

**Rape, Cake, and Gonzofeminism:
On Intergenerational Trauma, Sexual Violence,
and the Formation of White Female Subjectivities
in Gillian Flynn's *Sharp Objects***

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I. Gillian Flynn's Gonzofeminism: Complicating Men's Rights Narratives

As of December 2019, it is estimated that up to 70% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence from an intimate partner in their lifetime; more than a third (30,000) of the women murdered in 2017 were killed by their current or former intimate partners (“Facts and figures: Ending Violence Against Women”). In the United States, one in four women have experienced a form of severe physical violence by an intimate partner; 72% of all murder-suicides involve an intimate partner, and 94% of the victims are female (“National Statistics”). Yet myths around gender-based violence and the credibility of women’s accusations persist, often resulting in biased criminal persecutions, re-traumatization of victims, and the perpetuation and acceptance of gender-based violence¹. The dismantling of these rape and rape culture myths, then, should continue to be a priority in feminist activism, scholarship, and women’s artistic production.

Enter Gillian Flynn. In her novel *Gone Girl* (2012), the female protagonist Amy, after recent marriage troubles, disappears; family, neighbors, the police and national media suspect the husband—a statistically safe assumption. Amy, however, returns unharmed, having elaborately staged her own murder, fully intending on implicating her husband. By 2019, the *Gone Girl*-trope, like so many myths around gender-based violence, had found its way into a real-world case, and Flynn was forced to apologize to the family of a woman missing: Her husband’s lawyer had put forward the theory that her disappearance was a ‘Gone Girl’-type case”².

The reception of her self-described ‘gonzofeminist’ (*Dark Places* 349) work, then, has been governed by and interpreted within the context of its cultural work: Both capturing the zeitgeist as part of the rise of anti-heroines³ and variously called decade-defining⁴, as well as representative of

¹ See, for example, Lonsway, Kimberley A. and Louise F. Fitzgerald. "Rape Myths: In Review." *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 1994: pp. 133–164. doi:10.1111/j.1471-6402.1994.tb00448.x.

² See Flood, Alison. “It Sickens Me’: Gillian Flynn Slams *Gone Girl* Theory in Missing Woman Case.” *TheGuardian.com*, 8 Jul 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/08/it-sickens-me-gillian-flynn-slams-gone-girl-theory-in-missing-woman-case>>. Accessed 03 January 2020.

³ See Perez, Lexy. “Gillian Flynn Reflects on ‘Gone Girl’ Legacy and the Growing Appetite for Anti-Heroines in Books.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 20 Dec 2019. <<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/gillian-flynn-reflects-gone-girl-legacy-rise-anti-heroines-1260003/>>. Accessed 30 Dec 2019.

⁴ See Williams, Mary Elizabeth. “How the Scathing ‘Gone Girl’ Rant About Being the ‘Cool Girl’ Defined the Decade.” *Salon.com*, 26 Dec 2019. <<https://www.salon.com/2019/12/26/how-the-scathing-gone-girl-rant-about-being-the-cool-girl-defined-the-decade/>>. Accessed 30 Dec 2019.;

competing discourses around feminism, postfeminism and misogynys. How can these at times contradictory views be accounted for; is Flynn’s writing problematic, espousing men’s rights narratives⁵, or does it present serious challenges to patriarchal conventions?

My thesis interrogates the contemporary gonzo-feminism as proposed by Gillian Flynn in her debut novel *Sharp Objects* (2006). I argue that the problematic frame narrative—i.e., women themselves perpetrate violence—is so complicated by Flynn’s dense use of symbolism, narrative technique, and subversion and blending of genre elements, it reveals the inherent failure of gendered tropes and productively explores the relationship between the construction of womanhood and American cultural imaginaries to arrive at incisive sociocultural critique. I evidence how her writing reflects current cultural anxieties surrounding the failure of what has been termed ‘white feminism’; I also assess the ways in which her writing politicizes rape and her antiheroine destigmatizes survivors of sexual violence. The result of her writing, I contend, is not the pathologization of women, but the pathologization of society.

To evaluate how this pop cultural text complicates male-hegemonic discourses and reconsiders, re-centers, and rewrites feminine subjectivities, I draw on theoretical texts from feminist literary and cultural scholars and from fields as diverse as sociolinguistics, trauma studies, genre theory, and psychoanalysis. What unites them is their engagement with the construction of identities, their commitment to cultural and historical specificity, and the potentialities of subversion, as well as a profound sympathy to the pluralism that comes with the critical analysis of cultural artefacts. Due to the limited scope of this paper and the close reading necessarily required for a fruitful analysis of the novel of 2006 and its complexities, my paper centers its analysis on the literary text, but draws from Flynn’s other novels when required for a full understanding of the author’s conception of female protagonists, narratives, and larger societal concerns. I also pay critical attention to the ways in which the text’s migration to the screen, as an extended miniseries on HBO (2018), has excised, modified, or added storylines or characters, as it is in these transformations and gaps during the adaptive process cultural material undergoes, at the “point of infidelity” (Sanders 20), that we may begin to draw conclusions regarding its cultural work.

See also Clark, Alex. “From The Big Short to Normal People: the Books that Defined the Decade.” *TheGuardian.com*, 26 Dec 2019. <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/26/from-the-big-short-to-normal-people-the-books-that-defined-the-decade>>. Accessed 30 Dec 2019.
⁵ Dockterman, Eliana. “Is Gone Girl Feminist or Misogynist?” *Time.com*, 06 Oct 2014. <<https://time.com/3472314/gone-girl-movie-book-feminist-misogynist/>>. Accessed 31 Dec 2019.

I begin with a detailed analysis of the metaphors and symbolism that structure and impact the depiction of women throughout the text. I then interpret and historically contextualize the representation of sex, rape, and gender-based violence, as well as the impact of said violence on the protagonist and the construction of her sexuality and identity. In chapter IV, I examine the ways in which the text rewrites patriarchal conventions in favor of female genealogies, how circles of violence are generationally transmitted, and evaluate the political implications of white female perpetrators. In chapter V, I scale back to focus on generic conventions and their revision with regard to the mystery genre, to then bring together the themes developed in previous chapters and analyze the ways in which *Sharp Objects* is successful in disrupting or reinscribing normative discourses.

This thesis does *not* concern itself with the truthfulness of representation or the dynamics of mental illness itself, though I refer to theoretical and clinical studies where appropriate. This is due to the fact that as a non-expert, I am simply not qualified to do so, and I would do a disservice to those living with mental illnesses. One of the underlying presuppositions of this project is the neutral notion that the very depiction of women's subjectivities tells us something about the contemporary moment. It is thus the textual representation and interpretation that I concern myself with, less so the validity or current notions of therapeutic interventions.

Additionally, it is of utmost importance to keep in mind that the main literary production under analysis in this project deals with the fictional generational trauma of rather privileged, white, cis US-American women, an understanding of which I consider to be crucial and which will both implicitly and explicitly guide this research. It is for this reason, too, that the trauma theories under consideration at the end of my thesis advocate for cultural and historical specificity: postcolonial and multidisciplinary representations and readings of trauma on the regional, national, and global level need to account for a certain pluralism if they want to do justice to the people(s) they speak about. Due to this paper's limited scope and the researcher's cultural background, this project can but account for one of the many ways in which sexualized and gender-based violence is experienced, fictionalized, and read.

II. LAYERING THE CAKE: Conceptual Metaphors, Symbolism, and the Depiction of Wind Gap's Women

II.1. Women as Dessert

In *Sharp Objects*, Flynn densely layers metaphors, and to uncover the text's workings on a psycholinguistic and semantic level, the smallest and seemingly innocuous conceptual metaphors deployed throughout the novel require analytical attention. Flynn doubles, at times triples conceptual metaphors – women, variously, are figured as desserts, small animals/prey, and dolls—the systematic coherence of such dense layering, as I aim to show, culminating in the most intimate of abuses. Starting with this seemingly innocent metaphor of *women as dessert*, then, is fitting, as much of the text reveals itself on the level of figuration, and the descent into Camille's traumatic past starts harmless.

The analysis of conceptual metaphors, a subset of cognitive linguistics, is dedicated to “elucidating the interdependencies of thought and language” (Hines 145) in the form of metaphors and their role in constructing cognition. Conceptual metaphors exploit various linguistic channels to transport their messages, such as semantics, syntax, the lexicon, and phonetics (146); so when Camille explains, upon arriving in Wind Gap, that most “nice women in Wind Gap are teachers or mothers or work at places like Candy's Casuals” (*SO* 13), she describes not just the limited and very traditional job opportunities available for women. Covertly, the lexicon aligns *nice* and *Candy*, paralleling the semantic quality of *being sweet*; an introduction to the categorization of women in Wind Gap. Girls and women are likened to (sweetie-)pie (113) and cake toppings (72); interactions with women are wrapped in language denoting sweetness, such as tart⁶, cotton candy (149), ice cream (180) and (sweet) fruits such as cherry (151). The rather overt and extended use of a chain of metaphors describing women not just as diminutive objects, but further as decorative, sweet, and as ‘to be consumed’, mirror the subliminal education Camille has received. Semantically isomorphic, the fact that Camille cuts into herself (Hines 152) takes on an ironic secondary meaning, and can be read to connote with the more submissive aspect of Camille's sex life, too, tapping into the “confluence of violent slicing and sexual consumption” (154).

⁶ “You know how it is. He's from out of town. He's smart and worldly and eight times better looking than anyone else around here. People would like it to be him, because then that means this ... evilness didn't come from Wind Gap. It came from outside. Eat your tart.” - “Do you believe he's innocent?” I took a bite, the glaze dripping off my lip.“ (*SO* 143)

It is, of course, through Camille's focalizing perspective that the text figures women as desserts, and she likely unconsciously perpetuates learned micro-linguistic power dynamics (Hines 145) that are closely associated to the socially lived realities. The townspeople, due to geographical location and history, use especially 'sweetheart' just as liberally—notwithstanding the noun's etymology as a synonym for tart (153), another linguistic channel exploited here is the phonetic proximity of the near-homophones 'sweetheart' and 'sweet tart' (see also the evolution of the women as dessert metaphor contingent on the 'women are sweet' conceptualization, 147). Yet the explicitness with which Camille attributes sweetness and the act of consumption to women is unique to her character and highlighted and deliberately exaggerated in her interactions with little girls, the "Four Little Blondes" and her stepsister Amma.

Upon Camille's first encounter with the four girls, she describes the prettiest—not yet knowing it is Amma—as a "girl barely in her teens and her hair was parted in ribbons, but her breasts, which she aimed proudly outward, were those of a grown woman. A lucky grown woman." (16) As the novel progresses, she sexualizes both the other girls she comes into contact with *and* her stepsister⁷ ("Amma, a woman-child with a gorgeous body", *SO* 126; "Her nakedness was stunning: sticky little girl's legs [...] Full, voluptuous breasts. Thirteen", *SO* 222) to an almost uncomfortable degree. Amma's skin "was smooth and tawny, like warm ice cream" (127) and "Amma looked tan and blonde and delicious (...) she was as tiny and colorful as an appetizer." (140) The co-occurrence of physical descriptions of Amma and the lexical proximity of both the dessert diction and words connoting *youth* or *diminution* ('little', 'tiny', 'child') mutually amplify the power dynamics inherent in these metaphors and align Camille with the dominant male gaze. Moreover, they foreshadow the manner in which Camille experiences sex and the memories she accesses, or is forced to access, during sexual encounters⁸. And lastly, these collocations prefigure and intensify Camille's growing fascination with Amma and the manner in which interactions between the three main female characters take on sexual undertones, which I will explore more thoroughly in chapter IV.

