

What Does Reading Have to Do With Sexual Violence?

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It makes my palms sweat remembering how my father asked me if I wanted to fuck when I was little. He asked me in baby talk if I wanted to fuck. Yes, I replied, let's fuck.

—*The Incest Diary*

I am stunned by the unselfconscious sadomasochistic embrace of sexual violation when I first read *The Incest Diary*. I want to absorb her intensely pleasurable writing neutrally; I want to receive the quiet tension of each fragment without losing sight of the difference between rape and sex. I want to remember that this is a woman writing about the rape and the abuse she experienced at the hands of her father from when she was three years old until she was twenty-one. I want to hold on to all my feminist commonsense about rape: a child cannot be expected to consent meaningfully; rape is rape even if the victim has been ideologically/psychologically conditioned to want it and find it pleasurable; the testimony is the truth.¹ Each page of the *Diary* makes it harder and harder for me to hold on to my political wishes; I find myself completely absorbed by the sharp contours of its complex textuality; my reading pleasures align me with the narrator's experience of pleasure in rape; I am afraid politics is impossible for the moment. There is yet reading.

Sexual violence feminisms, especially the contemporary MeToo movement, rely on accounts of psychic reality only to ultimately extrapolate descriptions of empirical reality from them.² This move allows the personal

¹ See Judith Herman, *Father-Daughter Incest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), and *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992) for her work on incest and child abuse in the fields of psychology and feminism. For a more psychoanalytic understanding of incest, see Arnold W. Rachman and Susan A. Klett, *Analysis of the Incest Trauma: Retrieval, Recovery, Renewal* (London: Karnac Books, 2015).

² See Katie Way, "I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life," *Babe* (January 14, 2018) and Ijeoma Oluo "Due Process Is Needed For Sexual Harassment Accusations — But For Whom?" *The Establishment* (November 30, 2017) as examples of this move in the MeToo movement.

to be addressed as the political. The *Diary* renders this fairly conventional feminist gesture almost impossible. The *Diary* is a text solely of a subject's psychic reality. It holds on to its diary-ness even in moments of acute self-doubt. And yet, it definitively claims rape. The politics of the *Diary* consists not in relinquishing the psychic, but in reading it. Rape is posited not as an objective fact, but as a reading that can only be formulated and experienced internally. And it is, more often than not, like every reading, insidious and self-contestatory. Part of the violence of rape is having to live through this internal contestation, to come up against self-involvement, and having to tolerate not one meaning, but too many of them. Part of the trauma of rape is having to conjure, construct, constitute its subjective truth over and over.

In what follows, I illustrate some of the features of the *Diary's* textuality by way of narrating its story. Though sexual violence feminisms and theorists of sexuality are in the present moment often construed to be in opposition to one another,³ I demonstrate that the *Diary* is practically unreadable by both camps. I argue that the *Diary* — its own commitment to reading and its demand to be read⁴ — slows us down politically in the urgent struggle to end sexual violence, and that is precisely its inestimable political value.

Nowhere to go: the problem with psychic reality

Published anonymously in 2017, the *Diary* is composed of twelve unnumbered sections; each section is a collection of memories, strung together not by chronology but what appears to be some form of association. The narrator recounts being raped in many different ways; she was also tortured, tied up, cut with a knife, choked, locked up in a closet, coerced,

³ See Bari Weiss, "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being A Mind Reader," *The New York Times*, January 15, 2018; and Lisa Duggan, "The Full Catastrophe," August 18, 2018, for their sexuality-based critiques of sexual violence feminisms.

⁴ There is much in the *Diary* that can be read with psychoanalytic theory. I resist the impulse to interpret in this short essay so as not to arrest the textuality of the *Diary*. But I do use psychoanalysis as a set of reading techniques. I privilege the convolutions of psychic reality over political-corrective certainties; I treat each piece of pathological structure as an expression rather than something to be cured; I use my own reading responses as data about the text. I quote extensively from the *Diary* to allow the readers of this essay to experience something of the text themselves.

threatened, abused, humiliated, all while being taken care of as a child, as a teenager, by her father. He was the one who fed her, bathed her, took her to school, bought her sanitary napkins. She felt orphaned. She also felt desired. She felt abandoned in the periods that he did not have sex with her. She liked some of the things they did. Sometimes, she initiated sex. She took care of her father. She once managed to stop him from killing himself by giving him a hand job. She says that for a long time she would only see her father's face when she came. She entered dissociative states when the physical pain and the fear became too much, like when her father tried to kill her in the bathtub or when he cut into her vagina with a steak knife; she was eight or nine years old.

