BRINGING SURVIVOR DISCOURSE INTO THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE

Erin R. Kelley
John Carroll University, ekelley14@jcu.edu

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An Essay Submitted to the
Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts & Sciences of
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Erin Kelley
2015
The essay of Erin Kelley is hereby accepted:

Advisor—Debra J. Rosenthal, PhD

I certify that this is the original document

Author—Erin Kelley

Date

4/29/2015
Bringing Survivor Discourse into the Dominant Discourse

Gender-based violence and abuse is one of the most severe traumas a human can experience. This trauma does not end when the act of violence is over, as survivors of these types of trauma are vulnerable to future acts of traumatization. This re-traumatization is especially harmful when survivors tell their stories to people they previously trusted and they are isolated and challenged rather than supported and believed. Composition theorist Michelle Payne discusses her experiences of abuse and her family’s reaction. She says when she tried to talk about the emotional abuse she endured from her brother and the sexual abuse from an older family member, their father said it was her fault, and she began to question her perception of the abuse. She explains: “Although my father and brother now realize the debilitating impact all this had on me, it has seemed from the time I was in second grade, when my father attributed the sexual abuse I had suffered from his cousin to my over-active imagination, that my sense of self has been constructed around a belief that I am usually and easily deluded” (Payne 105). Payne explores the necessity of multiple genres and realities in her essay on authority as a woman writer and teacher. Because her sense of self and reality were shattered by the traumas of abuse and re-traumatization of isolation from her family, her relationship to power is complicated. She cannot represent her experience in a singular genre or straightforward narrative, because she recognizes that she is approaching the experiences from multiple selves. She approaches experiential writing with the knowledge that she must negotiate different voices and realities. She states:

…someone like me, whose sense of personal power was eroded from childhood on, and who knows that power does exist and is held by certain people, being a
deconstructive text is becoming more and more debilitating. Theoretically, we are not unitary individuals with one ‘self’ we need to find in order to be whole. We are multiple selves that have been constructed over time from the various ‘texts’ we have encountered (110).

Payne recognizes that as someone who experienced many different traumas early in her life, her relationship with power is very complicated and that this may be true for other survivors of abuse. Exhibiting power in performance for others by showing authority over her students in teaching or over her audience in writing is difficult. Her father’s disbelief of her narratives of abuse impacted her relationship to power and to her own authority throughout her life.

Though every experience of violence and recovery is different, it is important to look at particular survivor experiences to make conclusions about the most sensitive and productive ways to respond to narratives of trauma. This paper will examine the problems survivors encounter when telling their narratives across genres to distinctly different audiences. I will reference instances where survivor speakers show an awareness of their audiences’ potential or actual reactions to show how listener response shapes the texts of survivors as well as supports or undermines their recovery. By focusing on validating rather than challenging the reality of survivors, audiences can shape their reactions to discussions of trauma to support recovery of individual survivors. I will explore Alice Sebold’s memoir *Lucky*, the public letter of Dylan Farrow, and online survivor communities to see how different audience reactions influence the recovery of survivors. Looking at the reactions to abuse narratives in these different texts will help me examine the current way that audience reaction affects recovery from trauma. I will explain which types of reaction are most
beneficial for survivors and move towards alternative audiences to traditional challenging
listening to move towards supporting survivors and believing their narratives. In this paper, I
argue that the best practice for people exposed to survivor narratives will be to validate,
support, and listen to these stories to learn how to best help survivors move towards
recovery. By bringing survivors back into the communities that trauma has excluded them
from and excluding perpetrators, we can work to eradicate rape culture and move towards a
world without sexual violence.

Acts of trauma like violence and the traumatization of not being believed can
completely change an individual’s senses of self and the world, as it alters one’s views on
safety and interpersonal interactions. Trauma expert Judith Herman explains:

Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships. They breach the
attachments of family, friendship, love, and community. They shatter the
construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others. They
undermine the belief systems that give meaning to human experience. They violate
the victim’s faith in a natural or definite order and cast the victim into a state of
existential crisis. (51)

Many survivors of traumatic events like sexual violence feel isolated from communities they
previously belonged to because the event has altered their perspectives and beliefs, changing
the ways they connect to and communicate with those around them. Though they are isolated
from the general community of non-survivors and from individual family or social groups,
the trauma inaugurates them into a community with other survivors whose altered ideas
about the world may align with their own new views. Telling the stories of abuse and
recovery verbally or in writing can help survivors regain the sense of control that their abusers took away and move towards recovery from the traumatic event. Narratives of abuse and violence are complicated, as survivors writing these narratives may be re-traumatized through this writing and must negotiate between different senses of self and different ideas of audience expectations. As trauma affects memory and many people do not remember all the details of traumatic events, narratives of trauma are not always straightforward or linear. Riki Thompson describes the process by which child sexual abuse survivors use multiple genres and discourses to create a rhetoric of recovery. Like Payne, she recognizes that these narratives will be complicated and advocates for an “understanding of discourse in the plural” and argues that “the discourses of healing can be defined as the numerous dialogues pertaining to trauma and recovery that are entered into and acted within” (Thompson 654).

Because trauma shatters the self and separates one from outside communities, survivors often need to draw upon multiple genres and discourses to help use writing to heal from the trauma and rebuild their place in the world.

