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A Matricentric Feminist's Approach to Art Activism: Killjoy Tactics in *Rape Stories from the Family Album*

I am a matricentric feminist as described by Andrea O'Reilly in her text Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice. Matricentric feminists are evolving in response to new feminist understandings and motherhood theories; they do not pre-exist. I am a feminist killjoy as prescribed by Sara Ahmed in "A Killjoy Manifesto." Feminist killjoys are assigned to pre-existing conditions, often because they are assembled around circumstance. I also produce comics and sequential art in a reflexive praxis that has value in the disciplinary sense rather than aiming at market value. In this article, I discuss six drawings from my book Rape Stories from the Family Album. I consider them through a matricentric feminist lens highlighting how they reflect an activist art praxis that mobilizes feminist killjoy tactics. I will focus my discussion around my traumatic memories of learning about my three daughters' rapes as represented in the drawings. Where necessary for sense making I will introduce aspects of comics art and trauma memoir.

Introduction

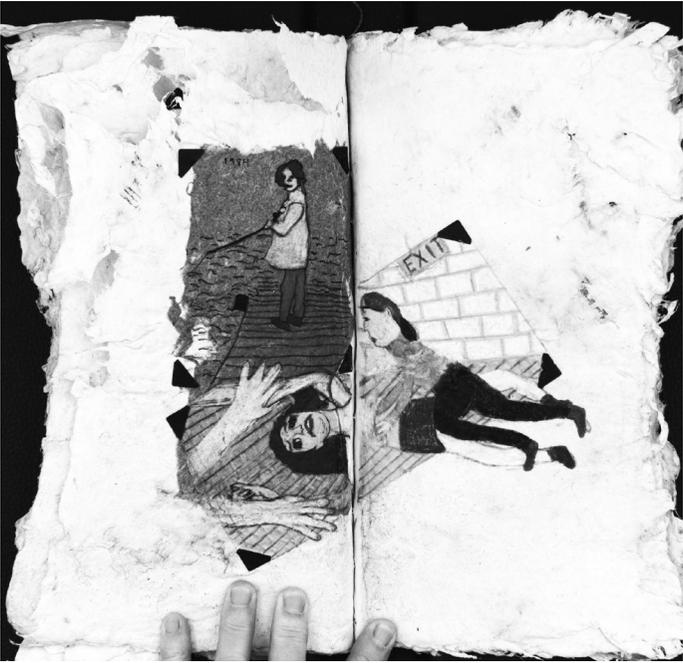
I am a matricentric feminist as described by Andrea O'Reilly in her text *Matricentric Feminism: Theory, Activism, and Practice*. Matricentric feminists are evolving in response to new feminist understandings and motherhood theories; they do not pre-exist. I am a feminist killjoy as prescribed by Sara Ahmed in "A Killjoy Manifesto." Feminist killjoys are assigned to pre-existing conditions, often because they are assembled around circumstance. I also produce comics and sequential art in a reflexive praxis, which has value in the disciplinary sense rather than the financial sense. Alana Jelinek writes in

This is Not Art: Activism and Other “Not-Art” that “disciplinary art practice is understood specifically as the material and intellectual negotiation with, and performance of, the conditions of modernity” (133). I aspire to create art that falls outside neoliberal norms and in Jelinek’s words “has resistant or disruptive potential for this moment” (150). My art is the product of traumatic mothering experience, and it is both activist and matricentric in the sense that it not only attempts to effect social change for my children but also reflects the agency in how I live my own life (O’Reilly 127). It represents my killjoy manifesto. To be a killjoy is to cause disturbance by “recognizing inequalities as existing” (Ahmed 251). Killjoys are assigned to “expose the happiness myths of neoliberalism” (257)—those that maintain happiness by facilitating violence and oppression. In this article, I discuss six drawings from my book *Rape Stories from the Family Album*. I consider them through a matricentric feminist lens highlighting how they reflect an activist art praxis that mobilizes feminist killjoy tactics. I focus my discussion around my traumatic memories of learning about my three daughters’ rapes as represented in the drawings. Where necessary for sense making, I introduce aspects of comic art and trauma memory.

