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Selfe Citizenship

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CHAPTER 14

Like a Stone in Your Stomach: Articulating the Unspeakable in Rape Victim-Survivors' Activist Selfies

Debra Ferreday

Abstract This chapter examines *Project Unbreakable*, a photographic project which posts selfies made by survivors of rape and sexual abuse, to demonstrate how selfie culture operates as a space of embodied resistance. Following Senft and Baym's view of selfies as relational and constitutive practices that involve the mobilisation of affect as a basis of politically engaged community building, it examines the ways in which selfies disrupt dominant narratives of survival as 'speaking out', a discourse which privileges some survivors' experiences as more worthy than others. Selfies, I argue, are moving in that they literally move, circulating virally in a culture that produces victim-survivor experience as both 'unspeakable' and 'spoken for': this chapter pays attention to the ways in which they both move and mobilise us.

Keywords Rape · Survival · Activism · Twitter · Trauma · Recovery narratives

Project Unbreakable (<http://projectunbreakable.tumblr.com/>) is a photography project that uses the visual imagery of the selfie to make visible survivors' experiences of rape and sexual abuse. The project uses

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Tumblr to publish survivor selfies: in its 6 years of operation, there have been thousands, submitted by people of all genders. Its stated aim is 'to give a voice to survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse'. Each submission follows a variation on a by now familiar format associated with selfie activism¹: a single, unnamed individual, holding up a placard with handwritten words. The words may be those of the survivor him- or herself, but are more usually quotes, words spoken by the rapist during the assault experienced by the author/subject or by others, including family, friends, teachers and law enforcement, who denied or denied the survivor's account of their experience. The project was founded in 2009 by Grace Brown (who recently stepped down), then a photography student who was deeply moved when a friend confided in her about her own experience of abuse: as Brown describes it, this experience, which led her to meditate on the many, many survivors whose stories would ordinarily remain untold and would instead linger 'like a stone in your stomach', was 'the last straw'² leading to the project's inception. I want to think about this image of living with a stone in the stomach as a way of thinking through what it means to inhabit traumatised subjectivity in everyday life, what forms of knowledge might be entailed in stone-carrying and how a recognition of such knowledge might be mobilised to transformative effect. A stone is a burden if carried, but also a potential tool and a powerful, shattering weapon.

ON THE AFFECTIVE POLITICS OF BEING MOVED

To look at *Project Unbreakable* is to encounter an emotionally devastating archive of feeling: it is staggering how many carry such a stone. Even in a mediated society steeped in violent imagery, the affective power of such a medium is considerable. To look at *Project Unbreakable* is emotionally overwhelming, occasioning rage, despair and sadness. Often – always – these images are harrowing. To read the words of rapists alongside the faces of their victims is confronting, even engulfing.³ In fact so great is the project's concern about the potentially triggering effect of viewing so many visually immediate accounts of sexual assault that updates are posted infrequently, resisting the fast-moving temporality more usually associated with social media: as the site's FAQ page has it, 'this project is a sensitive topic, and we don't want to overwhelm anyone with what is being posted. It's more important to make sure that everyone following the blog also takes time for themselves'. Sharing practices on the site are shaped by the need for

sensitivity, for caring forms of communality; comments on individual entries are not allowed: trigger warnings are ubiquitous.⁴ The aim in keeping examples temporally separate, then, is not simply to reproduce the sensationalist and individualistic narrative of the heroic survivor associated with mainstream media representations of survivor testimony, but to attempt to balance the need to bear witness to the scale of rape and sexual violence – to reconstitute the atomised and fragmented hidden community of the walking wounded into a collective – with the equally pressing need for each individual to be named, seen and heard in the clamour of a media society that continually silences and erases the experience of those whose trauma excludes them from neo-liberal framings of citizenship.

The timing of these posts, then, represents a performance of the need to walk the fine line between galvanising resistance and re-victimising readers by overwhelming them: between productive, empathic rage and disempowering despair. But the survivor selfies are not simply representations of violence: as Sentf and Baym remind us, selfies are relational and constitute practices: they initiate 'the transmission of human feeling in the form of a relationship (between photographer and photographed, between image and filtering software, between viewer and viewed, between individuals circulating images, between users and social software architectures, etc)'. Hence, selfies 'send... different messages to different individuals, communities, and audiences' (Sentf and Baym 2015: 1589). It is this sharing of messages, this transmission of affect, I argue, that allows *Project Unbreakable* to function as a site of resistance. Selfies are moving in that they literally move, circulating virally in a culture that produces victim-survivor experience as both 'unspeakable' and 'spoken for': and they both move and mobilise us.

