No More False Heavens: In the Wake of Campus Sexual Violence

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The Graduate Center, City University of New York
NO MORE FALSE HEAVENS:
IN THE WAKE OF CAMPUS SEXUAL VIOLENCE

by

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ABSTRACT

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This project explores the crisis of sexual assault on college campuses. The project draws on a collective "biography" of women students and their experiences, as well as creative writing and data visualization. It exists on the web and uses a mix of media -- data interactives, photographs, writing, audio, video, and annotated text are all possible mediums. (Only audio is collected from interviewees.)

Through this project I seek to consider issues of gender and inclusion within a college institution, with a particular focus on the built environment of the campus as metaphor. How does the architecture of a shared academic institution influence the psychological and physical experiences of its students? What is the relationship, if any, between the act of those students' shared intimate stories and the changes that result to their built physical space? How does the psychological healing of individuals contribute to the creation of safer shared physical spaces? And how might personal storytelling, safety, and physical space be reimagined in the digital age? These questions can be considered personally, sociologically, through data, or through literature. The project moves beyond reliance on any one epistemological form. The anecdotal stories shared in written and spoken personal accounts are reinforced by data visualizations that reflect
broader components of the sexual assault issue. The broader perspective seen through the data analysis is made concrete by archival materials found from my own undergraduate alma mater.
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NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

1. Description of the Capstone Project

   *No More False Heavens: In the Wake of Campus Sexual Violence* [https://arcg.is/0zy0eb](https://arcg.is/0zy0eb) is a long-form, multimedia, web-based project rooted in personal writing, data visualization, and other forms of digital media. It seeks to explore what happens to a person in the aftermath of sexual violence -- and, when that violence occurs on a college campus, what happens to that college institution and its community when they become aware of that violence.

   This project is my attempt to use personal writing to reckon with my own history of sexual trauma; to use data visualization to establish the connections between my experiences and the broader epidemic of campus sexual violence; to invoke the voices of other women who have experienced campus sexual assault; and to explore elements of our culture, including our architecture and built space, that create an affective environment in which this kind of violence occurs. It is my effort to produce a creative project that is both deeply personal and intellectually rigorous.

   The writing is the primary focus of the project. The other media elements -- data visualization, infographics, images, and archival materials -- are intended to support and enhance the writing. Through my track in “Data Visualization,” I have learned that this relationship between text and digital media is often a best practice.

   There were myriad sources of material for this project: my own personal and creative writing dating back over ten years; academic studies and reports on the sexual violence epidemic; archival materials from my undergraduate alma mater; interviews with other women who were assaulted at their respective colleges; journal and magazine articles; and many books, including fiction, non-fiction, and academic scholarship.
The process for developing this project was lengthy, and one that began as early as my first semester at the Graduate Center. In the spring of 2015 I traveled to Amherst College, my undergraduate college, for two purposes: to conduct archival research in the Amherst College Frost Library Archives and Special Collections, and to photograph the demolition of the college’s so-called Social Dorms.

The Social Dorms were of particular interest to me in pursuing this project. The obvious reason is because one of these dorms was the site of my own attack. But there were other reasons as well: their architecture seemed particularly conducive to sexual violence, and many women students were rightly wary of them. Their construction and eventual demolition also seemed symbolically fitting for the cultural changes the college has undergone in the past 50 years: from serving the nation’s elite to positioning itself as a pioneering institution for diversity. Lastly, I found metaphorical resonance between the pathways that are designed in a built environment like a campus, and the neural pathways that are constructed in a person’s brain during and after a traumatic incident. The last in particular accounts for my distinct interest in the college’s architecture.

In the Archives, I discovered articles about the buildings dating back to the 1960s, when the Social Dorms were first constructed, as well as archival photographs and blueprints of the residences. I later obtained copyright permission from the Amherst College Archives and Special Collections to cite and reuse these materials.

Soon after, I began the long process of collecting data about the campus sexual assault epidemic. This research nicely coincided with projects I did for two courses: “Introduction to Digital Humanities” and “Fundamentals of Multimedia Storytelling” (taken at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism). I sought data from the Association of American Universities,
U.S. Department of Education, the Center for Public Integrity, and the U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Financial & Contracting Oversight. I later supplemented this initial data with additional findings from new research out of Harvard Business School and the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

While collecting this quantitative data, I also set out to conduct qualitative interviews. I received HRPP/IRB approval after the Office of Regulatory Compliance at Queens College (the primary institution of my advisor) deemed my project exempt from requiring further human subjects review. I then recruited interview subjects through anonymous online forums for sexual assault survivors. I briefed interviewees on the project, process, and their various options for confidentiality, then conducted formal recorded interviews. In the end I conducted seven interviews. (I had interest from one or two more subjects, but time constraints prohibited me from being able to incorporate their interviews into the project at this phase. They could be interviewed and their voices included at a later date.)

