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Stories from the River: Developing Political Awareness Within Psychotherapy in Counselling
Sexual Violence

Doctor of Psychotherapy and Counselling

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Abstract

From the stories in the river (Solnit, 2020) to the process of unfolding within the counselling room; this thesis invites, you, the reader, to join my fictive clients and I on a journey of observing how the ideologies (Kearney, 2018) of a post Trump era have continued to simmer within ourselves as individuals as well as the practice of counselling and psychotherapy when working with those who have experienced sexual violence.

From the noticing of the ideologies instilled within our identities, to the re-emergence of the structural inequalities of oppression in the political world around us, the phenomenological contextualism of this process grapples with how the experience of relating between counsellor and client initiates the unfolding of such ideologies. A journey that may bring anxiety as counselling training has continued to ignore the context of these ideologies, leaving trainees with expectations of how this may be separate to the process (Kearney, 2018) rather than an important part of it.

The hope, or rather the invitation, is to discover a language for this once ignored area of counselling theory and show you, the reader, how I grapple with the parts of my identity affected by Trumpism within the counselling room as I work within the streams of Islamophobia, Transphobia, and Neoliberal Feminist forced ideologies upon individuals who have experienced sexual violence through the reflective process of intersectional feminism.

With fictionalisation and the display of my own reflexivity (Etherington, 2004), this journey from the river, to creation of my fictive clients, to the murky soup it generates, and the tasting that follows, leaves blueprints to how trainees, and you, the reader, may also wonder upon and discover their own language for the articulating these ideologies that appear within the counselling session when working with those who have experienced sexual violence.

**Keywords:** Sexual Violence, Sexual Trauma, Trauma, Politics, Counselling, Psychotherapy, Fictionalisation, Reflexivity, Feminism, Intersectional Feminism, Islamophobia, Transphobia, Neoliberal Feminism, Trumpism

**Word Count:** 54,941 (excluding title page, declaration acknowledgements, table of contents, references, footnotes and appendix)
Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself, and had not been submitted, in whole or in part, to any other degree or professional qualification. Except where states otherwise by reference or acknowledgement, the work presented is entirely my own.

Signature:

Date: 19/05/2023
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Chapter 1: Introduction - An Invitation:

“Once Upon a time…”

A long pause before I continued to type. The truth is I have rewritten this introduction several times, with each attempt drawing me closer to outline the story to you, the reader, who begins this quest with me to explore how we may observe the intersection of counselling and psychotherapy within the political world around us. A world which used to be thought of as outside of the counselling room, and yet, ignored screams litter history with moments which show how this may not be true. For example, when psychoanalysts met to debate whether the future be in Freudian or Klein theories, whilst ignoring the bombs falling around them during World War II (Grosskurth, 1995), or the notable lack of literature around sexual violence in psychoanalytic journals from the 1920s to 1986 due to psychoanalyst belief sexual violence was a social problem and henceforth, not part of the therapeutic process (Appignanesi, 2008). Memories in my own training to be a therapist as fellow students inferred how they would attempt to create a therapeutic space outside of the politics of this world; as if clients may be able to say, do, and feel safe being whatever they want as if the political world has no bearing on therapy room. A thought which continued as I noticed my own hesitancy to voice the political, even when I was speaking to the political impact, such as a global pandemic which dictated how my client and I may work together during continuously shifting rules and regulations. Memories and images that may even be evoked in your own mind, as you read these words here.

Thus, to begin this journey, to understand the context of this thesis and the themes of what will later be highlighted as the political streams of gender and race within the counselling room, I will attempt to rewrite some of what we have been taught through an updated storytelling of our history and of my own reflections of myself. These stories, pulled from what Rebecca Solnit (2020) describes as a river, will be located within the past and current political timeline of the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom (UK). The U.S. due to my own upbringing and, as I will explain further in later paragraphs, the impact of how a post Trump presidency has created a resurgence of these political inequalities in relation to race and gender. While the UK speaks to where this thesis was born, in the counselling training program I attended in Edinburgh, Scotland during a time where I could not walk to my own program without encountering a live example of protests around how gender and racial inequalities continued to impact individuals.

Each of these timelines will then condensed further, to focus on the area of counselling where clients have been impacted by sexual violence. The reason for this is due to my own journey as a counsellor and how my own trauma has led down a path to want to understand myself and, though that understanding, help others who have been impacted by what may come after sexual violence.

What you, as the reader, will then notice will be how each of these chapters will always tie back to these stories. Sometimes they may speak to the historical inequalities, sometimes they may speak to the current inequalities, and other times they may appear as either the remnants of drawings from my own personal reflections of this thesis or the fictionalised retelling of some parts of myself and my internalised experience of my client work. The point of this method; the use of storytelling, drawing, and eventually fictionalised case studies, is to both entice you into wanting to take such an arduous journey of reading about gender and racial inequalities impact on the counselling room, as well as attempt to contribute to feminist
research where there is a transparency between who and what is being researched (Etherington, 2004). Something that I argue briefly here - but I will explain further in the Methodology chapter - as important as if I am to answer the question of how can we develop a political awareness within psychotherapy and counselling when working with clients who have experienced sexual violence, then I will need to be as transparent as I am consciously able to about my own internalized thoughts and actions to being raised with such political inequalities.

The hope lies then, that by the end of this chapter, and more broadly this thesis, you may both understand the importance in learning how to notice such political inequalities of gender and race in the counselling room when working with those who have experienced sexual violence. While also learning how to begin your own process of wondering and reflections to how one may speak into these ‘cultural sore spots’ (Sanyal, 2019) that both counsellors and clients have lived through. To add another story to multitude of literature which suggests the desperation in observing and submerging ourselves into this river of stories (Solnit, 2020) was not because of another hysterical woman suffocating from her own wandering womb (Cleghorn, 2021), rather it was the importance of articulating the effects on our identity, on how we are, as counsellors, and how it will inevitably impact our sessions with our clients.

*My Own River- Introspections and Investigations in a Bathroom:*

> “…. A woman discovered a river filled with stories....”
> - Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

I was first led to this river of stories (Solnit, 2020) by my own therapist when she recommended me Solnit’s (2020) book, *Recollections of My Nonexistence*. This book explores Solnit’s (2020) own autobiographical exploration of what it meant to be a woman growing up in the U.S. with gender violence constantly surrounding her. A traumatising effect, or lifelong swim without ever finding dry land as Solnit (2020) writes, of what it means to be constantly reminded of the violence and oppression one faces due to the history of inequalities haunting our bodies.

Her words had echoed some of my own experiences; my nervousness when I heard a bump in the night when I was home alone, my hesitancy towards the clothes I picked for my day wondering if it was ‘too revealing’, my annoyance towards men who would make sure I did not do any of the ‘heavy’ lifting due to my ‘weaker’ genes. It was a reminder of the lifelong swim I had been through my entire life; a reminder to how the genitals I was born with made me the weaker sex. Inferior to what had been established as the standard of what has been conceived as normal - and sometimes even written as superior - men.

This internalised inferiority was only exemplified when I found myself faced with the fear of a missed period. The dread which rose from my stomach when my nightly routines were no
longer TV shows before bed, but rather the washing of bloody remnants from my hands after another painful investigation due to the thought I may be pregnant. A dread which fed on the rumination of when my menstruation would finally start. The dread of what this may mean if it were a missed period encouraged me to hunker away in the bathroom as I tore into myself to see if there were any signs of pregnancy. I felt for the strings of my IUD, for any signs of blood, and bent myself in half as I tried to scrutinise if anything had changed down there. Throughout the process, constantly whispering to myself that it was just stress as an attempt to push away the palpable fear of what if; what may have halted my cycle as I was near panic at the thought of if I might be pregnant.

The echoes of my inferiority had reminded me a potential pregnancy was no longer okay as this time was different. On June 24th, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned Roe v Wade, the case that ruled for legalised abortion within the U.S. The Supreme Court’s new ruling gave the option back to each state to decide whether they would allow abortions, of any form, to be legal within their jurisdiction. In response to this ruling, states were quick to write an overarching legislation for if it was criminalised or not and then, within the following weeks, would negotiate the intricacies of how-if how-, when-if when-, and for what reason, if what was an option.

This new ruling came from the aftermath of Donald Trump’s presidency as, he later brags to the press, he helped to overturn Roe v Wade (Feiner and Mangan, 2022). Something that felt to be an impossible future when I was promised, by my social circle, though Trump may have ‘won’ his presidency in 2016 through his win of electoral votes rather than popular votes, he would never be able to create legislation that could affect me. As if Trump had been somehow labelled to be harmless even though his presidential campaign reeked with the gender inequalities Solnit (2020) had highlighted in her book. Something that I wish to highlight here, to remind you, the reader, Trump was always tapping into these political streams of sexual violence within gender and race.

During Trump’s presidential campaign, seventeen allegations of sexual harassment and assault (Phipps 2020) followed him. The most famous being in 2016 right before the election, a tape was released where Trump went into detail on his sexual aggression towards women and perceived entitlement towards them, with him famously quoted for saying, “Grab ‘em by the pussy” (Rhodes et al, p 745, 2020). Trump’s actions and words evoked the history of oppression for bodies who were perceived to be within the historic gender binary of ‘women’ where women were made to be frightened of their own genitalia (Cixous and Clément, 1986) as they experienced the continued violence of the expectation placed upon them. Expectations, which I explore more thoroughly in the literature review, implied only good women were ones who submitted to their husband and had babies, with any other considered sick and unwell if they said ‘no’ (Cleghorn, 2021).

Any attempts to highlight how his words and actions re- evoked some of the historical inequalities around gender, and race; arguments of how these words were ‘meaningless’ emerged as Trump supporters would declare these words were innocent. Trump supporters wanted to put forth the argument Trump’s words were to be considered as ‘locker room talk’ (Nelson, 2017) and ignore how these words had deeper ties to the U.S. past and, arguably, western history of oppression. The louder an activist, or anyone, became, the louder the opposing side would scream over them as being ‘overly dramatic’. There would be no acknowledgement to how Trump’s remarks potentially stood on the U.S. historical shoulders of how these bodies would be made into witches, scapegoats that could be burned to solve any
misfortune that may fall onto a town (Sollée 2017), while also expected to be passive (Cixous and Clément, 1986) as it was believed their biological role as a ‘natural’ woman was to be feminine, submissive, and caring (Cleghorn, 2021).

Unsurprisingly, as Trump and his supporters continued to scream over these protests, only mimicked our western history of women who had attempted to push against such historical narratives would be deemed as ‘unwell’ that left some to be labelled as ‘mad’ and taken to an asylum for inhuman treatment that sought to bring a cure to their rebellion as society believed no ‘healthy’ women would be anything other than what they were told to be (Appignanesi, 2008; Cleghorn, 2021). Even with more extreme Trump supporters building upon historical arguments of feminism being at fault for women having issues with Trump as women had been brainwashed by feminism. According to these writers, feminism capitalised and thrived on its own failure through resentful women who do not understand “traditional male courtship behaviour” (Devlin, 2015, p 36). It was not men who were doing anything wrong, but women who were both misunderstanding what their role was as well as misunderstanding a male’s role in society (The Futurist, 2010). From these arguments for Trump and his remarks, women’s experiences continued to be silenced for the fear of what if they disagreed?

It was not long till articles began to highlight some of these ‘what ifs’ as Trump supporters began to attack those who Trump had targeted in his statements. Some examples being a man assaulting an inter-racial couple, a black woman being attacked for the colour of her skin, and a woman who was Muslim being attacked for her hijab as each perpetrator echoed Trump as part of their ideologies and through his words encouraged or incited them to commit such violence (Levin, 2020). As a result, these articles only hushed the parts of me who wished to speak against this inferiority I had internalised. I felt silenced, labelled as hysteric, and left with the fear of being attacked. It was not just women -or the spectrum of gender more broadly- who were being targeted in Trump’s remarks, but those whose race were declared by Trump as dangerous.

It left me to hunker away in the bathroom, out of fear of what would become of me if I were to once again challenge those who had said Trump’s remarks were harmless’ and demand for my own bodily autonomy.

Streams from the River- Trumpism and his legacy:

“And she consumed those stories…”
- Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

As I continued to hunker away, tearing into myself on the quest of how Trump’s presidential campaign has embedded their way into my body, it is important to note how Trump’s presidency, his continued social media posts, and legislation appealed to the resurgence of a “take back control” (Phipps, 2020, p 76) anthem where those who enjoyed the privileges from the structural powers of what has been consecrated “by a dominant culture at the expense of all
nondominant cultures and in service of erasure” (Merchant, 2020, p 4). Sometimes also referred to ‘whiteness’ when thinking within the context of the U.S. social political spectrum as it hints to how these structural powers are from a U.S. history -or western history more broadly- of inequalities where ‘white’ was determined as the normal and standard for societal behaviour (Merchant, 2020; Layton, 2018).

To then “take back control” (Phipps, 2020, p 76) appeals to the ‘whiteness’ as those within this category claim they are now made to be unequal to others; particularly in a time where social justice movements attempted to break down these structural powers of whiteness and, in turn, created the feeling of a “sense of victimhood when entitlements and powers are threatened” (ibid) to those who enjoyed such privileges. Trump’s presidential campaign and presidency re-evoked these old narratives as -I want to emphasise- the reality where these politics were not tied to the era of Trump’s presidency, something Fors (2019) warns as ‘common target’ of bad where the placed blame on Trump and his era of presidency draws focus away from where these political narratives are structural. Trumpism, as Layton (2018) notes, deeply intertwines itself into U.S. history -and arguably western history- from the way it draws the historical inequalities to the present. A historical inequality which has also been referred to as a patriarchy, where ‘white’ and ‘male’ has been the standard of normality for citizens to strive for (Atkinson, 2020), sometimes even being greatly rewarded when doing so in adjacent privileges (Merchant, 2020). Meaning the more an individual strives to be what is ‘white’ and ‘male’ -or rather behaves suitable to their prescribed gender- the more they are granted, such as green cards. It is not quite the full reward of what someone who is ‘white’ and ‘male’ may receive, such as citizenship, but it is better than the alternative punishment and attacks one may face for pushing against.

Indeed, Trump’s re-evoking of such political narratives which prescribe what is deemed normal as ‘whiteness’ and ‘male’ was not something that stayed localised within U.S. politics as it spread to other parts of the world. When Trump shouted, ‘Make America Great Again’, UK pro Brexit campaigners echoed the same as a reason to leave the European Union (Phipps, 2020). When Trump said, “Grab em by the pussy” (Rhodes et al, p 745, 2020), men’s right activists on social media demanded men to claim their rightful place in the ‘gender order’ (ibid) around the world. Trump had appealed to those who had begun to situate themselves both in the far-right movement as well as what Richard Spencer labelled as “Alt-Right”, an umbrella term for an identity movement that “coalesce around white identity, white supremacy and western chauvinism” (Chatterjee, 2021 p 2). Or best summarised as the identity crisis found from white men faced with what they articulate as the oppression from diversity in social justice movements (Chatterjee, 2021, p 24). The far right, the Alt-Right movement, and sense of victimhood within it has then continued to gain momentum in online spaces, in the U.S., the UK, and even other European countries such as Spain’s far-right party Vox (Phipps, 2020, p 77). It even had followed me, an ocean away, behind a locked door, and into my bathroom as I found Trump’s words in the bloody remnants, I pulled from myself when I sought to find where my monthly menstruation had gone.

In each scrap of myself, his essence appeared, reminding me of my inferiority, of the oppressive history that impacted me, and of how, even if I were to survive the sexual violence of my past, I was faced with the new trauma Solnit (2020) had highlighted. Or, as Atkinson (2018) wrote, the ‘traumarchy’, a lingering trauma from the historical impacts of the patriarchy and how many of the political narratives we have today echo the patriarchal capability to maintain power within certain populations of society. Something my clients, too, spoke of in our sessions when they asked how Trump could be put in such a powerful position when he speaks of his
entitlements over women, or more famously “Grab ‘em by the pussy” (Rhodes et al, p 745, 2020).