⁷ "They were hot little things, I had to admit. Long blonde hair, heart-shaped faces, and skinny legs. Miniskirts with tiny Ts exposing flat baby tummies. And except for the girl Jodes, whose bosom was too high and stiff to be anything but padding, the rest had breasts, full and wobbly and way overripe." (*SO* 107)

⁸ "Then I guided him into me and we fucked, fully clothed, the crack on the leather couch scratching my ass. *Trash, pump, little, girl*. It was the first time I'd been with a man in ten years. *Trash, pump, little, girl!*" (*SO* 158)

II.2. Women as Prey

The novel's very first flashback at the end of chapter one addresses Wind Gap's gender standards, the present scene being carefully set to thematically mirror the protagonist's past experience. Having joined the search party, Camille hikes through the woods towards the place where Natalie Keene's body was found, and concludes that because Wind Gap is a "town that demands utmost femininity in its fairer sex, [Natalie]'d have worn her hair long down her back. It would have tangled itself in the passing brush" (*SO* 18). The strands of hair that Camille expects to see reveal themselves to be spiderwebs, subtly introducing the connection between nature and gender, one that is fleshed out further when Camille ponders hunting as she is sitting down at the edge of the creek where Natalie's body was found:

Occasionally older boys, equipped with shotguns and stolen beer, would tromp through on their way to shoot flying squirrels or hare. Bloody pieces of meat swung from their belts. Those kids, cocky and pissed and smelling of sweat, [...] always compelled me. There are different kinds of hunting, I know now. The gentleman hunter with visions of Teddy Roosevelt and big game, who retires from a day in the field with a crisp gin and tonic, is not the hunter I grew up with. The boys I knew, who began young, were blood hunters. They sought that fatal jerk of a shot-spun animal, fleeing silky as water one second, then cracked to one side by their bullet. (*Sharp Objects* 19)

The connotative, metaphorical space that opens up through Flynn's use of lexical and symbolical techniques figures gender relations from the outset of the novel as a site of hunting and catching. Similarly to the perceived trappings of femininity being likened to the trappings of a spider's web, tapping into a long symbolic history and foreshadowing the plot's resolution⁹, Wind Gap's young men are conceived as hunters, predators whose behavior is set—and naturalized—within the environment they are a part of. The girls – especially those who are a "handful" (*SO* 13), are "running around town wild [like] little pretty animals" (137)—and because they behaved like a "bad animal", Camille ponders, "they were put down" (150). When partying with Amma and her

⁹ Psychoanalysts "would seem to agree that the spider is a representation of the dangerous [orally devouring and anally castrating] mother" (Sperling 493); "the choice of the spider symbol indicates [...] a very ambivalent and predominantly hostile relationship to the mother, with an inability to separate from the hated mother" (494).

friends, Camille describes one boy's tongue as being "big as a wolf's"—juxtaposed against Amma's tongue, which is "soft and little and hot" (165). Dead stepsister Marian has a "bunnylike" aura (154), and Camille's friend Katie dreams of "ice cream and bunnies" (180); here, the metaphors of woman-as-dessert and woman-as-small-animal (Hines 146) overlap. The text produces men as predators, and women as prey.

The motif is further consolidated as the flashback intensifies through the sensory impressions Camille experiences into a specific moment of her childhood:

When I was still in grammar school, maybe twelve, I wandered into a neighbor boy's hunting shed, a wood-planked shack where the animals were *stripped* and *split*. *Ribbons* of moist, *pink* flesh *dangled* from strings, waiting to be dried for jerky. The dirt floor was rusted with blood. The walls were covered with photographs of *naked* women. Some of the girls were spreading themselves wide, others were being held down and *penetrated*. One woman was *tied* up, her eyes *glazed*, breasts stretched and veined like *grapes*, as a man took her from behind. I could smell them all in the thick, gory air.

At home that night, I slipped a finger under my panties and masturbated for the first time, panting and sick.

(*Sharp Objects* 19, *emphases mine*)

Lexically, the connotative register accessed functions to further encode and perpetuate the covert message that women are sweet/cute objects ('ribbon', 'pink') and registers the dessert diction ('glaze', i.e., 'icing'; 'grapes') while at the same time taking a decidedly sexual, *animalistic* turn: As the animals are 'stripped and split', so are the women 'naked' and 'penetrated' in semantic parallelism; a woman is 'tied up' as the meat is 'dangling' from the roof¹⁰. Additionally, the fact that agency and consent are illegible from these pornographic images is crucial, as neither the reader nor Camille can deduce whether we actually see porn or instances of sexual violence; the text suggests they are one and the same. Importantly, it is after this discovery that Camille masturbates for the first time, her sexuality constructed around violence and women's non-/consensual submission.

¹⁰ "My mother's pigs were pricked with chemicals till they plumped and reddened like squirting cherries" (*Sharp Objects* 122). While pigs don't generally belong to the lexicon of cute small animals that registers as a conceptual metaphor for women, Flynn's collocative use of 'squirting' and 'cherry' constitutes an intentional, grotesque foreshadowing in terms of Adora's status and complicity (see chapter IV).

II.3. Women as Dolls

Just like the previous conceptual metaphors under analysis, the *women-as-doll* metaphor carries “attendant implications of powerlessness, inanimacy, and procurability” and can be seen as a means of metaphorical “commodification and belittling” (Hines 146). The doll itself functions mostly as a metaphor for the constraints Amma feels at home and the limitations of constructing herself as a subject against her mother’s demands: “I wear this for Adora. When I’m home, I’m her little doll” (SO 44). Just like the town’s women need to conform to societal expectations as *sweet* and *prey*, Amma, for positive attention, needs to be *tended to* by Adora.

Amma’s doll house is fashioned to look exactly like Adora’s Victorian (27), a house-within-the-house. A type of gothic doubling, it represents both the duality of Amma as well as the veneer of artificiality that attends Adora’s Southern Belle performance. “Perhaps at no time in Western history was the home more celebrated as a repository for societal values than during the Victorian era, which gave rise to the cult of female domesticity” (Weisman 86), and indeed, Adora fashions herself after an angel (of the house): “He seems quite impressed with me. Said that I was an angel, and that every child should have a mother like me.” (SO 219) If the Victorian house epitomizes societal values and norms, and the dollhouse mimics Adora’s house on the micro level, the dollhouse becomes a grotesque signifier of Wind Gap’s society. As it turns out, it is built on violence against girls: “Flash of Amma’s dollhouse floor, with its mosaic of jagged, broken teeth, some mere splinters” (224). In this symbolic reading of the dollhouse, the text—though implicitly—considers notions of class: Natalie and Ann, whose teeth make up the floor of her dollhouse, don’t have Amma’s socioeconomic standing¹¹. The house also reinforces Adora’s standing in Wind Gap society, for she wants “all relationships in the house to run through her” (73) And finally, the Southern Gothic house is always also the “place of conflation between past and present, self and uncanny other, past and present trauma” (Michlin 11); it is the place Camille needs to return to in order to confront her trauma¹².

¹¹ I analyze the racialized dimension of Lily Burke’s character, who, in the TV series, is recast as a Black girl named Mae, in chapter IV.3.

¹² Many of the words on Camille’s body correspond to the metaphorical concepts I have explored here: ‘Cupcake’, ‘kitty’, ‘curls’, ‘baby-doll’, ‘petticoat’ (SO 59), reinforcing the fact that they have decisively influenced her childhood and construction of her identity.

All of the metaphors explored in this chapter correspond to diminution or idealization and invoke limited subjecthood; they merge on the character of Amma, who codeswitches to variously access the metaphorical register of women-as-doll in her mother's house (*SO* 44) and women-as-dessert at some social functions (112). Whenever she can, i.e., when she is not forced to perform according to Adora and Wind Gap's expectations, she taps into, and inverts, the women-as-prey register, in an attempt to establish an identity separate from her mother and from socially precribed categorizations of womanhood. Recognizing this systematic metaphorical patterning at play undermines readings of the character's seeming arbitrariness and her apparent caprice: Amma exploits historically available figurations.

The long-standing various derogative conceptual metaphors—inevitably, the novel suggests—result in a character like Amma, who, bored (*SO* 169) but smart and underused in her hometown (96, 168), is late-modernity's ideal subject, “self-making, resilient, and flexible” (Harris 6). If girlhood is contemporarily posited, as Munford and Waters convincingly argue, as a locus of “ambiguous temporality”, i.e., not just an essential motif of transitioning from child- to adulthood, but also the site of a “strangely haunted futurity” (106), Amma is both image of that which was, and that which is to come. She is gothic in the traditional sense—she dwells “in the threat and fascination of collapsing boundaries” (Elfving qtd. in Munford and Waters, 114)—but she is also deeply racialized and class stratified. Anita Harris, distinguishing between the ‘can-do’ and the ‘at-risk’ girl, suggests that white middle class girls have emerged as imagined sites of cultural change and self-actualization¹³ (15), less bound by social stratification than the ‘at-risk’ girls, who are both structurally disadvantaged (25) *and* at fault for being at risk in the first place. At-risk girls are constructed, and marginalized, through the lens of individual failure, yet their livelihood contingent on poverty, ethnicity, and ‘risk of’ early motherhood (15) and mental health problems (14). It is telling that Amma, supposedly a ‘can-do’-girl, challenges the binary of Harris’ dichotomous categorization by simultaneously performing ideal postmodern subjecthood—flexible, malleable, and instable—yet evidencing a dissatisfaction with society that she violently externalizes. At the same time, we must not forget that she exerts violence against those girls who are less privileged

¹³ Note that Harris’ study was published in 2004, and *Sharp Objects* in 2006; at the time of writing of this paper (2020), it may reasonably be argued that dominant culture may now more readily see girls of color as an imagined locus of social change and transformation. Yet young female activists of color still struggle to be seen and heard, as the excision of Ugandan activist Vanessa Nakate on a representative photo of likeminded youth at the WEF in Davos recently evidenced (see Kenya Evelyn’s “Outrage at Whites-Only Image as Ugandan Climate Activist Cropped from Photo”, *The Guardian*, Jan 25 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/24/whites-only-photo-uganda-climate-activist-vanessa-nakate>>. Accessed Jan 30, 2020.)

than her. I will further analyze competitive individualism as a marker of postfeminist womanhood (Harris 20) in chapter IV.

III. SHARPENING THE SWEET: Rape, Sex, and Violence

III.1. Rape and Rape Fantasies: The Rape Narrative as Genre

The preoccupation of (white) women authors' postmodernist fiction with rape and rape fantasies is no coincidence. Sabine Sielke, whose *Reading Rape* (2009) I most thoroughly consult here to trace and understand recent historical trajectories, persuasively argues that this literary current reflects that "part of the difficulty in rediscovering 'our bodies, our selves' is due to the fact that (white) female sexuality has been constructed primarily in contexts of sexual violence or threats thereof" (Sielke 160). The existence of rape narratives and rape fantasies in female-authored texts—far from sanctioning and reproducing the former or legitimating the latter—constitute an interrogation of the power dynamics at play in their sociocultural production and reception. They also complicate and critique the supposedly masochistic nature of female sexuality that Freudian discourse (160) and male-authored fiction had alleged.

