

When I left my home, I imagined a new life waiting for me at Wesleyan. I arrived believing that I had left the darkness behind me, but the universe instead dug me into a pit of obscurity in which I needed to find my claws in order to scratch my way to the surface. The second month of my freshman year, my mother's greatest fear came to life: I was raped. That month in 2011, a friend and I headed towards the party at the Psi Upsilon fraternity on Wesleyan's campus. We walked into the house together but shortly after arriving we were separated by masses of students and solo cups. I wandered through crowds of pledge brothers and beer cans determined to reunite with my friend only to find that someone else had been looking for me as well.

His name was Michael and this was not the first time he had searched for me. He was tall, his limbs long and his frame towering over me. His speech slurred but his eyes were fixated on mine. His hands soon began to mimic his gaze, his fingers gripping the sides of my face holding it in place as he shoved his tongue inside my mouth. I froze wincing at the taste of his venom, but the claps and cheers that erupted from his pledge brothers made me question my feelings. Am I wrong? Should I kiss him back? Is this supposed to feel good? If I push him away will they ravage me too? Is this how hooking up is supposed to happen? Before any of my questions could be answered, his lips parted from mine. He grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the stairs. My body, accustomed to an adolescence ridden with feeling unsafe and uncomfortable, followed him as if out of habit.

I remember lying on the tiles of the Psi Upsilon laundry room. His sweat and stench of alcohol on my chest and neck, my blood staining my face and his hands. I began collecting my clothes, throwing my sweater over my body in haste. The first chance I had I darted out of the house. I remember bolting through the door and feeling the seeds of repression plant themselves in my mind as my feet hit the pavement.

Weeks passed and I thought nothing of the tiles. Those memories were burrowed in the parts of my mind reserved for reminiscences of violence. His smell, his words, his taste, his fingers, my blood, my tears, my skin were all locked away in a place where they would swim and murk together. I turned to humor to deal with my trauma, mocking him and hoping that if I laughed hard enough maybe it will just be that: a joke.

Weeks turned into months, months into years, until the second semester of my junior year arrived and the walls that were rooted in my skull began to crack. I remember the day when the mortar that was sandwiched between the bricks blocking my trauma turned to dust. Psi Upsilon was struck with a lawsuit regarding another incident of sexual assault that took place within the house. The entire campus erupted with anger and soon I could not find a space on campus that was free of

the words “rape” and “fraternities.” I could not even escape it in class. During one of these classroom discussions, I raised my hand and spoke about an article I read that stated that survivors of sexual assault often re-write the experience as a coping mechanism necessary for surviving trauma. Rape transforms into just a “bad hook-up.” As class continued, that statement continued to ring in my head.

“Rewrite...Coping Mechanism”

“Survive...Coping Mechanism”

“Trauma...Coping Mechanism”

It rang while I was in class, but it blared when I walked outside. The words slamming themselves against the bone in my skull, my hands shaking as I briskly walked back to my room. I walked past Psi Upsilon when the powerful reverberations of “rape,” “trauma,” “survive” shattered through the wall allowing everything within to ooze through. I remembered his smell. I remembered his fingers and where he put them. I remembered how my throat viciously fought to close up. I remember how he laughed when he saw my eyes water. I remembered how his fingers sprawled over my mouth, his hands squeezing on my face with such force that I thought he would split

“I rewrote...Coping Mechanism”

“I survived...Coping Mechanism”

“My trauma...Coping Mechanism”

There was no wall to hide behind anymore.

I had never felt more isolated then those moments when I realized that I had been raped. I felt like I had no place to go, no space for me, no safety net to fall into. We cannot support each other without recognizing and respecting our differences. We cannot help each other without first acknowledging and understanding our position and privilege on this planet. I cannot stand here and dream of a brighter future without discussing a major hurdle that is blocking us from the world we deserve. I cannot stand here and not talk about the thing that made me feel so isolated when I needed help the most. The hurdle I am speaking of is called White Feminism.

Blogger Cate Young defines white feminism as: “a set of beliefs that allows for the exclusion of issues that specifically affect women of color. It is “one size-fits all” feminism, where middle class white women are the mold that others must fit.” White feminism constantly has me asking, where do I belong? Are safe spaces meant for me?

To ask people of color to separate their race from themselves in order to “focus on cis, white women’s issues” is a cruel, dehumanizing and racist request. Yet white feminists constantly

demand and expect this. I cannot tell you how many times I, and other survivors of color have heard “Why bring race into this? Why are you making everything about race?” I cannot strip away my blackness, nor would I ever want to. It is a part of who I am. It is my beauty. It is my strength. It is a legacy that breathes within me from ancestors past and one that exhales a future of resilience and power.

Unfortunately white feminism is very mainstream and because of that, survivors of color are not able to receive the help they need. By expecting us to fit this mold, white feminism excludes real, serious issues that plague survivors of color. Survivors of color are pushed to the wayside only to be picked up for promotional photos and token friendships.

Statistics confirm that 80-90% of perpetrators come from the same racial background as the survivor in all violent crimes. That being said so many survivors of color never speak up because they feel as if they are letting their community down if they do so. Black survivors feel like they are endangering the black people in their community and enforcing awful stereotypes if their assailant is of the same race.

