refuses to be ignored. "*Je suis une réponse*," she pronounces (8). A response, in essence, necessarily demands an audience, which is indeed the dynamic established in *Trauma* and accomplished by forcing the reader to recognize the voice of the narrator and to regard her as a person imbued with full subjectivity right from the start.

Given that "the guiding principle of recovery is to restore power and control to the survivor," as Herman explains (159), it comes as no surprise to the reader that Duffau's narrator repeatedly emphasizes the importance of reclaiming agency over her body and world: For example, "*Je ne perds plus le contrôle . . . Je reste sous contrôle. C'est fondamental*" (9-10); "*Alors, j'organise mon monde, afin que rien ni personne ne vienne y décider à ma place*" (41). This desire to maintain authority over her life indeed extends to her living space, which makes sense given that "the acutely traumatized person needs a safe refuge," as Herman outlines (162). Reiterating, Herman explains, "[t]he first task of recovery is to establish the survivor's safety," which "begins by focusing on control of the body

and gradually moves outward toward control of the environment . . . [and] include[s] the establishment of a safe living situation” (159-160). It is apparent that Duffau’s narrator recognizes (consciously or unconsciously) this postulate articulated by Herman which holds that she (i.e., the narrator) must first feel safe both in her body and in her space if she is to address her condition.

Regarding her living arrangements and the ways in which she presides over this oasis and ensures its safety, the narrator explains that she does not allow anyone to enter her apartment, which renders it an exclusive haven where only she can go: “Personne n’accède à mon univers” (67). As Robson explains, “She equates the limits of her apartment with the boundaries of her body” (“Spaces of Violation” 63). Her apartment, like her body, has become a site that she seeks to segregate and protect as she closes herself off from the possibility of further violation. As she says, “Je n’offre rien. [...] Je me referme. Comme une huître” (8-9). She, along with her space, remains “Fermée. Verrouillée” (9). For the narrator, safety in body and space becomes about locking herself in and shutting out the rest of the world.

Furthermore, with respect to her apartment, she explains that she enjoys her second-floor location because it allows her to feel secure and protected (“en sécurité”) (30) and enables her to control whether or not she is seen: “Personne ne voit mon intérieur . . . Je vois tout” (30). This reasoning becomes more intelligible when she later recounts memories of her assault. In her words, “Ils jouent avec moi . . . Je vois la brillance de la torche électrique qu’ils m’ont braquée dans les yeux. Je vois l’aveuglement qui était mien . . . Je vois ma vue déformée” 60). In essence, she relates how her assailants not only treated her as though she were an amusing object (or toy) but also disrupted her ability to see by violently flashing their lights in her eyes. This experience of temporary blindness and deformed vision has terrorized and marked her so much so that now she no longer wishes to be seen by others without her consent. Her choice of apartment allows her to maintain complete command over who sees her (i.e., no one) whilst she is free to take advantage of the “panoramique” view afforded

by the apartment's orientation and exert her gaze upon those outside whom she observes from her garrison (30). In essence, she looks but is not seen, which allows her to affirm her subjectivity in the sense that she cannot become the object of another's gaze.

Another way that the narrator preserves a sense of control is through the ritualistic cleaning of her space and of herself. Regarding her apartment, she explains,

Je nettoie mon appartement. De fond en comble. À le désinfecter pratiquement. Je passe le balai avec plus de discrétion que la concierge. Je lessive le sol. Je le javellise. J'aère le séjour. J'aère toutes les pièces. Je nettoie parfaitement la cuisine. Je lave le réfrigérateur, dedans et dehors. Je vérifie sa température et celle du congélateur . . . Je fais le ménage de ma chambre. Je range ce qui n'est pas à sa place. Je déplace. Je replace. Je dépoussière les meubles. Je change les draps de mon lit toutes les semaines. Je lave les toilettes tous les jours. (125)

This cleaning ritual is highly organized and regulated, even “calculated” by her own admission: “Je calcule” (125). Differentiating what needs to be cleaned every week versus every day and listing each item to be cleaned (as well as how it is to be cleaned) further emphasizes the thought and energy that has gone into this ritual: “Tout est réglé. Tout est calculé,” she states (123).

She further extends this deliberate cleaning ritual to her body, which she performs two, three, even ten times per day in order to alleviate the uncleanness that she perceives her rape has engendered: “Je dois me laver. Sans cesse, il me faut épurer un corps souillé. Alors je me douche, deux fois, trois fois, dix fois par jour . . . Inlassablement je me savonne” (23). In these passages that outline the narrator's impulse to clean, sentences are blunt, creating a staccato-like effect that produces an impression of procedure, strict regimentation, and order. Further, and perhaps most interestingly, the language—simple, straightforward, present indicative—reinforces the concept of cleanliness in that the language itself is nearly sanitized. The narrator's need to wash and purify is made manifest not only in her activities but also through her words which have been trimmed, stripped, and washed of

all residue and excess, for “l’excès,” the reader recalls, is simply “intolérable,” according to the narrator (7).⁴⁰

Up until this point, the narrator’s strategies of recovery and reclaiming agency (i.e., imposing the “je,” reinforcing her voice, controlling her space, protecting her body, and cleaning) do not seem out of the ordinary. However, she reveals one ritual that she maintains in her recovery arsenal that demands the reader’s attention as it is highly idiosyncratic and, at first glance, puzzling. In an earlier section of the text, she explains that she is losing weight because she periodically rejects all solid food: “Je maigris. Je ne sais pas m’alimenter pendant quelques longs jours. Je rejette toute nourriture solide. Durant cette période, je ne peux absorber qu’une chose” (23).⁴¹ She does not, at this point in the text, reveal what that “one thing” is. Yet, we soon learn that in fact the narrator delights in a particular ritual in which she stealthily steals sperm (i.e., “the one thing”) from a series of anonymous sexual encounters with men, conserves the fluid in various ways, and then later ingests it either by consuming it as is or by adding it to her recipes and concoctions.

For clarity, it is worth examining this practice in more detail. The narrator methodically expounds upon the diverse—and potentially risky—ways that she procures this substance. In minute detail, she recounts how in the past she would wait until the anonymous man would leave the space⁴² before scraping the dried sperm from the sheets and placing this “harvest” (i.e., “récolte” 85) into “une boîte nacrée” (83). “[S]eule . . . j’opérais. En silence,” she explains (83-84). In previous renditions of this enterprise, she would “collect” the material from her own body following an encounter: “Écartant les jambes, j’ai recueilli le reflux de mon corps dans le fond d’un sachet en plastique” (121).

⁴⁰ The quote reads, “L’excès m’est intolérable” (7).

⁴¹ Note that the narrator does not appear to be fully anorexic as she explains in other passages that she regularly orders groceries and consumes them (32). “Je mange comme tout le monde,” she states (32).

⁴² She rents a room for these encounters (i.e., the men do not enter her home, as explained) (79).

However, these primitive versions of her ritual have been abandoned in favor of a new “procédure” (87). In this updated operation, she prefers the precious substance “fresh” (“la plus fraîche que possible”) (127). Therefore, she says, “Il m’est arrivé de masturber des hommes dans leur sommeil” (117), which she does “[l]e plus souvent que possible” (122). From there, she transfers the liquid either to a metallic box (119) or to a glass vial that she will freeze for future culinary purposes, depending on her needs and desires (131).

After explaining how the substance is procured, the narrator then describes how she ritualistically catalogues, makes use of, and finally incorporates these samples into her meals: “Je cuis. Je fonds. Je liste un à un les ingrédients . . . Je range par ordre chronologique. Je note la date du prélèvement, suivi du prénom . . . J’ajoute le premier goût ou la première odeur inspirée par le produit . . . J’ai des cahiers de secrets de cuisine” (109-111). Some “products” are kept frozen; these are, she explains, to be used during menstruation (a time of the month when her body reminds her that it is vulnerable, capable of being penetrated⁴³):

Dès les premiers symptômes menstruels, je les utilise. Une à une je vide le contenu . . . je fais un, deux ou trois repas par jour. Une fois dégelée je mélange la substance avec de l’eau. Du lait. Du yaourt mélangé à de l’eau pour le rendre liquide. (131)

Highly methodical and procedural, she essentially presents herself as a type of lab technician who organizes her accumulation of samples and subsequently runs tests and experiments with them in order to create her own curative, proprietary blend.

Certainly, it is a curious practice. And moreover, it is potentially dangerous as she arguably risks exposing herself to further interpersonal violence by taking anonymous lovers and stealing from them while they sleep (e.g., potential risks include disease and even physical violence should the

⁴³ Robson explores menstruation in more depth, noting that the narrator “cannot hermetically seal” her “violable body” in the same way that she closes off her apartment (“Spaces” 63).

unknown men awaken during her operation).⁴⁴ However, to the narrator, this practice is vital to her continued existence as it sustains and restores her body, thus ensuring her survival. It is, as she confesses, her “[s]alvateur” (28) and, moreover, the only thing she needs and desires. “Rien ne me fait plus de bien. Rien d’autre ne m’importe . . . C’est ce qui me maintient en vie . . . C’est *le fil tenu qui me rattache à mon existence*,” she explains (25) (emphasis mine). Repeating, she states

[P]our *continuer à vivre* . . . Je sors pour recueillir la substance qui me maintiendra *vivante*. Je sors glaner la laitance. Celle *sans laquelle mon corps souffre* . . . Celle qui me permet de tenir . . . Celle qui donne la vie . . . [C]es substrats *me tiennent en vie*. Il n’y a qu’eux que je digère. Eux seules me soulagent . . . Les douleurs s’amenuisent . . . elles s’apaisent. *Je puis continuer de vivre*. (131-132) (emphasis mine)

It is, in essence, her lifeline. And while it might seem eccentric at first glance, it is not all that surprising that she chooses this substance as her antidote because it is, by nature, life-giving. As Streff illuminates, it is “un liquide de corps qui a toujours été un symbole *de vie et de force*” (292) (emphasis mine). There can be no creation of new life without this powerful substance. Thus, similar to the way that she collects other voices (via song lyrics) in order to fortify her own, she collects an assortment of corporeal fluids from others in an effort to strengthen and revitalize her body.

More importantly, however, in addition to symbolizing and becoming her source of life, she turns to the substance because it ultimately allows her to access sensation within her body, which in turn makes her feel alive: “Je goûte . . . Je sens son odeur . . . *[M]on corps se contracte de toute part. Comme une joie qui se diffuserait partout en moi. . . Mon corps tremble . . . Ce pourrait être une danse . . . C’est le bien-être . . . C’est l’apaisement après la tourmente . . . Mon plaisir est viscéral*” (26-27) (emphasis mine). Effectively, the substance allows her to maintain conscious contact—and therefore a dynamic

⁴⁴ Robson notices this fact as well: “[H]er sexual encounters lay her open to considerable personal risk” (“Spaces” 64).

relationship—with her body and its interior fluctuations. It specifically permits her to “viscerally” sense the body’s dynamism: her muscles “contract” and “tremble,” allowing her to feel as though she could be “danc[ing]” (26-27). Given that rape has the ability to render a woman “homeless in her own body” (qtd. in Copleon 252), it appears that this ritualized ingestion of sperm in fact enables the narrator to reacquaint herself with and ultimately reinhabit her body. With this in mind, the detail of “danse” in this passage is significant in that dancing, by nature, is an embodied experience of aliveness that often permits one to feel, engage with, and express sensations of the body in the present moment. Thus the narrator communicates how, through her ritual, she ultimately recruits her body as a vehicle through which she not only finds pleasure and joy via exteroceptors (i.e., senses such as taste and smell “that have their origin outside of the body” [Rothschild, *The Body Remembers*, 101])⁴⁵ but also accesses deeper internal body awareness (i.e., interoception, or the ability to notice and understand internal sensations that originate “inside of the body” [101]) via interoceptors (e.g., the heartbeat, connective tissue, muscles, and viscera). The practice, in other words, makes it possible for her to perceive and communicate with her body’s internal landscape as it grounds her in the present moment, reminding (perhaps even reassuring) her of her current reality, which is that she is indeed still alive.

However, despite her insistence on the benefits of this act, the narrator is nevertheless aware of how peculiar this practice is and how others (e.g., Robson) might not understand. By her own admission, it is “un rituel probablement étrange pour certains” (Duffau 84). Yet, in her state of extreme disempowerment after living through her traumatic ordeal, it follows that she might turn to this revitalizing substance to feel empowered, in control and, most of all, alive. Of course, one cannot ignore that her activities are non-consensual and thus, in a way, she nearly assumes the role of the

⁴⁵ See Rothschild’s sixth chapter, “The Body as Resource,” in *The Body Remembers*. “Sensing” the body, she writes “is a current time activity” (107). More specifically, “Awareness of current body sensations can anchor one in the present, here and now, facilitating separation of past from present. One is less likely to stay lost or stuck in the past while aware of body sensations” (107).

abuser in her pursuit of her own wellbeing and continued existence. This unsettling idea in fact explicitly arises at three points within the text. In the first, she compares herself to a praying mantis that kills her lover after mating (“je me compare à une mante religieuse . . . celle qui tue ses amants . . . [E]lle utilise le mâle” 53). In the second, she bluntly confesses that her activities are an assault: “Je commence l’assaut” (97). This startling admission is closely followed by a third instance in which the musical artist Björk is quoted in an epigraph that reads, “I’m going hunting / I’m the hunter” (101). The proximity of these lyrics to the acknowledgement of an “assault” seems telling as it suggests that she knows that what she does is transgressive, predatory, perhaps even abusive. The reader thus gathers from these details that the aggressed appears to have become (consciously or unconsciously) the aggressor—a troubling idea, yet one that invites reflection.

In addition to its literal life-granting and life-affirming properties, one gathers that the sperm holds further symbolism for the narrator, which might (at least partially) account for her continued reliance upon this disconcerting method. When she replays the fragmentary memories from her rape, she mentions feeling as though she were her attackers’ “meal” (“leur repas” 60). In light of what the reader knows by the end of the text, it may be interpreted that because she was treated as “food” to be consumed, perhaps she seeks her own version of revenge by using others (particularly men) for food as well. Instead of being consumed, she now consumes. Or, if not revenge, then at the very least, it appears that she sees this fluid as something owed to her: “C’est ma récompense” (25). That is, if something was taken/stolen from her during the attack, then perhaps this is her attempt to steal something back: “L’homme . . . m’apporte ce qu’il m’a volé . . . je prends sans rendre” (63). However, while one can only conjecture, the prime reason behind her procedure cannot be known as it is perhaps not even clear to the narrator herself (given the contradictory information provided, this seems likely).

Nonetheless, it is certainly disconcerting and difficult to reconcile that her recovery comes at the expense of others. This contradiction is known to the narrator and produces mixed feelings within

her: “Mon plaisir est malin, je le cache. Il ne paraîtrait pas humain. Je suis torturée par l’incongruité de ma situation, je suis troublée par sa nécessité” (28). While it is clever, she thinks, she recognizes a certain inhumanity within the act and feels called to “hide” it. She is moreover “tortured” by what she senses as “incongruous,” which I interpret as her way of signaling an awareness that the resource she utilizes to assuage the pains of violation arrives via the violation of another. Although this issue remains unresolved, what distinguishes this text is its commitment to presenting a figure who attempts to reinstate her agency and rebuild her life while simultaneously engaging in behaviors that might confuse and even offend. In so doing, Duffau asks the reader to make sense of contradictory and potentially upsetting information: a victim can become an abuser; a survivor can be both exploited and exploiter; and a victim can seek reprisal while consciously recognizing that it is perhaps wrong. Victims are not always unimpeachable, and sometimes they upset and even outrage their interlocuter/audience. Duffau suggests therefore that when it comes to victimhood and survival, more than one thing can be true at the same time.

While the conflictual information is challenging to untangle and apprehend, what can be concluded however is that *Trauma* insists upon shaking off the cultural message that to be raped necessarily means leaving the realm of the living. Although references to dying appear periodically, the narrator consistently counters by communicating her will to endure, thereby rejecting the impulse toward departure. In addition to declarations that express her will to live, her ritual equally attests to a certain desire to exist in that it allows her, albeit anonymously, to connect with another living being through intercourse.⁴⁶ It may be inferred from Chapter XXIV’s epigraph, “I’ve come to the conclusion / That people / Need People,”⁴⁷ that although the narrator feels safest closing herself off from others,

⁴⁶ Robson also recognizes this within the text: “She is aware that she cannot survive by sealing herself off entirely from others and seeks to recreate her relationships with others on her own terms” (64).

⁴⁷ Lyrics from Day One’s “I’m Doin’ Fine.”

hiding away in her refuge, she nevertheless recognizes that “[r]ecovery cannot occur in isolation” (Herman 133) and that continuing to live necessarily involves others, as humans are relational beings who rely upon each other.⁴⁸

Finally, to see in the narrator a “fail[ed]” attempt to “rewrite” (Robson “Spaces” 65) or “exorcize” (Michel 84) her experience ignores the reality that trauma can be a chronic and complicated condition. It can be an affliction that persists throughout the course of one’s life, requiring consistent work, attention, and care. This is a concept reinforced by Duffau via the epigraph that she selects to begin and end the novel: “Je suis un cas chronique” (7, 133).⁴⁹ In other words, Duffau bookends her text with the same epigraph to convey that readers are encountering a figure who lives with an ongoing illness. As such, it is to be expected that one who lives with a persistent ailment will experience fluctuations and complications that often weigh heavily, making it difficult to exist. “Overcoming,” or vanquishing, as others have asserted (Robson, “Spaces” 64; Michel 84), is not the goal when enduring a chronic condition such as the trauma of rape, suggests *Trauma*. In Duffau’s text, trauma is not a terminal illness or a continuous dance with death but rather an affliction with which one learns to live.

“Oui. Et aussi des Hamachis. Deux pièces.”

—Michèle Leblanc (*Elle*, first utterances)

IV. “La patronne, c’est moi!”⁵⁰: Dangerous Games in “*Oh...*” and *Elle*

Although vastly different from *Trauma*, Djian’s novel “*Oh...*” and Verhoeven’s film *Elle* (the adaptation of Djian’s work) also tell the story of how one woman engineers her own recovery and in

⁴⁸ See Herman: “Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships” (133). See also Brison, specifically “Chapter Three: Outliving Oneself.”

⁴⁹ Lyrics attributed to the band La Strada.

⁵⁰ *Elle* (00:09:06).

so doing reclaims the sense of agency that was lost during her rape. In *Ob...* and *Elle*, the protagonist Michèle is a highly successful, self-made CEO who survives a home invasion and assault by a masked stranger, all in broad daylight. Yet, she chooses to not report the incident to the police and subsequently carries on with her day as though it were “business as usual.” Over the course of a month, the audience follows Michèle as she deals with a variety of concerns, such as coming to terms with an extremely difficult childhood, caring for her ageing mother and grown son, maintaining direction over her company, and later losing both of her parents, all while trying to discover the identity of her rapist. In essence, although Michèle’s attack is the primary element in her narrative arc, it is, in a sense, folded into her broader story as though it were just another life event. That does not mean rape is not treated seriously. Indeed, the rape and her quest to reclaim control are what motivate the character and drive the plot; yet Verhoeven and Djian make it clear that the attack does not consume Michèle’s entire existence.

However, the idea that a rape victim could have a life outside of her rape does not appear to be what has most shocked audiences and readers. In addition to Michèle’s inscrutable reaction to rape, what seems to especially disturb audiences (as I have already suggested in the introduction to this project) is that after Michèle successfully discovers who her attacker is, the story takes a sharp and unexpected turn. The narrative (especially that of the film) provides enough markers that would indicate rape-revenge territory.⁵¹ However, Djian and Verhoeven subvert this expectation and carve out an entirely new plot route: instead of following Michèle as she plans a methodical and bloody revenge (although she does fantasize about alternate “endings” in which she is able to stop her attacker by killing him), the tale presents Michèle as she consciously chooses to engage in a dangerous yet

⁵¹ See Pettey who considers *Elle* “a cinematic extension of and commentary on . . . [the] notorious French rape films,” *Irréversible* (Gaspar Noé, 2002) and *Baise-moi* (Virginie Despentes and Coralie Trinh Thi, 2000) (214). I take his point but ultimately consider *Elle* to be quite distinct from *Irréversible* and *Baise-moi*. See also Heller-Nicholas who mentions *Elle* in the second edition of her work *Rape-Revenge Films: A Critical Study*.

consensual sexual relationship (or ritualized game) with him. Although not an unusual or unrealistic response to rape (in fact, many real-life victims carry on as though nothing has happened, and many victims maintain consensual relationships with those who have previously harmed them),⁵² it is an unusual and certainly unfamiliar storyline in fiction that deals with rape.

As in my section on *Trauma*, I will first offer a review of the existing scholarship on “*Oh...*” and *Elle*, briefly commenting on these contributions and explaining how my interpretations differ from this previous criticism. Following this review, I will present a close reading of both works.

a. Scholarship/Criticism on “*Oh...*” and *Elle*

Both “*Oh...*” and *Elle* have been granted very little scholarly attention, and this is perhaps because they are so recent. Aside from being well reviewed and awarded France’s Prix Interallié in 2012,⁵³ very little has been written on “*Oh...*” (in fact, I have not found academic articles or book chapters that examine this text alone and in depth). Homer B. Pettey has written on both “*Oh...*” and *Elle* in his article “*Elle* (2016), Rape, and Adaptation” (2019) in which he specifically examines the “process of adaptation” as it concerns transposing “*Oh...*” into film. Although illuminating and helpful, Pettey and I are ultimately interested in examining different aspects of “*Oh...*” and *Elle* as his focus remains on text-to-screen adaptation whereas mine is on how the works engage with rape victimhood. In *The French Review*, Karin Egloff offers a brief (i.e., one paragraph) but enlightening academic review of Djian’s text, mentioning the ways in which the work constitutes “une sorte de surprise” (270)—a reading with which I agree and comment on later in this chapter. However, she does not discuss the

⁵² See Jeannie Vanasco’s, “I Kept Talking to My Rapist” (2023), in which she discusses how victims often stay in contact and even form relationships with those who have harmed them. She says, “We need to destigmatize victimhood and expand our notions of how a victim can think and feel and react.” See Herman.

⁵³ See De Larminat’s “Philippe Djian, Prix Interallié” (2012).

protagonist's (i.e., Michèle's) victimhood or recovery process (which is understandable given that her aim is to review the work rather than examine it in depth). In *Phillipe Djian: En Marges*, biographer David Desvérité briefly describes "*Oh...*" and writes that the protagonist "*tente de surpasser son traumatisme*," an assertion I consider too strong because, to my mind, *surpasser* connotes the idea of completely vanquishing one's suffering rather than striving to live with it (425).

Academic and critical work on the film *Elle* is more accessible. As mentioned, research has focused on how the novel was adapted into film (Petty, 2019) as well as how humor and satire are harnessed in the film (Bolton, 2019). On the other hand, some have discussed the ways that the protagonist can be viewed as a figure who has internalized her own subjugation to such an extent that she now desires her own possession/rape (Emmelhainz, 2022). Others have viewed the film more allegorically, holding that the film displays the ways in which patriarchy has infiltrated the female psyche so perniciously that it makes "women complicit in . . . their own oppression" (Murray, "Unexpected," 119). Alternatively, some have chosen to view *Elle* more abstractly through the lens of media theory and coherence theory of truth (Lichtenfels, 2021). None of these frameworks and lenses are particularly helpful, in my opinion, if one is interested in closely examining the condition of female victimhood and how survival is portrayed. While I can agree on some findings in these past articles (and thus cite them accordingly), I ultimately read *Elle* quite differently, especially regarding the views of Emmelhainz and Murray whose interpretations I oppose because each asserts that the protagonist's actions are (unconsciously) self-loathing and necessarily related to patriarchy. I furthermore reject Lichtenfels' readings of certain key scenes in *Elle*, particularly his assertion that one instance of the film "seems to endorse the notion that rape victims *can* want it" (184-185) (his emphasis). I object to this proposition as it is a misreading of the sequence which is, in fact, a consensual sex scene, not a rape scene. Furthermore, Lichtenfels' contention implicitly suggests that some actual rape victims

might desire their own assaults, which is a problematic reiteration of an outdated rape falsehood.⁵⁴ Conversely, I read the heroine's practices as ways to strategize her survival, reclaim agency, and rebuild herself after experiencing a corporeal violation. I also disagree with Lucy Bolton who claims that Michèle "does not appear to be traumatized or distressed by" her rape and that her reaction is "so unsettling" that it is "hard to fathom" (145, 153). Michele is in fact presented as quite traumatized in both film and novel, and there are numerous details that attest to this (e.g., changing the locks in her home and purchasing weapons—including an axe—to protect herself indicates a trauma response; she also frequently suffers from sudden, disturbing flashbacks, a common symptom of PTSD), which I discuss in depth later.

Aside from academic work on *Elle*, an analysis of mainstream reviews of the film is important for the discussion as it also reveals common biases and misconceptions about rape and female victimhood. As I stated at the outset of this dissertation, because Michèle seeks out her attacker and eventually engages in a consensual relationship with him, film viewers have been especially mystified—even offended—by this character. Numerous responses to the film (from both France and the United States) have characterized Michèle as not only amoral and perverse, but also unbelievable. Some have argued she is entirely unphased and untraumatized by her attack. That numerous critics have deemed her personal reaction to rape unsettling, unusual, and deviant is revealing. Actually, these writings disclose how filmgoers/critics/scholars have very fixed ideas about how victims are "supposed to" respond to rape. And because expectations are not met in the case of *Elle*, a storm of controversy ensued. For example, Bidisha SK Mamata, a critic for *The Guardian*, writes,

Watching *Elle*, I wondered if Verhoeven and his all-male club really know any women. Do they know that we are not like this, that this is not how we react, think, feel, behave? Do they

⁵⁴ See "Sexual Violence Myths & Facts."

know what it's like to survive male abuse, even if you're a woman as cool and capable as Michèle? ("Rape fantasy *Elle*")

Mamata furthermore calls the film "sick" and argues, "[B]y suggesting that women long to be raped[,] it's a slap in the face for survivors." She moreover holds that this is a cinematic "treat" for "[r]ape apologists" and "a vicious insult to all survivors of men's sexual violence" ("Rape fantasy *Elle*").⁵⁵

Other reviews maintain similar sentiments. Guy Lodge's assessment in *Variety* characterizes Michèle and the plot of *Elle* as "amoral" and "perverse." Similarly, *The Financial Times*' Raphael Abraham observes, "It's not the usual reaction to a violent rape," as if there were such a thing as a "usual" reaction to rape. Likewise, Dennis Lim of *Film Comment* asserts that *Elle* is "about one woman's rather unusual response to a rape" (66). A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* refers to what he considers the film's "suave perversity," calling it a "kinky sex farce," thus completely dismissing the film's trauma aspects. Likewise unsettled, Ben Dickinson of *Elle Magazine* explains that because Michèle does not respond as he would/did respond to interpersonal violence,⁵⁶ the film is thus "[absurd]" and therefore "contributes exactly nothing to the current cultural conversation over rape" (Abraham and Dickinson, "Two Critics, Two Takes")—a bold statement indeed, for one might argue, as I do, that everything that portrays rape and its victims contributes in some way to the cultural dialogue surrounding rape.⁵⁷

French critics have also focused on the perceived "perversity" and unbelievability of *Elle*. In online journal *Chronic'art*, critic Murielle Joudet (like Bolton) argues that Michèle displays "aucun

⁵⁵ It is inaccurate to say that *Elle* was made by "an all-male club," as it is well documented that the star of the film, Isabelle Huppert, was given much creative freedom by Verhoeven. See "*Elle* Press Conference."