ACTS OF CITIZENSHIP

As Engin Isin has argued, recent times have seen the emergence of new ways of claiming citizenship, with new media and social networking constituting important sites of struggle and enabling new acts of citizenship (Isin 2009). Central to the activist potential of victim-survivor selfies is this facilitation of action, in a context that positions sexual violence as unspeakable: activist selfies allow for speaking out, but on one's own terms. This is important because, as Tanya Horeck argues, the figure of the 'rape victim' is at once invisible and hyper-visible: rape is imagined as the most private and intimate of crimes, yet media and popular culture are

saturated with images of sexual violence ranging from the eroticised and sensational to 'issue-based' representations including soap storylines, mid-dle-brow mainstream cinema and the proliferation of popular survivor narratives in publishing and TV (Horeck 2004). In this context, selfe activism constitutes a way of articulating victim-survivor citizenship that resists the overwhelming cultural imperatives that construct this term as a binary (you are either a victim or a survivor) or as a narrative of linear progress through 'recovery' (you start out as a victim, but through personal effort, become a survivor). In this sense, victim-survivor selfes speak to Adl Kuntzman's reminder that selfe activism work by mobilising the intimate and personal to political effect (Kuntzman 2015): in capturing the rage, sadness and trauma that may surface in a single moment, they are acts of citizenship in that they refuse the need to become citizen through survivorhood and instead draw attention to the actual experience of the vast body of citizens who are also already victim-survivors.

It is the visual nature of selfes, their apparent capturing of a fleeting (if still composed) moment, that potentially opens up a space for resisting dominant narratives of victimhood and survivorhood. Such narratives circulate in culture to overwhelming effect: having been raped, we are told, there is work to be done to ensure that appropriate survivorhood which restores one to – albeit limited – citizenship (the focus, as always, is very much on the person who has been raped rather than on the rapist). To be a victim is to be non-productive according to the values of neo-liberal capitalism, except, we are told, when survivor narratives can themselves be made productive through commodification, for example, in the form of the popular 'misery memoir', a form which demands a very particular and proscribed mode of storytelling. To 'be a victim' is widely imagined as the ultimate failure of neo-liberal subjectivity, articulated through narratives that frame continued suffering as pathological attachment to one's own trauma, a failure to move on. Survivors are exhorted to move up, move on, attain closure in a linear narrative of courageous self-making that entails 'rising above' the intolerable and unspeakable status of victim. In a context where forms of trauma expressed as mental illness are already subject to disenfranchisement, then, the consequence of trauma is to be doubly denied citizenship.

While the notion of citizenship invokes ideals of equality, the question of who is defined as a citizen is in practice deeply gendered, raced and classed. The question of who has access to justice, and on what terms, is entangled with the question of citizenship: for example, the legal scholar Joanne Belknap identifies a structuring binary through which the legal

system separates offenders and victims into those who are marginal or deviant, and others conversely who embody a 'citizen lifestyle', living within mainstream society and conforming to social norms of heterosexual propriety, and hence have access to justice (Belknap 2014: 140). Yet this positioning of some subjects as citizens, she cautions, is complex, occurring as it does in a context where even privileged women are continually excluded from full citizenship (545). In cases of gender-based violence, the ability to maintain a citizen lifestyle defines the possibility of literal survival: 'financial security, self-esteem, citizenship, social support ... and other official support limit survivors' capacity to ... survive' (Belknap 2014: 419). The experience of sexual violence is deeply entangled with questions of social exclusion, inequality and citizenship: but also, to speak out about sexual violence is to lose citizenship, to become a non-subject whose testimony is regarded as inherently suspect. Rape and abuse are unspeakable, firstly in that the marginal and disenfranchised are disproportionately unable to speak out in the first place: and secondly in that when their stories are told, their status as testimony is immediately called into question.

