

Always Already Raped:
Whiteness and Captive Womanhood from Mary Rowlandson to the Manson Family

by

Morgan Robinson

Submitted to the Department of Gender Studies
School of Humanities
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May, 2022

Sponsor: Professor Elise Lemire

Second Reader: Professor Mariel Rodney

Table of Contents

| | | |
|------|---|----|
| | Introduction..... | 2 |
| I. | A Genealogy of the White Woman’s Captivity Narrative in US Literature..... | 7 |
| II. | <i>Lolita</i> : Whiteness and Sexual Violence..... | 26 |
| III. | Failed Academics: Placing <i>Lolita</i> in Conversation with True Crime..... | 40 |
| IV. | The “Ruse of Passivity” in Contemporary Literature: Dissociation Feminism and the New Captivity Narrative..... | 49 |
| | Epilogue: “I’m in my year of rest and relaxation era”: Passivity and Captivity in Popular Culture | 67 |
| | Bibliography..... | 70 |

Introduction

Olivia Gatwood's poetry collection *The Life of the Party* (2019) begins with an author's note detailing a week in which she found herself completely unable to sleep after months of consuming true crime media chronicling violent murders of women. As a whole, Gatwood's collection attempts to reconcile the relationship that women, and white women in particular, have to true crime. With true crime media remaining highly popular, violence against women has become its own genre of entertainment for the public. In an interview given by Gatwood with the true crime podcast *Truer Crime*, Gatwood is asked by the host, Celesia Stanton, to discuss her perspective on the relationship between true crime media's rampant fixation on missing and murdered women and white womanhood. Gatwood responds, saying that true crime "is not actually a genre that seeks to illuminate violence against women. Really what it does is it seeks to perpetuate this trope of white women as precious and prized beings" (Stanton 12:23).

Gatwood's collection was published the same week that I entered my freshman year of college. Now, upon attempting to craft a senior project that concerns white womanhood and violence, it seems only fitting that I begin my explanation of this project with Gatwood's collection.

My senior project began as a narrow attempt to analyze the literature surrounding one true crime case, the famed "Manson murders." Committed by members of Charles Manson's cult (known as "The Family"), these murders left actress Sharon Tate and four others dead. Upon further inspection of the literature relating to that one specific case, a linkage between white womanhood, captivity, and violence became painfully clear to me, begging for further inspection. I began this project, not unlike Gatwood, by feverishly consuming true crime literature and media. I, too, came to the conclusion that the genre as a whole seemed to obsess

over the paranoiac relationship that white women have to violence; to me, the very idea that violence and victimization is intrinsic to womanhood drove the research of this project forward.

Upon seeing the warning in popular true crime literature and media that white women's bodies are vulnerable to violence, seemingly more so than other bodies based sheerly on the amount of literature and media relating to crimes against white women, it became clear that the narrative of white women as especially vulnerable has been enshrined within a rich literary tradition that predates the consolidation of white womanhood as a recognized identity. I discovered that, with respect to what is now the United States, this literary tradition began in the colonial era with Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* (1682). I trace the perception of white womanhood as a vulnerable identity as a genealogy, using Rowlandson's captivity narrative as a starting point and continuing through U.S. literature into the twenty-first century. I use Rowlandson's text, to explore the ways in which the captivity narrative genre places white women into a category of sexual vulnerability, particularly within an adversarial relationship to nonwhite men. To explore the concept of false vulnerability, I use feminist theorist Sharon Marcus' concept of women as "always already raped," wherein Marcus uses the Derridean framework of "always already" to discuss women's relationship to sexual violence. Applying Marcus' theory to the ideology and body of literature that positions white women as sexually vulnerable, I make the argument that white women are perceived as "always already raped."

Moving forward with the issue of sexual violence, captivity, and white womanhood, I continue forward from Rowlandson's *Narrative* to discuss Henry David Thoreau's *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), focusing on his retelling of colonist Hannah Dustan's captivity narrative, Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). These three vastly different texts both work to establish the

aforementioned concept of the “always already raped” white woman and begin to triangulate the positioning of white women and nonwhite men in an adversarial relationship by introducing the issue of white men’s voyeuristic relationship to viewing the “always already raped” bodies of white women.

To continue with the thread of captivity narratives, I analyze Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955) as both a crime novel and a fictional captivity narrative. In placing Nabokov’s text into conversation with both Rowlandson’s *Narrative* and the “always already raped” perception of white women to illustrate the ways in which such perception becomes damaging to white women themselves, thus making white women even more susceptible to sexual violence at the hands of white men. To explicate this, I argue that the narrator’s whiteness and standing as an academic allow him to sexually and emotionally abuse his young stepdaughter.

Given that the narrator in Nabokov’s text is able to commit acts of great violence and is enabled to do so by his position as a white academic, I argue that this positioning is vital to understanding the way that violence and captivity functions with respect to actual, nonfictional acts of violence. This is particularly exemplified within the cultural fascination with the Manson murders, also known as the Tate-LaBianca killings, that spawned the number-one best-selling true crime book, Vincent Bugliosi’s *Helter Skelter* (1974), is representative of a fascination with the captivity of white women. By focusing on first-person accounts and secondary sources hailing from those who had close contact with Manson Family followers, I illustrate the relationship between whiteness, captivity, and violence present within the true-crime case and the literature and media surrounding it. For this exploration, I focus predominantly on using first-person memoirs from those involved in the case, lead prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi’s *Helter Skelter*, family member Dianne Lake’s *Member of the Family*, family member and convicted

co-conspirator in the Tate-LaBianca murders, Charles “Tex” Watson’s memoir, *Would You Die for Me?* (1978), and *The Long Prison Journey of Leslie van Houten* (2001) by Karlene Faith, feminist criminologist and “deprogrammer” of Manson family members Susan Atkins, Leslie van Houten, and Patricia Krenwinkel.

The history I trace focuses on the culmination of the “always already raped,” perception, which I argue leads to the construction of an image of passivity and dejection in relation to white women. By using the framework of the definition presented by Emmeline Clein, wherein she defines “dissociation feminism” as “a curdling of the hyperoptimistic, #girlboss, “Run the World (Girls)” feminism of the aughts, characterized by an uneasy combination of plaintive begging and swaggering confidence that gender equality was just past the horizon line” (“The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating”). I argue that the “dissociative feminist” has become a media trope, identified in attractive, young and predominately white women who use casual sex, disordered eating, and substance abuse to cope with traumatic experiences. This trope is particularly observable in Ottessa Moshfegh’s contemporary novel, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (2018), wherein the text’s narrator attempts to sleep for an entire year as a means of healing from her trauma. I argue that Moshfegh’s text is structured to present self-destruction via pharmaceutical drug addiction as a captivity narrative wherein the text’s narrator becomes captive by her own misguided, destructive attempts at healing. To explore Moshfegh’s novel as a captivity narrative in relation to the concept of dissociation feminism, I place Moshfegh’s text in conversation with Mary Rowlandson’s historical captivity narrative, *Narrative of The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* (1682). in order to deconstruct the ways in which the narrators portray their actual and imagined captivity as experiences wherein they falsely present themselves as passive victims. In actuality, these narratives embody what I deem as a “ruse of

passivity,” where white women construct solipsistic narratives of pure victimhood, ignoring acts of destruction or self-destruction to present an image of passivity.

I.
A Genealogy of the White Woman's Captivity Narrative in US Literature

Captivity narratives and crime fiction based around violence against white women are symptomatic of a longstanding cultural tradition that, in what will become the United States, first appears in English colonial literature. These texts work to create the colonial perception of English and later Anglo-American, female-sexed bodies as constantly vulnerable and subjected to violence. These works express significant concern for raped, captive, or dead English/Anglo-American female-sexed bodies rooted in an effort to consolidate the identity of what is now recognizable as white womanhood. . This perception of... becomes a cornerstone of the identity that, by the nineteenth-century, is consolidated and recognized as white womanhood as evidenced more than one hundred and fifty years later by its presence in Henry David Thoreau's fascination with Hannah Dustan, narrated in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849), Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940).

Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative*, structured in a series of twenty "removes" from English, colonial society, exists as a project that primarily aims to deny the subjectivity that she works hard to establish while captive. She focuses on narrating her time as a captive, specifically asserting that, despite her captivity, she is able to maintain her position as a virtuous woman as defined by her Puritan society, where Rowlandson lived as a colonist in Lancaster, Massachusetts. She was taken as a captive and held for ransom by Wampanoag Native Americans who used her as a bargaining tool in an attempt to regain land taken by colonists like Rowlandson and her family.¹ In her narration of these "removes," Rowlandson makes casual

¹ Jill Lepore's book, *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity* explains that the moniker of "King Philip's War" is misleading in that it proclaims the Indigenous people who inhabited New England as the aggressors. Lepore makes clear in her argument that, in actuality, the war transpired from colonial settlers committing acts of violence.

mentions of her efforts to establish herself as a community member within Indigenous society, therefore establishing her value beyond a captive, English, body by sewing and trading with her captors. She states:

During my abode in this place, Philip spake to me to make a shirt for his boy, which I did, for which he gave me a shilling. I offered the money to my master, but he bade me keep it; and with it I bought a piece of horse flesh. Afterwards he asked me to make a cap for his boy, for which he invited me to dinner. I went, and he gave me a pancake, about as big as two fingers. (Rowlandson 10)

Rowlandson begins by explaining the capitalistic exchange between herself and her captors. This type of exchange works to quietly implicate that, despite avoiding making any explicit claims, she views her captors as autonomous equals worthy of trading with. Rowlandson then moves to explain that, upon receiving payment for her actions, she immediately offers the payment to her master, who refuses the money but encourages her to continue participating economically in the community to her own benefit and nourishment. Rowlandson continues to work as a seamstress, even being invited to eat with her captors in exchange for her skills. With this invitation, Rowlandson reveals that she was not merely the passive victim she otherwise insists she was. Rather, she worked actively within the Indigenous community to have her subjectivity recognized and to establish herself as an equal and not merely an English body to be used as a bargaining tool.

Despite her capitalistic endeavors in sewing and trading with Indigenous people, Rowlandson denies the subjectivity that these actions establish. She states: “the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of His power” (4). In her assertion that it was God who “carried [her] along,” she swiftly denies the possibility that she championed

her own survival. With respect to this denial, scholar Margaret H. Davis states in “Mary White Rowlandson's Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife” that “Puritan society defined a woman's identity by the relationships that prevailed in her sphere; in the church, she was bride to Christ; in the home she was wife to husband, mother to child, goodwife to servant—designations altogether gender-based and hierarchical” (52). Davis’ argument is predicated on the assertion that a “goodwife,” such as Rowlandson, is tasked with maintaining passivity and submission to hierarchical figures such as the husband, the family, and God. The characteristics of passivity and submission become illegible in considering her establishment of subjectivity within the Indigenous community. Therefore, in an effort to maintain her stature in Puritan, colonial society upon her return, she must contextualize these efforts as made possible only by a “removal.” Rowlandson states: “I may the better declare what happened to me during that grievous captivity, I shall particularly speak of the several removes we had up and down the wilderness” (4). When Rowlandson refers to “removes,” she is specifically referring to being physically moved farther away from her colonial community. In addition to referring to a physical state, I read this language as describing Rowlandson’s temporal and psychic displacement from her colonial community and herself. The structuring of her time as a captive as a “removal” works to re-establish the passivity and submission that she betrayed in her capitalistic affairs with Indigenous people.

Rowlandson’s *Narrative* sets a precedent by asserting that the experience of womanhood as an English colonist is inextricable from perpetual victimhood with specific respect to interactions with non-European people. Rowlandson’s *Narrative* asserts that it is she who is the passive and submissive victim of the Indigenous people who held her as a captive. This assertion is consistent throughout all twenty “removes,” where Rowlandson claims that “Little do many

think what is the savageness and brutishness of this barbarous enemy, Ay, even those that seem to profess more than others among them, when the English have fallen into their hands” (4). By positioning her Indigenous captors as “savage,” “brutish,” and “barbarous” adversaries, Rowlandson is able to cleverly negate the violence that she perpetuates simply by maintaining “objectivity” through colonialist language despite its factual and connotative errors. She states: “On the tenth of February 1675, came the Indians with great numbers upon Lancaster: their first coming was about sunrising; hearing the noise of some guns, we looked out; several houses were burning, and the smoke ascending to heaven” (Rowlandson 2). It is important to note that, despite her claim that the raid took place in 1675, historians tend to place the event as having occurred one year later, in 1676.² This misdating enables Rowlandson to present the raid as one appearing unprovoked, with colonists seemingly being victimized and taken captive at random. Moreover, Rowlandson’s language implicates the Indigenous people as the sole aggressors and the colonists as the sole victims: “Thus were we butchered by those merciless heathen, standing amazed, with the blood running down to our heels. My eldest sister being yet in the house, and seeing those woeful sights, the infidels hauling mothers one way, and children another” (3). Here, Rowlandson positions herself and her fellow colonists (“we”) as the victimized subjects of the orchestrators of the raid (“merciless heathen[s],” “infidels”). Her positioning demonizes Indigenous people and victimizes colonists while completely erasing the larger context of the political struggle for land sovereignty in New England. Additionally, Rowlandson moves to gender her victimization by making mention of “the infidels hauling mothers one way, and children another.” The separation of mother and child becomes a grave threat to Puritanical

² According to Jill Lepore’s chronology in *The Name of the War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity*, the framework for the ongoing conflict began in January of 1675, with Rowlandson being taken thirteen months later in February of 1676 (Lepore, 39-45). The misdating becomes important in contextualizing the raid within the broader scheme of “King Philip’s War,” as it erases one full year of political unrest stemming from the Indigenous struggle for sovereignty over their ancestral lands taken by colonists like Rowlandson.

womanhood insofar as such separation would threaten the structure of gender in the colonies.