Themes of the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) and how Trump has tapped into these themes were part of the direction I could feel my client work wanting to go. In a way which Layton (2018) argues as moving from turning a blind eye to how the oppressive narratives impact us to acknowledgement of how Trumpism had become a catalyst for a resurgence of these far-right and alt-right moments worldwide. An exploration of how power, privilege, and historical inequalities have continued to impact us as human beings and how we are able to seek help, process, and come to understand what has happened to us.

Yet these conversations were not something I was trained how to do as a counsellor. At most I had some experience of psychoeducation where I could talk to a client, but what about talking with a client?

If I truly wished to do as Layton (2018) argues as moving from the blind eye to acknowledgement, I needed to notice how Trump had wound up here. To notice how Trump had found his way both in myself, within the counselling space, and even within my clients.

* Streams from the River- The Political Stream and Me: *

> “... and collected them to take with her...”

- Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

Attempting to draw attention to how Trump had become internalised within myself was to be able to notice how Trump was not just a dog with ‘all bark and no bite’, meaning his words led to political actions and though all will not be documented due to the limitations of this thesis, specifically within gynaecological health care we can see how the ripple effects of these structural inequalities within gender and race.

In Trump’s presidency he was able to make a lasting impact as he elected three justices to The Supreme Court, fifty-four U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, and one hundred seventy-four federal District Court Judges (James, 2021). During this, several states had introduced twenty-five new abortion bans (Nash et al, 2019) in the hope that these would be taken to the supreme court to overturn Roe v. Wade, which it did. With the added misfortune of how these new, and younger age judges -with the average age of forty-seven (James, 2021)- had, and continue to have, a long-term effect on policy making where we can observe the consequence after the end of Trump’s presidency as states have further approved other laws where pharmacist can refuse birth control prescriptions based on moral and religious objections (Edwards, 2022). These new laws echoed one Supreme Court justice, Justice Thomas, sentiments that perhaps more than
just Roe v Wade should be overturned (597 U. S. Thomas, 2022), begging the question to how birth control and gay marriage may continue to progressively lose lawful protection.

The assertion that one could have control over their own sexual agency and body continued to dissolve as the U.S. adjusted its laws; paralleling my own dread that grew in my abdomen as minutes turned into hours and days became weeks without signs of menstruation. The bathroom became a haven where I could conceal myself as I resumed my investigations. Each one only left me with more dismay, and others with a moment of hope at the sight of blood only for it to be ripped away at the realisation it was due to my own desperation in my investigation that I had hurt myself. A violence that grew with my desperation for the visa that kept me in this country, the UK, was slowly ticking away as I wrote these words and came to the end of my studies. Forcing me back to a country where if I were to buy a pregnancy test only tapped into the fear of the potential for what a plus sign could mean. It brought forth images of advertisement by re-elected congressman Eric Swalwell that depicted the horrifying reality for some individuals in the U.S. where they were dragged out of their homes, arrested, and forcibly examined by the government for having an abortion (Kreutz, 2022). A reality which may grow worse as the U.S. state of South Carolina attempts to introduce a bill into legislation that would allow for the death penalty for having an abortion with no exceptions (Richards, 2023). This would be a further step to what many already face as individuals have been criminalised by certain state legislation due to their local governments lawful right to choose to investigate a miscarriage, a stillbirth, or if they believed the individual had tried to conceal their own pregnancy and then incarcerate said individual (Wright, 2019; Platenburgh et al, 2019; Wolf and Rudvasky, 2019; The Editorial Board, 2018). Laws which had statistically more grossly impacted people of colour compared to their white counterparts (Abrams, 2023). These new laws only stood on the shoulders of a U.S. history where medical care has already been impacted by racialized biases around people of colour, such as how black women are more likely to die in childbirth and less likely to be given pain medication due to a racist belief during slavery of how people who are black do not feel pain (Cleghorn, 2020). A pregnancy test felt more than just a simple health test, it was the acknowledgment that my body due to its gender and its race was to be regulated by the government.

The emotions that arose from the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018); the fear, the pain, the desperation were the ones that forced me further into the bathroom I hid in as I wondered if I would have no choice but to butcher my body the way millions of other bodies before me had if I were to be pregnant. As if someway, this butchery was a response all other bodies who have felt the oppression of gender and race follow, a wish for my pain and body to be heard (Jamison, 2014). They were the emotions in the river Solnit’s (2020) book validated after a lifetime of being told this river I am outlining here and its oppressive history, and arguably dilated history, truly had no implications on the present. Sentiments I heard every time I voiced my thesis, “You are in the UK, you can get an abortion, you are being dramatic...”, “You act like you live in Iran, you have privilege, how about you enjoy it...”

The words which echoed the continued political silencing had even infected our cultures’ ideals when we thought of sexual violence, this being defined as any sexual act-which includes sexual comments and any attempts to receive, force, or traffic- directed towards someone through either use of coercion or without consent, regardless of the relationship between them and regardless of situation (Bewley, 2014). Those who had experienced such violence were the roots of my usage of ‘you’ I strung along in the sentences below as I pulled this ‘you’ from my own stream of stories, from the stories I have read as I researched for this thesis, and from the stories that outpoured from every client I have worked with as we found our sessions travelling
down a different path that was more than just the exploration of their own everyday social interaction (Murray, 2017). Sexual violence may have been the first trauma; however, our focus will be the trauma of what was evoked when Trumpism encourages a resurgence of structural inequalities. As Sanyal (2019) wrote, “[sexual violence] it’s also about gender, the relationship of the sexes to each other, and even sexuality” (p 1) that brought forth a “cultural sore spot” (p 2) that begs for our attention as we see these political narratives suggest it was not the perpetrators’ fault for committing such violence, but what Spring (2020) argues as the core of sexual violence, where the narrative always points back to who had it forced upon them to be at fault. That you are the one with “the rotten core” (Osborne-Crowley, 2019 p 87). That perhaps you have had false memories and had made it all up (Bourke, 2007). Narratives that led you to wanting to cite everything in hopes that you can shake that feeling that it is not just you, that this was political. That after a lifetime of being told that it was not a societal problem but a ‘you’ problem and trying to do something different akin to what Johnson (2020) had done in her women's shelter when she would say, “You are not crazy. You are a sane person responding to a crazy situation” (p 182) feels unknown, taboo territory. How it was not just the experience of being “grabbed by the pussy”, rather it was the moments where the U.S. presidents can blatantly brag of their ownership of women without repercussions (Rhodes et al, 2020). The experience of how as soon as we are born and given our societal roles due to the shape of the genitalia between our legs, the gender that we present ourselves as, the way others perceive us to be, combined with other historical discourses of oppression that emerged from human’s own categorising of genetics, we find ourselves struggling against the current of those narratives and how they impact who we are and what we can achieve.

This separation of you being bad or you are at fault, relates back to what psychoanalytic theorists have noted as Trump’s paranoid dynamic of “splitting, repression, inversion, projection” (Rozmarin, 2017, p 463). Where someone else was scapegoated for the ‘badness’; for the shame, for the failure, for the fear of what may arise out of one self’s conscious and unconscious recognition of the parts of ourselves that were critiqued for the oppressive and unequal thoughts we may hold and actions we may do. In this paranoid dynamic of Trump (Rozmarin, 2017), the transgressions of laws from the U.S. which dictate my bodily autonomy were my own fault for being an inferior being who needed to be told what to do, how to act, and how to be. The internalised projections and splits within myself as they appear in this thesis when I ask perhaps if I am just a hysterical woman (Cleghorn, 2020) were from my own repression to hide away from the harm which had been made. The ease of claiming a problem that only exists in my mind instead of facing the reality of how every paragraph I type may have some truth to the trauma narrative they speak into.

It was not just how Trump had put into action these laws, but how these laws used the paranoid dynamic in its creation and into the bodies of who it impacts. Trump's continued scapegoating and shifting the blame of what may be wrought in the U.S. political inequalities from living in a structural power of ‘white’ as the norm “onto the most vulnerable” (Layton, 2018, p 13) leaves us to constantly question ourselves. In turn, perhaps, leaving us to also lose our narratives; our own stories of who we are, of how we feel, and what we can be as we are continuously internalising these political narratives around us.

Both in gender and in race as Trump was building upon this extended usage of blaming another to avoid the partial feelings of what McKenzie-Mavinga (2007) refers to as recognition trauma -within racism- where one experiences the impact of either being aware of how they have contributed to and/or how they experienced racism and the feelings that come from the
recognition of it. Something that can be easier to split off from oneself and project onto someone else than acknowledging its place within us.

The question then becomes if I have begun to unpick these narratives within myself, understanding how these internal processes may impact myself, how could I then do this as a counsellor?

* Streams from the River- Counselling and Psychotherapy: *

“...to share them with others and identify such narratives...”

-Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

As mentioned, to notice these political narratives and then speak of it with clients, somehow, I could never find the words as I was never taught a theory or given an example of how to engage with our dread that the client and I were navigating together. With such an obvious need to work with the aftermath of Trumpism within the session, I was left without any idea of where to begin as this had been something my counselling training had been lacking. My counselling training was within a field that separated the counselling world from the political. Or, rather than separated, as Kearney (2018) wrote, counselling training had a perceived lack of acknowledgement around these political narratives that left trainees -such as myself- with a feeling that counselling and politics are separate. Politics were never part of the context in theory, with most counselling training focused on the interpersonal narratives of myself and the client through different lenses, whether it be our parents, relationship patterns, attachments, etc. Some of the most common questions were how did the client feel towards the counsellor, how did they feel towards their parents, towards themselves, what relationship patterns were they repeating in session, what difficult parts were they projecting, ignoring, and what defences they may be using to avoid these less digestible feelings?

None of these questions, though, asked what may occurring in the political sphere around them, to consider how Trumpism may be part of their experience of sexual violence, their ability to get help afterwards, the laws that impact them, or the way they may be treated by their environment and even by their counsellors. If to be in relation with a client, as a counsellor, was to potentially consider how theirs and your political world would be part of the relationship without having been trained to do so left many counsellors, as well as myself, feeling as if we were committing a taboo of politicising a client by crossing the political line in counselling (Gutwill, 2006). If I were to draw further attention to the dread that grew in our abdomens in reaction to our political environment, to suggest exploring the streams of how Trumpism may impact us and the space between us, which was beyond the feelings they articulated, felt to be a step too far. Not to mention, a taboo which brought forth consequences as some U.S. legislators proposed the removal of any of these topics from being discussed. With Florida being one the most recent States in the U.S. to completely ban any topics in classrooms and businesses that discuss how politics may impact one’s own privilege and oppression due to historical inequalities (Reilly, 2022). As well as the UK following suit as Tory party members,
the current UK political party in control of deciding the next Prime Minister (PM), expect candidates for PM to fit these ‘anti-woke’ credentials of not discussing and outright ignoring the streams within this thesis (Pickard-Whitehead, 2022). Outside of counselling, to try to articulate the impact of politics on oneself brought halts to discussions, broke out in arguments on social media and family functions. They were even the source that would end any inquiry or everyday small talk about “Oh what are you studying?” as most would only give me an awkward silence to my reply, or some would more boldly respond, “No wonder you look stressed…” Politics were taboo by themselves, combined it was a murky soup I had created to serve to the reader and begged you, “I know it is salty, but you need to taste it! This was important because...”

This was important because I am unable to leave my bathroom to face the effects of living in a post Trumpism country.

This was important because my clients’ counselling was impacted by how Trumpism continued to bleed into our sessions.

This was important because this was not something we can no longer ignore as counsellors.

In saying how it was important to no longer ignore, I am aware of how my counselling training did have some mentioning of politics. A rumbling during the three-day course, out of two years of study, that examined ‘difference, diversity, and power’ and considered how mainstream psychology echoed white, heteronormative, able-bodied, male narrative of what was considered to be ‘normality’ where individual self-fulfilment overrides any other narratives that were not within this idea of ‘normality’ (Goodwin, 2017). A reminder of how psychology can “subtly reinforced and legitimated oppressive attitudes and practices” (Burr and Dick, 2017, p 65) and left us with prompts to ask ourselves; how can we be aware of our own prejudices, how can we explore these in supervision, and how can we reduce the impact on our client work. But once again these questions never asked us how we could approach our clients in a way Samuels (2006) argues could offer a client the opportunity to explore politics that would not devolve into a political argument as it does in everyday space. To be curious with the client and the dread that arose from both of us, owning to how either of us may re-enact such Trumpism politics to each other and, that as much as we hope the counselling space to be separate, safe world from the one the client navigates, acknowledge these politics infectious ability to infiltrate even the safest of counselling rooms.

This thesis then explores how a counsellor may attempt to do what Samuels (2006) wrote as “the psychological processes of counsellor and client in a way that may be profoundly unsettling, possibly clarifying, and occasionally transformative” (p 20). Where there is both a notice that it is not always the individual who the problem lies with but rather how the problems can be widespread to society (Johnson, 2020) and to be able to observe, how for each one of Trump’s phobic social media posts, the U.S. and world watched as he turned it into legislation, impacting those bodies as the structural inequalities they faced only worsened. How in the counselling session Trumpism resurgence of structural inequalities intertwines itself with sexual violence.

As Gutwill and Hollander (2006) wrote, “we want to argue that the relationship of the subject to the social and political world and one’s role as a citizen is so central to identity that it ought to be a legitimate part of the psychoanalytic enterprise” (p 93). Psychotherapeutic work, thus, is not about cutting an individual from their surroundings, but in how we can open ourselves
to the experience of “a moving weave of relationships” (Rud, 2018, p 21), noticing how it presents itself in the room, in our identities, and how we understand each other. This goes beyond the idea of 'psychoeducation' of a client but rather what Jason D. Brown (2019) argues as an ‘anti-oppressive approach’ where counsellors use their “self-reflection and awareness in practice” (p 54) around oppressive narratives tied to power imbalances, structural advantages and disadvantages, and challenging of privilege that arose from oppression to help see the world from the client’s perspective and “help them find their own answers” (p 52). It is not just one’s ability to reflect outside the session, but in our ability as counsellors to have this awareness in the counsellor room with the client. To notice with clients the impact of recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007) and traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) on them, on us, and within the session. And, more specifically for the purpose of this thesis, for those who have experienced sexual violence.

Streams from the River- The Clients:

“...From this, new streams branched off the river...”
-Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

If I am to talk with my clients about these political narratives of gender and race Trump had re-evoked and what may be arising out of recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007) and the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018), then it meant I would need to have clients I could practise how to do this as I had practised my own reflections for this thesis. Clients who could help me further unpick these narratives and how they impact myself, the counselling session, and the client. Though this will be examined further in the methodology section, I first began such a practice inspired by Ketelle’s (2015) process of fictional writing. According to Ketelle (2015), fictional writing was a chance for practitioners to reflect upon issues that may feel a little too vulnerable if it were a real scenario. Given the intensity of themes this thesis pulls from and the murky soup it creates, the hope was with fictional clients I will be able to explore these reflections further than if it was a real client. Especially so as each client’s creation stems from myself, from the moments I noticed parts of my own identity react to the political narratives with gender and race.