While it is true that writing can help survivors to heal and move forward, when accounts of trauma are met with questions and disbelief rather than validation and support, survivors may actually be set back in their recovery. Without support from outside communities, survivors begin to doubt themselves and their experience of trauma in ways that can make them feel isolated and alone. This isolation can lead to feelings of self-hatred or self-blame, even though sexual violence is always the fault of the perpetrator not the victim. Because the way they previously protected themselves did not prevent the trauma, many survivors search their previous actions for mistakes that may have led to the event in
order to blame themselves for the actions of the abuser. These feelings of self-blame are multiplied in cases where survivors share their story of violence and the audience places an unfair or unrealistic burden of truth on the survivor, aligning themselves with the perpetrators of violence, rather than focusing on the survivors. When survivors recognize that their audience is not sympathetic or looking to support them, the rhetoric of telling moves out of the realm of personal narrative and into persuasion, as these audiences force survivors to either argue for the legitimacy of their experience or stop speaking. When survivors feel compelled to re-silence themselves or maintain silence because they see the negative backlash against others who speak out, their personal recovery may be compromised. Additionally, this forced silence reinforces the rape culture that tells abusers that their actions will go undeclared and they will not be punished, protecting rather than preventing future attacks.

The purposes of survivors telling their stories can be undermined when listeners react in ways that contradict survivor goals. Common goals of survivor narratives include: relieving oneself from keeping the experience secret, moving the story into the public so that survivors are less isolated by their experiences, re-immersing themselves into communities that they have been excluded from, taking back control, reversing the silencing power of the abuser, and raising awareness to the consequences of sexual trauma to prevent future attacks. When the audience challenges or mediates the survivors’ stories, there may be additional traumatization because the audience communicates to the survivors that it is not their right to control the narrative of their experience.
Especially in a longer piece of writing like a memoir, many different and sometimes competing author purposes may co-exist. Though it is difficult to summarize someone else’s trauma narrative as I risk ignoring details important to the survivor’s perception of the event, I will attempt to summarize Alice Sebold’s memoir *Lucky* to give details that will be pertinent to my discussion of audience reaction to her narrative within the memoir. This summary will be skewed by my own personal reading of her memoir and the context of this paper and should not stand as a comparable substitute for Sebold’s own words. Alice Sebold was a white college freshman in 1981 at Syracuse University walking back to her dorm room through a park late at night when a stranger emerged and brutally raped her. In 1999, she published her memoir *Lucky*, which outlines her rape and its aftermath. Her rapist is a young black man with a criminal record of previous violence, and she is told that she is “lucky” that her perpetrator fits this description and that she was a virgin, as these aspects of the crime made it easier for her rapist to be convicted. After her attack, she first returns to her dorm room before realizing she needs medical attention, then goes to the hospital to be treated. Her attack occurred on the last day of finals, so she returns to her dorm to pack her things before her parents come to pick her up for summer vacation. She explores the difficulty of coming to terms with her trauma on a personal level when the experience has been made public in her hometown and campus communities. This work of self-representation is an important example of the modern rape narrative because it upholds certain myths of rape while confronting the culture that holds these views. Many people in Alice’s life challenged her, not wanting to believe the reality of her experience and attempting to re-define it for her or “prove” that she was not being truthful. The acts of challenging and redefining are
extremely common for survivors of violence, even those whose narratives adhere to the stereotypes and is one reason many survivors do not feel safe speaking of or reporting their experiences.

Sebold’s *Lucky* as a rape narrative must be examined in relation to the myths of rape present in American culture. In her article “All-American Rape,” Anderson defines the classic, traditional rape narrative that “Culturally, as well as legally…remains the public face of rape in this country. It is statistically rare but spoken of frequently” (633). The discussion of rape in our culture typically remains within the context of the traditional rape narrative. Anderson gives a basic description of this type of narrative:

A fair young woman is walking home alone at night. Gray street lamps cast shadows from the figure she cuts through an urban landscape. She hurries along, unsure of her safety. Suddenly, perhaps from behind a dumpster, a strange, dark man lunges out at her, knife at her throat, and drags her into a dark alley where he threatens to kill her, and beats her until she bleeds. The young woman puts up a valiant fight to protect her sexual virtue, but the assailant overcomes her will and rapes her. Afterwards, she immediately calls the police to report the offense. (625-626)

This classic story of rape is the one more accepted in culture, but not the type that occurs most in reality. Anderson defines the “All-American rape” as the more common type of rape in practice, but not in narrative:

The typical rape involves no knives, guns, or other weapons. Many rapists find verbal coercion and pinning sufficient. The typical rape does not involve valiant physical resistance on the part of the victim. Frozen in fright, many women cry or
remain passive in the face of a sexual attack. The typical rape does not involve a victim with untainted sexual virtue. Rape happens to imperfect, complicated souls—like all of us—whose sexual pasts could not withstand critical public scrutiny. The typical rape does not include a prompt report to the police; many victims never report their most harrowing experiences to any authority figures. (627)

Sebold’s rape fits directly into Anderson’s definition of a classic rape narrative and is more likely to be discussed than the more likely to occur “All American Rape.” The myth that the woman is to blame for making herself available to be raped has permeated our culture to the point that victims of “all-American rape” believe that they have not actually been raped, and that they should be ashamed of what has happened to them and remain silent. “As a result, the classic rape narrative is the official story of rape in this country, while the reality of the all-American rape is suppressed” (Anderson 633). The suppression of the “all-American rape” narrative only serves to increase the number of this type of rape. Victims are taught not to speak out, and their attackers are free to continue to rape rather than held accountable for their actions. Sebold’s rape narrative is typical of the way that rape is viewed in America. Even if these instances of rape do not match the reality of rape in our country, we continue to tell primarily these types of stories and uphold the myth that this is the most common rape.

