Girls and Rape Culture

Roxanne Harde

In 1983, Andrea Dworkin addressed the Midwest Men's Conference in Minneapolis. She discussed the rape culture in which we live, noted the similarities between rape and war, and, following the title of her talk, asked for a "24-hour truce in which there is no rape." And she asked why men and boys are so slow to understand that women and girls "are human to precisely the degree and quality that [they] are" (n.p.). Every sexual assault begins with the dehumanization of the victim. And sometimes, after the violation, after the pain and the fear, comes the institutional dehumanization visited upon the victim who seeks medical or legal help. Two recent memoirs bring to the surface rape culture, evident in the young men who raped these girls and the systemic dehumanization they suffered when they sought justice. Chanel Miller's *Know My Name* (2019) describes the aftermath of being sexually assaulted, when she was just out of college and still living at home, by someone she met at a fraternity party. Although the case against her rapist was as strong as possible—there were eyewitnesses and physical evidence was collected immediately—he was sentenced to only six months in the county jail, and she was repeatedly shamed, her humanity denied by the judicial system. Lacy Crawford's *Notes on a Silencing* (2020) describes the aftermath of being sexually assaulted, when she was 15, by two boys, students at her New England boarding school, including an account of how school officials refused to do anything other than label her promiscuous and protect the boys. The ways in which she was silenced by St. Paul's, which disregarded her health and future, and denied her humanity because she was only a girl, were profound. In both cases, the promising future of the perpetrators was prioritized over the humanity of the girls by many institutions, including the judiciary and the press. Crawford was raped just seven years after Dworkin made her plea to that men's conference, but Miller was assaulted twenty-five years after, making perfectly clear that rape culture has become only more entrenched.

All of this is not to say the situation is hopeless. The judge who gave the lightest of sentences to the man who assaulted Miller was recalled and removed from the bench. Crawford was prompted to revisit her assault and write her memoir because the State of New Hampshire investigated St. Paul's for numerous reports of sexual abuse and she was shown, for the first time, the evidence that should have been used to prosecute her rapists. Moreover, that investigation was prompted by Chessy Prout, who was raped by a senior student when she was a freshman at St. Paul's. Prout's decision to come forward and seek justice, and then to go public when she faced backlash from the school and its community, led to more than the investigation. With support from Promoting Awareness | Victim Empowerment (PAVE), Prout brought her assault under public scrutiny, saw the man who raped her prosecuted and sentenced, and prompted wider awareness about rape culture.

My hope, when I put out the call for this special issue, was to attract studies of representations of rape culture in literature and film aimed at a young audience, and of movements to change rape culture or histories that explained it. As a scholar of literature and culture, I often trace the ways in which a text reflects and comments on the socio-cultural moment that produced it, but I also see the ways in which texts can work towards and inspire social and cultural change. I am pleased to present an issue that brings together studies of representations of rape culture in literature and film with studies of how rape culture continues to undermine the lives and futures of girls. The first four articles in this issue are cultural studies, but the first of them is rooted in textual studies. Brittany Adams, in "Consent is Not as Simple as Tea: Student Activism against Rape Culture" discusses an action project undertaken by a group of young women to foster public discussions about the prevalence of rape culture on their university's campus. Prompted by their study of a Young Adult (YA) novel that focused on rape culture and sexual violence, this group created a video, designed for university orientation events, that addresses common misconceptions about issues such as consent, relationship violence, sexual coercion, and victimhood. In "'Speak with Girls, Not for Them:' Supporting Girls' Action Against Rape Culture," Alexe Bernier and Sarah Winstanley review their community work with girls' groups in the Canadian city of Calgary. After exploring how rape culture manifests in the lives of adolescent girls who are between 10 and 15 years of age, they discuss how these girls have moved from awareness into collective action meant to challenge rape culture and the impact that this action has had on them. In "Sexual Abuse of

Girls in Post-Revolutionary Mexico: Between Legitimation and Punishment,” Susana Sosenski draws from archived legal records and newspapers to uncover the widespread sexual abuse of girls in early twentieth-century Mexico and analyze how conceptions of the prohibited, permitted, or legitimate uses of their bodies were intertwined with age and social class. Adults, including lawyers, judges, police officers, and criminals, tended to consider the bodies of young girls as legitimate targets of sexual violence, and some tabloid newspapers propagated this idea. Sosenski analyzes how common understanding of the sexuality of girls fed into family-based concepts of honor and chastity and shows how these practices and narratives of girls’ bodies has perpetuated rape culture in Mexico. Lyndsay Anderson and Marnina Gonick look at a more recent historical event in “The Saint Mary’s Rape Chant: A Discourse Analysis of Media Coverage.” They analyze a selection of Canadian media articles published in the weeks after the rape chant garnered national and international attention in September 2013. Drawing on feminist analysis of postfeminism and the sexualization of youth cultures, Anderson and Gonick trace the ways in which the media both undermined understanding of rape culture and perpetuated harmful discourses of youth, gender, and sexuality.

Drawing on her experience of being raped by an acquaintance as a teenager, Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999) is the germinal text in YA fiction about rape. The more than one-hundred YA acquaintance rape novels that I have collected, all from English-speaking countries, both follow and depart from Anderson’s work. All of them discuss how rape culture affects girls, even those who are not sexually assaulted or harassed. The second set of articles in this issue focuses on a few of those novels and some films that do the same work in representing girls’ experiences of rape culture. In “(Para)normalizing Rape Culture: Possession as Rape in Young Adult Paranormal Romance,” Annika Herb offers textual analyses of two YA paranormal romances that normalize the dynamics of rape culture and one that subverts them, arguing that texts that are product and perpetuator of rape culture can reflect cultural discourses to the reader and serve as critiques of this social paradigm. Cameron Greensmith and Jocelyn Froese analyze the Netflix series *13 Reasons Why*, and the popular novel on which it is based in “Fantasies of the Good Life: Responding to Rape Culture in *13 Reasons Why*.” Drawing on Lauren Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism,” they discuss the ways in which rape culture shapes girls’ agency in both series and novel, and how their lives are tied to everyday, often mundane, forms of sexist and cis-heteropatriarchal violence. Michele Meek focuses solely on

film in “Exposing Flaws of Affirmative Consent through Contemporary American Teen Films,” a study of consent culture in films that appeal to girls. She argues that in these films, date rape is no longer a joke, female desire is no longer transgressive, and queer teens are no longer relegated to the sidelines, but the focus on consent has not meant an end to rape culture.

The final article moves us away from North American rape culture to Malaysian. In “Addressing Rape Culture through Folktale Adaptation in Malaysian Young Adult Literature,” Sharifah Osman traces the ways in which Malaysian public discourse on rape culture is plagued by gender stereotyping, sexism, misogyny, and rape myths. She discusses two short stories aimed at girl readers that are retellings of Malaysian legends and feminist responses to the normalization and perpetuation of rape culture in Malaysian society. Osman argues that in their emphasis on female agency, consent, and gender equality, these work to dismantle rape culture, and affirm the significance of the folktale as an empowering tool for community engagement and feminist activism. The issue concludes with reviews, by Katy Lewis and Janet Wesselius respectively, of two recent books that focus on lifewriting, one that studies the way in which women’s lifewriting focuses on the figure of the girl, including her trauma, and the other that is a collection of women’s stories of sexual assault, many of which took place when they were girls. Taken together the work in this volume uncovers rape culture and discusses how to work against it, in part by bringing it into the light.

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