Prior to these examinations into identity construction through attempted renegotiations of power and subject-object positioning, modernist fiction capitalized on nineteenth century "realist" (re)presentations of rape by both continuing (31) their employment as trope for the violent construction of a social order and, at the same time, revealing its existence as a "figure and form of representation rather than an event" (76). Continuing this line of thought, modernism also opposed the logophilic tradition and moved toward a general de-hierarchization of the written and the visual—precisely because the written had, counter to realism's proposed verisimilitude, emerged as yet another system of images and signs that delays or absents meaning—interventions that (post)structuralists, semioticians, and sociolinguists alike would later expound upon.

Postmodernism relocates modernism's self-conscious but non-ideological textuality and aesthetics into the realm of the political, while generally retaining its insights into form and meaning construction, or lack thereof (137;160). The repoliticization of rape in postmodernism, then, draws attention to the corporeality of female subjugation (183), to the concrete reality of suffering, and furthermore establishes sexual matters as matters of identity (139). It may also, at

times—when modernism’s lessons are disregarded, so argues Sielke (182)—exhaust and diffuse its own meaning, such as when speech is so thoroughly equated to act that physical violence itself is trivialized. Without disregarding the possibility of speech acts and their power within fiction as normative not just in a postmodernist, but a post-factual world especially, the pain of real rape necessarily remains absent in the reading and interpretation of the textual. Accordingly, just like *Gone Girl* is not about violence against men, “*American Psycho* is not about sexual violence against women, even if it deploys its depiction [...] Instead, its explicitness recognizes that the meaning of rape has long been displaced” (182). Rape narratives and their reception in postmodern American fiction have advanced rape into a pervasive master trope for “defining the violation of women by the patriarchy”, largely indebted to Susan Brownmiller’s *Against Our Will* (Warner 13)—a book that helped establish the concept of rape culture *as* culture, and, through her sweeping claims to a “single virtual reality” (13) simultaneously suggested that rape and its multiplies such as sexual harassment or indeed, any and all interactions between genders (due to inherent power dynamics), define, unequivocally “the relationship between all men and women” (15).

There are, thus, two different types of narratives which relate to the rhetoric and readings of rape and which I seek to analyze in this chapter: The physical act of rape as experienced by Camille, and the way in which rape governs the sociopolitics of Wind Gap; as well as sex’s masochistic aspect, its convergence with self-mutilation, and the possibility of liberation and transgression. The symbolic and psychoanalytic aspects tied to both the gender-based violence analyzed in the present chapter and the metaphorical rape as imagined in the abuse Camille experiences in her childhood home will be critically analyzed in the following chapter.

III.2. Rape Culture and Rape as a Rite of Passage

“I’d wanted attention, I’d submitted myself to boys: *Do what you want, just like me.*”
(Camille in *Sharp Objects* 140)

The first time the reader is presented with evidence of sexual violence (it is clear, at this point, that victim Ann Nash was not raped), Camille describes the encounter in question as follows:

“What else do you remember?”

“Once, an eighth-grade girl got drunk at a high-school party and four or five guys on the football team had sex with her, kind of passed her around. Does that count?”

“Camille. Of course it counts. You know that, right?”

“Well, I just didn’t know if that counted as outright violence or ...”

“Yeah, I’d count a bunch of punks raping a thirteen-year-old outright violence, yes I sure would.”

(*Sharp Objects* 103)

The minimalist, nonchalant depiction of rape forces the reader not just to come to terms with the ubiquity of such encounters; it also activates, through the lack of explicit violence, the reader’s imagination, thus implicating them¹⁴, only to then immediately disturb and de-sexualize any eroticism by Willis’ explicit categorization of the encounter in question *as* rape. The descriptive verbs continue to aggravate—‘have sex’, to ‘pass around’, to ‘rape’—mirroring the process of realization that survivors of sexual violence may experience. The euphemism of being ‘passed around’ is one that disguises the violence of such encounters; it also re-activates the language of dehumanization that was firmly established through the conceptual metaphors I analyze in the previous chapter. By presenting rape in mediated direct speech and through two different speakers rather than Camille’s first-person narration, the reader is placed in between two poles: They are asked to categorize the encounter and choose sides with either Camille or Willis. And finally, Camille projects the experience onto the metonymic *her*, which figures rape as a common rite of passage, the namelessness suggesting the possibility of universality: it could be *any* eighth-grade girl.

The least of the outrages I’d committed in this park. Not only my first kiss, but my first blow job, at age thirteen. A senior on the baseball team took me under his wing, then took me into the woods. He wouldn’t kiss me until I serviced him. Then he wouldn’t kiss me because of where my mouth had been. Young love. Not long after was my wild night at the football party, the story that had gotten Richard so riled. Eighth grade, four guys. Got more action than than I’ve had in the past ten years. I felt the word wicked blaze up by my pelvis.

¹⁴ Sielke catalogues the presentation of rape in this way as “Faulkner’s metapornographic mode, which seduces the reader into participation by deleting, eliding, the act of rape” (141)

Only pages later does the text reveal that the eight-grade girl was, actually, protagonist Camille. In this way, the text cleverly establishes sexual violence as systemic *before* it is inscribed onto Camille's body. The reader, being forced to first interact with the cultural prevalence of nonconsensual sexual incidents, is more likely to see Camille's experience as evidence of the culture at large, not as an outlier. This effect is heightened by the inclusion of other nonconsensual sexual encounters in the discussion with Willis¹⁵. Sexual abuse initiates Camille, in various instances, into sexuality, as it does *Wind Gap*'s other girls. Like in most postmodernist fiction, rape is projected as systemic violence (Sielke 140).

I want to give the lexical ambiguity of the encounter in the description further attention. Whereas the current zeitgeist would certainly read the encounter as rape, diction denoting that violence (notwithstanding Willis' categorization), in the actual description of the encounter, is never deployed; rather, the "passed around" terminology is repeatedly used to describe Camille's rape (*SO* 104, 158; see also "my wild night", 106). How the moment is read is thus left up to the reader and the largely predetermined cultural and historical expectations they bring to the text. Only when Camille and the detective talk about the moment is it rendered a political issue. *How* Camille sees it, in this conversation—i.e., whether she is in denial or blames herself—is irrelevant at this point; what the gap between the event and its belated signification indicates, though, is that rape acquires its meaning only after its occurrence. This does not take away from the severity of the experience, but points towards the fact that it only obtains its sociocultural and -political significance by way of people talking about it (or not talking about it); moreover, the difference in opinion voiced by Camille and the outsider Richard Willis (*SO* 104) further politicizes the issue of rape and, like most postmodernist fiction, these passages thus disseminate "not the representation of rape, but its meanings" (Sielke 140).

¹⁵ "Fifth grade. Two boys cornered a girl at recess and had her put a stick inside herself."

"Against her will? They forced her?"

"Mmmm ... a little bit I guess. They were bullies, they told her to, and she did."

"And you saw this or heard about it?"

"They told a few of us to watch. When the teacher found out, we had to apologize."

"To the girl?"

"No, the girl had to apologize too, to the class. 'Young ladies must be in control of their bodies because boys are not.'" (*SO* 103)

Even so, the effects on Camille are neither minimized—throughout the discussion with Willis, she can “feel her limbs disconnecting” (*SO* 102), the “overpowering smell of the tuna salad [is making her] stomach twist” 103)—nor are they extensively dramatized. This is due to the fact that a part of her coping mechanism is creating a mediating perspective, at times even casting herself as the figure of passive voyeur. The spectacle of rape—its sight, as Camille posits, “actually does something to *you*, makes *you* less human” (*SO* 94; *emphasis mine*). Here, again, Camille creates an interpositional figure she implicitly aligns herself with. The pronoun ‘you’ does not just implicate the reader in its generic function, but should also be read as an attempt of disassociating herself from the fact that she has lived this traumatic event¹⁶; in this way, Camille distances herself emotionally and psychologically from the first-hand experience. This language of detachment is juxtaposed with the sensory overload she experiences when talking about violence, pointing to the limits of speech and Camille’s difficulty in allowing her rape to manifest any way but in bodily reactions.

‘Wicked’, Camille recounts, is the first word she ever “slashed on an anxious summer day at age thirteen” (59), using her mother’s steak knife; when remembering her rape, she feels the word “*wicked* blaze up” by her pelvis (106). It is the same summer she is raped, and the same summer Marian dies (60):

And near it, my first word, slashed on an anxious summer day at age thirteen: wicked. I woke up that morning, hot and bored, worried about the hours ahead. How do you keep safe when your whole day is as wide and empty as the sky? Anything could happen. I remember feeling that word, heavy and slightly sticky across my pubic bone. My mother’s steak knife [...] But once it was settled—and we all seemed to realize it that summer, the same summer I first found blood speckling my thighs, the same summer I began compulsively, furiously masturbating—I was hooked. I was taken with myself, an incredible flirt in any mirror I could find. [...] It was that summer, too, that I began the cutting, and was almost as devoted to it as to my newfound loveliness.

(*Sharp Objects* 59-61)

¹⁶ On the use of generic you to work through traumatic experiences, see Panko, Ben. “When I say ‘You’ But Really Mean ‘Me’.” *Smithsonian Magazine*, 28 March 2017. <<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/when-you-is-really-about-me-180962686/>>. Accessed 02 Feb 2020.

The lines between natural pain (as possible with the first occurrence of menstruation) and self-inflicted pain, the distinctions between bodily fluids, seem to blur. At the same time as she experiences her first period, she also begins masturbating, and cuts herself for the first time with a steak knife (tapping into the *women as game/meat* metaphor). Knowing that Camille cuts, the reader is left wondering if the ‘first blood’ is her menarche or the result of her self-harm; it does not seem to matter. The continued repetition of ‘summer’, too, aligns the awakening of female sexuality with the imagined emptiness of Southern summer. Counter to traditional readings of the season as lively and jovial (and instead of aligning young womanhood with spring), summer, here, figures as dead and dangerous. Camille’s becoming a woman, then, is imagined as an end, rather than a beginning, womanhood an initiation into a language of pain (‘my first word’).

The overwhelming, stifling quality of Camille’s experiences in her hometown is symbolized by the flora and fauna that are seemingly ever-present and inescapable. Further analyzing the first flashback about Camille’s sexuality, the inevitability of haunting, sometimes abrupt and violent, is foreshadowed two pages before the reader dives into the protagonist’s memory for the first time: “The air was jungle wet. Goldenrod and wild sumac bushes brushed my ankles, and fuzzy *white cottonwood seed* floated everywhere, *slipping into my mouth*, sticking to my arms. When I was a kid we called them fairy dresses, I remembered suddenly.” (SO 17; *emphasis mine*). The sudden evocation of Camille’s childhood in one single sentence signals the return of memory, one that is triggered by place. Additionally, the lexical foreshadowing of sexual memory is presented through a double entendre, as the passages I have italicized show. Here, Camille’s associative memory—and Flynn’s use of diction—create the relationship between nature and violent, overpowering sexuality, a motif Flynn repeats throughout the novel. This spatial connotation also further emphasizes the importance of place in the study of trauma and the accessibility of memory (Balaev 36). But place does not just trigger traumatic memory, natural imagery is also used to present disassociation: “I could feel my limbs disconnecting, floating nearby on an oily lake” (SO 102).