Sebold recounts the reactions of many people in her life to her trauma, which reveal important points in her own recovery but also represent many unproductive cultural ideas about rape that are understood by many but not always directly spoken. By exposing others’ reactions to her trauma, Sebold brings light to many problems survivors face when telling their stories to an audience that is not always sympathetic. Sebold pinpoints the moment
when she realized that the experience of trauma separated her from the people she would have previously been in community with. She describes her experience returning to the dorm immediately after being treated at the hospital: “My girlfriends and the resident advisor, who, after all, was only nineteen, tried to take care of me, but I had begun to notice that I was now on the other side of something they could not understand. I didn’t understand it myself” (Sebold 27). She recognizes that her friends wanted to help her, but that the trauma had separated her not only from them, but also from herself. Without education about the effects of trauma, it is difficult to help others who have been traumatized. Because sexual violence unfortunately remains highly common, we as a culture must begin to move towards preparing ourselves to support survivors, rather than waiting until someone we love is hurt and being incapable of responding appropriately. Though Sebold recognizes that she has crossed a boundary line and entered another space by the trauma of rape, she does not really understand the differences and can’t yet communicate to her friends or herself how she has changed.

Alice struggles to connect the change she feels in herself with the previous version she knew of herself. Like Michelle Payne had to negotiate multiple versions of herself in order to write and teach with authority, Alice understands that she contains multiple identities that seem to be in competition; she struggles to recognize both sides in herself as a single individual person. She wants to hold on to the version of herself she was before being raped by paying close attention to how she will look when her parents come to see her: “I knew, now that I had been raped, I should try to look good for my parents. Having gained the regulation freshman fifteen meant that my skirt that day fit. I was trying to prove to them
and to myself that I was still who I had always been. I was beautiful, if fat. I was smart, if loud. I was good, if ruined” (Sebold 29). Here, Sebold creates an image of herself but also anticipates her family’s reaction, trying to focus on the positives. Alice wants to stay connected to the world of her parents and the community she inhabited before being raped. She continually returns to the idea that she is still the same person that she was before the trauma, though she also recognizes that there has been a change. Later, when she returns home and her parents tiptoe around her, she makes a crude joke about her rapist’s penis to prove “The kid they knew was still there” (51). Her voice breaks the tension, and she tries to prove through using language she used as a “kid” that she has remained unchanged. While still at school, Alice rejects the help of the advocate from the Rape Crisis Center, saying that she did not trust the advocate’s promise of being there for her. She sets up the opposition of her previous and present ideas of community and support: “My mother was coming. I did not appreciate the soft touch of this stranger and I did not want to belong to her club” (29). Alice recognizes that the trauma puts her into the “club” of other survivors, but she wants to connect instead to her previous communities of family and college friends. She wants to return to her old community rather than enter a new one; she recognizes the multiplicity of selves that Payne discusses. She must find a balance between separate identities and communities. She comes to terms with being changed and being the same through language.

Her interactions with the police forced Alice to anticipate her audience’s reactions in the following times she explained what happened to her. Because Alice chooses to report her attack to the police before returning to her parents’ home for the summer, she must recount the story of her rape very soon after it occurs. When Alice begins speaking to Sergeant
Lorenz, he chastens her for saying that she did not know a man’s penis had to be erect to enter a woman. He tells her that it “isn’t possible” that she would not have known this, so Alice must disclose that she is a virgin to get him on her side (Sebold 31). She must present a credible argument in this context to prove her perspective on her trauma, as though as a recent victim she is the one who must argue for her innocence. Alice states: “He was the first person whom I had uttered the details of what had happened. I could not fathom that he might not believe me” (31). In addition to the traumatizing rape she experienced the day before, Alice recognizes another trauma when she realizes that she will have to defend herself to prove her story. When he writes down the affidavit of her statement, she notices changes that he made that did not reflect the truth of her experience. She states: “All I saw were what I thought of as the errors he had made, the things he had left out or the words he had substituted for what had actually been said” (32). In addition to these inaccuracies, the statement the sergeant creates to represent Alice’s perspective is also very watered down, focusing on objective “facts” like the time and specific actions, but lacks any emotional response. Sebold later explains: “Sergeant Lorenz was the first person to hear my story. But he often interrupted with the words, ‘That’s inconsequential.’ He probed my story for facts that would dovetail into the more salient charges. He was what he was: a ‘just-the-facts-ma’am’ cop” (75). The sergeant is not interested in encouraging Alice’s recovery or allowing her to have control over her story. Alice’s personality and humanity is taken out of the statement as her voice is silenced through changing specific details and erasing her reaction to events that occurred.
Like the sergeant who challenges her narrative, changing the situation of her telling from something personal to something defensive, her father does not accept her story immediately when the details don’t line up to his perception of how rape happens. Alice, because of her encounter with the sergeant, begins to understand that her story will typically be met with questions when she discusses the attack with her family. She must negotiate what they think about rape based on cultural myths and beliefs and her knowledge of what actually happened. When her father realizes the rapist, after beating her for some time, left the knife he threatened her with outside of the tunnel while he raped her, he questions: “‘How could you have been raped if he didn’t have the knife?’” and “‘But how could he have raped you unless you let him?’” (Sebold 58, 59). Alice patiently works with her father to help him understand that even though the weapon was not present during the actual rape, the man had beaten and overpowered her and she was not in any way free to consent or allow the rape to occur. Reflecting on this interaction, Sebold writes, “When I look back on myself in that room I don’t understand how I could have been so patient. All I can think is that his ignorance was inconceivable to me. I was shocked by it but I had a desperate need for him to understand. If he didn’t—he who was my father and who clearly wanted to understand—what man would?” (59). Her father’s challenge of her narrative is re-traumatizing as it forces her to defend her story and question whether the narrative would hold up to other people. She craves understanding and connection, but is forced to be the one to do the work to make her father understand. Like Sargeant Lorenz, Alice’s father puts the pressure on Alice to prove her innocence in this brutal attack. These men cannot fathom the trauma that she has experienced and search for holes in her story to destabilize the narrative in hopes that
they can disprove that it has happened at all. For Alice, there is no hiding from what happened. She must live with the experience and with the consistent shocking challenges to her narrative. Alice’s longing for connection and understanding are common among rape survivors, but are also common to women’s writing in general. Elizabeth Flynn found that male discourse is individually focused while female discourse is focused on community. Her analysis of student writing reveals: “The narratives of the female students are stories of interaction, of connection, or of frustrated connection. The narratives of the male students are stories of achievement, of separation, or of frustrated achievement” (Flynn 586).