Starting with the latter, the first of the fictional clients, Aisha’s creation occurred as I wondered around the themes of sexual violence in relation to the narratives of oppression Trump and felt Trumpism not only affected me through how he had helped to overturn Roe v Wade (Feiner and Mangan, 2022), it was how when he banned Muslims from traveling to the U.S. -including refugees- (Rafei and Mukpo, 2021) making me question my own heritage. Parts of myself, both the white coloniser -my mother’s side- and the Middle Eastern immigrant -my father’s side-, who reacted to Trump’s continuation of Islamophobic assumptions of Muslims being “antithetical” to the U.S. and its citizens (Waikar, 2018). A pressure on my family tree and parts of myself who already felt the historical weight of being sexualised by western society (Hamad, 2020) to then conform to the U.S. ideologies of ‘whiteness’ after immigration (Merchant, 2020) with the harassment that followed when my middle eastern heritage was more prominent on my skin post 9/11 as well as in the aftermath of Trump’s presidency.
The complexity of all these feelings arising out of the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) versus the shame which arises from how my own heritage helped to create these pressures and privileges I hold - and grew - from how I was raised, summarised the feelings from the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007). The interactions of these feelings made me wonder how these parts of my identity would respond when I sat across from clients who were both racialised and had the experience of sexual violence.

To then draw attention back to the former, the second client and third client related to gender. With the second client, Charlie’s creation occurred when I delved into how Trump had re-evoked the historical narratives of restricted ways in how we think of gender and how these narratives emerge as we work with those who experienced sexual violence (Bourke, 2007; Sanyal, 2019). For example, when Trump reversed Obama administration policy for transgender individuals to openly serve in the military as well as removing access to gender-affirming medical and psychological care (Jackson and Kube, 2019) brought forth the narratives around how individuals who are transgender, specifically transwomen, were never able to escape their genitalia manifest destiny. As if transwomen were just men who had “rape is in your genes” (p Sanyal, 2019, p 6) due to being born with penis and through inclusion, the only outcome would be how dangerous men would have access to safe spaces for women.

In Trump’s reversal, it also created further fear for how this would worsen the attacks on the LGBTQ community. The other parts of my identity, which struggled with gender roles and hidden bisexuality, reacted to Trump’s ability to invoke homonationalism within the LGBTQ community as we found ourselves acting out oppressive racial exclusions and mainstream white ideologies (Puar, 2017). In how I both wish to oppose these binary gender lines when writing this thesis and yet, found myself slipping into old ways of “naturalizing settler colonialism” (Puar, 2017, p 232) from both habit and external pressure as I try to find inclusivity in a colonised language.

This part of myself questioned what she should say to clients who wondered if they would be able to access counselling centres due to the pressures of transphobic gender divisions.

Finally, the last client, Elena, emerged when I related to gender as a feminist and how I felt pressured to explore and reflect on these issues in a neoliberal way, something Rottenberg (2018) defines as the idea which help “to shape women's desires, aspirations and behaviour, as well as producing a feminist subject informed through and through by a market metrics” (p 1075). A neoliberal feminist was an empowered woman who would take full responsibility of their well-being through the elimination of acknowledgments on how oppression can be structural in our society (Rottenberg, 2018) and, with Trump and his advisor/daughter Ivanka Trump, the narrative pushed for a ‘good feminist’ was to be a ‘neoliberal’ one. Who would always progress as an individual and not use structural oppression as an excuse since it was only a false limitation being placed on ourselves.

It was the final part of myself that felt forced to be the mainstream neoliberal feminist who could not be vulnerable or anything other than an ‘active agent’ who must always invest within myself and participate in the Trump’s family encouragement of neoliberal ideologies (Rottenberg, 2018). Where vulnerability was a weakness and I wondered how I can be both a ‘strong’ feminist and hold to the parts of myself that are terrified of truly being the hysteric
woman. In how when I ask you to drink from the river, Trump will state I am asking you, the reader, to drink the Kool-Aid of paranoia and lies.

The part of myself who resonated with another client’s story as she worried if she would no longer be a ‘good feminist’ if we were to explore the more vulnerable aspects of who we are after sexual violence in a counselling session.

The key concepts of this thesis then become the parts of my identity that were awakened, and summarised as the key concepts of Islamophobia, Transphobia, and Neoliberal Feminism. These clients were constructed and then seen in a fictive session with myself, that I have written as three case studies later in this thesis, to see how I could develop such a language of noticing what may be happening within the client and within myself due to the political world around us.

*Streams from the River- The Exploration:*

"...she wrote out these streams..."

-Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

As I mentioned, to talk with the client around Trump’s resurgence of political narratives and its impact within these key themes of Islamophobia, Transphobia, and Neoliberal Feminism, meant I needed something to add to the psychotherapeutic lens I had been taught. One potentially lens that could be added to the ones I had learned in my counselling training could be within feminism as Brown (2019) highlighted, feminist had attempted to liberate psychology from such structural oppressive narratives that also infected them, one in particular being feminist liberation of psychology where feminist asked for “psychotherapy practices to include the personal is political and wellness as relation” (p 27). Feminism could then become the bridge between my outside reflections and the process within the counselling room.

But similarly, to psychology, feminism was not immune to the oppressive narratives of their time (Cleghorn, 2020). From this, it was important to note that it was intersectional feminism I drew from as Flavia Dzodan (2011) famously announces, “My feminism will be intersectional or it will be bullshit” (Online). Intersectional feminism, which I will only briefly introduce here but will explain further how I use it in the methodology chapter, was a more recent strand of feminism that attempts to notice how mainstream feminism, sometimes referred to as ‘white feminism’, has fallen prey to repeating some of the oppressive narratives within Trumpism and Alt right politics. It began from its roots within intersectionality and Black feminism, something that was first coined by Kimberlé W. Crenshaw who used it to address the discrimination Black women faced in courtrooms (Bello and Letizia, 2016) (Davis, 2014). However, as Nash (2019) acknowledges, and gives more space to then I will be able to for the scope of this thesis, the idea of intersectionality has arisen in other writings such as the Combahee River Collective, Patricia Hill Collins, Deborah King, and Frances While, where these writings and authors had note how structural inequalities had affected communities.
differently, usually with a focus on gender and race. Intersectionality then became a tool to
draw focus on these oppressive narratives that were rarely acknowledged by those in power as
they were usually overlooked or implicitly ignored.

To then tie it to feminism, intersectionality within feminism was a lens to both understand
political and social narratives that influenced an individual’s development as a person and seek
to give us the reflective ability to prevent a continuation of oppressive and structural
inequalities. For this thesis, intersectional feminism was a chance to situate myself, reflecting
on my own political narrative and political identity and then notice how it affected/s myself as
counsellor either due to my own experiences, the context for where the session takes place -
both geographically and historically-, and my own political ideals (Davis, 2014). It was a tool
I could use to consider the moments where I noticed the unbearable feelings that arise out of
the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007), and traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) within
sessions with clients and reflect what may be occurring in the session with the client in a way
that may offer something transformative. To help answer the questions of how intersectional
feminism can help to inform political awareness within psychotherapy and counselling when
working with clients who have experienced sexual violence? Narrowing the focus to how
intersectional feminism create awareness around islamophobia oppression within counselling
spaces when working with sexual violence; how can intersectional feminism help practitioners
to navigate gender spaces and queer oppression within centres that work with clients who
experience sexual violence; and how can intersectional feminism help practitioners to be aware
of oppressive narratives, both in feminism and its history, within sexual violence?

Streams from the River- Its A Murky Soup:

“...She asks for you to take up the invitation....”
-Excerpt From Personal Journal 2023

From the river Solnit (2020) articulates in her book Recollections of My Nonexistence, to the
following of my own streams of narrative that flow from the river, this introduction attempted
to be the first of many chapters where stories are rewritten to create space for what has been
silenced. Showing how this may have occurred through following the narrative of
gynaecological care in the U.S. when I had invited you into my bathroom as I tore into myself
in an attempt to deconstruct, analyse, and provide context to where this research inquiry was
first formulated as well as to where the streams take me as I follow the historical concepts of
gender and race.

A flow which has led me to the themes of Islamophobia, Transphobia, and Neoliberal
Feminism in relation to Trump’s resurgence of structural inequalities and oppressive narratives
when working with those who have experienced sexual violence. Something which will later
evolve, in the subsequent chapters, as counselling sessions with my fictive clients Aisha,
Charlie, and Elena where we will reflect on these sessions with intersectional feminism as we
notice moments of recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007), and the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018).

To conclude, this thesis, in turn, hopes to add to this lack of literature and provide counsellors, and those within the counselling and psychotherapy profession, who work with those who have experienced sexual violence, a chance to see how they can develop their own language for noticing. To allow you, the reader, to not only step into the bathroom with me to see the horrors of how this impacts the individual, and in turn the collective as whole, but a chance to step into the session with me as I try to talk with my fictive clients Aisha, Charlie, and Elena.
As I write this chapter *Come Dine with Me*, a British competitive cooking show where contestants invite each other over to dinner and try to win the most votes from their fellow competitors with their food and entertainment, roars in the background. Mostly frets and cooking chaos travels from the TV as the host scrambles around to prep their dinner, worried if their soup would be tasty enough for the palates of their competitors. As they fret, I too find myself in a fret over my own soup that had been simmering away, waiting to be plated and presented to the reader who is soon to arrive. Would you also find these next few pages palatable like the competitors on the show?

When others had inquired about my thesis, I had found myself returning to the same metaphor; this thesis was a murky soup, a digestible enough liquid as the main ingredients that had led to its construction were sometimes the most difficult to consume as it tied to the conversations we would rather ignore. Something Sara Ahmed (2017) captures when she wrote her own experience of noting such a narrative in film to the complaint of her family, “Oh can’t you just let us enjoy this lovely sweet film” (p 39), as Ahmed continues “It is as if these problems are not there until you point them out; it is as if pointing them out is what makes them there” (p 39). Much like the narratives within sexual violence that ask those who have experienced sexual violence to be silent (Atkinson, 2018), the parts of this murky soup that makes it indigestible links to our ideology that Kearney (2018) defines as a set of known and unknown belief or values that one uses to create a political system of action. By action, it is the way we come to react to the world; the conscious and unconscious thoughts and interactions of counsellors, who are “political beings with political ideologies (of which they may not be aware)” (Kearney, 2018 p 59), who then see clients in a counselling setting that is “informed by a set of political values” (Kearney, 2018, p 59). Whether it be in our assumptions, our prejudice, our politics, or in how “how they exist in policies that determine, access, rights that determine treatment, and practices that embrace cultural expectations” (Brown, 2019 p 31), these ideologies infect everything, including ways we may approach clients who have experienced sexual violence and how we may help them. It is a moment of recognition that we could have perpetuated these narratives as well as the fear of what else may be discovered from the base to the soup that continued to bubble away on the stove. Something that can be unbearable as it draws from the feelings evoked out of recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavina,
I stopped my typing to get up to stir the soup, peering, with my mind’s eye, towards the unseen bathroom that laid on the wall behind. Both the soup and the bathroom had represented, in the previous chapter and in this one, different reactions to the political narratives I highlighted, sometimes referred to as discourse -by Foucault- which are “the set of conditions of existence” (Besley, 2015, p 1441). The political and everyday societal power that confines us to who we ought to be and how we should act. These can be subtle, as in the constant advertisement of hairless, thin, white, feminine bodies as what is sexually attractive. It can even be more aggressive, such as in the 1990s where writer Gail Simone created a website called Fridging to try and highlight the disproportionate number of female characters in comic books being raped and murdered to further the male protagonist story line (Abad-Santos, 2014). Discourses were then the narratives which confined us to what was not only sexually attractive, but what bodies can be exploited for sexual pleasure and be sacrificed for someone else’s gain. To show how powerful this discourse was and how it has impacted those who have experienced sexual violence, we only need to look towards Trump’s comment, “Grab em by the pussy” (Rhodes et al, p 745, 2020), as an example to how we continue to view bodies due to the history of these discourses.

Yet, this first definition from Foucault had ignored the complexity of discourse's impact upon the individual as they were subjective in how one may respond to them, meaning it was not just a forced narrative of how one must be. Some individuals may find themselves defined by it, others may struggle against it, some may believe everyone must be that way, some may believe it does not apply to them, and every subjective action in between. Thus, in his later, evolved theory of discourse, Foucault considers the complexity of the subjective individual within society as the three branches of “critical ontology of ourselves” (Yates and Hiles, 2010, p 72). One of these branches, the power domain, was to consider how we were in relation to each other, where we both act up on and are acted upon (Yates and Hiles, 2010). To return to the examples above, it is then not just how the discourse of ‘hairless, thin bodies’ in
advertisements and/or how “Fridging” (Abad-Santos, 2014) may force an individual to be, rather it was how we may reinforce and push against such discourses within ourselves and/or to each other. For some ‘hairless, thin bodies’ advertisements may have been the reason why dieting and razors became an obsession. For others, it may have been the reason they took up activism or found the need for rebellion in displaying their body hair. Similarly, to ‘Fridging’ (Abad-Santos, 2014), some may have found themselves to be only a plot device in someone else’s story and/or a need to make themselves known as a main character in order to push against such a discourse. The focus then was not what the discourse dictates us to be, rather I wish to draw attention to how we may react to the discourse. How the power domain were the moments when the counsellor and client found themselves moving between roles of oppressor and oppressed in relation to who may have sat across from them as Brown (2019) argues oppression was the “reflection of a groups and individual’s status relative to others” (p 5) and “manifest as unequal opportunities and unequal outcomes” (p 5). Subtle and unsubtle actions, re-actions, thoughts, and words to each other due to how these political discourses subjectivity impact how we are in relation to each other.

Indeed, if I am asking us to draw attention to how we react then it was important I took time to highlight what it was we may be reacting too. To notice how this power domain which exists from political discourses and ideologies was something Elinor Cleghorn (2021) had illustrated in her summary of how women - or bodies that were considered to be ‘women’ historically - were affected in their ability to get medical care due to the discourses of their time within the U.S. and UK.

A pause in this literature review, before we continue to Aisha’s, Charlie’s, and Elena’s portion of the soup, as we take note to how the broth has already been flavoured in an attempt to contextualise how each of these chapter’s inquiries into racialized bodies, gendered bodies, and pressure to be a certain way due to neoliberal feminism ideals were all influenced by a history that oppressed certain bodies. Whether it was the Ancient Greeks and their theory of wandering wombs that would travel throughout the body, sometimes choking their host (p 30) or the Medieval Christian laws that forbid any physician from physically examining these bodies as their organs were labelled as “her disgrace” (p 31). The continued mystification, shame, and fear that was written within the medical field around the vagina, womb, and hormones that accompanied them, were partially responsible for why certain bodies faced historical oppression not only at a political level, but at an intersubjective level from others as well. As Brown (2019) notes, research within the medical profession can help to create the impression of how these narratives of mystification, shame, and fear around bodies with vaginas were normal and neutral. Normal meaning to create “what is dominant”, “expected”, and “idealised” (p 101) while neutral is how, in this specific example, the scientific method holds a high social value believed to be objective, even though psychology within the U.S draws from “Euro-American, positivist, natural science approach” that may produce a ‘truth’ that carries these ideologies” (p 101-102). To summarise, research into how horrifying and shameful vaginas were, produced ideologies of how this was an acceptable scientific way of understanding and responding to these bodies.

According to Cleghorn (2021), vaginas, the wombs, and the hormones that accompanied them were inferior and even ticking time bombs, requiring men to be the ones to heal an “‘unnatural states of the uterus’ [that] could cause mental symptoms of the most ‘grievous’ kind’” (p 76) through receiving the male seed and carrying a child. With Joanna Bourke (2007) adding to how this ‘scientific’ view of bodies continued to reinforce such gender roles as sexologist in the 1960s wrote of how vaginas were supposed to resist the penis, even if it was consensual, as
the penis naturally willed to be “animalistic” (p 68) and needed the resistance to feel satisfied. From this, vaginas were viewed as the “passive receptacle” to the weapon of the penis (p 24) where ‘no’ was a natural way of saying ‘yes’.

