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Emma Piorier

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The Girl House Project: Narratives of Girlhood and Building a Site of Analysis

By Emma Piorier

*Thank you for teaching me that I should never be a secret
Grabbing my body from the small dark caves of shame and letting me take up all of the
space in the room*

*Now I know that I should be loud, scream from the handlebars of my old red bike
Wear \$1 lip-gloss because I like to shine
March in high-tops on the hearts of men who have harmed me*

*This is a poem for all the young girls who like me thought sexy was saying yes. Whose
carefree was the new consent. Whose young feminism and confidence, and strong
independent womanhood was on a leash in the hands of the older man telling you you're
beautiful.*

-Girl House Project Submission

Abstract:

The Girl House is a tiny home: a 14'x7' traveling house on wheels, a mobile art installation, storytelling vehicle, and a collective biography. Inside the house are stories, memories, reflections, poems and prose about girlhood, growing-up and learning sex within rape culture. This thesis locates the physical work of the Girl House Project in the theoretical landscape of girlhood studies. Situated in foundational gender theory work by Judith Butler this project understands gender as a constructed identity, and girlhood as a moment of gender production. The house, grounded in feminist methodology, is a collective biography: an expansion on how we comprehend the "girl identity" and an effort to illuminate the production of girlhood as one rooted in sexual injustice, an experience that is curated reproduced and maintained within the performance of gender and the reality of coming-of-age.

My work introduces four categories of analysis derived from themes weaved throughout the narratives of the project: 1) Orgasm and Sexual Awakening: Pleasure as a site of analysis, 2) "I Didn't Say no.. But I Didn't say yes either" Passivity and the normalization of trauma, 3) Letters to my teenage self- reflections on Girlhood, consciousness and reclamation, and 4) What does reclamation look like? This paper analyzes the narratives submitted to The Girl House Project and argues that they illuminate the political and social potential of storytelling and reveal sexual injustice as a unifying facet of the girl identity.

Keywords:

Girlhood, Sexualization, Performativity, Narrative, Collective Biography, Coming-of-age, Sexual Injustice, Girlhood Studies

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Introducing the Girl House Project

I was 15 and I was jumping on a huge trampoline with two of my best friends (both men). They had both been drinking, and I had not. I don't remember how it started, but I became aware that they were playing a 'game', trying to catch me.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

The Girl House is the brightest yellow. As you walk by, despite your best efforts, it becomes impossible not to stop, crane your neck to view the top of its' fifteen foot tall roof, peer at the words scribbled throughout its collection of corkboards, mailboxes, clothes lines and windows, and read the excerpts pinned on the walls. The Girl house, in resistance to the docile bystander, demands that you stop and look. Fundamental to the structure is the trailer it sits upon, an aspect of physicality that defines its identity as a home to, and a traveling collection of stories.

The Girl House is a traveling interactive art piece filled with personal narratives, archived within the tiny house and brought into public spaces to be shared. My project for the summer, I will now attempt to locate the physical work of collecting stories and building them a home in the theoretical world of girlhood studies and the practice of storytelling. Situated in foundational gender theory work by Judith Butler and Girlhood Studies Theorists, Marina Gonick and Susanne Gannon, this project understands gender as a constructed identity, and girlhood as a moment of gender production.¹ This project pursues an understanding of how rape culture, a system that relies on patriarchy, heteronormativity, and gender injustice, grasps onto girlhood, influencing adolescence and activating the mechanisms that teach the practice of sexuality and its normative functions. The Girl House Project attempts to illuminate this lived reality of gendered coming of age by inviting stories and reflections on growing up and learning sex within rape culture.

The house, grounded in feminist methodology, is a collective biography: an expansion on how we comprehend the "girl identity" and an effort to illuminate the production of girlhood as one rooted in sexual injustice. I have adopted a use of "sexual injustice" to not exclusively represent *interpersonal violence but rather the systemic injustice that produces rape culture and subjects girls to its governance*. My hope is that the display of these stories, their unity, and their presence within the Girl House and the public world, will disrupt the normalcy of a girlhood altered by the experiences of sexual injustice and violence.

Background: Building the Girl House and a Collective Biography

This section will begin by paying homage to my Girl House project co-creator, Miranda Garcia Karson. Miranda bravely joined me in learning to build and completing the construction

¹ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood*. (Canadian Women's Press, 2014), 2-3.

of a tiny home. This project is vast, complicated, difficult, physical, emotional and on-going. Miranda has approached these challenges creatively and tirelessly.

Miranda and I sat outside a local brewery near the University of Puget Sound. We were first-year students. We used newly purchased fake IDs to buy the cheapest bottle of wine on the menu. We spoke of growing up; of being girls and learning and unlearning what that meant as we experienced the sexual world around us, of the wonder of our teenage selves and the injustices we experienced. We are not the same and neither are our stories, yet we found an unidentified similarity in their tellings. We dreamed of a project that told stories, that spoke words into girlhood and found unity in voices. At the beginning of our University experience, theorists like Judith Butler and words like “gender performance” and “epistemology” were obscure. When we initially conceptualized autonomous storytelling as a way of disrupting the silenced stories of sexual injustice, it was a direct response to our personal experiences. We wanted to create a shared location for stories, a space to uplift similarly marginalized voices. As we aged and developed as scholars, under guidance of theory and feminist practice, the project came to life. We wanted a traveling space, a space that was not limited to one location and that could be brought into the public continuously, speaking the words inside of it. With no construction experience but a lot of ambition, we decided to build a house.

The house is a collective biography. Both physically and symbolically, it tells a story of growing up. This thesis will read excerpts of stories produced by The Girl House project to illuminate the political and social potential of storytelling within girlhood studies and sexual injustice as a unifying facet of the girl identity. Drawing from Black feminist thought, feminist methodology and critical social justice, The Girl House Project adopts memory as a site of analysis and narrative as a credible primary source in the theoretical expansion of girlhood, the construction of gender identity and a moment of political and interpersonal reclamation.

The presence of narrative-telling in the context of this project offers a dual political potential both as an opportunity for deciphering the intricacies of rape culture and gender construction but also as a means for collective healing and reconciliation. The use of storytelling in critical social justice methodology is practiced by marginalized communities as a resistant medium for fostering voice and agency within systems that amplify normative and oppressive discourse. These dominating systems of knowledge resist the integration of alternatives by policing credibility.² Narrative, in essence, resists the oppressive methods that produce and reproduce what and how we know by offering an expansive understanding of the world through lived experiences.³ Narratives of sexual injustice and violence hold a distinct positionality because of the specific strategies that govern their public telling and a culture of reception that undermines the experiences of women. Feminist scholar, Tanya Sersier, provides an analysis of the politics of “speaking-out”, describing the experience of telling as one often rooted in re-traumatization, silencing and invalidation.⁴ Collective biography, in a dual sense, by utilizing the individual narrative, not only offers a space for analysis of girlhood, but provides a moment of

² Hua, Anh. “Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance” (*African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*) 41.

³ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl*, 6.

⁴ Sersier, Tanya. *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, (Springer Nature, 2019), 159.

total unscripted agency in public space, a resistance and simultaneous reclamation, unified and protected by collectivity.

Background: The Necessity of Girlhood Studies

We were encouraged to be free, but not too free. To be wild, but not too wild. To be sexy, but not slutty. I remember feeling mad because I felt misjudged and misunderstood for it. But I don't remember analyzing it. We accepted it or we rebelled against it and sometimes we did both.

- Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Fundamental to Girlhood Studies are the philosophical contributions of Judith Butler that explore the construction of gender. Scholar, Sarah Salih, traces the application of Butlerian theory, and locates it within our understanding of the girl identity. She places Butler's argument that the description of sex is never without the assignment of gender, within the context of girls, who at birth are assigned a female sex and simultaneously subjected to an ideology of "Girling."⁵ Threaded throughout this interpellation are the acts of gender performance that produce girls, the same actions that girling teaches and enforces. The process of Girling is based on imposed differences between cis-genders and the functions of heterosexuality.⁶ The reinforcement of a corporal gender system thus is reinforced from birth, throughout adolescence and into adulthood. Butler describes Girling in her book, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex*:

To the extent that the naming of the "girl" is transitive, that is, initiates the process by which a certain "Girling" is compelled, the term or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm. This is a "girl", however, who is compelled to "cite" the norm in order to qualify and remain a viable subject. Femininity is thus not the product of a choice, but the forcible citation of a norm.⁷

Within this assertion, Butler articulates the process of girling as a system of becoming where the reenactment of norms solidifies belonging. At the beginning of this section, I included a Girl House submission that reflects on navigating the expectations of girlhood, representative of a never fully approximated norm of femininity. The speaker uses "we" to describe her community of girls, and references a shared awareness of a "correct" enactment of the girl identity and the simultaneous and complicated obligation of deciphering the specifics of that correctness and performing girlhood adequately. Her narrative and testimony to the navigation of these norms illuminates the performativity of gender and the implications and power of that performance.

Girlhood studies preoccupies itself with testimonies to growing up, searching to expand our understanding of what it means to be girl and the possibilities of girlhood.⁸ An interdisciplinary, and fairly contemporary field, Girlhood Studies, examines the lived experiences of girls in contrast to and alongside of representations of girls and girlhood

⁵ Sarah Salih, "On Judith Butler and Performativity", page 61

⁶Ibid.

⁷ Butler, Judith, *Bodies that Matter: The Discursive Limits of Sex*, Routledge Press, 1993, pg. 229.

⁸ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood*. (Canadian Women's Press, 2014), 2-3.

throughout various mediums. Fundamentally, girlhood studies resists the essentialization of “the girl”, inviting intersectional analysis to display the varying practices of girlhood. Drawing largely from women’s and gender studies methodologies, it seeks to examine what Butler describes as the “symbolic power” surrounding the functions of the girl identity.⁹ The work of this discipline is necessary for understanding how and why girls are constituted and constructed through various social and embodied processes. Ultimately, the field illuminates the depth of gender subjectification routinized as social practice.¹⁰ Simultaneously, this discipline offers a space that examines girl resistance to systems of production as sites that foster queerness, liberation and agency, clarifying how analysis of girlhood and moments of becoming not only expand our ability to visualize systems of power, but revolutionize our existence within them.

Literature Review

In the end, it all comes down to power and powerlessness. As girls, the power of our sexuality is taken from us over and over. Boys and men take it from us by treating sexual acts as things they do to us. They take our agency and leave us unsure of what we want. Society, often through our parents, takes our power by telling us to be careful. Telling us men will try to do things to us. Telling us to protect ourselves, to be cautious. They’ll never tell us that sex is for us. The feeling of powerlessness is the worst thing about that memory. It was something I experienced without a shred of choice or control.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

“Narrative requires both an individual to speak and a collective to listen...” asserts scholar Tanya Sersier.¹¹ Her claim is exemplified by feminist “speak-out conferences” in the 1970s that called for the collective liberation of women from systems of sexual violence by integrating and amplifying stories of rape into the public discourse. Her work understands the formation of these feminist collectives as a moment of epistemological expansion and the identification of narrative as a social and political function. Her argument interprets the reception of these stories and their public telling as a direct contrast to oppressive enforcement of the legal and social rhetoric that surrounded sexual violence. This incorporation of narrative into feminist methodology infiltrated the public discourse surrounding rape while collectively supporting survivors, liberating one another from normalized scripts of trauma re-telling and reception. She argues that speaking out profoundly asserted a woman as the expert of her own experience and the collective telling of these experiences as the formation of a political practice.¹²

Throughout feminist epistemology, analysis of the political potential of narrative is present. Marina Gonick and Susanne Gannon integrate a methodological approach of “collective biography” into their work with Girlhood Studies. Drawing from Judith Butler’s theory of

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sersier, Tanya. *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, (Springer Nature, 2019), 159.

¹² Sersier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 136-230.

“girling,” they utilize collective biography, memory and story to visualize a larger framework of becoming. Their relationship between girlhood studies and collective biography attempts to identify the moments that govern the “girl” identity within a system that conflates gender with a corporal enactment of femininity.¹³ The collective telling of stories revisualizes girlhood as a realm of multiplicity and the project of girling as that, a project that is distinct from the assumed innate functions of gender.

Collective biography methodology functions by understanding memory as a space of knowledge. Furthermore, the memory and the integration of memories from marginalized identities into the public realm is in radical resistance to hegemonic systems of hierarchy.¹⁴ Gonick and Gannon establish collective biography and the use of memory as a site of analysis. Their work examines multiple feminist collective biography projects to argue that the use of storytelling, in the collective biography context, acts as a methodological strategy for visibility; “In Collective biography stories are not merely autobiographical. Rather, they are used to show how collectively we become visible as constituted in constitutive beings.”¹⁵ By assuming the constitution of “girls” as the assemblage of cultural systems not physical facts, collective biography is used within their work to call on memories of girlhood that collectively expand the social category of girl and outline the ways in which it functions, has been materialized, reproduced and constructed.