It took me so long to call my rapist a rapist because I felt so guilty. I felt like I had betrayed my community because I had been raped. I felt so unwanted. I felt like calling him a rapist would enforce stereotypes. I felt like I was endangering the very community I had fought so hard to protect. This is a reality most survivors of color face, it is one that is brutal and painful. So you can imagine why we would not feel safe talking about our experiences in spaces that are not made with us in mind. White feminism wants us to strip away our race, a task that is impossible because we cannot separate what is so tightly intertwined. After experiencing such a traumatic event, Black survivors do not have the time or energy to explain the basic burdens of systematic racism and misogynoir to people who will use Google to steal from cultures but not to learn about them.

“She was asking for it” It’s a term we are all familiar with regarding cases of sexual assault. That sentiment is heightened when it comes to Black survivors. In this society Black people are not given the privilege of innocence. We can see this in the fact that Hillary Clinton once called black children “super predators” that have “no conscience, no empathy” and that they must be brought to “heel.” We see this in how young black survivors are often ridiculed when they come forward about their assault. Look at what happened to the girl who was sexually assaulted by R. Kelly on camera: We laughed at her, in fact on Amy Poehler’s new show *Difficult People*, a joke was made regarding baby Blue Ivy Carter stating “I can’t wait for Blue Ivy to be old enough for R. Kelly to piss on her.” Apparently, jokes about abusing children are always okay when the child is not white.

As we develop, even our growing black bodies are blamed, scrutinized and hyper-sexualized constantly. “That girl is so fast” they say, “her body’s growin’ thick and right.” A long tumultuous history of being demonized and hyper-sexualized since birth, leads black survivors to feel as if no one will believe us and even worse, that we somehow deserve what we got.

Black girls are even demonized for our voices. Constantly told that we are too loud, too ghetto. White feminists constantly tone police Black women, telling us that we sound too angry, that our words are too controversial. We are expected to carry the burdens of systematic racism on our shoulders while donning smiles to make white women comfortable. Tone policing robs us of our voices and undermines the very real validity of our words. That expectation is evil and leaves women of color not only out of the conversation, but excluded from safe spaces and a safe present and future. Our voices are constantly picked at and ridiculed but never listened to. We live in a world where women of color, especially dark-skinned women of color are constantly told to be quiet, to be smaller, to keep waiting until white feminists are ready to use our bodies and our cultures for their personal gain and entertainment. You can only imagine the heavy weight of silence that digs into the pores of survivors of color. That sinking, suffocating, piercing feeling that makes you want to clench your fists and scream—But what’s the point when no one chooses to hear you?

We are told to be grateful to get any help at all even if it is not enough. I remember when I met with Director of Title IX at Wesleyan, a meeting where I left shaking because he told me that I needed to learn to be grateful that my rapist was expelled. This was right before he victim blamed me for other assaults that would occur on campus. Even when we fight to make things better, the burden and the blame of the systematic oppressions that plague us, always fall on our shoulders. Gratitude is expected and if you don’t show it you are berated. Because girls like me are human beings viewed as disposable entities. When we get one sliver of justice, one drop of humanity we MUST show our appreciation and we are to do so by continuing to stay silent and expecting nothing more from a society that deems us as worthless.

This is why my project “Reclamation” needed to happen. I was being consumed and terrorized by the spaces that surrounded me: the fraternity where I had been raped; the co-ed fraternity that I was once a member of, demonizing me for being a rape survivor; the Wesleyan administration undermining me. I felt like I had shrank, my frame crashing and melding together until there was nothing left behind but fear and loneliness. I had no space for me, so I decided to make my own. I needed to take over the spaces that were torturing me and rewrite them for myself. I created in order to survive.

Creating allows me the chance to regain control of situations and experiences I had no control in. My path towards healing really came when I started to find and use creative outlets for my pain. I could be unapologetically angry, loud, forceful, poetic and proud. I could take up as much room as I wanted because through my creative outlet, I was able to make my own world, one where I felt I mattered. Creating, whether it be through writing, photography, drawing or performance art, allows for me to regain control over situations where that control was robbed from me. For years these spaces had consumed me until I felt like I was nothing but an exoskeleton of depression and anxiety. But those two days that I shot Reclamation, I was the most powerful woman on the planet.

There was this moment while we were shooting. I was standing in front of the Psi Upsilon Fraternity, one of my models standing by my side. The sun is drenching my face with light and in that moment I felt so beautiful, I felt strong, I felt happy. I hadn't felt those feelings in so long that at first they felt like foreign entities invading my body, and for the first time in so long, I said to myself "You deserve this. You haven't felt this in a while but you deserve every moment." I never in a million years would have thought that I would feel so powerful and beautiful, that I would be giving myself messages of self-love and care 20 feet away from the house I was raped in. It dawned on me that what Michael did to me, was a complete representation of himself. That rape described him as a person. Even though it was one of the most traumatic, disgusting experiences of my life, that rape has nothing to do with me as a person. How I get back up, how I persevere, how I grow and continue to love afterwards, will always be a representation of myself.

I look around this room and I see a real chance at a brighter future. But in order to get there, we must destroy white feminism. We must create more safe spaces for survivors of color. We must provide funding for creative outlets for survivors. We must listen to one another and appreciate our differences and experiences. Nothing will stop me from continuing to create. Nothing will stop me from continuing to speak out. Nothing will stop me from continuing to be there for survivors of sexual assault, just like the incredible, beautiful people who have been there for me. Fighting rape culture is a painful and difficult task but we can do it if we truly do it together. I stand by survivors, especially survivors of color and I will always stand by them and the choices they make to heal.

So tell me, where will you stand?