Though the vagina was always inferior, the vagina, in the same breath as Bourke (2007) continues, could also never be invaded without wanting it in some way. Whether it be how vaginas were ‘muscular’ enough to prevent a penis from entry (p 25), or how some analysts, including Freud, influenced this ideology in how a vagina not only needed to be dominated to experience sexual pleasure, but unconsciously craved it (p 70). With one gynaecologist, Robert Lawson Tait, suggesting “no man can affect a felonious purpose on a woman in possession of her senses without her consent” (Cleghorn, 2021, p 178). This was to say that up until the nineteenth century, and arguably now, there was a belief in how vaginas, in most circumstances, could not be raped.

This becomes a horrific reality in that it does not only impact how we interact with historically feminine bodies, but in how some believe if it was deemed for their benefit, the assault was in their fight against it (Cleghorn, 2021). Meaning it was not the assaulter at fault, but the one who experienced the assault. This was explicitly seen during the suffragist movement where protesters were incarcerated in hospital, forcibly fed with a twenty-inch tube multiple times for the extent of their stay with what McKenna, the Home Secretary at the time, believed was for the best for these American and British women that had succumb to their hysteria. As Cleghorn (2021) wrote

“that if a woman claimed she was raped, she must have submitted. The violation, the assault, is not in the action, but in the resistance to it. […] that women’s refusal to submit to a horrific abuse of their bodies was the cause of their suffering. This assessment is particularly sickening because some suffrage prisoners were force-fed through rectum and vagina.” (p 178).

The perceived abuse was in the resistance towards the violence that was directed to their bodies, as if the sexual violence of being force fed orally, rectally, and vaginally was for their own good according to some of these doctors and psychologists. Something Brown (2019) saw as another way privilege kept power in its ability to “other”, meaning a professional’s ability to differentiate and distance that goes beyond the necessity for boundary keeping where the professional is devaluing the client with the justification it is for their own good and, sadly, was not something we have rid ourselves of. We continued to treat bodies in such violent ways as Bessel Van Der Kolk (2014) described how he, and two other medical staff, held down and force fed a nineteen-year-old who had started to lose weight in hospital after refusing to eat and later listened to her as she told him her history of sexual violence. In Van Der Kolk’s (2014) own words, “I realized then our display of “caring” must have felt to her much like a gang rape” (p 25). It was not just about how we have forced these bodies to heal, but how we have continued to re-enact these narratives, even if those bodies may have fought against such ‘cures’.

The point of noticing this history, the broth which bubbled away at the stove, was to notice how the ideologies embedded within our genitals demanded how we should interact with ourselves and each other as even just reviewing some of the history, this thesis may leave the impression sexual violence -more specifically rape- has to be perpetuated by a penis to a vagina. A thought carried over from how vagina was defined, as written above, and influenced how we enacted laws. In the UK, according to the Sexual Offences Act 2003, rape was determined only if it was done by a penis (Sexual Offences Act 2003), while before 2013, the
U.S. defined rape as “the carnal knowledge of a female forcibly and against her will” (FBI: UCR, 2013). Once again, this reiterates how the power domain (Yates and Hiles, 2010) appears not only as how these ideologies may influence how we think about ourselves, it was also how these ideologies around sexual violence were being reinforced. Sometimes appearing as a force which moves beyond what we may say to each other by appearing through legislation.

This being said, an important reminder to you, the reader, as I attempt to highlight this history, I do not wish to perpetuate these ideas. As written in the introduction, sexual violence, for the purpose of this thesis, was an sexual act directed towards someone else without consent regardless of the situation and relationship (Bewley, 2014). The point of this detour, of noticing the broth flavouring the soup, was to note the impact of historic ideologies of sexual violence on us, including within the counselling profession we stand on. Lisa Appignanesi (2008) notes of the critics within earlier points of psychology; whether it was when feminist Simone de Beauvoir argument in the 1953 for how Freud fell for the patriarchal trap of making “the phallus both signifier and actual subject of power” (p 418); psychologist Phyllis Chesler objection in 1972 on how mental illness was gendered in that if a person did not have a core attribute of their gender, as in women to be “submissive, emotional, dependent”, they were perceived to be ‘crazy’ (p 420); or researcher William D. Mosher point of how English-language psychoanalytic journals from 1920s to 1986 only contained nineteen articles around sexual abuse and incest due to the prevalence of how psychoanalyst believed this to be a “social problem” to be dealt with outside of therapy (p 459). Somehow, somewhere, we have forgotten how mainstream psychology generated powerful and dominant narratives around social relations and what was deemed as ‘natural’ where we separate the genders as if there are “two, mutually exclusive, worlds: the masculine world and the feminine world” (Pujal i Llombart, 1998, p 35). It was in this separation, and ignorance towards “the non-subjective processes (cultural, historical, institutional, power, etc)” (Pujal i Llombart, 1998, p 33) that continued to evade how we, as counsellors, approach our clients in sessions and particularly when working with sexual violence. There was a real threat to repeat parts of the trauma where we re-enact that oppression, with Mithu Sanyal (2019) noting how, even though some may argue as “out-of-date gender norms” (p 18), these ideologies are the first to be present in conversations around sexual violence due to the way these ideologies have infected us and how we have internalised them. It has been even internalised in how activism and feminist theorist have thought around sexual violence and sexual harassment as Lisa Lazard (2020) notes how the exploration of sexual harassment was framed as something men do mostly to women within the U.S. and UK (p 3).

Gender ‘norms’ and the ideological assumptions they carry seem to always be at the core - or perhaps always the context- of these discussions. A note that Lynne Layton (2020) also makes as she observes how psychoanalytic literature was pulled to ideas of gender, in this example when she was questioning the literature around bisexuality; analyst can become unconsciously binary in their thinking, evoking connections to the genitals and defining what one was by what the other was not. One quote, that depicts this continued binary thinking was when Sanyal (2019) wrote about how those who experienced rape are collectively put into

“one incredibly narrow position of pain. But people who have different resources and live in different environments will also react differently to violence and will need to find their own ways to heal. […] Nobody in their right mind would treat a person who has been in a car crash as if the accident had changed their personality, but that is exactly what happens to rape victims.” (p 64)
The language in how we addressed sexual violence within the field of counselling and psychotherapy was influenced by these ideologies, first viewing the sexual violence only to “quickened” the insanity of the vagina - as they were believed to be unstable-, to being a being a violation of self-due to the impact it had on the individuals status within society, and, finally, a move towards the psychological (Bourke, 2007; Sanyal, 2019). From this, counselling, and strands of psychotherapy, thus, have roots in these oppressive narratives as both are built upon the shoulders of the psychology before them.

Though my counselling practice can be summarised by Meakins (2018) who refers to counselling as a phenomenological way of understanding, meaning to follow the client in their experience rather than leading the client through pre-scripted responses, the majority of it lies within a psychodynamic and person-centred understanding of counselling. To try and simplify these vast areas of literature, a person-centred approach was first conceived by Carl Rogers who argued for a non-directive type of counselling that used empathy and listening to help supported the individual, trusting the client’s own resourcefulness and ability to actualize (Merry and Haugh, 2020). While psychodynamic counselling focuses on theoretical models of development from infancy to old age, sometimes referring to psychoanalytic theories but in a way that brings back the relational aspect of counselling, meaning facing the client instead of the Freudian behind the couch and clipboard ways of counselling (Jacobs, 2017). Even if these approaches, person centred and psychodynamic, aim for a counsellor to be non-directive and relational in their approach, focusing on the client’s experience as the forefront, as Kearney (2018) warns, those ideologies we hold can be evoked and enacted in session. Especially when such ideologies have been re-evoked within the political spectrum due to Trump’s presidency and the resurgence of some of these oppressive ideologies.

This bloody broth, that I continued to stir as I waited for you, was one that had been simmering away longer than I had been here and has influenced the chapters with my fictive clients.

*Oppression and Sexual Violence within Race- Aisha’s Ingredient:*

“Islamophobia streams into the broth...” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023

With broth explored, it seemed evident to move onto the individual ingredients for each fictive case study as I imagined the first of whom, Aisha, would already have been pressuring me to move on to her segment. In my mind I could hear her say, “Are you done yet? You are already
at two thousand words for the history! That means, what, one hundred thousand for each of us? It is my turn now. Besides, in all of that history you aren’t going to mention race?”

Aisha, the first case study of my thesis, had first emerged as a client to explore how both the rhetoric of 9/11 propaganda within the U.S. and Trump’s presidency helped to continue racism formed within colonisation. As the books, White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Colour by Ruby Hamad (2020) and Feminism, Interrupted by Lola Olufemi (2020) depicted how current ideologies that have been influenced by colonisation and racism have impacted how we react to certain communities. For Hamad (2020), this was to note how the increased experience of sexual violence within Oriental communities was influenced from the West’s previously contrasted images of Orient individuals “as the antithesis of Europe: uncivilized, backward, barbaric, carnal, weak, feminized” (p 32). Quoting how publishers in the late sixteen hundreds depicted Oriental women and their culture as “sensual” and “erotic” allowing Western men to project their sexual fantasies onto them (p 33-34). Orient women were seen as sexual, mysterious beings and soon the imagery of these silk covered bodies continued throughout time to invade mainstream, western media where Orient women are stereotyped as the “hypersexual mysterious woman” (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017, p 77). From this, Orient women had experienced increased interactions of sexualised aggression due to the sexualization of their bodies.

As Hamad (2020) explains, this idea evolved in recent years, in how Muslims and Arab women, who are usually clumped together as the same, are viewed as “sexually repressed, frigid, virginal, burdened by virtue, shame, and family honor, and more or less silenced” (p 63). From sexualised bodies, these bodies were then also oppressed from their own religion, ideologies, and families. Ideologies echoed the helplessness and vulnerability of these bodies as the U.S. after 9/11 and during the Bush administration, formed a “fostered alliance” between conservatives and white feminist with the idea that Muslim women needed to “be schooled in the feminist ideas of the West” (Phipps, 2020, p 49). As if to help Muslim women, they needed to be taught the better, superior ideas of western feminism. Something Olufemi (2020) and Hamad (2020) argues as one of the many Islamophobic presumptions of Muslim women to be “‘Pets or Threats’” (Hamad, 2020, p 72) who look for their ‘white saviour’ to help them escape the “the patriarchal control of their fathers and brothers” (Olufemi, 2020, p 67) and “clutches of our Bad Arab kin” (Hamad, 2020, p 72). Sentiments Trump built upon during his speeches as president where he localised the problem of terrorism, within the Middle East and in terrorist attacks in the U.S. -such as the 2016 Orlando attack-, to be influenced and guided by radical Islam (Waikar, 2018, p 163). This insinuates both how any terrorism the U.S. experienced as coming from within Islam and, thus, “singularize people who identify with Islam as nothing but Muslims with zero agency” (Waikar, 2018, p 164). Indeed, Trump continued to push the idea of Muslims being “Threats” in his speeches, in his legislation from the Muslim ban (Rafei and Mukpo, 2021), and helped to add to the rhetoric of “Pets” with his suggestion of how anyone who was Muslim has a “blind adherence to a radical variant of Islam” (Waikar, 2018, p 164).

These ideologies from the west and from Trump’s presidency impacted how Muslims, and for the purpose of this thesis Muslim women, were treated as they felt the impact of how these ideologies infect everyday interactions. To narrow our focus to the dialect of Muslim women being “Pets” where the idea of Muslim women to be autonomous beings, capable of their own saving became lost and within counselling, it can be obvious how many professionals may re-enact such narratives with clients. As Hamad (2020) added, many of these engrained tropes
created the belief that Muslim women do not own a voice worth listening to, and, as Olufemi (2020) wrote, resulted in how many would speak for Muslim women instead of with them.

To distil these ideologies from mainstream, western media, as Olufemi summarises (2020), Muslim women…

“does not belong to herself and she does not exist outside of her role as a child-rearer, spouse, mother, the Muslim woman is the perfect symbol for anti-radicalisation measure. Not only is this deeply sexist, it leaves no room to understand how Muslim women exist outside of the family. It leaves no room to view them as human beings with conflicting sets of desires, thoughts, and needs.” (p 73-74)

Hence, as Olufemi (2020) continues, the way the government then generated policies that impacted Muslim women expressed this internalised Islamophobia, and within counselling and helping professions more generally, there are laws that have a continued oppressive effect on the Muslim community. Whether it be in the UK and Prevent Duty legislation that came out in 2015 with the goal to prevent people -and children- from supporting or becoming terrorist and have been the reason for why many Muslim students and staff have felt the impact of Prevent duty disproportionately to their white counterpart within schools due from the embedded Islamophobia within society (Jerome et al, 2019). Or the ways in which the U.S. have reinforced Islamophobic beliefs of what is a ‘safe’ and ‘presentable’ Muslim woman through the court systems ruling on cases of whether Muslim women are allowed to wear a hijab, usually suggesting that most Muslim women must not wear their hijab either due to uniform policy, due to imprisonment, or even “required to remove their hijabs on threat of being barred from the courtroom where they were conducting unrelated business” (Sheth, 2019 p 414-415). To notice these laws, brings forth the suggestion of how the counselling session was not a safe and separate space as these laws may directly impact both the counsellor and the client. Though there are charities, such as Maslaha and Transforming Together, who have worked together to produce pamphlets for helping professionals to work with such injustice laws (Johnston and Akay, 2020); as Brown (2019) argues, “there is no neutral context within we work. Either we are working to change the status quo, or we are working to accept it” (p 46). The question becomes how we work with such laws in session with an awareness of how these Islamophobic ideologies infect and are internalised within us and within the laws that bind us, how does one view themselves as a Muslim woman after facing sexual violence, how are they able to access help when counsellors may interject such Islamophobic views, and how does it silence a Muslim woman in the counselling session?

Aisha, and what had been evoked within myself from our fictive work together, left me to wonder how not only my own ideologies have been impacted due to being raised in the US post 9/11 and in a military family whose father was deployed to the Middle East, but also my own identity as I wrestled with what it meant to be both a ‘coloniser’ and an ‘immigrant’ within my family tree. How would these strands of my identity impact our sessions? How would these strands entangle themselves with the ideologies in the political world around us as I have written above? How would-

A pause, as I heard Aisha, within my mind, interrupted my thoughts as she would have interjected “Don’t give it all away…”
To pause in the continued unravelling of questions and summarise: our work together was around how we worked with a racialised woman who experienced sexual violence and finding the language, from these different authors, to dissect the experience of the session.

“And…” I could imagine Aisha adding, “That was my thousand words, shouldn’t you move on to your next client?”

**Oppression and Sexual Violence within Ideas Around Gender- Charlie’s Ingredients:**

“Transphobia streams into the broth...” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023

Charlie, the second of my fictive cases and who I struggle to introduce in their own chapter, reluctantly announced their presence within my mind as I could imagine them questioning, “I know you have done your ‘best’ to make this more inclusive but with all this gender language, I still do not know where I belong in this thesis.”

Charlie had, and maintains within their presence, as a phantom client whose existence wishes to be accepted for who they are and yet is constantly forced into binary spaces of gender. As I have begun to allude to above, the politics within sexual violence wrap themselves in ideologies of gender and gender roles, the main point being vaginas are to be invaded, penises the invader; or in terms of binary gender, women are to be raped and men are to be rapist (Bourke, 2007; Sanyal, 2019). But the idea of this binary gender, of masculine roles and femininity roles, related back to what both Alex Iantaffi (2021), in their book *Gender Trauma: Healing Cultural, Social, and Historical Gendered Trauma*, and Jack Halberstam (2018), in their book *Trans*: *A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variations*, argued as how gender was influenced by colonisation. Iantaffi (2021) wrote how colonisation helped to spread the church’s, mostly Catholicism, ideologies of gender and Halberstam (2018) wrote how the classification process within sciences in the 1900s helped support said ideologies of the church, once again returning to how Brown (2019) acknowledges the ways in which science can be used to ‘normalise’ such ideologies. Even those these were set to be the prominent ideas of gender, the reality is the conception of gender has changed throughout time and geographically (Iantaffi, 2021; Halberstam, 2018), making it necessary terminology to take the time to define for the purpose of this thesis.