⁵⁶ He writes, "If you've ever been violently assaulted and faced the immediate prospect of being murdered (as I have) . . . you will recognize that this scenario doesn't remotely get at the kind of trauma that it purports to portray" (Abraham and Dickinson, "Two Critics, Two Takes"). To be clear, I disagree with his normative stance and argue that it cannot be concluded that all individuals will have the same response to interpersonal violence.

⁵⁷ See Wolfthal; See Higgins and Silver.

trauma” in the film. In *Bande-à-part*, journalist Jo Fishley characterizes Michèle and the film as one of “bas instincts” and “perversion.” *Le Parisien*’s review contends that “*Elle* offre un rôle de femme très dérangeante” (“*Elle*: rien ne fait peur”). *Paris Match* focuses on Michèle as an unhealthy or morbid character: “Il fallait tout le talent sulfureux d’Isabelle Huppert pour dessiner ce portrait sublimement malsain d’une femme qui dissimule ses failles” (“*Elle* - la critique”). Pascal Merigeau of *Le Nouvel Observateur* indicates that Michèle’s final question in the film (i.e., “Qui aurait pu imaginer une chose pareille?”) is addressed to the viewer, suggesting that the film and its characters are unbelievable: “De toute évidence c’est au spectateur que la question s’adresse” (Merigeau, “*Elle*”).

Reflecting upon these critiques and reviews of “*Oh...*” and *Elle*, what stands out is that audiences tend to fixate on Michèle’s reaction to her rape, designating it as bizarre, sick, and unusual (etc.). But I repeat the questions I posed at the outset: what is a usual response to rape? Is there such a thing? These past writings on Djian and Verhoeven’s works thus reveal, to my mind, deeply embedded, normative expectations of what victimhood entails and demonstrate a lack of critical consideration for the ways in which one might cope after such an event. This is what I believe Djian and Verhoeven are perhaps intimating—that there is no singular, “usual” response to rape because rape is experienced by individuals who respond to life’s circumstances and traumatic events *as* distinctly unique individuals.

b. Close Readings of “*Oh...*” and *Elle*

As clarified, “*Oh...*” and *Elle* offer an atypical character who embodies an alternate version of female victimhood—one to which audiences are simply not accustomed, as my literature review has shown. The figure of Michèle likely offends many precisely because she does not fit any established narrative mold: she is neither outwardly vengeful nor depressed and suicidal. Rather, Michèle regroups after her attack, discovers her rapist’s identity (i.e., her neighbor, someone she already knows), and

consents to a sexual affair (or game) with him.⁵⁸ Thus, Djian and Verhoeven avoid adhering to conventional rape victim storylines and tropes that audiences have come to comfortably recognize and, instead, create a new way of conceiving of victimhood in fiction. This is not to suggest that *Elle* and “*Ob...*” are superior; rather they merit attention because they audaciously interrupt and ultimately reroute familiar narrative patterns that treat rape and the condition of female victimhood. The story of Michèle is neither about revenge (though revenge is a touched-upon theme) nor of pure trauma (although psychological trauma is certainly present as there are many instances in both text and film that attest to her having intrusive memories/flashbacks of her assault, for example). Her story is, furthermore, neither a general statement made for/about all rape victims nor one that carelessly eroticizes or downplays the effects of rape (as many critics have argued). Rather, the accounts illustrated by Djian and Verhoeven are that of one singular character whose entire life appears (out of necessity) to have been built around pragmatism and maintaining control over situations and circumstances.

More specifically, as the plot progresses, audiences learn that Michèle has been forced by familial/life circumstances to adopt a variety of oversight roles, such as mother, caretaker, and executive boss. In addition to providing for herself, she financially supports multiple individuals (e.g., her eccentric/irresponsible mother and her incompetent son, along with his demanding partner) and furthermore operates as director of her own business (in the novel, she is a film producer; in the film, she co-owns a video-game agency with her friend Anna). As almost all the people in her life rely upon her continued support and guidance, she appears to have learned to maintain authority and responsibility over situations and circumstances more generally. Therefore, although traumatized, she remains composed and does not outwardly assign her rape the weight that others might expect. She

⁵⁸ This is known in the field of victimology/criminology as “post-incident contact” (i.e., when a victim stays in contact with her abuser). See Donovan.

does what she feels is necessary to continue functioning as the foundational support for so many while maintaining her own sense of safety and agency that she has worked diligently (since childhood) to cultivate.

For nearly forty years, Michèle has shouldered the emotional, psychological, and social burden of being not only the child of a notorious mass murderer but also (falsely) accused by the media of deliberately assisting him in his horrific crimes (01:02:21). In other words, as an adolescent, Michèle was placed in a position in which she lacked any say over how others viewed and subsequently treated her.⁵⁹ Blamed for crimes she did not commit (i.e., acting as her father's accomplice) yet unable to defend and speak up for herself, she no longer trusts the police, which explains why she does not involve them in apprehending her assailant. Moreover, she has emerged as someone who treats life as though it were a game of chess, calculating her actions to avoid making "false" moves while (micro)managing the activities (and the lives) of others in her orbit in order to lessen any chance of disaster.

Though her response to rape is initially surprising (like Djian's title, it startles one into exclaiming, "Oh...," upon first glance),⁶⁰ her reaction becomes nearly unsurprising when one takes her entire narrative into account. Bearing this in mind, I show in this section how *Elle* and "Oh..." scrutinize power and control by drawing attention to the unorthodox (even transgressive) ways in which this character seeks to reinstate her subjectivity and agency after an instance of extreme powerlessness (i.e., rape). While I discuss both works, I place most of my emphasis upon *Elle* because of its creative inclusion of video gaming, a detail that does not exist in Djian's original source material

⁵⁹ In the film, Michèle speaks of how her picture was taken when the police arrived to arrest her father: "Quelqu'un m'a prise en photo. Et bizarrement c'est cette photo-là qui a resté gravé dans les mémoires des gens" (01:03:35).

⁶⁰ Egloff notes this as well in her review: "L'apparent laconisme du titre convient parfaitement, car il exprime une sorte de surprise" (270).

(although he does include the idea of “play” between Michèle and her attacker). In this way, the film’s main storyline (i.e., Michèle’s campaign to regain agency after rape) mirrors the plot of a new video game that she is developing. Accordingly, as the plot progresses, Verhoeven increasingly recruits a video-game-like aesthetic into his technique, presenting Michèle as the avatar in her own game in which triumph for triumph’s sake is not the goal. Rather, Michèle’s objective is to gain the upper hand against her opponent so that she can recover the autonomy she once held and, additionally, live more fully, unencumbered by the threat presented by her opponent.

Both Djian and Verhoeven begin by precisely illustrating the moment of disempowerment/lost control (i.e., rape), introducing audiences to Michèle and showing how her first instinct is to mitigate the damage. Verhoeven’s film adaptation presents this quite dramatically, opening with an entirely black screen. Although I have described this scene in my introduction, I will recapitulate to remind the reader. Paired with the heavy darkness of the black screen are the human sounds of intense panting and moaning as the civilized tones of chamber music play in the background. The spectator then hears glass falling to the ground, shattering, followed immediately by what seems to be an intense moment of climax between two individuals. The first image is that of a black cat gazing at the unfolding scene to which the viewer is still not privy. Seemingly bored by (or indifferent to) the scene, the cat vacates the frame, and only then is the viewer permitted to see what the feline has just witnessed: Dressed all in black, a masked man lies on top of a motionless, battered, and seemingly stunned woman. Silently, he wipes her blood from his body, buttons his pants, and leaves through a broken window. The viewer, suddenly forced to reassess what was previously heard, quickly realizes that what has taken place is in fact a violent home invasion and rape. Verhoeven’s camera captures the scene from a distance, as though standing outside the room, looking in at the spectacle. Her limp body, still filmed at a distance, appears small and fragile. As Verhoeven’s camera approaches, the viewer notices that the victim’s thighs are covered in blood, her cheek is badly scraped,

and her dress is torn. She slowly peels herself from the floor and pauses, as though stunned. Suddenly, the elegant chamber music is interrupted by the abrupt sound of broken glass being swept away. Michèle removes the fragments and debris, throws her clothes into the trash, washes away the blood, and calmly orders sushi: “Oui. Et aussi des Hamachis. Deux pièces” (00:03:38). With these words (in fact, the first uttered), the overture concludes (00:01:52-00:03:42).

To reiterate, this extraordinary opening sequence is disorienting, even disquieting. An affluent, middle-aged woman⁶¹ has been viciously raped and beaten in her home, in broad daylight, and yet she outwardly appears indifferent. Moreover, she does not call the police. Although apparently momentarily shaken (based on her stunned expression), she (literally and figuratively) picks up the pieces of her life, collects herself, and quickly resumes her (presumably) regularly scheduled activities. She explains her injuries (i.e., a scraped cheek) to her son later that evening as “une chute à vélo,” thereby controlling the flow of information about this event right from the start (00:04:03).

Whereas Verhoeven frames and establishes the story with her rape, Djian chooses to introduce Michèle more cryptically. The first lines of “*Oh...*” (a first-person narrative) read as follows:

Je me suis sans doute éraflé la joue. Elle me brûle. Ma mâchoire me fait mal. J’ai renversé un vase en tombant, je me souviens l’avoir entendu exploser sur le sol et je me demande si je ne me suis pas blessée avec un morceau de verre, je ne sais pas. Le soleil brille encore dehors. Il fait bon. Je reprends doucement mon souffle. Je sens que je vais avoir une terrible migraine, dans quelques minutes. (11)

In this way, readers are introduced to Michèle who subsequently leaves them in suspense as she resists immediately revealing how she came by these abrasions and other injuries. This opening monologue suggests her initial disorientation as she quickly scans her body and her space, noticing her cheek, her

⁶¹ It should be noted that another novelty provided by Djian and Verhoeven is that Michèle is a woman of a certain age; this is an uncommon portrayal of female victimhood (especially in film) as the majority of works that treat the subject focus on younger women or children/adolescents.

jaw, the broken vase, and the pieces of shattered glass. Suddenly, she moves to discuss the beautiful weather, perhaps to contrast it with the chaos of her surroundings. As she begins to regain her poise and her breath, she continues to offer little information about what has transpired, reiterating the sense that she is controlling how much she shares with the reader. Providing only minor clues, she explains her bewilderment at her failure to lock her door, questioning how she could have let her guard down: “Je ne sais pas ce qui m’a pris. Comment ai-je pu relâcher ma vigilance?” (12). She clarifies that she once vowed, as a youth, to always take precautions in order to protect herself: “j’ai alors décidé que . . . j’allais prendre certaines précautions afin de protéger ma vie” (12). She speaks of regularly looking for signs of danger and remains continuously on the defensive (“les signes . . . m’incit[ent] à me tenir sur mes gardes”) (12). She blames herself and experiences great shame for having not been vigilant: “J’ai tellement honte. Je suis tellement furieuse, à présent. Furieuse après moi. Il y a une chaîne à ma porte. Il y a une maudite chaîne à ma porte, l’ai-je oublié? Je me relève et je vais la mettre” (12-13). At this point, she turns her mind to other things, decides to take a bath, and instantly, it seems that all is “back to normal” (so to speak): “Ce bain est miraculeux . . . Je ne prétends pas avoir tout effacé, mais j’ai totalement recouvré mes esprits. La migraine attendue ne vient pas. J’appelle le traiteur et je fais livrer des sushis” (12-14). Although she speaks of lost control and wonders how/why she dropped her guard (as that is, she concludes, out of character for her), she nevertheless quickly regains her equilibrium and carries on. Her language (like that of Duffau’s narrator) is blunt and to the point. She allows herself to express initial shock and anger but avoids lingering on these feelings, preferring to remain brief and factual—even businesslike.

In both overtures, Djian and Verhoeven emphasize the ways in which Michèle immediately attempts to inscribe “the event that scraped her cheek” (i.e., her rape) into her life so that she can proceed with her evening (i.e., order sushi to share with her grown son, Vincent). She “sweeps up” the situation and proceeds as planned. Many (e.g., Cohen; Abraham and Dickinson) have interpreted

this behavior as dissociative (a common response to traumatic events in which a survivor distances themselves or disconnects altogether from their body, identity, environment, thoughts, feelings, and/or actions), while others (e.g., Bolton; Joudet) read her as thoroughly unphased by the events.⁶² However, rather than solely basing my interpretation of the character on the opening sequences (as others have), I take a more nuanced stance, preferring to examine her behavior in the context of her entire narrative arc. She is not disconnected from her trauma, and in fact she is quite phased by her rape. This is especially apparent in the passages cited above from Djian's novel in which she berates herself for what she deems as a lack of diligence (i.e., not locking her door properly). She essentially communicates that not locking her door is simply unlike her as she is someone who always takes precautions. The text gives a clear impression from its first pages that this woman is committed to maintaining control, so much so that she is consistently on the lookout for signs of danger and "furieuse" (13) that she might have missed one that could have prevented this incident (so she believes). Thus, although her rape does not appear to shatter her identity completely, it shakes her sense of who she is and causes her to question what she knows to be true about herself.

Since there is no inner monologue to which the viewer is privy, the film might seem (as others have argued) ambiguous regarding Michèle's feelings (Phased? Unphased?) and whether or not she immediately goes into a default control mode. In fact, however, the film presents a brief sequence that unveils just how shaken she is (00:06:12-00:07:06). When alone, she ensures that her gate is firmly locked and surveils her street to make sure (one presumes) that no one is there to breach her metal barrier. Once inside, Verhoeven presents a close-up shot of Michèle's hands intently rummaging through a drawer where she eventually finds a small hammer. With her weapon held tightly and close to her chest, she stares fixedly out from behind her window, as though once again assessing if someone

⁶² Her "response," Bolton writes, is "so unsettling . . . [that it] makes it difficult to decide whether she is traumatized, in denial, unperturbed, or something else" (153).

is “out there,” waiting to attack. Verhoeven films Michèle from a distance, just as he did in the opening sequence, and this distancing has the effect of making her body seem small and therefore vulnerable whilst alone in the house. The next shot is that of a television playing a nature documentary (i.e., zebras running free in the wild), a media choice that communicates the protagonist’s need for something soothing or peaceful (as nature tends to be). The camera then pivots to focus on Michèle, hammer still in hand, sleeping by herself, marking the end of the sequence.

Although entirely wordless, this segment conveys significant distress. Locking herself in, searching for a weapon, surveilling the outside world from behind her window, clutching a hammer as she sleeps amidst the peaceful sounds of nature, Michèle is frightened and unsettled. Where the initial overture may have left some to wonder about her state of mind, this sequence clarifies that she is thrown off balance by the event and is now actively reorienting herself by first reestablishing (as best she can) a sense of safety in her home (like the narrator of *Trauma*). And if this sequence were not clear enough, the next is, as it immediately cuts to Michèle (now in her office) speaking to a locksmith over the phone, instructing him to change all the locks in her home. Of note, film viewers will recall that her attacker came through a broken window, and thus the need for new locks is not technically mandatory (i.e., the locks have not necessarily been compromised). Yet, this detail is significant, attesting both to Michèle’s traumatization and subsequent need to reestablish her barrier: “Il faut changez toutes les serrures. En haut et en bas” (00:07:07). In Djian’s text, she explains “Je fais venir un serrurier. Je fais doubler les sécurités. Je fais poser à la porte de ma chambre une solide serrure de type coffre-fort, puis l’homme finit par me proposer de mettre le rez-de-chaussée sous alarme et j’accepte” (37). Later, she buys cans of pepper spray: “j’ai acheté quelques bombes de défense” (23); in the film, in addition to pepper spray (known as “le safety angel”), she purchases a small axe (00:17:55). These items, assures the salesman, will offer Michèle “une certaine avantage”

(00:17:48). In other words, she takes all the necessary steps to re-establish “a safe living situation” (Herman 160) and gain the “advantage” against her opponent.

Further attesting to her need to (re)secure mastery over her world, a subsequent scene portrays Michèle as she undergoes a medical examination which includes bloodwork that tests for sexually transmitted infections so that she can ensure that her health is in order post assault: “Je veux un bilan M.S.T complet,” she states (00:10:03). And when asked if she would like Post-Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP), an emergency medication prescribed in the event of possible HIV exposure, she pragmatically declares: “Non, j’ai regardé sur internet, il y a des effets secondaires, et je peux pas m’arrêter de travailler” (00:10:09). Basing her decision on research and carefully weighing the pros and cons, the ever-practical Michèle ultimately decides that while an STI panel is needed, PEP is not as it would temporarily put her out of commission with regard to her role as CEO. In essence, she founds her decisions on what will allow her to maintain control. In Djian’s novel, Michèle’s health concerns are treated with an equally matter-of-fact attitude: “Je vais voir ma gynéco, je fais les examens nécessaires” (24). This statement is slipped into the text, as though a random aside or just simply part of a mental to-do list (24). She says nothing further about this, which reinforces the impression that she sees the event as part of her life—something routine that requires her attention and care. As in the opening passages of the novel, she remains brief and factual. Thus, while her rape may have interrupted her control and caught her off guard, Djian and Verhoeven illustrate how she immediately takes steps to promptly get “back on track” (so to speak).

As she navigates reestablishing the wellbeing of her body and the safety of her home, Michèle is also working with her team of employees to produce a video game.⁶³ It is in this way that Verhoeven introduces the concept of gaming which, as I will show, becomes more significant as the film

⁶³ To reiterate, this plotline does not feature in the novel.

progresses. Without warning, Verhoeven splices footage from the game into the film (00:07:29). Although viewers quickly come to realize that what they are seeing is the footage that Michèle and her staff are currently reviewing/editing, it is quite abrupt, so much so that for an instant, it seems as if the viewer has entered another realm (00:07:29-00:07:53). Pettey describes this imagery well: “[A] grotesque, medieval monster subdu[es] a blonde female figure,” approaching her “from a rape-like rear-entry position and then violently penetrating her skull with a phallic appendage” (218). Interrupting this footage, thus ending the gaming sequence, is the sound of Michèle’s voice. Criticizing the graphics, she argues that the characters’ “convulsions orgasmiques sont beaucoup trop timides” and adds that their task as a company is clear: “Notre objectif est clair . . . quand le joueur étripe un orc, il faut qu’il *sente* le sang . . . entre ses droits. Tiède et épais, le sang” (00:07:54-00:09:28) (emphasis mine). Aside from the fact that Michèle (a rape victim) is the one in charge of overseeing rape-like content, which is intriguing in and of itself,⁶⁴ this underexamined sequence is not only visually interesting (in that, for a few seconds, the viewer leaves *Elle*’s world to enter a computer-generated fantasyland) but also important in that it conveys Michèle’s awareness that within a game, it is imperative that the contender *feel* as though it were essentially real as that is what makes a player feel powerful. A player, she asserts, must sense in their own hands the “warm and thick” blood and guts of their opponent. While this scene appears to have remained under the radar for many viewers, I argue that this section is the foundation upon which the film rests. In addition to introducing how Michèle earns her living (again, a fascinating detail), this sequence establishes the idea of gaming and the importance of authenticity for the player, which becomes significant when examining the dynamic between Michèle and her opponent (i.e., her rapist). Further, at the risk of stating the obvious, it is

⁶⁴ That is, it is challenging to make sense of her willingness to participate in rape culture by creating intense, grotesque, sexually violent materials for the eyes of video gamers whilst having been a victim herself.

notable that the actual content of the game conspicuously mirrors the events that transpired in Michèle's own home.⁶⁵

The game between Michèle and her attacker arguably begins when he rapes her, although she is naturally unaware and unwilling (i.e., nonconsenting) at the time. The contest progresses in this fashion with Michèle as the unknowing player. In both the film and novel, her attacker begins to send her anonymous, threatening (and grotesque) text messages: "*Je t'ai trouvée très étroite, pour une femme de ton âge*" (Verhoeven 00:17:26) (Djian 23) (emphasis mine). Later: "*J'aime bien le chemisier que tu portes. Sa couleur crème. Mon sperme n'y fera pas de tache,*" suggesting that he is closely watching her (Verhoeven 00:27:41) (emphasis mine). The language her assailant employs communicates his attempt to supersede her subjectivity with that of his own. His words suggest that (to his mind) he holds the power, and he seems to want Michèle to know this. In the novel, this is made even more concrete when he menacingly writes, "*Tiens-toi prête, Michèle*" (37). Moreover, later in the film, her opponent (somehow able to access the interior of her home once again, which constitutes another violation of her space) leaves her a particularly distressing message on her own computer, "*Pardon. J'ai pas pu me retenir...*," which is accompanied by what appears to be his sperm on her bedsheets (01:12:40). To be sure, these messages visibly unnerve her (01:13:05). Consequently, she begins to view every man in her vicinity with suspicion as she gathers that this is someone she knows.

In the scenes in which Michèle is specifically searching for her violator's identity, Verhoeven often adopts a very mobile, hand-held, first-person camera technique, producing the effect that one

⁶⁵ There is also an explicit connection drawn between the video game and Michèle that appears in a red-herring subplot of *Elle*: One of the company's male employees overlays Michèle's face on top of that of the cartoon female/victim in the videogame. The film, it seems, leads the viewer to surmise that perhaps this is a message from Michèle's attacker, but in fact it turns out to have been created by an employee who never intended for the file to be publicly leaked.

generally encounters in an avatar-based (i.e., first-person) video game.⁶⁶ For example, when she receives the second message regarding the color of her blouse, the camera takes on the point of view of Michèle (i.e., viewers see what she sees) (00:28:14). The viewer follows and mirrors her gaze as she walks down a hallway, like a skilled combatant, visually scanning left and right as though assessing for imminent danger (00:28:39). One senses that the camera, like Michèle, is on high alert, ready to adapt to whatever unexpected change or ambush the situation might hold. Verhoeven alternates between this first-person point-of-view technique and a more standard tracking shot to follow Michèle as she moves through the building. The effect is subtle but nevertheless quite effective in conveying the sense that Michèle has entered into a game (unbeknownst to her) and now must proceed carefully and strategically if she is to discover the one against whom she is fighting.

When Michèle finally learns her assailant's identity (i.e., her neighbor, Patrick, a man with whom she has an established flirtation), she then knowingly chooses to engage and play the game that he has initiated—a game in which the goal is to gain (and maintain) the upper hand. Following the revelation of his identity, Michèle invites Patrick into her home, using the opportunity to both assess her rival and implicitly declare herself a conscious player in the match. Verhoeven again makes use of the first-person camera perspective, which shows Michèle calculating the situation, evaluating her adversary, overserving him as he moves and looks at her (01:32:33). Measuring her opponent, she references his sexual assault upon her and asks him to explain his actions: “C’était bon? C’était comment? (01:32:56). When he does not reply, she pushes: “Répondez-moi. Ça vous a plu? Pourquoi vous avez fait ça?” He ends the sequence by replying cryptically, “C’était nécessaire” (01:33:08-01:33:31) (Djian 174-175).⁶⁷ This scene establishes that both players now appear to be consenting participants, at least from an audience perspective.

⁶⁶ See Ernest Adams, *Fundamentals of Game Design* (2010).

⁶⁷ The dialogue is the same in Djian's novel (174-175).

Patrick appears to not yet know the extent to which Michèle will take part. Testing her, he invites Michèle to dine at his home, where all becomes clear. There, he attacks her again in his basement, and she begins to struggle and fight back.⁶⁸ Yet, when he finally knocks her down and is about to strike again, she announces: “Vas-y,” giving her explicit consent (01:43:47). Verhoeven’s camera again assumes the point of view of Michèle, focusing upon Patrick’s stunned expression. “Non, ça peut pas marcher comme ça. Pas pour moi. Il faut que ce soit comme avant” (01:43:56). Effectively, Patrick clarifies the rules of engagement. It seems there is an element of ritual for him in that there is a set way for things to be done. Michèle immediately agrees to and adopts these conditions as she begins to fight back. Again, Verhoeven makes use of the avatar-like camera shot (so that the audience sees Patrick from Michèle’s vantage point), visually reiterating Michèle’s role as an active participant in the game. When they begin to engage sexually, she makes sounds that are similar to those she made in the opening scene during her attack, thus demonstrating her implicit consent and understanding of the procedure (i.e., that it must be “comme avant”). In so doing, she ultimately exemplifies the feedback she gave earlier to her employees in order to improve the video game they are developing (i.e., “les convulsions orgasmiques sont beaucoup trop timides”). That is, with Patrick, she makes her “orgasmic convulsions” quite bold, which attests to her commitment to playing her role (i.e., that of “the rape victim”) in this ritualistic game as authentically as possible so that it feels real for her as well as for her opponent.

In the novel’s version of this scene, her inner monologue makes clear that she knows she is in control: “[I]l est . . . en moi *pouvoir* de mettre fin à son assaut dans la seconde” (194) (emphasis mine). She is aware that she can end the game at any time (and therefore holds the power) because she knows he will refuse to play if she outwardly appears to consent. In a later, similar scene (one that appears

⁶⁸ This scene also occurs in the novel, but the film has different dialogue that adds nuance to the scene (194).

only in the novel), this is reinforced when Patrick compliments Michèle on her ability to play her “role” with such talent. She relates, “[I]l siffle entre ses dents avant de m’annoncer que j’ai tenu mon rôle de façon brillante, exceptionnelle” (215).⁶⁹ Even she is genuinely impressed by her performance in this “jeu” (227): “[J]e suis époustouflée par ma prestation, par ma fureur, par mes effroyables cris” (234).

To make clear that Michèle has the upper hand (in the sense that she knows Patrick’s weakness), Verhoeven ends the basement sequence and immediately cuts to the videogame footage again, only this time, there is no rape imagery (01:45:42). Rather, it is the end of the game, and the female warrior-heroine emerges triumphant as she confidently walks away from the world of the monsters. Thus, as Michèle’s story seemingly continues to mirror that of her avatar-heroine, one senses that now that she knows how to “end” the game, it is no longer challenging and therefore perhaps no longer needed (she can now walk away, like her female avatar in the video game). By participating in and commandeering what was once Patrick’s ritual (i.e., rape), Michèle appears to have acquired what she wanted, which is the sense that she has reclaimed her power and no longer feels threatened by him.