I went through multiple versions of constructing the narrative in writing -- four or five versions in total. With each iteration, I sought to find a balance between scholarly writing and more fragmented, creative prose. I landed on the final tone, voice, and style when I came to embrace the project as a capstone, rather than a thesis, and to recognize it as a creative project with deep roots in scholarship, rather than as a traditional academic paper.

After writing the narrative, I uploaded the various elements online. I went through various iterations of considering different sites and platforms to host the site. I considered the CUNY Academic Commons, Scalar, Omeka, Shorthand, Squarespace, and eventually landed on Esri Story Maps. I also used a variety of different tools to develop the data visualizations and
infographics: CartoDB, JSFiddle, TimelineJS, Google Charts, and Canva.

2. Relationship to Track and Course of Study

It is not an exaggeration to say that this project was built from every course I have taken at the Graduate Center, both from my track in “Data Visualization” and in my additional coursework in “Life Writing.” In my track in “Data Visualization,” I took the two required core courses: “Introduction to Digital Humanities” with Professors Matthew Gold and Kevin Ferguson, and “Data Visualization Methods” with Professor Lev Manovich. In the former, I began to think critically about the integration of digital elements with writing and scholarship, and creative ways to bring these forms together. That course also taught me to define data and data visualization broadly -- to understand a blueprint or a timeline as a visualization of data. This was a lesson that I took to heart for this project. It was in that class that I first developed the interactive timeline that now appears on the final project site.

In “Data Visualization Methods,” I took a deeper dive into visualization techniques, data cleaning and analysis, and the principles of modern design as it applies to visualizations. I learned the principles of form, proportion, color, composition, design grids, typography, and information hierarchy. This learning and practice was further supported in the two courses I took at the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism, “Fundamentals of Multimedia Storytelling” and “Data-Driven Interactive Journalism,” both of which focused on data visualization methods and which further exposed me to data visualization tools and innovations.

This capstone project would not have been possible, either conceptually or practically, without this coursework in data visualization. It was the work completed in those courses that
allowed me to develop the skills to produce a multimedia digital project and that inspired me with the conceptual and theoretical grounding to pursue the project, especially when connecting large-scale data sets with personal writing.

It was in “Data Visualization Methods” in particular that Professor Lev Manovich encouraged a creative exploration and use of data visualization. In that course I first had the idea to apply data visualization to myself and my own life as a subject; to use data visualization not solely for the analysis of cultural and sociological data sets, but for the support of personal narratives as well.

While “Data Visualization” was my official track in the Liberal Studies program, my other coursework focused heavily on “Life Writing,” which also deeply influenced the content and design of this project.

An Introduction to Graduate Liberal Studies course (MALS 70000) on “Oversharing” with Professor Carrie Hintz provided an initial framework for examining personal or so-called confessional writing through both a creative and critical lens. From the reading assigned in that course, I was inspired by the creative example of Dwight A. McBride in Why I Hate Abercrombie and Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality. In particular, I learned from his use of archival and cultural evidence as textual sources, his combination of first-person narrative with research-based data, and his search for broader patterns that illuminate his subjective experiences. I was also inspired by the anecdotal writings of Sheila Heti in How Should a Person Be? and Matias Viegner in 2500 Random Things About Me Too.

The course on “Oversharing” also introduced me to a critical examination of the ethics of life writing. What ethical considerations must we take into account when we are writing publicly in ways that involve or implicates the lived experiences of others, with or without their consent?
Reading from Paul John Eakin’s *The Ethics of Life Writing*, Nancy K. Miller’s *But Enough About Me: Why We Read Other People’s Lives*, Trudy Govier’s “Trust, Distrust, and Feminist Theory,” and Claudia Mills’s “Appropriating Others’ Stories: Some Questions about the Ethics of Writing Fiction” raised important questions about ethics, honesty, and authorial trust -- as well as the unreliable boundaries between fiction and nonfiction -- that I considered seriously in the development of the capstone project. Towards the end of the course on “Oversharing,” I wrote a paper on the ethics of memoir. This paper was my attempt to chart an ethical framework for non-fiction personal writing and, in many ways, I followed that same framework when making decisions about what to include or not include in this capstone project.