Charlie, as a fictive client, emerged to explore how I could move to a more nuanced language of gender when working with clients who experienced sexual violence. Where, more recently, these ideologies of gender being a binary of male and female has been contested, and a more
updated idea of gender has formulated that Iantaffi (2021) defines as both including biological characteristics as well as “social interactions”, and “psychological characteristics” (p 21). This does not mean gender requires an individual to have all of these or specific sex traits, but it may be a combination of some of these in relation to how an individual may define themselves as. From this updated definition, there has been a growth of gender identities, such as those who are trans*, meaning those whose gender is either something that is different to the gender they were assigned at birth or who are transitioning to something that may not be destined to one gender and everything in between (Halberstam, 2018). Hence, when there is a reference to a specific gender like ‘woman’ within this thesis, it is not only to those who fit in the historical binary view of gender, but the updated idea of gender including the acknowledgement of social and psychological parts of gender. As Bellot (2019) wrote “Living as a trans woman of colour forced me to redraw my maps of the world, to redesign the topography of dreams and reality alike” (p 51).

To name gender, and its updated terminology, I must attempt to detangle when these ideologies are in relation to what they believed were characteristics of genitalia, characteristics of the individuals’ gender -or perceived gendered-, and how these can be intertwined. The purpose in doing this was to update said language from the original gender binary to a more inclusive language that acknowledges how gender is part of how one sees themselves socially (Iantaffi, 2021) and was an attempt to not fall into these “out-of-date gender norms” (Sanyal, 2019, p 18). Though as Layton (2020) rightfully notes, it can be easy to fall back into it and as I stood in my kitchen stirring the murky soup, I continued to wonder how I could fit Charlie in when exclusivity felt to be the well-trodden path.

“Well-trodden path?!” I imagined Charlie exclaiming to my own thoughts, “Don’t you mean forced path? Or even a witch hunt?”

The colonised view of gender and ideologies they reinforced within culture, can feel as if it was a one-way path, meaning to go against what is culturally supported can, according to Ahmed (2017), feel as if you are walking against a forced current. With such a pressure to return to the well-trodden path, counsellors and counselling centres who work with those who have experienced sexual violence have felt an increase cultural demand for these spaces to be safe from ‘penises’ and ‘men’ due to the ideologies that surrounded them. Some of these ideologies building upon the history of what was written about in how rape has been previously defined as penis to vagina.

In some instances, but not all, these ideologies were then perpetuated by another alliance between the far right, alt right conservatives, and white feminism regarding “women’s safety”, depicting “trans women as potential rapists who want to invade ‘women’s space’” (Phipps, 2020, p 30). This rhetoric has helped to push transphobic agendas such as Trump’s reversal of Obama’s administration and in turn refused any individuals who were trans* from openly serving in the military and from gender-affirming medical and psychological care (Jackson and Kube, 2019). In response, this had led many trans* activists to fall into the trap of homonationalism, a terminology which highlights the dilemma of when we argue for trans* rights, we fall into the trap of saying individuals who are trans* were able to reinforce oppressive racial exclusions and mainstream white ideologies as much as their cisgender counterparts do (Puar, 2017). Put simply, it was the dilemma of how we both argue for trans* rights and, for this thesis more broadly, a gender nuanced language without being pressured to repeat how we can also fit into these historically oppressive ideologies.
But to do this, meant to acknowledge how this pressure has increased as one of the loudest voices echoing such a fear of trans women invading ‘women safe spaces’ comes from within the UK where J.K. Rowling who has not only written a three-thousand-word essay around her worries but has also rallied against any reforms of gender recognition bills entering parliament (Wheaton, 2022). Even though these continued narratives of ‘women’s safety’ have only once again perpetuated oppressive narratives of how if a body does not present as they should, they will feel the violence to conform as several cisgendered women within the U.S. and UK “have reported being harassed in women’s toilets over whether they had any right to be there – because they did not look feminine enough” (Phipps, 2020 p 142). This was not to say cisgendered women are feeling the same pain that the trans* community has felt when they have been pressured to ‘pass’, meaning a pressure to present themselves to match the sociocultural gender norms of appearance (Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019), but rather how this misguided thought of ‘women’s safety’ is another way politics “weaponize” (Phipps, 2020, p 30) such fear to continue these ideologies.

With such a pressure to take ‘sides’ for inclusivity or exclusivity of who may have access to counselling after experiencing sexual violence added to the tension, within this thesis and in my fictive client work, of how I could attempt to adjust my own vocabulary to a more nuanced way of expressing gender. Charlie and my fictive work together were wondering how these transphobic ideologies and pressures may impact our sessions. How has being raised in conservative states and within a family who unconsciously pressured binary views of gender and sexuality impacted my own identity as well as the language I use around gender expression in relation to Charlie? In what way would I be able to work with Charlie with such pressures in legislation and in the counselling centre? What could I promise Charlie as a realistic expectation for our sessions in a transphobic political world?

Charlie, the reluctant phantom in my thoughts, hushed these questions as I imagined they replied, “Well we wouldn’t have to worry about this if it wasn’t for feminism making these witch hunts…”

An imagined reply which halted my thoughts, my stirring, and evoked my last fictive case study, Elena in my mind, as this reply angered her. I could hear Elena in my mind say, “But not all feminism, not the feminism used to reflect on the word in this thesis, and not the feminism I aspire to…”

Another pause, as I felt my internalised reflections of my two clients, Elena and Charlie, come into tension with each other. I could picture the stand-off, the glares, and eventual break as Charlie clicked their tongue a few times before a big sigh. Giving space for Elena to take up the space within my thoughts and be introduced for the last bit of ingredients for the murky soup.

*Oppression and Sexual Violence within Feminism- Elena’s Ingredients:*
Elena, the last of my fictive case studies, emerged as the part of my identity which intertwined itself to feminism. A vast terminology as the branches of feminism and its history, according to Olufemi (2020), “are unwieldy; they cannot and should not be neatly presented” (p 1). Part of this may be due to how we have focused on the narratives that are white, heteronormative, able-bodied bits, forgetting the moments where feminism was also the “slave rebellions orchestrated by black women in European colonies or social and political uprisings against colonial invaders” (Olufemi, 2020, p 13). Or in moments where itself had oppressive intentions as some feminist advocated for birth control to force eugenics programmes that favoured ableist and racist ideologies of the time (Cleghorn, 2021). Feminism, when we take a harder look, was something much more complicated than just a movement seeking equality or as Shane (2018) wrote “hollow phrases like ‘female empowerment’ and ‘strong woman’ and ‘girl power’” (p 5).

However, these hollow phrases echo where the imagined Charlie in my mind was possibly connecting to the points of mainstream and white feminism that, observed by Eric-Udorie (2018), has “blind spots and wilful exclusion” (p xii). How this mainstream and white feminism has pushed away those who do not hold heteronormative, white, and able-bodied and leaving others to feel betrayed by it as we continued to watch how this mainstream and white feminism hijacks social moments against sexual violence, akin to the #MeToo movement in 2017 founded by activist Tarana Burke, away from those who do not fit the cookie cutter idea of white, heteronormative, able bodies (Phipps, 2020). The betrayal, and perhaps shame, evoked socially, and within me, continued when there were attempts to pluck the different strands of feminism. Conjuring a growing awareness of how it can be difficult to do so as my own history has been riddled by my own moments of mainstream, white feminism where I spoke for, instead of listening to, and hijacked spaces from others. I could not help but notice this familiar feeling of discomfort, from the tension between Elena and Charlie in my own mind, echoed by my own tension. How I both wanted to use feminism, intersectional feminism to be specific, to reflect upon this thesis with the knowledge of how some feminism, such as white feminism, has continued these problematic ideologies. Even ideologies which were evoked in my fictive work with Elena as her own session circled around her question of whether she was a ‘good feminist’ and how these ideologies impacted her own internalised view of herself.

Elena, who was a strong activist, first pressured our work to circle around the acknowledgement of how one can feel pressured by the heavy, historical ‘rape’ cultural ideologies that created images of victims to be asking for it if they did not seem to do ‘enough’ to prevent it (Taylor, 2020; Solnit, 2020). But, in doing so, Elena and my first few sessions together had ignored the heavy pressures from feminism as a movement has responded to ‘rape-cultural’. More recently, this was noticeable in how neoliberal feminism had developed their own ideologies of how women ought to be agents of change in escaping their own oppression without acknowledging how politics may prevent this from happening (Lazard, 2020) or at the expense of others (Olufemi, 2020). Neoliberal feminism was a newly emerged ideology which, according to both Rottenberg (2018) and Lazard (2020), promotes the idea of women to be viewed as a business investment as a way to empower women out of their own oppression. Recently this has been more popular with high powered, corporate women who continued to promote how neoliberal feminism was the best way for women to fight against social injustices (ibid.) During Trump’s presidency, his advisor and daughter Ivanka Trump, used Trump’s platform to promote such ideologies through her book, Women Who Work, and used the two hundred pages to tell women how they must improve their own life through hard work and
constant business strategy of well-being (Rottenberg, 2018). This appealed to the U.S., and was encouraged by Trump’s presidential, neoliberal ideologies for individual growth and achievement. Truly Ivanka Trump’s work were the echoes of “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” I had heard repeatedly growing up in the U.S.

However, this “pulled up by your own bootstraps” and, arguably fight for equality for women, according to neoliberal feminism, could only be won not in challenging structural powers, but rather in women’s own accountability of their actions (Rottenberg, 2018). From this lack of acknowledgement of how women’s oppression was within structural powers, it in turn promotes white, heteronormative, class privilege agendas and ignores the plights of women who do not fit within these criteria (ibid). Women can then feel the pressure to be their best, to constantly develop themselves, without ever taking time to notice that some of what they may face are from the ideologies in their environment and thus make it difficult to notice the vulnerable feelings of what it means to be what living in such an environment. Something Solnit (2020) had attempted to articulate about her own experience in her book, Recollections of My Nonexistence.

The tension, in my fictive work with Elena, was how we could both be feminist and notice when feminism, such as neoliberal feminism, may affect our own views of ourselves, particularly for those who have experienced sexual violence. Neoliberal feminism, as I have mentioned, did not just pressure women collectively, it also had an individual impact on those who had experience sexual violence; which Lisa Lazard (2020) unpacks the impact of these ideologies of neoliberal feminism on sexual violence in her book, Sexual Harassment, Psychology and Feminism: #MeToo, Victim Politics and Predators in Neoliberal Times. Lazard (2020) summarises the history of how neoliberal feminism created “polarisations around agency as good and passivity as bad” (p 63), generating tension within those who experienced sexual violence to voice their experience, or not voice their experience, as they attempt to navigate ideas of ‘feminine identities’ and ‘feminine victimhood’ that was influenced by “white, middle-class privilege” (p 63). This was to say, some may feel the need to report to appear as an agent, rather than a victim, while others may feel as if they had not done enough to prevent their own victimisation. A tension that continued to steer a client in how they may continue to react in the aftermath of sexual violence as they focus on their own individualised solutions as not being enough due to how neoliberal feminism ignore social pressures and the power domain’s influence.

When working with Elena, the questions became how does this impact Elena and her view of herself, especially as she notices a difficulty in being vulnerable when neoliberal feminism constantly demands for continuous growth in oneself? How does my own feminist past, one that strayed into the waters of neoliberal feminism due to growing up in the U.S. and the influence of Trump’s presidency, impact how I react to Elena’s own struggle? How do Elena and I see what may lay underneath these pressures of neoliberal feminist ideologies? Questions which were also the last drops of the ingredients to the murky soup. Imagine Elena joining the others; Aisha and Charlie, completing the murky soup. I finished stirring and turned off the hob.

Conclusion- The Recipe for Murky Soup
Tapping the ladle on the rim of the pot, I placed it to the side and added the lid to the top of the pot. The broth underneath was one that had been formed from the historical past of the U.S. and the UK; focusing on how the medical field viewed vaginas as ‘weak’, hysterical, mentally ill biology (Cleghorn, 2021). From this, we have noticed how we discuss sexual violence was partly influenced by these ideologies where vaginas were always the one to be ravaged by the penis (Bourke, 2007) and creates a very narrow path of how one may be after sexual violence (Sanyal, 2019).

This broth, with the addition of the past six thousand words, becomes murky soup as we consider how each of these fictitious clients, Aisha, Charlie, and Elena, add their own complexities to its flavour. Noting how colonisation and racism has created Islamophobic views and policies on how we approached those with sexual violence. Where colonised views of gender, and pressure from transphobic politics pressure sexual violence centres as they feel forced to choose who they may accept as clients. To finally, a wondering of how neoliberal feminism has forced certain ideologies that have begun to take centre stage over ‘rape culture’ narratives in session with clients.

All of these layers within these stories, within this murky soup, reminded myself of how I may not be able to note at every point in this thesis; as Solnit (2020) acknowledges on the difficult of writing stories, “you’re grabbing handfuls of flotsam form a turbulent river; you can arrange the detritus but you can’t write the whole river” (p 130). There may be flotsam I miss, and as I have begun to reflect on the taste and smell of this soup for you in later chapters, I wonder about how I must fit this in fifty thousand words.

“But” I said as I stopped stirring, lifting the pot from the stove to carry it to the dinner table for your arrival, “at the very least I know the reader won’t go hungry...”
The soup, placed on the table anxiously waited, mirroring the nerves emerging from my stomach. In the background, the doorbell rang, you had arrived and yet I was reluctant to let go of the soup, to leave it to open the door. Your arrival was expected, part of this thesis was to present it to you, to savour the soup with you, and yet I was not ready. Before the chapters had circled around the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018), where I had used introspection as a “springboard for interpretations and more general insight” (Finlay, 2002, p 215) to ground this thesis in my own experience and how these ideologies within sexual violence had impacted myself and the clients I had work with. But from being the oppressed, I had slowly begun to hint to the oppressor, to the points where I would notice the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga 2007) bubbled from within me as this methodology chapter would be the first of the next four chapters that would further pick apart the messier points where I experience the ideologies of both oppressed and oppressor and how these impact on my intersubjectivity. The reminder of my hometown decorated with “Make America Great Again” flags which hung from the majority of houses with an old siren who could still be heard -until recently- every afternoon as it reminded the town how they were once designed to alert indigenous tribes to exit county borders, forced back to land that was staked out for them rather than be a part of the land that was taken from them (Martin, 2021). How those signs and sirens tied back to what Kearney (2018) defined as the ideologies and the narratives they imprinted within me as I recalled how fellow students would laugh at these sirens’ primaeval alarms and shout, “All right Indians, you have to go home!” every time they heard it while I laughed along, unaware of the horrors I was laughing about.

The doorbell chimed again, similar to the siren it brought forth the discomfort of having to face the reality of what it means to have experienced such oppressive narratives and the pain of acknowledging how I have aided in the different strands of its continued narration. The soreness in how these ideologies evoked themselves in conversations; how writing this thesis drew tension when others asked, and how each word was another taste of the murky soup. It froze me at the thought of what questions you would ask, by the interjections, by the potential accusations, by the fear that you may evoke the shame, though Zembylas (2019) argues as a
point of learning within politics where oppression and shame are connected as writing, does not make the shame any more palatable.

The last echoes of the doorbell travelled through my flat, to where I stood, objectively aware of how I could understand how Zembylas (2019) argument of shame as a point that may empower and transform our ways of being ethically responsible to the others, as shame is when we began “seeing, feeling, and becoming in the world with Others” (p 315); yet, how could I face you with the shame? How do I own it as part of the process once these words leave the safety of my laptop as I am also asked to defend the method I used, in this chapter, as I believed fictionalization as a method was the best to be used to “unmake or trouble sense” (Thomas, 2012, p 211) of the narratives I had noticed in counselling sexual violence. I chose it aware of how it goes against dominant, objective research that removes subjective views (Etherington, 2004; Ketelle, 2015), summarised by a family member when they asked me, “How is it real research if you are making it up?”