The role of Puritanical women, as argued by Davis, relies on motherhood. Separation of mother and child would threaten Puritanical womanhood's purpose in reproducing more colonists to populate Puritan communities.

Given that Rowlandson clearly attempts to instill a sense of passivity and victimhood throughout her time as a captive, she is forced to contend with the assumption that she was raped by captors she describes as inherently evil. To avoid losing her position as a virtuous woman in Puritan society, Rowlandson insists that she was never raped while captive. She states:

O the wonderful power of God that I have seen, and the experience that I have had. I have been in the midst of those roaring lions, and savage bears, that feared neither God, nor man, nor the devil, by night and day, alone and in company, sleeping all sorts together, and yet not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action. (Rowlandson 22)

Rowlandson is forced to clarify that she was never raped by her captors, making clear that she never suffered any "abuse of unchastity," which she defines as sex outside of wedlock, in order to preserve her status in her society. As Lisa Logan argues in "Mary Rowlandson's Captivity and the 'Place' of the Woman Subject,"

Rowlandson's attempts to discredit public speculation about rape merge with her defense against those who question her writing and "say [she] speak[s] it for [her] own credit." In order to validate her piety and chastity, Rowlandson must define the meaning of her experience or risk the interpretations of others, who might see her captivity (and imagined rape) as divine justice for sins that they themselves have authored for her. (263)

Logan is correct that the issue of “imagined rape,” is critical in understanding Rowlandson’s *Narrative*. That said, the point becomes lost in Logan’s analysis in her sequestering the issue to parentheses. I argue that “imagined rape” is the basis of Rowlandson’s *Narrative* in its entirety. Piety and chastity remained vital pillars of Puritan womanhood. However, “chastity,” in the Puritan imagination is not synonymous with virginity. Rather, it is the commitment to engaging in sex only within the context of wedlock, with the potential to further the reproduction of Puritans. In considering the issue of an English woman’s captivity at the hands of Indigenous people, rape is assumed or “imagined” to have taken place. With this assumption, Rowlandson was immediately forced to argue that she had not brought sexual violence upon herself as a divine “punishment” and to further argue that no rape had occurred, whether factually true or not, to dispel any criticisms of her ability to return to Puritan society as she had left it: pure, chaste, and sexually submissive to God and to Puritan reproduction.

The racial implications of rape occurring between an English woman and an Indigenous person would undeniably violate the qualities expected of a Puritan woman, based on the adversarial relationship between the Puritans and the Indigenous inhabitants of New England. This becomes clear in Rowlandson’s positioning of her captors as “roaring lions, and savage bears” (22). Rowlandson develops a dichotomy wherein her captors are positioned as carnivorous, bloodthirsty animals able to attack her at any time. Having positioned her captors as “savage,” Rowlandson continues by making the possibility of rape clear, explicating that she and her captors slept “all sorts together” (22). With these inclusions, Rowlandson implies that rape existed as a constant threat based on her sleeping arrangements and further complains of her fear amongst her “savage” captors. However, as argued earlier, in order to maintain her stature in Puritan society, Rowlandson must present herself as passive and perpetually victimized. She thus

maintains her passivity by asserting that she had no hand in her survival. She argues that she was “saved” by God. Rowlandson maintains her passivity by saying: “Though some are ready to say I speak it for my own credit; but I speak it in the presence of God, and to His Glory” (22). She simultaneously claims the looming threat of rape based on her circumstance but assures her readers that no such threats were ever actualized. Moreover, she claims that it was not the morality of her captors or her own actions that prevented her from being raped, but God. In this sense, Rowlandson uses the possibility of sexual violence to rhetorically reinforce her passivity and purity.

Rowlandson’s framing of rape as a constant threat, highly dependent on her existence as an English woman among Indigenous men uses the perception of “imagined rape” among English colonists and later white readers as a rhetorical strategy that works to construct white womanhood as an identity formulated on the basis of passivity and inherent victimizations at the crossings of cultural and racial lines. This rhetoric leads me to the argument on which this project is predicated: that the identity of white womanhood is constructed around the perception of an English and later white female-sexed body as “always already raped.” Here, I am building on but also radically revising the work of theorist Sharon Marcus, who argues in “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” that the prevalence of sexual violence is rooted in a consideration of female-sexed bodies as generally “always either already raped or already rapable,” (386). Marcus argues that this ideology actually perpetuates rape, claiming that considering the experience of sexual violence as one inherent to womanhood places women into a harrowing double-bind wherein rape is truly inescapable. She states:

I propose that we understand rape as a language and use this insight to imagine women as neither already raped nor inherently rapable. [...]. Such a view takes

violence as a self-explanatory first cause and endows it with an invulnerable and terrifying facticity which stymies our ability to challenge and demystify rape.

(387)

I intend to complicate Marcus' argument through the addition of racialized complications that will make visible the ways in which the "always already raped" female-sexed body is the body of white womanhood. I pursue this visibility by allotting specific consideration to interactions, either actual or assumed, existing at the crossings of cultural and racial lines.

I argue that the "always already raped" perception of female-sexed English (and later white) bodies is visible in Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* and that such visibility is rooted in specific rhetorical strategies of representing racialized and gendered bodies in North American culture. By extension, I argue that Rowland's compulsory avoidance of rape (as "removes" if you will) is dependent upon these intersections as pillars of purity and colonial power. Its obfuscation makes clear the terror of rape discourse. If, as Marcus, opines, "rape is a language," Rowlandson's narrative provides a useful framework of analysis.

June Namias argues in *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier* that rumors of Indigenous men raping and forcing marriage upon English women began to permeate colonist communities, saying: "The 'wild' or 'savage' Indian, even when he did not strike or make sexual overtures to Anglo-American women, became one who ravishes—a fearful part of the colonial imagination" (89). As argued by Namias, the rape rumor justified rhetorical and real acts of violence and genocide under the guise of protecting white women colonists from defilement or danger. Rowlandson's own declarations of "saved" from rape, captures the logic of the "always already raped" woman. Puritanical colonizers needed the logic of "always already raped" to justify the seizure of land and resources. Such rhetorical work lays the premise for

Rowlandson's double-bound denials in defense of purity. The captive body is not only doubly enacted upon, it is also doubly acting, as I will demonstrate later in the project. Namias' historical context demonstrates that the "always already raped" justification falls apart under general encounters with Indigenous communities and white women. With this in mind it becomes clear that the threat of the "always already raped" has been used to rhetorically seize control of the narrative around gender, colonial encounters, and power. Merely existing within a body structurally coded as vulnerable by virtue of being on the geographical and ideological margins of colonial English/Indigenous societies is enough for those in English, female-sexed bodies to develop a false narrative that works to construct what will become a racialized and gendered identity: white womanhood. Moreover, this false narrative is constructed directly at odds with identities positioned as adversarial to white womanhood, primarily nonwhite men. Therefore, if this discourse posits that the white woman is always already raped, the nonwhite man is always already a rapist. This accusation, clearly made on unfounded claims, actively works to invalidate and harm nonwhite people. Within this dichotomy, it becomes clear that the construction of white womanhood as a recognizable identity predicated on Anglo-American, female sexed bodies as inherently passive and vulnerable is a ruse, made to enact cultural violence against nonwhite people and consolidate what will become white power.

Where Mary Rowlandson's *Narrative* becomes symbolic of the ruse of passive submission expected of what we can now see as the myth of inherent vulnerability in white womanhood, the captivity narrative of Hannah Dustan becomes the active counterpart. Dustan was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts, to English colonists twenty years after Mary Rowlandson. After marrying another English colonist and starting a large family, Dustan was taken as a hostage by Abenaki Indigenous people in the late seventeenth century following a raid on the

Haverhill community, which was conducted as a means of protecting their ancestral land from colonization. Multiple English accounts assert that Dustan escaped her captors by murdering Indigenous men, women, and children in their sleep and that she later returned to scalp their bodies, both for-profit and as a means of proving that she was not a victim. In short, the story of Hannah Dustan appears to have been told to establish the same sexual purity Rowlandson was anxious to reap. Namias discusses Dustan's history in detail, taking as her source material primarily Cotton Mather's retelling of her history in *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702). Conversely, I focus my analysis on Henry David Thoreau's account in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* (1849) in order to establish the hold Dustan's story had in white circles more than a century later. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* details a boat trip taken by Thoreau and his brother. A portion of their trip took place at the site of the murders committed by Dustan. Thoreau reveals his fascination with Dustan by using her as a means of transcending chronological time. He retells Dustan's escape, saying:

On the morning of the 31st she arose before daybreak, and awoke her nurse and the boy, and taking the Indians' tomahawks, they killed them all in their sleep, excepting one favorite boy, and one squaw who fled wounded with him to the woods. (Thoreau 136)

Unlike Mather's account, which is widely considered to be the most definitive and exhaustive one, Thoreau's retelling is rather vague. He avoids commenting on who the "favorite boy" and wounded squaw are and their respective relationships with Dustan. In doing so, he is decisive in only presenting the parts of the narrative that interest him, not necessarily in presenting one that is historically or factually accurate. These exclusions speak to the misleading nature of captivity narratives; they are consumed mythically rather than factually and the ahistorical nature of the

accounts speak to presenting a narrative that prioritizes the white reader's reaction and pleasure rather than understanding factual events.

Thoreau positions Dustan as actively forcing her freedom. This active effort contrasts the narrative that Rowlandson strives to present to readers, wherein she is meant to be read as passive (although her underreported actions of sewing for and trading with her captors contradict this narrative). Dustan, however, supposedly turned to an extreme level of physical violence, only adding to the inherent violence of existing as a member of a settler colonist community in Massachusetts. Her actions in murdering her captors and their children prove to be an act of what would now be considered a mass-killing. Dustan and at least one other white captive then fled the scene of the crime, escaping by canoe. However, as Thoreau narrates, they supposedly return to scalp the murdered bodies of the Indigenous victims, who are dually victimized by the crime of colonization and of the subsequent murder by Dustan: "But after having proceeded a short distance, fearing that her story would not be believed if she should escape to tell it, they returned to the silent wigwam, and taking off the scalps of the dead, put them into a bag as proofs of what they had done" (136). Thoreau mentions later that Dustan was not motivated to return to the scene of the crimes merely for the victims' scalps solely as a form of proving that she had been captive and escaped by committing the murders. Rather, there was a profit incentive attached to this further desecration of the bodies of her victims, meaning that she financially benefited from her acts of violence. In his discussion of Dustan's escape, Thoreau enacts a convoluted framework that implies his deriving pleasure from both her fear and butchery. He does so by changing his narrating tense from past to present, thereby manifesting his own escape from chronological time and allowing himself the fantastical opportunity to occupy the same physical and psychic space of Dustan, placing himself in closer proximity to her resisting and ultimately

violent body. Placing Dustan's crime in present tense while physically occupying the same space, he states:

Early this morning this deed was performed [...]. An Indian lurks behind every rock and pine, and their nerves cannot bear the tapping of a woodpecker. Or they forget their own dangers and their deeds in conjecturing the fate of their kindred, and whether, if they escape the Indians, they shall find the former still alive.

(Thoreau 136)

He begins his transition into Dustan's timeline by placing himself in voyeuristic proximity to the party. He takes care in noting Dustan's fear and anxiety as well as her grief, allowing himself to take pleasure in her terror. In his change from past to present tense narration, he places himself in proximity to Dustan to fantastically imagine her plight for the purpose of heightening his experience within the same historical space. For Thoreau, Dustan's terror is the means by which he enjoys his time in the space.

The captivity narrative and appropriation of women's fear also converge in fiction such as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841) and Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940). With Dustan and Rowlandson's narratives in mind, the newer, fictional texts can serve as a manifestation of the same concerns over the sanctity of the white, female-sexed body into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Moreover, I argue that the texts present these crimes in such a way that work, in the case of Poe, to present a narrative wherein the violation of the white, female-sexed body acts as a site of voyeuristic pleasure for white male viewing and implicitly raises issues of racialized violence, not unlike the same tactics utilized in Thoreau's re-telling of the Dustan myth. In the case of Wright's novel, as in the earlier texts, the "always already raped"

white female-sexed body becomes the justification for the continuation of racialized terror against people of color.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" was published only eight years before Thoreau's *Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. Poe employs similar tactics and additionally provides explicit details on the violation and murder of white, female-sexed bodies. He focuses the short story on the fictional murders of Madame and Mademoiselle L'Espanaye, who are assumed to be mother and daughter. Poe's fascination with "always already raped" white womanhood is evident within his staging of voyeuristic scenes wherein dead white women's bodies act as a spectacle through which male intelligence is showcased; Poe allows Dupin to use the crime scene as an intellectual playground. Poe's voyeurism is evident through Dupin's reenactment of the strangulation of Mademoiselle L'Espanaye: "The paper is spread out upon a plane surface; but the human throat is cylindrical. Here is a billet of wood, the circumference of which is about that of the throat. Wrap the drawing around it, and try the experiment again" (18). While this action is presented as a deductive experiment, it simultaneously allows for the investigators to place themselves within the crime, utilizing a similar tactic to Thoreau's transition between tenses as a means of drawing closer to temporal proximity. Poe thereby makes the experiment an opportunity for the male investigator to share in the experience of perpetrating violence against women. While Dupin does not commit violence in actuality, his fascination with the murder and his subsequent reenactment signifies that Dupin, too, shares in the same sadistic desire of harming women. Dupin himself is not the only male figure that is concerned with voyeuristically entering the scene littered with dead white women's bodies. This voyeuristic staging is especially evident in the physician's arrival to the scene the morning following the murders: The bodies "were both then lying on the sacking of the bedstead in the chamber where

Mademoiselle L. was found” (Poe 9). The women’s placement together in bed reveals that the bodies were deliberately moved from the place of their discovery and placed in that space for male viewing. It is this misogynistic theatre upon which Poe’s voyeurism takes center stage; in the context of the text, the L’Espanaye murder is no mere tragedy, it is an opportunity for the text’s cast and readers to take voyeuristic pleasure from dead white women’s bodies.