Therefore, against the soundscape of Iggy Pop’s “Lust for Life” (a recurring song in Verhoeven’s film that suggests Michèle’s keen desire for life),⁷⁰ Michèle initiates her exit strategy (01:51:50). As Patrick drives her home from a party, she explains to him that she no longer wants to participate, affirming that she plans to go to the police. The audience knows, however, that this is a strategy to goad Patrick into playing right at that moment. The attentive viewer will recall that Michèle rejects all police intervention as she states quite clearly earlier in the film, “Pas de police, j’ai eu ma

⁶⁹ In later sections of the novel, she calls their arrangement a “petite mise-en-scène” (226) and “ce jeu” (227).

⁷⁰ It plays twice—once at Michèle’s dinner party and at the end, during her videogame launch event.

dose,” her “dose” referring to her childhood history in which she was accused, but not convicted, of assisting her father in crime (00:39:42). The strategy has its intended effect—rendering Patrick enraged—which impels him to assume the role of villain in their ritualistic tournament and invade her home.

In this final confrontation, Michèle assumes her persona as the “powerless rape victim” and attempts to imbue the scene with the authenticity she knows is necessary to keep Patrick engaged until she is finally able to position her adversary where she wants and effectively conclude the ritual that she seemingly no longer needs/wants. Tension palpable, he continues his “assault” when, suddenly, a new player enters the game. That is, Verhoeven cuts away from the ensuing violence and offers the first-person perspective of an unknown player accessing Michèle’s home. The camera assumes the vantage point of this mystery contender who surveils the situation while seeking a weapon. Verhoeven follows up with Michèle’s point of view, which allows the audience to finally recognize the third player as her grown son, Vincent, who succeeds in mortally wounding Patrick. Appearing genuinely confused, Patrick asks, “Pourquoi?” before finally dying (01:58:35).

Although a challenging finale to unravel, it is one that invites reflection. Others might argue that by having Vincent kill Patrick, Michèle gives away her power and dominion. However, in light of the dynamic between Michèle and her son that is presented throughout the film, it follows that she would use him as a pawn in her search for agency, as much of her energy is directed toward launching her rather ill-equipped and incompetent son into the world so that he might gain the confidence that he so lacks and ultimately make something of himself. In essence, micromanaging her son appears to be another way that allows her to appropriate control. Moreover, as Michèle reveals in an earlier scene, Vincent in fact once played the role of a gallant prince in one of her video games: “Vincent, c’est un très bon acteur. À douze ans, il jouait Achille jeune dans *Kronos*, un jeu vidéo que j’ai produit”

(00:23:04). Thus, Michèle, like a master conspirator, makes use of her son again and inserts him into the game that she “produces” and directs in real time.

Moreover, some may consider this a rape-revenge film and argue that by having Patrick killed, Michèle’s actions are not dissimilar to those of the murderous duo of Despentès’ *Baise-moi*. Further, some might hold that the point of a game is to have a clear winner/vanquisher, which is the general outcome that one finds in most (traditional) rape-revenge films. But, in fact, *Elle* and its source material “*Oh...*” are about far more than revenge. Certainly, Michèle imagines vengeance (and thus the theme is surely present), but there is never the impression that Michèle genuinely has payback in mind for Patrick (nor is there a suggestion that Michèle is transformed into a new person/avenger by these events). Rather, as she appears to have regained her sense of power (one that she apparently held before the start of the story), she chooses to end the game because Patrick is a rogue player, unlikely to ever stop. As such, she knows that he will go on to harm others. “Je pense . . . aux autres,” she tells him in their final car ride together, referring to those women whom he will most certainly attack in the future (01:54:35). Thus, in order for her to put her rape “beside her” (to borrow Martin’s phrasing [41]) and prevent him from causing further damage, Patrick cannot remain in play. It is as though his death is the most practical outcome, at least to Michèle’s pragmatic mind. In his final moment, when he asks Michèle “Why?” Michèle does not say anything, but one gathers that the answer could be, “C’était nécessaire” (which, one recalls, was his response to her when asked why he raped her). Of note, after Patrick’s death, Verhoeven’s camerawork no longer takes on the same first-person, video game perspective, which visually underscores the official end of the game.

Although Patrick is killed, this story nevertheless ends on a life-affirming note for Michèle. As Verhoeven punctuates the final moments of the film with Pop’s “Lust for Life,” he further reiterates (in rather concrete terms) that rape can be disentangled from the notion of death by setting the film’s final scene in a cemetery and following Michèle as she physically removes herself from this site most

associated with death. While she has spent most of the story engaged in rituals and behaviors that could have resulted in her demise, Verhoeven chooses to end his film by portraying Michèle's symbolic rejection of the association between death and rape. With both of her parents deceased (the reason for which she visits the cemetery), Patrick now out of her life, and having extricated herself from an affair that she was having with a friend's (i.e., Anna's) husband, the ever-pragmatic Michèle releases the relationships and dynamics that no longer serve her and seems poised to make a new start of sorts. Verhoeven makes this explicit when Anna approaches her in the cemetery and proposes that since Michèle lives alone, perhaps they should live together (a proposition appears also in the novel, but not at a cemetery [237]). In effect, both novel and film conclude with Michèle reconnecting to a dear friend, which recalls Herman's contention that "[r]ecovery can take place only in the context of relationships," not in "isolation," as humans are relational beings by nature (133). Verhoeven and Djian seem to agree on this and thereby end their stories with a celebration of friendship, implicitly suggesting Michèle's objective to live despite having endured the grave traumas that have threatened her sense of self and security. Verhoeven makes this most explicit, however, as his version of Michèle's tale ends with the women leaving a cemetery, thus abandoning a site of death, agreeing to a life together.

To summarize, Michèle is thrown into a game that she never asked to play. Although she outwardly appears armed with a strong sense of self, rape causes her to doubt her abilities and call into question that sense of self since any loss of control is simply unlike her (to her mind). She is, in essence, shocked that something like this could happen to someone like her—someone so "vigilant," one who takes "precautions" (Djian 12). While she does not outwardly express fear (to others), her terror is indeed made manifest through the examples discussed (e.g., changing locks and arming herself with weapons). Rape causes her to go deeply into survival mode and exacerbates her (pre-existing) need to regain the perception that she alone controls what happens to her.

Although initially an unwilling player, Michèle well understands that games can be a safe space in that they are contained; once a player knows the rules, the landscape, the traps, the ambushes, and their opponent's weaknesses, that player can achieve dominance and a sense of power. Thus, as someone who has always sought to maintain control in her life (as the evidence provided shows), and as a successful videogame executive and developer (in the film version), Michèle, like a skilled competitor, immediately resolves to regroup, reorient, and re-strategize after her brutal assault. A master tactician, she calculates her moves before acting. And although she opens herself to significant risk (like the narrator of *Trauma*) by engaging with the assailant, she ultimately outmaneuvers him by cunningly appropriating the very ritual that makes him feel powerful and in control, using it against him in order to regain her agency and reassemble her sense of self.

"I wonder how much victimhood they'd be willing to grant a girl like me."

—Kate Elizabeth Russell, *My Dark Vanessa* (234)

V. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined three works, Duffau's *Trauma*, Djian's "Ob...", and Verhoeven's *Elle*, demonstrating how they strongly exemplify an emerging trend within contemporary French fiction and narrative cinema in which the ways that one relearns how to live and reclaim agency after surviving rape are interrogated in depth. I have argued that these works not only upend conventional rape narratives (e.g., that rape is necessarily a kind of death and that all rape victims act in ways that conform to audience expectations) but also invite audiences to think critically about the complexity of the trauma recovery process and the unexpected (even shocking) paths that journey can take.

To reiterate, examining victimhood and the uncommon ways that survival can manifest is a relatively new yet vital development in literature, film, and media. These works, I have shown, offer

diverse notions of victimhood, providing new perspectives. And although they are not works of testimony or memoir (and therefore, do not contain real-life insight into the condition of victimhood), they nevertheless challenge the conceptions and expectations of how rape survivors “should” react. As evidenced by the remarks made by scholars and critics about the protagonists in *Trauma*, “*Ob...*,” and (especially) *Elle* (i.e., that they are “bizarre,” “aberrant,” or “unusual”), audiences appear to have preconceived notions about what victimhood and the aftermath of rape entail. It is understandable that these stories (*Elle* in particular) have disquieted audiences as they are indeed unfamiliar depictions and defy certain narrative conventions. Although rape (and violence against women more generally) is an enormously popular and common trope in literature and cinema, the versions of victimhood portrayed in the tales I have examined here are simply not ones with which audiences and readers have had much (if any) contact.

In the following chapter, this dissertation will continue to examine the various ways that literature is responding to the question of victimhood and thus broadening cultural understandings of surviving interpersonal violence. Within the memoir genre, I continue to explore themes of power and control, emphasizing the ways in which new works put forth messages of both survival and resilience. Examining the experimental uses of language and form harnessed within texts by Vanessa Springora, Loulou Robert, and Adélaïde Bon, I show in my final chapter how these personal works demolish stereotypes and rape myths (like those examined in this and the previous chapter) and, moreover, allow the survivor to regain agency and centrality in her story.

Chapter Three:

I Believe the Word You're Looking For is *Rape*: What the Body Remembers in Three Contemporary French Women's Memoirs

"Wounds don't just go away. They don't take up less space because you turn away from them. They don't mend on their own because you ignore them. They don't heal because you avoid them. They are persistent because they want to be healed. If you try to cover up a wound, it will find a way to grab your attention."

—Vienna Pharaon, *The Origins of You* (44)

"J'ai vécu un viol qui, étrangement, est très minoritaire, mais qui s'impose dans l'imaginaire."

—Giulia Foïs, *Écrire le viol: ça brûle les mains*

I. Introduction

In my previous chapter, I identified an emerging trend within contemporary French fiction and narrative cinema in which the turbulent psychological process of recuperating one's control and sense of self in the aftermath of rape is treated as the primary matter of importance. I showed how contemporary writers and filmmakers have harnessed their artistic techniques to inquire about the ways in which one relearns how to live and reclaim agency after surviving sexual violence. The works, I argued, veer away from the prevailing narrative patterns to which audiences have grown accustomed and present stories of recovery not ordinarily encountered in literature and cinema. Although fictional, these works contribute to widening collective understandings about the inherently tumultuous nature of the rape recovery process while emphasizing that there is no "perfect," "correct," or "normal" response to sexual violence.

In this chapter, I pursue this line of inquiry further, shifting my focus to first-person, non-fictional narrative accounts of rape, survival, and endurance. I show how, much like the fictional works previously discussed, these personal memoirs—written in the victim's own unique voice—provide untidy yet necessary accounts that spotlight the long-term impact of sexual violence on its victims

while dismantling prevalent misconceptions about rape and victimhood. The distinguishing feature of this chapter is its focus on language—both verbal and, especially, somatic—as it relates to rape and victimhood. I examine three recently published memoirs by Vanessa Springora, Loulou Robert, and Adélaïde Bon, placing particular emphasis on the latter two works as they are most emblematic of the themes I discuss. I call attention to the ways in which these authors initially resist ascribing the word *rape* to what they lived through. That is, they demonstrate how, in the aftermath of sexual violence, the word, the concept, even the memory, of rape can remain inaccessible to the victims. Through close readings, I investigate the ways in which these authors portray their struggles to understand and ultimately name what they have lived through, which allows me to inquire about the role that language plays in recognizing, identifying, and framing sexual violence. In addition to describing this lack of verbal language to communicate their experiences, these works explore the embodied (i.e., somatic/corporeal) impact of rape or, in other words, the ways in which their bodies attempt to speak in order to signal that something traumatic has happened. In instances where language remains out of reach, these works show how the raped body itself (i.e., the scene of the crime) attempts to express its distress and convey its experience through corporeal (i.e., non-verbal) language.¹ These works, I assert, show how the experience of rape so often lies outside of one's available cognitive framework and can resist verbal articulation.

That is not to say that these works present the trauma of rape as fundamentally “unspeakable.” Rather, I argue that they highlight a prevalent phenomenon known by social scientists, psychologists, and victimologists as “unacknowledged rape,” which refers to experiences that meet the legal

¹ See Babette Rothschild's *The Body Remembers: The Psychophysiology of Trauma and Trauma Treatment* (2000); Robert Scaer's *The Body Bears the Burden* (2001); Gabor Maté's *When the Body Says No: Exploring the Stress-Disease Connection* (2003); Pat Ogden, Kekuni Minton, and Clare Pain's *Trauma and the Body: A Sensorimotor Approach to Psychotherapy* (2006); Peter Levine's *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (2010); Bessel van der Kolk's *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (2014); Janina Fisher's *Healing the Fragmented Selves of Trauma Survivors: Overcoming Internal Self-Alienation* (2017); and Muriel Salmons's “Traumatic Amnesia: A Dissociative Survival Mechanism” (2018).

definition of rape and yet are not perceived, identified, remembered, or labeled as such by the victim for various reasons.² In other words, these works notably spotlight the distinct consequences of “the inability to perceive [one’s] rape as such” when it happens, or even for years after (Krimmer and Simpson 31).³ These memoirs, I contend, offer rare insight into the condition of victimhood, illustrating how challenging it can be to recognize oneself as “raped,” how difficult it is to put the experience of rape into spoken language, how the body intervenes to make its internal wound known, and how finding the right words to describe and acknowledge one’s experience can facilitate recovery.

However, before I expound on these arguments, I would like to ground the discussion by reflecting on journalist Giulia Foïs’ concept of “le bon viol” as it strongly influenced my ideas for this chapter. In *Je suis une sur deux* (2020), a memoir in which she describes the vicious attack committed against her at age 20 by a stranger, Foïs opens with the following statements: “J’ai eu de la chance. J’ai eu le bon viol” (9). At first glance, the concept of a “good rape” appears oxymoronic. How can a rape be characterized as “good”? How could one ascribe “luck” (i.e., “de la chance”) to their rape? As if anticipating the reader’s questions, Foïs elucidates:

Alors . . . j’ai pu *dire*. Une fois, même, j’ai pu *porter plainte*. Et aujourd’hui je suppose qu’il m’est plus facile d’*écrire*: le bon viol, vous pourrez peut-être le *lire*. Le bon viol, c’est celui avec le

² Research shows that instead of using the term “rape,” victims often choose phrases such as, for example, “grey zone,” “misunderstanding,” or “bad sex” to describe the experience. See *Herstory Global’s* “Had an Uncomfortable Experience but Not Quite Sure What to Make of It?”; Laura C. Wilson and Katherine E. Miller’s “Meta-Analysis of the Prevalence of Unacknowledged Rape” (2016); “How Female Disclosure Recipients React to Women Survivors: The Impact of Rape Acknowledgment and Rejection of Rape Myths” by Laura Wilson, H.R. Truex, M.C. Murphy-Neilson, *et al.* (2021); Heather L. Littleton, Deborah L. Rhatigan, and Danny Axsom’s “Unacknowledged Rape: How Much Do We Know About the Hidden Rape Victim?” (2007); and Rachel Thompson’s “Unacknowledged Rape: The Sexual Assault Survivors Who Hide Their Trauma Even From Themselves” (2021).

³ Regarding the words of Krimmer and Simpson that I borrow, please note that they are speaking about texts by Lisa Taddeo and Annie Ernaux, which are not works upon which I focus in this chapter.

Loup-Garou sorti de nulle part. Celui avec le parking, à la tombée de la nuit. Celui avec le couteau qui luit . . . Celui avec les coups de poing dans la gueule. (9) (emphasis mine)

In other words, a “bon viol,” according to Foïs, is one in which the victim can immediately remember, identify, and communicate her experience. It is one that the victim can write about and one that others can read and, most importantly, recognize as a rape. The “bon viol,” she asserts, is committed by a stranger—a monstrous being—who comes out only at night wielding a weapon that clearly marks him as a predator who uses violence to subdue his prey.⁴ Therefore, a “bon viol” is that which “vous pouvez imaginer sans effort,” states Foïs (10). The “bon viol,” she explains, “[c’est] celui qu’on croit” (“Giulia Foïs: ‘Le viol’”). It is believed because “c’est celui [qui] conforme à l’image que l’on s’en fait” (qtd. in Hochberg). In short, it is the rape that is uncontested and thereby the one that society legitimizes. “Donc,” she concludes, “on peut en parler plus facilement” (qtd. in Hochberg).

However, the “bon viol” is experienced by relatively few victims. In an interview with *Marie Claire*, Foïs explains: “Le viol que j’ai subi appartient à une catégorie très minoritaire de viol” (qtd. in Hochberg). Providing statistical support for her statement, Foïs demonstrates that the rape she lived through—committed by a stranger, immediately recollected and reported, recognized by others, and one that included all four of the French penal code’s criteria⁵ for what constitutes rape (i.e., penetration

⁴ This image of rape/the rapist has been identified and discussed by many researchers. See the “Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance (IRMA) Scale.” See also Georgetown Law’s “Myths and Facts about Sexual Violence”; Joanna Bourke’s chapter “Rape Myths”; Sofia Persson and Katie Dhingra’s *Rape Myths: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing* (2022); Trudy Govier’s *Victims and Victimhood* (2015); Kate Harding’s chapter on Rape Myths in *Asking for It*; “Dispel Myths” at *Herstory Global*; and Helen Benedict’s *Virgin or Vamp: How the Press Covers Sex Crimes* (1992).

⁵ As stated in France’s *Code pénal*, “Tout acte de pénétration sexuelle, de quelque nature qu’il soit, ou tout acte bucco-génital commis sur la personne d’autrui ou sur la personne de l’auteur par violence, contrainte, menace ou surprise est un viol” (“Code pénal: Article 222-23”).

via violence, constraint, threat, and surprise)—makes up one in ten reported rapes (*Je suis une sur deux* 124). “Neuf fois sur dix,”⁶ she explains,

les victimes connaissent celui qui les viole. Moi, pas. [...] En plus, moi, il avait un couteau. Et il n'était pas tard. Et je portais un pantalon. Trois petits détails qui font le bon viol: on avait pu admettre . . . que je n'aie *vraiment* pas eu le choix. Voire, que je ne l'avais pas *forcément* cherché.
(124-125)

Foïs highlights that not only was her attacker unknown to her but also that it was overwhelmingly obvious to others that she played no role in her victimization: he used force, she did not dress objectionably, and she was not out late. She was simply in the “mauvais endroit au mauvais moment,” she writes (11). These details allowed her to be “plus facilement entendue” and thus believed (125). Foïs’ assertions align with those of victimologists such as Condry, whose words bear repeating for their relevance here: “[R]ape stereotypes and myths . . . are deeply embedded in our culture. These myths include a restrictive definition of what constitutes “real rape” (*an attack out of doors on a stranger using force, with the victim actively resisting*) . . . [and] normative expectations about how rape victims behave (e.g., *reporting an offense immediately*)” (242) (emphasis mine).

Foïs maintains that society holds tightly to this image of rape for a specific reason: “Parce que ça nous rassure” (qtd. in Hochberg). It reassures because it confirms the misconception that rape is an unusual occurrence, that it is obvious when it is happening, and that attackers are few and far between. She elucidates: “[L]es loups-garous, ce n’est pas comme si il y en avait partout. Au moins le loup-garou, ce n’est pas un copain, ce n’est pas un comme nous” (qtd. in Hochberg). By conserving the belief that rape is rare and carried out by clearly delineated villains, society does not have to concede, Foïs argues, that those who rape are in fact “des gens qui nous ressemblent, puisqu’on viole à tous les étages de

⁶ According to Arrêtons Les Violences: “Dans 91% des cas [i.e., rape], ces agressions ont été perpétrées par une personne connue de la victime. Dans 47% des cas, c’est le conjoint ou l’ex-conjoint qui est l’auteur des faits” (“Les chiffres de référence”). See also Foïs’ note in *Je suis une sur deux* (186).

la société, quelque soit le milieu ou l'âge [...] On se rassure ainsi, mais on n'est pas dans le vrai" (qtd. in Hochberg).

"Le vrai" of which Foïs speaks is, as her title states, that "[u]ne femme sur deux, en France, aujourd'hui, subira au moins une forme de violence sexuelle au cours de sa vie" (131-132).⁷ This statistic breaks down to "94,000 autres femmes" per year, "7,800 femmes par mois; 261 femmes par jour. Une toutes les sept minutes" (131).⁸ And, to reiterate, "Neuf fois sur dix, les victimes connaissent celui qui les viole" (124).⁹ Furthermore, the majority of rapes "se produisent le plus souvent au domicile de la victime" (Salmona, "Pour en finir avec le déni"). Far from "reassuring," these findings make it difficult to minimize the prevalence of rape,¹⁰ especially considering that the statistics encompass only reported rapes.¹¹

What Foïs' describes as the "bon viol" is therefore a dominant, pervasive cultural myth that structures collective understandings of rape. By the term "myth," I am not suggesting that the "bon viol" is a falsehood (Foïs' own rape fits perfectly within these confines). Rather, I am proposing, as Foïs does, that because rape so rarely happens in this way, the "bon viol" is a narrow and incomplete

⁷ See "Plus d'une Française sur deux victime de violences sexuelles"; "Les chiffres de référence sur les violences faites aux femmes"; Lydia Menez's "Une Française sur deux victimes de violences sexistes ou sexuelles"; and Virginie Ballet's "Le chiffre: Près d'une Française sur deux victime de violences sexistes ou sexuelles."

⁸ These figures only include women over the age of 18. See Foïs' note: "43% des femmes âgées de 18 ans et plus ont subi au moins une fois des gestes sexuels sans consentement" (*Je suis une sur deux* 187).

⁹ These numbers are well documented. See Longeray's "New Study Looks at Rapes in Paris"; Lucy Adams' "Sex attack victims"; *National Institute of Justice's* "Most Victims Know Their Attacker"; Michelle L. Meloy and Susan L. Miller's *The Victimization of Women: Law, Policies, and Politics*; and the World Health Organization's "Violence Against Women."

¹⁰ See Raphael's *Rape is Rape: How Denial, Distortion, and Victim Blaming are Fueling a Hidden Acquaintance Rape Crisis*; see Harding; see Bourke.

¹¹ Reported rapes are between "8% and 15% . . . [O]f the small number of cases brought to court, only 10 to 15% are tried in the *Cour d'assises*" (qtd. in "Sexual Violence and the French Justice System").

framework for recognizing and responding to the crime. My use of “myth” here is borrowed from Roland Barthes’ remarks in *Mythologies* (1957). According to Barthes, myth reduces something complex into something easily digestible.¹² In his words, myth “abolishes the complexity of human acts, it gives them the simplicity of essences, it does away with . . . any going back beyond what is immediately visible, it organizes a world . . . without contradictions,” which is ultimately “reassur[ing]” as it offers “blissful clarity” (256). In short, it is a “distort[ion]” (231). Although Barthes was certainly not speaking of rape in these passages, his words hold relevance as this is what Foïs essentially describes as the “bon viol.” It is the uncomplicated, reductive, and iconic image of rape, one that “vous pouvez imaginer sans effort” (*Je suis une sur deux* 10), one that “on peut en parler plus facilement,” and one that “reassures us” (i.e., “ça nous rassure” [qtd. in Hochberg]). Although comforting in the sense that it provides psychological relief by allowing individuals to believe the illusion that rape is both rare and unlikely to happen to them or a loved one,¹³ the myth of the “bon viol” is fundamentally a misrepresentation of reality¹⁴ that poses serious consequences to victims.

Keeping these concepts in mind as well as the remarkable statistic that one in two women in France will survive at least one form of sexual violence over the course of her life, salient questions arise: What about the “[n]euf fois sur dix”—or rather the nine out of ten women—of which Foïs speaks (124-125)? What happens when they cannot remember, identify, and communicate their experience? If the predominant available framework for conceptualizing and authenticating rape is the

¹² Barthes writes, “Myth does not deny things, on the contrary, its function is to talk about them; simply, it purifies them . . . it gives them a clarity which is not that of an explanation but that of a statement of fact,” rendering it “natural” and that which “*goes without saying*” (255-256). “However paradoxical it may seem,” he writes, “*myth hides nothing*; its function is to distort” (231).

¹³ See Govier who speaks further on why rape myths are “comforting illusions” (7).

¹⁴ By *reality*, I refer to the statistics mentioned that demonstrate the prevalence and incidence of sexual violence against women and how the crime is most likely to occur (i.e., at home, by an acquaintance, etc.).

“bon viol,” then how can a victim make sense of her experience if it lies outside of this frame? And, by extension, how can others recognize and validate a victim’s experience if it does not fit within this construct? Finally, how does this ultimately harm victims and forestall their recovery? These are precisely the questions Springora, Robert, and Bon put forth in their memoirs, and those which I investigate in this chapter.

II. On the Recent Proliferation of Rape Memoirs and the Significance of the Genre

At this point, an explanation about the recent proliferation of rape memoirs, the general features of the genre, as well as my reasons for selecting the works of Springora, Robert, and Bon to study is necessary. Further, a reflection on why many victims turn to the genre of memoir and why readers are drawn to these works, is provided.

Within the last 25 years in France, there have been numerous memoirs published in which female authors share their experiences of sexual violence. There has been a vast increase in these publications especially within the last decade, and this is perhaps because current cultural conditions have arguably enhanced public interest and investment in listening to victims’ experiences, creating a market for more publications of this type. These conditions include the rape allegations against former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK) in 2011, an event that proved most impactful for increasing public discourse devoted to addressing the urgent problem of sexual violence against women in France.¹⁵ Further, the 2017 #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc movements of women across the globe sharing their experiences of sexual violence on social media allowed for greater public discussions on rape and sexual misconduct. Although as Bon correctly states in an

¹⁵ Of the DSK allegations, Springora stated that it was those against DSK that were “the beginning of the inversion of domination” (qtd. in Macdonald). Gilmore confirms, “The [DSK] case resounded in France, spotlighting a permissiveness toward sexual harassment, assault, and even rape” (*The #MeToo Effect* 156). See the documentary series *Room 2806: The Accusation* (2020), directed by Jalil Lespert.

interview with *The Guardian* that “[t]here have always been books about it [sexual abuse and rape], [and that] people have always spoken about it” (qtd. in Macdonald), the DSK affair and #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc have likely made possible a much wider readership and created higher demand for more publications of this kind. While media sources (e.g., news, literature, film, podcasts, and television) still focus much of their attention on assailants and perpetrators, the surge in rape memoir publications suggests a rapidly growing public interest in and demand for hearing the victim tell her story in her own words.¹⁶

Although each is unique, rape memoirs generally share similar features. Most often, these include first-person narration (i.e., author as narrator), detailed information about the circumstances prior to, during, and after the assault(s), as well as reflections on trauma (e.g., PTSD) and the path to recovery. One also frequently encounters considerations of past and current cultural conditions, which generally provide valuable insight into how those conditions impact victims. Moreover, these works often contain passages that explicitly state their goals, which include raising awareness about the prevalence of rape, challenging harmful victim-blaming myths, and contributing to broader dialogues about violence against women. Finally, many of these works offer encouragement to others whose lives have been touched by the crime.