Though “Collective Biography” is coined by more contemporary feminist methodology, the use of narrative as a resistance to and as an expansion of exclusive and hierarchal systems of knowledge production, has been developed extensively within Black feminist practice and history. Anh Hua asserts that the narrative world offers a site of resistance to hegemonic representation and silencing. Hua examines the work of Black women that calls on personal memory and experience and writes, “I have suggested that it is critical for marginalized women, in this case Black diaspora women, to become their own image-makers as writers, poets, scholars, and activists, creating and imagining resistant subjectivities to counter the various

¹³ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood*. (Canadian Women's Press, 2014), 2-3.

¹⁴ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl*, 41-43.

¹⁵ Gonick, Marnina, and Susanne Gannon. *Becoming Girl*, 6.

subjugating forces that work against them.”¹⁶ By demonstrating the use of the personal narrative as resistance to subjectification and stereotypes, Hua illuminates storytelling as practice of expansion, reclamation, resistance and politics.

Black Feminist Thought, written by Patricia Hill Collins, was fundamental in theorizing the social potential of producing and validating knowledge of subordinated communities. Her work specifically argues that Black women, through their lived experience, hold a distinct consciousness reflective of a material reality that contrasts that of dominant groups.¹⁷ Black feminist thought argues that the knowledge held by oppressed peoples are suppressed within a system where those with institutional power uphold ideologies of superiority. Fundamental to her argument, Collins illuminates the potential of Black feminist thought to both resist subordination, offer space for unity and foster collective identity. She says,

Black feminist thought’s potential significance goes far beyond demonstrating that Black women can produce independent specialized knowledge. Such thought can encourage collective identity by offering Black women a different view of themselves and their world than that offered by the established social order. This different view encourages African American women to value their own subjective knowledge base.¹⁸

Her work asserts that those with material realities shaped by oppression and whom have developed a consciousness rooted in the validation of personal and collective knowledge, have manifested a “tool of resistance”.¹⁹

Similarly to the work of Black feminists, though without the racialized contextualization, Sersier argues that the marginalized identity of women was contained within normalized and oppressive scripts in which their experiences with sexual violence were forced to exist. Story as a political practice is also rooted in the framework of the Speak Out conferences that validated the experiences of sexual violence survivors within system in which their narrative was oppressed. Speaking out was not only a political act of reclaiming agency and subjectification particularly following the desubjectifying and violent experience of rape, but an expansive moment in the collective understanding of sexual violence. She references scholars Connell and Wilson; “Rape as an issue didn't arise because feminist leaders decided it was ‘the issue’... Instead, it became an issue when women began to compare their experiences and realized that sexual assault was common.”²⁰ This assertion reveals a political significance of speaking out and narrative telling:

¹⁶ Hua, Anh. “Black Diaspora Feminism and Writing: Memories, Storytelling, and the Narrative World as Sites of Resistance” (*African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*) 41.

¹⁷ Collins, Patricia Hill. “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, pg. 750.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Sersier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 241.

narratives, and narratives that counter the normalized discourse of society, radically defy the operant of silencing. Within a system that reproduces the stories we hear and therefore the stories that we know, stories that expose this oppression, are powerful.

Furthermore, both Hua and Sersier argue that within a system where narrative is produced by systems of oppression, the collective telling of marginalization reveals that stories of oppressed people are not singular instances but reflective of a larger systemic experience. Similar to Gonick and Gannon's argument that collective biography reveals multiplicities of reality, they argue that socially, the significance of narrative telling and collective narrative telling is powerful in its ability to build community and in their unity, resist the systemic dehumanization of silence. Sersier writes, "Feminism did not give women the ability to speak were previously they had been silent. It provided them in environment and a discourse in which their stories could be verified and heard."²¹ These scholars agree that though the individual story must not be undermined in value, the intentional cumulation of stories, allows for a political action, community healing and solidarity.

My work with collective biography draws from central facets of each of these scholars: Sersier's analysis that feminist storytelling rejects the scripts that dictate speaking out and instead holds space to grow in collectivity and power; Gonick and Gannon's work in establishing girlhood as a socially constructed identity and collective biography as a method for visualizing the processes that oversee "girling"; and Hua and Collins, who assert narratives as a resistant voice and an experience of liberation. My work utilizes narrative and collective biography by interacting with memories of coming-of-age in an attempt to visualize the production of girlhood. This work asks for memories of girlhood that reflect on sexual injustice and reveal the cultural threading of gender hierarchy and a pervasive rape culture into adolescence and early experiences with sexuality.

Rape culture as a sociological phenomenon has been defined by Joyce Williams as "a complex of beliefs that encourages male sexual aggression and supports violence against women.. Herman (1984) characterized the United States as a rape culture because sex is typified in aggressive males and passive females. This quotation defines rape culture by its enforcement of gender violence justified through the guise of biological gender and innate gender characteristics. I read this definition as an example of the inseparability between rape culture and the enforcement of both the gender binary and heteronormativity. Butler and the process of gender construction that she introduces, helps us to identify rape culture, as derived by patriarchy, as an example of a system that forces a violent gender performance within moments of sex. "²² I hope that the close readings of narratives of Girlhood will illuminate how rape culture is introduced and reproduced in adolescence, ultimately leading to the rape culture that Herman identifies in the sexual practices of males and females.

As shown in the works of Hua and Sersier, the power of collective narrative-telling lays not only in the expansion of our known reality but empowers the speaker by providing a

²¹ Sersier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, 161

²² Williams, Joyce E. "Rape Culture." *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2015

withheld agency and voice. My work attempts to mimic this duality by asking for stories told in the speaker's own voice, without script and to be sent into the public space; reflections, letters, poems and memories of growing up and learning the system of sex. Together, these stories work to expose experiences with sexual injustice and rape culture as a central facet in the production of girlhood, a systemic and cultural reality of the constructed girl identity.

Methodology

"I have gained a lot of clarity around what happened, how wrong it was, and how valid my feelings were. But the fear of being dismissed is still very much there."

- Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Throughout the stories sent to the Girl House Project, voices spoke of shame, dismissal and fear as they navigated the politics of speaking their story of sexual injustice. Many narratives spoke of an experience of invalidation or the looming fear of speaking-out. Patterned throughout these narratives, is the power of silencing, the threat it poses, and its forceful prevention of healing. Tanya Sersier, in her work with speaking out politics, argues that the systematic response to vocalized experiences of rape and assault, the inquisitive and procedural nature of follow-up conversations and a legal system that undermines these violences, further perpetuates the subjugation of women and the grasp of gender hierarchy.²³ The primary sources collected in this work, speak to this: they illustrate a culture where voices are restricted by the looming threat, as perpetuated by the public treatment of survivors, that their trauma, among many implications, will be dismissed.