The murder, as it is described more than four times in explicit detail throughout the work, is depicted as one wherein the victims suffered extreme brutality, revealing Poe’s stake in presenting violence against the white, female body in the context of voyeuristic entertainment. According to the text, “the corpse of the daughter, head downward, was dragged therefrom; it having been thus forced up the narrow aperture [of the chimney] for a considerable distance.” Poe continues to describe the corpse of Madame L’Espanye: “the old lady, with her throat so entirely cut that, upon an attempt to raise her, the head fell off” (6). Poe presents a narrative where two women are murdered, one being forced into the chimney posthumously and one being nearly decapitated with a razor. Poe implies sexual undertones through the descriptions of the corpses. Poe describes the daughter’s body as being forced into a chimney with the language employed by Poe resembling a rape. By placing emphasis on body parts being forcefully thrust into a “narrow aperture,” Poe presents imagery that is undeniably akin to the action of penetrative rape. Poe’s utilization of rape-like imagery coupled with the fact that this instance of violence results in the death of a young woman reveals the prevalence of the construction of the “always already raped” white woman. As with the issue of “imagined rape” in Rowlandson, Poe provides no explicit naming of these crimes as rape. In fact, the word “rape” is entirely absent from the text. Rather, he is able to merely make use of language like “forced” and “narrow

aperture” and allow the perception of the “always already raped” white woman to do the work of making the possibility of sexual violence clear to his reader.

Adding to the issue of gendered violence in Poe, the way in which the author presents the crimes within the texts also raises the issue of racialized violence. By the text’s conclusion, it is revealed that the murders were supposedly not committed by a human being, but rather an “Ourang-Outang,” which escaped its master’s captivity only to commit brutal acts of gendered violence. In the text, Poe positions the “Ourang-Outang” as representative of a racialized Other kept in captivity by a sailor. The text states, “He had lately made a voyage to the Indian Archipelago. A party, of which he formed one, landed at Borneo, and passed into the interior on an excursion of pleasure. Himself and a companion had captured the Ourang-Outang” (Poe 21). Poe is decisive in his choosing of a sailor to act as master to the “Ourang-Outang.” He makes clear that the sailor is able to cross international borders freely and has recently done so, taking an animal from his native land in the process. Poe continues,

After great trouble, occasioned by the intractable ferocity of his captive during the home voyage, he at length succeeded in lodging it safely at his own residence in Paris, where, not to attract toward himself the unpleasant curiosity of his neighbors, he kept it carefully secluded, until such time as it should recover from a wound in the foot, received from a splinter on board ship. His ultimate design was to sell it. (21)

Poe himself names the “Ourang-Outang” as a ferocious captive, taken from its native land and kept in seclusion to be sold. With this configuration in mind, Poe clearly enacts a slave/master relationship between the sailor and the “Ourang-Outang,” thereby racializing the animal to act as representative of a Black man. This point has been similarly argued by numerous scholars, one

being Courtney Novosat, arguing that “For not only is the Ourang-Outang often personified as a relative of the African in the racist discourse of the “missing link,” but the relationship between the sailor and his “beast” is rendered in a master/slave dialectic.” She continues, writing: “With all this in mind, Poe’s positioning of the Ourang-Outang as a racial signifier anticipates—even expects—the contemporary reader’s sense of terror about miscegenation and interracial rape” (92-94). As argued earlier, in the case of Mary Rowlandson, the issue of “imagined rape” with respect to violence against white women is utilized too by Poe. Based on the positioning of the murdered women in bed, and the penetrative implications of body parts “forced up the narrow aperture,” (Poe 6), Poe implies rape, but never explicates it as a fact of the crime. In considering the crime as one having occurred between two white women and an “animal” coded to be a Black man, the explicit naming of rape is not necessary; rape is already assumed and imagined by the reader.

Richard Wright’s *Native Son* complicates the concept of the “always already raped” white woman insofar as it introduces the actualization of interracial sexual violence and raises the issue of the “always already raped” white woman as a fatal threat to nonwhite men. As I have argued, if white women are “always already raped,” nonwhite men are always already a rapist. Wright’s Black male protagonist, Bigger Thomas, is tasked with escorting Mary Dalton, a white woman and the daughter of his employer, to her bedroom after a night of drinking that leaves her unable to stand: “She closed her eyes slowly, then opened them; she was trying desperately to take hold of herself. Her eyes closed again and she swayed toward him. He caught her.” The text continues: “‘I’d better help you,’ he said.” (85). Upon offering to escort her upstairs, Bigger immediately realizes the precariousness of his situation, saying: “It wasn’t his fault that she was drunk. He felt strange, possessed, or as if he were acting upon a stage in front of a crowd of

people” (Wright 86). Here, Wright implicitly comments on the existence of the “always already raped/always already a rapist” perception; Bigger must move carefully — silently, even — as the white inhabitants of the Dalton home might discover him with an inebriated white woman in his arms and thereby name him as the rapist he must inevitably become irregardless of what happens next. Upon Bigger finally placing Mary Dalton into bed, Wright chooses to complicate the “always already” gendered and racialized perceptions by introducing sexual assault into the text:

He lifted her and laid her on the bed. Something urged him to leave at once, but he leaned over her, excited, looking at her face in the dim light, not wanting to take his hands from her breasts. She tossed and mumbled sleepily. He tightened his fingers on her breasts, kissing her again, feeling her move toward him. He was aware only of her body now; his lips trembled. (87)

It must be noted that while this encounter is certainly sexual assault due to Mary’s inability to consent based on her intoxication, it is not, at least within any legalistic and criminal definition, rape. However, as argued with respect to the earlier texts discussed in this paper, when considering an interaction occurring between a white woman and a Black man, rape does not have to factually occur to be assumed to have taken place. This becomes clear as this particular scene unfolds, as Bigger is interrupted by Mary’s blind mother, who enters the room as he gropes Mary: “A white blur was standing by the door, silent, ghostlike. It filled his eyes and gripped his body. It was Mrs. Dalton” (Wright 87). Wright positions Mary’s white, blind mother as “a white blur,” or more aptly, the unseeing yet all-assuming white perception of Black men. This is to say that Bigger does not need to be seen committing an act of violence to be assumed guilty of such an act. His presence in Mary’s bedroom amidst her intoxication is more than enough for “the white blur,” which accuses but does not see, to damn Bigger as “always already raping” a drunk

white woman. Wright makes this clear in the second section of the novel, entitled “Flight,” saying: “[Bigger] committed rape every time he looked into a white face” (214). Here, Wright asserts the issue of Bigger always already being perceived as a rapist in any and all encounters with whiteness and white people. With this perception in mind, Bigger feels he must silence Mary to prevent her from revealing his presence in the room; he smothers her with a pillow, killing her accidentally.

Mary Dalton’s death and the death sentence Bigger receives by the end of *Native Son* ultimately work to reveal how the “always already raped/always already a rapist” perception functions: it is fatal for both white women and nonwhite men. In the case of Wright’s novel, Mary Dalton’s actions in forcing a Black man into the care of her drunken body violates Bigger’s safety, eventually resulting in his death; Bigger Thomas’ groping of Mary Dalton violates her drunken body, eventually resulting in her death. Instead of placing Bigger and Mary at odds on an assailant-victim continuum, an intersectional feminist reading of the text is better served by considering the two as dual victims of white, heterosexual patriarchy, placed at odds with one another to benefit the larger system. Placing *Native Son* into the larger genealogy of literature, both fictional and nonfictional, that relates to captivity narratives and real, imagined, or assumed interracial rape with white women perceived as the ultimate victim proves to be a violent fallacy. What we are left with, then, are narratives such as Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and Henry David Thoreau’s retelling of the Hannah Dustan myth, wherein white men are able to derive joy from both the assumed rape of white women and the murder of nonwhite men, women, and children. Returning to Wright’s novel, as evidenced by these false perceptions, Mary Dalton and Bigger Thomas have been doomed to an adversarial relationship since Mary Rowlandson penned her *Narrative*; the possibility of moving past white, heterosexual patriarchy

has been squandered by the false narratives that perpetuate the “always already raped/always already a rapist” perception. Whether it be Mary Dalton or Mary Rowlandson, the real and fictional “always already raped” white woman’s body exists as a lethal threat to nonwhite men, and assumes rape to be a ubiquitous facet of women’s experiences.

II.

Lolita:

Whiteness and Sexual Violence

In 2006, NPR's *All Things Considered* published a segment narrated by author and former director of Harvard's creative writing program, Bret Anthony Johnston. He names Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel *Lolita* his "favorite" book. He proclaims that "*Lolita* is one of the most beautiful love stories you'll ever read. It may be one of the only love stories you'll ever read." Despite Johnston's insistence, *Lolita* is not, at least for those who read the novel from a feminist-informed angle, a love story; it is a crime novel *framed* as a love story. Johnston's misreading, perhaps all the more surprising because of his former position at Harvard, exemplifies the ways in which Nabokov's framing has been misconstrued to set aside the violence of the narrator, English-academic Humbert Humbert. I add Nabokov's text into my broader discussion of whiteness and captivity narratives and further assert that *Lolita* is a fictional captivity narrative. To explore the issues of whiteness, sexual violence, and captivity, I apply a feminist narratological lens, focusing specifically on the absent voice of the novel's silenced figure, Dolores Haze.

Even famed narratologist James Phelan, who is successful in proving Humbert's unreliability and his ability to convince untrained readers that he is not unreliable, fails to challenge the ways in which the novel uses the positioning of focalizers as white male academics to speak to their credibility. In other words, Phelan fails to consider the ways in which it is Humbert's stance as a white, male academic that aids in allowing him to succeed in manipulating the reader. Phelan's "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*" takes on Nabokov's narrator, framing Humbert as manipulatively unreliable, attempting to seduce his readers into mistaking his predation for love and obsession in a voice so charming that many, like Johnston, believe him. In taking a narratological approach, the framing by which

Nabokov presents his text becomes crucial in producing an intersectional feminist-centered analysis. The text simultaneously asks the reader to distrust and place ultimate faith in the white male academic as the authoritative voice. Consider the way in which Nabokov frames the text: Humbert's retrospective narration of his crimes against Dolores Haze, those crimes being rape and kidnapping, are framed by Humbert's present-tense narration while in prison, wherein he partially repents these actions, and Humbert's entire "memoir" is framed by the forward written by John Ray Jr., Ph.D. With this framing in mind, Nabokov places the entire narrative of a girl's traumatic rape and kidnapping in the hands of both her abuser and an outside source who acts as the authoritative editor, both of whom are white, male academics. Nabokov's framing simultaneously asks the reader to distrust Humbert due to his unreliability, but accept the ultimate authority over the text from a voice that has a stake in the same power dynamic that enabled Dolores' abuse, that being an intellectual man over the narrative of a young girl. The result is the squandering of the victim's own narrative which, in the case of *Lolita*, is the voiceless Dolores Haze, Humbert's step-daughter.

The horror of Nabokov's narrator comes in his unique and quiet ability to manipulate not only his victim but his readers, like Johnston, who fail to see through his tactics. This ability to manipulate stems from the way in which Nabokov situates Humbert as an unreliable narrator. In considering unreliable narration in general, a narrator often displays unreliability either due to a deliberate attempt to misrepresent the truth or an unintended inability to present such truths factually due to mental illness, typically stemming from trauma. Humbert exists as a fascinating hybrid between these two possibilities; Humbert admittedly misrepresents the truth, describing himself as "a murderer with a sensational but incomplete and unorthodox memory" (Nabokov 143), while simultaneously making mention of his trauma, stemming from the loss of his first

love and his numerous stays in mental institutions. With this seeming contradiction in mind, it becomes difficult to categorize Humbert as *either* deliberately unreliable or unreliable due to an inability to narrate truthfully due to trauma. Narratologist James Phelan's "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of *Lolita*" takes a broad approach in discussing various forms of unreliable narration, focusing on the textual impact of estranging unreliable narration (narration that pushes the authorial audience away from the implied author) and bonding unreliable narration (narration that pushes the authorial audience towards the implied author). In keeping with my attempt to shed light on the misreading of the text, or more aptly, the way in which the narrator is able to draw in his audience, my analysis focuses on the latter: bonding unreliable narration. Phelan names six subtypes of bonding unreliable narration, citing texts outside of Nabokov's novel as a point of comparison. He names these subtypes as 1) "communication literally unreliable but metaphorically reliable," 2) "playful comparison between implied author and narrator," 3) "naive defamiliarization," 4) "sincere but misguided self-deprecation," 5) "partial progress toward the norm," and 6) "bonding through optimistic comparison." For his outside textual example for subtype five, "partial progress towards the norm," he cites Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), a perfect example of unreliability imposed on a narrator as a result of trauma imposed on a character. In keeping with attempting to produce a feminist ethical analysis of the text in conversation with Phelan's narratological approach, my analysis is primarily concerned with subtype five. To discuss Narrating Humbert's status as a "hybrid" of unreliable narration via trauma and unreliable narration via deliberate misrepresentation, I will first analyze the text that Phelan himself names in his attempt to discuss subtype five within the context of an example of traumatic narration: Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. Of subtype five, Phelan explains that the fifth subtype

“typically occurs along either the axis of ethics/evaluation or along that of understanding/perception” (Phelan, 231). For his textual example, he cites the final paragraph of Hemingway’s novel, in which Narrating Fredric Henry retells his attempt at saying goodbye to his wife, Catherine, after the trauma of losing both her and their stillborn son during a failed cesarean-section: “But after I had got [the nurses] out and shut the door and turned off the light it wasn’t any good. It was like saying good-bye to a statue. After a while I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hotel in the rain” (Hemingway, 297). Phelan analyzes this conclusion as an example of subtype five on the basis that Narrating Henry recalls his attempt to say goodbye as one in line with “the norm.” Phelan states:

His first impulse is to say a romantic good-bye to her, but that effort fails miserably. [...]. Then somehow he is able to complete the last steps of his movement toward the implied Hemingway's views and that completion closes the rest of the perceptual, ethical, and affective distance between Frederic and the authorial audience. The understated and controlled quality of his narrative's thoroughly reliable last sentence subtly conveys the closing of the final distance. The sentence appears to be only a report, but in this context it also functions as an ethical statement of Frederic's decision not to be utterly destroyed by Catherine's death but instead to move forward even as he acknowledges his loss.