The Images – Story #1



The Images – Story #2



The Images – Story #3



My recent art praxis confronts traumatic maternal experience through a series of handmade books. The sequential images in each book, like the six I have included here, resemble comics but without the words; they rely only on the images, their relationships, and the spaces between them for meaning. Comics blur the line between fact and fiction in transcribing worldly phenomenon to produce art. They depend on moments of presence within the frames and absence between the frames to create the nonlinear narrative that carries the audience outside the moment into a sense of suspended animation somewhere between the real and the imagined. In this way, comics are especially powerful as vehicles for trauma memory. Jill Bennett claims in her text *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma and Contemporary Art* that “the imagery of traumatic memory deals not simply with a past event or with the objects of memory but with the present experience of memory” (24). Trauma memory is embodied experience; it lives in and learns to co-exist with its host in the present.

The six graphic panels preceding this text comprise part of my book *Rape Stories from the Family Album*. References to *Rape Stories* in this article refer specifically to these six images. The panels reimagine my three daughters’ rapes at the intersection of matricentric feminism, art activism, and killjoy experience. Through comic art, I confront a private family history unfolding publicly in my graphic representations. They are my experience of my daughters’ rape stories. As a mother, and with their permission, I use my creative praxes to endorse the truth in my daughters’ rapes over and against their shame, fear, and loss, and despite the social and political authorities that chose to ignore them. My oldest daughter was raped by her paternal grandfather when she was twelve years old. My middle daughter was raped in a hallway by two of her classmates in her public school when she was twelve. My youngest daughter was raped by an older acquaintance in her high school stairwell when she was thirteen, and as the drawing indicates symbolically, she suffered serious mental health issues as a result. The six panels featured here depict knowledge of the rapes as revealed to me by my daughters. Each story consists of two panels drawn on handmade paper I created to look like pages in an old photograph album. Each image is pinned with black corner caps that were made popular before photo albums were constructed from sticky pages with clear plastic coverings. Symbolically, the caps provide an idea of history, a context. Rape stories are not unique to our time. The caps in my book give the album a sense of collage; they are frames piecing together experiences and images that could otherwise be removed and forgotten. After all, this is what is expected of rape victims—to forget and to move on. However, just as the traumatic memories of rape are etched into my daughters’ bodies, my drawn images telling their stories are pushed deep into the heavy paper with coloured pencil, only to be removed when the paper crumbles.

The first of each pair of drawn comic panels shows my daughters through their life stages from infant in my arms, to child, and to adolescent, though not in chronological order. Comics are characterized like this by nonlinear time, which allows for the unpredictable surfacing of memories. The second of each pair presents a figurative representation of my daughters' rapes. Although I have words in this article that say my daughters have been raped, I have none to describe how the myriad emotional, sensory, and psychological implications of these traumatic events impacted my maternal experiences of my daughters' journeys since. Images in their nuanced affect allow me to express this. In their essay "Affect," Lisa Blackman and Couze Venn describe affect as bodies' processes "gestur[ing] towards something that perhaps escapes or remains in excess of the practices of the 'speaking subject'" (9). We speak through images, sometimes more loudly than through words. Affect is a state, a movement between what was and what is, a becoming. Affect moves an art audience from the representation of traumatic events that happened in the past to their own interpretations of the images in present time. Simon O'Sullivan claims that art continues producing affect because after the deconstructive reading, the art object remains. He describes affect as moments of intensity, reaction in/on the body at the level of matter or what Giles Deleuze describes as a bloc of sensations waiting to be reactivated by a spectator or participant (126). In this way, art tells stories powerfully. This is what I intend with my drawings: to provide an opportunity for my daughters' stories of rape violence to reach public audiences and to add to current discourse about rape and the culture that supports it.

Matricentric Feminism

Rape Stories from the Family Album is the initial project in my multi-year engagement with representing traumatic maternal experience through art. By maternal experience I mean my matricentric experience and practice of mothering. Motherhood scholar Andrea O'Reilly claims that matricentric feminism is racially, culturally, ethnically, sexually, and geographically defined across race class, age and ability. Accordingly, every mothering experience embraces a particular set of circumstances. Matricentric feminism "is difficult to define ... other than to say that it is explicitly matrifocal in its perspective and emphasis—it begins with the mother and takes seriously the work of mothering" (6). *Rape Stories* is active mothering. Through these drawings, I celebrate my daughters' resilience in telling their stories. Their words are translated by my hands as I draw, colour, and validate their experiences. What emerges is activist art through the lens of feminist theory and the practice of matricentric feminism (130). The experiences of rape that unfold and the agency I employ in the process of creating the drawings illustrate what

O'Reilly calls a “politicized activists’ view of motherhood” (121). I am owning my power as a mother—emotionally informed and embodied. O'Reilly argues that “the rage or grief that a mother feels as her child is threatened radicalizes and mobilizes the mother and can move her to social action and political resistance” (127). These drawings are an active maternal response to realities no mother wants to inherit. Through them, I acknowledge my rage, but mostly my grief, for transgressions against my daughters.