Notable recent French examples of this genre (aside from those studied in this chapter) include Christine Angot’s *L’Inceste* (1999),¹⁷ Marie-Ange Le Boulaire’s *Le Viol* (2002), Samira Bellil’s *Dans l’enfer des tournantes* (2002), Virginie Despentes’ *King Kong Théorie* (2006), Tristane Banon’s *Le Bal des hypocrites*

¹⁶ Accounts of male victims of rape remain scarce. Édouard Louis’ *Histoire de la violence* (2016), Camille Kouchner’s *La Familia Grande* (2021), and Arnaud Gallais’ (with Ixchel Delaporte) *J’étais un enfant* (2023) are among the few recent examples of works devoted to male victims.

¹⁷ Angot’s work straddles the realms of both memoir and fiction. See Gill Rye’s “Public Places, Intimate Spaces: Christine Angot’s Incest Narratives” (2010) and Ruth Cruickshank’s “Christine Angot: Trauma, Transgression, and the *Write to Reply*” (2009).

(2011), Andréa Bescond's *Les Chatouilles: Ou La Danse De La Colère* (2015),¹⁸ Annie Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* (2016), Flavie Flament's *La Consolation* (2016),¹⁹ Sophie Chauveau's *La Fabrique des pervers* (2016), Sandra Muller's *#BalanceTonPorc* (2018), Sarah Abitbol's *Un Si Long Silence* (2020), Giulia Foïs' *Je suis une sur deux* (2020),²⁰ Lola Lafon's *Chavirer* (2020),²¹ Angot's *Le Voyage dans l'est* (2021), Francesca Gee's *L'Arme la plus meurtrière* (2021), Charlotte Pudlowski's *Ou peut-être une nuit* (2021), Axelle Jah Njiké's *Journal intime d'une féministe (noire)* (2022), Hélène Devynck's *Impunité* (2022), Neige Sinno's *Triste tigre* (2023), Isild Le Besco's *Dire vrai* (2024), and Vahina Giocante's *À corps ouvert* (2024).

While these recent texts relay the experience and aftermath of rape, I chose the works of Springora, Robert, and Bon because they illustrate the difficult process of recognizing their experience as rape and naming it as such. They are unique in that they spotlight the widespread yet little-discussed (outside of medical and victimological discourses) phenomenon of “unacknowledged rape” and thus work harmoniously as a grouping. They also employ similar literary devices, stylistic choices, and argumentation methods that serve to disrupt dominant notions of rape and victimhood. Each moreover draws attention to the corporeal symptoms and sensations that accompany rape. Though my primary focus is on the memoirs of Robert and Bon as they are most illustrative of this chapter's themes, all three distinctly “explore . . . complex truths of rape without altering . . . [the] narratives to fit seamlessly into culturally sanctioned scripts” (e.g., “le bon viol”) (Roeder 22).²² And while Springora

¹⁸ Adapted for film in 2018, entitled *Les Chatouilles*, directed by Bescond and Éric Métayer.

¹⁹ Adapted for television in 2017 (under the same title), directed by Magaly Richard-Serrano.

²⁰ Adapted for television in 2022, entitled *Une sur deux*, directed by Emmanuel Noblet.

²¹ Lafon's *Chavirer* was published and marketed as a fictional novel. However, in 2021, Lafon shared on her personal Instagram page that *Chavirer* is directly based upon her own experiences of grooming and rape as an adolescent, which is why I include it here (Lafon, “Un jour”).

²² Please note that while I borrow the words of Tara Roeder, her quotation refers to English-language rape memoirs that I do not discuss here.

and Bon have specifically garnered scholarly attention, the points of discussion and research questions that I confront with regard to these works have not yet, to my knowledge, been examined within the discipline of French literary studies. Further, the work of Robert has remained unexamined altogether—a significant gap that I address.

Given that so many women turn to memoir to impart their stories of abuse and victimhood, one might ask what it is about this literary form that continues to appeal. That is, why are so many choosing this genre over others (e.g., fiction) to describe their experiences of trauma? What is possible through memoir, and what are the risks of employing this format? And why are readers drawn to this kind of life writing? At its core, memoir is a creative vehicle through which authors may, in their own voice, confront and impart formative experiences through which they have lived and, often, from which they have learned. Eschewing objectivity in favor of a subjective exploration and representation of the self, memoir is, according to Donna Sadler, “a type of self-examination” that is not “chronological” but rather “function[s] like memory itself in the selective re-writing of a life” (157, 159). Memoirs are, as the word itself suggests, rooted in remembrance, often composed at the end of one’s life with an eye toward evaluation. The genre thus assumes a certain amplitude of experience.

However, when it comes to rape memoirs, one often finds that authors writing in this form, including those studied in this chapter, are young—not at all near the end of their lives. Yet, it is as though the experiences of traumatic abuse have somehow aged these individuals, radically changing—even compressing—their lives.²³ In these cases, the memoir functions not as a way to account for a whole life but rather as a means to impart a heightened, life-altering experience, allowing for an “unburdening” through the process of sharing (Febos 108).

²³ My advisor, Christy Wampole, greatly helped to conceptualize this section.

Regarding the idea of sharing, memoirs have long been associated with the notion of confiding in the reader, offering an honest confession of sorts.²⁴ I mean *confess* not in the sense that one has committed an offense or is telling a secret, but rather in the original Latin meaning of the word, which signifies “to acknowledge” (109).²⁵ To my mind, this is perhaps what continues to draw survivors to the format. Not only does memoir allow for an “unburdening,” permitting authors to both “digest” and “integrat[e]” their experiences (to borrow Melissa Febos’ words [xvi]), but memoir also invites recognition of those experiences (108-109). The writer acknowledges her own story and, likewise, the reader is invited to bear witness. Memoir is therefore an opportunity for a victim to tell her point of view and, because it is a work of literature that assumes a reader, it offers the possibility for the victim to be heard and, perhaps most importantly, believed.

On the matter of belief as it relates to memoir, Philippe Lejeune’s concept of *le pacte autobiographique*²⁶ is particularly germane. According to Lejeune, when an author presents their work as autobiographical—as memoirists generally do—an implicit contract is formed between author and reader, attesting to the authenticity of the material (Lejeune 26-31). The writer avers that they are telling the truth, and the reader accepts. In this way, memoirs are offered as genuine—as documents to be believed. However, as Gilmore explains, belief is something that is often denied to female victims by the legal system and the media, which are institutions that routinely “contaminate” women’s testimonies “by doubt” (*Tainted Witness* 2). Thus, the format of memoir arguably offers victims what Gilmore calls “an adequate witness,” which denotes an audience that “receive[s] [a victim’s] testimony

²⁴ This is likely due to Augustine’s *Confessions*, which many consider to be the origin of the memoir genre. See Jacinta Read’s “The Long View: Reconsidering the Confessions” (2018).

²⁵ According to *Collins Dictionary*, the origins of confess are “from Latin . . . from *fatēri* to acknowledge; related to Latin *fārī* to speak” (“Confess, N.”).

²⁶ While autobiography differs from memoir, I find Lejeune’s concept a useful framework for thinking about belief with regard to women’s memoirs.

without deforming it by doubt” and “resists the rush to judgement” (5). Memoir can therefore be understood as an instrument that facilitates not only the reception of a victim’s story but also trust in the sincerity of her account.

To be sure, the format is not without its risks. Whereas fiction might provide the protective shield of distance by using different names, places, and details, memoirs are usually written under the name of the author and often communicate the identity of the person(s) who harmed them. Moreover, by sharing her story publicly, the victim opens herself to scrutiny and, potentially, further trauma in the sense that some readers might not hold up their end of *le pacte*. There may still be suspicious readers who refuse to believe what the memoirist has presented as truth. There may also be legal ramifications for sharing one’s story,²⁷ and some may even accuse authors of exhibitionism and over-sharing.²⁸

However, as the ever-growing bibliography of rape memoirs attests, survivors do not appear to be discouraged from communicating their experiences through this form. Perhaps this is because the genre offers more freedom than, for example, a tweet, police report, or legal testimony (Gilmore, *The #MeToo Effect* 13). By freedom, I mean that, within the genre of memoir, the author makes all creative choices in both her storytelling and self-representation. If rape represents a fundamental loss of choice over what happens to one’s body, then perhaps memoir is both a path to restoring (at least partially) her agency and maybe even a means of achieving a sense of justice in the sense that the crime committed against her is exposed and thus laid bare for others to recognize. In this way, a memoir can be seen as “an act of resistance” wherein the author reasserts her subjectivity through her authorial voice while calling attention to a widespread problem (Gilmore 13).

Moreover, as the genre grows, it continues to be widely read, with many works (e.g., Springora’s) achieving bestseller status. French publishing executive Caroline Laurent explains, “In

²⁷ See “Sandra Muller, France’s #MeToo Creator, Fined for Defamation” by *BBC*.

²⁸ See Febos’ chapter, “In Praise of Naval Gazing” (5).

the #MeToo era, readers want the victims' stories . . . [n]ot those of their tormentors. All these stories hold up a mirror to our civilization and force us to look at ourselves with lucidity and courage, in order to make things better" (qtd. in Macdonald). I agree, yet I also suspect that rape memoirs attract audiences because they offer hope and attest to the possibility of both surviving and enduring. Further, these works permit readers to better understand, even "imagine," both "shared *and* unshared experience, to feel moved by characters whose [sustained] violence appalls us," and invite them to closely examine "scenes and feelings from which we too rapidly turn away" (Gilmore 13). As for those who have specifically survived sexual violence, memoirs may provide an avenue out of isolation. The format perhaps offers validation to other survivors, demonstrating that they are not "the only one," which in turn contributes to lifting the stigma that keeps rape shrouded in silence and shame while illustrating that this event is survivable. As Febos—a memoirist herself—asserts, "We are writing the stories that we could not find in any other book" and, in so doing, "we are giving . . . proof of our survival to each other" (27). In what follows, I show how the memoirs of Springora, Robert, and Bon spotlight that resilience and proof of life while asking readers to look closely at the impact of the crime rather than turning away.

"C'était une violence sans nom."
—Vanessa Springora (131)

III. "Une blessure jamais cicatrisée"²⁹: The Body Refuses in *Le Consentement*

Vanessa Springora's 2020 memoir *Le Consentement* recounts her experience of systematic grooming³⁰ which devolves into repeated occurrences of rape at the hands of a successful French writer and intellectual whom she refers to as "G" (i.e., Gabriel Matzneff). Calling herself "V"

²⁹ Springora (168).

³⁰ Grooming refers to the "gradual process whereby an abuser wins the trust and cooperation of a potential victim, starting with interactions that seem normal and benign, like paying special attention or offering compliments and gifts" (Barnard, "What Does 'Grooming' Mean in Sexual Abuse Cases?").

throughout the text, Springora narrates how at the tender age of 13, she meets G, then 50 years old, at a literary dinner party she attends with her mother whom Springora describes as a “féministe soixante-huitard” (119). Springora explains that because her father had been conspicuously absent from her life, she was particularly vulnerable and easy “proie” (37) for G since, at the time, she had “un immense besoin d’être regardée” by a paternal figure (35). Thus, when they first encounter one another at the party where G intently gazes upon her, young V is made to feel special, admired, even exceptional. Initially charmed, the girl (mis)interprets his attention toward her as fatherly—attention in which she is all too eager to bask:

Son regard ne cesse d’épier le moindre de mes gestes et quand j’ose enfin me tourner vers lui, il me sourit, de ce sourire que je confonds *dès le premier instant avec un sourire paternel*, parce que c’est un sourire d’homme et que de père, je n’en ai plus. [...] [I]l n’en faut pas plus pour capter mon attention. (40) (emphasis mine)

After the party, G pursues her and initiates a relationship by first sending her passionate letters (often twice a day) and then contriving “chance” encounters for them to meet in her neighborhood (45). Unsurprisingly, young V is “flattée” and thus eager to follow the man into his home where he eventually pressures her into sexual acts that, at the time, she perceives to be romantic and mutually agreeable (54). Thereafter, he ensures that V spend every afternoon with him wherein he regularly rapes her while convincing her that their “histoire. . . [est] unique . . . et sublime” (129). “À force qu’il me le répète,” Springora solemnly explains, “j’avais fini par croire à cette transcendance, le syndrome de Stockholm n’est pas qu’une rumeur” (129).

What is more, G becomes increasingly possessive, even domineering over V’s life: “G s’est mis en tête de contrôler *tous les aspects de mon existence*,” explains Springora (119) (emphasis mine). These mechanisms of control include dictating her appearance (118), writing her homework assignments to ensure that it is *he* that remains the only “writer” in the relationship (81), and isolating her from her

friends so that he becomes her sole companion (151). Springora recounts the various ways he not only consumes her body and invades her psyche by convincing her that she is complicit in their acts, but he also begins to subtly appropriate her image (i.e., photos) and her voice (i.e., words), using her as “material” for his literary creations: “M’avoir transformée en personnage de fiction . . . c’est m’empêcher de déployer mes ailes, me condamner à rester figée dans une prison de mots” (171). Effectively, he steals her identity as he attempts to cripple her individuality and render her permanently dependent upon him for any sense of significance: “Il existe de nombreuses manières de ravir une personne à elle-même. Certaines semblent au départ bien innocentes. [...] La dépossession commençait comme ça” (81-84). It is only after V discovers his taste for other adolescent girls and, furthermore, reads his published essays that flaunt his sexual abuse of boys as young as eight years old that she begins to realize G’s depravity and thus withdraws from the relationship. These revelations prove to young V that she is not an exception but rather merely one of many children that G has exploited. “Cet homme n’était pas bon,” she reflects, “Il était . . . un ogre. [...] Le sortilège se dissipe” (130-132). Springora describes how the damage wreaked by this short-lived relationship is both long lasting and far reaching. She explains how, for many years after, she considered herself to be ruined, sullied—a “broken toy” that no one would ever accept: “Personne n’aime les jouets cassés” (161).

Springora’s account is an indictment of her time and culture. According to Lola Seton, Springora highlights “the permissive sensibility of her mother’s Parisian milieu of intellectuals and writers” (“How Vanessa”). More specifically, Seton explains, it was an atmosphere “formed by the . . . protests of May 1968, and the ensuing social revolution against what the *soixante-huitards* regarded as the puritanism of conventional sexual mores, including the taboo against sex between adults and minors” (“How Vanessa”). Sociologist Pierre Verdrager confirms in his 2013 work *Forbidden Child: How Paedophilia Became Scandalous*, “The identification of the potentially sexual nature of the relationship between adults and children was one of the ways of going against the bourgeois order” (qtd. in Seton,

“How Vanessa”). This environment of the 1970s and 1980s described in Springora’s work resulted in “a movement defending paedophilia [that] emerged . . . with its own associations and journals” (“How Vanessa”). Perhaps unsurprisingly, leading this movement was G (i.e., Matzneff). Seton elucidates, “Matzneff became the spokesperson” for this cause, “drafting (initially anonymously) an open letter in *Le Monde* in 1977” where he explicitly “argued for the decriminalization of sex between adults and minors” (“How Vanessa”).³¹ In fact, more than just writing open letters in favor of pedophilia, G flagrantly boasted for years about his desire for children, especially those under the age of 16,³² and yet remained an unrebuked, esteemed intellectual figure in France who continued to win literary prizes until as recently as 2013 (Seton, “How Vanessa”).

Springora vividly portrays this distinct cultural milieu, illustrating how her grooming and rape take place in plain sight. This desecration of the child is enabled by Springora’s mother who “accept[s]” (62) and tolerates the relationship despite knowing G to be, in her own words, “un pédophile” (51). Additionally, the abuse is fostered by Parisian literary elites. As Springora clarifies, “Il faut croire que personne ne se montre particulièrement inquiet” by the relationship between the 14-year-old and G (62). Many even encourage the young girl to maintain the relationship, considering it a privilege to be “chosen” by someone of his intellectual status: “C’est un immense honneur qu’il vous a fait en vous choisissant,” as an elderly friend of G asserts (141). With this information in mind, one is able to apprehend the conditions that made Springora’s sexual abuse as an adolescent both possible and socially permissible.

Despite the accepting, bohemian environment in which it was “interdit d’interdire” (65), Springora’s work nevertheless underlines, in stark terms, that while “[y]oung people can be coerced

³¹ Notable figures who co-signed this open letter include (but are not limited to) Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Simone de Beauvoir, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Louis Aragon (Springora 63).

³² See “Les Moins de seize ans” (1974), one of his more (in)famous essays.

into sex . . . they cannot consent” because children and adults do not share “an equivalent understanding . . . of sex” (Gilmore 159). Children, such as young V, do not know to what they are agreeing (159). Thus, Springora’s text persuasively defends the point that consent given by a young girl such as herself can never be considered valid (163-166). Some may attempt to justify the actions of G by arguing that they were not particularly harmful because the teenager desired them. Springora argues however that, indeed, she was harmed, and furthermore, that it is never the child’s attraction to the adult that should be examined but rather that of the adult for the child: “Ce n’est pas mon attirance à moi qu’il fallait interroger, mais la sienne” (Springora 129).

While many aspects of *Le Consentement* invite discussion and analysis, I am particularly struck by Springora’s periodic yet unmistakable passages in which she describes how her body endures and responds to the rape(s) and, additionally, the ways in which she articulates the emotional ramifications inherent to grappling with a prolonged experience of abuse she had initially considered consensual—even romantic. In the following section, I first offer a summary of the extant scholarly criticism written on *Le Consentement*, explaining how my reading differs from this previous research. I then analyze Springora’s remarks about the raped body as well as the psychological turbulence that her abuse engenders, bringing to light aspects of Springora’s work that have thus far remained neglected.

a. Scholarship/Criticism on *Le Consentement*

Le Consentement has received considerably more academic attention than the works of Bon and Robert, likely because it was an immediate sensation upon publication (selling over 300,000 copies) that sparked a national conversation about the sexual abuse of minors as well as France’s apparent legal and societal tolerance of such crimes.³³ Notably, this attention resulted in France passing its first

³³ It is generally agreed upon that this societal tolerance is rooted in the cultural revolution that began in France in May 1968, and Springora specifically explains this in her work.

law regarding age of consent; it also led French prosecutors to open an investigation—eventually dropped due to the statute of limitations—into Matzneff, whose pedophilia was something of an open secret within France’s intellectual community (Morrey 224).³⁴ Additionally, the success of the memoir yielded a film adaptation, directed by Vanessa Filho in 2023 (released under the same name as the book).

In “Vanessa Springora et le fossage des mythes de la séduction ‘à la française’” (2022), Angélique Ibáñez Aristondo and Lucie Nizard examine *Le Consentement* through the lens of longstanding French national ideas/ideals of seduction and how such ideals serve to romanticize, conceal, and perpetuate sexually abusive dynamics. These authors point out that Springora insists upon harnessing precise language to both name the experience she lived through and expose her abuser—a topic I also explore (167). However, these authors are mainly concerned with examining how Springora “deconstructs” the figure of the seductive French man and the “le mythe de l’écrivain tout-puissant” (166-168). These authors do not specifically focus, as I do, on Springora’s struggle to pronounce the word *rape* and to identify herself as a victim, nor do they discuss the bodily symptomatology that occurs in the wake of sexual abuse.

In “Vanessa Springora, Gabriel Matzneff and the Problem of Consent” (2022), Douglas Morrey examines *Le Consentement* and argues that although Springora’s work had an “impact on French culture” (241), and although the question of consent “is far from straightforward” (243), her work “demonstrates a reluctance to take a firmer line on the question of sexual consent” (241). He contends

³⁴ Prior to this law, “[i]n France, as long as ‘violence, coercion, threat or surprise’ . . . [was] not proven, sexual intercourse with a minor— even one under 15 . . . [was] considered an “atteinte sexuelle,” which is an infraction and not a crime” (Faure, “Can an 11-Year-Old Girl Consent to Sex?”). There was “no equivalent to the charge of statutory rape” (Morrey 245). As Gilmore explains, “[U]ntil as recently as 2020, France was an outlier with respect to age of consent and rape law. It had no age-of-consent. If a complaint for sexual assault or rape was brought, the victim had to prove they did not consent, a negative burden few met” (*The #MeToo Effect* 157). See *The Economist’s* “France’s Silence Over the Sexual Abuse of Minors is Breaking.” See “France Toughens Law on Sex with Minors Under Age 15.” See also Dominique Vidalon and Simon Carraud’s “France Opens Rape Investigation After Writer Accused of Child Abuse.”

that Springora's work fails to address the larger societal issues and structural inequalities at play that contribute to the exploitation of girls (245). He continues, *Le Consentement* is "framed . . . less as a general indictment of a society that condones . . . the predation of older men on very young girls, and ultimately reads more as a therapeutic working-through of her traumatic encounter with one man's pathological desire" (250). To my mind, however, Springora's work is equally "a therapeutic working-through" and an "indictment" of a societal problem (i.e., it is not "less" one and "more" the other) (250). She intently focuses on how this situation impacted her body, mental health, and life while starkly highlighting a grave societal issue.

Morrey locates "the problem of consent" in Springora's work not within the realm of rape but rather within the domain of literature, a reading with which I disagree: "The 'problem of consent' identified in Springora's book," he argues, "is *not so much that Matzneff had sex with her when she was fourteen (she wanted him to)*, but rather that she thereby became . . . one small piece in . . . his . . . [literary] project" (254) (emphasis mine). I object to this assertion because the issue Springora raises is both that Matzneff raped her and that he continued to violate her by appropriating her likeness and words within his own works to legitimize "[his] paedophilic desire" (254). I read the second crime as an extension of the first in that the primary violation (i.e., corporeal) is directly related to the second (i.e., psychic); the abuser continues to deny Springora's personhood by misappropriating her voice and transforming her, in Springora's own words, into a "work of fiction" (94). I also object to Morrey's statement, "Matzneff had sex with her when she was fourteen (she wanted him to)" because this implies that Springora, a child at the time, was at fault and complicit in her own rape, which minimizes (even effaces) the perpetrator's responsibility.³⁵ Morrey concludes that *Le Consentement* is "[a]wkwardly poised between the sex-positive agency of post-feminist womanhood and the unfortunate victimization and

³⁵ See the webinar "Raped or 'Seduced'? How Language Helps Shape Our Response to Sexual Violence" which "discusses how the language of consensual sex . . . is constantly used to describe assaultive acts. This language often implies consent and romance, rather than criminal acts."

Springora dedicates to discussion about the patriarchal figure, according to Garnier, “contribue[nt] aux meilleures pages du livre” (215). It is true that the absence of Springora’s father made it easier for her to be preyed upon, as she was (by her own admission) yearning to be “seen” by a father-figure (Springora 35). However, this is not a specific focus of my chapter.

In “*Le Consentement (Consent: A Memoir)* by Vanessa Springora (2020), and *Something Disguised as Love* (Hebrew: *Davar She’Mitshapes Le’Ahava*) by Galia Oz (2021): Similarities and Differences” (2023), Hanna David examines how Springora appropriates the weapon of her abuser to regain centrality within her story (138). She writes, “The power the men [in these memoirs] had because of their literacy made the abuse possible; the words that their victims used to describe their deeds made it possible for them to reclaim their stories, their narratives, their literary place in the world of letters” (138-139). That said, David never expounds on this part of her discussion; rather, she focuses on the language used by the general public to “describe” the perpetrators’ “illegal deeds” (139). She compares the differences and commonalities between the two memoirs. While she states her intent to discuss how victims use words “to reclaim their stories” there is no further analysis of this in the body of the article.

Most recently, in her work *The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When We Believe Women* (2023), Leigh Gilmore holds that Springora’s memoir is “an act of narrative justice” as it “effectively prompted the passing of . . . [France’s] first age-of-consent law” (155). Contrary to Morrey, Gilmore argues that Springora “indicts a cultural view, mingled with the law, that the trope of seduction indemnifies men for sexual abuse” (155). She puts *Le Consentement* in context, explaining how it “propelled an effectively suppressed #MeToo breakthrough in France” (155).³⁶ Gilmore’s main focus is how *Le Consentement* is an act of “narrative activism” that both “expose[s] how the law enabled Matzneff to groom and rape her” and allows her “to tell her story and reclaim her image, her reputation, and her life,” assertions

³⁶ See Marie Mercat-Bruns’ “The #MeToo Movement in France: A Wave of Ambivalence” (2020).

with which I agree (159). However, I concentrate on the ways that Springora illustrates her struggle to find language for what she has lived through and how, in the absence of appropriate words, her body relays its distress via its own somatic, internal language.

Reflecting on these scholarly writings, one remarks the tendency to prioritize literary abuse at the expense of sexual abuse, placing little to no emphasis on the impact this experience had on Springora's body and psyche. There is, in general, a lack of attention to the ways that she discloses her physical and emotional pain, challenges mainstream narratives surrounding sexual violence, and reclaims her own authorial voice, taken from her by her perpetrator. My work here addresses these research gaps.

b. Close Reading of *Le Consentement*

The most pronounced examples of V's corporeal reactions to G's violations appear when Springora describes the first instances of molestation and rape. In their first encounter, alone in his apartment, Springora reflects upon her complete inability to react—even move—when he begins to intimately touch her young body: “Je suis paralysée, incapable du moindre geste. [...] Le temps s'étire” (49-50). She suggests that she instinctually “freezes,” which is a common biological stress reflex often triggered by sexual trauma (as I show in more detail later when I analyze Robert's work). In this way, Springora immediately presents her younger self as so overwhelmed by G's advances that she is temporarily incapacitated to the point that her body cannot respond to the situation. The scenario is furthermore described as one in which time has stopped (i.e., “Le temps s'étire” [50]), suggesting a sense of not only disorientation but also a trance-like state wherein the young girl remains powerless as well as motionless.

Springora notes how G strokes her 14-year-old body “avec une délectation manifeste” as he prepares to penetrate (54). Conversely, the girl remains uneasy and instinctually attempts to thwart his gestures. More precisely, Springora relates that despite his reassurances that he knows how to

penetrate her body without causing her to “souffrir” (54), her “cuisses se serrent dans un mouvement réflexe incontrôlable” (54). Even before he physically invades, she anticipates the breach to the extent that her body involuntarily obstructs the man: “Impossible de se frayer un passage. Je hurle de douleur avant même qu’il m’ait touché” (54). This somatic reflex is confusing to her because, as she notes,

J’ai déjà acquiescé intimement à cet horizon inéluctable: G. sera mon premier amant. Et si je suis ici allongée sur son lit, c’est bien pour cette raison. *Alors pourquoi mon corps s’y refuse-t-il? Pourquoi cette peur irrépressible?* (54) (emphasis mine)

Springora indicates that her body itself subconsciously recognizes a threat and, in an attempt to protect itself, rejects this disturbing experience. Thus, while the young girl believes she is ready and willing, her body suggests otherwise and struggles to stymie the assault.