(Phelan, 232)

Though Phelan is correct in asserting that the conclusion of Hemingway’s novel is an example of bonding unreliability via an approach towards “the norm,” which, in the case of the novel, would be to move forward from the grief that character Henry experiences, as Phelan claims, he completely underestimates the effect that trauma has on the text by simply claiming that

character Henry's leaving from the hospital signifies a form of healing/unaffectedness by such trauma. Literary scholar Trevor Dodman rightly argues in his paper "Going All to Pieces: *A Farewell to Arms* as Trauma Narrative" that:

In Frederic's case, the disarticulation of the self occurs in a narrative that shifts unpredictably between past and present, between the time of the action and the time of the telling. To reconstruct the past he must confront the "holes" in his subjective experience of the war, despite the fact that he might not have full mastery over the memories. (Dodman, 251)

My critique on Phelan's analysis of both his example for bonding unreliability via "progress toward the norm," *A Farewell to Arms*, and his analysis of the text with which the paper is primarily concerned, Nabokov's *Lolita*, is rooted in the assertion that Dodman makes here, which is overlooked by Phelan: the "disarticulation of self," that occurs between the character and the narrator, in both texts, is rooted in trauma. In *A Farewell to Arms*, the conclusion of the novel leads the reader to believe that character Henry leaves the hospital and undergoes some form of "disarticulation" leading to Narrating Henry's retelling of the trauma by writing *A Farewell to Arms* as the implied author. However, Narrating Henry's unreliability becomes evident through the text in his underreporting of his mentality. Consider the novel's conclusion wherein he attempts to say goodbye to his wife following her passing, as quoted earlier. Narrating Henry underreports in that he fails to explicitly convey to his audience the trauma sustained from the events which led him to "write" the novel. Moreover, Narrating Henry's trauma can be identified within his use of rain as a motif for grieving and loss. Consider the narrator's conflation of rain with death, the first chapter concludes: "At the start of the winter came the permanent rain and with the rain came the cholera. But it was checked and in the end only seven

thousand died of it in the army” (Hemingway, 10). Narrating Henry first cites the rain as an accompanying factor to the spread of cholera, then moves to explain that “only” seven thousand people died. This conclusion exemplifies both the connection between rain and death in the text and Narrating Henry’s underreporting of his grief via his claim that “only” seven thousand people in the army died of cholera. In doing so, Narrating Henry’s trauma and subsequent attempts at coping with such trauma via underreporting becomes visible. Moreover, the final line of the novel also concludes with Narrating Henry’s mention of the rain as a coinciding factor alongside the death of his wife, Catherine and their son. He states: “I went out and left the hospital and walked back to the hospital in the rain” (Hemingway, 297). With this motif in mind, Narrating Henry’s underreporting with respect to trauma sustained from grief can be observed within his failure to fully report on his own grief and grieving process. In considering this alongside Phelan’s subtype-5: “partial progress towards the norm,” it is evident that Narrating Henry *attempts* to explicate his trauma but often underreports the true impact that his losses have on him.

Returning to Nabokov, *Lolita* too can be considered a work of trauma narrative. Humbert suffers from debilitating mental illness from trauma, partially stemming from the death of his first lover, Annabel Leigh. In his retelling of this trauma, he mirrors Edgar Allan Poe’s “Annabel Lee,” (1849) slightly altering and reappropriating the name of Poe’s object of affection and outright taking lines from the poem, citing a “princedom by the sea” wherein the adolescent romance occurred. This appropriation of naming makes clear Humbert’s lifelong romanticization and fascination with this initial doomed relationship, wherein his “Annabel Leigh” dies prematurely from typhus (Nabokov, 8). Humbert states: “I also know that the shock of Annabel’s death consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer, made of it a permanent obstacle to

any further romance through-out the cold years of my youth” (Nabokov, 8). Humbert reveals that Annabel’s premature death “consolidated the frustration of that nightmare summer,” his frustration referring to the permanent psychosexual damage incurred from her passing. He elaborates, claiming that this trauma barred him from forming romantic and sexual relationships in his youth. This admission makes clear that Humbert sustained lifelong trauma following Annabel’s death, leading him to search for her by proxy through his violation of Dolores. In this assertion, I invite my reader to consider Humbert’s narration as unreliable on the basis of his narration acting as a “hybrid” of traumatic narration and deliberate misreporting.

The structure of the text as a frame narrative is crucial in understanding the position that Humbert takes in relaying the story to his audience, who he addresses as “ladies and gentlemen of the jury.” In other words, Humbert’s retelling comes from a position of confession. It is this confessional structure that exemplifies the “disarticulation of self” that occurs in the separation between Humbert as a character and Humbert as a narrator. Consider the way in which Narrating Humbert addresses his audience as “ladies and gentlemen of the jury.” In this positioning, the novel becomes a legalistic statement of confession, the very first paragraph concludes by saying: “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, exhibit number one is what the seraphs, the misinformed, simple, noble-winged seraphs, envied. Look at this tangle of thorns” (Nabokov, 5). Narrating Humbert clearly uses legalistic speech in presenting his “case,” structuring his arguments around legal jargon. Moreover, he utilizes complicated, lyrical language to complicate his speech, a tool used to distract his “jury” from the horror of his actions. Poetics aside, the narrator also clearly frames the narrated events around this confessional, legalistic voice. That which follows vacillates between that of romanticization and regret but certainly concludes with the re-stating of guilt and confessional intent. In the final portion of the novel, the narrator states:

When I started, fifty-six days ago, to write *Lolita*, first in the psychopathic ward for observation, and then in this well-heated, albeit tombal, seclusion, I thought I would use these notes in toto at my trial, to save not my head, of course, but my soul. (Nabokov, 205-206)

Narrating Humbert's syntax evokes a sense of confession not simply in the legal sense, but in the moral and even religious sense. This sentiment is substantiated by Narrating Humbert's mention of both the tombal and secluded nature of his surroundings and the implication that his writing of the text would "save" his "soul." The implication of salvation, indeed, points to sins that require, at least in Catholic sentiment, confession for absolution. Additionally, Humbert reminds the reader of his stay in a psychopathic ward; he notes several times throughout the text that he has had extended stays in various mental institutions:

The reader will regret to learn that soon after my return to civilization I had another bout with insanity (if to melancholia and a sense of insufferable oppression that cruel term must be applied). I owe my complete restoration to a discovery I made while being treated at that particular very expensive sanatorium. I discovered there was an endless source of robust enjoyment in trifling with psychiatrists. (Nabokov, 22)

Early in the text, Humbert makes clear to the reader that he has a history of insanity and institutionalization. Moreover, he claims that he was returned to sanity by deliberately misleading psychiatrists. I would argue that this behavior implicates his inability to narrate reliably; he claims to feel a great sense of enjoyment in misleading an audience. Returning to Phelan's overlooking of traumatic implications from his explanation of bonding unreliability via "partial progress to the norm" (subtype 5), or unreliability exhibited by a partial but incomplete

move towards conforming to ethical norms, the reader can glean the undeniably traumatic aftereffects that the death of Annabel Leigh had on Humbert, the trauma from which made it impossible for him to form healthy romantic bonds, eventually leading him to begin assaulting Dolores. Following Annabel Leigh's death, Humbert admits to having a specific fascination with the bodies of girls aged around Annabel at the time of her death, girls who he deems "nymphets": "Between the age limits of nine and fourteen there occur maidens who, to certain bewitched travelers, twice or many times older than they, reveal their true nature which is not human, but nymphic (that is, demoniac); and these chosen creatures I propose to designate as 'nymphets.'" (Nabokov, 10). Rather than being explicit in making the reader aware that this pedophilic attraction is rooted in his inability to form romantic relationships with women, he attempts to place an otherness on the girls he deems as "nymphets," claiming that they possess some supernatural, demonic power. This attempt to place blame on his victim rather than admitting that his own trauma led him to pedophilic abuse proves his unreliability with respect to the trauma he suffered from the loss of Annabel Leigh.

His move to confession and further implication that he wrote the text as an attempt to rescue himself from the adverse effects of said trauma becomes the reasoning for Narrating Humbert's close association with bonding unreliability via "partial progress toward the norm." Where early in the text, as mentioned, Humbert seems to place blame on some supernatural affect possessed by those he deems to be "nymphets," the structure of the frame narrative that leads to his eventual repenting in the penultimate chapter can be interpreted as a form of legal confession. His confession and framing as a crime narrative makes visible his guilt. In the late portion of the text, Humbert states: "Had I come before myself, I would have given Humbert at least thirty-five years for rape, and dismissed the rest of the charges" (Nabokov, 206). This

example, Humbert's final willingness to name his crimes as a rape (moving towards the norm of the "ladies and gentlemen of the jury," or the authorial audience in the way that the reader is positioned) reinforces the "disarticulation of self," through the process of his writing *Lolita*. However, Narrating Humbert's tendency to underreport suggests that even having undergone the implied moral splitting that led him to his confession, he is still unable to fully report his wrongdoing. Consider the scene in Part I, chapter 13 wherein Humbert narrates his usage of Dolores' body to masturbate. The actual scene describing the assault emphasizes the way that he did so without Dolores' awareness of her own violation. His narration in the following chapter states:

I felt proud of myself. I had stolen the honey of a spasm without impairing the morals of a minor. Absolutely no harm done. [...].

The child knew nothing. I had done nothing to her. And nothing prevented me from repeating a performance that affected her as little as if she were a photographic image rippling upon a screen and I a humble hunchback abusing myself in the dark. (Nabokov, 41)

This narration implicates Humbert's unreliability in a retelling that is supposedly honest; while the structure of the frame narrative and his willingness to admit the lacking morality of his actions, he is painstaking in explicitly ensuring the reader that Dolores was completely unaware of his assault of her. Furthermore, Narrating Humbert claims that based on Dolores' alleged lack of awareness, Character Humbert felt justified in continuing to commit similar acts. However, in moving back to the initial assault, Narrating Humbert's syntax implies that his actions did not necessarily go unnoticed on the part of Dolores. He writes:

Immediately afterward (as if we had been struggling and now my grip had eased)

she rolled off the sofa and jumped to her feet—to her foot, rather—in order to attend to the formidably loud telephone that may have been ringing for ages as far as I was concerned. There she stood and blinked, cheeks aflame, hair awry, her eyes passing over me as lightly as they did over the furniture, [...]. Blessed be the Lord, she had noticed nothing! (Nabokov, 40)

The contradiction within Narrating Humbert's claim that Dolores is unaware of the assault he commits against her is revealed in his admission that immediately following his orgasm, Dolores immediately releases herself from him "as if [they] had been struggling and now my grip had eased" and that, additionally, Humbert comments on the redness of her cheeks and the displacement of her hair. It is in the underreporting that the authorial audience can infer the ways in which Humbert bonds with his audience by making "partial progress toward the norm" but is still unreliable via his unwillingness to fully report his actions, both due to his deliberate tendency to misrepresent the events and his inability to see his own wrongdoing due to his use of Dolores as a proxy for his first love, Annabel Leigh. The structure of the text as a frame narrative is the evidence for Humbert's unreliability as a narrator; even in the confessional structure, which is itself compromised by being situated in a court in front of a jury Narrating Humbert disdains, he is still unable to fully report retrospectively the events that victimized Dolores.