The *Diary* narrates the experience of extreme violation *and* the desire for it in unflinching detail. Of the last time she had sex with her father, she writes about the anticipation, the clothes she wore, the way in which she held her body when she knew he was looking. She writes about waiting in her bedroom:

The first two nights I couldn't stop masturbating, thinking about my father being so close. At the other end of the house, alone, sleeping in the bed with the walnut headboard. I couldn't help it. I wanted and didn't want him to come in and fuck me. On the third night he did.⁵

She says she wanted *and* didn't want him to come in. This is the tense, double-edged sword-like atmosphere of the entire text. She goes on:

My father pulled off the bedspread and saw my twenty-one-year-old body. I was naked and I was wet. I wanted his big hard cock deep inside me. I was very wet. I wanted him inside me all the way up. I had never felt sexier. My body was pure sex. My father had made himself a sexual object for me, too. I objectified him as I objectified myself for him. I had an orgasm bigger than any single one I had in my subsequent twelve-year marriage. We didn't say anything. Not one word. Then he got out of my bed, went out of the

⁵ Anonymous, *Incest Diary* (New York: Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 2017), 5

room and down the hall and back into his bed. Not one word ever about that night.⁶

She says that he fucked her and made her come. They did not kiss.

We never kissed. We didn't kiss that night, and we didn't kiss when I was a teenager, and we didn't kiss when I was eleven or ten or nine or eight or seven or six or five or four or three. He never put his tongue inside my mouth.⁷

It is not clear if this is a complaint. It is not clear what their lack of kissing means to her. That this is how she communicates the ages through which she was abused makes it sound like she is hurting about not being kissed. That she felt used without being loved. But the last sentence about her mouth also suggests that this was some relief, some safety: at least he did not do *that* to her when she was eleven or ten or nine or eight or seven or six or five or four or three.

The effects of this extreme sexual violence are serious and damaging. As a child, she is afraid that people will know her secret by looking at her. She wonders obsessively if she was pregnant in the first, second and the third grades. She is surprised that her peers don't have the same bloody dreams as her. On a family trip to New York and Boston, she feels sharp pains in her body because she thinks that all the tall buildings are about to fuck her. She tells her mother about it as a child, and then as a grown woman; her mother does not help her, or validate her experience, or acknowledge her injuries and pain except when she is furious with her and sees her as a rival. The narrator tells a family friend she trusts and respects. The older woman places a hand on the narrator's mouth and asks her to move on. She sees therapists, psychologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts. She tells none of them about the extent of the sexual violence. With most of them she does not even mention it. She is unable to have lasting friendships and relationships. She finds herself repeating the pattern of having an abusive, secretive romance with an older, married man

⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁷ Ibid, 6.

in another country. She gets married to a man who she does not desire so that she can have a “sexless home.”⁸

She wonders if it is her fault. She mentions her father’s own history of being abused by his grandfather along with his sister. But there is no real explanation of why her father did this to her. No thesis of ideology, toxic masculinity, generational trauma and psychopathology or individual depravity. Instead, we have his kettle logic:

...my mother sang me to sleep. Then later my father would come into my room. Sometimes he would penetrate me, sometimes he would masturbate onto my body. He said he couldn’t help it. He told me it was my fault. It must have been my fault. He said that he couldn’t help it because I was so beautiful and it felt so good. He said he was a sick man. A weak victim of his desire. And I, too, felt desire; I felt my wildness. Sometimes I rubbed myself on his hairy thigh. I did it because it felt good.⁹

Mother sang lullabies; father had sex. The proximity of tender, protective, soothing care by someone who did *not* make her feel loved, with penetrative, possessive, desirous contact with someone who did, was confusing: did I do it, did you do it, do you want it, do I want it, what do you want, what could I want, who wants what. Against all of that confusion, her own simple admission: “I did it because it felt good.” The feeling good is obviously fraught.