In an effort to directly resist projects of silencing and dismissal, the methodology of this thesis will adopt an understanding of knowledge validation systems as theorized within Black feminist epistemology, and the theorization of collective biography, to situate the stories of the Girl House Project as foundational, primary texts, within this paper. Thus, this approach, understands the value of these stories not only as an insights into the reality and lived experience of girlhood, but as content whose exclusion from normative discourse offers a distinct political potential.

This thesis through a system of patterning and threading, will draw similarities throughout format, content and theme, and examine excerpts from five categories of story, their testimony to girlhood, sexual injustice and their expansive potential.

"I Didn't Say no.. But I Didn't say yes either" *Passivity and the silence of trauma*, is named in part from a narrative that describes an experience of sexual trauma in which the speaker neither consented nor withdrew consent. This section explores the moments between the "yes" and the "no" that consent is constructed through. These narratives tell of the complexities that influence the ability to consent and the nuances of articulating desire. This section explore how passivity and silence reflect gender norms of female docility and sexual obligation.

The first orgasm: Pleasure as a site of analysis, will examine narratives that reflect on sexual discovery, sexual pleasure and the learnings of both sexual freedom and sexual

²³ Sersier, Tanya. *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, (Springer Nature, 2019).

oppression. These stories speak of shame, compulsivity, queer awakening and anger. I will use these excerpts to argue that sexualization within girlhood introduces gendered sexual repression and a language and understanding of sex that is specific to heteronormativity. These excerpts interact with those frameworks for learning, internalizing, and reflecting on sexual repression and shame associated with orgasm, the navigation of heteronormativity, feelings of compulsivity and its relationship to pleasure, and the discovery of orgasm as a site empowerment, and sexual awakening.

In the middle of the summer, we asked the community how they would speak to their younger selves about sex. The result of this initiative gave us dozens of letters, stories, poems and single sentences, apologizing, forgiving, teaching, mourning and loving younger, teenage selves. *Letters to my teenage self- reflection on Girlhood, consciousness and reclamation*, explores pathways to healing and growing. These stories speak to the moments of consciousness-awakening and reflection. Specifically, with the use of hindsight that identifies aspects of gender performance, I understand these excerpts as illustrations of the gendered acts that are fundamental to the production of girlhood. These stories describe the thinking and actions of their teenage selves as they navigated sex, while offering a reflection on the ways in which they internalized ideas of patriarchal sexual norms. Their collectivity illustrates a system of becoming, the internalization of gender norms and the moments of resistance that led to an awakened consciousness.

Threaded throughout these works, individuals speak of searching for voice. *Girlhood and the politics of speaking*, is comprised of excerpts found in a multiplicity of stories that describe the experience of finding voice, the performance of words and the complexity of speaking. I argue, these stories and their experiences with the language of sexual injustice and the scripts of speaking out, expand our understanding of girlhood as a time of navigation of words and a search for voice.

Halfway through the summer, I received an anonymous submission with the single sentence that this section is named after: "*Before this project I was already scared of men, Now, after reading these stories, I am terrified of men*" *Rape culture instills fear, what does reclamation look like?* My research partner and I spoke of the oppressive nature of rape culture, its ability to not only control physical interactions but offer a narrative and internalization of girls as incapable of sexual agency and positive sexual experiences. These stories speak of positivity and empowerment. They offer a reminder within this violence, of the ability to transcend, to foster beautiful and pleasurable relationships with our bodies, celebrate sexuality and resist the oppression of joy. I hope to counter this oppression of sexuality by introducing withheld stories, of autonomous, empowering, and queer sex. These narratives resist rape culture and expand our understanding of girlhood outside of a patriarchal formwork, they illuminate a reality with the possibility of sex positivity where consent can be fostered, and sexuality can be empowering.

A note about the demographics of this project: The majority of our submissions were given to us anonymously and online through our website. We did not track where submissions were coming from as an effort to stay entirely anonymous nerveless through close readings of all the narratives and the incorporation of personal details we do have a sense of the demographics of our project. Though we have narratives from a very diverse range of storytellers it appeared that the majority of submissions come from younger people in their early and mid-twenties, most likely from the University of Puget Sound and surrounding community. The majority of submissions come from those in the Tacoma, Seattle and Portland areas where we prioritized our visibility.

Finally, I hope to prevent any doubt you may have gathered about the potential danger this project poses to strengthening the cis-gender binary and experience. This project publicly and in this analysis has and will continue to refrain from strictly defining “girlhood” and attempt to not limit the experience of girlhood with an exact definition of age or gender nor create boundaries as to what does and does not count. The Girl House adamantly affirms our visitors, “If you have had an experience with girlhood and coming of age, however you define it for yourself, then this project is for you. No one will be turned away”

Analysis

We learned about sex by reading 17 Magazine, or novels about girls who got pregnant, or by playing Truth or Dare at slumber parties. Most of us probably had our first kisses and gropes in the woods behind our houses. When we talked about sex, we talked about bases which all were described as what was being done to the girl. There were no bases for acts to be done on boys, not officially. I wonder why not. Wouldn't the boys want us to be trying to get to 3rd base on them? Instead they'd be shoving our hands down their pants and we'd be wondering "What are we supposed to do with THAT?"

-Except from a Girl House Project Submission

The interior of the Girl House is designed to prompt an exploration of familiar space. Curated as a recognizable living room, the Girl house alters the interior space and fills it with stories; pieces of paper are hung along clothing lines, pinned across the walls, tucked inside boxes, mounted on shelves and hidden throughout books, drawers, cabinets and picture frames. As you prepare to enter the space, we provide you with information: “Stories are integrated throughout the house. We encourage you to find them, touch and move objects as you please. If at any point you feel inclined to add your own voice, we have materials available, place your story anywhere inside the house.”

I include this as the beginning of my analysis to illustrate the physical engagement that the house requires which is essential to both the participatory experience and the significance of its existence as a collective biography. The integration of stories into the structure of the house requires the viewers to physically engage with the narratives. The setting of the Girl House exists in public space and in resemblance to a daily encounter, though the submissions are clearly visible, the audience is still required to find them, open them, and pause as they read. This physical interaction quite literally offers a metaphor for the existence of similarly scripted stories within the public space: stories of sexual injustice are all around us, yet the reality of their repression yields an environment in which their existence is mostly realized in moments when they are being sought, if you do not look for them, they are not read.