Encouraged by the material in the “Oversharing” course, I subsequently enrolled in a MALS core course on “Life Writing” with Professor Brenda Wineapple. That course developed my analysis of the role of character and narrator in life writing -- how each can be made unreliable or untrustworthy by an author without being rendered any less worthy of our attention. This analysis proved especially important as I approached the content of my capstone, which is by definition both personal and slippery in its epistemology. Consider the women whose voices appear in this project, who share their personal experiences of sexual violence: there is no empirical way for the reader to know if what they (we) speak is true. It is up to the reader to determine what they choose to believe. The “Life Writing” course taught me that this paradox of personal truth-telling does not by definition invalidate the process or purpose of writing a personal truth.

That course, “Approaches to Life Writing,” also offered another insight that proved invaluable to my thinking about this project. In reading texts like Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*, Elizabeth Hardwick’s *Sleepless Nights* and, especially, Hilton Als’s *The Women*, we
discussed the ways in which a writer’s memoir or autobiography often becomes the story of their process of coming into one’s self as a writer -- as they claim the identity of ‘writer’ for themselves. In other words, very often the life story of a writer becomes the story of their self-actualization through writing. This framework offered a model for the way I structured my own story: how my repair has been found in writing -- my own writing and others’ -- more than anywhere else. As a narrative device, the role of writing also offers a symbolically resonant metaphor for voice, as well as healing -- ideas that are already well charted in literature.

These analyses were further crystallized in a course on women’s writing: “Feminism, Autobiography, Theory” with Professor Nancy K. Miller. There were perhaps more relevant readings and lessons from that class than can be fully articulated here. Among the many were “The Laugh of the Medusa,” in which Helene Cixous insists that the reappropriation of the female body must happen by women first; Writing a Woman’s Life, in which Carolyn G. Heilbrun asserts that the role of anger should not be overlooked when a woman writes her story; and A Room of One’s Own, in which Virginia Woolf models the value of using characters to make a rhetorical point, rather than relying on a discursive strategy alone.

Additionally, it was in this class that I was introduced to the work of Annie Ernaux, in particular her book Shame, in which she recounts her personal experience of abortion. In Shame, Ernaux suggests a question -- What if an essential experience of womanhood is not labor and motherhood, but abortion and the choice to reject motherhood? This question led me to parallel questions of my own: What if an essential experience of womanhood is sexual violence? What if an essential experience of womanhood is having one’s personal experience undermined, disbelieved, and degraded? These are questions I invoke in the capstone project.
This course made another significant contribution to my capstone: by introducing me to the feminist scholar Leigh Gilmore and her work on women’s testimony. Gilmore visited our course in advance of publishing her latest book, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives*. I anticipated the publication of *Tainted Witness* for months. As expected, once it was published, it proved foundational both as theory and inspiration for the project. *Tainted Witness* was important not just for the many quotes it provided about women’s testimony, rape culture, and blaming the victim, but also for the framework it offered for making creative choices in the context of writing women’s testimony. Perhaps one of the most important frames the text offered was a critique of redemptive rape narratives, as well as the demand by rape culture for “pure” victims of sexual violence.

This critical lens led me to write a few declarative statements in the capstone about my role as narrator -- statements that I find to be particularly important. One such statement is my suggestion early on that I tend to short-shrift my younger self. The implication is that this tendency is symptomatic of a broader cultural inclination to disbelieve and discredit young women. Another is my statement that I am insisting not on the fact that I was right, but on “the refusal to deny that [the men around me] should have done better.” This line seeks to upend a simple victim/assailant narrative that is familiar but unhelpful in its lack of complexity. A last example of one of these statements is my direct line of questioning of the reader about their set of assumptions. I ask directly about their belief or disbelief in me and I pointedly acknowledge my unreliable status as narrator: “There is no way for you to know if I tell the truth, is there? You choose to believe what you will. But consider if you ask the right questions.”

The last of the many contributions of Professor Miller’s “Feminism, Autobiography, Theory” course to my capstone was the centering of the body as a valid and critical
epistemological site for feminist life writing. There were many texts from that course that drew
from the body, including Roxane Gay’s *Bad Feminist*; Rigoberta Menchú’s *I, Rigoberta
Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*; the poems of Adrienne Rich; Audre Lorde’s *Zami: A
New Spelling of My Name* and *The Cancer Journals*; Gloria Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands*; Maggie
Nelson’s *The Argonauts*; and Claudia Rankine’s *Citizen*, among others. These highly embodied
texts provided an example for tracking the impact of trauma, and its repair, on a body.