I had orgasms. I remember how scary they felt. Scary and so good. Like I was flying and falling and exploding and about to die. I didn’t know if my body would still be there when it was over. Every time he fucked me, every time he made himself come, or me come, I was pushed further into solitude.¹⁰

The violence is severe; the experience is too *full* — of pain, pleasure, fear, arousal — for a child.

⁸ Ibid, 121.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid, 40.

Her father's kettle logic, on the other hand, maintains an emptiness at the heart of (his) desire: "I did it because because because because." The writing follows each possibility articulated in her father's discourse to its logical end. Nothing holds up. What remains is the narrator's psychic relationship to these probable "causes." This relationship is subject to extreme violence, and also a subject *of* it.

...I didn't [escape]. A child can't escape. And later, when I could, it was too late. My father controlled my mind, my body, my desire. I wanted him. I went home. I went back for more.¹¹

Didn't, can't, could not want to, wanted, went, went back for more. The claim that her father controlled her mind, body, desire, cannot contain this climactic chain of verbs. Her brother suffers a breakdown; she assures him it must have been someone else who raped her. She briefly makes up with her father; she assures him too: "someone else must have raped me."¹² These assurances compromise the content of her truth, and yet, they affirm something of its quality: certain, *because* one has to take a position in relation to the chaos of experiential data in order to make meaning; speculative, for there is something radically unknowable about one's own psychic reality. Between these two slightly different assurances — it must have been someone *else* and I *must* have been *raped* by someone — the narrator does not fall into the abyss of confusion and psychosis. On the contrary, her testimony deepens every time she interprets an event: "My father wanted to fuck me, and sometimes he wanted to kill me. Sometimes it was both."¹³

She organizes the many meanings of each "sometimes" into an interpretation that is intelligible, without nullifying that which is contradictory.

Sometimes fucking me made my father very happy. And sometimes it made him very angry. When I remember the day in the bathtub, I can only see it either from above, watching the two of us, or from my father's perspective. I see the terrified girl. But there is nowhere

¹¹ Ibid, 4.

¹² Ibid, 12.

¹³ Ibid, 16.

to go. The tub is so slippery it is hard to move, and the water sloshes about when she does.¹⁴

Let's do something: the problem with politics

Very few readers are able to tolerate this “nowhere to go” quality of the account.¹⁵ They want to do something with the *Diary*. Anything! Lisa Schwarzbaum¹⁶ suggests the book is highly marketable and has the added advantage of rousing a reader to throw it across the room. Many reviewers doubt the veracity of the account because of the extreme nature of the violence. David Aaronovitch¹⁷ claims that a psychotherapist he spoke to expressed high skepticism about its authenticity. These smug, misogynist reviews are precisely why the more feminist readers like Lauren Oyler¹⁸ want to use the *Diary* for political purposes: raise awareness about the severe effects of child abuse, listen empathically to the story of a survivor, feel her suffering. Many reviews address the problem of her pleasure. Is it rape if she feels good? Is she forced or is she complicit? Rich Smith¹⁹ cites scientific studies of women who experienced wetness, arousal and orgasms during rape. These studies point out that the body reacts in this way to survive even when the person is being forced and absolutely does not want to have sex and is not enjoying any of it. Zosia Bielski's whole “review”²⁰ is about the sociological facts of child sexual abuse, the psychological literature about it, and strategies for survival.

¹⁴ Ibid, 14-15.

¹⁵ Two notable exceptions are Erin Spampinato's essay “Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse, and What Do We Let Them Say?” *Electric Lit* (October 2, 2017) on the history of the reception of incest memoirs and H. C. Wilentz's review of the book, “The Challenge of ‘L’Inceste” and “The Incest Diary,” *The New Yorker* (February 15, 2018).

¹⁶ Lisa Schwarzbaum, “My Father, My Rapist: ‘The Incest Diary’ Book By Anonymous Is Disturbing Yet Necessary,” in *Newsweek* (July 17 2017).

¹⁷ David Aaronovitch, “Review: The Incest Diary by Anonymous,” *The Times* (July 29, 2017).

¹⁸ Lauren Oyler, “Anonymous ‘Incest Diary’ Is a Brutally Honest Account of Paternal Rape,” *Broadly* (July 18, 2017).