This thesis includes stories that were both submitted virtually and through the process of participating in the installation. Notably, the stories accumulated after the prompting of the installation, speak to the potential of collective biography to foster solidarity and continue the production of resistant narratives. The combination of the virtual and physical space create a site of analysis that offers insight into the expansive properties of collective biography and the potential for understanding girlhood and sexuality by engaging with systemically repressed narratives of coming-of-age.

I Didn't Say no.. But I Didn't say yes either" Passivity and the silence of trauma

I was never taught about sex, but I was very much taught to be "nice" and " never cause a scene." This was a recipe for not knowing anything, specifically that I had choices, like I could say "no."

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Narratives submitted to the Girl House Project tell us that consent is a binary. That in moments of sex, the presence of a yes or a no constitute the act as consensual or nonconsensual. The stories explain consent to us, but question the rigidity of this binary language; what happens between a yes and a no? And as the author above brings to our attention, even if "no" exists, how do we familiarize the word within our mouth? How we learn how to say it?

Passivity in this analysis describes the moments in sex that are silent, where consent is absent but not withdrawn, where questions of obligation, fear, pleasure, and normality arise, and docility becomes the simplest answer. One narrative describes a sense of grief, without explanation at the time, that she felt after having sex for the first time:

I never said no, I never rejected him, it was always just assumed. We had been dating over 6 months, and we had done everything else physical, so when I felt him between my legs I just thought, "I guess this is what happens next.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

Her narrative illuminates an important aspect of passivity where passiveness is embodied despite discomfort because of an assumption about the correct and normal performance of sex. Her narrative articulates to us how her first experience with sex occurred without positive or negative communication but based off her understanding that what was happening was normal and furthermore, that her partner knew of this progression and was correct in pursuing her despite a lack of consent. In this example, passivity led to the speaker feeling a sense of loss, as if her virginity was taken from her. In the context of gender performance, it reveals the internalization of sexual gender norms, where the sexual acts of boys are assumed as normal and the subjectification of girls to those acts is required to uphold that normality. Her passivity was a moment of gender subjectification, leading to her discomfort and ultimately upon reflection, an experience she holds as unjust and in need of reconciliation.

Another narrative more explicitly reveals passivity as an instigator of sexual trauma:

When I laid down my head was on the pillow. Now it's rammed up against the headboard. Surely he'll notice. But no. And I don't want to make a fuss, disrupt his rhythm. I'm starting to feel like an instrument for his masturbation. Not seen. Not here. My comfort not considered. No needs to meet.

Best just to let him finish... Women do it all the time. Many do a lot worse. Some get raped. This isn't rape. Surely. I never said no. Didn't try to stop him. I close my eyes. A tear leaks out and trickles into my ear."

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

The writer speaks of their traumatic experience of passivity and articulates that it existed outside of their understanding of sexual injustice and abuse. They write, “This isn’t rape. Surely. I never said no.” a claim that reinforces a normalized understanding of sexual injustice as an act reliant on the presence of an explicit “no”. Nonetheless, the speaker, by voicing her experience and articulating her discomfort and sadness, disrupts the consent binary, and expands upon how moments between consent or lack of consent, can lead to trauma and perpetuate gender hierarchy. The gendering of this experience is made clear in two lines: “I don’t want to make a fuss”, offers an explanation for her passivity that references the expected docility and quietness of girls as a constant expectation in moments of sex. And, the line “women do it all the time” further showing us how passivity is often performed in an effort to uphold a sense of normality.

Both of these narratives, through their display of sexual normality leading to moments of passivity and trauma, illustrate how the “normal” is fundamentally constructed through the subordination of girls and their agency in sex. Another voice reinforces this assertion:

He didn’t ask. I don’t think I would have said yes, but I didn’t have the conviction to say no. The feeling was so intense, good and also painful, but the most potent part of the memory is an extreme lack of control...I didn’t know what I wanted but I knew what I was supposed to want... The feeling of powerlessness is the worst thing about that memory. It was something I experienced without a shred of choice or control. No physical force, not even explicit emotional manipulation. I was there and it was happening, and I could have stopped it, could have said “no” or even said “yes” just to claim my own agency. But I didn’t.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

This voice argues that agency was absent without the presence of a “yes” or a “no” and that passivity and the non-existence of agency contributed a feeling of powerless, The argues that “I knew what I was supposed to want.” Further alluding to a collective understanding of “normal” sexual performance. These three narratives articulate that their desire to exit the sexual situation was in contradiction to their perception of normal and sense of sexual obligation, fostering the confusing silence of passiveness. Within these moments of passivity we see a process of gendering where obligated docility reinforces heteronormative functions of sex and the repression of sexual agency and is justified and comprehended by the girls as normal.

One narrative specifically articulates the distinction between sexual violence and the trauma that passivity can foster. The voice speaks to the construction of gender norms within these early moments of sexuality as reflective of a system of patriarchy, a system that creates violence and trauma, but is distinct from individual acts of sexual abuse. She says,

I wanted to kiss, I wanted someone to lay with. But when it came to sex, penetration that is, I didn’t want it. When it got to that point I just felt like it was owed.

For the most part I don’t hold it against any of those boys, for not asking for consent, for not noticing that I froze beneath them when they went inside of me.

We were always drunk, and they were as new to it as I was. Really it wasn't always fair to them either...But I ache. I ache thinking about the pain I put myself through, doing what I thought I was supposed to in order to be the kind of girl those horribly average teenage boys wanted.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

This narrative further describes the reinforcement of a "normal" sexual performance that is assigned to girlhood. These narratives continue to articulate the experience of passivity in relationship to obligation with language such as "supposed to" that leads to their silence during sex and consequent feeling of powerlessness, and pain.

The ability of narrative and collective biography within this analysis of passivity is particularly powerful as it provides testimony shared experience of passive sexual trauma while expanding the binary definition and operation of consent by challenging the avenues in which sexual injustice can occur.

And what he did shouldn't cause me this much trauma, right? It was always *technically* consent. If I were to go to court he would be innocent, I looked. So then why? Why do I feel this way? Maybe because I was too young (14). Maybe because I didn't listen to my first "no", and nor did he. And I can't say rape because I did say yes. I can't say coercion cause he didn't intimidate me. And I can't say abuse because he never laid a hand on me. But I'm still scared. I'm really scared.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

The writer tells us that they have been and continue to be scared by the space that exists between yes and no. That their sexual trauma occurred outside of our understanding of sexual injustice. This narrative provides testimony to the nuances of sexual injustice and complexity of passivity. The cumulation of the excerpts argue about power; they illuminate the dynamics that ground our behavior within sex, dynamics of gender that teach silence and obligation and subscribe girlhood to these systems. The collection of these stories provides a painting of sexual injustice as an extension of hierarchal gender functioning, where sex becomes a space of powerlessness, not masked as violence because of its normality.