This project is part of the “twenty-first century motherhood movement with its own specific mandate and objectives” (O'Reilly 106). It is made possible by motherhood scholarship that has previously laid the foundation for contemporary maternal activism. Maternal activism is performative in the sense that it demands action. By revealing violence graphically, *Rape Stories from the Family Album* actively points a finger not only at rapists but also at a society that even in 2019 upholds the testimony of rapists against the truths of the people they rape. Recent examples include missing and murdered Indigenous girls and women, accusations of sexual assault against former CBC radio host Jian Ghomechi of which he was subsequently acquitted, and the delayed trial of film producer Harvey Weinstein on charges of sexual assault. *Rape Stories* is my call to action for all of us. It is simple—stop condoning and hiding sexual and other violence against girls and women. Take up a pen, or a paint brush, or a megaphone, and speak. Women’s voices in the recent #MeToo Movement among other social media platforms encourage women who have experienced rape to speak up. As matricentric feminist theory emerges and transforms, there is room for actively participating outside the institution of motherhood. As empowered mothers we can act with agency, authenticity, autonomy, and authority. It is time to move outside the attachment to patriarchal social, legal, and law enforcement institutions that seldom convict rapists, and stop letting them shame women and girls who have experienced rape.

Without all the work of maternal scholars over the decades, I could not have inherited the particular feminist horizon *Rape Stories from the Family Album* problematizes. Matricentric feminism has developed as a natural extension of maternal theory cultivated within the patriarchal institution of motherhood; it demands that motherwork be acknowledged and advocates for mothers’ rights. Patriarchal maternal theories and motherhood myths must be critiqued so activist scholars can identify the difficult stories, the messy stories, and the true stories of mothers’ experiences that do not fit within them. Matricentric feminism widens the lens of maternal experience. It puts its political focus on mothers’ practices of mothering rather than on the biological condition of giving birth. It provides me a place and a sense of safety in exposing violence and rape for the purpose of creating disturbance and unhappiness that could lead to social change. *Rape Stories from the Family Album* represents one

strategy for such change. It rests in political agency predicated on the pain and suffering of my daughters (Patrice DiQuinzio 61) and on the pain, suffering, and loss I experience as a result of the violence against them.

Gun control and racial justice activist Lucy McBath, whose son was killed in a 2012 shooting, provides a similar example of matricentric feminism. She headed to the US Congress, after narrowly winning a 2018 election in the State of Georgia. McBath's mothering practice extends far beyond her son's death just as mine extends beyond my daughters' rapes. In a *New York Times* article she proclaims, "Six years ago I went from a Marietta mom to a mother on a mission.... What I'm doing today is still mothering my son's legacy. I'm extending what I would do for my son to my community" (qtd.in Herndon). McBath is a matricentric feminist activist. What McBath is doing through national politics I am doing through art, from positions of agency that honour our children. These are killjoy tactics. We are acting from positions of privilege to make room for change. Sarah Ahmed claims that "we have to create room if we are to live a feminist life. When we create room, we create room for others" (265). Matricentric feminism cannot bring back McBath's son or relieve my daughters of their rape experiences. It can, however, help to sound the gong on transgressions against our children and to unsettle the flow of violence.