¹⁹ Rich Smith, “The Incest Diary Afflicted Me with as Much Trauma as the Written Word Can Transfer from One Body to Another,” *The Stranger* (July 19, 2017).

²⁰ Zosia Bielski, “The Incest Diary: New memoir chronicles the devastating legacy of family sexual abuse,” *The Globe and Mail* (July 17, 2017).

Amia Srinivasan²¹ also relies on the crucial link between pleasure and survival to counter the negative reviews of the book. She argues that pleasure and wanting it are beside the point:

When a victim of sexual abuse says she wanted it, she is telling us about the sort of person the abuse required her to be. [...]She is sexually obsessed with him. How, indeed, could it be otherwise? Describing her father letting her out of the closet in which he had locked her, she asks, “How could I not love the man who set me free?”

According to Srinivasan, there was pleasure precisely because a child was sexually used by an adult who she was dependent on. Her capacities for pleasure were taken over by the need to survive. This was “the kind of abuse that comes so early as to precede the child’s ability to express it, to others or to herself.” Srinivasan points out that there is ample evidence in the text to support her view that whether the narrator wanted it or not, whether she enjoyed it or not, whether she initiated it or not, she was raped by her father. In Srinivasan’s reading, the “how could I not” — heartbreaking, terrifying, tense — becomes “how, indeed” — knowing, resigned, deadening.

At the time of writing the *Diary*, the narrator is in a romantic relationship with a man called Carl. Soft-spoken and gentle in front of others, Carl is angry, possessive and violent as a lover. The narrator says they must have both smelled the need for violence in each other:

I don’t like pain, but I desire pain from Carl. I like it when he pushes on my wounds. It makes them feel better. I like it when Carl hits me. I like it when he bites me. I like it when he holds me down and I squirm, which makes him fuck me harder. And if I cry, harder still. I like it when I have marks from him. Marks I carry around with me, like badges on my body. I want him to abuse me. I like it when I can’t tell the difference between sexual pleasure and sexual pain — when they are the same. The fact that my father raped me makes him want me more. When I told him about my father tying me up

²¹ Amia Srinivasan, “Silent Treatment: The troubling response to a memoir of incest,” *Harper’s Magazine* (March 2018).

and putting me in the closet, Carl said that was his now, he owned all of it. Carl tied me up and put me in the closet. He let me out and face-fucked me. How could I not love the man who set me free?²²

Erin Spampinato²³ argues that this “psychoanalytic repetition” points to the inescapability of the kind of violence that the narrator went through. She “lived” but did not emerge as a conventional “survivor.” Amia Srinivasan also cautions against reading her relationship with Carl as a liberatory narrative where she owns her sexual trauma. There is no freedom here, Srinivasan says, for the narrator is still only trying to survive; Carl is an accommodation without judgement, without blame, but still just that: a reenactment. I am alarmed by Srinivasan’s specifically political foreclosure of textuality. Even if it’s a reenactment, how do we know what that means to the narrator? What is the psychic status of this repetition; what does it express, what does it work through *as* reenactment, what are the satisfactions it affords, what is the nature of that satisfaction; who is the narrator in this repetition: is she Carl, is she the little girl, is it possible to *be* the little girl ever; who is Carl? And what about the repetition that is writing? What about the pleasure of reading her repetition?

Rich Smith argues that the reading pleasures are the very point, for they approximate the “shame-pleasure-horror spiral” that the narrator describes as desire. The reading pleasures of the text are simply there to serve the feminist purpose of creating awareness. The more powerful the testimony, the more stark its effects. No reading here, only truth-telling. He recommends the book to everyone who can stomach it; he says he couldn’t stop reading. Some readers, however, are concerned about this very feeling of not being able to stop reading: isn’t this the most banal apology for rape? I couldn’t stop, I just had to. What if the *Diary* repeats what it is supposed to critique and condemn? What if evidence of her pleasure is used by pedophiles to justify child abuse? What if the *Diary* turns pedophiles on? Allison Pearson²⁴ claims that though she does not know much about the

²² *The Incest Diary*, 126.

²³ Erin Spampinato, “Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse, and What Do We Let Them Say?” *Electric Lit* (October 2, 2017).