Orgasm and Sexual Awakening: Pleasure as a site of analysis

*Like think about orgasms like you think about love
Like love is not orgasms and orgasms are not love but to love your body,
your orgasms,
your screams,
is radical
and rare,
just like love.
Like real love.*

*Like love her.
Like make her cum.
Like let her scream.*

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Throughout the Girl House submissions, pleasure and the discovery of pleasure are displayed in contrast to sexual repression. For many individuals, the experience of physical pleasure during moments of sex disrupted a learned sexual performance, where pleasure was the conscious goal but absent from the actualized moment. By combining these stories and presenting pleasure as a site of analysis we are given insight into the practices that comprise sexual freedom. These voices remember their formative experiences with pleasure as radical awakenings that disrupted and exposed the ways in which their gender impacted the experience of pleasure they were having during sex. Pleasure for many of these voices was something that upon discovery communicated the ways that they had internalized a performance of sex where pleasure did not exist and where the absence of pleasure was normalized. Many of these excerpts describe the discovery of pleasure as one found through individual practices of sex, such as masturbation, queer sex and sex with intentional consent, moments that allowed for complete individual autonomy and ultimately, prioritized their own pleasure.

Seven years... The amount of time that passed between my first sexual encounter and my first orgasm... I wish I could go back seven years and teach myself how to do this. If I knew then how good I could make myself feel, I don't think I would have spent seven years becoming a finely tuned instrument for others' pleasure. Now I am practicing for the day when someone comes along who will share in my music...I am determined that the next seven years will be more playful, more joyful, gentler, sweeter, and better than the last.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

I cry for my 15-year-old self, how much I want to crawl back in time and shake her and tell her that she can go far far away from the people that have hurt her. Tell her that she doesn't ever have to do anything she doesn't want to do ever again. Tell her that she will buy a vibrator and make herself feel amazing anytime she wants. Tell her that while the shame won't go away, she'll learn how to turn it into productive rage that keeps her certain she'll never let herself be treated poorly again.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

These narratives speak to sexual liberation. Liberation as a result of discovering pleasure and rejecting practices that prohibited pleasure, reveals the existence of a system in which contrasting, repressive sexuality is the norm. After experiencing sexual pleasure, the writers were able to articulate how they internalized and understood sexual pleasure as something that they as girls, would give to their partners. These two stories of girlhood describe masturbation and orgasm as means of sexual autonomy, where sexual pleasure is situated as an autonomous practice of

sexuality. Their depiction of pleasure both exists in contrast to their negative experiences of sex where pleasure was either absent and performed or actively suppressed by their partner. Within this framing, pleasure is seen as resistant to the sex that was introduced to them during formative years of sexualization. Sexual pleasure as resistance therefore rejects the spaces in which pleasure is restricted. With the discovery of pleasure and the rejection of pleasure suppression, we see a departure from girlhood, a setting where sex denies a pleasurable physical relationship.

The gender-specific teaching of sex as pleasureless has roots in the relationship that many stories vocalize between pleasure and shame.

To this day (and I mean literally last night) I sometimes sob after sex, even though I'm in a committed, loving, healthy relationship now...I cry because I feel overwhelmed with the layers of shame I have to work through almost every time in order to just feel good and deserving of an orgasm.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

The positioning of an orgasm as shameful reinforces an oppression of girl sexuality where pleasure is rejected. The narrative gives testimony to a relationship between sexual pleasure and shame, and orgasms as moments of wrongfulness. This relationship describes the way that girls are subjected to sexualization and required to participate, yet withheld from seeking and experiencing sexual pleasure.

We see queer sex as a further demonstration of the sexual obligation and the defiance of that expectation as a site of pleasure and sexual discovery:

The first time I was naked in front of a man, I had already realized I'm a lesbian, but I felt that I couldn't be certain unless I had a viscerally bad reaction to being intimate with a man. And I didn't, but every action felt robotically planned; kiss, clothes off, kiss, touch dick, kiss, tell him I didn't want to have sex. Each action was leading up to the sex I was supposed to give him.

Being intimate with a woman, I found that mutual pleasure was finally central and there was no end goal to constitute actions as sex or not sex. Anything was sex if I felt like it was. Or it wasn't sex because I cared less about if it was or wasn't."

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project submission

This narrative introduces the concept "of mutual pleasure" where sex was transformed into a shared space and the radical centering of their own sexual pleasure was encouraged. They articulate a feeling of sexual obligation, an internalization and perhaps, actualization, that assumes their participation, a further example of girls as subjected to sexualization and a simultaneous disregard for their sexual agency. In this example, pleasure was discovered by the integration of pleasure into the sexual conversation, the centering of a pleasure that had previously been non-existent, and a queer sexual agency that not only prioritized pleasure but withdrew from the requirements of heteronormativity.

Letters to my Teenage Self- Reflections on Girlhood, Consciousness and Reclamation

I need to tell you that we replicate trauma, try to reclaim experiences of being taken and feeling invisible in an effort to be in control, to have a hand in this replication, to choose to feel small and not be forced into smallness. Please, I must tell you that there are other ways to reclaim sex. That trauma is not the only language your body can speak. That you will know more and can know more than a silent “no”. That your queerness will come to you, be let free from you and suddenly you will learn how to sing.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

How would you talk to your younger self about sex? This prompt is beautiful. It offers space for an immediate reflection, takes the writer to memory and asks for guidance. These narratives articulate various sexual injustices of girlhood from violence, abuse, the sexualization of race, the teaching of gender roles during sex, and the withholding of sexual pleasure. The natural hindsight of this prompt identifies difference between past and present and reconciles with their younger self. The guidance that the prompt asks for leads to an illustration of transcendence and reclaims past oppressions. The beginning quote of this section spoke to trauma but ultimately, offered their teenage self, hope; a future that is also their reality, in which their sexuality is theirs and no one else's, “...trauma is not the only language your body can speak. That you will know more and can know more than a silent “no”. That your queerness will come to you, be let free from you and suddenly you will learn how to sing.”