As evidenced by the ways in which Humbert misreports and underreports in his narration, it becomes evident that there is one crucial voice missing from the text: Dolores Haze. Azar Nafisi's memoir *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) focuses on a group of women in a Western literature class held in Iran as a means of transgressing upon the oppressive laws imposed upon citizens and women in particular. Of *Lolita*, Nafisi speaks to her reasoning for teaching the novel:

Lolita belongs to a category of victims who have no defense and are never given the chance to articulate their own story. As such, she becomes a double victim: not only her life but her life story is taken from her. We told ourselves we were in that class to prevent ourselves from falling victim to the second crime. (Nafisi, 41)

In keeping with Nafisi's assessment, I agree that Dolores is dually victimized by the constant abuse she suffered and her being barred by the Narrating version of the man who raped her from articulating her own story. In an attempt to explore the "double victim" classification assigned by Nafisi, I move to explore the narration which is *not* present in the text: the story from Dolores' perspective. As some early feminist critics have noted, marrying the disciplines of narratology and feminist critique can be a difficult undertaking. James Phelan attempts to apply an ethical lens to his narratological analysis of *Lolita*, but he largely fails to apply any sense of feminist ethic to his critique. This difficulty is noted by Susan S. Lanser in "Toward a Feminist Narratology," saying:

The challenge to both feminism and narratology is to recognize the dual nature of narrative, to find categories and terms that are abstract and semiotic enough to be useful, but concrete and mimetic enough to seem relevant for critics whose theories root literature in "the real conditions of our lives" (Newton, 125).
(Lanser, 344)

As stated by Phelan, structuralist thought would caution against any attempt to consider the violence present in the text in the same way that feminist thought critiques acts of real violence against "flesh and blood" girls, as Phelan makes clear in his argument. Indeed, it is difficult to meld feminist critique and narratology, especially from a place of intersectional framework,

which has rarely even been explored, with respect to Nabokov's text because the semiotics of the text can be so easily observed in the tactics of "flesh and blood" pedophiles. This challenge becomes even more difficult with respect to *Lolita* due to the concealment of Dolores' perspective. With this lack in mind, I make an attempt to analyze the passages in which this concealment becomes visible. I first turn to a scene after Humbert's initial rape of Dolores, wherein Humbert's narration seems to present his own words, his own voice as Dolores': "You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man" (Nabokov, 94). As we have established Humbert's unreliability as a narrator and in an attempt to analyze the text from a feminist perspective, the syntax utilized in this quotation, allegedly coming from Dolores, should be treated with skepticism. While Narrating Humbert presents this sentiment as that of Dolores, the syntax mirrors his own. The description of Dolores as "daisy-fresh" seems to imply that she was a virgin prior to the assault, a feat which would directly contradict Humbert's assertion following the initial rape that he "was not even her first lover" (Nabokov, 90). This exemplifies the "double victimization" that Nafisi names as the dual force of violence waged against Dolores Haze. Indeed, "Dolores'" outcry to Humbert is the first time in the novel wherein the violence that Humbert commits against Dolores is named as rape; Humbert's willingness to place this specific terminology into Dolores' speech reveals that Dolores is not even given the space in the text to name her own abuse. One crucial scene takes place wherein Character Humbert finally realizes the abusive nature of his actions. Humbert finds himself standing above a valley, listening to the joyous cries of children at play. He states,

I stood listening to that musical vibration from my lofty slope, to those flashes of separate cries with a kind of demure murmur for background, and then I knew

that the hopelessly poignant thing was not Lolita's absence from my side, but the absence of her voice from that concord. (Nabokov, 205)

Humbert admits his most horrific crime: he has utterly robbed Dolores of the opportunity to be a child. Through his predatory sexual exploitation of her, she was never given the opportunity to join the children in the valley. Upon the very first instance of Humbert raping Dolores, she is unable to experience childhood in the innocent way that he perceives the children in the valley to experience. Additionally, Humbert places emphasis on "the absence of [Dolores'] voice"; he admits in this moment that aside from the rape and abuse he forces on Dolores, his most vicious crime has been the squandering of her "voice." Following the first instance of Humbert's assault on Dolores, the two have an uncomfortable car ride wherein Dolores complains of pain following the rape. The text states, "More and more uncomfortable did Humbert feel. It was something quite special, that feeling: an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed" (Nabokov, 93). Humbert seems to dissociate in this moment, referring to himself in the third person as an outsider. Within this dissociation, he describes the car as akin to a liminal space, he separates himself from the space by utilising third-person narration, and he simultaneously banishes Dolores to liminality by describing her as not entirely alive, but still present. Indeed, through the creation and silencing of "his" Lolita, Humbert commits the murder of Dolores Haze.

III. Failed Academics: Placing *Lolita* in Conversation with True Crime

On August 9th, 1969, five members of Charles Manson's infamous cult, "The Family," committed an act of violence that reverberated across the United States. Followers Charles "Tex" Watson, Susan "Sadie" Atkins, Patricia "Katie" Krenwinkel, and Linda Kasabian drove to the home of celebrities Roman Polanski and Sharon Tate in the evening. The following morning, Sharon Tate, Jay Seabring, Abigail Folger, Wojciech "Voytek" Frykowski, and Steven Parent were found dead at the house at 10500 Cielo Drive. The word "pig" was scrawled on the wall in Sharon Tate's blood. The records of this evening are inconclusive and often conflicting. The specifics of who killed whom vary and have changed over time.

The following evening, Charles Manson himself, Tex Watson, Leslie "LuLu" Van Houten, and Patricia Krenwinkel entered the home of Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. Manson entered first, binding the couple and subsequently leaving the scene. The other three members of the party are said to be responsible for the loss of life, although some accounts claim that Tex Watson was solely responsible for the knife wounds that resulted in the death of the couple.

Undeniably, the famed "Manson murders," or "Tate-LaBianca" killings have become a media sensation, spawning films like Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood...* (2019), myriad crime documentaries and television specials, and fictional recreations of the case present in novels such as Emma Cline's *The Girls* (2016). As with Cline's novel (now slated to be adapted into a film) there seems to be a trend calling the history surrounding Manson and his cult into conversation with fictional representations of violence. With this conversation between fiction and history in mind, I find it valuable to place Manson's crimes in conversation with Nabokov's *Lolita* in order to address victimization in both text and reality.

I argue that Manson, like Humbert, needs to be considered a failed academic. This assertion is unorthodox, as Manson certainly does not fit the image one typically associates with an academic. However, his primary concern—gaining recognition and adulation for his doctrine and ideas comprised of haphazardly synthesizing multiple texts and ideologies like the Bible, L. Ron Hubbard’s *Dianetics* (1950), white supremacy, and popular culture—is at its core, a strange yet scholarly approach to defending one’s actions. This becomes important because, in many ways, Humbert is guilty of similar behavior. I believe, at least for the purpose of this analysis, that we can consider Manson to have attempted misguided literary scholarship as a means of furthering his control over the members of his cult, defending his abhorrent violence, and gaining respect from those from whom he sought admiration. For my source material in my analysis of Manson’s actions, I turn to the memoir *Member of The Family: My Story of Charles Manson, My Time Inside His Cult, and the Darkness That Ended the Sixties* (2018). I analyze this text in particular because its author, Dianne Lake again, joined the Manson cult at fourteen, placing her around a similar age to the fictional Dolores. Lake’s own life, according to her memoir, was filled with sexual trauma even before meeting Manson, who further raped and traumatized her. I believe this text to be supremely helpful in attempting to start the conversation between fiction and fact, reality and Nabokov’s text, because Lake’s memoir can speak back to Nabokov’s narrators in a sense and thereby give voice to Dolores. As my previous narratological analysis is concerned with the fictional text of *Lolita* and thereby makes a separate distinction between a novel’s focalizer as the narrator and a character, I attempt to make a similar distinction while avoiding distinguishing Lake’s fourteen-year-old self as a “character.” This is an attempt to maintain her autonomy as a real figure with real trauma who deserves proper attention and care in any feminist analysis of her writing. Once again, this attempt reveals a conflict between

feminist textual analysis and narratological analysis; the application of traditional narratological distinctions on the splitting between the narrator and the narrated cannot be applied to nonfiction without stripping the individual of their autonomy. In an experimental attempt to provide a feminist narratological analysis of Lake's memoir, I move to distinguish Lake's voice as a retrospective narrator as "narrating Lake" and the subject of her narration, herself at ages fourteen to sixteen as "subject Lake."

According to lead prosecutor Vincent Bugliosi's *Helter Skelter*, Manson began his lifelong, sporadic stints of incarceration around age twelve when he began to be incarcerated in reformatories and juvenile centers for crimes ranging from being a runaway to grand theft auto and burglary. As he aged, Manson began to incur more serious charges and more time incarcerated. His final stretch of freedom occurred between 1967 and 1969, his early thirties, after spending seventeen nonconsecutive years behind bars (193). When released, he proceeded to the Haight-Asbury district of San Francisco, where he began the cult that eventually became "The Manson Family." While in prison, Manson took a series of courses on the Dale Carnegie method and eventually became interested in Scientology, mixing different ideologies to create his own doctrine which he preached to Family members nightly. He began with a few followers in San Francisco, eventually procuring a famed painted-black school bus which became the mobile home of the Family when they migrated from San Francisco to Los Angeles (Bugliosi and Gentry, 217). Eventually, Manson's cult settled on Spahn Ranch in Los Angeles where Manson led his cult-commune in nightly LSD and group sex rituals based in his doctrine. As described by currently incarcerated former Family member, Charles "Tex" Watson, who claims to have been the sole killer of actress Sharon Tate, Manson's ideology was initially based on a universal idea of "love," he states: "Love was always the key word: love as nothingness, love as death...His

teaching at first seemed complex, its terminology a strange mixture of Eastern religion, Scientology and pop psychology, but at its core was a simple, powerful message. Everything was one, he said” (Watson, 40). Over the years, Manson became less concerned with “love” and turned to violent white supremacy, attempting to inspire his followers to incite a race war.

According to Vincent Bugliosi’s opening statement from July of 1970:

one of Manson’s principal motives for these seven savage murders was to ignite Helter Skelter; in other words, start the black-white revolution by making it look as though the black man had murdered these seven Caucasian victims. In his twisted mind, he thought this would cause the white community to turn against the black community, ultimately leading to a civil war between blacks and whites, a war which Manson told his followers would see bloodbaths in the streets of every American city, a war which Manson predicted and foresaw the black man as winning.

Obviously, when attempting to make sense of Manson’s bizarre teachings, it becomes quite clear that his “ideology” is the result of the LSD-induced ramblings of a madman. According to Bugliosi’s arguments in court, Dianne Lake’s memoir, and Charles “Tex” Watson’s memoir *Will You Die For Me?*, the race war theory came about after Manson became obsessed with reading The Beatles *White Album* in tandem with biblical scripture, particularly Revelations 9:1-2, which reads: “Then the fifth angel sounded: And I saw a star fallen from heaven to the earth. To him was given the key to the bottomless pit,” believing that his followers were being called to incite a race war and then descend into the “Bottomless Pit.” Thus, according to Watson’s memoir, Manson directed his followers to move from the Spahn Ranch in Los Angeles to Death Valley following the Tate-LaBianca murders, where they would eventually repopulate the Earth in

Manson's image (53). As mentioned, his readings were strange and seemed to be a means by which to defend any and all violent and abhorrent actions. It is this very behavior, performing contrived attempts at "scholarship" and literary readings to defend one's own crimes that allows for Manson to be placed in conversation with Humbert Humbert. As previously discussed in this paper and by scholar and author Azar Nafisi in *Reading Lolita in Tehran*, the feminist challenge to Nabokov's novel becomes an attempt to find a representation of the voice that is relinquished in the text, the voice of Dolores Haze. In placing flesh-and-blood pedophile and, in my view, failed academic Charles Manson in conversation with Nabokov's text, feminist scholars can turn to the voices of the real-life victims of Manson, attempting to assess the damage done to the fictional Dolores Haze by her silencing in the text.

Dianne Lake, being only fourteen when she joined the commune, provides insight into the mind of an adolescent girl being sexually abused by her father figure. Manson, the self-proclaimed patriarch of The Family, indoctrinated his female followers by having sex with them. Lake recalls him saying, "'You are so beautiful, my little one.' His voice was barely above a whisper, but I heard it reverberate through my consciousness. We had only smoked pot, but I felt as if I were on a trip, his trip, and he was guiding my every move" (Lake, 134). Lake retells the way in which Manson comments on her age as he had sex with her. While the encounter and their relationship at large, according to Lake, began consensually, Lake was only fourteen years old, making the encounter a violation of statutory rape laws and abuse of power on Manson's part. Lake recalls the way that this encounter made her feel as psychedelic, referring to the sexual experience as akin to an acid trip, commenting further that Manson was in complete control over the encounter.

Returning to *Lolita*, as we have explored, the text is filtered through several lenses of unreliable men who present the story of Dolores' abuse, making it difficult to perceive the impact the abuse had on her psyche; the reader must rely upon Humbert's narration, filtered through the editorial lens of John Ray Jr., PhD to understand the effects of the rape. While the reader is limited in their ability to see Dolores' perspective, the day after she is first raped, she willingly returns to his bed following the news of her mother's death. The text states: "At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (Nabokov, 94). Humbert refuses to even name this assault on Dolores as sexual, let alone be explicit in naming the encounter as violent. He then moves to make clear to the reader that he has isolated Dolores to the point of having no source of comfort except that from him, her assailant, which is a further enactment of violence and manipulation. Moreover, in presenting these facts alongside the fact that, according to Humbert, Dolores came to him, he attempts to position the encounter as consensual and further positions Dolores as having initiated the assault herself. Consent is an impossibility given the toxic sexual power dynamic between a child and an adult, especially within the relationship positioned as a father and daughter. Narrating Humbert attempts to move past this power dynamic by presenting the encounter as initiated by Dolores. Moving back to Lake, one can observe the similar manipulation of the young victim by the man who aims to manipulate her into believing any encounter sharing such a power dynamic could ever be consensual. Of course, these relationships share violent undertones that become clear to the victim a short time after the initial assault. Lake recalls an encounter at fifteen when she attempts to initiate "consensual" sex with Manson, resulting in his brutally raping her. She states:

“You want me to make love to you?” he practically shouted at me, as if what I was asking was absurd. I hadn’t seen this side of him before. He appeared enraged, like he would just as soon hit me as have sex with me.

He grabbed me by the arms and pushed me against the wall with my back facing him.

“Charlie, what are you doing?” I asked. This was not what I was expecting from him. I had done things I didn’t enjoy with men because I felt I had to, but I had never felt frightened or in danger from anyone—until now.