²⁴ Allison Pearson, “This ticks all the boxes of a bestseller – but I hated it,” *The Telegraph* (July 23, 2017).

reading habits of pedophiles, she is certain the *Diary* would delight them. What if evidence of the narrator's rape fantasy is used to justify rape: "she was asking for it, she liked it, she meant yes when she said no, it's what she really wanted, she consented to being raped, it was just violent sex? The political stakes are very high. Pleasure is a problem, hers, and especially that of the readers."

Srinivasan, however, is not engaged with the question of reading pleasures, except to explain its origin in abuse. She admits that the *Diary* is as much about pleasure as it is about pain. She recognizes "that sometimes rape and seduction, coercion and desire, are not opposed at all." She ends the review by saying that it is very difficult to review the *Diary* as a literary object:

For all its elegance, its moments of chilly beauty, the book never allows one to fully divorce it, as a piece of writing, from its devastating occasion — much less to entertain the thought that the abuse might be somehow redeemed through its writing. It is far easier to say, or should be, that the book is a significant feminist text.

She does admit that the writing is powerful: "It is a controlled, exquisitely written book, it disturbs and disgusts, but it also mesmerizes and, at certain moments, charms in its quiet brutality." The narrator's pleasure is an effect of rape; the pleasure that her father may have experienced is a psychopathology borne of his own experience of intense child abuse. Our feminist pain, disturbance, disgust, are an effect of witnessing her pleasure; our literary pleasure — feeling mesmerized, feeling charmed — cannot be explained. In any case, it is beside the point.

Something else entirely: the problem with rape is (not) sex

The narrator is date-raped when she is twenty-one. She says that the hospital staff was very kind and her boss was very understanding, but she herself was not very traumatized by it.

The truth was that what happened that night didn't really get to me. I also felt partly responsible for it. We can smell these things. I have a weakness that he sensed. He might not have done that to another woman, but he did it to me. Perhaps I smelled the violence in him and acted differently around him, unconsciously, like I did with Carl. And I knew how to leave my body behind and let things happen to it.²⁵

Here, as in everywhere else in the text, the *Diary* does not privilege either the violation or the self-involvement. They co-exist. They do not cancel each other out. Feminism, however, is currently — always — under immense pressure to prove the reality of rape in the courtroom, on the couch, in one's own mind, in the classroom, in the hospital room, in the bedroom, in the senate. Feminism tries to rescue the subject from the terrible effort of reading. It was not your fault. Pleasure is inconsequential. Rape is rape is rape. You are being truthful. The *Dairy* is unable to find relief in this feminist rescue that is predicated on the opposition between complicity and consent. She presses on, she repeats, rape, pleasure, yes, no, no, no, yes, no, pleasure, sex, rape.

The *Diary* does not posit the complexity of sexuality as something that compromises the politics against sexual violence. However, a lot of contemporary theory on sexuality does present literary reading and the messiness of desire and pleasure as a counterpoint to claiming, understanding and fighting against rape. For example, Janet Halley²⁶ re-reads the facts of two American Supreme Court cases of sexual violence — *Oncala v. Sundowner Offshore Services* (1998) and *Twyman v. Twyman* (1993). Events that were interpreted as sexual violence in court could also be read as ambiguous, confusing sexual encounters. While Halley's reading is generative and persuasive, she completely undermines her own argument about the fuzzy and counter-intuitive nature of sexuality: if everything sexual is up for interpretation by its very nature, why can't subjects interpret their own experiences as rape? Why does rape have to be countered by reading? Why can't rape be a reading? It is not that I am arguing — as

²⁵ *The Incest Diary*, 116-117.

²⁶ Janet Halley, *Split Feminisms: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

liberal feminisms would — that we simply add rape as one of the many interpretive possibilities. Neither am I claiming — like a radical feminist — that rape is *the* reading. I am suggesting that it is only *as* reading, that the claim of rape can profoundly alter the text that it addresses. Once it is on the table, this reading will *have* to be contended with.