Camille narrates any ensuing sexual encounter from an object position, using passive sentence construction, and figuring sex (like rape) as a series of actions committed by men that she passively allows: “He held up my arms, my legs, turned me on my back [...] He took off his own clothes [...] He unhooked my bra” (191); “I’d let him touch me” (136) and “Richard fucked me another time that afternoon” (159). Textually, there is no difference in the representation of sex and rape, enthusiastic consent is never given; this is due to the fact that Camille has trouble telling the difference between the two, as is rendered explicit after one of her sexual encounters with Willis:

Now it was just me, feeling sticky and stupid. I couldn't decide if I'd been mistreated. By Richard, by those boys who took my virginity, by anyone. I was never really on my side in any argument. I liked the Old Testament spitefulness of the phrase *got what she deserved*. Sometimes women do.

(*Sharp Objects* 159)

This passage reveals Camille's internalized shame and her self-stigmatization—due to her sexual conditioning and the social norms of the town. Wind Gap proposes that rape, not murder, is the ultimate violation of (white) femininity, reaffirming the construction of white womanhood around im-/purity¹⁷: “He didn't rape her. Everyone says that's unusual in a killing like this. I say it's the only blessing we got. I'd rather him kill her than rape her“ (25). Accordingly, Camille blames herself and suggests that, like a vengeful God who punishes disobedience, rape is deployed in cases of societal transgression.

Rape, then, retains its master trope for defining the violation of women, in fact, the initiation into womanhood, female sexuality, and womanhood *per se* are equated with violence and submission. In *Sharp Objects*, rape reads as political and an ever-present manner of social organizing.

III.3. A Space for Transgression: Submission, Masochism and Self-Harm

Navigating womanhood in Wind Gap, then, seems a rather bleak endeavor, seemingly devoid of optimism; and while I have established the ways in which sexual violence governs both the town and Camille, *Sharp Objects* suggests there is more to Camille, her body and her sexuality, which should not be reduced to the active/passive distinction (Sielke 142). I analyze here the ways in which the text accounts for the possibility of transgression by disrupting normative and binary conceptions of sexuality and health, conceptions that are always, too, informed by constructions of race, class, age, and gender.

Camille's submissive (and masochistic) tendencies are not just a result of learned sexual behavior—she remembers a “murmur of an orgasm” after they had “passed [her] over to the third

¹⁷ Echoes of Calhoun Day abound, which I go on to analyze in chapter IV.3.

guy” (158)—but also one of societal conditioning, as I have explained in the chapter on conceptual metaphors, which structure gender norms and require passivity and powerlessness on behalf of Wind Gap’s female residents. Significantly, Camille first masturbates after stumbling across the photographs in the hunting shed, and *not after* being raped; the interconnection between flesh, violence, and sex already having been established beforehand. It would thus be not just an oversimplification, but patently wrong to suggest that Camille’s masochism is only a pathological result of abuse.

Ruth McPhee in *Female Masochism* asserts that the “restrictively rigid binary oppositions that have dominated [debates on masochism] must be deconstructed and recreated more openly and with an attentive awareness to the possibilities of the fluid and the multiple” (151). One of the flaws apparent in feminist critiques of female masochism (to which self-harm and -mutilation belong¹⁸) is that “they fail to deconstruct the conceptual framework that they are opposing” (17), instead reproducing “mistaken binary logic” (16). Drawing on Irigarayan conceptions of the female sexual imaginary as multiple, she postulates the necessity of understanding the sensations of “the female masochistic body as irrevocably plural” (17). The cis- and heteronormativity inherent in singular and restrictive conceptualizations of passive/active, dominant/submissive, and sadistic/masochistic should be apparent, as queer theory especially has complicated these inherited, largely heteronormative psychoanalytic perceptions and challenged assumptions about “sado-masochistic desire and power dynamics”, “emphasizing the mutability of gender roles ” (Sherwin 174).

Reading Camille simply as a (sexual, passive, and sexually passive) receptacle, then, denotes an overly simplistic understanding of agency and the possibility of self-actualization through blurring the boundaries between the corporeal and the mental/emotional. Refusing to take into account Camille’s libidinal investment and the possibility of jouissance reinforces the binary of active-male-subject-spectator and passive-female-object-receptacle that feminist and queer analysis seeks to complicate and would align the reader-viewer with a paternalistic and expropriative male gaze. The texts suggests the possibility of positive sexual transgression by building up towards the last of Camille’s sexual encounters that is textually realized, and by describing said encounter in terms of extreme and liberating satisfaction:

¹⁸ See on the definition of masochism: “any undertakings that are regarded as voluntarily painful or self-punishing”, a meaning that is a result of conceptual slippage from sexual practices into colloquialism (McPhee 6) and, consequently, on self-mutilation as masochistic pleasure and vice-versa: Masochism can “firmly and unequivocally be situated broadly within the realm of ‘self-harm’” (71).

He pulled my shirt over my head as I sat like an obedient child. Eased off my shoes and socks, pulled down my slacks [...] John pulled back the covers, motioned for me to climb in, and I did, feeling feverish and frozen at once.

He held up my arms, my legs, turned me on my back. He read me. Said the words out loud, angry and nonsensical both: *oven, queasy, castle*. He took off his own clothes, as if he sensed an unevenness, threw them in a ball on the floor, and read more. *Bun, spiteful, tangle, brush*. He unhooked my bra in front with a quick flick of his fingers, peeled it off me. *Blossom, dosage, bottle, salt*. He was hard. He put his mouth on my nipples, the first time since I began cutting in earnest that I'd allowed a man to do that. Fourteen years.

His hands ran all over me, and I let them: my back, my breasts, my thighs, my shoulders. His tongue in my mouth, down my neck, over my nipples, between my legs, then back to my mouth. Tasting myself on him. The words stayed quiet. I felt exorcised.

I guided him into me and came fast and hard and then again.

(*Sharp Objects* 191)

The repeated active sentence construction that underlines John's position and the terms 'obedience' and 'child' that construct the passivity we have come to expect in Camille deliberately engender the dynamics of active/passive. Yet at the same time, the text seeks to renounce traditional readings of superimposed hierarchies of power by letting Camille's voice be heard (i.e., *read*). It is the first time that she has sex from equal positioning, as she is not forced to hide herself—her visibly injured body no longer a site of shame, Camille is truly seen. During sex with Willis, words blaze up—here, in their acknowledgment, they stay quiet, and Camille feels *exorcised*. Note here again the lexicality, subtly suggesting a psycholinguistic connection to the specter, the gothic, and the abject: The wounds of the self-mutilated body, McPhee argues, exist “within this border space of neither entirely self nor completely other” (77). John's, and by extension, our reading of Camille's body in this psychosexual space can then be read as an encounter with the abject: Her body should disturb social reason (Kristeva 4), *should* invoke “an involuntary eruption of horror [...] from the spectator looking on” (McPhee 77), reinforcing her identity as that which is Other and impure; self-inflicted cuts are always only articulated in “a limited range of narratives [...] according to pre-existing structures of signification” (71). This scene, however, proposes an alternative reading, one in which existing conceptualizations of self-harm *don't* “manifest

themselves as forms of discursive violence against the subject” (71). Instead, at the intersection of visibility, eroticism, and the mutilated female body, a space for recovery opens up.

Importantly for the possibility of recuperation, the text suggests that Camille’s sexuality, while surely having been decisively influenced by violence, is not irreparably doomed because of said violence, her sex life not forever tragically muted or unvaried; on the contrary, by textually realizing sexual behaviors that are at the same time ‘messy’ as they are escapism and, in the end, even hint at the possibility of exorcism, i.e., the *eviction of (inner) demons*, the text refuses to give up on Camille, destigmatizing her. What the text offers, here, is thus an attempt at complicating, if not transforming the narrative that female masochism is natured or a sign of the irredeemable pathological mind; and, most importantly, it offers a counter narrative to the town’s assertion that as a rape survivor, *defiled*, her womanhood is shattered.

IV. EATING THE TART: Representing Intergenerational Violence

IV.1. Complicating Motherhood

Sharp Objects constructs female sexuality, early on, in contexts of violence, and natures white womanhood and the social functioning of *Wind Gap* around it, politicizing rape and identity. This postmodernist tradition, however, is complicated in one crucial way: The actual sources of violence, in the resolution of the plot, are women. Camille is abused in multiple ways, the physical violation of gang rape constituting only one; Adora, on the level of metaphor, enacts rape much earlier. The second part of this chapter intensively deals with the abuse Camille experiences in her childhood home, both past and present. For now, I want to focus on the multiple ways in which the text complicates motherhood and criticizes the naturing of motherhood and womanhood.

An Irigarayan reading of Sharp Objects postulates that its centering of the mother-daughter relationship amounts to attempts at undermining the patriarchal order—the mother-daughter relationship is “the most victimized, the most obscure relationship” (qtd in Maroney 31); the creation of decidedly female-centered genealogy, then, that goes back as far as Millie Calhoun and the town’s founding, can be read as an attempt at writing women and their herstories into being,

separate from male-authored constrictions. This undertaking, the negotiation of female spaces and ‘forgotten ancestries’ (Gray 122), is no coincidence: Like Irigaray, Amma, too, is fascinated with Greek mythology, in fact, it is Persephone Amma fashions herself after¹⁹. The myth of Persephone aids in deconstructing what Camille perceives as Amma’s duality, signifying both Amma’s desire to return to her mother as well as her attempts at establishing her selfhood as an individual, emancipated subject. There is no Hades, though, to take Amma into the underworld or feed her seeds (123-24), or if there is, it is within Adora who figures as both Hades and Demeter: Demeter, as the goddess of fertility, is only productive with her daughter at her side; yet in *Sharp Objects*, it is the mother who gives the daughter(s) milk that will bind her to her (*SO* 203). Hades’ generative seed(s)—connoting both the pre- and the post-, the semen and the (male) ancestor—is overwritten, in its place the mother’s milk. According to Irigaray, “the mother needs to nurture and if she doesn’t, she doesn’t exist” (qtd. in Maroney 31), i.e., in the current existing, masculine symbolic, a mother’s identity is fashioned through the absence of subjectivity, and only through her existence as mother-object. Therefore, where the text problematizes the toxicity that stems from womanhood-as-motherhood in a masculine symbolic/imaginary—mother’s milk is literally poisonous—it also decenters the masculine and its genealogy and rewrites one of the Greek mythologies²⁰ foundational to Western philosophies.