A natural sequel to “Feminism, Autobiography, Theory” was Professor Wayne
Koestenbaum’s course on “Notebooks & Other Irregular Accountings.” In this course, too, we
read books that were highly embodied, including another by Claudia Rankine. “Notebooks &
Other Irregular Accountings” also provided two additional writers who were particularly
inspirational for this project: Susan Sontag, especially in *As Consciousness Is Harnessed to
Flesh*, the second volume of her journals; and Simone Weil in *Gravity and Grace*, who in many
ways is a creative and theoretical guide to many of the feminist writers who most inspire my
creative work, in this capstone project in particular. (Among the feminist writers who draw
inspiration from Simone Weil and who have been a source of inspiration for this project are
Sheila Heti, Chris Kraus, Mary Gaitskill, Maggie Nelson, Marie Howe, Patti Smith, Jean Rhys,
Jane Bowles, and Alice Birch, among others.)

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Professor Koestenbaum’s course to this project was
the critical lens it applied to so-called “Irregular Accountings” -- journals, anecdotes, lists, diary
entries, fragments, and memories of dreams -- and, as an extension, its implication that these
forms of writing were worthy of serious consideration as creative texts and as sites of critical
analysis. The lesson was that they were as worthy of this attention as any other text, including
more formal texts. Over the course of the semester, the course reading and discussion offered
permission for me to embrace fragmentary and anecdotal writing, which ultimately proved stylistically important as a strategy to represent the fractured memory and psyche of the traumatized mind.

The last class that informed my thinking was neither a “Data Visualization” nor a “Life Writing” course, but an Anthropology seminar on “Affect Theory.” This subject matter proved particularly useful for my discussion of the affective environment of the campus space -- that which is cultural but also extends beyond the cultural; that which is influenced by the built environment of the campus but also extends beyond the limits of the buildings alone. In this course, I was particularly influenced by readings from Athena Athanasiou on a moment of affective turn; Judith Butler and William Mazzarella on the affect of protests, public assemblies, and collectivities; Elspeth Probyn on writing shame; and Juan Orrantía on atmosphere in the aftermath of trauma. These readings influenced a final paper I wrote for the course on the moment in October 2012 when college students started to share openly their experiences of campus sexual violence; this paper formed the foundation of the section of the capstone entitled “The Lid Blows Off.”

As before mentioned, I can trace various elements of the theoretical, conceptual, and creative foundations of this capstone project to each course that I have taken in pursuit of my Master’s degree. The capstone project has provided a valuable opportunity to bring together the digital media skills that I acquired through the “Data Visualization” track with my interest -- and now theoretical and practical foundation -- in feminist life writing.
3. Evaluation

This project had a number of objectives, chief among them was to explore the crisis of sexual assault on college campuses through a mix of mediums. This objective was realized. Another objective was to draw on a collective biography of women students and their experiences, in addition to creative writing and data visualization. This objective was mostly realized. Initially, I envisioned a project that would evoke more voices of sexual assault survivors, and more frequently throughout the central essay. Out of respect for the privacy of my interview subjects, as well ethical concerns, I decided to shift the focus of the project towards my own personal experience and away from theirs.

Additionally, as described in my project abstract, I sought to consider issues of gender and inclusion within a college institution, with a particular focus on the built environment of the campus as metaphor. This objective was realized. In the abstract, I asked, How does the architecture of a shared academic institution influence the psychological and physical experiences of its students? This question I explored in depth in the section of the capstone essay entitled “Campus Architecture,” and then later in the section entitled “No More False Heavens.”

There were additional questions that I proposed considering in the abstract: What is the relationship, if any, between the act of students’ shared intimate stories and the changes that result to their built physical space? How does the psychological healing of individuals contribute to the creation of safer shared physical spaces? And how might personal storytelling, safety, and physical space be reimagined in the digital age? These questions were touched on and implied in the final version of the project. In earlier iterations, when I was conceiving of the project in a more linear, traditionally academic way, I addressed these questions more directly. When I took
a turn toward a more abstract, fragmented, and nonlinear presentation of thoughts, I decided that it was preferable to imply these creative choices -- and their answers -- subtly, rather than overtly. After all, the project is not intended to be a polemic.

Finally, I proposed that the project would move beyond reliance on any one epistemological form. In the abstract, I wrote that the anecdotal stories shared would be reinforced by data visualizations that reflect broader components of the sexual assault issue. The broader perspective seen through the data analysis will be made concrete by archival materials found from my own undergraduate alma mater. The project did realize this objective of movement between and across digital mediums: from written text to data visualization to images and archival materials.