This is not to say that the very notion of 'speaking out' is not implicated in relations of inequality. As Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray have argued, the dominant strategy employed by survivors' movements has been to encourage 'breaking the silence' in both public and private contexts. This project is almost universally articulated in terms of speech: as they note, 'survivor demonstrations are referred to as "Speak Outs," the name of the largest national network of survivors of childhood sexual abuse is VOICES, and the metaphor figures prominently in book titles' (Alcoff and Gray 1993). This notion of 'speaking out' has gained traction, they note, in the mainstream media, with figures such as Oprah Winfrey featuring survivors discussing their experience with psychiatric 'experts'. This speech can result in genuinely transgressive moments of solidarity that effect social change: but it is also always subject to a framing that produces a hierarchy between survivor and expert, with testimony always subject to potential recuperation as sensationalised media commodity. These representations as rape, they argue, involve a particular performance of emotion in which the survivor must appear upset, but not too upset, and especially not too angry (Alcoff and Gray 1993: 284). Further, the framing of rape through mediated forms of speech, like the headlines that have become a regular feature of rape storylines in soap opera and TV drama ('if you have been affected by the issues in this programme, please call ...'), produces it as a rare 'issue' that affects a small

number of individual subjects such that the real scale of rape as a social phenomenon – indeed as one of the defining social phenomena of heteropatriarchal capitalist societies – is obscured. Paradoxically, we are told that the survivor must affirm her status as not-victim through privileged speech to a trained expert, even as the sheer prevalence of rape together with the ongoing erosion of mental health services through neo-liberal forms of governance makes this impossible. This reproduces the status of rape, and the rape victim, as absent referent in public discourse: s/he is, as Horeck describes, everywhere and nowhere (Horeck 2004).

At the same time, questions of citizenship work to determine whose trauma can be recognised as such. As Jin Haritaworn points out, women of colour are discursively regarded as ‘non-rapable’ (Haritaworn 2013: 70), and the same is true in various contexts of queer, trans and disabled people, people with mental illnesses, and sex workers as well as those simply regarded as engaging in ‘deviant’ behaviour, a fluid category that encompasses everything from non-mogamy to being drunk. Poverty is central in determining who is most likely to experience sexual violence: this is starkly demonstrated by the ‘£100 test’ cited by Walby and Allen, in which the ability to find this sum of money at short notice was found to map onto levels of risk, for both men and women. ‘Among women’, they state, ‘rates of sexual assault were twice as high among those who would find it impossible to find £100 compared with those for whom it was no problem’ (Walby and Allen 2004: 77). In the UK alone, we are currently seeing a wave after wave of testimony from survivors of childhood sexual abuse whose attackers escaped detection for many years through their membership of business, media and government elites, and whose own status as queer, poor or disabled children often led to their testimonies being ignored or disbelieved.

CONCLUSION: VICTIM-SURVIVOR SELFIES AND NETWORKED REFLECTIVE SOLIDARITY

In the face of such overwhelmingly shaming and silencing public discourse around sexual violence, what spaces of resistance might be found? Following Senft I would suggest that selfie practices constitute precisely such a space (Senft 2008). The practices through which victim-survivor selfies are shared, consumed and circulated, I would argue, a potential articulation of ‘networked reflective solidarity’: making connections

between those whose shared experience of trauma is privatised, individualised and made unspeakable. To have a ‘stone in one’s stomach’, to inhabit traumatised subjectivity in daily life is, here, transformed into the basis of collective action and mutual support. This is not to claim some utopian power for selfie activism: although it has formed an important element in a global move towards consciousness raising, it is yet to be seen what, if any, material social change will result: and, as Baym and Senft have suggested, ‘every campaign for solidarity, from the most urgent to the most banal, contains explicit and implicit claims regarding whose suffering and heroism matters, and whose does not’ (Baym and Senft 2015). Feminist scholarship has long shown that those who do have access to public platforms, especially those identifying as feminist, are subject to rape threats and other forms of hate speech aimed at policing and limiting our participation in public debate (Jane 2014a, 2014b). The digital, while it constitutes a potentially powerful space of organisation, testimony and support, has engendered new platforms for re-victimisation and silencing (Alfcoff 2015). Nevertheless, these acts of sharing operate to create spaces of support on the terms of survivors themselves. The proliferation of victim-survivor selfies works together to insist on the way in which trauma is experienced as intimate and personal, as something that one carries around, but also to the collective and communal possibilities afforded by activism. They constitute both a way of speaking back to the multiple denials of citizenship through which rape culture is both reproduced and continually made invisible, and a graphic performance of the impossibility of speech. Functioning both as speech and not-speech, the selfie operates on multiple levels to articulate what is both literally and figuratively unspeakable in culture. As Alfcoff and Gray conclude:

Women’s righteous anger on our own behalf is a success won through political and theoretical struggle. The difficulty we are made to have in experiencing anger on our own behalf is indicative of the threat it poses for patriarchal society. In what ways can we express this anger and unleash its disruptive potential while minimising the adverse effect on our safety and wellbeing? (Alfcoff and Gray 1993: 286)