Through its complicating of the mother-daughter relationship at the same time as it is centering it, *Sharp Objects* refuses to idealize femininity and feminine spaces. Western literary history is “populated with dead, absent, and missing mothers” (Francus 25); if mothers are not there, they cannot fail, and the missing mother responds to the many “fears, hopes, and anxieties” (Francus 30) the maternal body and its idealization in absence engenders. Especially in mid 20th century narratives, eager to respond to fears of ‘momism’ (Coontz), feminist rhetoric sought to recover the

¹⁹ “She’s the Queen of the Dead,” Amma beamed. “She was so beautiful, Hades stole her and took her to the underworld to be his wife. But her mother was so fierce, she forced Hades to give Persephone back. But only for six months each year. So she spends half her life with the dead, and half with the living.” -“Amma, why would such a creature appeal to you?” Alan said. “You can be so ghastly.” - “I feel sorry for Persephone because even when she’s back with the living, people are afraid of her because of where’s she’s been,” Amma said. “And even when she’s with her mother, she’s not really happy, because she knows she’ll have to go back underground.” She grinned at Adora and jabbed a big bite of ham into her mouth, then crowed. (*SO* 213-14)

²⁰ Of note here, too, is the fact that Amma-as-culprit fashions herself after Artemis: “James Capisi wasn’t lying about that ghostly woman. Amma had stolen one of our pristine white sheets and fashioned it into a Grecian dress, tied up her light-blond hair, and powdered herself until she glowed. She was Artemis, the blood huntress. Natalie had been bewildered at first when Amma had whispered into her ear, It’s a game. Come with me, we’ll play.” (*SO* 224) Both Artemis and Persephone are identities that, in the masculine order, are constructed crucially around notions of purity, with Artemis being the virgin huntress and Persephone’s purity being assaulted when Hades takes her into the eponymous underworld.

excised and devalued mother, paradoxically further aggravating the anxieties it attempted to assuage. “The fear is that a mother will be—or choose to be—a ‘bad’ mother instead of a good one” (30); sacred motherhood at the expense of maternal autonomy²¹. The concept of motherhood is, of course, ultimately corrupted on the level of plot when the conclusion reveals that Adora suffers from Munchhausen by Proxy (*SO* 207)—the growing portrayal of which, according to Elizabeth Podnieks, coincides with the “rise of anxieties surrounding motherhood”, intensive forms of parenting, and the “consistent focus on mothers’ performance” (qtd. in Gajanan).

Camille Nurka suggests that the dramatization of the mother-daughter conflict bespeaks anxieties about (post)feminism, as it is the redundant mother who “ironically denies women their liberatory sexual potential” (qtd. in Munford and Waters 115). The seemingly puritan mother versus the sexually liberated (or so she attempts) daughter signifies the push-and-pull between second and a mutated third-wave feminism—in the process denying the lessons of second-wave feminism in favor of objectification in a “hyper-culture of commercial sexuality” (McRobbie, qtd. in Nurka 4). While I believe that the generational conflict staged in *Sharp Objects* evidences these anxieties, the plot’s dramatic and bleak resolution belies any favoritism towards or espousal of Amma and the politics she may represent. Postfeminism’s “neoliberal sway” (Munford and Waters 21) would celebrate the accomplishments of individual women at the expense of pinpointing systemic gains and losses²²; yet in *Sharp Objects*, competitiveness between women is highlighted even in the supposedly sacred space of the home (a nod to neoliberalism’s invasion of the private sphere). Amma, adhering to the precribed role her mother imposes upon her, finds that even if she holds up her part of the contract she entered with her mother, she needs to eliminate possible competitors. As her mother’s doll, she feels betrayed when her mother showers other girls with affection, in fact, Amma competes not just with intrusive outsiders, but even with dead step sister Marian (172). This suggests that there is only so much space for women, that even if they play by

²¹ Rosella Valdré’s *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Women and Power in Contemporary Fiction* suggests that novels like Flynn’s *Gone Girl* explore “malicious intimacies”, those that are rooted in victim-executioner roles that need to construct an idealized partner-object, only to then deconstruct them through the de-idealization of women and femininity, thus transforming the locus of power (ix). This process of de-idealization is, through the desecration of the sacred maternal, further heightened in *Sharp Objects*. The divine mother has also been recovered by some ecofeminist and cultural feminist rhetoric as well as feminist sociologists (see, for example, Mary Daly, Carol Gilligan, or Maria Mies), in effect gendering and naturing femininity to an almost essentializing extent (though Haraway’s cyborg, here, intervenes into these strict identity politics and binarisms, proposing the affinity paradigm). Gonzofeminism, then, negotiates these views, denaturing femininity without casting off femininity itself or discarding female language(s).

²² See also Nancy Fraser on how neoliberal values have subsumed feminist revolutionary ideas; she teases out how second-wave feminist values such as individual autonomy through wage-earning, as well as the feminist turn towards identity politics at the expense of political economic critique, now sanction neoliberal individualism: Fraser, Nancy. “Feminism, Capitalism, and the Cunning of History.” *NewLeftReview*, no. 56, Mar/Apr 2009, pp. 97-117.

the rules of traditional femininity, *even if they eliminate other women*, successes are temporary and their attempts, finally, moot.

IV.2. Generational Abuse and the Incest Trope

As I have outlined in chapter II, the relationship between Amma and Camille is, at times, highly suggestive; the psycholinguistic co-construction of women not just as objects, but as sexual and sexually available, as desserts waiting to be consumed bears repeating here, as it is, vitally, how the interactions between Adora and her children are figured as sexualized. In one of Camille's memories, Adora looks at a child "lasciviously", only to then, literally, take a bite (*SO* 93). When taking Camille's temperature, she takes a rather unorthodox approach: "She put a hand between my legs, quickly, professionally. It was the best way to feel a temperature, she always said" (176). Similarly, the boundaries between care and sex blur when Amma admits that after Adora "takes care" of her, she likes to have sex (167). The earliest instances of assault on Camille's (and Amma's) bodily autonomy, it can be assumed, are not committed at school or during Camille's rape in the woods; they are, both literally and figuratively, enacted much earlier by her own mother.

The lexical proximity of diction relating to 'taking care of someone' and 'taking care of someone sexually' is epitomized in the following scene, where the interaction between mother and daughter takes on an undoubtedly sexual subtext:

"Lie back down and be a **good girl.**" [...]

"Camille. **Open.**" **Soothing voice, coaxing.** *Nurse* began **throbbing** near my left armpit. I remember being a kid, rejecting all those tablets and medicines, and losing her by doing so. She reminded me of Amma and her Ecstasy, wheedling, **needing me to take what she was offering. To refuse has so many more consequences than submitting.** My skin was on fire from where she'd cleaned me, and it felt like that **satisfying** heat after a cut. I thought of Amma and how content she'd seemed, wrapped in my mother's arms, **fragile and sweaty.**

I turned back over, let my mother put the pill on my tongue, **pour the thick milk into my throat, and kiss me.**"

(*Sharp Objects* 176-77, **emphases mine**)

On the level of content, this scene aligns the abuse Camille suffered at home with her need to please, one that extends into her sexual practices and, indeed, any relationships (as when she craves Amma's approval); as during sex with John Keene (190), Camille needs convincing, *coaxing*, to open, to 'submit'. The words 'throbbing', 'satisfying', 'sweaty', and 'thick milk' can be read as double entendres, as can the kiss at the end. When Camille submits, she is a 'good girl'²³, the collocation of words being used only in interactions with her mother, when she submits to Amma, and during a sexual encounter with Willis (159). Finally, Adora pours the white liquid down Camille's throat, having succeeded in forcing her to open her mouth.

It is only through the consideration of the Crellin women's relationship as highly sexualized, even incestuous, that the symbolism of the violated girls—whose corpses have missing teeth—reveals its full meaning. Amma takes the girls' teeth not just because they represent an attack on her mother and the twisted contract they have entered, but also because she is jealous of the fact that Ann and Nathalie were able to resist Adora more than she was: "I couldn't stop thinking about it. Why Ann could bite her, and I couldn't" (227). Teeth constitute a natural form of protection, a barrier against intrusion; without them, the mouth as a violated orifice is teased out even more. While their violent removal is not, as the town and the detectives long speculate, a gendered enactment of rape on the basis of male-female power dynamics²⁴, it is similarly symbolically loaded to constitute the violence Amma experiences at home and reenacts, and taps into the symbolic history of rape narratives and their use of the trope (Sielke 176). Moreover, the removal of teeth figures as generationally transmitted silence—teeth play a big part in speech and its development—and, in turn, the forced projection of said silence onto girls who don't conform: Both Ann and Nathalie were known for biting people (*SO* 149) .

The depiction of the relationship between Camille, Adora, and Amma as sexualized, at times violently so, then, effects various interpretative outcomes. Firstly, a postmodernist depiction and reading of rape, as is present here, indicts the clear distinction between female victim and male perpetrator and points to the limits of such conceptualizations²⁵, which reinforces the "gender binarism that informs radical feminist perspectives" (Sielke 178) at the expense of Queerness and intersectionality. The possibility of a lesbian spectrum is evoked, for better or worse, in the

²³ A good girl conforms to societal standards, and the term can be used inversely in *dirty talk* to break down the boundaries between, and make apparent the construction of, good and bad girl behavior.

²⁴ "I think in our guy's mind, the teeth pulling is equivalent to rape. That's all about power—it's invasive, it requires a goodly amount of force, and as each tooth comes out ... release." (*SO* 105)

²⁵ "The clear-cut discrimination between (female) victims and (male) violators [...] has hampered rather than helped the evolution of new bodies and selves." (Sielke 166)

relationship between Camille and Amma (and Adora), as is the possibility of female jouissance: Amma's touch feels better "than any touch I'd ever experienced" (*SO* 169).

Meanwhile, the tropes Flynn taps into and rewrites are historically racialized. The preoccupation with mouth and teeth has a long symbolic history in rape narratives, where "images of Black rapists [usually] focus on teeth and mouth, suggesting sexual prowess as well as fear of castration" (Sielke 176). And the metaphorical incest committed by Adora mimes the mechanisms of the incest trope in African American writing to both appropriate and displace the Southern "plantation family", America's first incest scene, into the white, angelic, Victorian domesticity that Adora, and by extension Amma, represent, a scene that *Sharp Objects*, not just in setting, "uncannily remember[s]" (Sielke 184). The twisted representation of care (work), then, reflects not just an attempt at dissolving the naturing of care work and femininity, but also remembers the construction of Mammy narratives, and is thus doubly racialized, once within the framework of white Southern femininity, and again by its evocation and transferal of racialized care work within the confines of the plantation (to which Black wage-workers often had to return after 1865). The pioneering fiction of Black American women has "employed the incest trope in order to re-present rape as "family affair" and "figure for internalized racism" (Sielke 183), and it is this internalization that, through the metafictional transferal onto the triad of the Crellin women, brings to light intergenerational and intragender and -racial violence among white women through similar metaphorical mechanisms. As white women's complicity in the preservation of white patriarchal supremacy has emerged as central to current feminist debates, the texts reflect on and indict misplaced competition and autoaggression (Sielke 143), and also reflect cultural anxieties over white womanhood²⁶ and its construction not just against the masculine, but against non-whiteness: "For whereas "family done right facilitates conformity, 'family done wrong breaks open the membrane of civilization'" (Williams qtd in Sielke 173).

²⁶ Adora's complicity is foreshadowed in the scene in which Camille first reveals the town's extensive culture of sexual violence to Willis. Before mentioning the violation of another girl by her classmates, and later her own, she recounts the memory of her mother biting a child. By aligning her mother's abuse with the sexual violence perpetrated by the town's male inhabitants, a small act of violence that crescendos into the revelation of gang rape, the text implicates women like Adora in the existence of rape culture, per se. It is a subtle revelation, but one that aligns the veneer of white womanhood that Adora performs with the patriarchal culture the text indicts. With indictment comes possibility: In Flynn's gonzofeminism, it is up to women to undo their own constraints.

IV.3. Violence, Accountability, and Whiteness

Flynn's protagonists are acutely aware of the type of women society seeks to avenge and afford justice²⁷. Her characters usually defy traditional notions of femininity and perform, to the extent that they can, outside of the male gaze (or are in the process of attempting just that). The girls are repeatedly referred to as defying social expectations, be that as victims or perpetrators—i.e., of course, white social expectations.