Art Activism

Rape Stories from the Family Album is the work of a feminist activist artist. It is art "that deliberately self-defines as a form of creative emancipation" (Tolmie xvi). The act of creating these drawings validates my daughters' experiences and makes them visible to the world. I am producing art that is personally motivated to destabilize and resist the status quo; it grounds the issue of rape in matricentric feminist practices of mothering. Autobiographical writing and art by extension are situated within multiple subjectivities that locate us in relation to privilege and oppression in our lives. Although privileged by whiteness and feminist politics, and not taking this for granted, I am, nonetheless, among the oppressed as both a woman and a mother in today's society, perhaps more as a mother since feminism is just now addressing mothers from the perspective of mothers. In "Interrogating Privileged Subjectivities," Bob Pease suggests that that when we write autobiographically, we highlight our subject position (77)—the places from which we critique privilege and oppression. *Rape Stories* provides such critique by disturbing the silence that protects rapists and by exposing rape in a way that says you will see and you will not be happy. As art activism, *Rape Stories* is shaped equally by my mothering experience at a specific time in history, a reflexive process of filtering this experience through my body as trauma memory, and my attempt at representing that experience in art. It brings together what Tina Rosenberg

in “On Feminist Activist Aesthetics” says are “the aesthetic and socio-political impulses that attempt to challenge, explore, or blur the boundaries and hierarchies traditionally defining [rape] culture as represented by those in [control]” (5). Rape violence is controlled by silence that promotes invisibility. *Rape Stories* breaks the silence and makes visible. Any harm or violence towards our children affects our mothering and determines how we mother forward in the day to day. By speaking through art, I am actively mothering. I am circumventing the institution of motherhood and other institutional powers that would silence me, including some schools of feminism. My art represents a rebel tactic aimed at rapists by exposing through these drawings the realities that I claim to exist.

The three sets of drawings are designed to focus on the mother and children. In each set, I carefully set aside mother blaming and prefer instead to show representations of my children’s innocence and my active nurturing of them. To these images, I juxtapose a more emotional representation of the impact rape has had on my daughters. The mother is never represented as the cause. The children are never represented as the cause. The drawings are intended to disrupt the hegemony of power and to introduce the notion of girls’ bodies as contested spaces in the disembodying and re-embodying practise of identity formation following rape trauma. In the process, bodies are emptied of feeling, identity, and trust. They attack others and themselves, and after subjective annihilation, they slowly become redefined. If they remain resilient, rejecting scripts that provide power for rapists, they can become aware and accept themselves again—and now defined through a politicized and agential interpretation of their experience.

In terms of activism, my work aims to create knowledge about what exists but is not openly discussed, to raise awareness about rape, and to advocate for a more specific representation that calls out rapists through art. Derek Attridge argues in “Once More with Feeling: Art, Affect, and Performance” that “simply to challenge existing norms does not guarantee the creation of an artwork ... the otherness that characterizes the work of art has to have a particular relation both to the culture into which it is being introduced and to the culture within which it is being received” (332). The purpose needs to be apparent and relevant. *Rape Stories* blurs the boundaries across a particular history between social reality, visual production, and life writing. The history and culture within which it is introduced are mine at the point of production. It is a history that until now has been silenced by fear. The culture within which it is being received is the twenty-first-century motherhood movement. Audre Lorde once wrote, “your silence will not protect you” (41), and Ahmed adds that our silence could protect them. And by them, she means those who are violent or those who benefit in some way from silence about violence. “Silence about violence is violence” (260), she writes. We have to find ways to

communicate violence even when people do not want to listen, ways in which the violence becomes evident. Ahmed suggests we might need to use guerrilla tactics like writing down the names of harassers, putting graffiti on walls, or red ink in the water. There are many ways to cause a feminist disturbance; feminist speech can take many forms (260). *Rape Stories from the Family Album* is my choice of feminist disturbance. It undermines male authority over female bodies by speaking it in confrontations that leave little to the imagination.

Killjoy Tactics

I am in Sarah Ahmed's words willing to cause unhappiness if reading rape stories makes people unhappy. If my daughters' rapists recognize themselves in my work, I may have caused their unhappiness, but their unhappiness is not my cause (257). My cause is truth in an unjust world. *Rape Stories* is motivated by the personal and the private. The drawings are activism rooted not in the academy but in mothering practice and art practice, and they are my killjoy manifesto, how my story unfolds into action (255). Activist art is one instrument in the feminist struggle for equality across race, class, and gender. But feminist activist artists cannot only produce what Ahmed calls a killjoy manifesto; they can also be a killjoy manifesto themselves. A manifesto repeats something that has already happened, and Ahmed claims that "a killjoy manifesto must be grounded in an account of what exists. It is about what we come up against. It is a politics of transformation, a politics that intends to cause the end of something; it is not a program of action that can't be separated from how we are in the worlds we are in" (251). Killjoys are called to action, to become manifestoes, through what they perceive as injustice. Ahmed further states that "killjoys are assembled around violence; how they come to matter, to mean, is how they expose violence" (252). And rape, especially of one's children, is perhaps the greatest injustice and violence a mother can know.