Similarly, the male audiences of Alice’s story tend to focus on details in ways that alienate Alice from their own systems of reality, while female audiences like the rape crisis center advocate, her college friends and her mother try to move forward through community.

While her father and the sergeant try to come to an understanding of Alice and her experience through precise facts, Alice’s mother tries to understand through speaking and through connecting to her spiritual community. In order to try to contain the narrative of her rape, Alice theorizes that “primary people,” those close to her to whom she has told the story, can share with others, but the people they tell cannot repeat her story (Sebold 33). She recognizes that her family and close friends might need help processing what has happened and need to speak about it like she does. When her mother tells their priest, however, he turns around and tells the rest of their Church: “He did not use the word raped but he said ‘assaulted brutally in a park near her campus. It was a robbery.’ Those words meant only one thing to any old-timer worth her salt. As the story made the rounds, they realized I had no broken bones, how brutal could it be? Oh…that…” (65). The priest does not only break
Alice’s system of containment by making her story public without her permission, he also redefines her experience by refusing to use the word “rape.” He tiptoes around the reality of the experience because for him, it is better to avoid the risk of making members of his congregation uncomfortable. However, this redefinition is counterproductive for Alice, the person who is the primary survivor of trauma. Though his purpose may have been to share the news with the church community to garner support for Alice, by ignoring her wishes to keep it private and using inaccurate language to describe her trauma, he does more harm than good.

One especially problematic form of choosing to not believe abuse is by re-defining the survivor’s experience and telling them the terms they choose to apply are inaccurate, which takes the control of the narrative away from the survivor. Listeners who linguistically redefine the trauma by discouraging the survivor from using technical terms like rape similarly take control away from speakers and exclude them from the community of survivors. Audiences who shame survivors by allowing the trauma to redefine their relationship with the speaker or by blaming the survivor for the abuse reinforce rape culture, forcing the survivor to endure a second trauma and encouraging the future silence of the particular survivor. When these negative reactions are in response to public stories of sexual violence like memoirs, television, newspapers, and magazines, survivors who have access to these reactions may be encouraged to remain silent to protect themselves from these additional traumas.