Flynn's writing, then, problematizes whiteness, too, as it is constituted against Blackness and, at times, through the appropriation of racialized tropes, as I have shown. Of course, Wind Gap is a predominantly white town—not simply because of its location in the Bootheel of Missouri²⁸ (*SO* 9)—but because it needs to be for the purposes of the story. The political leanings of Wind Gap don't need to be explicitly stated; the toxicity of white patriarchy is revealed in the plot and its resolution. *Only* for the fact that they are white can Adora and Amma act in the way they're acting. The veneer of Southern-Belled angelicity, purity, and *sweetness* that both characters situationally hide behind affords them social status and protects them not just from societal-reputational consequences, but often, too, very material and legal repercussions. In chapter seventeen, it is revealed that "Alan immediately paid the punishing bail sum so [Adora] could await trial in the comfort of her home" (221) and then, in the book's epilogue after she is found guilty of first degree murder, that Adora's presumed costly "lawyer is already preparing the appeal, which is enthusiastically chronicled by the group that runs my mother's Web site, freedora.org" (*SO* 226); Amma is in prison until her eighteenth birthday (226). It is not just that Gillian Flynn could not convincingly and authentically write a Black woman's story; she could also *realistically* not do so. In the novel, it is the absence of Black girls that is revealing²⁹.

²⁷ Consider this scene in *Dark Places*: "On a nearby telephone pole flapped a grainy photocopy of an unsmiling teen, missing since October 2007. Two more blocks, and what I thought was a copy of the same poster turned out to be a new missing girl, vanished in June 2008. Both girls were unkempt, surly, which explained why they weren't getting the Lisette Stephens treatment. I made a mental note *to take a smiling, pretty photo of myself in case I ever disappeared.*" (*DP* 100; *emphasis mine*)

²⁸ All of the three counties that make up this culturally largely Southern part of Missouri are majority-white: Dunklin County has a Black population of 9.7%, New Madrid County 16.1%. ("Dunklin County"; "New Madrid County"). Only Pemiscot County has a sizable number of Black residents at 27.2% ("Pemiscot County").

²⁹ See the cases, recently, of Cyntoia Brown and Chrystal Kizer, Black girls who were victimized and killed their traffickers. Contrera, Jessica. "He Was Sexually Abusing Underage Girls. Then, Police Said, One of Them Killed Him." *The Washington Post*, 17 Dec 2019. <<https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/local/child-sex-trafficking-murder/>>. Accessed 01 Feb 2020. On national media coverage of missing Black and missing white women, see also Moody-Ramirez, Mia and Blackwell, H. "The Invisible Damsel: Differences in How National Media Framed Coverage of Missing Black and White Women." *Media Report To Women*, vol. 37, 2009, pp.12-18.

The TV series problematizes the racialized nature of Wind Gap's feminine subjectivities and non-/agencies more explicitly. Here, Adora pleads not guilty, and judging from Camille's final writings on the case, Adora's punishment may be even more lenient than in the book:

Men get to be warrior poets. What woman is described that way? Not Adora. Prosecution says my mother is a warrior martyr. If she was guilty, they argued, it was only of a very female sort of rage: over-care. Killing through kindness. It shouldn't have surprised me that Adora fell on that sword spectacularly.

(“Milk.” 00:39:07)

It is doubtful that a Black mother's abuse of her daughters would evoke rhetoric of martyrdom and over-care.

The TV series' last images, haunting the viewer, are of Amma, presently smiling at Camille and into the camera and feverously murdering in the past, but very much *not* in prison, the ambiguity deliberately questioning how, if even, Amma will suffer consequences. And most tellingly, the last girl Amma murders in the series, once she and Camille have left Wind Gap, is Black. Amma's killings, then, expressly culminate in the murder of a member of one of the most vulnerable demographics in the United States. The intergenerational trauma of the Crellin women and the societal mechanisms around them have led to an externalization of inherited violence onto society's most victimized, who, in the TV series, explicitly bear the brunt of such institutionalized patterns; the visual text, here, reflects more realistically on the effects of white violence.

While the book sidelines other characters of color³⁰, their representation in the series is heightened, although (with the exception of Dr. Hafía, the psychiatrist treating Camille in rehab) they are cast in supporting roles with limited agency. Black characters, such as the facility's intake nurse, editor Curry's wife Eileen, or housekeeper Gayla³¹ (stylized deliberately to evoke *Get Out*'s housekeeper Georgina in ‘the sunken place’), are invisible in the Ellisonian sense: Though lacking social power, it is shown that they are well aware of Wind Gap's destructive tendencies, possess

³⁰ “‘Right. Adora's got a grown-up daughter. I remember,’ said the old guy. His nametag said Jose. I tried to see if he was missing any fingers. Mexicans don't get cushy box jobs unless they're owed. That's the way plants down here work: The Mexicans get the shittiest, most dangerous jobs, and the whites still complain.” (SO 94) This is one of the only scenes in which whiteness—and the extent to which Wind Gap relies on its socioeconomic dominance—is rendered explicit. In the novel, neither Eileen, nor Gayla, nor Becca are coded black.

³¹ See “Sharp Objects: Full Cast & Crew.” *IMDB.com*, <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2649356/fullcredits>> Accessed 01 Feb 2010.

knowledge only their marginalized status affords them. Becca, who is coded white in the novel and played by Hilary Ward on the show, is the least popular of Camille's former class mates (and the one she gets along with most); in episode six, she recounts that she knew Camille had started cutting herself when they were children, the only person to take note of her pain ("Cherry"). Pointed camera work in episode seven registers an unnamed Black man witnessing a conversation between Jackie and Vickery in which they agree to remain ignorant to the town's problems ("Falling", 00:06:25), and later in that same episode, the audience's view lingers on a Black nurse, whose gaze follows Willis (00:22:50) as he enters the hospital for evidence (she is purposely contrasted with a white nurse, who does not seem to notice the detective). In an earlier episode, a wide angle shot shows Camille and Amma entering a car, followed by an unnamed Black man's reaction shot to the wide angle scene, and then an over-the-shoulder shot as his gaze follows the sisters and the teenagers driving away ("Cherry", 00:33:54). In a show that is as densely layered and edited as *Sharp Objects*, these moments must be read as intentional and meaningful.

The addition of these named and unnamed Black characters, and their depiction as aware yet limited in agency, is multifold in effect. By casting Black women, especially, as 'the help', their contributions in a story firmly set in a South they actively created are stereotyped and demoted. In HBO's *Wind Gap*, Black characters emerge as the witness bearers of history, silent/silenced and their bodies bearing proof of white violence. At the same time, their visual inclusion heightens the notion of white (female) complicity that the novel sought to engender. When juxtaposing Gayla's character, for example, who is in a position of economic dependency vis-à-vis Adora, with the character of Jackie O'Neele, who enjoys similar privileges as Adora, the question of power and powerlessness manifests more readily than in the novel. It is shown, unequivocally, that Jackie knew of Adora's murder, yet she exempts herself from all accountability ("Falling", 00:45:20). Arguably—especially, too, in light of Alan and Chief Vickery's behavior—the whole town absolves itself from looking too closely into the overt and covert control exercised by the owner of *Wind Gap*'s largest economic operation³². Who, then, in a town that celebrates white supremacy, would believe the Black housekeeper?

³² "The Capisi home sat on the edge of the low-rent section to the far east of town, a cluster of broken-down, two-bedroom houses, most of whose inhabitants work at the nearby pig factory-farm, a private operation that delivers almost 2 percent of the country's pork. Find a poor person in *Wind Gap*, and they'll almost always tell you they work at the farm, and so did their old man [...] For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that my mother owns the whole operation and receives approximately \$1.2 million in profits from it annually. She lets other people run it." (*SO* 50)

Finally, the addition of Calhoun Day (“Closer”) epitomizes the TV series’ open dramatization of the family’s existence within the framework of white supremacy, though its dramatization on stage relies, again, on the violation of white women’s bodies and their construction through purity politics as opposed to acknowledging the true historicity of rape, race, and their entwinement. The town’s founding myth narrates the story of Millie Calhoun, formerly of the Union, who—pregnant with a Confederate soldier’s child—refuses to give away her spouse’s position, and is then repeatedly raped by Union soldiers, which results in the loss of her baby. The sexually victimized subject, and the subject as survivor, has its own particular American history, and the town’s founding myth problematically calls forth America’s “primal incest scene” while erasing those at the center of it: “[It] appropriates the position of the (sexually violated) African American woman and a rhetoric that evolved under conditions of institutionalized sexual violence” (Sielke 184). It is the nobility of the cause and its defenders’ continued resistance against the North that the staging highlights, plainly mirroring the formation of postbellum national identities and the discursive construction of the ‘Lost Cause’, which excised from its narrative the centrality of slavery—and enslaved people—in the antebellum South. Only in the name of ‘Calhoun’ is slavery implicitly evoked. It is not just rape, then, that figures as an initiation rite for the town’s girls as well as the town at large, but also the town’s overt and ritual re-enactment of negationist Reconstruction mythologies.

In an attempt at contextualization, one readily available reading of these more explicitly realized racial dynamics may argue for the open rise of nationalist sentiments and their counter-movements reflected in the adapted text of 2018, the overt critical engagement emblematic of the post-2016 election cultural moment. The problematic tradition of historical erasure has found its way into dominant political discourse: Confederate monuments, most of them erected during Reconstruction or later as revisionist propaganda, are being torn down all over America at the same time as white nationalist rallies are growing in number³³. The more explicit conversations about representation in cultural productions, as well as the sociopolitical zeitgeist, are reflected in the changes made to the visual adaptation of *Sharp Objects*.

³³ See Bigood, Jess, et al. “Confederate Monuments Are Coming Down Across the United States. Here’s a List.” *The New York Times*, 28 Aug 2017. <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/08/16/us/confederate-monuments-removed.html>>. Accessed 01 Feb 2020.

V. Arriving at Gonzofeminism: Generic Conventions and Their Subversion

V.1. Complicating Mystery: *Whodunit* and *Whoisshe*

As John Frow writes in *Genre*, the “semiotic frames within which genres are embedded implicate and specify layered ontological domains” (19), i.e., genre creates worlds (or world views) and works at a level of meaning-making. The implicit realities formed and the intertextual knowledge presupposed—whether all readers belong to all of the discursive communities addressed or not—seek to evoke contextual frames that have been accessed prior to the reader’s interaction with the text, and then, in the process of interaction, create new sociocultural references. If Flynn, then, situates her intimate women’s character study within certain larger generic frames and topoi, it is because aspects of women’s realities are evoked or embodied by them, as well as provide responses to them (14). She places her writing on a historical continuum that she then seeks to subvert or rewrite—even at the risk of reifying aspects or reproducing the male imaginary, such as the dead girl trope. This chapter will delineate and expound upon those generic conventions, topoi, and frames that have, as of yet, not been mentioned, delineate the ways in which Flynn’s writing diverges from established notions and how this affects the text’s meaning-making, and bring them together with those I have mentioned earlier in this thesis.