Narratives derived from this prompt reflect on the intersectional experiences of sexual injustice and the intersections of race, gender and sexuality, that fundamentally shapes the experiences of growing-up and learning sex. Thus, the reconciliation that occurred within these narratives simultaneously navigated the on-going experience of existing in a body of layered identities and the rejection of body and gender ideals that are distinctly racialized within the processes of Girling and the teaching of rape culture. The presentation of this story within our collective biography, echoes the argument of Patricia Hill Collins that tells us the voice of subordinated identities within public knowledge directly disrupts hierarchies of power.²⁴ The reclaiming we see in these stories is not solely a reclamation of sexual injustice, but an act of independence within the larger systems of domination that control the ideologies constituting us as subjects.

My younger self felt a lot of shame and pressure to engage in sex, as an indication of feeling wanted. I never felt like my brown body was desired or valued. There were a lot of feelings of othering and ways in which I felt unlike the feminine ideal. I would tell my younger self to prioritize communication and the safety of my body in all sexual interactions. I would affirm that I owe nobody sex.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

²⁴ Collins, Patricia Hill. “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 14, pg. 750.

One narrative in particular provided a perspective that illuminated the on-going work of rejecting dominant ideology. Their story spoke of how their teenage-self internalized concepts of gender as they navigated their trans-identity. Throughout their experience of transness they continued to hold themselves to the norms of sexual performance that gender dictates. Their story carries us through their eventual distancing of sexual gender norms from their understanding of self.

This question got me thinking about gender roles I encountered growing up. I wish I could talk to myself about who I am as a person, what I like to do, what I want to do for work, and the things I enjoy in life are not reliant or determined by my gender. I might be comfortable using masculine and neutral pronouns, but those labels don't come with prescribed prerequisites and qualifications. Going off of that, sex as an activity tends to be role specific, and cis. I wish I could talk to my younger self about how it's okay to not have to feel like a man whenever I have sex:

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Furthermore, we saw an abundance of narratives that spoke directly to their teenage sexual trauma and reassured their younger self of their innocence within a system of rape culture. These stories repeatedly told themselves, "This was not your fault." ‘

Dear 15-year-old me, this wasn't wrong because you were "too young" to have sex. This was wrong because you didn't want to have sex. Other people, including yourself, will try to pass off what happened to you as age-inappropriate sex, when it was in fact wrong because it was nonconsensual.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Girlhood and the Politics of Speaking

I didn't scream. So I'm sure as hell gonna raise my daughter to scream like a banshee.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

This section will bring together three narratives that reflect on voice. These stories share reflections on growing-up, learning to speak, when not to speak, and the politics of speaking. The politics of these narratives, as words that disrupt the systemic silencing of experiences of sexual injustice, further testify to girling by providing insight into the gendered experience of obtaining and possessing voice.

The first narrative speaks to voice directly. They assert that their girlhood required the formation of "The Voice" distinct from their true voice and to be used to navigate the realities of everyday patriarchy. They write,

My friends and I talked about using The Voice. We might use it at a bar, or a party, and at our jobs. It was a soft voice, girly, not our real voices. It could be giggly-innocent or faux-oblivious or weirdly saintly. It was calculated to deflect

sexual tension/attention/aggression without ‘hurting his ego,’ or ‘making him mad,’ or ‘hurting his feelings.’

Writing this, it occurs to me, I never spoke to my own daughter directly about The Voice. When she was small, I told her nobody could touch her private parts without permission and to tell me right away if anybody tried. But later on, say middle school, why didn’t I remember to tell her that ‘no’ needs absolutely no softening? I’m also wondering, did I teach The Voice to my girl in the same mysterious way it was taught to me?”

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

The author references “The Voice” as distinct from their “real voice” and a mechanism for navigating and deflecting unwanted male attention. Their story reveals the ways in which their experience with girlhood required their performance as “innocent” “oblivious: and “saintly” in order to protect themselves from tension and aggression. As an example of gender performativity, The Voice shares both the obligation and necessity of adopting patterns of inauthentic speaking in order to comply with the expectations of girlhood and maintain personal safety. The requirements of an inauthentic voice for a successful embodiment of girlhood is reflective of gender hierarchy particularly because this speaking is grounded in the comfort and security of men. Furthermore, the author reflects on motherhood and the manner in which The Voice continues in the girlhood of her daughter. They ponder the “mysterious way” The Voice was taught to them. I argue this generational teaching is reflective of the hegemonic system of gendering that we hear from Butler, where we see repetition as the primary source of gender norms. The narrative is a testament to the normalization of the subjected girl identity, reinforced through generations of patterns of speaking.

Another narrative reinforces the argument that the adoption of protective behaviors was normalized for girls and in natural contrast to the displays of male-supremacy exercised by boys and men.

But we didn’t write essays about it, except in our journals. It was something we were expected to deal with. Being harassed was part of walking through the world as a young woman. We had two choices: ignore it or have a snappy comeback ready. We learned to not take it personally. It happened to most of us. It meant men were noticing us. We built up our armor from a young age. It wasn’t right, but that’s what most of us did.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

This narrative again speaks of necessity and the building of "armor" necessary for preventing harassment. The writer tells us that this harassment was common, making the navigation, building of armor and the complexities of speaking-up, a natural and normal burden required by girlhood. However, this narrative also reflects on an additional facet of the politics of speaking: that learning to exist in an assigned, subordinated gender, and the intricacies of dealing with harassment, were not talked about in public spaces. The silence surrounding their experience, and their inclusion of it within the piece, demonstrates the resistant quality of narrative and the expansive potential of their presence. Though they did not write about it

growing-up, they are writing about it now, providing an alternative perspective to the very system they describe as unjust, and rejecting the continued silence of that experience.

The third narrative of this section reflects on an experience of sexual violence:

Was thinking about it and it's like now all the suddenly I'm burdened with telling people this "thing" about myself at some point or another because it's "helpful" and "useful" information for them to know, as if the boundaries that are set have to be explained to some degree and they just can't be the way I am??
-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Their narrative tells of the on-going consequence of sexual violence where not only is a body violated but where trauma continues within the body throughout a lifetime. Other narratives spoke to similar rage, that their trauma made simple functions of the world difficult and that often, in order to engage in everyday living, they were required to speak to their trauma to obtain necessary support, a burden that was violently imposed upon them. This example gives a unique perspective on the politics of speaking by posing a reflection on the way society scripts and holds stories of sexual abuse and violence, coding them as unwanted because of their disruption of a system where sexual injustice is justified as normal and held without accountability. Furthermore, the author hints at an assumption made about those who do speak about their boundaries. They argue that boundaries are inconsiderable without the presence of trauma, suggesting a society that does not respect sexual boundaries simply for being boundaries- a clear contradiction to what we've heard in these narratives that testify to a society that does not respect sexual boundaries with or without the articulation of past trauma.