The survivor selfies of *Project Unbreakable* represent precisely such an unleashing of the disruptive potential of survivors’ rage. As recent demonstrations against capitalism have powerfully demonstrated, a stone represents a powerfully disruptive weapon: but to throw stones is to risk

immediate and disproportionate punishment by the ideological and repressive apparatuses of the state. It is dangerous to throw one's stone: even to display it as an object that might be thrown. The viral and proliferating nature of selfie culture potentially creates, then, a sense of community, of safety in numbers, which makes it possible for survivors to waive the anonymity (and hence the isolation) that is the sole protection afforded them by the neo-liberal state. Through speaking out the stone is potentially no longer carried heavily in the stomach but is hurled, shattering the silence that surrounds what is imagined as the most private and shameful of crimes. As is a political gesture, survivor selfies insist on placing accountability back where it belongs: not simply with the rapist as toxic individual, but with a wider rape culture. After all, the inescapable conclusion to be drawn from these images is that the numbers of stone-carriers are not confined to a small group of unfortunates, but are limitless, stretching back into a long history of undocumented suffering.

And yet we can think of stones as more than a weapon. *En masse*, stones can be used to build, they can form a cairn to guide the lost: piled on a grave, they are a sign of grief, of mourning. And then there is the form of the selfies themselves: in these images as in all selfies, the face is a marker of presence, but the written sign is held at a distance from the face, performing a literal distance between the person and the experience: it is thus a refusal to be defined by the experience of violation, even as it insists on the realness of that experience. The survivor's face is displayed alongside their written words, positioning them as a subject located in language, as one who writes and through writing takes back their own experience. What is more, by reproducing the words of rapists, they make visible that sexual violence is itself inextricably entangled with normative social discourses around violence, gender and sexuality: we start to see patterns, scripts emerging (e.g. in which male victims are told to be 'good little girls') that shatter the illusion of sexual violence as somehow separate from the normal, the natural and the everyday.

Finally though, although the words it bears are shocking and violent, the sheet of paper itself suggests hope: in the child's game of rock paper scissors, paper beats rock, not through superior strength or violence, but through the protective and caring gesture of wrapping. The stone of trauma might be thrown, but is never quite thrown away: and yet to belong to a community of stone-bearers might feel qualitatively different than the miserable experience of carrying this burden alone. Above all it involves a refusal of shame.

In rearticulating the figure of the victim-survivor as activist citizen – by confronting our culture with what it has done, and continues to do, through its yoking together of sex and violence, and especially by refusing its limited and atomising modes of reparation for harm done – selfie activism provides a potential space to refuse dominant ideals of 'speaking out', and to mobilise what have been framed as troublesome, pathological forms of emotional experience to politically disruptive effect.

NOTES

1. Its model of selfie activism has been widely adapted by other survivor projects, and more widely as a mode of 'hashtag activism' on platforms including Twitter and Tumblr to speak about experiences of racism, homophobia and transphobia.
2. <http://www.msmbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/meet-grace-brown-unbreakable-photograph>.
3. Although the content of specific articles will be explored in a future article, I have made a deliberate decision, here, not to cite specific images or texts: since the focus of the project is on the face of the survivor, it feels politically urgent and necessary to foreground survivor experience. This is not, however, to deny the importance of accountability in holding rapists, and rape culture more generally, responsible for the acts of violence the selfies recall.
4. The use of trigger warnings has been controversial in recent feminist theory: nevertheless, I would argue that the trigger warning as genre should be understood as a practice for thinking through forms of practical caring, not primarily or only as a technology of constraint (Ferreday, forthcoming).

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 CHAPTER 15

Selfless Selfe Citizenship: Chupacabras Selfe Project

Sylvia Rodriguez Vega

As undocumented immigrants, we have been portrayed as monsters sucking the blood out of American society. To them, we are not humans, we are the Chupacabras.

– Chupacabras: The Myth of the Bad Immigrant, film by author

Abstract This chapter sheds light on the experiences of immigrants criminalised by the immigration system in the USA. As the media perpetuates a discourse of immigrants as dangerous and threatening to a sanitised American way of life, the aim of this chapter is to focus on the often forgotten stories of people left out of the immigrant right's agenda and often the main targets of punitive legal measures. At the centre of the chapter is ARTivism – activism through art. Inspired by the author's film, *Chupacabras: The Myth of The Bad Immigrant*, undocumented immigrants in California were encouraged to take selfies with a chupacabras mask and stand up to dehumanisation and criminalisation of immigrants by taking 'selfless selfes' and using the hashtags #NotYourChupacabras and #YourChupacabras.

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