The objective that was expressed in the abstract and that has not yet been fully realized is the intention to incorporate audio clips as an additional source of digital media. Each of my interviews has been audio recorded. As a podcast producer, it is my intention to cut, edit, and embed sound clips from their recordings into the final web project. Audio production is a time-intensive task, and the sensitive nature of this particular interview content demands the utmost care in the process of selecting, cutting, and editing the appropriate clips. Given these considerations, I decided to wait to incorporate this element of the project until after the capstone project has been submitted to the Liberal Studies Department for review, when I will have more time to adequately give it its due. I have every intention of adding this component after the project has been submitted and archived. I believe that the addition of survivors’ voices will add weight to the collective biography element of the project.

The sensitive and traumatic nature of the issue of sexual violence repeatedly presented the greatest challenge when approaching the project. Though my project did not require further
IRB/HRPP review or approval, I followed the same steps to ensure the anonymity and safety of my interview subjects as would have been required had the project been reviewed. I took great care with interview subjects, and the recruitment process was lengthy. I often spoke with them multiple times before conducting a formal interview. The care required in securing their trust and participation meant that I had to seek a degree of quality in the content of the interviews rather than a high quantity of participants. I also went to lengths to ensure their safety, protection, and anonymity. I deleted any identifying information and gave subjects repeated opportunities to remove or alter their consent to participate; those opportunities still stand. This imperative to protect the safety of the interview subjects -- as well as ethical concerns about my right or ability to represent another person’s experience -- led me to focus more on my own experiences than those of my interview subjects’.

The greatest setback was a personal one. In March, while well into the process of researching, interviewing, and writing about sexual violence for this project, I was again sexually assaulted -- this time by a stranger on the New York City subway. This incident left me unable to continue to work on a project about sexual violence for a significant period of time, as I needed to prioritize my mental health. This turn of events meant that I was unable to complete the project in time for the Spring 2017 graduation deadlines. With my advisor’s consent, I pushed back the timeline for the entire capstone. It was a challenge to return to the project, but I felt a responsibility to the women who had already shared their stories with me. If anything, this incident only further proved the need for women to continue speaking and writing publicly about the prevalence of sexual violence in our culture.
4. Continuation of the Project

As aforementioned, I intend to include an additional element to the project: audio clips from my recorded interviews with campus sexual violence survivors, which will be embedded throughout the written essay. As it is now, the project can stand alone successfully without this additional media, but I believe that it will be enhanced by the heard voices of the women who have shared their stories with me. Further, during the process of recruiting interview subjects to the project, I told each participant that recorded clips of their voices would be included in the final version of the project. I feel I owe it to them to fulfill this commitment as it was initially expressed.
5. Appendix: Screenshots of project

Title image
What our tour guide didn’t show us: the inside of the library, the dining hall, the Social Dorms. The last he only waved at from a campus hill. These are other buildings for student housing, he said. We don’t have time to go inside.

Examples of archival materials

Build better buildings, the logic went, and these college men would be better too.

A cartoon in the Amherst Student, accompanying a 1962 article announcing the ground-breaking of the new dorms. “By FHA standards, these buildings are extravagant,” the college’s then-Business Manager is quoted in the article, “but we feel that every dollar we are spending is necessary.”
Examples of data visualizations
Examples of additional multimedia

Adrien Brody kissing Halle Berry at the Oscars. I used to think it was romantic. The sea of faces smiling, clapping, glittering along.

The poster of the World War II soldier kissing the woman on the street. This, too, I found romantic.

Una: Imagine the voices in solidarity of all the women who have experienced sexual violence.
"Otherwise we are united only by silence."

SEXUAL ASSAULT ON COLLEGE CAMPUS
Examples of original photography

What is uncomplicated: Not a dorm, not a campus, but a house. White, green shutters. A long driveway. A front porch. A flat roof. Attic walls covered in drawings, beautiful and surreal. A home we made in our last year of college, and in our friendship in the years since, ten of us women and one man. A home of our own.
Example of integration of interviews

"If I had a nickel for every time I told myself over the years it could’ve been so much worse, like I’m making a big deal about nothing, you know, I would be a millionaire ten times over. I was constantly trying to convince myself that this was a really second class experience...Like partying really heavily, somehow still managing to have fun, compartmentalizing this pain. I was going on for about a year and a half before I ever told anybody what had happened."

Later in my freshman year, a meeting of the student-run Feminist Alliance: An older student recounts an anecdote. During a hook-up, a guy, a date, trying repeatedly to have sex with a woman, to put his penis inside of her, after she has repeatedly said no. Finally she tells him: If you do that again, it’s rape.

More than one woman in the group, this Feminist Alliance, reacts scoffing: She’s definitely not getting a second date.

I leave the meeting early. When we can escape, we do.
6. Select Bibliography


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