“Little girl, you need to know that you can’t always get what you want. You need to learn some serious lessons about life.” He pushed my head forward so it hit the wall, ripped down my skirt, and entered me from behind. I stopped hearing anything but muffled sounds as I tried to escape the moment. We had tried all types of positions, but I had never had anal sex before, and it hurt. My body automatically tensed to try to prevent him from penetrating me, but he was too forceful, pulling my hair back as he thrust inside. It felt like I was being ripped apart. Hot tears streamed down my face.

“This is what I got in prison. Is this what you like, little girl?”

When he finished, he pushed me down on the pillows and glared at me. I could barely breathe. He pushed his way out of the caravan and left me there, sobbing and gasping for air. I’m not sure how long I stayed there, but the first

thought I had was that I wanted to die right then and there,
to disintegrate into nothingness. My heart and my spirit were broken. (Lake,
276-277).

The abuse is horrific, with the physical and psychic effects so jarring they led her to consider suicide. I believe it to be valuable to read Lake's narration of the trauma she experienced, as it begins to open the pathway to communicating with the narration Humbert fails to deliver to his readers. Narrating Humbert's "memoir" is structured in such a way that Dolores' physical and emotional pain is secondary to Humbert's journey from pedophilic violence to confession and regret; the unreliable nature of his narration prevents the reader from connecting with Dolores and hearing her voice. Placing real, "flesh and blood" trauma alongside fiction allows readers attempting to approach *Lolita* from a feminist narratological lens to begin to understand that which is rendered illegible. Returning to Nabokov, following Humbert's initial assault, Dolores "started complaining of pains, said she could not sit, said I had torn something inside her" (Nabokov, 94). While he makes clear that Dolores experiences physical pain following the assault, he makes it more difficult to see the emotional trauma that was incurred. Before complaining of physical pain she states "'You chump,' she said, sweetly smiling at me. 'You revolting creature. I was a daisy-fresh girl, and look what you've done to me. I ought to call the police and tell them you raped me. Oh, you dirty, dirty old man.'" (Nabokov 94). Narrating Humbert claims that he was unable to tell whether or not she felt she had been assaulted, saying "Was she just joking? An ominous hysterical note rang through her silly words" (Nabokov 94). The juxtaposition between alleging that Humbert had raped her and the tone in which the allegation is presented makes it more difficult to discern the psychological effects of the assault. This becomes more complicated because, following the exchange, Humbert reveals that Dolores'

mother has died. The following chapter then states that Dolores came into Humbert's room crying, where he raped her again: "At the hotel we had separate rooms, but in the middle of the night she came sobbing into mine, and we made it up very gently. You see, she had absolutely nowhere else to go" (Nabokov 94). With Dolores being made aware that her mother has died, Humbert's narration is unclear on whether her agony stems from the assault or the death of her mother. He is clear, however, in explicating that he took her distress as an opportunity to assault her again, further clarifying that he has isolated her to the point of Dolores having nowhere else to turn. In placing these fictional events in conversation with Dianne Lake's narration of the sexual trauma she experienced at the hands of Charles Manson, one can glean more insight specifically into the psychological distress exhibited by Dolores. In the same way that Dolores "had nowhere else to go," Dianne remained in the cult following the assault; she, too, had been isolated by her abuser to the point of having nowhere to turn for support and being trapped in a cycle of violence. I place these texts in conversation primarily to analyze the dynamics of victims and abusers within the context of childhood sexual violence, fictional and otherwise, and to create a meaningful, feminist-centered analysis of the Manson crimes. Much, if not most, of the literature surrounding Charles Manson and "The Family" centers around the murders committed in August of 1969 or salacious accounts of the drug-laden sex that was taking place within the cult. I feel that placing Nabokov's *Lolita* into conversation with Dianne Lake's memoir allows for a more meaningful analysis of Manson's crimes and the power dynamics present within the cult. Moreover, placing Lake in conversation with Dolores as a fictional character allows for readers to have a greater, more explicit understanding of psychological trauma stemming from sexual abuse. This is to say that I argue that Manson and Humbert function very similarly and engage in similar tactics to further their abusive, violent behaviors.

IV.
**The “Ruse of Passivity” in Contemporary Literature:
Dissociation Feminism and the New Captivity Narrative**

In 2019, *Buzzfeed* writer Emmeline Clein coined the term “dissociation feminism,” referring to a reactionary movement in white feminist circles set at odds with the neoliberal ideology of capitalist feminism, often colloquially referred to as “#GirlBoss feminism.” Kyla Schuller argues in *The Trouble with White Women* (2021) that neoliberal white feminism teaches that the most promising path to dismantling misogyny requires feminism to “install women presidents and CEOs,” thereby arguing that more women in positions of capitalist power would ensure that “equality would trickle down” (Schuller, 124). Whereas neoliberal feminism preaches that liberation is achieved through capitalist advancement and enfranchisement of women into positions of power, so-called “dissociation feminism” claims power in passivity. According to Clein, dissociation feminism is “a curdling of the hyperoptimistic, #girlboss, ‘Run the World (Girls)’ feminism of the aughts, characterized by an uneasy combination of plaintive begging and swaggering confidence that gender equality was just past the horizon line” (Clein). Clein’s article, which has spawned a series of op-eds and viral posts online, essentially argues that, amidst the “#GirlBoss” era of Western feminism, dissociation feminism offers a nihilistic alternative. Dissociation feminism appears to serve as an outlet for women who feel the weight of years of a movement that has yet to deliver on its promises of gender equity. While Clein does briefly make mention of privilege and whiteness in her article, saying that dissociation feminism’s bolstering of “giving up on progress is perhaps the epitome of white feminism, and promotes a nihilism that is somewhere between unproductive and genuinely dangerous” she largely fails to explore the relationship between dissociation feminism and white womanhood

beyond this disclaimer. To complicate Clein's configuration of "dissociation feminism," and place the term into the broader discussion of white womanhood throughout a genealogy of U.S. literature, I use Ottessa Moshfegh's *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* to illustrate the self-destructive, falsely passive feminism Clein refers to in coining the term dissociation feminism. I turn to this text in particular because the text focuses on the narrator's attempt sleep for an entire year, made possible through her drug abuse. This continues with the issue of drug use throughout the Manson case. Specifically, the way in which drug use in white women work to produce a narrative of passivity. Moreover, I argue that the sleeping project that Moshfegh's novel focuses on functions as a captivity narrative, keeping the narrator in a disconnected, dissociative state through an ultimate embodiment of passivity: sleep. To explore passivity and captivity within Moshfegh's text and to explore these themes within dissociative feminism at large, I revisit Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative, placing the two texts from vastly different periods in conversation to reveal the captivity narrative's continuance into the modern era via dissociation feminist discourse.

Passivity is a privilege, one that requires, at the very least, access to ample finances to support oneself outside of a stable job and the ability to "drop out" of mainstream society. Moshfegh's novel addresses the issue of privilege and access to passivity almost immediately within an interaction between the novel's narrator and her friend, Reva. The narrator makes clear that her project of sleeping is aimed at withdrawing from work, saying: "I'm taking some time off. This is my year of rest and relaxation," to which her less financially privileged counterpart replies, "Lucky you.... I wouldn't mind taking some time off work to loaf around, watch movies, and snooze all day, but I'm not complaining. I just don't have that luxury" (Moshfegh 12). Moshfegh introduces the importance of privilege as the enabling factor in her narrator's

ability to commit to her relaxation project. Moshfegh makes clear that her narrator is only able to access passivity via her sleeping project through her privilege. In response to Reva's comment on her inability to access passivity, the narrator makes clear that "I looked like a model, had money I hadn't earned, wore real designer clothing, had majored in art history, so I was 'cultured'" (Moshfegh 13). Moshfegh clearly demarcates the differences in access to passivity via the relationship between the narrator and her friend. The narrator states later in the text that she "vacillated between wanting to look like the spoiled WASP that I was and the bum that I *felt* I was [...]. Being pretty only kept me trapped in a world that valued looks above all else" (34). In addition to obvious financial privileges held by the narrator, Moshfegh introduces the concept of attractiveness as a possible factor in accessing the privilege of passivity. Based on the narrator's assertion that she looks "like a model," the reader can ascertain that she is referring, at least in part, to her body and its size specifically. The discussion of the narrator's thinness and, in a broader sense, the relationship between thinness and passivity provides a meaningful framework to begin to deconstruct Moshfegh's novel as a modern captivity narrative that functions through the mode of dissociation feminism. The narrator asserts early on that her sleeping project functions as her attempt "to escape the prison of [her] mind and body" (Moshfegh 18). Here, the narrator frames her captivity narrative as one stemming from her body and her path to escaping such captivity as being achieved through her sleeping project, rooted in passive action (sleeping) to separate herself from her body. The narrator states, "Oh, sleep. Nothing else could ever bring me such pleasure, such freedom, the power to feel and move and think and imagine, safe from the miseries of my waking consciousness" (Moshfegh 46). Moshfegh's narrator frames the "pleasure" she finds in sleep as liberatory enough to invoke a certain level of consciousness raising, allowing her to transcend consciousness, almost in a psychedelic sense. The narrator

frames waking consciousness as a constant experience of misery, a trauma that is enacted every moment that she is conscious. Within the narrator's framing, the passivity of sleeping allows her to escape her conscious body; sleep is her method of severance from her conscious body, acting as a form of dissociation.

In both Rowlandson's *Narrative* and Moshfegh's novel, the image of passivity is illustrated to the reader by use of starvation as a rhetorical strategy. Rowlandson constantly concerns herself with starvation and access to food. Within the "First Remove," Rowlandson notes that her access to food was limited by her captor, saying, "It was nine days from the first wounding, in this miserable condition, without any refreshing of one nature or other, except a little cold water" (Rowlandson 5). Later, she recounts a similar experience with starvation: "Being very faint I asked my mistress to give me one spoonful of the meal, but she would not give me a taste" (Rowlandson 14). As I have established with respect to Rowlandson's captivity narrative, Rowlandson's primary focus within her text is adopting the rhetorical strategy of appearing passive. Within this purpose, her retrospective description of enforced starvation becomes a primary facet of maintaining this appearance; to be starving is to be empty, inherently passive. Returning to Moshfegh, the narrator frames her own captivity as one existing within her own body, escapable only through dissociation. Rowlandson is painstaking in conveying that her starvation was imposed upon her by the circumstances of captivity at the hands of her captors. Similarly, Moshfegh's narrator experiences starvation as a consequence of her sleeping. While asleep, she is unable to eat, resulting in enhanced thinness: "Since I'd started sleeping all the time, my body had gotten very thin. My muscles had turned soft. I still looked good in clothes, but naked I looked fragile, weird" (Moshfegh 143). In both texts, starvation becomes symptomatic of the real or imagined captivities of the focalizers. As the emptiness of starvation

is framed by the focalizers as inherently symptomatic and not self-imposed, starvation becomes a primary vehicle of conveying passivity to the reader.

With these claims in mind, the narrators are able to reap the benefits of the moral implications of asceticism associated with being, as Joan Jacob Brumberg states in her book exploring anorexia, “fasting girls.” Brumberg’s *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia* (2000) explores self-starvation as a mental and physical disease and as a method of conveying asexuality and piety, with a specific focus on anorexia in the nineteenth century. Rowlandson and Moshfegh’s texts provide depictions of starvation that stress the relationship between passivity and hunger in women, as Rowlandson clearly uses hunger as a means of appearing passive and as a rhetorical strategy aimed at emphasizing her faith and her purity while Moshfegh’s narrator quietly implicates herself as anorexic, citing symptoms of starvation yet denying the disorder in speech. Brumberg claims that “some pious women did deny themselves ordinary food in order to become receptacles for the food that was God, but power and service to others, through ‘holy eating,’ was the ultimate goal” (47). In other words, Brumberg cites the long-held sanctification of women’s bodies via ascetic appetites, focusing on women who chose to express their devotion to God through abstinence from nutrition. Applying Brumberg’s research to Rowlandson provides an opportunity to explore the author’s emphasis on her hunger throughout the text. Not only does her hunger allow her to present herself as passive, but her survival amidst such hunger allows for the claim that she was spared from death by God, based on her superior faith. Rowlandson states that throughout her experience of captivity, “the Lord renewed my strength still, and carried me along, that I might see more of His power” (4). While this particular assertion came with respect to the ordeal as a whole and not her starvation in particular, her syntax implies that she was granted divine sustenance throughout her experience of captivity,

that her captors depleted her of strength, and yet she was miraculously kept alive by God alone. Her assertion is not unlike some of the “fasting girls” that Brumberg focuses on, specifically those who were said to be suffering from “anorexia mirabilis,” or “miraculously inspired loss of appetite” (44). Brumberg focuses specifically on the sanctified “fasting girl,” Catherine of Siena, who “ate only a handful of herbs each day and occasionally shoved twigs down her throat to bring up any food that she was forced to eat” (43). Catherine of Siena’s refusal of traditional nutrition in favor of holy sustenance echoes Rowlandson’s assertions that she was able to survive amidst starvation due to her piety. Moreover, Brumberg argues that there is a strong correlation between appetite, eating, and sexuality, claiming that a woman’s appetite has the power to “underscore her purity” (49). Later, psychoanalysts such as Freud made claims that food is closely related to “basic sexual desires or their absence” (Brumberg 213). Rowlandson is painstaking in assuring her reader that, throughout her time as a captive, she never suffered any “abuse of unchastity,” meaning that she was never raped by her captors and was thereby able to maintain an image of purity and passivity in the publication of her captivity narrative (22). In this sense, Rowlandson’s *Narrative* becomes a project in self-sanctification, in the dual assertions of her being sustained by God despite starvation and her maintenance of her supposed sexual purity, the relationship between starvation and a pious female body becomes observable within the text.