Silence.

I was waiting for another chime to announce your arrival and declare how I must not only try to speak into ideologies within sexual violence but prepare a defence for why it felt important to continue to unpick these narratives through a methodology of fictionalization that can hopefully reflect the political, historic, and personal narratives of the moment (Thomas, 2012). To fully articulate why I believed that fictional narrative through the lens of hermeneutic constructivism within phenomenological contextualism was a way to help make meaning from my experience as a client and this could be an alternative way knowing where instead of fragmenting experience, there was a consideration of it as a whole (Thomas, 2012). I thought my thesis would be best presented as the whole experience, the personal and the political, to help our understanding as counsellors and wonder how these can interweave together in our sessions.

All this waited ahead of me on this path as I nervously hesitated to take the first step, to answer the door, as I tried to articulate my way through a very ambiguous, muddy trail (Finlay, 2002) of methodology.

*Epistemologies and Ontologies- The Chicken and The Egg:*
The doorbell rang for a third time. It was louder this time, impatient, leaving me to quickly jog to the door as you stand on the other side, uneasily shuffling with a bottle of wine in one hand.

“I did not think you were going to let me in for a minute... Jaz, I am presuming? I am here... And I brought this.” You said as you nudged to the bottle, “I figured this may help...?”

“Sorry, I was just... um finishing up, come on in.” I said with an awkward smile and led you through my flat.

As you followed, I continued, “I would ask to take your coat, but I think it may be best to just get into it....”

“Well, you have delayed it with another eight-hundred words, but yes. It may be best to get on with it.” You answered as you sat at the table, placing the wine next to the soup.

“Oh, okay, well umm...” I said as I sat across from you, wondering how I would begin. “So clearly my thesis is a question of how intersectional feminism can help inform political awareness within psychotherapy and counselling when working with clients who have experienced sexual violence. With sub themes around Islamophobia, Transphobia, and neoliberal feminist ideologies within sexual violence... And I explore it with fictional writing.”

You let out a small sigh as you crossed your legs. “I know this.” You replied, “I want to know why you use this method, why did you frame it this way? Why in this manner?”

“Oh well...” I paused again. I felt my own nervousness rise with each question. It jumbled my thoughts, but I did not want the pause to lengthen into an awkward silence. I quickly added, “I use this weird analogy of a chicken, egg, and a bowl for my methodology chapter... Maybe that will help this conversation a bit.”

“A what?” You asked.

“A Chicken, egg, and a bowl. A chicken and the egg stand in for epistemologies and ontologies because they both need each other. The chicken needs the egg for the next generation and the egg needs the chicken to incubate it, same with epistemologies and ontologies. Though I am still unsure whether epistemologies are the eggs and ontologies are the chicken, or vice versa...” My voice trailed off, it seemed obvious in my own mind and yet I noticed a slight embarrassment to reveal my own process of development with this chapter. I was drawn to considerations of chicken and egg for epistemologies and ontologies as these felt uniquely intertwined as epistemologies are the philosophical endeavour of what it means to know while ontologies are the philosophical endeavour of what is reality or the nature of being is (Etherington, 2004). Epistemologies and ontologies both are uniquely different, yet their existence rely on each other to support one another. These provide the framework and background for qualitative research as they help to explain what choices I had made in how I work, how I make sense of the data I have collected, and how I represent that data here.

Given the focus around experience, the epistemology for this thesis would be within the world of phenomenology that Merleau-Ponty describes as the study of “essence”, especially the “essence of consciousness” in relation to a problem it may be attempting to define (Merleau-
Ponty, 1956, p 59). There were a few philosophers who would develop phenomenology further, but it was Heidegger who I found this research drawn to due to his acknowledgement that, when doing phenomenological research, if we tried to “forget” or “ignore” our presuppositions by a removal of them then they may creep back into our reflections. Something Kearney (2018) had warned for counsellors to be aware of, though she refers to them as ideologies rather than biases, as they will have direct and indirect consequences on our clients. When we are more explicit about them; whether they be ideologies, biases, etc, then we are more able to “hold them at bay and even turn them against itself” (van Manen, 1990, p 47). If we can acknowledge our own subjectivity in the research, then we will be more able to speak to the experience since we will be less likely to be hiding what may be occurring.

I continued my train of thought, “So my egg and chicken are more about how the knowledge I am producing is from experience, so in the case study where I am reflecting on what is happening, on what we say or how we react to each other…. I kind of describe these moments as ‘murky soup’ and that I am trying to describe every bite, every taste, smell, texture of the experience.”

“Oh okay so phenomenology, but that is still very broad…” You said.

“Yes, but I focus not just about the experience, it is about the context of this experience.” I answered.

Heidegger’s phenomenology may notice the importance of being explicit about our biases in research, however it does not stress the importance of how context is also a relational aspect for this thesis. Within counselling, part of the psychoanalytic work with a client and when working with trauma, according to Stolorow (2013), was to consider how the emotional experience takes form within “constitutive intersubjective contexts” (p 383). This is to say how emotional experience, the essence of the phenomenology for this thesis, was formulated from an individual’s perspective. Stolorow’s (2013) argument was emotional experience, and its trauma, are born from how someone feels it relationally to another. Thus, to understand such experience and trauma, the phenomenological contextualist perspective can be used to help in “illuminating not only trauma’s context-embeddedness but also its existential significance” (p 387). It draws emphasis back to how, in the upcoming fictive client vignettes, each chapter is informed by the context it is written in; in who is writing this, in the history and ideologies of the sexual violence, in the political environment it occurred in, and the geographical location of where we are having these sessions. As Rud (2018) summarises, “individuality cut off from its surroundings is meaningless” (p 21), and if this thesis was to aid a counsellor in developing a way to reflect on political context for themselves and the client, then what it means to know must include context. To not just note the biases one holds, as Heidegger argued, but to attempt to illustrate the different strands of context that may help aid us to understand the process which is unfolding in the counselling session.

If phenomenological contextualism can then be used to aid counsellors in understanding the experience of sexual trauma and the intersubjective impact of political world on the individual that unfolds in the counselling session, the next step within psychoanalytic work would be to find a way for the client to “to construct the experience of trauma and to give it language” (Martínez Ruiz, 2020, p 600). As Martínez Ruiz (2020) argues, psychoanalytic work can be a “political strategy” (p 596) where the counsellors aid the clients to name the violence through their listening. This was to say, from knowledge around context, counsellors can then use it as a frame to listen and help the client develop a language. In this way, language then becomes
how one was able to vocalise what the reality was for them. The ontological position, specifically hermeneutic constructivism, would then be how we can use language as the basis for how we understand and experience specific events within the world around us that we are specifically attuned to, as we may never be able to understand every nuance that surrounds us (Peck and Mummery, 2018). Being human is to be…

“compelled to understand the world in order to go about within the world. Understanding, however, is not an understanding of things in themselves in terms of a perfection of understanding; it is rather an understanding of the thing of itself, as an understanding of that thing as it for us […] Therefore, if the comportment of being is toward understanding, and those aspects of the world that we reach toward in understanding are events, then being itself is an active movement on the part of the person that can be embodied in terms of a being situated within a stream of events”. (Peck and Mummery, 2018, p 393).

To try and simplify this, what hermeneutic constructivism suggest was that as humans, we actively seek to understand events that draw our attention as we can appreciate them and through this appreciation, we use language to understand the event so we can continue to move about this world (Peck and Mummery, 2018). Without language we can never come to understand the events that happen to us, nor would our experience be explicitly tied to the world as language creates the dialogue of understanding through our wondering.

“So, if to know is through experience and its context,” I began, “then how we communicate what we know is through language.”

“Language?” You repeated, as if you were surprised by it. “Language is usually never together with trauma… Usually it is the opposite, that trauma destroys language…” You trailed off.

“But for us to understand what has happened. We must be able to voice it, to develop a language for it, otherwise it remains unprocessed…”

To continue with Martínez Ruiz (2020) argument, how a client can move from a “passive object of aggression to an agency of language or, […] the subject who can claim the traumatic experience” (p 609) was through the narration of trauma. For trauma to be processed and understood by the client means the client must be able to, if they choose to, speak of what had occurred to them. Trauma, or rather traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) and the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga 2007), may always be at risk of being silenced, but this thesis aim was to attempt to announce its presence through language. To begin the process of how counsellors and clients can listen, verbalise, and start to understand what has happened. A sentiment which has echoed research within neuroscience, where it has been noted how the brain cannot understand what the raw sensory data was without an emotional concept -language- and once it begins to learn these emotional concepts, it can update its understanding as it develops more of them (Barrett, 2018). Within client work this may be seen as the beginning stages of the client and counsellor working together to name what the client was experiencing to then noticing how the client was able to use the language they develop in sessions to fully articulate their experience of their trauma. For this thesis, it was the importance of how phenomenological contextualism, and hermeneutic constructivism supports the journey from this thesis being a collection of indigestible stories to experiential knowledge which could be used by counsellors. Something Flyvberg (2001) refers to as ‘phronesis’ or knowledge of experience. Flyvberg (2001) draws on the importance of this knowledge as he compared it to the Dreyfus model of knowledge that starts with a novice level to proficient performer and to then expert where these later levels rely on the individual's previous experience. With
experience being the part of what separates a proficient from an expert, it would suggest that research that produces practical knowledge around experience would be useful for those within the field of that specific research.

“So, you aren’t discounting that it is silencing, you are just saying a part of the process to understand it, to know what it is, is with language.” You summarised.

“Yes... So that’s the chicken and the egg, phenomenological contextualism and hermeneutic constructivism.” I answered.

“Okay,” You say as you shift yourself in your chair, “now how do the chicken and egg inform the method?”

Methodology- Reflective Bowls:

“Well, if it is a murky soup, then it needs a bowl to hold it right?” I asked.

“Your method is a bowl?” You questioned.

“Metaphorically yes but the actual method is through fictionalisation, like a story.” I answered.

Stories, sometimes thought of as narrative inquiry meaning the study of stories (Thomas, 2012), was an overarching method I was drawn to. Narrative inquiry, as Thomas (2012) continues, has retrospective meaning making in its telling and brings back the idea of how knowledge, within social sciences, can sometimes focus on what is being produced from the intersubjective, experiential kind of research (p 211). This was to say if both my ontology and epistemology circled around context, experience, and language, it would seem sensible the methodology would be similar in its focus of the intersubjective, experiential themes.

To then narrow to a specific method within narrative inquiry, there were a few I had considered such as critical narrative analysis where the focus is how language is used in communicating the story of everyday experience within story telling (Langdridge, 2017). The difficulty, though, in methods such as critical narrative analysis within narrative inquiry was considerations to how I would need participants to gather data from. Given the harm and fragility in collecting stories around ideologies of gender and race within sexual violence and
how this research was deeply embeds itself in a reflexive process, the concern was how could I both keep my participants and myself safe during this process? How could I analyse in a way which does not restrict my research and allows space for these silent narratives arising out of these ideologies to emerge for exploration?

To answer this quandary, this research turned toward fiction as a method as, according to Trahar (2019) and Ketelle (2015), it could be used to reflect and produce intersubjective, experiential knowledge while being able to provide more safety for myself and the other during the reflective process. Ketelle (2015) described fictional narrative as an opportunity to explore one’s personal voice where a ‘real’ exploration of the experience may be too difficult to do so. This methodology would then help to create a space for deeper reflection while still producing practical knowledge which may be useful for other counsellors.

Indeed, fictionalised narrative or, as Bruce (2019) writes ‘fraction’, was how one was able to combine elements of fact and fiction to create “verifiable and justifiable claims to truth and simultaneously engage readers” (p 57). It was then both, the retelling of stories in a way which incorporates fiction to attract readers while also potentially creating a buffer from the difficulty in facing some of those truths. Fictionalised narrative and fraction can thus be an experience where a researcher takes creative liberties when retelling their internalised view of the experience. The hope was then when using fictionalised stories, the researcher may be able to process parts of the experience that felt inaccessible, potentially due to shame to return to Zembylas (2019), as the researcher has a larger capacity to reflect. The strength of using fictional narratives as methodology was in its potential capacity for further reflection than other methods, especially with topics that were difficult to articulate due to the vulnerable feelings they stir up.

Due to the strengths written above, Fiction as a method felt to be the best method compared to other streams of narrative inquiry due to its ability create a more digestible murky soup of exploration when considering ideologies around gender and race with those who have experienced sexual violence in a counselling setting. For this reason, this thesis employed fiction as a method.

“So the murky soup are the stories, and the stories I use, the bowl I use to hold them, are fictionalised client work and then I reflect on it.” I concise.

“Fictionalised case studies.” You echo.

“Yes... Well, they're part of the reason why I told fiction; because it can make these more difficult topics captivating to read...” I continued.

According to Bruce (2019), for fictionalisation to work as a method it needs to meet the requirements of both being academically credible of gathering data -ethically and rigorously-, while also convincing the reader of the quality in its craft to tell a narrative in an artistic way. This was to say, another strength in fictionalisation as a method, for this thesis, was how it builds upon the ways in which most individuals “understand the world through the cultural stories told about them” (pg 58) and how these stories told about them become the stories they tell others. From the passages of stories, individuals can express their own context of their internal experience and how they, through both conscious and unconscious understanding, feel the impact of different ideologies that surround them in their environment. For this thesis, fictionalisation was a method which built upon the natural pathways we are guided to in
storytelling and how, throughout history, we have used storytelling when it comes to change. A few examples of such storytelling were from Nellie Bly who, in 1887, went undercover in a New York City insane asylum to write her first account of the horrors patients faced (Bernard, 2019). Her story, along with others, akin to David Rosenhan’s research ‘On Being Sane in Insane Places’ in the 1970s where himself and eight of his friends presented themselves to psychiatric treatment and took notes of their time in hospitals and asylums, helped to completely change the course of American psychiatry. Their stories were able to depict the inhuman treatment patients experienced due to how these treatments were not only based on unreliable diagnoses, but it was also influenced from heteronormative, oppressive ideology within the profession (Appignanessi, 2008; Bernard, 2019). Though what they both had published were not fictive, it shows how the importance of how this type of methodology does not ‘tell’ the readers about the context of experience, but rather it can show readers the experience as it draws them into the story “both intellectually and emotionally” (Bruce, 2019, pg 63). By being shown the context of the experience, by being drawn to its emotional experience consequently makes fictionalisations contribute to our understanding by “presenting truths in all their contradictory complexity” (p 69). If the contents of this thesis were to be a murky soup of truths and its inherent complexity, it needed a method that honours its murky depths rather than attempt to make clean, simple truths.

“But why fictionalisation?” You interrupt my thoughts, “Why not actual case work or an interview? It is almost as if you rid the other.”

“Um,” I could feel the nerves return with your question, one that I was almost anticipating. I took a breath, shifting a little in my chair before I continued, “I am not ridding the other, the difficulty with interviews or actual case work is there is a limit to how much I can reflect. It can seem self-indulgent, but in fictionalisation there is opportunity for deeper reflection and connection with the other.”

The idea of fiction as a method to be a self-indulgence has been a repeated critique, but, as Ketelle (2015) combats, “Fictionalizing real experience is an exploration of personal voice that can connect the write to “self” and “other”” (p 451). This was to say, it was more than a self-indulgence storytelling but an opportunity for reflection that unfolds an experience where the reader- and writer- have “an opportunity to connect to the less noticed” (p 451). To return to shame, and what Zembylas (2019) argues as an emotion that can aid in our learning, shame can also halt any potential for learning when it becomes overwhelming. To dilute some of the shame, and any other overwhelming feelings that arise from the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) and the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga 2007), through the usage of fiction, make it so the reflective process which myself, and you the reader, endure as we read this thesis can become more extensive than a process that initiates overwhelming feelings within us.