In a chilling turn of events, G reacts to these circumstances by announcing that he knows another way to achieve penetration: “C’est pas grave, on peut faire autrement,” he asserts (55). Springora relates how he sodomizes her, taking her virginity as though she were, in his words, “un petit garçon” (54). Although Springora does not speak of physical pain during this violation, she nevertheless closes the passage by highlighting her complete dissociation (another theme that will feature prominently in my subsequent sections): “Quelque chose comme ma présence au monde s’efface. Et tandis que sa langue vorace s’insinue en moi, mon esprit s’envole” (55). Not only does her body “refuse” in this instance, but so does her mind. With the boundaries of her body transgressed, the last biological, self-protective measure available is for her to mentally detach.

Not long after G introduces the sexual dynamic into their pairing, Springora relates how she begins to experience inexplicable and excruciating pain. “La douleur sournoise, se présente un soir, à l’articulation du pouce gauche. [...] [L]’inflammation s’est transformée en une brûlure presque insoutenable, irradiant toutes les articulations des doigts,” she explains (68). This pain extends to the rest of her body and, by the time medics arrive, “la douleur s’est étendue aux articulations des autres

membres. Lorsqu'on me trouve un lit, je ne peux déjà plus bouger. Je suis littéralement paralysée” (68). While this condition is eventually diagnosed (and treated) as “un rhumatisme articulaire aigu, dû à une infection par un streptocoque,” Springora (from her older perspective) nevertheless suspects that this episode of acute, systemic inflammation was directly related to the psychic pain of rape (68-71). In this way, Springora suggests that despite her youthful perception that her activities with G were mutually gratifying, her young body was crying out in its own way, imparting its internal, unseen distress.

Springora makes this suspicion most explicit by sharing a conversation that she recalls having with her psychologist during her hospitalization. She inserts the doctor's words directly into her work verbatim: “Parfois *les souffrances psychiques*, quand elles restent silencieuses, *s'expriment à travers le corps* en provoquant des douleurs physiques. Réfléchis un peu à tout ça” (qtd. in Springora 71) (emphasis mine). While Springora notes that her younger self did not understand the doctor's theory, the more mature Springora (i.e., the one who writes) believes that the doctor may have been right. His insinuation, she explains, is that infection and inflammation often point to an overtaxed body, which can occur in response to both physical and emotional stressors (71). I interpret Springora's inclusion of the doctor's hypothesis, as well as its conspicuous placement in her memoir (i.e., appearing just after G begins his physical invasion) as her way of indicating that, unbeknownst to her at the time, her young body was under severe duress. In this way, it seems that in the absence of a vocabulary to describe her experience, Springora's tender body relates its anguish through its own corporeal, nonverbal language.

While it is never clarified if her somatic pain is ongoing during her time with G, Springora periodically relates that the language to frame and name this experience evades her for years. More specifically, when “[l]e sortilège se dissipe,” and young V recognizes G as a predator, she discloses the difficulty of accepting this “nouvelle réalité” (132). At the time, words fail her, and she expresses her profound lack of understanding and inability to describe what she has lived through: “Je manque

cruellement de vocabulaire” (133). Moreover, she shares that, for so long, she had no idea that what happened with G could even be considered a type of violence: “Je pense encore qu’il n’y a de violence que physique” (133). This leads her to call this experience “une violence sans nom” (131).

Springora recounts how, for many years, her time with G remained (to her mind) ambiguous. “Une violence physique,” she explains, “laisse un souvenir contre lequel se révolter. C’est atroce, mais solide” (163). On the other hand, she argues, “l’abus sexuel . . . se présente de façon insidieuse et détourné, sans qu’on en ait clairement conscience” (163). Springora deftly outlines here how sexually abusive dynamics do not always appear harmful at first. Indeed, one—especially a vulnerable child—can be raped, repeatedly and for long periods of time, “sans qu’on en ait . . . conscience” (163). Because young V is not “conscious” of the fact that she is being abused, the words *rape* and *victim* remain protractedly at a distance.

Even when she finally grasps that what she had experienced amounts to rape, Springora nevertheless describes the difficulty of accepting that she is a victim:

[D]ans les cas d’abus sexuel . . . on retrouve un même déni de réalité: le refus de se considérer comme une victime. Et, en effet, *comment admettre qu’on a été abusé, quand on ne peut nier avoir été consentant?* . . . Pendant des années, je me débattrai moi aussi avec cette notion de victime, incapable de m’y reconnaître. (163)

What Springora cogently highlights throughout this passage is that rape can be so subtle and pernicious that it leaves many (including Springora) believing that they consented to—even took part in—their own violations and are thus complicit. In this way, she argues, it can be nearly impossible to recognize, even after many years, that one has been victimized and thus bears no blame.

Despite the “blessure jamais cicatrisée” (a wound that encompasses both chronic depression and an eating disorder [168-174]) that she carries as a result of her time with G, Springora nevertheless stresses how the act of writing allows for her healing and, moreover, for prevention. She explains how

through her work, she can now share her story with others and thereby raise awareness about sexual abuse—both its emotional and physical impact. She furthermore underscores the ways in which rape can seem so unrecognizable at first (i.e., so dissimilar from “le bon viol”) that it ultimately passes under the radar of the victim herself as well as those who should know to intervene. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, through her writing, Springora relates how she is now able to reappropriate and reclaim this chapter of her life that G had stolen from her (202): “Parce qu’écrire, c’était redevenir le sujet de mon propre histoire. Une histoire qui m’avait été confisquée trop longtemps” (202). “[L]a parole des victimes,” she firmly concludes, “[est] en train de se libérer” (204). In this way, she affirms that she is a victim—a word she struggled to pronounce for many years (170). Now able to identify herself in this way, she adds her voice to the growing number of voices that are breaking the silence to recapture centrality in their stories.

The concepts that Springora raises in her work appear even more prominently in the works of Loulou Robert and Adélaïde Bon, to which I now turn. I show how, like Springora, these authors share how the process of identifying and finally naming their experiences appropriately not only allows them to regain ownership of their bodies but also permits their emotional recoveries.

*“I know it wasn’t rape-rape. It was something else,
but I don’t believe it was rape-rape.”*

—Whoopi Goldberg, *on Roman Polanski* (qtd. in Harding 128)

IV. “Dis-le.”³⁷: Pronouncing the Undigestible, “Forbidden Word”³⁸ in *Zone grise*

In “What People Misunderstand About Rape,” an article published in *The New York Times* in 2023, Jen Percy sheds light on a common yet under-discussed biological reaction that can happen to

³⁷ “Dis-le” (Robert 140).

³⁸ “[J]e prononce le mot interdit” (Robert 145).

victims during rape, which is the “freeze” response. Like the “fight” or “flight” reactions to threats, freezing is an unconscious, instinctive survival mechanism. In situations where actively resisting (i.e., fighting) and/or trying to escape (i.e., fleeing) are not options (or not perceived as options), many individuals will respond to a frightening situation (such as rape) by doing nothing, or “freezing.” The most extreme version of freezing, *tonic immobility*, is a response “that leaves victims literally paralyzed. They can’t move or speak,” Percy explains (“What People Misunderstand”). They are, in effect, frozen in fear; some have even called it “playing dead.”³⁹ Studies show that this is an especially common reaction in victims of sexual violence and assault.⁴⁰ Yet, as Percy substantiates, this biological process remains (as her title indicates) “misunderstood” and, consequently, largely viewed with suspicion as it conflicts with ingrained beliefs about rape (e.g., “le bon viol”). In one substantial study, for example, “the myth that seemed most entrenched was that women would try to physically resist rape” (“What People Misunderstand”). Other studies report similar findings, confirming that resistance seems to endure as the standard for arguing or proving that consent was not given.⁴¹ This belief is so pervasive

³⁹ This response is commonly seen in the animal world and is helpful for understanding its presence in humans. Percy writes, “For more than a century, scientists have studied similar phenomena in animals, and over the years they have been named and renamed—animal hypnosis, death feigning, playing dead, apparent death and *thanatosis*, an ancient Greek word for ‘putting to death.’ Tonic immobility is a survival strategy that has been identified across many classes of animals—insects, fish, reptiles, birds, mammals—and draws its evolutionary power from the fact that many predators seem hard-wired to lose interest in dead prey. It is usually triggered by the perception of inescapability or restraint, like the moment a prey finds itself in a predator’s jaws” (“What People Misunderstand”). See also Levine’s chapter “Immobilized by Fear: Lessons Learned from Animals” from *In an Unspoken Voice* (2010), and “Fear and the Defense Cascade: Clinical Implications and Management” (2015) by Kasia Kozłowska, et al.

⁴⁰ See “Tonic Immobility During Sexual Assault: A Common Reaction Predicting Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and Severe Depression” (2017) by Anna Möller, Hans Peter Söndergaard, and Lotti Helström. See also David C. Rubin and Carolyn F. Bell’s “Tonic Immobility (Freezing) during Sexual and Physical Assaults Produces Stronger Memory Effects than Other Characteristics of the Assaults” (2023).

⁴¹ See Condry (242). See “Dispel Myths” at *Herstory Global*. See also “Consequences of Rape Myth Acceptance on the Criminal Justice System and Women Subjected to Rape” in Sofia Persson and Katie Dhingra’s *Rape Myths: Understanding, Assessing, and Preventing* (2022): “Research has documented a common belief . . . that a ‘genuine’ victim-survivor would fight back, leading to substantial defensive injuries” (60).

that even victims report not understanding why, in the face of threat and violation, they froze instead of actively protesting, which can result in long-term shame and self-blame.

Although unnamed, freezing and tonic immobility are the responses to rape that Loulou Robert vividly describes in her 2020 personal account, *Zone grise*. To summarize, Robert tells of how, at the age of 18 and at the beginning of her modeling career, she is raped on her first photoshoot by a trusted acquaintance—a celebrated fashion photographer whom she refers to as “D.”⁴² Robert writes that although internally terrified during this assault, she finds herself completely unable to move, speak, or react, which leaves her with chronic depression and lasting remorse for an experience she initially perceives to be her “fault” (134). It takes years for Robert to recognize her response (i.e., freezing), understand her experience as a rape (as opposed to a “misunderstanding” or “romantic encounter”), and label it as such. Above all, *Zone grise* is an arresting work, for it underscores the somatic anguish and psychological complexity inherent to grappling with an experience not immediately recognizable to the victim as rape because it is so dissimilar from popular cultural ideas about the crime (i.e., “le bon viol”).

In this section, I analyze Robert’s work, spotlighting what I regard as its primary specificities and strengths. I first investigate how Robert artfully communicates the sense of internal confusion (i.e., the “not knowing”) that transpires during and after this attack and, furthermore, how this experience activates sustained corporeal disruption and dysregulation in her body. I discuss Robert’s depiction of not only her initial “freeze” reflex but also the ways in which traces of this event remain buried within the recesses of her body, only to resurface and ceaselessly plague her. In addition to the effects on her physical health, this experience gravely erodes her mental well-being, and I highlight how this leaves her internally fragmented, emotionally withdrawn, and overwhelmed with shame for

⁴² Since identified as David Bellemere.

having been unable to say “no.” I moreover spotlight what I consider Robert’s most innovative contribution, which are the ways in which she calls attention to prominent misconceptions about rape, specifically the troubling concept of the “gray zone” (from which she derives her title). To clarify, the “gray zone” is a phrase often used to describe sexual interactions in which consent is (seemingly) murky. In Robert’s words, the *zone grise* is (loosely) defined as, “Ne pas dire non. Ne pas dire oui. Ne pas dire du tout. Flou. Hésitation. Signaux brouillés” (188). In more specific terms, the *zone grise* is commonly used by some (including, at times, victims themselves)⁴³ to define situations in which apparently “mixed signals result in unwanted sex,” usually between acquaintances, making it ostensibly “unclear whether a rape has occurred” (Raphael 55). Robert is not particularly interested in defining this “gray zone” (in fact, she shows throughout her work that there is no one stringent definition) (Robert 188). Rather, her agenda is to demonstrate how the *zone grise* is an “invention” (190)—not a legitimate “zone” at all—and, furthermore, how this language is chiefly used to cast doubt upon the prevalence of rape while indemnifying “prédateurs” (187-191). By employing certain experimental literary devices, Robert adroitly points out society’s collective, willful avoidance of the term “rape” (even amongst victims themselves) and persuasively argues that by regularly calling rape something “other” than what it really is (e.g., *la zone grise* instead of *viol*), society “reinforces,” even “encourages,” rape, ultimately offloading the responsibility from perpetrator to victim (191).⁴⁴

⁴³ See *Herstory Global*’s “Had an Uncomfortable Experience but Not Quite Sure What to Make of It?”

⁴⁴ See Harding: “Believers in ‘gray rape’ encourage victims of all genders, but especially young women, to consider what they might have done to provoke their attackers and whether there’s any possibility that those nice people just didn’t realize what they were doing could be characterized as a crime” (149). See Raphael. See also the personal testimonies included on *Herstory Global*.

Close reading of *Zone grise*

In an interview with *Elle Magazine*, Robert describes the rape during the photoshoot with D as “un viol extrêmement complexe” (“Loulou Robert: ‘Je n’ai pas su dire non’”). *Zone grise* scrutinizes that complexity, describing the network of conditions that set the stage for this crime. She explains that her assailant is a well-established and respected photographer within the fashion industry, rendering the balance of power in his favor: “C’est un grand photographe. Moi, je ne suis rien. [...] Je pense que tout est normal. D est un professionnel” (70). Moreover, because it is her first photoshoot as a working model (“Mon premier job” [62]), she relates how she fears disappointing her family, agency, manager, and D, highlighting her wish to be seen as professional, congenial, and committed to advancing her career (59). Describing her emotions and mindset prior to the shoot, she writes: “Bon petit soldat. [...] Je ne vais pas les décevoir. [...] Je vais les rendre fiers. [...] Ma carrière va décoller . . . Mon agent croit en moi. [...] Je fais ce qu’il faut. Je suis sympa. [...] J’ai la phobie de décevoir” (62-69). Although she feels uneasy in the photographer’s presence when they first meet (before the photoshoot), Robert articulates how she is repeatedly “assured” (“assuré”) by her manager that D is a “spécialiste” and “un pro,” and that working with him will be beneficial for her career (69). “Tout est normal,” she is told, and thus there is nothing to be concerned about, she believes (58). As she later remarks, “Je suis contente, rassurée. Une relation de confiance s’installe” (“Loulou Robert: ‘Je n’ai pas su dire non’”). However, she later discovers that she will be working alone with the photographer, isolated in an unfamiliar region (Vichy) with no third party to represent her and, if needed, intervene on her behalf: “Je ne vois pas le danger. Personne n’est là pour me le montrer. Personne n’est là pour me protéger,” she later reflects from her 26-year-old viewpoint (*Zone grise* 67).

While she does not initially “see the danger,” Robert explains that she is nevertheless uneasy about the prospect of working with D (67). Shifting into her 18-year-old mindset, Robert attempts to recreate her internal monologue from that time, emphasizing her determination to calmly quiet her

apprehension about the approaching shoot: “Vichy c’est loin, non? Sois contente, ce sera comme des vacances. Je pars . . . avec le photographe. Sans agent. Sans équipe. Ce sera simple, naturel. Tout va bien. Encore. Répète. Tout va bien. OK. OK” (62). Between the repetition of “Tout va bien” that she recites as though it were a reassuring mantra, and the way that she addresses herself via the imperative (i.e., “Sois contente”), suggesting an attempt to convince herself that everything is “naturel,” the reader grasps the accelerating panic of the inexperienced 18-year-old model (62).

Despite the photographer’s efforts to put her at ease on the shoot (“Il me rassure: je suis parfaite”), Robert’s anxiety heightens as D becomes increasingly more sexually invasive, even aggressive (73). Robert relates, in present tense—as though reliving the very moment as she writes—how he manipulates and molests her body for his photographic compositions. She takes the reader further into her overwhelmed mind, illustrating her growing discomfort and sense of objectification: “Il positionne mon bassin. Je suis sa *chose*. [...] Est-ce que c’est normal? [...] Est-ce que c’est normal? Il n’arrête pas de s’approcher, de toucher. [...] Est-ce que c’est normal? Maman... Personne n’est là pour me répondre” (74). Of note in this passage is the repetition of the question, “Is this normal?” which develops an overall atmosphere of escalating distress and powerlessness. Adding to this sense of helplessness and inner disturbance is her poignant interjection, “Maman,” a detail that reminds the reader of just how young and vulnerable Robert is during this scenario and thus in need of protection.

Treated by the photographer as nothing more than a “thing” (i.e., *sa chose*), Robert writes that, in this moment, she feels herself becoming a “belle poupée,” or his inanimate, speechless plaything (85). She communicates how, as D continues to work, her body physiologically begins to drain of all animation, becoming not only overwhelmed but also immobilized (i.e., frozen): “Je ne bouge pas . . . Je suis immobile” (57-60). When D finally penetrates her without her consent, she narrates, “Le traumatisme se répand en moi . . . [J]e suis paralysée” (80-82) and “[J]e me fige . . . Je suis figée” (129). “C’était donc ça . . . La paralysie,” she reconfirms (188). She expresses, moreover,

how despite consciously knowing that she does not want this, not a single word leaves her mouth to convey her refusal. Describing the scene, “D pose son appareil. S’approche. S’allonge. Se colle” (84). Robert remarks her silence as he continues to violate: “Je n’ai rien dit. [...] Les mots restent sous ma langue. [...] Il veut. Il veut. Il veut” (77-85). Although language and words are present, they are (like her body) essentially frozen, trapped—unable to be voiced. Her repetition of “Il veut,” rhythmically infuses the text with the impression of a rapid heartbeat, reminding the reader that even in her paralysis, Robert is still animated and aware, yet caged like a prisoner within her own body. It is as though she attempts to mirror her content to her form, capturing upon the page her internal, physiological distress signals in order to render the experience more palpable for the reader. Continuing to clarify her critical situation, Robert discloses, “[J]’ai trop peur . . . Je ne veux pas. Je ne veux pas,” once again making use of artful repetition to paint her internal frantic state (89).

Ultimately, Robert dissociates during this assault, mentally exiting the scene so that she can endure: “Je suis vide. [...] Je ne sais pas. Je bloque tout. Puis j’efface tout. [...] Je ne ressens plus. [...] Séparer. Séparer. [...] [J]e comprends que je vais avoir mal. [...] Alors séparer. Couper” (88-89). In this immobilized state, she further recounts: “Je laisse D me pénétrer. [...] J’obéis. [...] Je regarde mon reflet, mon corps et ma peau. *Sans reconnaître*. Je suis *extérieure*. Je suis docile. [...] Le non est inaccessible. Le non n’existe pas . . . *Je déconnecte*. [...] Je n’étais *plus dans mon corps*” (90-110) (emphasis mine). “Je suis coupée en deux . . . Je suis dissociée,” she repeats (130). Robert reiterates in essence the inaccessibility of language in this moment while further illustrating how her body involuntarily freezes, contracts, and rejects the experience, thereby forcing her to psychologically disconnect (or “erase” [88]). As though attempting to mirror this sense of internal fragmentation, Robert adopts a disjointed writing style. While this technique appears throughout the work, it is especially significant here in that it relates to her sense of depersonalization and interior division, aligning form and content:

“Donc couper. / Pour survivre. / Juste ça. / Survivre. / Donc sourire. / Retenir. Effacer. Transformer. Se persuader. / Tout ira bien” (89). Rendered on the page in this way, with its clipped, blunt sentences, Robert strengthens the mood of both confusion and detachment.

What is more, via her unique *mise-en-page* (Figure 1, below), wherein each word or phrase maintains its own line isolated within blank space (or silence), Robert visually evokes both an atmosphere of emptiness and a sensation of falling, which dovetails with her various references to the “void” and “abyss” that appear in this same section (just one page prior): “Arrêter la pensée. Tomber. [...] L’espace. Le trou. Le vide. Je suis vide” (88). Robert establishes the effect of descending into “nothingness” as she becomes psychologically fractured, relegated to a space devoid of all clarity and light (i.e., “[l]ucidité” [92]).

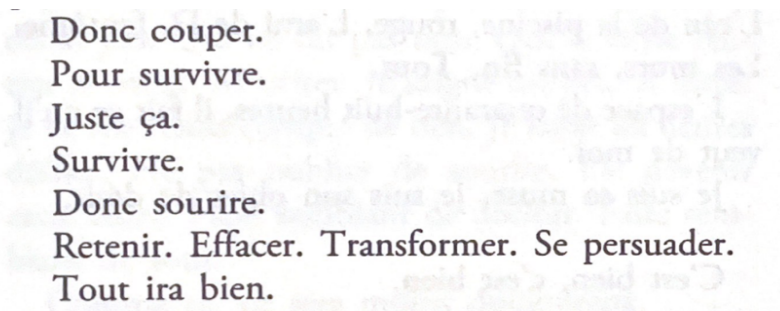


Figure 1, Loulou Robert, *Zone grise* (14)

As she declines into a depressive state in the aftermath, Robert remains at a loss for how to interpret and characterize this event. She reports how, for nearly six years after, she had no label or framework to make sense of what happened: “Rien, je n’ai pas le vocabulaire” (131). During those years, she explains that she did not see the connection between what she endured and the concept of rape. As she highlights, the encounter was not overtly violent, she was not confined via force, her perpetrator was an esteemed figure in the fashion world, and it occurred during a nude photoshoot in which she agreed to take part (134). It in no way resembled the common cultural imagery of rape circulating within the public imagination (i.e., “le bon viol”). Even when she hears the Harvey

Weinstein allegations and regards the #MeToo/#BalanceTonPorc movements as they begin to unfold in 2017, sparking global conversations about sexual violence, she writes: “Je ne fais pas le lien” (51).

For years Robert holds herself responsible for what happened and even questions whether it occurred in the way that she remembers, which ultimately causes her to fall into “un coma de honte” (110). Blaming herself, she writes: “[J]e ne voulais pas mais je n’ai rien fait, rien dit. Alors c’est de ma faute?” (134). Continuing to retroactively analyze the situation, “Je ne comprends pas ma réaction,” she remarks. “Est-ce que je ne suis pas en train de tout inventer? Je n’arrive pas à définir. À nommer. Foutu cerveau. Foutu langage” (134-137). She highlights here both her confusion and lack of self-trust, wondering if perhaps this is all an invention of her own mind. While desperate to define and name her experience, explanation and “langage,” she writes, remain inaccessible.

Consequently, her only perceived recourse, she explains, is to transform this episode in her mind so that she can (metaphorically) metabolize and thereby cope. She unconsciously rewrites this event, convincing herself (and eventually others) that she has had a romantic “histoire” in which she was a willing participant: “Mon inconscient a tout organisé. [...] Je transforme tout . . . pour respirer, me regarder dans la glace . . . [n]e pas trop me détruire [et] me haïr . . . [J]e refoule et je dis: j’ai eu une histoire avec D” (84-93). Robert shows how framing the event in this way is an instinctive, protective (i.e., self-preserving) measure that, at least temporarily, allows her to find some psychological relief through modifying—even blocking—much of her memory of the event: “Pour se protéger, le cerveau se déconnecte . . . Pour survivre. [...] Pendant six ans, je n’ai pas de mémoire. Juste cette phrase: j’ai eu une histoire avec D” (126).

Despite this reorganization of facts and mental erasure, Robert’s body nevertheless intuitively signals during this six-year period that what she had experienced was not a simple “histoire.” She relates that, following the photoshoot, she begins to suffer from chronic stomach pains and digestive issues: “J’ai tout le temps mal au ventre” (84). Reiterating, “J’avais de drôles de sensations dans le bas

de mon ventre” (107). Robert peppers her text frequently with references to this constant, unexplained “[m]al au ventre” (184): “J’ai mal au ventre. Je ne me demande pas pourquoi” (51). The insinuation is that despite her attempts to reshape the contours of this event and frame it as a consensual “histoire,” her body remembers (and understands) something that she does not: “Je me sentais mal. Je ne faisais pas le lien,” she writes, recollecting this time of “not knowing” (110).

Making the “lien” (i.e., link [110]) between these distressing abdominal aches with their source occurs by pure chance as she is changing television channels one night, six years later. She happens upon a film, *La Consolation*, based upon journalist Flavie Flament’s 2016 memoir of the same title that portrays Flament’s rape while an adolescent model at the hands of famed photographer David Hamilton.⁴⁵ As though describing snapshots, Robert recounts the unfolding cinematic scene of violation that allows her to have a breakthrough (i.e., “un déclic” [196]): “Une simple image. Une main. Regards. Souffle. Un enfant et un homme. Un bout de tissu. De la peau. Les cheveux fins. Innocence. Peur. La silence” (30). Her reaction to these details is primal and corporeal (almost Proustian), as though something deeply buried finally rises from within her body, flooding her mind with dark memories and sensations: “Puis viennent les sensations. En vrac. [...] Le corps a une mémoire” (129). Further describing this visceral reaction:

Tout me revient. La sensation dans le bas de *mon ventre*. Spasmes. J’ai mal sans penser. Je cours aux toilettes. Rien ne sort. *De l’eau, de la bile*. Aucun visage. Encore. Encore. Laisse-moi. Ne me touchez pas. Ne me touchez pas. Sa main sur ma cuisse. Sa main sur mes tétons. Rends-les durs. Lèche. Mange. *Flash*. Sa main partout en moi. Moi, je disparaïs. Je deviens *eau, bile, acide*. Encore. Contorsion. Je bave. Je coule. (30) (emphasis mine)

⁴⁵ See “Flavie Flament: ‘J’avais 13 ans, David Hamilton m’a violée’” by Catherine Durand and Corine Goldberger.

Again, Robert adopts a fractured, staccato style that creates the impression of a furious deluge of fragmentary memories (which appear—as evidenced by the inclusion of the word “Flash” [31]—in the form of a stream of photographs) that threaten to overtake her. Moreover, reemphasizing her stomach, which is the locus of her chronic pain post rape, she describes her body’s fruitless efforts to empty itself, as though it were attempting to reject something poisonous and undigestible, such as these intrusive memories. References to water, bile, and acid—all digestive aids—further strengthen Robert’s intimation that her “gut” knows the truth of her experience before her mind does.⁴⁶ “Ce n’est pas ma tête qui parle,” she later writes, “Mais mon ventre. Là où les tripes. Là où les émotions” (200). In other words, Robert claims, her corporeal understanding/knowing has preceded her cognition.

Her physical reaction becomes even more extreme as her body temperature drops and her muscles begin to seize: “J’ai froid. Maman, j’ai froid . . . Ne bouge pas. Tétanie” (31). Her cries for “Maman” and her somatic reaction here (i.e., tetany) suggest that Robert is reliving the moment of her rape in real time. Unlike the original experience, however, she now more clearly comprehends what is happening: “La voix dans ma tête. *Tu sais. Tu sais tout.* [...] Non. Non. Non. [...] Je ressens tout” (31). Despite wishing this realization were not correct, as indicated by her repetition of “No,” she explains nonetheless that, “Je relie tout. [...] À partir de là, je fais le lien” (155). That is, “Après la diffusion d’un film à la télé,” she affirms, “j’ai eu un déclic. J’ai compris que je n’avais pas consenti” (196). Because of the distinct similarity between Robert’s experience and that which is depicted in the film (i.e., Robert’s experience as reflected back to her via the mirror of Flament’s story), Robert is finally able to grasp what happened and thereby begin to process (or “digest”).