Rowlandson’s *Narrative* pursues a passive, pious image and employs a rhetorical strategy of utilizing the linkage of food to purity in the seventeenth century to achieve her purpose. Similarly, in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* the pursuit of a thin body becomes a religion in and of itself. Scholars Michelle Lelwica, Emma Hoglund, and Jenna McNallie argue in “Spreading the Religion of Thinness from California to Calcutta: A Critical Feminist Postcolonial Analysis” that the celebration of thin, sometimes emaciated, white female bodies within Western culture

becomes a pseudo-religion in and of itself, with its devotees committing, not unlike the sanctified “fasting girls,” to an ascetic course of living, valuing the procuring and maintenance of a thin body as a divine pursuit. The authors assert that the overwhelming pursuit of a thin body “functions as a kind of ‘cultural religion’—what I call the religion of thinness—with its own set of convictions, myths, rituals, images, and moral codes that encourage women to find meaning and purpose in their lives through the pursuit of a ‘perfect’ body” (Lelwica et al 23). In Moshfegh’s text, the narrator emphasizes (and, arguably, overemphasizes) her thinness:

Protruding ribs, wrinkles around my hips, loose skin around my abdomen. My collarbones jutted out. My knees looked huge. I was all sharp corners at that point. Elbows, clavicles, hip points, the knobby vertebrae of my neck. My body was like a wooden sculpture in need of sanding. Reva would have been horrified to see me naked like that. “You look like a skeleton. You look like Kate Moss. No fair,” she would have said. (84)

The narrator constantly asserts that she is very thin, with descriptions that come across as very much akin to the desperate imagery persistent on pro-anorexia (more commonly referred to as “pro-Ana”) blogs. Despite this, she denies being anorexic, saying that ““Not every skinny person has an eating disorder”” (82). Early in the text, the narrator self-identifies as someone who “looks like a model” (13) and a “spoiled WASP” (34). With these self-identifications in mind, the narrator asserts that she is white and conventionally attractive, as well as financially privileged. These axes of power function as a means of establishing the narrator as a woman stationed in a position of a sort of cultural hegemony; the narrator is a self-identified “it girl,” which, in considering the incredible thinness presented as the standard for 21st-century women (solidified by the text’s numerous references to Kate Moss), means that the narrator, too, is a “fasting girl.”

Within the “religion of thinness” bodies such as Moshfegh’s narrator are pseudo-sanctified, they are hailed as ideal and looked to for “thinspiration,” casting aside the negative consequences of emaciation for the pursuit of a thin body at all costs. This pursuit is morbidly portrayed by Moshfegh when the narrator’s best friend, Reva, discusses the death of her mother after she passes from cancer. Amidst her grief, she exhibits a disturbing fascination with the thinness of her mother’s emaciated, dying body:

“You know, in a way, I’m glad we didn’t have to get her embalmed. That’s just creepy. She was just a sack of bones, anyway. She probably weighed half of what I weigh now. Well, maybe not half exactly. But she was super skinny. Skinnier than Kate Moss, even.” (162)

In drawing a comparison between a dying, emaciated body to that of a supermodel, the text asserts that the “religion of thinness,” as practiced by the modern “fasting girl,” such as Reva, who the narrator asserts is openly bulimic, or the narrator herself, is an exercise in suicide. Moreover, in the postcolonial sense, the beauty standard established as one not unlike Moshfegh’s narrator, white, thin, and financially well-off, establishes thin, white women’s bodies as the sanctified body in the “religion of thinness.” This sanctification establishes that the concept of the “fasting girl” as one devoted to a brand of asceticism that sanctifies young women for attempting to destroy and emaciate their bodies for a “divine” purpose, that being purity or maintenance of a hegemonic position, or both, has the same result: the decimation of women’s bodies at the personal and systemic level, wherein the white women’s pursuit of thinness furthers the narrative of white womanhood as fragile, vulnerable, and passive identity on its surface while remaining violently destructive at its core.

Self-denial is intrinsic to the attempt to curate passivity within Rowlandson and Moshfegh's captivity narratives. In the same way that Mary Rowlandson ensures her survival by instilling herself within the indigenous community that she identifies as her captors while explicitly denying that her survival was self-earned, Moshfegh's narrator is only able to achieve the passivity and dissociation she finds to be so ultimately pleasurable through the use of narcotics. The narrator states:

I *was* "on drugs." I took upwards of a dozen pills a day. But it was all very regulated, I thought. It was all totally aboveboard. I just wanted to sleep all the time. I had a plan.

"I'm not a junkie or something," I said defensively. (Moshfegh 12)

The narrator, narrating retrospectively, highlights her unreliability as both a character and a narrator. To apply a narratological lens, I aim to analyze the narrator as both a character and a retrospective narrator. For the purpose of clarity, I will refer to the retrospective narrator as "Narrator," and the character that Narrator focuses on as "Character." Narrator makes clear that she is narrating retrospectively, making such an implication by interjecting Character's thoughts with "I thought." Moreover, Narrator implies Character's unreliability in simultaneously claiming that she is on drugs and actively taking multiple medications while practicing self-denial in claiming that she is not addicted, not a "junkie." Moreover, relating Narrator and Character's unreliability to the overarching concept of dissociation feminism, Narrator finds great challenge in relaying the trauma of Character's experience to the reader. This trauma primarily stems from being orphaned while attending college, Narrator states: "My parents died one after the other my junior year of college—first my dad from cancer, then my mother from pills and alcohol six weeks later" (Moshfegh 49). With this traumatic grief in mind, Narrator

becomes unreliable in relaying Character's reaction to such grief. Narrator claims: "I'd feel sorry for myself, not because I missed my parents, but because there was nothing they could have given me if they'd lived" (Moshfegh 69). Later, in the hours before attending the funeral of a friend's parent, Narrator exposes the anguish that Character expressed upon losing her second parent and thereby becoming orphaned: "I spent days in the house alone, poring over my childhood photo albums, sobbing over piles of my mother's unopened packages of pantyhose. [...]. There was no big drama. Things were quiet" (Moshfegh 153). The contradiction present in the narrator exemplifies the dissociative effect of Character's trauma, made evident in the unreliable narration. Narrator makes clear that Character responded to being orphaned with a melodramatic flourish, grieving over objects related to her parents. Following this narration, Narrator claims that there was no such melodrama, that "things were quiet." Narrator's denial of Character's trauma, leading to her drug-fueled sleeping project exemplifies the same tactic that Rowlandson utilizes throughout *Narrative*: the denial of one's actions and assertion of passivity.

Moshfegh's novel stands as a remarkable example of unreliable, traumatic narration, with the text's narrator retelling her past traumas retrospectively within a larger frame narrative. The narrator states that her attempt to sleep for an entire year is motivated by an extreme attempt to heal from past trauma; her approach is extreme in that the narrator aims to heal mentally in order to move past the trauma but goes so far as to hope that her sleeping project would physically renew her body, removing the aftereffects from her physical being. Narrator states: "I knew in my heart—this was, perhaps, the only thing my heart knew back then—that when I'd slept enough, I'd be okay. I'd be renewed, reborn. I would be a whole new person, every one of my cells regenerated enough times that the old cells were just distant, foggy memories" (51).

This moment emphasizes the frame structure and the way in which Moshfegh places narrative space between Character and Narrator. Narrator's interjection on the retelling of Character's motivations for pursuing the sleeping project, referring to "back then," notes that time has passed since Character undertook the project to the point when Narrator takes it upon herself to retrospectively narrate her experience. Harkening back to my earlier narratological analyses, I refer back to narratologist Trevor Dodman's essay concerning Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms* as a piece of trauma narrative. Dodman writes, with respect to Hemingway's focalizer Frederic Henry, that "the disarticulation of the self occurs in a narrative that shifts unpredictably between past and present, between the time of the action and the time of the telling" (251). In applying Dodman's assertion to *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, one can ascertain that a similar "disarticulation of self" occurs between Narrator and Character. Referring back to Narrator's interjection that marks the passage of time, the trauma invokes the same disarticulation of self that is present within Hemingway's text.

The "disarticulation of self," rooted in trauma, establishes the frame narrative within the texts and makes visible Narrator's unreliability in retelling Character's trauma. The frame narrative becomes particularly observable in Narrator's retelling of her parents' deaths. Narrator accompanies her friend, Reva, to Reva's childhood home for funeral services following the passage of her friend's mother from cancer, the same illness that caused the death of Narrator/Character's father. Narrator retells the experience, saying: "I sensed Reva's misery in the room with me. It was the particular sadness of a young woman who has lost her mother—complex and angry and soft, yet oddly hopeful. I recognized it. But I didn't feel it inside of me" (Moshfegh 134). Narrator retells Character's remembrance of a "particular sadness" that she recognizes from her own experiences grieving her mother. The frame narrative

is structured around the past grief Character experienced following the loss of both parents, which is then examined by an older Character, who has decided to heal from such trauma by attempting to sleep for a year, both of Character's experiences (the earliest grief-based trauma and the sleeping project, are then unreliably re-told at an even later point in time by Narrator, who, as with narratologist Trevor Dodman's assessment of Narrating Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, "shifts unpredictably between past and present, between the time of the action and the time of the telling" (251). Following the remembrance of the "particular sadness" Character recognizes from the loss of her own mother, Narrator claims that Character's placement at a funeral for her friend's mother led her to remember the trauma of the loss of her father, Narrator states:

In the time I had to kill there in the dark of Reva's childhood bedroom, I decided I would test myself to see what was left of my emotions, what kind of shape I was in after so much sleep. My hope was that I'd healed enough over half a year's hibernation, I'd become immune to painful memories. So I thought back to my father's death again. (Moshfegh 137-138)

Narrator makes clear that, whilst in the midst of Character's sleeping project, the experience of being in her friend's childhood bedroom directly following the loss of a parent opened the door to remembering her trauma, claiming that she allowed herself to remember as a "test" to experiment with the validity and effectiveness of her sleeping project. I would argue that this portion of narration is unreliable given its relationship to trauma, Narrator claims that Character was merely conducting a test, however, the retelling of the trauma following the inception of the experiment seems to imply that she was far from in control of her emotions, being littered with

contradictions and instability. On the day of her father's passing, Narrator claims that Character experienced a love for her father that she had previously not felt,

all of a sudden, I loved him. So I lost it. I started crying. "I'll be all right," my father told me. I got down on my knees beside him and buried my face in his stale blue blanket. I wanted him to pet my head. I wanted him to soothe me. He stared up at the ceiling as I begged him not to leave me alone with my mother.

(Moshfegh 139)

Narrator describes Character's anguish in watching her father succumb to his illness, her sobs, her pleading to not leave her alone with her mother, who would die by suicide just a few weeks after her father. However, Narrator seems to deny Character feeling any kind of grief following her "experiment" in traumatic remembering, saying instead that Character was completely unmoved, "Remembering it all now in Reva's bed, I felt almost nothing" (Moshfegh 140). This proves to be an impossibility; Character lies in the bed of her best friend who has just lost her mother, she claims that she recognizes a particular sadness of this grief, an emotion she remembers from her own experiences with grief, she then begins to remember the loss of her own parent, but once she narrates the final time she sees her father, the moment when his nurse "pulled the blanket over his head," (Moshfegh 140) Narrator is unable to continue with the memory. Instead, Narrator moves from retelling the traumatic experience at the core of the novel to the outer frame narrative, Character's sleeping project, and subsequently denies having any feelings towards the trauma, which even Narrator, years away from experiencing the death of Character's parents, cannot continue to retell.

The outer-most trauma of the frame narrative reveals to the reader the conclusion of the sleeping project. On the final page of the novel, Narrator explains that Reva, who was at work in

the Twin Towers died by suicide on 9/11, “leap[ing] off the Seventy-eighth floor of the North Tower” (Moshfegh 289). Narrator continues to say that she kept a VHS tape of the news coverage, coverage that shows what the Narrator believes to be Reva’s suicide, saying “I watched the videotape over and over to soothe myself that day. And I continue to watch it, usually on a lonely afternoon, or any other time I doubt that life is worth living, or when I need courage, or when I am bored” (Moshfegh 289). Narrator’s admission makes clear that the outermost trauma of the frame narrative, that which inspired her to retell the experience of the sleeping project which is revealed to be a trauma, ending with the death of her best friend and 9/11, and the trauma at the core of the novel, the death of her parents.

I argue that the unreliability of both Character and Narrator demarcates a notable unsteadiness within dissociation feminism; to appear passive, withdrawn, “dissociated,” all while actively inundating oneself with narcotics to do so is paradoxical. It is this very unsteadiness of the falsely passive white woman that one must confront in the context of a discussion surrounding “dissociation feminism.” By Clein’s own admission, the ability to be a dissociation feminist — to withdraw oneself from society, to starve, to drug, to sleep — all while remaining decidedly and deliberately *un-blissfully* indifferent to the collective forces driving the urge to dissociate, is “the epitome of white feminism.” It is the same “ruse of passivity” employed by Mary Rowlandson in her *Narrative*; in the same way that neoliberal, #GirlBoss feminism repackages patriarchal capitalism as empowering, dissociation feminism positions white women’s active destruction of the self as a rejection of the latter and not its dark twin, with both focusing on an image of rejection of patriarchy while maintaining a specific air of individualism. Moreover, with the Moshfegh’s structure as a frame narrative in mind, I argue that the convergence of the frame narrative and the captivity narrative exemplify a relationship wherein

an unreliable narrator becomes “captive” to their trauma, enveloping themselves within a traumatic narrative that becomes difficult to escape. For Narrator in *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, her year-long project to heal merely becomes a project in self destruction and dissociation. With the novel’s conclusion saying that she has resigned herself to watching her friends suicide “over and over to soothe [herself]” (Moshfegh 289), the attempt to heal from trauma results in a constant dissociation; Narrator is captive to her project, she cannot escape the dissociative project of passivity through sleeping and finds solace in a voyeuristic snuff film. I argue that this text exemplifies the way in which the “ruse of passivity,” with its roots in text’s like Rowlandson’s *Narrative*.