A process of reflection which can also include more of the context within the counselling session as, akin to when one reads a comic book, in fictionalisation not only does the reader have access to the text in the speech bubbles, but the thought bubbles as well. To show my back story, my thoughts, the context of my reactions and develops a scholarship to the “evocative” (Ketelle, 2015, p 451) that “engage(s)” (Bruce, 2019, p 57) the audience to devolve further into reflections, especially in reflection of social issues (Ketelle, 2015) that may be less tolerable.

“I mean there is how reflections may deepen if someone isn’t overwhelmed by emotions and there is also more depth to the interaction. Think about a movie versus a comic book. In a
comic book you can see the thought bubbles, the behind the scenes, the context... You do not always have access to that in movies.” I explained.

“Okay,” You answered, “and so you are connecting in your reflections... And reflections, what do you mean by that as part of your method?”

“I guess this is what connects back to counselling, I mean I paid a lot of money for the counselling skills I developed on this doctorate course, might as well use it right?” I joked, waiting to see if I could lighten the mood, you only stared back, unwavering.

I could feel my heart skip a beat in the silence.

“Um, well, anyways,” I said, stumbling with my words again, “reflecting is a tool counsellors use when in session with clients, and something I use, and depict here, to illustrate my process.”

Reflexivity within counselling speaks to our ability to be cognizant of both how we feel and how we may want to react to the experience of our clients, making sure that we then choose to react in a way that supports our client to be autonomous beings. Comparably, within research, reflexivity was used to be cognizant of how our individual experiences inform the research, the contexts which inform inquiry, as well as how the contexts inform the outcome of inquiry (Etherington, 2004). The reflexivity skills I developed in my counselling training, and continued to develop as a counsellor in practice, I could use as a researcher to create a transparency that displays the process of collecting and presenting data (Etherington, 2004).

“Okay but just because you use it as a counsellor doesn’t mean it may belong in a thesis.” You reply. “You focus a lot on wanting to be transparent and showing the ‘thought bubbles’, why?”

“Because that is my process.” I answer.

“Okay but your process could arguably be unimportant, we just need the outcomes of your research.” You continued.

“Well...” I paused, unsure of how to answer. When I first began this endeavour, in the discomfort and uncertainty of becoming a researcher, I relied on the comfort I found in my counselling self. Yet, this was not reason enough to have a transparent process laid out in these pages as the main focus of this thesis in replace of outcome.

What I found, as I continued on to grow as a researcher, was how if I were to use reflexivity in research, I had to answer the critics who Pillow’s (2003) summarises as falling into the trap of being a narcissistic and self-indulgent discussion of our position in relation to our work rather than “doing research “with” instead of “on:”” (p 179). Once again returning to the point of question, how does my fictional case studies and reflexivity not just become my own narcissist study of self? How can this process attempt to do as Pillow (2003) writes as both the unfolding of power within one's research and simply stated “doing research differently” (p 178). Shifting reflexivity from what Lazard and McAvoy (2020) warn, as either vague knowledge of self-reflective accounts which have appeared in research as either listing of personal characteristics (p 166) or, conversely, over detailed unpacking that does become of service of the research question (p 167); to a scaffolding of critical thinking to link between the context this research was written in, the process of how it was formulated, the interpretations presented, and knowledge it produced (ibid). Encapsulating as an idea of creating more awareness of the
political, of the ideologies the client and I may be imposing on one another, re-enacting between us in an attempt to help the reader to see where my therapeutic responses were drawn from when I respond to the three fictive clients in subsequent chapters.

One answer to how reflexivity may evolve in such a way may be in what Pillow (2003) argues as uncomfortable reflexivity, “a reflexivity that seeks to know while at the same time situates this knowing as tenuous” (p 188). Uncomfortable reflexivity was this thesis pull-though Pillow writes as a push- towards the murky soup of experience when counselling sexual violence where reflexivity cannot be simple stories intertwined with humility and honesty. Rather, it was the need for uncomfortable reflexivity to be “‘messy’ examples” (p 193) of disrupting endeavours “that would continue to challenge the representations we come to while at the same time acknowledging the political need to represent and find meaning” (p 192). This was to say, my endeavour for this thesis was to create a process through uncomfortable reflexivity where I could scream the stories from the river (Solnit, 2020) who have been silenced in sexual violence, agitate the ideologies we have found ourselves accustomed to in a post Trumpism world, dissect the interactions of the power domain (Yates and Hiles, 2010) with my fictive clients, seek transformation out of the tension in the counselling room, and lay it out all here for you, the reader, as an attempt to engage and create a dialogue within this area of research. This dialogue was one which would be uncomfortable, messy, and, as Pillow (2003) reminds us, one that should not be assumed as a success or failure. Uncomfortable reflexivity asks for an ongoing critique, a living document -which I will explore further in the conclusion- of how we come to think of process as I have written here in these pages and thus, ask you, the reader, to note the process as a way of continuing the critique of what I have attempted to disrupt and acknowledge.

Cautiously I answer, “The point in really illustrating the process is the hope that can make this more of ‘alive’ where we are somehow always in a dialogue. Something that becomes real and can continue to be reflected upon beyond the point this is submitted and becomes a trilogy of books.”

You raised your eyebrows at me.

“Okay maybe not actually a trilogy but I guess I am always thinking of this as never ending because I am always in dialogue with my fictive clients and because of this I am able to transform my counselling practice with my real clients from those dialogues.” I answered.

You only continued to look at me with raised eyebrows.

I waited for you to reply but after two breaths, I quickly filled the space.

“So, ideologies are always changing. We can see how there can be a resurgence, a progression, a moving back… etc. So, I think it is important I am always returning to reflexivity for how I can be in tension with these changing ideologies in my fictive client work so it can become transformative in my real client work.” I said.

To reiterate what has been written above and to quote Emirbayer and Desmond (2012), reflexivity should be an ongoing engagement where it becomes “a process that, in principle, is never complete; it builds continually and necessarily on the accomplishments of past reflexivity” (p 591). Hence, this thesis then builds upon other reflexivity beyond what Etherington (2004) describes, and Pillow (2003) writes as uncomfortable reflexivity.
Given the focus of gender and race, it would be important to pull from theorists who speak of reflexivity in these areas; specifically, McDonald (2016) who speaks of queer reflexivity and Emirbayer and Desmon (2012) who speak of racial reflexivity. In McDonald’s (2016) view, queer reflexivity should be informed by queer theory to aid researchers in reflecting over their social identities and how these social identities may become disclosed or undisclosed -which he refers to as ‘returning to the closet’- throughout the research. McDonald (2016) acknowledges how this process can always be shifting, both for researcher and participants, of how the tension may arise and how those tensions may be managed.

Such tensions of coming in and out of the ‘closet’ may be seen in the introduction, conclusion, and in the introductions of each fictive case study. Other tensions may not be seen, hidden away in the reflective journaling and drawings scattered throughout; or even in the pages which did not make it to the final draft either out of self-preservation, ethical reasons, or beyond my conscious awareness.

With racial reflexivity Emirbayer and Desmon (2012) -though both acknowledge their contributions can apply to other communities who have been marginalised- pinpoint three levels of concern; the first was what social space was the researcher in and how did they get there, the second was what field of discipline the research was written in, and the third was how did the scholarly gaze the researcher inherited impact the social world this research exist in. According to Emirbayer and Desmon (2012), for racial reflexivity to occur, it must go beyond just the first level and consider the second and third levels of concern as well. This would imply this thesis must include moments which go beyond just considering my own social position and how I got there, as I have mentioned above. Indeed, each fictional case study should include moments of level two and level three considerations, something that has been woven in and out of different parts of the thesis, whether it be the introduction, the literature review, or within the fictional case studies themselves when I explore structural ideologies may be within the tension the fictive client and I found ourselves in.

Through these different types of reflexivity, I am able to return to what I have previously mentioned in the introduction as an intersectional feminist lens to note the ideologies emerging from the power domain (Yates and Hiles, 2010) during the fictive counselling sessions. The importance of the lens being an intersectional feminism one was from its roots in intersectionality which, according to Cho et al (2013), was “a gathering place for open-ended investigations of the overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities” (p 788). This was not to say its roots were, as Cho et al (2013) warns, as the relationship with “difference” (p 788). Rather, intersectionality was about how it could create a way of thinking that was “fluid and changing, always in the process of creating and being created by dynamics of power” (p 795). Connecting to what Brown (2019) echoes as anti-oppressive practice where the counsellor draws awareness to how “conditions and issues shift” and was “constantly in process and evolving within different context” (p 54). Intersectionality as a lens to use with reflexivity aided in this thesis ability to create further reflection on the ideologies I have outlined in previous chapter and will explore further in the counselling session with fictive clients.

“The point of showing your process is because of how you define reflexivity then.” You interject.

“...Yes?” I reply, “I mean I think it is just the type of reflexivity I am engaged in.”
You look away as if you are considering my words.

“And it is not just about the different types of reflexivity,” I continued, “it is about how I also use intersectional feminism to help aid in those reflections. You know, queer reflexivity builds off of queer theorist contributions, racial reflexivity builds upon racial theorists’ contributions, I use intersectional literature written around gender and race to help think about ideologies around sexual violence. So, reflections can then become about what is happening to the client or myself or how we are reacting to each-...” I trailed off, as I noticed your eyes glazed over in the stare as if your thoughts had taken you elsewhere.

I could feel my nerves rise again.

“Um, are you still there?” I asked.

You blink a few times before you look back at me.

“Yes.” You answer, “I guess I was just wondering about the tension to transformation. What about the client and what if they are not in that tension as you are.”

I looked at you a bit confused from the switch in the conversation.

You continued, “So if your clients are stuck with you in this tension, how does that not make them one dimensional? How does it become transformative for them or the populations they represent? For your voice to be the loudest in the thesis... Guess I am thinking about ethics.”

“Oh... Yeah that is a big one... and one that I thought of as well.” I said, as I began to squirm in my seat again.

To use language and focus on context, suggests there was emphasis on who was the inquirer (Stolorow, 2013) where part of what was known was filtered by who has asked it. This was an ethical dilemma which philosophers, akin to Gadamer, echoes as how understanding was interpretation as much as it was a “very condition of being human” (Schwandt, 2000, p 194-195). To summarise, it meant the knowledge produced from this thesis was through my own analysis of what I have come to understand in my research. From this, my own nerves which made me shift from leg to leg in my chair, were part of the ethical considerations of what I needed to consider with myself being the inquirer.

**Ethical Considerations- The Fictive Other:**
“Fictive bits” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023

With experience and how we could understand such experience with intersection feminism was the centre of this thesis it was important to remember, as Simone De Beauvoir argues, part of the job as a feminist phenomenologist was to “describe the ways in which women experience their bodies” (Finlay, 2011, p 62). However, there was a difference between noting the experience of what may be occurring in that particular moment and suggesting that experience accounts for their total identity. A difference which has been absent in research due to its history of previously missing other ‘voices’ as those who have been the researchers tend to have more privilege than those who are being researched. In turn, this can perpetuate certain ideologies as a universal narrative or as a “universal spokesperson” (Langdridge, 2017, p 176). From these set universal experiences, other voices had been silenced as perhaps they have been unable to find themselves in position of researchers, or research that tends to interrupt the ‘other’s voice’ it is set out to gather (Burr and Dick, 2017) due to the process of interpretation that takes away from its original intention.

With the epistemology, ontology, and methodology I had chosen all centred around my experience and my voice that I bring to the research, it becomes a question of what happens when my voice becomes the loudest in this paper? Am I repeating what white and mainstream feminist have when they ignore the plights of disabled, queer, lower-class individuals who were other races than white, something that has been argued by Olufemi (2020) and June Eric-Udorie (2018). Have I repeated the mistake of previous research and silenced the voices who do not have as much privilege as I? If I have written about the others, others who have been historically silenced, how do I know if I had given their voice due credit? One ethical consideration that continues to return to my thoughts was if my voice was the loudest, what does it mean for the ‘others’ that I may include in this paper and how do I keep them ‘safe’?

Novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) summarises this ethical dilemma in her Ted Talk, The Danger of a Single Story, addressing how ideologies can create stereotypes of how we may assume the other’s story to be, something which she suggests may be transformed or challenged if we are able to see more than one story of the other. Within this thesis, I am aware of the tension I seek out in the counselling session with my fictive clients, these single stories may arise. My point here is not to do what Adichie and the other theorists who I pull from warn of where I only reinforce these single stories. Preferably, what I am hoping for, was from staying in this tension through dialogue with the fictive client and inward experience, something transformative may happen where client and I are able to move towards seeing the other stories in each other. Or at least, if not seeing, announcing how these single stories have impacted them and their experience after sexual violence to move towards complexity instead of staying with singularity.

It is important to note -something that will be reiterated in the conclusion- these fictional characters have backgrounds and stories which go beyond what will be written here in this thesis. As Solnit (2020) reminds us, we cannot write the entire river. Instead, what has been written was only a handful of their identity pulled from their own river. I do not suggest these interactions make up the total of their stories and I hope these interactions will someday continue in ways for their identities to then be seen in their uniqueness and complexity.

“I think reflectivity partly answers your question...” I said to break the silence. “I keep saying this to be a living document, but I really do mean that I think this thesis confines... or maybe captures? Anyways it is just a part of the whole story. Especially since to use intersectional
feminism as a lens when reflecting means I am not suggesting this is everyone’s experience, this is my own internalised experience in this moment, in this context… which may not be the same in other moments or for other people or in further counselling sessions with these fictive clients.”

Intersectionality and intersectionality within feminism, for this thesis, could be used to look at political identities and the political structures of our society to note how we may push against and re-enact them within session; nevertheless, it must be done so without suggesting this would be each person’s exact experience. As Cooper (2015) argues, one issue with intersectionality was how it has been used “in some feminist academic circles as a totalizing account of identity, and it has proved insufficient for such projects” (p 390). This was to say, a repeated mistake was how the conclusions drawn from the usage of intersectionality were used in a way that suggest a representation of “knowing that person as an individual” (Cooper, 2015, p 391). Intersectionality was not about making ‘universal truths’, rather it echoes the ontological position of hermeneutic constructivism of there being multiple realities (Bruce, 2019), leaving room for others to have their own experiences which will be vary to the ones I have written here. It was important to emphasise throughout this thesis how I am not suggesting these written experiences were universal. I take ownership of these experiences as being my own internalised reflections, understandings, and interpretation, thus they may not match others’ narratives.

“Are you suggesting that your reflection is how you answer the question of ethics for your voice being the loudest?” You ask.

“In part… I think there are two issues. One is the power. Power in having my voice being the loudest and that it does not represent all experiences, like this conversation now may not be the actual conversation we would have together. It is what my internalised and assumed experience of a conversation with you.” I said as I shifted my weight again so I could be in your view.

You looked back to me as I continued, “And the power I have in writing this thesis…The power I have as a researcher.” I answered with another pause. When I started as a trainee counsellor, I had first encountered the idea of power as the different ways power can present itself within the therapeutic relationship between counsellor and client. Power can even refer to something more broadly described as political power like how society has often given those who are within ethnic and minority groups considerably less, if at any, power compared to those who were white and were within what society believes as ‘normal’ groups (Proctor, 2017). Power, or privilege as I have so far written it as, was once again brought to my attention when I started this journey for my thesis. As a trainee counsellor I learned how to be responsible for this power through the use of supervision and reflexivity; within this thesis I found a similar rhythm. During this journey I frequently returned to my reflexivity, to supervision, and to what other activists have suggested while attempting to create what Etherington (2004) and Lazard and McAvoy (2020) argue for how research can be transparent in how it may interweave to the different oppressive ideologies within both research and societally. This process was then an attempt, in the confines of my world limit and conscious reflection, to display how my own process through my creative reflections from the art in my process journal and the parts of myself in my biases, my own presumptions, my own history as they have impacted this research to help the reader understand why I had chosen to reflect and react in the experience in such a way. To demonstrate how I have noticed the different ways ideologies have entangled their way into the session, as Ferguson (2019) states, there was an “extraordinarily important
fundamental truth about nature, which is that no life exists except through vast, dynamic webs of connection” (p 35) and it was in this ‘dynamic webs of connections’ I have tried to display, owning to the more difficult and uncomfortable reflections that wove their way in.