Alice recognizes that discussing her trauma may help her work through it, but struggles to find an audience to share her story with. She tries to talk to her mother, but her
mother cannot handle the details of the trauma and instead sends Alice to the family
psychiatrist (Sebold 76). The therapist does not offer the support or listening that Alice
craves. Instead, as soon as Alice says that she has been raped, the psychiatrist responds “‘I
guess this will make you less inhibited about sex now, huh?’” (77). Alice describes her
response to this abrasive question: “I couldn’t believe it. I don’t remember whether I said,
‘That’s a fucked-up thing to say.’ I’m sure I just wish I had. I do know that was the end of
the session, that I got up and walked out” (77). This experience mirrors Alice’s interactions
with her father and the policeman, whose mediation of her narrative shock her rather than
help her regain control. Though her therapist recognizes that this event will change Alice,
she acts like it could be a positive experience or open Alice up to sexuality, which is not
usually the immediate result of sexual trauma. The expectation that therapy will be a safe,
healing space is not met because this therapist views rape as a sexual act, not an act of power
and violence, and because she does not support or validate Alice’s experience but instead re-
casts it as something that Alice needed to move forward with her sexual life. By simplifying
and evaluating the experience for her, the therapist silences Alice as she could not imagine
sharing anything personal with this unsympathetic audience again. This negative interaction
is especially problematic as Alice specifically went to the therapist for help and guidance, to
heal through talking and release, but instead found ignorance and judgment. If the therapist
had been better trained on the effects of sexual trauma, she would have known that it is
crucial to listen and wait for survivors to evaluate and theorize about their own experiences.
Audiences of narratives of abuse must be careful to align their goals to side with the
survivor’s individual needs.
Despite the overwhelmingly negative reactions to her trauma narrative, there is one interaction that is closer to a helpful, positive experience for Alice’s recovery as she is listened to and entered into a community with other survivors. Alice’s friend Tom comes to visit her, bringing a gift because he heard in Church that she was mugged and beaten. Because the priest took the power of her story away from her and disclosed it to the community inaccurately, Alice is put in the unfair position of either affirming his alternate narrative of what happened or telling the truth, as the possibility of keeping the trauma private was taken from her. She has lost control of her narrative, though she only chose to share her trauma with her family, not the entire church community. Alice decides to clarify, saying she wasn’t just robbed in the park like her priest announced in Church; she was raped. Tom says it doesn’t change his views of her, but he does physically pull away from her (Sebold 72). Tom later returns and tells her that when he went home to tell his mother what happened to Alice, she reveals her own trauma. “While she looked out the window, she told them the story of how she had been raped. She was eighteen when it happened. She had never told anyone about it until that day” (73). When Tom says that he didn’t know how to react, Alice tells him there is nothing to do. However, reflecting back on this experience, Alice states: “I wish I could go back and erase my last line to Tom. I wish I could say, ‘You’re already doing it, Tom. You’re listening.’ I wondered how his mother had gone on to have a husband and a family and never tell anyone” (73). Here, Sebold identifies that the best way to help is simply to listen and support and recognizes telling as an important part of her healing. Tom offers an alternative reaction to other masculine figures in the text who push to find facts they deem necessary for believing the narrative. He admits he doesn’t
know how to react and waits for Alice to give him a role to fill, rather than forcing her into the role of fact-giver. The reaction of Tom’s mother to hearing Alice has been raped shows that the more that survivors begin to speak out about their abuse and break the silence, the more they create a safe space for others to talk about their own trauma. As rape survivors begin to learn that they are not alone in their experience and that they are part of a community, they may begin to feel safe breaking their silences and connecting with the sympathetic listeners in their audiences. The act of speaking catalyzes future speaking because it forms a community.

The problems that Alice Sebold shares in her memoir reflect responses from people in her personal life. When survivors or perpetrators of sexual violence are public figures, the narratives become much more complicated as the media treats events of trauma as public property. These public narratives are also more likely to be challenged when they deviate from the traditional rape narrative and challenge expected roles and relationships between family members and the reputation of public figures. The New York Times recently published a letter from Dylan Farrow speaking out about the abuse she experienced by her famous father Woody Allen. The letter is preempted by a disclaimer from Nicholas Kristof, who runs the Times blog that published the letter. He explains that this is the first time Dylan herself issued a public statement despite this case being heavily publicized since 1993. He also states: “It’s important to note that Woody Allen was never prosecuted in this case and has consistently denied wrongdoing; he deserves the presumption of innocence” (“An Open Letter from Dylan Farrow”). Is Allen’s freedom from legal repercussions important for an outside party to note before readers enter Farrow’s statement? Kristof’s voice comes first
to question Farrow’s voice before we even encounter it. He acts as the voice of the unsympathetic audience and manipulates the way the otherwise neutral audience will respond to the text and Dylan’s story. Farrow covers this issue of Allen’s legal “innocence” herself in the letter, explaining that her mother chose to drop the case after specialists explained that continuing to prosecution could be harmful for Dylan who had already experienced so much trauma. Most perpetrators of sexual violence are not found guilty in court either because the cases are unreported, dropped, or lack proper evidence, but this should not be used as proof that abuse did not occur. Alcoff and Gray explain that mediation of survivor texts like Kristof’s note serve to disempower survivors: “Given the structured nature of discourses, survivor speech has great transgressive potential to disrupt the maintenance and reproduction of dominant discourses as well as to curtail their sphere of influence. Dominant discourses can also, however, subsume survivor speech in such a way as to disempower it and diminish its disruptive potential” (270). The privileged position of the disclaimer preceding the text as well as the content allow Kristof’s words to cast a shade on Farrow’s narrative. Kristof takes authority away from Farrow by inviting us to side with the abuser before the survivor even speaks. This mediation may reflect a cultural anxiety that makes us mistrust those who speak out against people who have power over them. Kristof reinforces the power system that kept Dylan silent for so long and protects Allen from scrutiny, which completely opposes Farrow’s purpose in writing the letter.