Within Moshfegh’s novel, 9/11 acts as a release; Moshfegh’s narrator is liberated from her passivity, renewed with a new perspective on life, on death through her best friend's suicide: “There [Reva] is, a human being, diving into the unknown, and she is wide awake” (289). Throughout the majority of the novel, sleep becomes the narrator’s ultimate escape, her ultimate high. By the end of the novel, Moshfegh makes visible that the narrator sees the fault in her behavior, longing instead for the courage to exist actively. But the reality of dissociation feminism is a suicidal pursuit. Self-destruction, with respect to anorexia or drug addiction, moves the self towards an oblivion of one’s own design. This oblivion becomes the captivity narrative of the dissociation feminist such as Moshfegh’s narrator. However, in the narrator’s case, she is not one to commit suicide. Rather, she becomes the voyeur, a position that awakens something in her that prompts her to leave her sleeping project and her drug habit intrinsic to it behind. Moshfegh makes a unique choice in framing 9/11 as the catalyst for the narrator shedding her image of passivity and trauma victimization in so far as the attacks tend to be framed as an attack on American values: capitalism, patriarchy, Christianity, freedom. Of this, scholar Johnathan

Greenberg writes in “Losing Track of Time,” the only piece of scholarly material in English that explores Moshfegh’s novel, that “This popular narrative—9/11 as the end of the end of history—took on, as we know, a moralistic and politically reactionary coloring as the attacks became a “wake-up call” to a sleeping and complacent nation.” In this sense, Moshfegh makes a radical choice in positioning her narrator, a white, upper-class young woman living in Manhattan as renewed by the attacks rather than victimized by them. This is not so dissimilar to other contemporary novels, namely Mohsin Hamid’s *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). The novel’s focalizer, Changez, a Pakistani man forced to leave the U.S. following 9/11 due to growing instances of xenophobia, has a relationship with a troubled white woman, “Erica,” who represents America as a troubled nation. “Erica,” like *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*’s Reva, eventually commits suicide by jumping. What both Hamid and Moshfegh’s text have in common is an exemplification of the white woman’s “ruse of passivity”; one could easily frame Reva as a victim of the terrorist attack, in actuality, she chose *not* to be a victim, killing herself instead. Hamid’s “Erica” is framed as unbelievably passive and institutionalized for mental illness, with the text being nonspecific in whether she truly committed suicide or simply disappeared: “one day she had walked out and not come back. Her clothes had been found on a rocky bluff overlooking the Hudson, neatly folded in a pile” (97). Despite her being framed as passive, she is implied to have taken the initiative to actively end her life. It is this commonality between contemporary U.S. literature, that commonality being the trope of a depressed white woman, framed as having no hand in her mental state despite active self-destruction, that begins to establish the trope as manifesting as a modern captivity narrative.

Moshfegh’s and Hamid’s texts are served well by being placed in conversation, in part, because their unique narrative structure places the two narratives at complete odds. Moshfegh’s

focalizer remains unnamed; she is representative of the privilege held by any attractive, white, upper-class woman living in pre-9/11 Manhattan. By contrast, Hamid's novel is narrated in second-person by Changez, who develops a certain level of resentment for his lover, Erica. Erica and Moshfegh's narrator function similarly in that they both represent whiteness in some sense. The two characters converge further in that they both come from wealthy families, both live in Manhattan, and both graduated from elite universities with degrees in the humanities. Moreover, within the text, Erica, too, suffers from trauma related to grief, having lost her childhood lover: "They were both admitted to Princeton, but he had not come because he was diagnosed with lung cancer...He died three years later" (Hamid 23). Following the loss, like Moshfegh's narrator, Erica becomes dejected, dealing with episodic depression. The most valuable convergence in the texts, with respect to an attempt to construct an analysis of the relationship between white womanhood and passivity represented through mental illness, lies in Hamid's framing of Erica's depression as a captivity narrative. Erica states: "I used to turn to it, my writing, when I needed to get something out that was stuck inside. But I can't get it out now. It pulls me in, you know? I dwell on it instead of writing it." (Hamid 69). The language employed by Hamid implies that Erica is held captive, "stuck" within her own misery. The author makes clear that her sadness renders her immobile and that, moreover, she is unable to liberate herself from her dejected state. The narrator states that:

Seeing her as I had seen her last—emaciated, detached, and so lacking in life—pained me; I recalled the dog we had had in my childhood and his passivity and desire for solitude in those last days before he succumbed to the leukemia induced in him by that brand of tick powder a veterinarian would subsequently tell us never to use. (Hamid 84)

The narrator likens her state, “emaciated, detached, and so lacking in life,” to that of a dying dog. A helpless, explicitly passive creature, made clear by the narrator. It is important to note here that the “ruse of passivity” does not become entirely evident within the text until one interprets Erica’s character as allegorical for America. In this case, presenting “Erica” as a passive actor becomes an impossibility within the cultural lineage of the genealogy constructed within this project as a whole; given the colonial legacy of whiteness and white womanhood in particular coupled with the captivity narrative that Hamid implies as an author makes legible the ways in which Erica’s passivity is false, a “ruse.” In placing both Moshfegh and Hamid’s texts into conversation, the ways in which self-destruction, addiction, trauma, and mental illness work to create an image of passivity become visible. Moreover, within these constructions, the texts work to construct a modern captivity narrative wherein the “ruse of passivity” is achieved by presenting white women as vulnerable, pathetic beings incapable of liberating themselves from their own dejection.

Epilogue:
“I’m in my year of rest and relaxation era”:
Passivity and Captivity in Popular Culture

Throughout the entirety of this project, it has been my goal to illustrate how violence is consumed and used to rhetorically produce a narrative in which white women are presented as a passive, vulnerable demographic constantly subjected to violence. I trace the lineage of this perception from colonial New England to New York in the early 2000s, making clear that the “ruse of passivity” has been consistent throughout U.S. literature over a period spanning from the seventeenth-century into popular, contemporary texts such as *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*.

Earlier this year, Moshfegh’s *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* surged in online popularity, with young girls online proclaiming that they were “entering their year of rest and relaxation era,” meaning they were entering something that looked like a depressive, avoidant episode. I recently saw a post on TikTok featuring a young white girl in a white dress with accompanying text that read “can’t decide if i wanna have a manson girl or a lisbon girl summer,” (“Lisbon girl” referring to Sofia Coppola’s film adaptation of Jeffery Eugenides 1993 novel, *The Virgin Suicides*, wherein five white, middle-class sisters commit suicide over the course of one summer). Up-and-coming “Generation-Z” culture critic Rayne Fisher-Quann recently published an essay entitled “standing on the shoulders of complex female characters,” written completely in, as Emmeline Clein describes in her article on dissociation feminism, “self-effacing lowercase.” Fisher-Quann takes on dissociation feminist media — media that works to construct the very same “ruse of passivity” I have explored throughout the entirety of this project — writing that this type of media reinforces undeniably negative dissociation feminist rhetoric, but simultaneously feels good (and relatable) to consume. Fisher-Quann writes:

i am in my fleabag era. i am in my yellow wallpaper era. i am in my phoebe bridgers era. i am fiona apple, i am eternal sunshine of the spotless mind, do you get it now, do you get it now. try as i might, i can only seem to understand myself through the fictions of the more actualized — and, just as i reassure myself that i am drawn to this media because of some predetermined, inherent sense of self, i wonder if it is creating me, too. who would i be if i stopped consuming things? what would there be left to feel? (Fisher-Quann, “standing on the shoulders of complex female characters”)

While one may be unfamiliar with the particulars of the various references to modern pop culture and more traditional feminist literature Fisher-Quann makes, one does not have to be familiar to ascertain the ways in which these pieces of media represent white women: passive, dejected, addicted, suicidal, vulnerable, hysterical. The media fixation on the “ruse of passivity” is concern enough, given the cultural violence enacted by it, but the pleasure that white women derive in consuming this particular brand of media — dissociation feminist media — raises concerns of its own. The “ruse of passivity” is replicated over and over; the “ruse of passivity” becomes the catalyst for its own reproduction spanning across century after century of consumable media and literature.

In considering the broad relationships between white womanhood, captivity, and violence across varying periods, genres, and narrative structures, one common thread emerges: there is a rampant fascination with the dead, raped, and otherwise annihilated (via outside violence or self-destruction) white women within U.S. literature and culture. Across five centuries of text, the assertion of white women’s vulnerability and passivity has remained, manifesting itself in different modes of delivery: true crime, crime fiction, the media/literary

trope of the hysterical white woman; the assertion of white women's passivity dominates — and very actively dominates — consumable media and literature. This high level of concern for the bodies of white women, of course, proves to be false. The concern for these bodies will always demand more violence to consume. This concern, like white women's passivity within the narratives considered in this project, is a ruse; it is the very demand for violence that constructs white women as “always already raped.”

Works Cited

- Bugliosi, Vincent, and Curt Gentry. *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders*. W. Norton & Company, 1974.
- Brumberg, Joan Jacobs. *Fasting Girls: The History of Anorexia Nervosa*. Penguin Random House, 2000.
- Clein, Emmeline. “The Smartest Women I Know Are All Dissociating.” *BuzzFeed News*, BuzzFeed, 20 November 2019, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/emmelineclein/dissociation-feminism-women-flea-bag-twitter>. Accessed 3 May 2022.
- Davis, Margaret H. “Mary White Rowlandson’s Self-Fashioning as Puritan Goodwife.” *Early American Literature*, vol. 27, no. 1, University of North Carolina Press, 1992, pp. 49–60, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25056881>.
- Dodman, Trevor. “‘Going All to Pieces’: ‘A Farewell to Arms’ as Trauma Narrative.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, vol. 52, no. 3, 2006, pp. 249–74, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20479772>. Accessed 4 May 2022.
- Fisher-Quann, Rayne. “standing on the shoulders of complex female characters.” *Substack*, 6 February 2022, <https://internetprincess.substack.com/p/standing-on-the-shoulders-of-complex?s=r>. Accessed 3 May 2022
- Greenberg, Jonathan. “Losing Track of Time.” *Daedalus*, vol. 150, no. 1, 2021, pp. 188–203, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48609833>. Accessed 4 May 2022.
- Hamid, Mohsin. *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*. Harcourt, 2007.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *A Farewell to Arms*. New York: Scribner, 1957. Print.

- Johnston, Bret Anthony. "Why 'Lolita' Remains Shocking, And A Favorite." *NPR*, National Public Radio, 7 July 2006, <https://www.npr.org/2006/07/07/5536855/why-lolita-remains-shocking-and-a-favorite>. Accessed 3 May 2022.
- Lake, Dianne. *Member of The Family: My Story of Charles Manson, My Time Inside His Cult, and the Darkness That Ended the Sixties*. HarperCollins, 2018.
- Lanser, Susan S. "Toward a Feminist Narratology." *Style*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1986, pp. 341–63, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42945612>. Accessed 4 May 2022.
- Lelwica, Michelle, et al. "Spreading the Religion of Thinness from California to Calcutta: A Critical Feminist Postcolonial Analysis." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2009, pp. 19–41, <https://doi.org/10.2979/fsr.2009.25.1.19>. Accessed 4 May 2022.
- Lepore, Jill. *The Name of War: King Philip's War and the Origins of American Identity*. Vintage, 1999.
- Logan, Lisa. "Mary Rowlandson's Captivity and the 'Place' of the Woman Subject." *Early American Literature*, vol. 28, no. 3, University of North Carolina Press, 1993, pp. 255–77, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25056945>.
- Marcus, Sharon. "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention." *Feminists Theorize the Political*, edited by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, Routledge, 1992, pp. 385-401.
- Mather, Cotton. *Magnalia Christi Americana*. 1702. Internet Archive, 2007, <https://archive.org/details/magnaliachristia00math>
- Moshfegh, Ottessa. *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*. Penguin Publishing Group, 2018.
- Nafisi, Azar. *Reading Lolita in Tehran*. Penguin Random House, 2003.

- Namias, June. *White Captives: Gender and Ethnicity on the American Frontier*. UNC Press, 1993.
- Novosat, Courtney. "Outside Dupin's Closet of Reason: (Homo)Sexual Repression and Racialized Terror in Poe's 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue.'" *Poe Studies*, vol. 45, no. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012, pp. 78–106, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48599425>.
- Phelan, James. "Estranging Unreliability, Bonding Unreliability, and the Ethics of 'Lolita.'" *Narrative*, vol. 15, no. 2, 2007, pp. 222–38, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30219252>. Accessed 3 May 2022.
- Poe, Edgar A. "The Murders in the Rue Morgue." New York: J.H. Sears, 1900.
- Rowlandson, Mary W. *Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. 1682. Project Gutenberg, 2008, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/851/851-h/851-h.htm>
- Schuller, Kyla. *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism*. Bold Type Books, 2021
- Thoreau, Henry D. *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. 1849. Project Gutenberg, 2003, <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4232/pg4232-images.html>.
- Watson, Charles "Tex". *Will You Die for Me*. Abounding Love Ministries, 2010. *Abounding Love Ministries*, https://www.aboundinglove.org/images/bookPDFs/Will_You_Die_For_Mesmall.pdf. Accessed 3 May 2022.
- Wright, Richard. *Native Son*. Harper, 1940.