In a move similar to Halley, Laura Kipnis²⁷ argues for the complexity of sexuality and the rich life of fantasy²⁸ in situations of hierarchy as grounds for invalidating an allegation of rape. Though Kipnis is primarily concerned with the execution of Title IX cases on university campuses, it is difficult to find any real space — beyond her rhetorical assertions every dozen pages that she believes people shouldn't be raping each other — for critiquing sexual violence. Moreover, her argument replicates some of the gestures of sexual violence feminisms that she finds problematic. She analyzes the evidence of a Title IX case herself to argue that the student, who filed a complaint against a faculty member that she was once consensually involved with, could be lying. The Title IX officers, Kipnis claims, refused to believe the faculty member and thought *he* was lying. Is there really a difference between the officers and Kipnis? Everyone is actually agreed that rape is a factual truth, and it can only be on one side, and people can either have sex or be raped, and it is not fair for women to allege rape in hindsight. Kipnis is also very committed to women cultivating sexual and emotional maturity for their own good rather than relying on legal systems. She calls it grown-up feminism. That Title IX is faulty and not up to the task for tackling sexual harassment on university campuses, I understand. What I don't understand is the moralism attached to alleging rape; for all of Kipnis's criticisms of the rescue fantasies of sexual violence feminisms, she is pretty much trying to rescue young women from their confusion, aggression, vindictiveness, fear, masochism, and risk-taking legal behavior herself. Have the vicious chaos of sexuality, she is saying, instead

²⁷ Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: HarperCollins, 2017).

²⁸ Jacqueline Rose has critiqued what she sees as Kipnis's (mis)use of fantasy in "I am a knife," *London Review of Books*, vol. 40, no. 4 (22 February 2018): 3-11. Elizabeth A Wilson, on the other hand, has found Kipnis useful precisely because of her "subterranean deployment of Freudian principles," in "I'm Not Sure: Response to Rosalind Smith," in *Australian Humanities Review*, vol. 63 (2018), (199). See also the low on reading, high on rhetoric, "Short Takes: Laura Kipnis' Unwanted Advances," published in *Signs*.

of the virtuous chaos of rape cases. What she demonstrates, in spite of herself, is that the chaos of rape *is* the chaos of sexuality. The takeaway is not that the confusing presence of sexual complexity — queerness, sadomasochism, intergenerational sex, regressive behavior — makes rape impossible to allege, but that the *claim* of rape is the surest sign of the destructive force of sexuality.

Srinivasan, Halley, and Kipnis have very different political commitments. If Srinivasan is interested in understanding sexual violence to fight against it, Halley and Kipnis are broadly allied in their desire to understand feminism's relation to sexuality. What they have in common is their refusal to *read* rape. Though they claim that rape and sex are deeply proximate to one another, they are not able to think beyond the "rape is not sex" maxim. Consequently, they can either allow themselves to have a pleasurable reading of sexuality *or* a political fight against the pain of sexual violence. *The Incest Diary* reconfigures these territorial battles by simply turning away from them: "I feel his pleasure exploding out of me. His pleasure between my legs. I want to fuck myself like that, feel him splitting me in two. Feeling us become each other and something else entirely."²⁹

Bloody insides everywhere: the problem that is reading

In the eighth grade, the narrator is asked to keep a journal. She writes everyday about the Persian Gulf War and the weather. Her teacher asks her why she doesn't ever write about herself.

The curves of the clouds, where they were white and where they had gray. If the gray was from shadows, or if it was from being full of rain and the clouds were about to burst. I wrote about the color of the sky. Whether it was hazy or blue. What kind of blue in the morning, what kind of blue at noon, and the blue before the sunset. And the blue of dark, of night, and the moon. Waxing or waning. I wrote about the shadows of the clouds on the fields. I wrote about birds. I wrote about how the air smelled. I wrote about dust, I wrote

²⁹ *The Incest Diary*, 67.

about wind. I wrote about how the smell of the rain hitting the earth was like yellow mustard.³⁰

Later she will say that she went into the clouds when her father cut her:

I floated up out of that bedroom and house. I lived in the sky. I played in the clouds. My body was down in that house, but I was up in the sky. I *was* the sky. I was an endless blue sky when I was tied to the chair when he put the knife inside and cut.³¹

She *was* writing about herself in the journal, carefully and with nuance, in writing about the clouds, the sky and the moon. As a teenager, she dreams of her “bloody insides being everywhere.”³²