⁴⁶ There is scientific evidence showing that the stomach and brain are in constant communication and collaboration. Some researchers even consider the gut to be a “second brain.” See Harvard Health Publishing’s “The Gut-Brain Connection” (2023). See also Adam Hadhazy’s “Think Twice: How the Gut’s ‘Second Brain’ Influences Mood and Well-Being” (2010) in *Scientific American*.

Recognizing her experience and calling it by its appropriate name, “viol,” proves to be challenging however, even after Robert’s initial moment of clarity. In a passage in which she addresses herself in the second person (i.e., “tu”), as though directly speaking to her younger self, the reader follows as she scrupulously explains to the 18-year-old all the reasons why this experience was non-consensual and must be classified as a “rape,” a word she strongly resists at first (141, 182). She notes her age and inexperience, “Tu avais vingt ans de moins que lui. Tu n’avais aucune expérience” (140). She highlights her desire to comply and please, “Tu as obéi. [...] Tu ne voulais pas décevoir.” (140). She points out the imbalance of power, her lack of protection and maturity, and how he initially appeared to be safe:

Il était le photographe, il te dominait. Rapport de force. [...] Vous étiez seuls. Vous étiez loin.
 [...] Il était familier, amical. Tu avais confiance. Manipulation. [...] Tu étais contrainte par des
 forces que tu ne maîtrisais pas. Tu ne savais rien. Lui savait tout. (140)

All these reasons build to what is arguably the climax of the entire work, which is the declaration of “le mot interdit” (145). Integrating the narrating “je” (her current, writing self) with the “tu” (her younger, confused self), grammatically signaling her inner reconciliation and healing, Robert writes: “*Ma vérité: Tu n’as pas consenti. [...] À dix-huit ans, un homme a abusé de moi. Dis-le*” (141) (emphasis mine). The “it” that Robert entreats her younger self to speak appears as one lone word surrounded by space and silence on an otherwise blank page: “Viol” (142) (Figure 2, below). From there, it must be noted, Robert assumes full use of the “je,” suggesting that the acknowledgement and use of “rape” is restorative for the author.

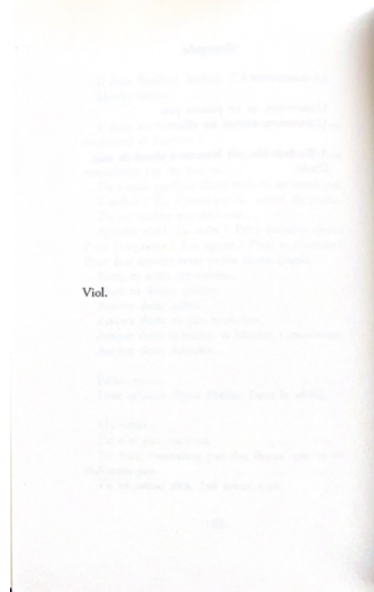


Figure 2, Loulou Robert, *Zone grise* (142)

With this unique textual formatting, Robert gives prominence to the word that, she argues, no one (including herself) wants to confront and yet is so prevalent in women's everyday lives (145). The effect is not only visually striking, particularly as it is the only page in the work of its kind, but it also allows Robert to force herself and her readers to look at the uncomfortable word without distraction and, moreover, shift the focus from her individual story onto the broader problem—that of the so-called “gray zone.” She explicitly turns her attention to the ways in which society exploits this vague terminology in order to avoid calling rape by its true name while downplaying the prevalence and severity of the crime.

Robert characterizes her work as a “combat” against the “zone grise” (11). She explains that her ultimate agenda is to attack, even “demolish” (“détruire” [10]), the various problematic arguments that exist under the “umbrella” term known as the “gray zone.” She argues that society regularly employs this expression in order to deny (even efface) the quotidian pervasiveness of rape and redirect blame onto victims so that the comforting myth that sexual violence is rare and always straightforward (i.e., “le bon viol”) can be preserved. To accomplish her mission, Robert artfully structures her text

around anonymized (yet generally attributable via a web search query) quotes that attempt to excuse rape and deny women's experiences of sexual trauma while concealing the realities of the crime by calling it "something else" (i.e., *la zone grise*). "Car ce ne peut pas être ça [i.e., viol]. C'est toujours *autre chose*," as Robert later bluntly declares (189) (emphasis mine).

Figure 3 (below) is an example of how Robert exhibits these quotes, mobilizing them to both periodically punctuate her chapters and introduce ideas to which she will later return in the text. The citations all follow a pattern of a quotation alongside an attribution, such as "un photographe" (39), "un avocat" (49), or "un homme politique" (114), etc., presented alone on a blank page:

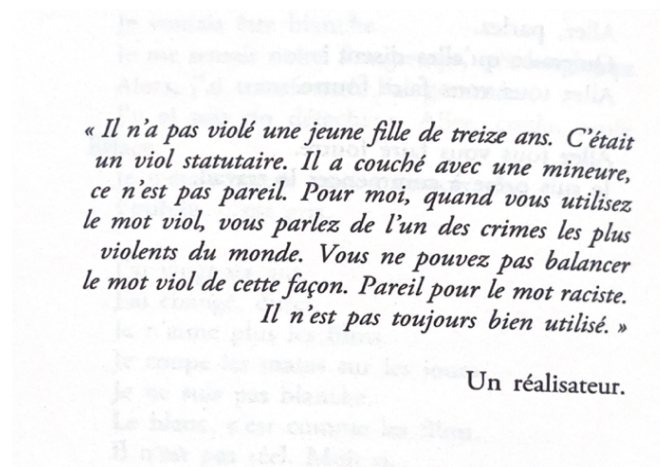


Figure 3, Loulou Robert, *Zone grise* (22)

One of the more provocative inclusions, shown above (Figure 3), features a translated quotation by "réalisateur" Quentin Tarantino who defends convicted sex offender/filmmaker Roman Polanski.⁴⁷ What is perhaps most salient (as it relates to specific arguments Robert makes) from this 2003 quote is the way that Tarantino minimizes Polanski's crime, arguing that "statutory rape" is simply not the same as rape (22). Tarantino argues that Polanski merely "slept with a minor" because, for Tarantino,

⁴⁷ In 1977, Roman Polanski was charged with drugging and raping 13-year-old Samantha Geimer in California. He initially agreed to a plea bargain (admitting to unlawful sex with a minor) yet fled the United States before sentencing to evade prison. He has since avoided entering countries that have extradition agreements with the U.S. See Geimer's memoir, *The Girl: A Life in the Shadow of Roman Polanski* (2013).

the word *rape* designates “l’un des crimes les plus violents du monde” and should not be used in situations such as that of Polanski (22).⁴⁸ This quotation allows Robert to efficiently call attention to the misconception that “real” rape (or, as Whoopi Goldberg called it in reference to the Polanski case, “rape-rape”) must be overtly brutal to be counted as such. Tarantino’s argument assumes that violence is always easily and clearly identifiable. As Robert shows via the specifics of her own experience, however, this is a (“bon viol”) myth. She further shows that “real” rape (i.e., “rape-rape”) happens even in the absence of weapons, blows, physical constraints, and/or other variations of explicit force. Violence, she holds, appears in other pernicious forms such as coercion, creeping invasiveness, abuse of one’s authority, and non-consensual touch/penetration.

Other allusions that Robert integrates in order to call attention to pervasive misconceptions that transform rape into something “other/gray” include the following: “Trop masculine pour être violée. –Un avocat,”⁴⁹ which indicates a belief about the kinds of women that can be raped (i.e., only feminine-appearing women, according to this lawyer) (50); another, by an accused offender, “Par rapport à la moyenne des hommes, j’ai une sexualité plus rude, que certaines femmes n’apprécient pas et je le regrette. –Un homme politique,” which indicates a belief that some men are simply predisposed to exhibiting a more aggressive nature that should not necessarily be considered wrong or predatory but rather natural (63)⁵⁰; another quotation, “À aucun moment, la fille n’a pleuré. –Un homme” (192), makes the case that tears must be present for it to be considered rape—a myth which implies that if a woman is not crying, she consents by default. Lastly, the myth of the victim’s clothing that “invites”

⁴⁸ Tarantino’s other implication here is that children can consent to sexual relations with adults, which is false. Children and adults do not have “equivalent understanding[s] of the consequences of sex,” therefore a child cannot give consent (Gilmore 159). “Young people can be coerced into sex, but they cannot consent, no matter what they are persuaded to say or write” (159-160).

⁴⁹ See “Italie: ‘Trop masculine’ pour être violée, le procès qui fait scandale” by Morgane Giuliani.

⁵⁰ Quote by Dominique Strauss-Kahn (DSK).

rape takes center stage in one female lawyer's courtroom argument: "Vous devez considérer la lingerie qu'elle portait. Elle avait mis un string en dentelle. –Une avocate" (153). While I offer here only a sampling of the quotes that Robert showcases, these are generally representative of the content found in the vast majority. To be clear, these citations are not merely decorative within Robert's work. Rather they allow her to strategically strike at the ways society assiduously avoids using the word *rape*, preferring to argue that these events fall within the category of the "gray zone" and must be considered, as Robert deftly points out, "toujours autre chose" (188).

Robert's work vociferously refutes the various ways that society presumes to define and decide—often on behalf of the victim herself—what does and does not count as rape, excusing a wide range of predatory and criminal practices by designating them "zone grise" situations in which consent is unclear. Robert reports that she had never heard the term "zone grise" until a journalist asked if her experience with D placed her into "la zone grise" in which the "signaux" were "brouillés" (187). Robert is offended by the question and the concept because, she reports, "[d]ans cette zone grise, je n'ai pu être violée. C'est autre chose. C'est toujours autre chose" (188). Inscribing experiences such as hers within this "zone," she argues, makes rape effectively disappear (i.e., become something "autre" [188]) which renders it not unspeakable but rather ensures that it stays unspeakable: "Le viol c'est gênant, mieux vaut ne pas en parler. Mieux vaut ne pas savoir. Ce qu'on ne sait pas n'existe pas. [...] Alors le viol s'évapore. [...] Il n'existe pas" (182-188). Robert argues that the "zone grise" (as a concept) ultimately permits rape to continue in practice because it allows the various contours and specifics of the crime to remain unexamined, unquestioned, and unknown. She asserts that if cultural messaging insistently promotes the idea that rape occurs in one distinct and recognizable way, women will continue to be confused—having no vocabulary to frame and understand their uncomfortable, violating experiences—and rape will continue to go largely unreported (182). No one will notice, she argues, that "[l]e viol [est] . . . partout" (184).

According to Robert, the term/idea prevails because, on a surface level, “Le mot viol dérange. Zone grise sonne mieux. Zone grise, c’est plus doux. Plus propre” (190). The word “viol,” is not “poli” (190). Thus, she argues, “on invente la zone grise” (190). On a deeper level, however, the *zone grise* represents something much darker, she argues. It is “une tactique” consciously employed by predators and those who would protect them (190). It is a strategy that exists to allow predators to “manipulate,” “dominate” and “torture” without, as Robert says, leaving any “trace” (“Pour maîtriser. Dominer. Manipuler. [...] “De nous torturer sans laisser des traces”) (190). They know (i.e., “Eux savent”) she argues, that the “zone” allows for criminal behavior without “committing a crime”: “Ils ne commettent aucun crime. C’est autre chose. Toujours autre chose” (189). The gray zone, she argues, “déforme la vérité” and is thus “dangereuse” (190). “La zone grise est un schéma,” she reiterates (190). “Elle protège les prédateurs. Elle n’empêche pas le viol, elle l’encourage. Elle ne l’annule pas, elle le renforce” (190). Clarifying, she writes: “Quand on ne sait pas, on ne peut pas parler. [...] Quand on ne sait pas, on ne peut pas se défendre” (42). “Pour la plupart des femmes . . . Jamais le mot viol ne leur vient à l’esprit. C’est toujours autre chose” (182). Thus, Robert highlights that because this “zone” masks the full spectrum of what rape can encompass, it can leave women (like the 18-year-old Robert) unable to speak about or make sense of their experiences. The “zone” allows rape to continue to be defined and identified in narrow terms (perpetuating myths such as “le bon viol”), which maintains ignorance about rape, for (as Robert asks), “Comment parler de ce qu’on ne connaît pas?” (165).

Robert concludes by asserting that there is nothing gray about rape: “Le viol n’est pas gris. [...] La douleur n’est pas grise. La culpabilité n’est pas grise. La manipulation n’est pas grise. Les prédateurs ne sont pas gris” (189). She notes that while she is not considered “raped” within the framework of *la zone grise*, she nevertheless maintains assurance that she knows what happened to her and asks for the benefit of belief from others: “J’ai ressenti mon viol. Je n’ai aucune preuve. [...] Mais . . . croyez-moi, c’est bien un viol” (196). She continues, “J’estime pouvoir employer le mot viol. Car

mon corps l'a ressenti. Mon corps ne ment pas. [...] Je ne laisserai pas des gens qui ne me connaissent pas dire le contraire. [...] Je ne les laisserai pas *décider* à ma place" (203) (emphasis mine). If rape represents for a victim a fundamental loss of power and choice (i.e., decision), then Robert reclaims that agency here, asserting that obfuscating conceptual language such as "la zone grise" will not be used to manipulate her into questioning her own lived and felt experience.

Robert's closing words announce that she writes not only on behalf of herself but also for other victims, those with stories like hers that do not inscribe themselves neatly within the confines of the "bon viol." In her "combat" against the "gray zone," Robert weaponizes words (i.e., "Mon arme: mes mots. [...] J'écris" [204-206]), hoping that her work will "déculpabiliser les *victimes* 'défaillantes,' les comme moi" (204) (emphasis mine). By "imperfect" victims, she means those who freeze and experience tonic immobility, those "qui n'ont pas dit non . . . qui savent pas encore, qui sentent que quelque chose ne va pas mais ne savent pas quoi . . . qui ne se souviennent pas," those who dare not call it rape because others call it "something else" (204). In short, Robert seeks to offer language to those who, like herself, have struggled—both mentally and physically—without the means to "définir" and thus "nommer" their traumatic experiences (137).

In the next section, I examine *La Petite fille sur la banquise*, composed a few years prior to *Zone grise*. Like Robert, Adélaïde Bon describes another "imperfect victim" who desperately seeks the words to describe and comprehend what has happened to her. While distinct from that of Robert in many ways, Bon's heartbreaking work tells of a child victim who, much like Robert, senses via her body's internal signals that "quelque chose ne va pas" (Robert 204). That is, remembrance or "knowing" begins on the level of the body and only gradually becomes clear to the mind after great effort and excavation.

“Une invasion invisible que nul ne m’a aidée
à déceler, à nommer, à comprendre.”
—Adélaïde Bon (134)

V. Where Does Rape Live in Your Body?: Somatic Memory, Traumatic Amnesia, and Restorative Words in *La Petite fille sur la banquise*

The themes upon which I focus in this chapter are most pronounced (perhaps even most extreme) in Adélaïde Bon’s 2018 personal account, *La Petite fille sur la banquise*. Bon’s chilling text relates how, at the age of nine, a seemingly friendly adult man who frequents her neighborhood follows her into her family’s apartment building one afternoon and quietly rapes her (orally, vaginally, and anally) in the stairwell, instructing her (i.e., threatening her) not to tell “their secret” (i.e., “c’est notre secret” ([qtd. in Bon 11])). So terrifying is this event that it not only renders her temporarily mute but also overwhelms her to the extent that she immediately dissociates. When her parents later find her in tears, she is unable to communicate the full extent of the crime committed against her as she is both too traumatized—suffering from severe PTSD-induced amnesia and loss of speech—and too young to have any comprehension of/vocabulary for rape: “On ne sait rien de ces mots [i.e., rape], à neuf ans,” she later relays from her adult perspective (148). In response to her parents’ anxious interrogation, young Adélaïde can only confirm via nodding and shaking her head (i.e., silent, corporeal gestures) that a man inappropriately touched her genitals, which is a mere fraction of what in fact happened, as she will recall much later in adulthood. Her case is ultimately (mis)classified by French police as an *attouchement sexuel* (i.e., unwanted sexual contact; groping) (13).⁵¹ Following this initial report, the event is quickly minimized as “que des attouchements” (58, 90, 92), brushed aside for two decades by both Bon and her family: “Les années passeront. Ils oublieront ce dimanche ensoleillé du

⁵¹ An *attouchement sexuel* is considered a *délit* (i.e., offence) in French law as opposed to a serious *crime*. A *délit* is a punishable offence that is tried in a *Tribunal correctionnel* (Correctional Court). A *crime*, which is considered more severe than a *délit*, is tried in the highest French court, the *Cour d’Assises*.

mois de mai, ou plutôt, ils n'en parleront pas. Elle non plus, elle n'y pensera plus," Bon writes, speaking of her younger self in the third person (13).

The memoir traces Bon's life for over twenty years as she moves into adulthood. She assumes a cheerful façade and outwardly displays no signs of severe trauma. Yet, she internally struggles in silence, solitude, and shame, unable to identify, name, or put shape to the source of her suffering as she has deeply buried the full memory of this episode. Bon's work shares the devastating, long-term mental and physical impact this violation imposes on her daily existence. She relates how rape and its aftermath have the power to plague an entire life, even causing severe corporeal symptoms and impairments that she likens to pathogenic "jellyfish"/"des méduses" that invade her body and torment her psyche (13). Bon illustrates how rape leaves the victim not only emotionally and psychologically limping but also isolated and marginalized. For years after, she maintains one recurring image of herself—that of a small child, displaced and stranded in a frozen "no man's land" where time seems to have stopped; she is *la petite fille sur la banquise* who desperately waits "seule" (136), hoping for rescue and recovery from an untreated, unnamed wound (68, 89, 99). Relief comes, however, twenty-three years later when she receives word from the police that her attacker has been apprehended and her case is thereby reopened. As a result of over twenty years of demanding and painful work in various forms of talk therapy and somatic healing modalities, as well as having the opportunity to finally confront the man who had incapacitated her life (and the lives of at least 72 other children), Bon is able to fully remember and, most importantly, name the source of the ailment that has tormented her for years: rape (104-105).

In the following section, I first offer a brief analysis of the only scholarly article available (at the time of this research) on Bon's text, explaining how my views differ from this previous research. I then move into my own interpretation of the text, examining how Bon documents the moments just after her rape. This passage, I show, highlights her terror, immediate dissociation, and memory loss—

afflictions that carry through the majority of her youth and adulthood and arguably constitute the bulk of her narrative. I demonstrate how Bon provides an immersive glimpse into the experience of living in a body that has been violated, offering readers a vivid phenomenology of rape (i.e., a detailed description of the subjective, lived, corporeal experience of sexual abuse). I focus on the ways in which Bon's trauma manifests somatically, ultimately creating dissonance and distance between the mind and body. With these elements in mind, I then examine the aspects of Bon's work that relate to lack of memory, which directly addresses the concept of the "le bon viol" (or, as Bon terms it, "le mythe du vrai viol" [143]). These details that address memory loss raise awareness about the condition of traumatic amnesia (i.e., how it is possible for victims to have incomplete or inconsistent memories of something so horrific).⁵² I discuss how Bon innovatively embeds her text with highly researched evidence and documentation presented in the form of a dialogue between Bon and the reader about the complex ways in which a victim's mind can become so overwhelmed by the enormity of rape that it will, in the effort to protect from further damage, effectively "shut off" parts of the brain, causing significant gaps in recollection. These gaps, Bon shows, complicate recovery as they make it more difficult for the victim to comprehend her own experience and all the more challenging for others to understand her trauma. These voids in recollection, she explains, make others suspicious and even dismissive of the victim.⁵³ According to Bon, even within the mental health and legal communities,

⁵² Regarding traumatic amnesia, Bon relies extensively on the work of psychiatrist and activist Dr. Muriel Salmona (to whom Bon dedicates *La Petite fille sur la banquise* and of whom Bon was a patient [202]). Salmona shows that traumatic amnesia is an especially common occurrence when the victim of sexual abuse is a child or adolescent. See Salmona's work, "Traumatic Memory: Sexual Abuse and Psychotrauma." She writes, "Traumatic amnesia is very common among victims of child sexual abuse (nearly 60% of child victims have partial amnesia and 40% total amnesia. [...] This phenomenon can last for many years, even decades" ("Traumatic Memory" 6). See also "The Psychological Impact of Victimization: Mental Health Outcomes and Psychological, Legal, and Restorative Interventions" by Simon N. Verdun-Jones and Katherine R. Rossiter.

⁵³ Recently, there has been a significant increase in public awareness about this issue. See Sammy Caiola's "How Rape Affects Memory and the Brain, and Why More Police Need to Know About This" (2021); Jen Percy's "What People Misunderstand About Rape" (2023); Jim Hopper's "Why Can't Christine Blasey

there is a broad societal ignorance surrounding this psychological defense mechanism, and she shows how this societal illiteracy works against victims in their pursuit of recovery and justice. Finally, I show how the discovery of the correct language to describe this episode of Bon's life encourages healing, recentering, and the reconciliation between her mind and body.

a. Scholarship/Criticism on *La Petite fille sur la banquise*

Thus far, only one scholarly article has been published on Bon's narrative. In "Témoigner pour instruire: *La Petite fille sur la banquise* d'Adélaïde Bon" (2022), Béatrice Vernier argues that Bon's text "identifie et dénonce les manquements de la société en matière de prise en charge des victimes d'agression sexuelle" (11). It is, moreover, "une littérature dont l'ambition est de faire progresser les instances sociales et juridiques," a reading with which I agree (11). Characterizing this work as "un guide de survie' pour ce type d'agression," Vernier asserts that Bon's "l'objectif . . . est certes de conseiller d'autres victimes d'abus sexuels" (13, 11). For Vernier, Bon "ne peut qu'inspirer d'autres victimes à réagir, car elle leur fournit les renseignements utiles pour surmonter un traumatisme vécu trop longtemps dans l'ignorance de sa définition et de son impact quotidien" (11). Although I share many of Vernier's interpretations, her focus is primarily on the ways in which Bon's work functions as an instructional manual for other victims (a reading I find pertinent). My chapter, however, emphasizes the ways that Bon's text informs all readers (victims and non-victims alike) about the lived experience of sexual violence while relating the difficulty of recognizing that one has been raped as the word/concept itself often remains elusive.

Ford "Remember How She Got Home?: Time-Dependent Effects of Stress on the Hippocampus and Memory—and Why They Matter" (2018); David Lisak and James Hopper's "Why Rape and Trauma Survivors Have Fragmented and Incomplete Memories" (2014); and Joan Cook's "Sexual Trauma and Memory—We Remember Pieces as Opposed to Complete Storylines" (2018).

b. Close Reading of *La Petite fille sur la banquise*

To begin this discussion, it is important to closely examine the incipit for the ways in which it establishes the child's confused, dissociative, and anesthetized state—a state in which she remains for roughly twenty years as a result of her trauma and its ensuing amnesia. These opening pages, although brief, are emblematic of the major themes and imagery that Bon explores over the course of the work, making it a particularly apt example for study. Launching the reader into the mind of her nine-year-old self immediately after her assault, Bon begins with a series of questions, swiftly conveying an atmosphere of shock in which young Adélaïde cannot register what is happening: “Est-ce qu’elle s’est essuyé la bouche du revers de la main, passé la langue sur les dents, recoiffée un peu? Est-ce elle ou lui qui a remonté la culotte, remis un semblant d’ordre dans la robe-tablier rouge, tiré sur le chemisier blanc?” (11). From the outset, these questions establish the impression that young Adélaïde is so stunned, distressed, and disoriented that she can neither remember nor trust whether it was she who just redressed herself or her attacker. Bon notably shifts into the third person pronoun *elle* to describe herself (something she does throughout the narrative, regularly enlisting a symphony of pronouns: *je*, *tu*, and *elle*),⁵⁴ aesthetically representing her dissociation. She portrays herself as immediately detached, watching the scene unfold as though a distant spectator of her own rape and its immediate aftermath.

The impression of chaos and inner turmoil is further emphasized when she writes, “Quelque chose s’est renversé, elle ne sait pas si c’est le sol ou si c’est elle, elle se concentre pour gravir l’escalier” (11). The reader senses here Bon’s dazed, vertiginous state as she describes the experience of not knowing whether she is still upright or if she has fallen. It is as though the ground has shifted beneath her, disorienting and impeding her from knowing which way is up and which is down. Something as simple as climbing the stairs is now rendered so difficult that it requires her utmost concentration (11).

⁵⁴ An example of how these pronouns interact simultaneously: “*Elle appelle cet endroit ma petite fille sur la banquise, elle ignore que cette petite fille a encore longtemps à m’attendre*” (68) (emphasis mine).

In this way, Bon suggests that young Adélaïde, in her condition of severe overwhelm, can no longer rely on something as constant as the law of gravity. She will later describe and reiterate this sensation as “vivre à l’envers,” or living upside down, “sans que nul le sache” (157).

The sense of confusion is accentuated when Bon relates the assault that her perpetrator enacts upon her psyche (i.e., post rape). Recalling his words, she writes: “*Je suis gentille, je suis jolie, j’aime ça, tu es mon ami, tu aimes mes grosses fesses, tu me fais du bien, je suis gourmande, je ne dirai rien, c’est notre secret, je te promets, je ne dirai rien. Des mots qu’il lui a dits*” (11). That is, as she climbs the stairs and attempts to find her (literal and metaphorical) footing, her attacker demands her attention again, appropriating and—in a sense even annihilating—her subjectivity by using “*je*” to speak to her about her, as though she were speaking. He frames the experience for her and, in essence, puts words into her mouth, effectively stealing her voice and planting a false narrative in the impressionable child’s mind. The narrative imposed on her is that he is her “friend,” that she is a greedy “gourmande” who enjoyed the experience, and that they now share a “secret” of which she will “promise” (“promets”) to say “nothing” (note that “*je ne dirai rien*,” is repeated twice) (11).⁵⁵ Thus the assailant further dominates the girl, controlling and abusing her adolescent body as well as her mind, twisting her thoughts so that she mistakenly believes that she has been an active and consenting participant—an appalling (and intrusive) thought that plagues her for years (27, 148, 180). This contributes to her dissociation in the sense that she hears her “voice” coming from a source outside of herself (i.e., his mouth).

Young Adélaïde, consequently rendered completely mute in her shock (“mutique,” as she later writes [42]), can only nod to him in response as her voice has been appropriated: “Elle le regarde en opinant du menton, comme les petits chiens qui hochent la tête sur les plages arrière des voitures. [...]”

⁵⁵ This tactic is commonly used by assailants for the specific purpose of manipulating the mind of the victim. See Judith Herman: “[S]imple compliance rarely satisfies him [i.e., the perpetrator]; he appears to have a psychological need to justify his crimes, and for this he needs the victim’s affirmation. [...] His ultimate goal appears to be the creation of a willing victim” (75).