Sharp Objects goes—if sporadically so—through the motions of crime fiction (*whodunit*) and its American sister genre *thriller* (Todorov 47), and merges them into what we may call *suspense* (50-51) or mystery³⁴. *Sharp Objects* is first and foremost a character study that centers and subverts feminine subjectivities and expectations, but it is also a novel where women make decisions, affect the story, and push the plot forwards, and it is through such writing alone that it emerges as a powerful exercise in approaching more full-fledged and nuanced portrayals of women in mainstream cultural productions.

Yet in terms of generic frames, I mention the genres *whodunit*, *thriller*, and *mystery* because while some of their conventions are parodied, subverted, or completely excised, others re-emerge

³⁴ Note that in the traditional iterations of these genres as well as their specifically American inflections such as the *hard-boiled* detective story or the *noir*, women are generally sidelined, often acting as victim/damsel, femme fatale, red herring or other male-adjacent and -supporting characters. Of course, current renewed interest in stories told through women’s perspectives and the general trend towards genre-bending have resulted in some interesting pop-cultural productions such as *Jessica Jones*, which fuses the *noir* and a female detective-protagonist with the superhero genre. Historical and contemporary counter-writing notwithstanding, a general, male-dominant trend prevails.

in at times unexpected places and to striking effect. The American equivalent of the classical whodunit, for example, registers its version of the bumbling detective, a member of the police who works within the system but is corrupt or in other ways unreliable (Rzepka 181); he serves as *foil* to the protagonist, who often joins the investigation later and/or does not work within the traditional institutions of justice. In *Wind Gap*, Chief Vickery takes on the role of local detective who is so immersed in service to his town, he ends up literally serving its members³⁵ and has a hard time committing to the investigation³⁶. Vickery's characterization relies heavily on established tropes, but it is his juxtaposition with hard-boiled investigator Richard Willis³⁷ that is most telling. Described as a "big-shot detective from Kansas City" (32), who saw what was happening as "a job, a project to assemble and complete" (69), and whose interactions with Camille are based on mutual gain (71; 159; 210), there is an air of detachedness, if not superiority, to him, and his "paternal sternness" (32) extends not just to his interactions with his local colleague, but also to Camille (72; 159). When, after Camille's sexual encounter with suspect John Keene, he admits that his interest in her was tied to the investigation, he also proclaims that he nonetheless "genuinely fell" (210) for her; and of course, it is Richard who asserts that what happened to a thirteen-year-old Camille was, in fact, rape (103). Yet Camille never hears from him again after he has seen her "marked-up body" (226). His first instinct upon finding her poisoned by Adora, in response to Camille's question, is as follows:

"Jesus Christ." A psychic wobbling: He teetered between laughter and fear.

"What's wrong with *my mother*?"

"What's wrong with *you*? You're a cutter?"

"I cut words," I muttered, as if it made a difference.

(*Sharp Objects* 218; *emphasis mine*)

³⁵ A dynamic that the TV series teases to the hilt in the relationship between Vickery and Adora, episodes four and five especially ("Ripe" and "Closer"), where Adora blackmails—through the familiar deployment of weaponized feminine Southern charm—Vickery into letting her continue with the Calhoun Day celebration; and in the first minutes of episode six ("Cherry"), where Vickery, upon finding Ann's bike in the sludge pond of Adora's pig farm, escorts Adora down to the pond and crime scene like one would a prom date.

³⁶ Vickery deals with Natalie's crime scene like a community member, not a professional investigator (he is overcome with emotion and Camille suggests he may even be praying instead of securing the scene, *SO* 32); he takes on tasks as menial as repairing road signs (45); and the imagery used to convey his characterization establishes him as a relic of the past. He is described as wearing bifocals, and, tellingly, Camille flips through a *Redbook* (14) at the police station—a magazine that "instruct[s] American women in the lost art of domesticity" (Goodyear).

³⁷ Camille herself goes through the motions of hard-boiled detective, at times, yet, as I go on to show, her character differs in critical ways, too.

I believe this interaction to be a crucial one in terms of understanding the meaning and limitations of Richard Willis' character. If, textually, there was only Camille's assertion in the epilogue (226) that he is repulsed by her scarred body, the statement could arguably be read as Camille's interpretation and thus be debatable. But direct speech, here, sees Richard (understandably) shocked, and then swiftly using rhetoric that may reasonably be interpreted as blaming Camille for her illness (note the parallelism in lines two and three of the quoted section, shifting focus from the abusive mother to the self-abuse of the daughter), and repeating the word 'wrong' (which Camille uses situationally to inquire about the current state of her mother, and Richard uses to *question her character overall*), therefore pathologizing Camille. Furthermore, the noun phrase 'a cutter'³⁸ linguistically extends one aspect of her personality to Camille's whole being, denying her character multidimensionality and complexity. In *Sharp Objects*, Richard Willis comes closest to a politically progressive male character³⁹, evidenced by his and Camille's discussion about sexual violence and his explicit characterization as liberal, which he does not deny (103-05). Willis, for all his progressivism, falls into replicating prevailing myths on self-harm and abuse, to the detriment of those affected.

What *Sharp Objects* proposes, then, is that both Vickery's conservative stance *and* Willis' progressive bend fail to accommodate and account for the trauma of and violence experienced by (Wind Gap's) women. Both represent not just stereotypes in crime fiction, but also different institutional approaches to justice, neither of which, in Flynn's world, actually manage to afford women justice⁴⁰. While Willis' investigative skills finally lead him to suspect Adora, the very

³⁸ Rhetorically, such language also has as a distancing effect: It suggests there are two groups ('the cutters' versus the 'non-cutters', i.e., the normal ones). Compare this linguistically to less-stigmatizing utterances such as 'a person who (also) cuts herself'.

³⁹ Frank Curry comes from a "working-class Irish enclave on the South Side" (76) and has a background in creative communities (155), and in the series, his wife is played by Barbara Eve Harris. The markers in diction and location imply a bend towards progressivism. The relationship between Camille and Curry oscillates between professional mentoring and parental consolidation; it is suggested that similarly to Camille's need for substitute parents, Curry views Camille as a daughter he never had (*SO* 76,77). Mostly, however, the fact that Camille relies on her editor is used to provide contrast to her toxic upbringing and abusive biological family, and validates her sanity as her mental state seemingly unravels. (On casting, see "Sharp Objects: Full Cast & Crew." *IMDB.com*, <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2649356/fullcredits>> Accessed 01 Feb 2010.)

⁴⁰ Vickery's paternalistic impulse to protect comes at the detriment of the investigation and results in a misplaced obsession with "out-of-towner" John Keene (*SO* 211). Similarly, Willis suspects John Keene simply because he was "very close to his sister", in a way he deems "unhealthy" (159); he indicts and, at the same time, reproduces oppressive and limited gender norms, as well as the urban-rural divide (71, 104). The urban-rural divide is further teased out in the first meeting of Vickery and Camille, when Wind Gap's disdain for 'media' is made apparent, while, at the same time, denying the extent to which premeditated narratives have always, and continue to, influence the town. At the police station, the receptionist, in the very first instance of direct speech from a town character,

nature of the system requires for him to stall (“[tomorrow] we’re getting the order to search the place”, *SO* 212; ‘order’, here, is to be taken both literally as a search order, and a nod to the orderly procedures of an androcentric justice system). This delayed action results in putting Amma at risk and in Camille being poisoned, her body rendered crucial evidence⁴¹. As is the case so often in gender-based crimes, it is the *delay* in justice that, in the meantime, results in harm being done to more women; the trauma suffered, meanwhile, is rarely accounted for. Vickery and Willis, then, are not just foils for each other, signifying the limitations of two official, tried-and-lacking approaches in fiction and criminal procedures; they are also foils to victim-journalist-investigator Camille, who presents a third approach.

In Flynn’s mystery, Camille inhabits a curious liminal space, one in which we are led to assume she is less at risk than Amma and Wind Gap’s other young women due to her age in a world that fetishizes and immortalizes girls’ youth by killing them. Yet we are constantly aware of both the violations she has already experienced, immortalized, too, on her body and in her mind, and of the commonality she shares with the murdered girls: the defiance of societal expectations that value a traditional femininity above all⁴². While Camille is progressively integrated into the universe of the other characters upon her return, Wind Gap doubles as the figurative locus of trauma⁴³, her return after eight years analogous to a return to her past. The main interest of the story derives not, like in the classical mystery, from the present (Todorov 51): it is the past that informs the current line of events. She needs to recover her memory not just for her own sake, but she also literally needs to relive her abuse to figure out the mystery at the heart of the crime story.

The hard-boiled stance and cynicism of American crime fiction is quintessentially American “in its idealization of personal autonomy in the face of shadowy coercive forces” (Grella qtd. in Rzepka 180). Cynicism is not just the mode of the traditional mode of hard-boiled investigation; it is also, as Slavoj Žižek argues, the prevailing mode of postmodern late capitalist ideology⁴⁴ (but appears as post-ideological). True subversive potential cannot be reached by developing critical, ironic

introduces Camille, “with eager disdain”, as “Media.” (*SO* 14). Camille, here, personifies for the townspeople a national media that has traditionally abandoned them. The national, or even state-level interference, is conceptualized as an intrusive Other, and it is just as clear to Wind Gap residents that an outsider must be responsible for the crimes at hand as it is obvious that an outsider will fail in their quest to do justice.

⁴¹ “Everyone has to leave the house, Camille. Put on some clothes and I’ll get you to the doctor’s.” – “Yes, you need your evidence. I hope I have enough poison left in me.” (*SO* 218)

⁴² “The girls weren’t friends. Their only connection was a shared viciousness, if Vickery’s stories were to be believed.” (*SO* 69)

⁴³ Camille says this, at the *end* of the novel: “I’ve returned to my childhood, the scene of the crime.” (*SO* 228)

⁴⁴ “Our thesis here is [...]: in contemporary societies, democratic or totalitarian, that cynical distance, laughter, irony, are, so to speak, part of the game. The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally.” (Žižek 24)

distance, precisely because it does not take the system as seriously as it should⁴⁵. Taking this into account, the figure of Jackie O’Neele—and, at times, Camille—emerges as the system’s *cynical subject* who cannot but reproduce the stifling conditions that surround her, although she is rationally fully aware of their destructive potential. Arguably, Jackie is still positioned too close to power in Wind Gap’s society, benefits in her own way from the gender, race, and class politics of the town⁴⁶; although she is “quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, [she] none the less still insists upon the mask.” (Žižek 25) Although Jackie individually fails to take action, it is still her “booze and gossip” (179), which Camille acknowledges will provide her with more information than “a dozen formal interviews” (SO 121). Gossip functions not just as an extra-institutional, norm-correcting arm, but can also save women and provide them with crucial information where male-dominant institutions fail them—such as, most recently and publicly, in the case of Harvey Weinstein, where his practices had been talked about long before the criminal system got involved⁴⁷. Thus Jackie “very clearly wanted to say something” (SO 179) for a long time, but didn’t (83-84), and while some of her coping mechanisms, including alcoholism, align herself with Camille, their world view differs in critical ways⁴⁸.

⁴⁵ Similarly, Angela McRobbie’s seminal *Aftermath of Feminism* (2009) reads irony’s tenacity in contemporary culture as the prerequisite for postfeminism’s *cool girl*. Culturally recognizable sexist discourse and behavior is sanctioned through ironic distancing—McRobbie claims that although the new female subject is ‘gender aware’, she is made to withhold critique (18), thus engaging in behavior that reproduces the system’s norms but is masked as knowing, cynical transgression. Rosalind Gill, in *Gender and the Media*, has made similar claims about postmodern irony and feminism (qtd. in Nurka 4).