Writing about herself is to write about rape because “[m]aybe all of the things I do are about my father raping me before I knew how to read or write.”³³ She tries again and again to go back to this “before” of reading/writing. Her body remembers everything, she says, all the feelings. In her fantasies, she goes back to being eight or nine or ten, “just before getting breasts,”³⁴ when her body was not big enough to accommodate penetration. “Putting his cock into me was pure pain until ... I was a teenager.”³⁵ She remembers feeling split into two, impaled, and that is the time of the body she wants to return to. “My body is pure rapture.”³⁶ Not the whole, inviolate body, but the body at the moment of being split, the body that was now accessible only in the play between the representation of the cut and the fantasy of unmediated pure substance. “My body was pure sex.”³⁷ Once she sits down on a heater and burns herself because she needs to feel her body/pain. She is the sky. She is tied to the chair. In the middle of the book, she faints at hearing the word “incest.” It is the body that hears the cruel word, it is the body that responds to this word that writes her, this

³⁰ Ibid, 69.

³¹ Ibid, 75.

³² Ibid, 47.

³³ Ibid, 39.

³⁴ Ibid, 48.

³⁵ Ibid, 40.

³⁶ Ibid, 22.

³⁷ Ibid, 6.

word that she will learn to write. Flying, falling, exploding, about to die; she says she did not know if her body would still be there when the fuck was over. What body if and when the fuck is over?

What I am trying to say is that the rape and the pleasure and the before and the burning flesh and the sky and writing and reading are the knots around which the narrator's subjectivity gathers and frays. Her father unties the knots with which she is tied to the chair. She runs out in the sunshine. This does not (only) mean that she survives the violence; it also means that she survives the fantasy of being rescued by feminism. The unfathomable experience of pure pleasure—always sadomasochistic, inevitably violative—she survives in writing it. Writing, as in, offering it up to be read. *The Incest Diary* is a stupendous analytic achievement. It is not survival that is the achievement, but the reading/pleasure of it and in it, ours *and* hers.

Today I read in a book about torture that the more a captive is raped, the more likely she is to experience pleasure. Pleasure as a means of survival. The more she is raped. The more pleasure. Does this mean I have felt the most pleasure in the world? My body is pure rapture. Writing this arouses me. I think about my father and I get wet. I think about my father and I feel him in my pussy.³⁸

I feel her words in my body, I feel them in my heart, I read them aloud, I hear them out, I feel shards carving into my eyes. I feel engaged and alive and in her and with her. I feel wounded; humbled by her capacity for the pain she calls pleasure.

Pleasure as a means to survive. My father is my sexual pleasure. I'm tied up and he's hand-feeding me his semen. Hand-feeding me what he just jacked off into his palm. This great pleasure of ours is bursting in light. I feel God in my heart getting bigger. I'm swallowing his sperm while I'm bound to the chair, and I have rays of light shooting out of my head and face.³⁹

³⁸ Ibid, 22.

³⁹ Ibid, 22.

Pleasure not (only) as a means of survival, but as that which survives, transmits itself, outlives, exceeds and decimates our speculations about its functionality. There is no meta-position here; this pleasure is in service of nothing; pleasure *is* nothing; it is certainly of no political use. There is yet reading: not as understanding or resolution, but as the endless reaching for this textuality of sexuality, *and* not being able to do anything about it. Readers are horrified by the *Diary* not (only) because of the severity of the sexual violence. It is our implication in the text: if we can feel the light shooting out of her head and face, what kind of sexual subjects are we? How do we rescue her when she drags us down with her? Drowning, I think: how did I ever think there was a shore: a concept of rape that I could hold without referring back to the abyss of sexuality? The *Diary* engages—inhabits, transmits—the violation of rape *as* the violence of sexuality.

Rape of children demands an active, urgent, decisive response. The *Diary* neither supports us nor stops us. It is rather passive, and yet, passivity, the kind that Freud associated with femininity, is performed painstakingly, maintained actively, sustained aggressively. As readers, we can choose to meet this text where it formulates itself: in the deadly place where rape appears as sexuality. We can refuse it too. And in doing so, we reject its groundbreaking insight: the foremost political intervention available to us in relation to rape/sexuality is reading. It is not much. And yet, it is all we can take for there is no reading of sexuality that is also not a reading of the reader. Bloody insides everywhere. It is too much: who is to say that we are any less—if not more—fucked than the narrator? God gets bigger, yes, in my heart too.

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