Sur le palier, elle se retourne quand il l'appelle, promet encore en hochant la tête" (11). She portrays herself as silent—or rather silenced—and even entranced, ceaselessly moving her head up and down yet unable to register what has just transpired. She writes, "[E]lle ne se souvient pas . . . [E]lle ne se souvient [pas] de ce qu'il lui a fait," suggesting (via the repetition of "elle ne se souvient pas") how already in the immediate aftermath, the child's mind has gone offline, preventing access to the complete memory of this traumatic experience (11).

She carries this emotional paralysis into her familial space where she remains speechless, disoriented, and cut off from communication. "Elle regarde les murs . . . elle ne les reconnaît pas, comme elle ne reconnaît pas ses propres parents. Tout est soudain changé sans qu'elle puisse saisir quoi," Bon writes (12). Without warning, the very structure of her home (i.e., "les murs") as well as the pillars of her family (i.e., "ses parents") have become defamiliarized (12). Further, in her flustered state, even familiar sounds have become foreign to her ears: "Ils [i.e., her parents] lui parlent, elle a du mal à les entendre, à les comprendre" (12). Bon imparts that the shock of rape can be so acute that it can dispossess one of language as well as destroy one's ability to hear and understand, which results in alienation and marginalization. The most communication of which young Adélaïde is capable in this moment is moving her head to relay that something has happened: "Sa tête se déplace. Gauche. Droite. Droite. Gauche. [...] Haut. Bas. Bas. Haut" (12). Reduced to basic bodily gestures, the young victim has been removed—even excluded—from discourse.

In addition to her inability to speak, hear ("entendre"), and understand ("comprendre"), she is, as she describes, fully severed from and even dispossessed of her body:

Elle flotte. [...] Elle n'est plus là . . . Personne ne semble s'en rendre compte . . . Elle ne ressent rien. [...] Elle ne sent pas les méduses s'immiscer en elle ce jour-là. Elle ne sent pas les longs tentacules transparents la pénétrer, elle ne sait pas que leurs filaments vont l'entraîner peu à peu dans une histoire qui n'est pas la sienne, qui ne la concerne pas. Elle ne sait pas qu'ils vont la déporter de

sa route, l'attirer vers des profondeurs désertes et inhospitalières, entraver jusqu'au moindre de ses pas, la faire douter de ses poings, rétrécir année après année le monde qui l'entoure à une petite poche d'air sans issue. *Elle ne sait pas que désormais elle est en guerre et que l'armée ennemie habite en elle.* Personne ne la prévient . . . le monde s'est tu. [...] Elle n'y pensera plus. (12-13)
(emphasis mine)

It is an event that not only distances her from herself and others but also leaves her in an extended liminal state in which she is physically present (i.e., still in her familial home) yet psychologically absent and “floating,” which no one seems to notice (“Personne ne semble s'en rendre compte” [12]). Going further, she describes herself as “deported” (“déporter”), evoking one not only thrown off her path (or “route,” as she says), but also exiled (12)—an image she later recalls and repeats more explicitly when she writes “se vivre déportée,” describing what it is to live with the daily “consequences” of rape (157). Corporeally numb (i.e., feeling “rien”) and adrift in a world that has “gone silent” to her ears and threatens to suffocate her (e.g., “petite poche d'air” [12]), she does not recognize that an invisible force is quietly yet systematically overtaking her body, as evidenced by the detail of the “méduses” (i.e., what she later understands to be her PTSD symptoms [144]). In this passage, her body is described as emptied of both life and memory as well as hijacked in plain sight or, as she later writes, “colonized” (162). So pernicious is this “colonization” that “[l]es années passeront” before she will remember the full extent of this experience and learn how to name it (13).

This brief overture masterfully highlights the problems that will tax Bon's psyche and body for the next two decades. She outlines how rape disorients her, disrupts her sense of safety and existence in the world, ruptures her connections and communication with others, displaces her and renders her homeless in her own body,⁵⁶ and threatens her ability to construct a coherent self as her

⁵⁶ While I independently noticed this aspect of corporeal homelessness in Bon's text, I must note that in 1994, psychotherapist Lepa Mladjenović also called rape an experience that makes a woman “homeless in her own body” (she was speaking about war and not literature) (qtd. in Copleon 252).

voice, subjectivity, and bodily autonomy have been taken from her. This passage is a concise example of the overall themes of this work as the majority of Bon's text continues in this vein, showcasing these consequences and providing further illustrations of how this event haunts her and results in her belief that there is something intrinsically wrong with her (133).

The disruptive impact of this event is felt daily as her pain manifests somatically, as though the body—itsself a site of remembrance—seeks to signal its need for attention. Bon endures a host of corporeal suffering named and envisioned (to repeat) as “des méduses” immersing themselves in her body (13). Among the first of these “jellyfish” to manifest are overwhelmingly painful sensations in her throat and jaw: “[E]lle a mal, mal à la gorge, mal aux mâchoires, tellement mal” (24). As she seeks to exorcise these disturbances (“que ça lui sorte enfin”), “elle enfouit sa tête” so that she can “hurle,” “vomisse le grand cri,” and “crache” (24). It is as though there is something obstructing her throat that she tries to evacuate, and yet, despite best efforts, cannot. “[E]lle écarquille sa bouche, elle s'épuise, mais *rien* ne sort, jamais, pas un souffle, *aucun* bruit, *rien*” (24) (emphasis mine). This loss of voice is chronic to the extent that she eventually seeks the assistance of a voice pathologist (one of the many specialists and healing practitioners she consults): “Elle consulte une phoniatre après une énième extinction de voix” (73). As her dysphonia is severe, her doctor prescribes a series of exercises (73). However, as soon as she attempts the vocal drills, “les méduses surgissent” (74). In these instances, she must force herself to stop the exercises, choke down the sensations, and ultimately disengage from her body (i.e., dissociate) in order to find some relief: “Alors, la douleur, elle l'avale . . . nauséuse . . . elle s'oublie, elle s'enfuit” (24). “Passer chaque journée en dehors de soi,” she later stresses (157). Consequently, this constant “swallowing” of emotions results in chronic breathlessness, as though her oxygen has been cut off: “Elle suffoque, elle n'arrive plus à respirer” (131).

These painful sensations in her throat and jaw coincide and correlate with another “jellyfish,” that of overwhelming hunger that resists satiation. I say “correlate” because both are mentioned

together and concern the locus of the mouth/throat as well as the act of swallowing. For example, immediately after her rape, Bon begins to compulsively engage in “frénésies alimentaires,” eating in secret, finishing plates of food “sans que personne la voie,” swallowing “les restes au lieu de les jeter,” and stuffing herself to the point of numbness (“celle qui file s’abrutir en cuisine”) (21). This extreme, insatiable appetite (she will later discover the name for this affliction, *hyperphagie boulimique* [140]), although painful, eventually becomes a habitual coping mechanism that provides a measure of relief: “Manger, ce n’est plus se nourrir, c’est se *calmer*” (17) (emphasis mine).⁵⁷ This begins a decades-long dynamic of “[e]ngloutir puis vomir” (37)—a behavior that suggests, much like her desire to scream (i.e., “hurle”), a need to release something that remains trapped in her throat. Bon illustrates how she looks for this elusive release via alternately “stuffing” these sensations further down within herself (“Alors, la douleur, elle l’avale” [24]) and vomiting. These practices of bingeing and purging, however, do not provide lasting relief and in fact only exacerbate the sense of asphyxiation (“asphyxiée” [164]) that young Adélaïde has felt since the day of her rape (i.e., that “petite poche d’air” to which she is reduced [13]).

As if that were not enough, in addition to her dissociation, physical pain, loss of voice, extreme hunger, and chronic breathlessness, Bon endures complete loss of sensation in her pelvis (71), crippling panic attacks (88), rage (27, 55), apathy (13), intrusive thoughts, images, and flashbacks (129, 163), sleep disturbances and nightmares (18, 73), self-harm (e.g., slapping/punching herself) (18), suicidal ideation (37), extreme self-loathing (40), and frequent nausea (24). Direct results of her rape, these pathogens (i.e., “jellyfish”) are portrayed as collaborators that both commandeer and terrorize her psyche and physical being, leaving her estranged from herself (i.e., “en dehors de soi” [157]), as though her body does not belong to her.

⁵⁷ See Fisher: “Over-eating . . . results in numbing accompanied by relaxation, increased parasympathetic hypoarousal, disconnection from the body, spaciness, or drowsiness. Bulimia . . . causes a reduction in hyperarousal and decreased pain sensitivity” (131).

In her quest to alleviate these symptoms and sensations, Bon participates in over “226 séances de thérapie individuelle, 39 séances de thérapie de groupe, 21 journées de constellations familiales,⁵⁸ 146 séances de yoga de la voix, 118 séances de thérapie corporelle, 58 cours de Méthode Feldenkrais,⁵⁹ 16 consultations de nutritionniste, [et] 37 séances d’ostéopathie et de méthodes diverses” in the endeavor to reinhabit and “ressentir son propre corps” (139). Further experimental attempts to regain contact with her body include countless “stages de théâtre,” “cours de yoga et de pilates,” “cours de chant ou de trompette à tenter de retrouver son souffle,” writing “essais” and “témoignages,” and reading “livres de développement personnel” (139). All of these efforts amount to over two decades spent painstakingly searching, scanning, and excavating her body and mind in order to find the missing pieces of her story and finally restore order within her being. Through this extensive list of treatments, specialists, therapists, and modalities consulted, Bon reveals how rape is a physical, emotional, and financial burden that absorbs a victim’s time, energy, and resources. In this way, her ample descriptions of the anguish she experiences (both mentally and physically) combined with the details regarding her efforts to alleviate her symptoms give the impression that one is reading a pathography—or illness narrative—in which the mysterious disease is only later identified (or diagnosed) as rape.⁶⁰

With Bon’s traumatic and corporeal reactions to rape in mind, I now turn to a key passage in which Bon specifically devotes vast textual space to an explanation of the neuro-psychological mechanisms responsible for both her loss of memory and the severe symptoms she discusses (i.e., her “méduses”). This passage arguably anticipates (or intuit) a possible question (or skepticism) that Bon’s

⁵⁸ A type of alternative therapeutic intervention (76).

⁵⁹ The Feldenkrais Method (founded by Moshe Feldenkrais in the mid twentieth century) is a somatic movement and educational method that helps individuals to (re)connect with their bodies.

⁶⁰ Pathographies are a type of personal narrative or memoir in which an individual describes their experiences with illness and disease. For a robust study of pathography as a genre (mainly in an English-speaking context), see Anne Hunsaker Hawkins’ *Reconstructing Illness: Studies in Pathography* (1999).

readers might have, which is, “How could such a dramatic rupture in recollection and such a violent process of total dissociation and devastation be possible after only one brief episode of sexual violence?” It is true that her reactions might seem extreme to some. Bon is well aware of this doubt, having experienced it firsthand: “Qu’est-ce que c’est, un viol? Quinze minutes de votre vie? . . . Vous savez, autour de vous, il y a beaucoup de gens . . . à qui il est arrivé des choses vraiment terribles,” as one psychologist, frustrated by Bon’s fragile state and lack of coherent recollection, asserts (qtd. in Bon 152). Knowing this skepticism is widespread, Bon confronts it directly in her work with an objective to educate those skeptical of rape-induced amnesia and the lasting damage that the crime can inflict.

In the passage in question (166-169), Bon places great emphasis on explaining, in her own words, the science behind traumatic memory loss as a result of rape. This in-depth clarification arrives directly after she expresses her disappointment in the psychologist’s comments (quoted above) and her dismay over the general lack of public awareness in France about rape and the effects of PTSD: “Comment se fait-il que dans notre société surinformée ces informations-là [i.e., those about rape] circulent si peu?” she laments (144). As if to specifically counter this lack of knowledge and clarify what she has personally lived through, she devotes nearly an entire chapter to detailing the neurobiological effects of trauma on the brain.

What is innovative—even experimental—about her presentation of these mechanisms is how she frames the information as though casually conversing with a friend. “Un matin . . . on discute. [...]’évoque la mémoire et les amnésies traumatiques” (166). Since it is unclear whom she means by the pronoun “on,” the reader gains the impression as they read further that Bon is actually constructing a dialogue between herself (i.e., assuming the pronoun “je” in this section) and an unknown interlocutor (designated by the pronoun “vous”) who appears to stand in for the curious reader that is eager to

understand her condition more thoroughly. The dialogue is written in present tense, which lends to the impression of a real-time conversation between Bon and her reader.

Of further note is the lucidity with which she illuminates the information in this passage as it stylistically contrasts greatly with other sections of her memoir in which she illustrates the chaos and suffering she feels internally.⁶¹ This section on traumatic amnesia thus stands out, inviting closer attention since it is aesthetically so different. Her work here reads like a clear and thoughtful public service announcement designed to inform her reader. Although lengthy, it is nevertheless worth examining in full for the ways in which Bon artfully organizes and imparts this complicated science.

Opening with a question, she begins her illustration: “*Ça marche comment, la mémoire traumatique?*” the unnamed person asks (166). Bon proceeds to outline over the course of three full pages what happens in the brain during instances of shock and terror: “Eh bien, si on garde en tête trois des structures du cerveau, l’amygdale cérébrale, le cortex préfrontal et l’hippocampe, c’est assez simple” (166-167). She makes a drawing (“un dessin”) of “une petite amande” which represents the “l’amygdale cérébrale,” then “un gros ovale” to represent “le cortex préfrontal,” and “un cheval de mer” to stand in for “l’hippocampe” (167). She clarifies, now apparently directly addressing her reader via the use of *vous*, “S’il vous arrive quelque chose de grave, l’amygdale va sonner l’alarme la première,” thereby activating the fight or flight response, permitting immediate reaction (i.e., “réagir immédiatement” [167]). Inviting the reader to visualize with her, she writes: “Imaginons un accident de voiture, BAM. Le moteur est en feu, votre amygdale va demander au corps de sécréter de l’adrénaline . . . pour que vous puissiez . . . sortir du véhicule, courir cinquante mètres, [et] vous asseoir” (167). Once out of danger, “le cortex préfrontal aura eu le temps d’analyser la situation, l’hippocampe l’aura comparée avec sa banque de données” and ultimately recognize it as “a car accident” (167). The

⁶¹ In the other sections of her work, for example, she portrays her chaotic internal state via the blending of multiple pronouns as well as the use of disjointed sentences to represent her intrusive thoughts.

two of these together (i.e., the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus), she outlines, “viendront ainsi moduler, affiner, voire éteindre la réponse émotionnelle de l’amygdale” (167). In essence, Bon shows, in relatively simple terms, how these three parts collaborate harmoniously (or, at least, are supposed to), using a scenario that is likely familiar to most (i.e., a car accident). The detail of her drawing is further educative in that it evokes a clear mental image in the reader’s mind of these abstract (in the sense that one cannot see them during conversation/reading) neurological components.

As if discerning that her listener (i.e., reader) may already be confused at this point and might need to see this further illustrated in order for the information to integrate, she begins to verbally describe her next drawing (167): “Je dessine deux traits qui les relient à elle. [i.e., she draws two lines, one from the prefrontal cortex and one from the hippocampus, both connecting to the amygdala]” (167). This balanced communication amongst the three parts looks, she explains, like realizing that your body hurts (i.e., “que vos côtes vous font horriblement mal”) and that if “vous voyez rouge,” it is because you are bleeding (167). You will, she continues, think to “vous allonger, à appuyer d’une main sur la plaie, à sortir votre téléphone de l’autre pour appeler le 18, et votre hippocampe vous permettra même de préciser aux pompiers où vous êtes” (167). Bon then explains how this becomes a memory ultimately stored by the hippocampus and classified as “mémoire autobiographique” (167). It will, as she states, thereby become just another story that you tell your friends (“il deviendra une de ces histoires frémissantes qu’on raconte aux diners” [167]). Everything makes sense, the memory is categorized, and you can put this event behind you, she clarifies.

However, when it comes to rape, Bon outlines how something entirely different can happen in the brain that short-circuits this process. The continued use of the pronoun “vous” becomes especially powerful in this section in that it invites the reader to imagine that they are the victim of sexual violence. Since this dialogue takes the form of direct address, Bon encourages the reader to see themselves in the scenario which will allow them to better understand the gravity of the experience. She

writes, “Si vous êtes victime de viol, si vous êtes en présence de quelqu’un qui a l’intention de vous détruire, de vous annihiler, de vous réduire à un objet,” your prefrontal cortex will search “en vain,” unable to “analyser la situation” (168). “Vous n’êtes pas un objet,” and thus this scene will make “aucun sens” to you, she explains (168). Continuing, she states, the hippocampus “aura beau mettre à sac ses archives, lui non plus ne trouvera pas de réponse adaptée à la haine qui lui fait face” (168). Consequently, she continues, since the prefrontal cortex alone can neither “moduler” nor “éteindre” the amygdala, and since the overload (“survoltage”) of the amygdala represents “un risque vital pour votre organisme,” the prefrontal cortex will stop you from dying of an “overdose d’adrénaline et autres drogues endogènes” by simply breaking (“disjoncter”) the circuit, thereby disconnecting the amygdala (168).⁶² To clarify again, Bon renders this process with an image: “J’efface les traits qui les relient [i.e., the lines that connect the prefrontal cortex and the hippocampus to the amygdala], j’isole l’amygdale cérébrale d’une barre définitive” (168). She clarifies that the amygdala is offline and represents it as disconnected and distanced from the other two elements.

Bon does not stop her explanation there. She carries on in order to insist upon her ultimate point, which is how one could have no memory of such an episode. The disconnected amygdala, she elucidates, will continue to “sonner l’alarme” and “enregistrer tout ce qu’il se passe,” which includes “votre terreur, votre douleur, sa [i.e., that of the rapist] violence, sa haine, sa perversité” (168). However, since “votre cortex est au chômage,” it is as though “vous êtes comme à quelques pas, spectateur indolent, dissocié de vous-même” (168). Even as the trauma continues to unfold, she remarks, “vous ne ressentez plus d’émotions, plus de souffrance physique, plus de souffrance

⁶² See Salmona’s “Traumatic Amnesia” (2018): “Major traumatic events can have on the victim’s psyche a *siderating* effect, which . . . prevents her cerebral cortex from managing the intensity of the response to stress and the production of adrenaline and cortisol. [...] Extreme stress . . . [and] the excess of adrenaline and cortisol constitutes a vital risk for heart and brain . . . trigger[ing] neurobiological survival mechanisms that cause the emotional circuit to cut off and lead to an emotional and physical anesthesia by producing morphine and ketamine-like hard drugs . . . This mechanism disrupts the emotional and memory circuits, and leads to dissociative and memory disorders that cause traumatic amnesia and traumatic memory” (3).

psychique” because the hippocampus also no longer receives the “informations nécessaires,” and thus can neither classify “cet événement dans votre mémoire autobiographique” nor “permettre le repérage temporo-spatial” (168-169). You will not “consciemment” remember “tout ou partie de ce jour-là,” and the memories that you do have will be “confus, désordonnés, comme irréels” (168). Your emotions, she further explains, “vont alors se retrouver piégées . . . dans la mémoire traumatique de votre amygdale,” which is “une mémoire sans logique, sans repères, une mémoire émotionnelle brute” (169). In other words, these emotions will be stored in the amygdala, but they will make no sense and seem disconnected from one’s life story.

Finally, Bon declares that long after this event is over, and even when one begins to feel better, it will only take “une odeur,” “un bruit,” “un mot,” “un fragment . . . de cette scène,” or “un des mille et un détonateurs,” for this memory to “exploser” and “vous envahisse de pensées de haine et de terreur” (169). Specifying what happens when a victim is activated (i.e., triggered), she states, “Vous n’allez pas comprendre d’où viennent ces images, cette violence, [et] ces gestes horribles que vous vous infligez” (169). Because the victim has no access to the full memory, Bon asserts, these “triggers” and symptoms will confuse her, causing feelings of deep “honte” and “culpabilité” as she does not comprehend that these violent images and intrusive thoughts derive from her attack, rather than from some fundamental flaw within her (133). And because she does not realize this, she will try to make this shame and pain disappear. Bon describes,

Vous allez chercher à ne plus souffrir, à ne rien ressentir. Vous trouverez de mauvais refuges dans la boulimie, l’anorexie, la masturbation compulsive, la sexualité violente, la pornographie, les drogues, l’automutilation, le goût du risqué . . . [V]ous trouverez refuge dans des conduites dissociantes. Ainsi, vous augmenterez votre niveau de stress afin de sécréter suffisamment de drogues dures endogènes pour vous *anesthésier*. (169) (emphasis mine)

This is indeed what happens to Bon. Because she cannot fully remember her violation (at least for a very long time), it is impossible for her to make sense of “ces images, cette violence, [et] ces gestes horribles” that she inflicts upon herself (169). To her mind, her only recourse is to quiet the “jellyfish” that cause these internal disruptions through harmful numbing practices, such as drugs (63), binge eating followed by purging (21), compulsive masturbation (23), and other forms of self-harm (23, 37).⁶³ Bon later explains that she is only able to remove herself from this cycle and find the pieces of her missing memory because she is privileged enough to afford the therapies and supportive practices that help her to eventually break this pattern—something she acknowledges is not available to all victims and thus presumably keeps many trapped within a numbing/self-harming pattern (159).⁶⁴

Although a highly common response to trauma, this psychological defense mechanism that Bon clarifies nevertheless remains poorly understood, which hinders victims in their pursuit of justice and recovery (since they often cannot make sense of their symptoms). Bon illustrates this explicitly. For example, during the trial against Bon’s assailant, rape-trauma specialist and victim advocate Dr. Muriel Salmona is called upon to answer questions posed by jurors, the presiding judge, and the prosecutor—questions such as “Est-ce *vraiment* possible d’oublier qu’on a subi un viol?” and “Les souvenirs qu’on a du viol peuvent-ils *s’inventer*?” (the answers to which are “yes” to the first and “no” to the second) (qtd. in Bon 203) (emphasis mine).⁶⁵ Although it is true that in a court of law everything

⁶³ For more on numbing practices and how they offer relief to traumatized individuals, see Fisher.

⁶⁴ Bon acknowledges her access to both mental and physical health care as well as her access to a lawyer—privileges she knows are not available to all victims: “J’ai eu les moyens affectifs et financiers de me battre pendant presque trente ans. J’ai été introduite à la pensée féministe et à un réseau de femmes solidaires. J’ai fini par être diagnostiquée et accompagnée vers la remémoration par une psychiatre formidablement compétente et empathique. [...] J’ai eu accès à une avocate bienveillante et formée à la spécificité des violences sexuelles, qui m’a solidement soutenue” (159).

⁶⁵ To the first question, Salmona’s responds, “Oui . . . La majorité des enfants victimes de violences sexuelles présentent des amnésies traumatiques complètes ou parcellaires, liées au mécanisme de disjonction que le cerveau déclenche pour se protéger du stress extrême généré par ces violences” (qtd. in Bon 203). To the second, Salmona states, “Absolument pas, il ne s’agit pas de souvenirs autobiographiques

must be made explicitly clear, these questions imply that there exist skeptical individuals even within the legal system who routinely doubt the legitimacy of traumatic amnesia and thereby the veracity of what victims share. By including Salmona's entire explanation of traumatic amnesia verbatim, Bon counters this incredulity by offering an authoritative opinion on the matter. Salmona's sworn testimony not only buttresses everything Bon has already said on the subject but also allows Bon to further address what she calls deep public "ignorance" on these matters (231).

Bon continues to show how this survival mechanism is misunderstood, even among the well-educated. Describing the findings of an additional psychologist summoned by the court (i.e., the same that earlier had suggested that rape is nothing more than "15 minutes of one's life" [152]), Bon tells of how this psychologist dismisses the trauma of another plaintiff (i.e., one of the other 72 victims harmed by the same assailant), arguing that this individual presents "un état de stress post-traumatique que *très léger*" (230). And yet, as Bon notes, this victim specifically testifies under oath to "la profonde sidération" into which her rape has "plunged her" ("l'avait plongée"), despite remembering only fragments of the attack (230).⁶⁶ Another plaintiff is deemed (by this same psychologist) as not having PTSD at all: "[L]'experte ne diagnostiquera pas d'état de stress post traumatique" (231). And yet, Bon writes, this victim testifies that although her full memory of the event is repressed, she has nonetheless been completely "détruite" by the experience and subsequently lives "constamment dans la peur" (231). A third expert witness/psychologist argues likewise that one plaintiff they evaluated appears to have no trauma at all (i.e., "aucune séquelle psychotraumatique . . . quasiment restaurée, le

conscients, des souvenirs qui eux se situent dans le temps et s'émoussent au fil des années, qui peuvent se remémorer intentionnellement, qui peuvent se raconter, être analysés, transformés. Non, la mémoire traumatique générée par le viol, elle, est hors temps, elle s'impose comme si elle était en train de se reproduire, elle se répète de façon immuable avec la même charge émotionnelle initiale, les mêmes détails. Les années n'ont aucun effet sur elle" (qtd. in Bon 203).

⁶⁶ See page 230 in Bon for more on this plaintiff's testimony, which details her symptoms at length.

retentissement sur sa vie serait quasi nul” [231]). And yet, as Bon relays, a lawyer arguing on behalf of that same plaintiff attests that the victim is indeed traumatized and that the only thing currently maintaining her functionality is her ongoing therapy (231).

Through these examples, Bon demonstrates that the ways in which trauma manifests in individuals remain substantially misunderstood, even within the mental health system. This, Bon argues, has serious repercussions as the lack of awareness often works against victims in a court of justice. “Quand les jurés ne sont pas émus, ils sont plus indulgents,” contends Bon (246). She cautions that when those in charge of important decisions (i.e., jurors) regarding the guilt of an abuser are convinced by expert witnesses that some victims are only “lightly” traumatized and that the effects of rape on their lives is “quasi nul” because their full memory is impaired, it lessens the (already slim)⁶⁷ chance that abusers will be convicted (230).

Lamenting this systemic deficiency, Bon declares, “Qu’elle est laide l’ignorance dissimulée sous les airs doctes” (232). Continuing her indictment, “Quelle honte qu’en France les médecins, les psychologues, les policiers et les magistrats ne soient pas systématiquement formés aux symptômes spécifiques liés aux violences sexuelles” (232). Bon insists that because some victims do not sufficiently remember the details of their rapes, or perhaps seem outwardly indifferent (e.g., dissociated) when describing the impact this crime has on them, even medical professionals can be dismissive because these experiences do not resemble and thus contradict what Bon calls “le mythe du vrai viol” (143)—a concept that directly mirrors Foïs’ notion of “le bon viol.”