Rape Culture Instills Fear: What does Reclamation Look Like?

Being intimate with a woman, I found that mutual pleasure was finally central and there was no end goal to constitute actions as sex or not sex. Anything was sex if I felt like it was. Or it wasn't sex because I cared less about if it was or wasn't... The first time a girl went down on me, I felt like I could say I'd had sex for the first time.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Soon after we began publishing narratives we received an anonymous submission with a single sentence, *"Before this project I was already scared of men, Now, after reading these stories, I am terrified of men."* This submission reveals a terrifying reality of rape culture: it's ability to operate outside of singular instances of sex, but as a system of domination. The sentence reflected the persistence of rape culture in all of its facets we've explored thus far; moments of violence, the intricacies of passivity, the rigidity of consent, the expectation and obligation of sex, the performance of gender, and the fear of speaking out. The operations of rape culture maintain its domination by further limiting the exploration of and access to healthy, positive sexual experiences. The threat of sexual injustice, and the shared knowledge that vocalizing sexual violation is often subjected to a culture of dismissal, is a pervasive operation of domination. Rape culture rejects queerness and reinforces gender hierarchy and

heteronormativity.²⁵ Yet, we continue to see hundreds of stories that speak of sexual freedom. We read stories of queer discovery, of pleasure, orgasms, sex positivity, reconciliation, healthy reflections on previous injustice, and transformations in gender identity. These stories not only offer a moment of individual reclamation but provide a direct resistance to rape culture by refusing subordination and compliance within its system of oppression.

Queerness as a theme within the Girl House Project was commonly referenced as a site of resistance to girlhood sexual injustice and also as a means of reclaiming the subjectification of the girl identity. Queerness rejects the expectation of heterosexuality and the gender norms that are grounded in maintaining heteronormativity.

Growing up, I was taught that a girl's sexuality was something to be ashamed of, afraid of, exploited. The only messaging I got was from religion: abstinence and guilt, whores and sinners. It has taken me a long time not to feel guilty about my own sexuality - not just having sexual thoughts and feelings and masturbating and enjoying sex as a woman but certainly also because I'm a queer woman.
-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Many narratives that directly speak to reclamation reference shame as a facet of the sexuality that they were taught and as a mechanism of sexual injustice that they eventually overcame.

Healthy, consensual sex with someone you love - regardless of your or that person's gender, regardless of your marital status - is NOTHING to be ashamed of. In fact, I'm pretty fucking proud of how good I can make my partner feel. In fact, I'm pretty proud of the times I've owned my own sexuality, whether with a partner or alone, and whether that looked like saying yes or saying no.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

This narrative vocalizes a freedom from shame and associates their liberation from shame with the act of owning their own sexuality. The language of "owning" resembles the argument that names passivity as a perpetrator of agency, where moments of passiveness undermine autonomy. In this sense, freeing themselves from shame was and continues to be a route to claiming individual agency. A short submission echoes this sentiment and attributes agency to resistance, "*I'm working, slowly, on agency. On claiming a sexuality that belongs to me and perhaps to those I choose to share it with. It's small, but I believe it to be the best small resistance I can muster.*" Furthermore this narrative locates agency as an aspect of a sexuality that belongs to them, not constructed by the systems that impose sexuality on girlhood.

²⁵ Williams, Joyce E. "Rape Culture." *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2015, doi:10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosr019.pub2.

I'm sad for the young person who told us these stories relate men and sex to terror. Yet, I hope that as this project grows, and as these stories become public, the Girl House will be able to physically and symbolically resist the terror that rape culture demands. The Girl House Project, as a home to stories of sexual reclamation and liberation, offers an alternative to sexual injustice, where the simple articulation of sexual joy can be marked as resistance, and the collection of joy, as monumental.

Conclusion

As girls, the power of our sexuality is taken from us over and over. Boys and men take it from us by treating sexual acts as things they do to us. They take our agency and leave us unsure of what we want. Society, often through our parents, takes our power by telling us to be careful. Telling us men will try to do things to us. Telling us to protect ourselves, to be cautious. They'll never tell us that sex is for us.

-Excerpt from a Girl House Project Submission

Following our installation, I found a notecard pinned to the side of the house, it read: *I am upset. Feel like crying. Am crying. It was wrong. I didn't deserve it. I'm grateful for this. Thank you for speaking. I am finally letting my heart weep and my chest flow out and it will be okay. But it is hard right now.*" This narrative clearly speaks to the experience of engaging with the Girl House as one that prompted their individual reflection. Though their words do not voice a specific story, they've contribution to the collective biography. The notecard references an experience of sexual trauma, prompted to emerge by the narratives of sexual injustice and girlhood housed within the project. We see the use of intentional spaces for voicing sexual trauma as both sites for reclamation and as feminist political formation within the 1970's Speak Out Conferences where similarly, the community created a space to illuminate specific gender subjectification and validate experiences of assault.²⁶ The notecard pinned on the wall demonstrates not only a moment of validation but spoke to the potential of narratives as agents in the rejection of systemic silencing.

The narratives exemplified within this thesis paint an outline for the politics this project attempts to disrupt: the normalization of sexual injustice within coming-of-age and as a process of gendered becoming that is rooted in the perpetuation of hierarchal systems of gender. I have identified themes of passivity, docility, pleasure and pleasure repression, shame and autonomy, silence and speaking-out, reclamation queerness, and voice, all of which help us to visualize the complicated landscape of a girlhood existing in the confines of patriarchy. Collective biography offers a medium for disruption. The experience of reading personal stories that express broad, diverse narratives of growing up and navigating systems of sex, gender, sexuality and trauma, continuously prompt others to consider how their private experiences are reflected within the stories of others. The potential of collective biography is made visible through the ever-growing and accumulating nature of the Girl house in which individuals are encouraged to give their story a home and to continuously diversify our understanding of girlhood and the systems of learning sex that ground its existence.

The Girl House, as a collective biography, recognizes the possibilities of narrative-telling. In its application to girlhood and sexuality, we have built not only a site for storytelling but a site of analysis. The stories shared, though diverse in their content, place and language, visualize a

²⁶ Sersier, Tanya. *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, (Springer Nature, 2019), 159.

systemic process of girling. The Girl House will keep growing, honoring the autonomy of the storyteller and filling the spaces it enters with undisputable power.

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