Despite the biased mediation, the text of Dylan’s narrative remains strong because she recognizes the empowerment of speaking up and specifically calls out those who choose to side with Woody Allen. Farrow maintains an awareness that the audience may have an
understanding of the history of her case and be predisposed towards believing Allen over her. She recounts the traumatizing event of speaking out as a young child against someone who had power over her not only because of the system of power in their abusive relationship, but also because he was her father and a famous, well-respected filmmaker. She says that when she first questioned her mother about what Woody Allen did to her, she was too young to understand that what these actions constituted was sexual assault and not normal father-daughter interaction. At this point, she states: “I didn’t know that I would be made to recount my story over and over again, to doctor after doctor, pushed to see if I’d admit I was lying as part of a legal battle I couldn’t possibly understand. At one point, my mother sat me down and told me that I wouldn’t be in trouble if I was lying—that I could take it all back. I couldn’t. It was all true” (Farrow). Even her mother, who has been historically blamed for “planting” the narrative of abuse in her daughter, entertained the possibility that Dylan was lying and gave her the opportunity to take it back. Her mother’s questioning comes from a place of protection of Dylan and an attempt to understand what happened to her, but she makes it clear that she will support her either way. Farrow includes this detail to help show the public audience that she didn’t make it up. She explains that no matter how many times she told her story to professionals during the initial period of allegations, “sexual abuse claims against the powerful stall more easily. There were experts willing to attack my credibility. There were doctors willing to gaslight an abused child” (Farrow). Though we expect professionals to be on the side of the victims, especially young, defenseless children, they are influenced by the power dynamic of adult and child and the power of Allen’s celebrity, and instead try to protect our ideas about Allen’s reputation and the role of a father.
Until this letter, outsiders to the abuse were called upon as experts on what happened, invalidating Dylan’s voice as the survivor and challenging her narrative and authority. Kristoff’s opening note points out that Dylan has not spoken out before, which indicates the power and uniqueness of this letter, but also inherently places blame on her for not speaking out sooner, as though she owes this personal narrative to the public. Instead of the public claiming ownership of this trauma, as outside “experts” weighed in on the events for twenty years before the survivor chose to speak, the object of those hearing the abuse should have been to listen to and protect the survivor.

Farrow explains the aftermath of the trauma and her experience growing up with the knowledge that Allen was free to abuse others: “That he got away with what he did to me haunted me as I grew up. I was stricken with guilt that I had allowed him to be near other little girls. I was terrified of being touched by men. I developed an eating disorder. I began cutting myself” (Farrow). The trauma of Woody Allen’s abuse did not end when Dylan gained legal physical separation from him, as she remained tormented by the abuse for many years and developed other mental issues that are symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder. For Dylan, the pressure of her trauma was multiplied because the details had become so public and dominant discourse tended to side with her abuser. She explains:

That torment was made worse by Hollywood. All but a precious few (my heroes) turned a blind eye. Most found it easier to accept the ambiguity, to say, ‘who can say what happened,’ to pretend that nothing was wrong. Actors praised him at awards shows. Networks put him on TV. Critics put him in magazines. Each time I
saw my abuser’s face—on a poster, on a t-shirt, on television—I could only hide my panic until I found a place to be alone and fall apart. (Farrow)

From the age of seven into her adulthood, Dylan had to deal with the knowledge that the general public and the community of Hollywood celebrities she knew as a child chose to ignore her claims and continue to support her abuser. As a culture, we all look up to Hollywood and view celebrities as representations of public opinion or the right way to act. Most chose to deny her the support that may have helped her heal because they would rather uphold someone who may have sexually abused his daughter just in case she had been lying than help a child heal from a terrible trauma. This lack of support isolates Dylan from the community, acting as a second trauma like Alice Sebold experienced when her narrative was challenged by her audience. What was difficult for Alice was impossible for Dylan. Alice’s rapist was never part of her community, but she still had trouble relating to and re-entering the communities she previously belonged to because she recognized how her trauma changed her. For Dylan, the community of the family she had before the trauma is completely shattered because her abuser was part of that community and the family unit of her childhood dissolved around the time of her abuse. She is also isolated from the Hollywood community, despite being close with many celebrities in her childhood. She cannot reenter a community where the perpetrator of her abuse is welcome, powerful, and regularly celebrated. Since the Hollywood community acts as role models through their entertainment of the American public, Dylan is severely isolated from the general public.

The Hollywood community failed Dylan, as she reveals: “For so long, Woody Allen’s acceptance silenced me. It felt like a personal rebuke, like the awards and accolades were a
way to tell me to shut up and go away” (Farrow). The very public approval of Allen contributed to Dylan’s silence, but she found community with other survivors of sexual abuse who helped her heal and inspired her to speak out to extend this community to other survivors who are suffering in silence. She explains: “But the survivors of sexual abuse who have reached out to me—to support me and to share their fears of coming forward, of being called a liar, of being told their memories aren’t their memories—have given me a reason not to be silent, if only so others know they don’t have to be silent either” (Farrow). Dylan’s purpose in writing the letter is very clear. She wants to not only expose those who have failed her by excluding and invalidating her, but create a new model for other survivors for speaking out despite the potential backlash. She gestures towards those still living in silence: “But others are still scared, vulnerable, and struggling for the courage to tell the truth. The message that Hollywood sends matters for them” (Farrow). She recognizes that the media’s response to her narrative harms not only her, but other survivors who want to tell their stories but fear similar retribution.

As a society, we must begin to do better. Survivors need the space to speak out and heal in a supportive environment. There must be a change in the way we respond as a culture to cases of sexual violence that have been made public so that more survivors feel safe speaking out in public and private spheres because they understand that their experience, voice, and recovery will be protected and supported. By targeting Hollywood, Farrow targets the whole culture. In her essay “Dear Young Ladies Who Love Chris Brown So Much They Would Let Him Beat Them,” Roxanne Gay discusses the dangers of allowing public figures to abuse women without serious consequences. She references celebrities like Chris Brown,
Charlie Sheen, Richard Pryor, and Roman Polanski who have been physically and sexually abusive but are still celebrated and rewarded for their artistic accomplishments. She explains how the public acceptance of abusers makes young women more likely to accept abuse and violence:

Over and over again we tell you that it is acceptable for men—famous, infamous, or not at all famous—to abuse women. We look the other way. We make excuses. We reward men for their bad behavior. We tell you that, as a young woman, you have little value or place in this society. Clearly we have sent these messages with such alarming regularity and consistency we have encouraged you to willingly run toward something violent and terrible with your eyes and arms wide open. (Gay 186)

People experiencing abuse or vulnerable to violence who receive these messages from our media may begin to think that they should accept harm from those around them. Popular media and public opinion act within a symbiotic relationship; the media informs culture as the culture informs media. Social change can be catalyzed through representation of social change in the Hollywood community and in changes to popular media. Farrow specifically calls out names of other women who could have supported her or could have easily been abused in the way she was to try to make outsiders to the survivor community more like insiders. Calling for empathy from specific individual celebrities makes her letter harder to ignore. She recognizes that she was once a part of the Hollywood community, and the act of her public, open letter demands reform within the community so that it will be a safe space for her and other survivors to enter. Unrepentant abusers must be pushed away from these communities in order to make these spaces open to survivors and health for their recovery.
Despite the important work Dylan’s letter does in offering representation for other survivors and in its potential to reform those who hold the power of media to control public culture, her statements were criticized and condemned by many people in an equally public ways. Even her abuser Woody Allen wrote a response to her letter, belittling her brave proclamations by challenging the “facts” of her story and attempting to cast himself as a victim because he was denied a relationship with his daughter after sexually abusing and assaulting her (Allen). To his tasteless and offensive response, Dylan replies: “Woody Allen has an arsenal of lawyers and publicists but the one thing he does not have on his side is the truth. I hope this is the end of his vicious attacks and of the media campaign by his lawyers and publicists, as he’s promised. I won’t let the truth be buried and I won’t be silenced” (“Dylan Farrow Responds to Woody Allen: ‘Distortions and Outright Lies’”). She remains confident in her story and the power of telling in order to help other survivors as she has been helped by the survivor community.

Alcoff and Gray explore the many ways that survivor discourse can help empower survivors, but also recognize that these therapeutic narratives may lead to a “recuperation of the dominant discourse” when these texts are sensationalized, eroticized, or used as tools for victim-blaming by those who have the power of mediating or repackaging these texts (263). When survivors who have remained silent about their abuse see other survivors being attacked in the media or by their peers, they may be discouraged from speaking out. In cases of violence within their family structures or personal relationships, survivors tend to undergo more pressure to remain silent because these incidences of violence conflict with the cultural beliefs we have about love, family, and rape. Dylan Farrow and other survivors like her
should have been safe with family members but were not; to accept their narratives as true, audiences must open themselves up to the possibility that this kind of abuse is happening or has happened to people they know. It is easier to believe stories like Alice Sebold’s, because her narrative fits the classic rape narrative where certain circumstances like walking alone at night made her more vulnerable to attack. The audience can read her story and still feel primarily safe, as long as they do not walk alone or stay out of “dangerous” neighborhoods. Farrow’s story does not allow the same type of audience safety, as she was a six-year-old child spending time with her father, a situation that should be safe. Stories of sexual violence in these trusted relationships can traumatize the audience, causing them to question their own relationships and the role of family in our society. It is easier to believe the dominant cultural narrative that all members of families and personal relationships choose to treat their loved ones with care and respect than accept the reality that violence and abuse can exist within these structures. The speakers of these narratives as well as the audiences must be able to recuperate past and present selves, negotiating between truths that seem to be contradictory in order to have the fullest understanding of issues of sexual violence and how these issues change in different class, race, relationship, and gender contexts.

Allowing survivors to speak out and publicly proclaim the trauma they have experienced is a good first step towards putting their stories into the public sphere and changing a culture that views sexual trauma as a taboo. The simple act of speaking out is not always enough. For many survivors, having a safe space to discuss the aftermath of the trauma is just as necessary for a productive recovery from trauma. Thompson identifies several websites and virtual spaces where survivors encourage others to speak out so that
they can create a community to help one another heal. These spaces are especially crucial because individual survivors often feel forced into silence by their abusers or by a culture that tends not to believe them. These communities support one another and encourage healing and recovery.

I would like to identify another online community, Self-Care after Rape, which is a survivor-run blog where survivors answer the questions of other survivors and make posts encouraging ways to take care to recover and move forward. The moderators of this blog are consistently supportive of those who write in, normalizing and validating their experiences while offering resources to get help and talking about their own healing experiences to help others move forward. They are careful to give autonomy to those who write to them. They do not give individuals mandates or tell them what to do, but give advice and options for what may help and remind the survivors that they will ultimately know what is best for them. They don’t define or classify the experiences of others by naming their trauma as a specific crime, but do offer legal or official definitions of different types of abuse and remind survivors that they have the choice to identify their trauma however is most helpful to them. Online communities like this one offer a model to outsiders to help survivors recover from trauma, as the moderators are all survivors with the experiential knowledge of their own trauma and recovery informing the way they work with other survivors. Speaking out in the contexts of these websites is also safer for survivors because they are free to remain confidential (some moderators use a nickname or initial, but anyone can ask questions anonymously). The lack of personally identifying information makes it safer for survivors to reach out and still remain private from their abusers and from people who would challenge
their narratives. Alice Sebold and Dylan Farrow are not safe in this way, because they have spoken out in a public way with their names attached to their narratives. Though their status as survivors of sexual violence can be a part of their identity, it is important to remember that it does not have to be the only aspect of their personality we know or remember about them. As Payne reminds us, they as human beings belong to many communities and may switch between different identities constantly. The anonymous nature of online interactions gives survivors the chance to speak out about their abuse in a way where they are protected in their personal lives and do not have to risk strangers making assumptions about them based on the abuse they have experienced.