So far, I have outlined Bon’s views concerning the lived experience of rape and how that violation continues to torment the victim’s body and mind long after the attack is over. I have discussed the ways in which Bon demonstrates how the absence of memory is indeed the result of a

⁶⁷ Only “between 1.5% to 2% of all . . . rapes” will lead to a conviction (Salmona, “To End Denial”).

neurological survival mechanism. Finally, I have shown how this mechanism can complicate recovery, especially since it can impede a victim from integrating the experience into her autobiographical memory. It can, additionally, work against victims who desire restitution and justice as traumatic amnesia remains misunderstood by much of the public. For my final section on this text, I address how claiming the word/label *rape* and identifying her experience as such are integral to Bon's recovery as they allow her to reinhabit her body more fully and come to terms with this event.

As much as her text is about illustrating the somatic experience and mental anguish that accompanies surviving an attack on one's person, Bon's book is equally about, as she communicates, attempting to put disaster into words ("tente[r] d'accoler des mots au désastre" [210]). This proves, however, extremely challenging for Bon, as I have shown. After all, language fails her immediately, at the moment of violation, in the sense that she is rendered mute. As she explains from an older perspective, "Les mots manquent à neuf ans pour dire ça [i.e., rape]" (136). Moreover, as illustrated, language is weaponized against her by her attacker who puts words into her mouth, producing a false narrative: "Je suis ton ami" (27). This sentence ("phrase venimeuse" [49]) haunts her for years and becomes one of her many frequently-recurring intrusive thoughts. When she recalls this phrase and later associates it with the word "pedophile" and its literal meaning (i.e., "one who loves children"), young Adélaïde comes to mistrust language, going as far as to say that "les mots mentent" (27), for she knows instinctively that the person who spoke these words to her was not friendly in the least, and certainly no lover of children. Just as her trust in the world is broken, so is her trust in language for many years.

However, when she begins regularly practicing the various somatic and therapeutic healing methods and, additionally, taking part in a feminist activist group, she initiates the process of reconciling sensation with language (i.e., body and mind) while learning how to label her experience. Through various *thérapies corporelles* that help Bon locate where she holds pain in her body (i.e., throat,

jaw, pelvis) (71, 93), through talk therapy that empowers her to delve into the reasons she might be holding tension in those places (163), and through participation in the feminist group where she learns about the legal definition of rape (104-105), she is able to name her experience and begin recovery.

Once she remembers, with the aid of her therapist, that her experience was more than an “*attouchement*,” Bon then attends the feminist group where she finally undergoes a significant breakthrough: “Tout acte de pénétration sexuelle . . . est un viol,” the group’s speaker explains (104). When the speaker clarifies what “pénétration” can encompass, Bon is stunned: “Par un doigté vaginal? Des mots comme une trouée d’éclairs. Ce qu’elle appelle depuis plus de vingt ans *attouchement sexuel*, ses doigts à lui en elle, ses doigts à lui . . . en elle . . . c’est un VIOL” (104). This word, capitalized so that it commands notice and confronts the reader, brings the first glimpse of healing to Bon, although the full extent of her memory is still yet to come: “Elle ne sait pas que certaines photos manquent à son récit et il faudra encore des années pour les retrouver intactes” (49). In essence, “VIOL” is the missing piece that allows her to realize, for the first time, that her suffering is not because of an inherent defect within her: “Peut-être après tout n’est-elle pas si folle, peut-être y a-t-il une raison à sa souffrance? Quelqu’un lui a fait du mal, quelqu’un lui a fait ce mot-là. Et si la clef qu’elle cherche depuis toutes ces années, toutes ces années à fouiller en vain, si la clef, c’était ce mot?” (104-105). Accordingly, when (at the age of 33) her case is reopened, it becomes imperative for Bon that her complaint be correctly designated to match this language. “[C]’est important pour moi que ce que j’ai subi soit nommé,” she announces (155). She requests “la requalification de sa plainte, passer d’attouchement sexuel à viol. Ce mot lui est nécessaire,” (135). Bon continues to insist upon the restorative power of the word, exclaiming, “*Viol*. Quatre lettres et dedans, mon billet retour pour la terre natale. [...] Les mots dessinent l’horizon de nos pensées, alors quand les mots mentent, quand on remplace ennemi par ami . . . viol par attouchement . . . l’horizon est une ligne de barbelés qui interdit toute sortie du camp” (148-149). In effect, Bon underscores here that while words have the

power to harm and lie, they can also help to reframe an experience for which one previously had no way of conceptualizing and thereby no way of emotionally and psychologically digesting.

Learning how to define and write her experience facilitates her liberation from the grip of the “méduses,” so much so that she is able to revise her use of the term “méduse” and transform it into a more empowering symbol. Instead of maintaining the literal sense (i.e., “jellyfish”), Bon reclaims the Greek origins of the term and evokes the myth of Medusa who was raped, punished, disfigured, and ultimately held responsible for her own assault.⁶⁸ Proclaims Bon,

Alors, *je* suis Méduse . . . violée par Poséidon . . . *je* suis l'innocence profanée jugée *coupable* et *condamnée* à voir mes longs cheveux *transformés* en serpents, *je* suis celle dont on raconte que le regard pétrifie qui me croise, *je* suis la femme sauvage contrainte à se cacher dans une grotte humide, *je* suis celle à qui l'on coupe la tête quand elle dort, celle dont la dépouille mutilée terrifie les armées, *je* suis ce qu'il reste d'une femme après qu'on l'a violée. *Et de l'écrire me renoue, me relie, me répare.* (173-174) (emphasis mine)

This key passage marks a significant shift in narration for Bon in that, during and after this proclamation, she largely abandons the use of the pronouns “tu” and “elle” and assumes consistent use of “je,” which suggests that she is *en route* to recovery and restoration, no longer completely cut off and distanced from herself. By way of this artful comparison to Medusa, Bon articulates how rape had once “condemned” her, sentencing her to a “transformation” to which she never consented. It is, furthermore, rape that forced Bon into prolonged isolation—into that inhospitable “no man’s land” that is the *banquise* (much like “grotte humide” in which Medusa was forced to hide [174]).

⁶⁸ Medusa has long been an iconic symbol of empowerment to which survivors of rape turn. Indeed, tattoos of the figure have become popular among survivors of sexual violence: “Survivors of sexual assault use tattoos of Medusa to fight back against the narrative that victims should be shamed, blamed or punished for their assault. Medusa and her story have been reclaimed as a symbol of strength and power, with her image also being used as a mark of protection against evil” (“The Medusa Tattoo”).

Furthermore, Bon asserts, rape and its devastating consequences have (at least to her mind) left her “mutilated,” compelling others to turn away and regard her with suspicion.

And yet, Bon ends this passage with the affirmation that, despite this event and its marginalizing effects, she prevails. By rendering this experience through writing, Bon is able to reassemble the wounded pieces of herself and communicate that which needs to be named and acknowledged. In this way, Bon arguably evokes Hélène Cixous’ iconic manifesto “Le Rire de la Méduse” (1975) in which Cixous urges women to find their own language to write their experiences and their bodies: “Il faut que la femme se mette a texte. [...] Il faut qu’elle s’écrive . . . en s’écrivant, la femme fera retour à ce corps qu’on lui a plus que confisqué . . . Écris-toi: il faut que ton corps se fasse entendre” (37-45). Both women thus speak of the need to write and use Medusa as the vehicle to further this idea. Bon’s work thus responds to Cixous’ exhortation by writing her own raped body, allowing it to be heard and imploring readers to look directly at the damage rape inflicts on its victims.

VI. Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyzed the memoirs of Springora, Robert, and Bon, focusing on the ways in which these personal accounts offer privileged and uncommon insight into the interior lives of rape victims. These works, I argued, demonstrate how rape can surpass a victim’s available cognitive framework as the crime frequently comes in ambiguous forms, making it all the more difficult to recognize that what one has endured is, in fact, a rape. As this experience can evade one’s understanding, the word and even the memory of the event can remain entirely inaccessible to victims, often for many years (i.e., “unacknowledged rape”). I illustrated how these authors explore and articulate the embodied (i.e., somatic) impact of rape, demonstrating the various ways in which the material body itself calls attention to its pain and suffering. In so doing, these works present the raped body as a kind of repository in which the memory of rape lives. These works are significant in that they enjoin readers to better understand the lived, felt experience of sexual abuse by highlighting its

far-reaching, long-lasting effects, while complicating the accepted norm of “*le bon viol*.” Through the medium of memoir, a genre that allows these authors to speak of the harms they have endured and, moreover, to be acknowledged and heard by their readers, Springora, Robert, and Bon creatively narrate their experiences and give evidence of their survival.

Regarding survival, Melissa Febos persuasively argues that “a memoir is a kind of monument”—an idea that I consider pertinent to the themes I examined in this chapter (148). She explains that society is willing to recognize certain traumas (i.e., those that typically befall men [148]) and memorialize “those injured in combat” through “war monuments or military awards” (148). This is not the case, however, for wounds sustained by women and other marginalized people: “Rape victims do not get monuments in public spaces. They rarely even get legal justice” (148). However, memoirs have the capacity to make a substantial impact in that they can function as monuments to the rape victim, Febos contends (149). Like monuments, memoirs may be understood as “public manifestation[s]” of survival that “carry tremendous political. . . [and even] spiritual power” (149). Personal narratives, such as those I have analyzed, serve as proof of life and evidence the possibility of enduring in the wake of such an event. Moreover, they allow authors to “integrate” their experiences “into . . . [their] lives in ways that empower” them while also “connect[ing]” them to others (149). In this way, the works of Springora, Robert, and Bon (among others) may be seen as memorials of both sorrow and hope. Their documents communicate that rape represents so much more than just “*quinze minutes de votre vie*” (as Bon’s psychologist suggests [qtd. in Bon 152]). And most significantly, their works commemorate personal histories of resilience, as well as the stories that their bodies hold, while simultaneously contesting the conditions that allow rape to continue.

Conclusion

“It’s something that I thought was never existed [sic] before in fiction . . . She’s an unknown character . . . she doesn’t want to be a victim that’s for sure, but she doesn’t either [sic] fall into the caricature of the revenge/ avenger girl taking a gun . . . and shooting the guy. She’s somewhere else...”

—Isabelle Huppert, “‘Elle’ Press Conference”

In this study, I began by showing that the figure of the female rape victim is a consistent figure throughout the history of French literature and cinema, appearing in both canonical and popular works (e.g., Zola’s *La Bête humaine*, Buñuel’s *Belle de jour*, and Fargeat’s *Revenge*). I demonstrated that these narratives not only tend to treat rape and its aftermath as entirely peripheral aspects of the story (if they discuss them at all) but they also generally portray the victim in narrow terms. Consequently, by repeatedly offering fixed and predictable characterizations, audiences have come to expect female rape victimhood to look a certain way. These works, in essence, reiterate longstanding myths and assumptions about rape and female victimhood while devoting little narrative attention (if any at all) to the subjective experience of the victim.

However, I showed that there are a number of contemporary French writers and filmmakers who have begun to elevate the figure of the victim by constructing their narratives around her and her traumatic experience. These authors and directors, I asserted, notably depart from the firmly entrenched ways of depicting victimhood and, instead, present original stories that allow them to not only refute common stereotypes about rape but also unravel—even demolish—routine myths the surround the victim. I demonstrated that through the mediums of film and literature (both fiction and nonfiction), creative intellectuals such as Virginie Despentes, Gaspar Noé, Philippe Djian, Hélène Duffau, and Loulou Robert deploy a variety of aesthetic and rhetorical techniques in order to reinterpret the image of the female victim. I argued that by producing unfamiliar yet highly nuanced

depictions of this perennial figure, these *auteurs* contravene the existing narrative boundaries and, in so doing, expand what is permissible to say and show regarding rape victims through works of art.

In Chapter One, “Violence After Violation: Dismantling the Tropes of the Rape-Revenge Genre,” I investigated a longstanding, contentious narrative genre known as rape-revenge. To begin my analysis, I offered a reflection on Vanessa Springora’s extraordinary prologue from her memoir, *Le Consentement*, in which the author communicates her dreams of avenging the sexual abuse committed against her as a young girl. This passage allowed me to launch a discussion about the ways in which vengeance has long been associated with narratives of rape. After defining revenge and providing an overview of the ways in which retribution has persisted as a general theme in works of literature since the beginning of storytelling itself, I analyzed a specific category of reprisal tales, known as rape-revenge. I established the history of this genre, demonstrating how it became especially popular in American cinema during the 1970s and 1980s and has since remained a prominent story type in cinema (and literature) across the globe, including France.

I explained the predominant features of this type of narrative, which are relatively straightforward and fixed. Rape-revenge tales generally begin with a rape (or rapes) and conclude with an act (or acts) of retribution, and this is carried out in one of two ways: Either the victim herself pursues and kills her attacker after she has been raped (e.g., Meir Zarchi’s *I Spit on Your Grave* [1978]), or alternatively, another agent (usually male) seeks justice on the victim’s behalf by hunting down the assailants (e.g., Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* [1972]). These stories have also become known for their established iconography, which includes a virginal woman who, after rape, transforms into a provocative *femme fatale* wielding a gun and/or other weapons of male destruction, as well as frequent motifs such as castration and torture. Scenes of rape in these films are frequently prolonged and graphic, which has led many academics and reviewers to categorize films of this type as misogynist,

exploitive, and thus offensive. I summarized these ethical objections and offered an overview of the primary critical scholarship on these types of stories, which permitted me to lay a foundation for my discussion of more recent French artistic offerings that experiment with the conventions of this narrative type.

I selected works by Virginie Despentes, Coralie Trinh Thi, and Gaspar No  , as they are particularly experimental and iconoclastic in their approaches to this well-established genre. I investigated the creative and surprising ways in which these contemporary filmmakers adopt this narrative type, only to then reject and reimagine many of its most traditional features. I analyzed Despentes novel *Baise-moi* (1993), her film of the same name that she co-directed with Trinh Thi (2000), and No  's film *Irr  versible* (2002), and I argued that the works enlist a wide variety of unconventional methods and aesthetic choices, such as reverse narration, innovative camerawork, and explicit imagery, to disrupt the customary patterns that audiences have come to anticipate from this genre and, more importantly, refute entrenched societal misconceptions regarding rape and rape victims.

I demonstrated how the story of *Baise-moi*, both novel and film, calls attention to the brutality of the crime through its aesthetic choices (e.g., explicit imagery) while reflecting on—and provoking reflection about—the ways in which rape is often considered the most stigmatizing life event for a woman. Moreover, it argues for the possibility of rejecting that paradigm. Regarding *Irr  versible*, I examined the ways that the film specifically invites audiences to question common victim-blaming tropes by emphasizing through its unique structure that rape is never the fault of anything that a victim does prior to her attack. The film ultimately underscores the deep losses that rape engenders for victims of rape (e.g., loss of choice and loss of life). I thus showed how *Baise-moi* and *Irr  versible* reject the fantasy of justice that audiences generally anticipate from rape-revenge stories.

In Chapter Two, “Aberrant Fictions: On Control, Ritual, Risk, and Reclaiming the ‘Lust for Life,’” I identified a new thematic trend within French fiction and narrative cinema in which the complex psychological process of recovering a sense of control in the wake of sexual violence is treated as the primary matter of importance in the narrative. I demonstrated why this is a significant development for fiction and cinema. Until now, female rape victims have been most commonly portrayed in one of two ways: She is either depicted as the irreparably emotionally damaged victim which prompts her to engage in self-harming practices and even turn to suicide; or, alternatively, she externalizes her anger and pain, enacting violent retribution on her attacker(s). The new tendency that I discerned and described in this chapter subverts these conventional plots and characterizations, offering instead counternarratives (or counter-fictions) of victims whose responses to sexual violence frustrate and upend the expectations of not only those within the story but also those watching or reading it.

Although there are several recent French works that follow this pattern, I chose to focus on Hélène Duffau’s 2003 novel *Trauma*, Philippe Djian’s 2012 novel “*Oh...*,” and Paul Verhoeven’s 2016 film *Elle* (the adaptation of Djian’s text) as they are most emblematic of this new pattern that I described. In particular, I showed how these three works illustrate protagonists who turn to rituals, risk-taking, and even games in order to regain autonomy. In so doing, these stories, I argued, refute a long-standing, pervasive cultural notion that equates rape with death by portraying victims who assert their desire to exist and continue to live in the aftermath of rape.

I explained that the paradigm of rape-as-death became an especially popular way of conceptualizing and discussing rape in the 1970s, the time in which the crime came to be more widely understood in terms of its negative psychological effects (Robson, “An Encounter” 433; Vigarello 209). In accordance with legal and social discourses of the era, cinema and literature (from the 1970s-present) have tended to reiterate the association between death and rape, presenting it either literally

or metaphorically. The theme, I clarified, has essentially become one of the most routine and expected ways of portraying rape and its aftermath. I also raised the point that even prior to the 1970s, works of literature and film generally presented rape victimhood as either a literal or symbolic death. Although past representations of rape victimhood, such as Perrault's "Petit chaperon rouge," Baudelaire's *femme-fleur*, and Zola's *Séverine*, pay little attention to the experience of rape and do not conceptualize the crime as an extinction of a victim's personhood, they nevertheless generally tended to present rape as the end of a woman's existence (either literally or metaphorically).

However, I showed how Duffau, Djian, and Verhoeven notably divert from this pattern. Instead, they choose to create a new kind of narrative that offers unfamiliar depictions of figures who, as evidenced by their actions, dispute the entrenched cultural message that to be raped necessarily entails departing from the realm of the living. I showed how Duffau's *Trauma* makes use of several experimental aesthetic and rhetorical devices (e.g., the repetition of the pronouns *je* and the borrowing of song lyrics) in order to spotlight the grueling process of recuperation after rape—a process that instigates the creation of unexpected, idiosyncratic rituals and remedies (e.g., stealing and ingesting seminal fluid collected from anonymous sexual partners) that facilitate the protagonist's journey back to agency. For Duffau's heroine, trauma is a chronic condition with which one learns to live.

Examining Djian's *Ob...* and Verhoeven's *Elle*, I described how these works interrogate the search for power and autonomy after rape through the character of Michèle who devises an unconventional—even shocking—strategy (i.e., a consensual game with her attacker) that allows her to reclaim "the upper hand" and move forward with her life. That is, Djian and Verhoeven illustrate how Michèle, a master tactician, ultimately commandeers the ritual that once made her attacker feel powerful, using it to outmaneuver him and, more importantly, reestablish her independence. Finally, both Djian and Verhoeven end their narratives with a celebration of friendship (between Michèle and her best friend), a detail which ultimately emphasizes the protagonist's desire to live even after

surviving a violent home invasion that had once threatened her physical sense of safety as well as her sense of self.

These stories (especially *Elle*) are controversial and engendered very strong, often unfavorable reactions from critics and scholars. To be sure, the survival methods, rituals, and risky games depicted are unexpected and potentially disturbing from an audience perspective. However, as I argued in this chapter (and throughout this dissertation), there is no “usual” way to respond to the trauma of rape. This appears to be precisely what Duffau, Djian, and Verhoeven are interested in confronting and investigating. In so doing, they challenge the expected modes of representing victimhood and ultimately present stories that, until now, have been left off the page and off-screen.

In Chapter Three, “I Believe the Word You’re Looking For is *Rape*: What the Body Remembers in Three Contemporary French Women’s Memoirs,” I shifted my focus to non-fictional narratives. Rape memoirs, I explained, have become increasingly more popular within the last 25 years, especially after the arrival of #MeToo and #BalanceTonPorc in 2017. I provided an overview of the most recent publications of the genre (i.e., the rape/abuse memoir), and I outlined (what I consider to be) the general characteristics of this type of work. I moreover reflected on the reasons for which so many women seem drawn to this specific genre in order to talk about their experiences of sexual abuse.

I analyzed Vanessa Springora’s *Le Consentement* (2020), Loulou Robert’s *Zone grise* (2020), and Adélaïde Bon’s *La Petite fille sur la banquise* (2018) because they share particular stylistic choices as well as thematic elements. More specifically, I demonstrated how these three accounts portray the confusion—the “not knowing”—that can accompany rape as the event is often insidious, rarely resembling the dominant, iconic imagery of the crime (i.e., “le bon viol”). I thus established that these works in fact highlight a prevalent phenomenon known by social scientists and victimologists as “unacknowledged rape,” an expression which refers to experiences that meet the legal definition of

rape and yet, for various, complex reasons, are not perceived, identified, or labeled as such by the victim. With this in mind, I showed how these authors portray their struggles to understand, name, and finally come to terms with their experiences. They vividly illustrate how the experience of rape so often lies outside of one's available cognitive framework and consequently resists verbal articulation. Moreover, these works show how in instances where language remains inaccessible, the body itself attempts to convey its experience of suffering through corporeal (i.e., non-verbal) language. I thus established how these works immerse readers in the turbulent experience of living through sexual abuse, communicating what it is like to inhabit the raped body by underscoring the somatics (i.e., the physical sensations, perceptions, expressions, and pains of the material body) of sexual trauma. Finally, I demonstrated that these works stress the importance of finding the right word (i.e., rape) to describe their experience as it ultimately allows for healing.

To support my arguments, I began by explaining Giulia Foïs' concept of "le bon viol," which she develops in her memoir, *Je suis une sur deux* (2020). In short, "le bon viol" is defined as the rape that conforms to popular imagery of the crime. It is, in other words, rape carried out by a stranger, overtly violent, and imposed on an obviously unwilling victim. Moreover, it is a rape that the victim immediately identifies, names, and reports. It is an attack that others believe and for which they do not hold the victim responsible. Foïs shows that although this kind of attack does happen (e.g., Foïs own rape), it is a type of rape that is experienced by relatively few survivors. Yet, society holds tightly to—and routinely reinforces—this image of rape, presenting it as a standard framework for understanding the crime. However, although "le bon viol" is reassuring in the sense that it veils the uncomfortable realities of the prevalence and insidious nature of rape, it is a narrow and incomplete framework for recognizing and responding to the crime. That is, if "le bon viol" is the predominant cultural model for understanding rape, yet it happens to roughly one in ten victims, then what about the other nine? How can victims understand and acknowledge traumatic experiences that do not

mirror or fit within this schema? And if this framework is the primary method for authenticating rape, how can others validate a woman's experience if it contrasts with this notion? Finally, in what ways does this reductive, yet little-challenged concept ultimately hinder victims in their journeys toward recovery? In this chapter, I showed how Springora, Robert, and Bon respond to these questions by describing experiences that directly contradict the idea/ideal of "le bon viol."

Springora's work, I showed, conveys the emotional and physical ramifications inherent to grappling with a protracted experience of sexual abuse that she had, as a young girl, initially considered consensual, mutually gratifying—even romantic. I highlighted the passages in which Springora's adolescent body senses the threat that her abuser poses well before her mind does, and I called attention to the details that attest to how rape (unacknowledged at the time) results in her physical, systemic, long-term pain (e.g., acute inflammation). The author shows that rape can come in subtle forms (e.g., under the guise of "romance"), so much so that it leaves many victims (including herself) believing that they had consented to and are thus responsible for their own violation.

Regarding Robert's text, I examined how the author presents the ways in which her internal terror during rape becomes so overwhelming that it renders her body involuntarily "frozen," unable to react, move, or protest despite mentally knowing that she does not consent. I emphasized the aspects of Robert's work in which she aesthetically represents the dissociative state into which she falls during and after this attack, and I examined how Robert illustrates the somatic pain (e.g., severe digestive issues) caused by this event. I moreover analyzed how she persuasively calls attention to the various ways in which society regularly makes use of the term "gray zone" in order to deny and conceal the prevalence of rape while diverting blame onto victims. This term, she argues, allows for the preservation of the myth that sexual violence is both rare and always straightforward (i.e., "le bon viol").

In analyzing Bon's text, I investigated the ways in which the author demonstrates how an attack she endured at the age of nine leaves her dissociated and with amnesia. For over twenty years, she is unable to identify the source of her suffering as she has deeply buried the full memory of the event. I focused on the passages that describe Bon's trauma as it manifests somatically, creating intense and often painful dysregulation in her body (e.g., chronic breathlessness and voicelessness, extreme hunger, nightmares, suicidal ideation, and complete loss of feeling in her pelvis). I then considered the aspects of Bon's work that relate to her lack of memory, otherwise known as "traumatic amnesia," and I closely analyzed the passages in which she artfully explains (i.e., through the staging of a dialogue) how a victim's mind can become so overwhelmed by the magnitude of rape that it will effectively disconnect parts of the brain in an effort to protect the victim from further damage. This biological defense mechanism, Bon shows, can cause significant gaps in memory, which can greatly complicate recovery as those gaps make it more difficult for the victim to understand her own experience and, additionally, more challenging for others to comprehend her trauma and believe her account. Finally, I concluded by discussing the ways in which Bon's text stresses the importance of finding the right word—rape—to identify her experience and how this discovery allows her to finally heal.

This dissertation contributes to the field of French Studies in that it fills a critical void. I reiterate that while the general topic of rape has been considered, a project that specifically juxtaposes multiple representations of the victim while analyzing the artistic innovations that disrupt prominent (mis)understandings of victimhood and survival in contemporary French works has not been done until now. This dissertation thus begins a discussion about this underinvestigated yet significant area of study.

Although I have offered an examination of the ways in which female rape victims are portrayed in a selection of contemporary French works, it is my sincere hope that this research will inspire future

scholars to further develop this area of research. There remain many contemporary works of memoir, fiction, and film that address the intricacies of female rape victimhood and thus invite scholarly reflection (e.g., Catherine Breillat's *À ma soeur!* [2001]; Delphine De Vigan's *Rien ne s'oppose à la nuit* [2011]); Annie Ernaux's *Mémoire de fille* [2016]; and Neige Sinno's *Triste tigre* [2023]).

I have concentrated on victims who identify as women because they represent, statistically speaking, the population most likely to be affected by rape. However, I am hopeful that, in the future, academics might choose to examine works depicting victims who do not identify as women, as so little has been written on this matter. Men, queer, trans, and non-binary individuals are also often sexually victimized and yet tend to be excluded from research and public discourses about rape. While France has yet to offer a wide variety of victim representation (i.e., there are not yet, to my knowledge, artistic works that focus on, for example, queer, trans, or non-binary victims), there are a number of recent works illustrating the experiences of male rape victims that, in my view, are especially compelling and worthy of study (e.g., Édouard Louis' *Histoire de la violence* [2016]; Camille Kouchner's *La Familia Grande* [2021]; and Arnaud Gallais' (with Ixchel Delaporte) *J'étais un enfant* [2023]).

In closing, this project began out of my curiosity over criticisms made about the film *Elle*. I considered the question: What is a “usual” response to rape? I sought to better understand why the protagonist's response to the violence committed against her was so unnerving, not only to those in her story, but also to those watching her as the film unfolds. I discovered that *Elle* and other works (e.g., those studied in this dissertation) are indeed culturally significant in that they present stories and characterizations that have not previously existed in literature and cinema, which perhaps (at least partially) accounts for why they have sparked controversy. It has been rewarding to discover authors and filmmakers that reject conventional approaches to representing rape victimhood while establishing original narratives that prioritize the victim and speak directly to the inherent complexities of survival.

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