Ahmed's *Feminist Killjoy* blog represents activism rooted in social media rather than in the academy, which was her initial platform. In a blog entry titled "Resignation," she describes what led to her break with academia. "I felt a snap: I call it feminist snap. My relationship with the institution was too broken. I needed a real break: I had reached the end of the line." Informed by knowledge of both life and art praxis viewed through critical lenses, *Rape Stories* comprises part of the research-creation for my PhD. My art, like Ahmed's blog, is embedded in a quest for social justice and works outside the institution of motherhood and outside institutions where bricks and policies speak louder than bodies. I "snapped" when there was no justice for my daughters when their voices were heard by authorities and silenced. Feminist killjoys will speak out against social injustice.

Ahmed suggests that “if you are letting violence come out of your own pen, to travel through you, you have to let the violence spill all over the page” (253). As a feminist killjoy, my drawings spill, and I am joining the call to “end the institutions that promote and naturalize violence” (253), especially sexual violence against girls and women. According to Ahmed, “to be involved in political activism is to be involved in a struggle against happiness. Historically mothers were not positioned to own this kind of power. The struggle over happiness provides the horizon in which political claims are made. We inherit this horizon” (255). Social beings long to be happy and will protect happiness even over truth and justice. But to be politically active mothers in the twenty-first century means to recognize the kind of horizons Ahmed identifies: the things we want to change. We have inherited these horizons from a long history of patriarchal rule and motherhood theory. We must then push towards them as part of our mothering practice often creating unhappiness by revealing ugly truths. As a feminist and a matricentric mother, I am strategically positioned to be a witness for my daughters’ struggles against violence and to provide voices for them. Matricentric feminist mother-artists are ideally situated to become the killjoy manifestos that tackle escalating and unchecked rape violence against their daughters. As a feminist killjoy I am both creating and created through art activism.

The figure of the feminist killjoy often comes up in situations of intense pain and difficulty. Ahmed claims that “when you are seated at the table, doing the work of family, that happy object, say, you threaten that object by pointing out what is already there in the room; you are not being inventive. But what a feeling: when all the negative feeling that is not revealed when the family is working becomes deposited in the one who reveals the family is not working (Ahmed 254). The six drawings from *Rape Stories* are that kind of intervention. They expose rape in family homes and in schools and private and public institutions where children should feel safe. The drawings are ugly and beautiful. They subjectively embody my maternal responses. They are autobiography and memory.

Conclusion

Matricentric mothering like feminism, is lifetime praxis; neither is limited to time. As a mother of adult children, I can attest to this. In an interview with *Truthout*, Ahmed contends that, “feminism is ... above all else, about *how we live*.” Both praxes can embody experience, especially traumatic experience intergenerationally. I am a single, white, lesbian, mother, who has been affected by domestic abuse violence. My daughters’ trauma recalls my trauma. I embody maternal practices like listening to my daughters’ accounts of their rapes and letting them vibrate through my killjoy being. I view mothering

through hands-on day-to-day experience; I reflect on it, turn it into art, and theorize it through scholarship. Through comic art, I put colour, shape, and texture to maternal experience that I could not otherwise express. Hillary Chute in "Comic Form and Narrating Life" calls comics "unsynthesized narrative tracks" (108), which independent but necessary to each other. Such is the process of piecing together life after trauma, of attempting to reconstruct a new whole from damaged parts. Chute continues that "embodiment in comics may be read as a kind of compensation for lost bodies, for lost histories. Comics resurrects, materializes" (112). My daughters were lost to themselves through the violence of rape. They have been resurrected; rape is recorded as part of their history. Engaging with the experiences represented in *Rape Stories from the Family Album* empowers me as a mother, an activist artist, and a feminist killjoy. The matricentric feminist lens provides a way for me to look beyond the earlier tropes of patriarchal maternal theory that were necessary initially in helping me identify the horizon I push against and find a place for my messy mothering story that did not fit.

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