Another effective online community is the Brave Miss World website, created by rape survivor and 1998 winner of the Miss World competition Linor Abargil. Abargil used her international celebrity status to raise awareness about her experience and the experiences of other survivors through the documentary *Brave Miss World* and the website. The site allows survivors to submit their own stories in textual or video format and comment on other narratives. In both the website and the documentary, Linor speaks of how speaking the trauma of her narrative can be helpful and how reaching out to other survivors can help one understand their own reactions to trauma and work to move forward. On a page featuring video testimonials from survivors, the purpose of sharing is represented: “We believe that your survival story can inspire others who may be victims of sexual assault to come forward for the first time and receive the help they need. Our hope is that the process of sharing your struggle will help you overcome what happened and heal, as well as connect you to a community that lets you know you’re not alone” (“Speak Out”). In addition to offering
survivors a sense of community through the website, there are also links to national and local resources like rape crisis centers so that survivors can reach out for professional support. Sharing narratives of abuse can be therapeutic for individual survivors, can help other survivors find the strength to reach out, and can help fight incorrect myths about rape and violence in our culture and help move non-survivors towards understanding and sympathy.

Outsiders to the survivor community should not pretend to have the expertise to tell survivors what to do to recover or explain why they are reacting to trauma. However, they can learn from these survivor communities to consistently believe, validate, listen to, and give control back to survivors as this is the best way to help encourage recovery and give autonomy back to survivors. Outsiders to the survivor community must start acting like insiders from the moment a survivor chooses to share their story. Because so many people experience sexual violence and abuse, most people know or are close to people who have survived violence and may have a survivor reach out to them for help. Individuals can prepare themselves to support people in their personal lives who have survived abuse by believing and supporting public figures who speak about their experiences. They should not do this by appropriating authority and acting as experts on the experiences of others, but by taking positions of always believing survivors, refusing to tolerate or ignore abusive behavior, and supporting survivors’ recovery. This attitude of belief and support can help individual survivors recover from trauma while sending a message to perpetrators and potential perpetrators that their behavior is unacceptable, serving to heal past traumas and prevent future abuse.
Publishers and listeners should allow survivors to act as the mediator of their own texts and speeches, giving them the choice to offer whatever details of their trauma and recovery they are comfortable sharing and theorizing on their own experience. The audience of the text should act as listeners not mediators by avoiding questioning or challenging the narrative they have been presented with. The survivor deserves control of the texts they create, but once they give the text to an external audience the audience is in control of their reaction to the texts. Readers or receivers of survivor narratives should adapt a reaction based on techniques that help survivors heal and recover. This supportive listening can be achieved by believing the survivor’s expressed reality of the events of the trauma and aftermath. Survivors must recreate their sense of the world after a trauma has occurred, and this world should be built on support and healing. Instead of critiquing or challenging survivor texts as though they were arguments with logical flaws, we should be listening to move towards understanding how individual survivor experiences fit in with the greater cultural problems of sexual violence and rape culture. When the audience challenges the survivor’s recreation of their reality, the audience re-shatters the survivors newly formed sense of the world by failing to affirm the survivor’s reformed sense of self and community. Creating a community of supportive listeners that neither judge nor ignore the trauma will help prevent future crimes as potential perpetrators begin to see that their behavior will not be accepted or ignored.

Recovery from sexual violence on a personal survivor level and on a general cultural level is not a linear process. Alcoff and Gray explain: “no ‘cure’ exists that can take the pain away or remove all the effects of sexual violence, but [survivors] are not objects with
attributes (‘syndromes’ or ‘disorders’). We are fluid, constantly changing beings who can achieve great clarity and emotional insight even from within the depths of pain” (282).

Expecting survivor narratives to be structured like a direct linear argument is not a valid way to encourage recovery. Rather, outsiders should accept and listen to survivors as they want to tell their story at any time in recovery, not focusing on details of the event but on what individual survivors feel as a result of the trauma and what they need to continue to move forward. Texts like memoirs and blogs which allow the survivor to revisit events and feelings and revise their reactions based on the passage of time best mirror the actual experience of surviving the trauma of sexual violence. When survivors must tailor their narratives of trauma and recovery to meet the needs of an audience rather than their own needs, they may not feel safe to effectively use speaking out as a healing process. If survivors do not feel safe to express themselves outside of survivor communities honestly or completely, the greater culture cannot fully understand the true climate of rape culture or individual experiences. Only through moving towards creating a more supportive non-survivor community that mirrors the existing survivor community, can we reverse the marginalization of survivor experiences and help move them back into the dominant culture. As the general society begins to learn about the effects of trauma and the extent to which our culture has allowed the perpetration of sexual violence to continue over time, we must listen carefully to the narratives survivors tell and make sure to support and validate their experiences in order to move away from the history of excusing perpetrators and to a society that believes survivors and prioritizes their experiences and recovery.
Works Cited


<http://books.google.com/books/about/Trauma_and_Recovery.html?id=3cn2R0KenN0C>.