⁴⁶ The text reinforces the town’s economy upon Camille’s arrival at Jackie’s house, which “was only a few minutes away, a modern mansion meant to look like an antebellum plantation home. A scrawny pale kid was hunched over a riding mower, smoking as he drove back and forth in tight lines. His back was spackled with bumpy, angry zits so big they looked like wounds. Another meth boy. Jackie should cut out the middle man and just give the twenty bucks straight to the dealer.” (SO 180) “

⁴⁷ See, for example, Silvia Frederici’s “How the Demonization of ‘Gossip’ Is Used to Break Women’s Solidarity”, *InTheseTimes.com*, 31 Jan 2019. <<https://inthesetimes.com/article/21707/the-subversive-feminist-power-of-gossip>>. Accessed 01 Feb 2020.

⁴⁸ An exemplary scene: “Was my mother ...” I could feel a sob welling up in my throat, so I swallowed it with my watered-down vodka. “Was my mother ... a nice person?”- Jackie cackled again. Popped a chocolate, the nougat sticking to her teeth. “That’s what you’re after? Whether she was nice?” she paused. “What do you think?” she added, mocking me.” (SO 185) Camille can be surprisingly earnest. She has not moved away from “probity, integrity” (Žižek 26), even when she suspects her mother, she wants to believe in her goodness.

V.2. On Words and Corporeality, Trauma and Objectivity

It is the emotionality, sensitivity, and quite literally a lack of distance—the result of childhood and societal abuse is inscribed onto her skin—that allows Camille to move to a place of critique, refiguring the traumatized individual as one that has "special knowledge or unique, positive powers" (Balaev 27). Trauma can be mitigated by both speech and physical rituals; Camille does both. Sex with John constitutes the physical ritual, literally and physically exorcising the demons of sexual violence; as well as the reenactment of her childhood abuse that results in a different outcome (she is believed); and she narrates the abuse at the hands of her mother through writing (she writes about it as a journalist) and the inscription onto her body (her cutting).

By eleven, I was compulsively writing down everything anyone said to me in a tiny blue notepad, a mini reporter already. Every phrase had to be captured on paper or it wasn't real, it slipped away. I'd see the words hanging in midair—Camille, pass the milk—and anxiety coiled up in me as they began to fade, like jet exhaust. Writing them down, though, I had them. No worries that they'd become extinct. I was a lingual conservationist.

(Sharp Objects 60)

The above paragraph conveys Camille's anxieties about narration and reality; she tries to affirm the existence of abuse by writing the words on her body, a corporeal reminder of her mental anguish. Camille quite literally needs carve herself up and drink the poison of toxic femininity and intergenerational abuse, to prove her identity as an abused and long-suffering individual produced by generations of unresolved trauma. She needs to re-victimize herself to bring the tale to its conclusion and uncover the mysteries—social arrangements unchanged⁴⁹ and identity relegated to the realm of the always momentary intangible, it is through a corporeal, *stable* presence of pain and trauma that any sort of autonomy can be accomplished, that Camille can make meaning of her world and constitute herself as a subject within it. Camille's body also becomes, quite literally, the body of evidence in the crime's eventual resolution.

⁴⁹ "The neoliberal gothic remains resolutely insistent on alerting its readers to the impossibility of escaping the internalized gothic so long as social arrangements remain the same" (Johansen 54).

Ironically, Camille's body figures as the most reliable source of information: While the novel's narrative technique mimics the workings of a traumatized human mind and its selective memory through fragmentation and nonlinearity, the words Camille carved onto herself are ever-present. Abuse is so often unseen; in *Sharp Objects*, Camille's body is where proof of abuse—and evidence of the crime—is located. For survivors of abuse, this constitutes a powerful fantasy. Additionally, “the visibly self-injured body [...] emerges as a distinctly gendered body, caught within the overdetermined cultural matrix of the signs and meanings of femininity, beauty and socially prescribed value” (McPhee 71). Camille disrupts normative oppositional structures by mutilating “this privileged organ”—she “catalyse(s) a transformation in the signifying chain” (77), one that is central to stratifying categories such as race, gender, and age.

Finally, *Sharp Objects*, as all of Flynn's writing, makes use of postmodern metafictionality. All female protagonists are provided with the possibility to make money from their suffering, which only Camille pushes back against; she gets a book offer, but rejects it (*SO* 226); nonetheless, she gets to tell her story on her own terms—“wouldn't you rather be in control of the conversation?”, Camille asks Vickery (“Vanish”). Furthermore, Camille's narration and focalizing perspective allows Flynn to straddle the line between the point-of-view-protagonist as subject and as object. Camille is as much a part of Wind Gap as she is an outsider, oscillating between an inherent and instinctive knowledge of the town's rules, machinations, and character, and the assumed rationality of the visiting observer⁵⁰. She feels “no particular allegiance to the town”, doesn't “mind the idea of spilling Wind Gap's stories” (*SO* 72), realizing only later the true extent to which Wind Gap's stories are her own. Finally, all metafictionality alludes to the mutability of stories. The articles

⁵⁰ Camille comments on local dialect (“He said *picture* like *pitcher*. So do I if I don't watch it.” *SO* 25), on the town's employment history (“Find a poor person in Wind Gap, and they'll almost always tell you they work at the farm, and so did their old man” (50), and anthropologizes the gendered culture through first-hand experiences (“*Girls growing up in Wind Gap studied the older girls [...]:* who dated the football stars, who was homecoming queen, who mattered. *You* traded favorites like baseball cards.” (99, *emphasis mine*) She does so in a manner that often seeks to create analytical distance, yet fails to remove herself completely and ends up reinforcing her identity as a Wind Gap child. This is realized either by her own admission to common cultural, linguistical ground such as in the first and third instances presented here, or when she, as narrator, consciously or unconsciously reveals information to the reader that an outsider would discover concurrently with the audience, such as in the second example. After describing, in vivid detail, the practice of slaughter at the afore-mentioned pig factory-farm, Camille admits that her mother, and by extension her, are part of this history: “For the sake of full disclosure, I should add that my mother owns the whole operation and receives approximately \$1.2 million in profits from it annually.” (50) A paragraph break between the gory yet systematic and methodological slaughter description and Camille's admission of a familial connection, thus her re-insertion into the narrative, formally signals the gap Camille seeks to create, meant to reinforce her fruitless attempt at detaching herself from the town. It also serves as a sudden reminder to the reader that Camille's perspective is a source of intimate knowledge about the town, but her unreliability and the possibility of deliberate omission may also obscure some of Wind Gap's inner workings.

Camille writes lack objectivity: While not exactly gonzo journalism, she does admit to adding “dramatic padding”, to ‘stretching’ (40) the truth. We may assume that, similarly, there are no claims to objectivity with regard to Camille’s narration: *Sharp Objects* is, by and large, a feminist fairy tale.

The generic and tropical conventions and various cultural registers that Flynn draws on and subverts within *Sharp Objects* are multifold: Firstly, set within the generic conventions of mystery, she proposes an irrational mode of investigation, countering phallogocentrism, one in which lived experiences and the scarred body of a woman resolve the crime. On the other hand, a more problematic reading suggests that only re-victimization of the abused protagonist allows for the plot’s resolution. And yet even in her repeated suffering, in the end, Camille leans “toward kindness” (SO 228), suggesting not just perseverance but also, after its deconstruction as natured, an embrace of the feminine. Furthermore, in *Wind Gap*, it is not just the criminal who “has broken ranks in a way that threatens the stability of the cosmos” (Rzepka 180), but all residents are implicated in the upholding and veneration of binary gender constructs and the silencing of victims thereof; traditionally, in the scapegoating of the individual criminal, it is implied that the rest of society is worth redeeming. No such value is ascribed to the societies Flynn’s texts present. Secondly, through naturalistic imagery and metaphors, Flynn taps into natural determinism, only to turn on the naturing of socially constructed identities by problematizing motherhood and womanhood. She overturns contemporary myths, specifically the one that “woman by nature is structurally good and consequently the victim” (Valdré 2). Thirdly, she avails herself of various gothic tropes: The Victorian home and the uncanny, doubling, and childhood abuse that figures as repressed and haunting are part of the larger gothic template; and “narrative anachrony as a symptom of buried trauma” (Luckhurst 105) has quickly become canonical not just within the Gothic or trauma narratives, but mainstream literary fiction. And within these tropical conventions, the incest narrative is entangled and makes “the recovery of memory an identity practice” (Sielke 184). Historically racialized tropes on sexual violence and abuse point to the limitations of the purity construct of white womanhood; yet at the same time, Flynn places her own writing along a continuum of African American modes of writing, appropriating the fiction of Black women while simultaneously excising their existence in a story set in the American South. *Sharp Objects* is successful in disrupting certain normative discourses, while reinscribing others.

VI. Conclusion: How *Sharp Objects* Reflects and Anticipated Current Cultural Anxieties

As the name suggests, gonzofeminism is *not* about objectivity. There is a reason why psychoanalytic readings of *Gone Girl* have enjoyed immense scholarly popularity. Flynn's gonzofeminism exemplifies the Irigarayan polemics of difference: Women, characterized by phallogocentrism and masculine discourse as irrational, should "mime and exploit" their specification (Gray 120). *Sharp Objects* does just that: through the disturbance of the masculine imaginary, the text, far from simply reproducing problematic myths, creates shock and potential for change. And of course, neither are the myriad ways in which trauma nor anger manifest necessarily objective; be it through repeating generational abuse like Adora, internalizing pain like Camille, or externalizing the violence like Amma. If anything, Flynn provides a vocabulary for female anger, expanding the ways in which women are being seen, in which they experience, and in which they know. *Sharp Objects* presents female subjectivities that are mutable, manifold, and, at times, malicious.

I believe Flynn's representation of angry white women to be paradigmatic because she resists self-censorship, liberating her characters, as much as possible, from the male gaze, at times almost parodically exposing its limits. What is man-made, her writing suggests, does not work for women; a gonzofeminist element that has been taken up by TV shows such as *Dietland* and *Jessica Jones*, in which vigilante(s) take justice into their own hands. "I'm sick of being told that love is all a woman is good for" says Saoirse Ronan's Jo March in the latest, angriest incarnation of Little Women⁵¹; in many ways, *Sharp Objects* anticipated the current cultural moment.

Most crucially, in terms of cultural anxieties reflected, we have witnessed the migration of historically racialized tropes, most notably the incest trope, into white domesticity. By placing the discourse around gender-based violence, with regard to victim and perpetrator, on white cis-women's bodies, the text bears witness to current white anxieties; it is noteworthy, here, that Flynn writes to a white pop cultural mainstream. *Sharp Objects*, then, reflects contemporary cultural anxieties relating to privilege, agency, and responsibility. Similarly to Johansen's assertion that mainstream's concern with the crisis of neoliberalism "signals an expansion of neoliberal failure

⁵¹ Martinelli, Marissa. „A Key Line in the Little Women Trailer Is Not From Little Women at All.” *Slate.com*, 13 Aug 2019. <<https://slate.com/culture/2019/08/little-women-movie-trailer-quote-rose-in-bloom.html>> Accessed

into the ranks of the more or less privileged” (33), so does the alignment of rape, incest, and memory on three generations of white women signal white feminism’s failure.

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