I picked up where I left off, “…And then there is the process of writing the stories.”

“A very transparent process.” You add.

“Well, yes… And it was not as if these stories came from no-where, they are based on my internalised experience of my client work as a counsellor for the past few years…” I responded.

With both Ketelle (2015) and Bruce (2019) methodologies which used fictionalisation, the original base was inspired by the authors’ own experience with some creative liberties taken. Similarly, I had also pulled from my own internalised experience of how these ideologies have impacted myself as a base to outline the fictional case studies in later chapters. As mentioned in the introduction, Aisha, Charlie, and Elena, emerged from the tension within me in relation to Trumpism around ideologies of gender and race within sexual violence. Each fictionalise client beginning as a notable spark of tension within my counselling work; the spark of anxiousness towards how the webcam may portray the tone of my skin during online counselling work, the spark of nervousness around questions from coworkers about my identity as they attempted to answer potential clients enquiries of if Jaz was a boy name or a girl name, and the spark of fear for how my newfound vulnerability as a counsellor may prevent my feminist side from being strong enough to push against Trumpism and ideologies of oppression within gender and race.

With each of these sparks, I pulled out the ignited tension for exploration and, similar to an artist akin to Pablo Picasso where his paintings began with a base that is usually something different to the original pieces (Langley et al, 2020), I began to sketch the base of my client with these sparks before I added layers of other internalised memories of counselling work which felt similar, parts of my identity, and then research I had found around these areas of gender and race within sexual violence.

These clients, as they began in reality, are then slowly fictionalised as they evolve in each draft, in every revision, where I would take time to reflect back on the development of interaction and the evolution of the tension I had written above for Aisha, Charlie, and Elena. Focusing specifically on moments when I may have attempted to write myself out of it or fell into traps of silencing ideologies I was hoping to name. In those sections, I would revise, adjust the therapeutic intervention to answer how I could stay in this discomfort to allow for a transformation as I talk with my fictionalised client, rather than too, and notice how closer I felt to the answer of transformation out of tension in each draft. Eventually Aisha, Charlie, and Elena were solid enough pieces of interactions, becoming the chairs who I have pictured in the start of each chapter and within the room with me.

The finalised client, and chair depicted in my process journal, was then a fictional being that I could interact with for the thesis. With a key difference between my own way of working and Picasso, was in the ownership of these ideologies where I attempt to articulate how I have been influenced by colonisation and other narratives of oppression that have tried to silence this history. Notably, Picasso struggled and outright refused to acknowledge how colonisation and cultural appropriation of African art helped to make him one of the most well-known artists from the 20th century (Modiano, 2022). As Etherington (2004) wrote, in reflexive research “we
close the illusory gap between researcher and researched and between the knower and what is known” (p 32); helping to depict to the reader both “what we have discovered” and “how we discovered it” (p 32). Though the original and my own subjective view of the client work is covered in layers, the narratives that impede on our sessions still bleed through, allowing me to note, highlight, and reflect on why they have continued to infect the rest of the painting.

“The stories you have written here are based on your experience, as a counsellor, from your own experience, from what you have read.” You summarised.

“Yes, and from that, they are confidential as they are layered.” I answered.

“And you make them into chairs...” You continued.

“Yes, I do draw them as chairs, kind of a nod towards how philosophers always write about chairs in their rants around metaphysics and stuff.” I said with a smirk.

“Okay...” You replied.

“But that is not important, it is just the clients are drawn and layered from myself and what I have read.” I said.

“Uh huh...” You said, “But what about you in all of this?”

“Huh?” I replied, surprised by the change in topics.

“It is your experience, your thoughts, your reflections.” You reiterated, “What about the ethics around you?”

Ethical Considerations- A Not So Fictive Self:

“Oh I mean I do take care of myself...” I spoke. Though these interactions were fictionalised, however, there was truth in the original inspiration, and it was important to note that truth in the original inspiration is not an objective truth of the world.

With such transparency with my own internalised experience and process for this research, there then needs to be some kindness towards myself and my trauma. As written in other experiences when one has done wrong, it can be easier to torture oneself with a metaphorical
(and sometimes not metaphorical) beatings rather than give forms of selfcare (Elva and Stranger, 2017). One way I have found selfcare in this thesis was with fictionalisation as it created a reflective space from my trauma that may be still too raw to write in its full form for others to read. Another way was through time and therapy that have given me the space from the different traumas and helped to increase my ability to tolerate the discomfort during different points of reflection. I have also been fortunate enough to create a support network that has helped to see me through some difficult bits of reflection within this thesis and find solace in breaks between chapter writing through exercise and creative outlets.

“That doesn’t sound very convincing given you wrote over a thousand words about the fictive other and a hundred or so about yourself.” You said as you lean back and cross your arms.

“Yes, well I don't know what else you want me to say, I have done a lot of therapy, I have my routines, but it is uncomfortable reflexivity, it is about shame, is it about trauma and gender and race. At one point it will just be eating murky soup.” I answered.

“Okay, okay, we have to check. That is all.” You said, uncrossing your arms as you shuffle in your chair.

An awkward silence had begun to form.

I jumped in again to fill the silence, “Besides, just like I took some self-care, you probably will need to as well.” I replied.

“Wait me?” You seem surprised by my attempt to change the conversation, “But why are you focused on me?”

“Well, this is it. We have explained what is in it, how it was made.” I said as I pull the pot closer to us. “Now you have to try it.”

“But so soon?” You ask. “You have quickly moved from ethics to the end...”

“But that is all, this research was a fictionalised endeavour which uses hermeneutic constructivism within phenomenological contextualism to display this research...” I summarised.

**Conclusion- A Tasting**

“Soup’s up” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023
The soup which now stood dangerously close to the edge was ready to be served. In its creation, with experience of sexual violence and wondering of ideologies to be at its core, the usage of phenomenological contextualism was used as the epistemology for this research. This type of phenomenology helped to emphasise the importance of context in both the political climate this thesis is written in as well as who has written and who this thesis attempts to research (Stolorow, 2013). With the ontology to support such an inquiry into context of experience being hermeneutic constructivism as it parallels the natural process of counselling where the counsellor and client develop a language to understand the trauma and its impact on the client (Martínez, 2020). From this, the research was necessarily guided to a methodology which emphasised the importance of experience through the use of storytelling; specifically, through fictionalisation (Ketelle, 2015; Bruce, 2019; Trahar, 2019) as it can create deeper reflections in how it can show the ‘thought bubbles’ within the session while aiding in a more palatable process, rather than overwhelming both the researcher and reader.

Throughout this journey writing fiction, different types of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004; Pillow, 2003; McDonald, 2016; Emirbayer and Desmon, 2012) were employed to help create a transparent process for this research with intersectional feminism used as a lens within the reflexive process in writing these fictive client case studies, in supporting the therapeutic interventions, and how I approach the ethical questions surrounding this research.

“So,” I continued as I got up to get us bowls, “Do you want your glass of wine with it or afterwards?”
Chapter 4: Aisha’s Case Study- A Name and an Elephant

Forty minutes to nine, and I had already stepped into the counselling room. I had always been early to work. Perhaps it was from being raised by a father who was in the military, maybe it was due to my counselling tutor who preferred us to arrive thirty minutes before a counselling session. Either way, this morning was a bit earlier than I had anticipated; my nerves from the night before speeding up my morning walk, a commute fuelled by the knowledge that today held three new self-referrals. The first of whom, whose name had caught my eye, was Aisha. What I was assuming was an Asian rooted last name, had unleashed the butterflies within my stomach.

I whispered to myself, “Maybe it is Eisha? Or Esha?” attempting to practise how I would pronounce her name as I sat my bag down and hung up my coat. A part of myself found this unnecessary, knowing I could ask when Aisha arrived, yet another part of me wanted to get it right before she even arrived. As if by doing so, I might become connected to the younger part of myself that had stood in front of a mirror every morning practising my other name, “Yasmine”. The rationale for these repeated practices, in my younger mind, was from the promise from my mother that she would change it, connecting myself back to my Middle Eastern roots of my father’s side of the family. The part of my family filled with mystery due to war, immigration, and my grandfather’s early death when my father was seven. A connection I never experienced beyond a few family gatherings. Occasions where distant Aunts and Uncles would speak to me in Arabic as they filled my plate with what they told me were Lebanese dishes, and my own memories of when I stood across from that mirror practising my pronunciation, noticing how strange Yasmine felt in my mouth from being raised in the U.S. with a west coast accent. This strangeness and what could even be labelled as disconnect was a reminder of when my father told me to check the white box in the ethnicity section of any form while most students would nickname me, “Brown sugar”, or “camel jockey”. I was told I was raised to be ‘white’ at home even though outside; some would ask me for a green card, confusing me for Hispanic due to how my skin was not quite ‘white’ enough.

With my bag put away and coat hung, I turned my attention to the chairs within the space, setting up for the session. As I moved what would be Aisha’s chair, I continued to whisper, “Maybe an Aaasha? Asssha?” Each vowel separating the Yasmine from the Jaz, or rather Jasmine, whose skin had grown paler from the moves to northern climates with less sun. A camouflage that meant reactions from others evolved from “friendly terrorist” to “assumed to
be white until further notice” (Parke, 2020, p 141). This shift had challenged me to confront my own conception of my cultural identity and the biases it had created within me (Ibrahim and Dykeman, 2011). I was no longer the dark-haired child that surprised the doctors when I came out of my pale, blue eyed mother, but the child whose ancestors were the ones my mother would proudly proclaim, “You are a princess! We are related to Pocahontas!” as she would run across the meadows during our hikes, her pale bare feet hopping from flower bed to flower bed. A nod to the Disney fairy-tale where Pocahontas was a “quintessential noble savage” that “understands the inevitability of white civilization” and becomes a bridge between her community and the Englishmen who have come to America (Hamad, 2020, p 36). A story that left out the true Pocahontas, whose real name was Matoaka, a ten-year-old child who was kidnapped, held captive for a year, and then taken to England where she was married off to then have children (Hamad, 2020). No longer a fairy tale, but a horror story leaving me to shudder when I type these memories as it was not a celebration as if she were truly part of my blood line, it was the reminder of how my existence came from the rape of a young girl who watched the ravaging of her own body, her loved ones, and her home. Jasmine was the recognition of this historical trauma. How it inter-wove back to a society that had been built upon this colonisation and the patriarchal society it had created (Iantaffi, 2021) (Atkinson, 2018), and, in attempt to rectify this history, was now desperate to attempt to connect back to Yasmine, to show I could pronounce Aisha’s name with ease.

I paused in my chair, wiggling, and sighed as I muttered, “Would it be I-E-sha? A-E-sha?” All these thoughts had only stirred the butterflies further in my stomach as it pulled emotions from recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavina, 2007) as feelings of regret, shame, and guilt began to emerge alongside the frantic butterflies. The regret of disconnection from Yasmine. The shame in how a part of the regret was from Jasmine’s wish to avoid the confrontation of her white heritage. The guilt of whether Jasmine’s own white heritage threatened to overpower the room and make it into something more comfortable, something more white. It left me to wonder, if Jasmine butchered the pronunciation of Aisha, could it suggest or emphasise the space between us was to be comfortable for western, English tongues? If Jasmine attempted to present Yasmine, would that only ignore the white presence already there?

A loud beep from my pocket interrupted my thoughts. The notification from my phone informing me that I had fifteen minutes till Aisha’s appointment, and I only had wiggled Aisha’s chair into place, my chair still hidden away in the corner, moved by last night’s counsellor who must have hoovered the floor. I sighed to myself as I crossed the room to my chair, aware of how easily I had been pulled into the paranoid schizoid. Splitting myself into what is deemed ‘acceptable’, Yasmine, and ‘unacceptable’, Jasmine, to create a more easily digestible, black and white world (Roth, 2001). In reality, it was much more complicated, a grey mixture that holds both Jasmine and Yasmine in my blood. A white European heritage of colonisation and a heritage where both the grandfather and father had military backgrounds, begging for a sense of conformity and immigration to the U.S., where the hierarchy of races promoted what Merchant (2020) articulates as “the possibility of belonging to “Whiteness”” (p 106). How immigrants are rewarded for such conformity to ‘whiteness’ and are forced to ignore the trauma they inherited while others gained the luxuries out of colonisation and ideologies from it (Merchant, 2020). The conformity my grandfather and father faced imprinted on their descendants, on me, as a post 9/11 era within the U.S. engrained my own superiority to those who did not share such a luxury of being a U.S. citizen through its constant Islamophobic dialect within the media. A dialect which infected social circles as my friends would message me at 9:11am and 9:11pm most days, “congratulations, your family must be proud.” Only to
be continued in Trump’s presidency when he blamed Muslims to be the greatest ‘Threat’ to the U.S. and its freedom (Waikar, 2018).

Yasmine, in some way, was destined to be what Mariya Karimjee (2018) articulated as her own experience of being dubbed as ‘chicken nugget’ by her friends, described as ‘dark on the outside but white on the inside’ (p 216). For her, this was how she had to survive in a westernised country; by eliminating her own identity to make space for something more comfortable for those around her, something white.

Jasmine, conversely, was destined to grow as her privilege gave her more room. From the ‘success’ story of colonisation she was able to fill out the bigger part of my identity; commanding more awareness onto my skin in recent years and now, as I noticed how light my arm seemed in comparison to the fabric of the chair I moved in the room.

I paused in my adjustment of the chair, placing my hands on my hips and wondering if the space between the chairs were wider than usual when the doorbell rang, alerting me to who may be waiting for me.

“A bit early too then Essa? Eeesa...?” I mumbled to myself as I noticed it was seven minutes too.

I swung the door open with a bit too much vigour, the nerves still present as Aisha and I spoke at the same time.

“Hi, is it Eisha?”

“Hello, I am here to see Jaz?”

A pause before I chuckled at our mirrored hastiness, “Yes, I am Jaz. Just follow me.”

I led Aisha to the room and motioned to her chair. As we settled, I began, “So first session, it is early but are you okay to start? Gives us time to go over admin... which I usually start with... if that is okay with you... I-E-sha? Was it?” Aisha, a bit wide eyed, only nodded as I continued, “Okay cool...” I took a breath, hoping to settle the jitters of working with a new client and my own observation of Aisha’s hijab that felt to be a stark contrast to the wallpaper behind her. I could feel the butterflies returning to bubble away again, leaving Jasmine wanting to scream of Yasmine’s presence as an attempt to connect to Aisha how I was not just white. Perhaps I could tell her of my uncle who fed me red wine as soon as I could walk... Wait do Muslim’s even drink? Or, at least, did Aisha?

Internally I shook my head. Breathe, I reminded myself, and started on my usual script of administrative information I told every client, letting her know of how our weekly sessions would be on a Tuesday morning for fifty minutes, about missed appointments, and confidentiality. As I led the session, it could be seen as a use of power inherent to the role of being a counsellor within an organisation (Proctor, 2017), where I used said power to take control of the session and lead it, taking away power from Aisha if she would want to start differently. This could be debated within the counselling community as to whether it was the best use of power. For myself, from my training as a counsellor to being qualified, I had found in leading the first session I could help set the framework and boundary of the session to prevent
potential ethical dilemmas of clients jumping in without being aware of the limitations to the space. Yet, even as I wrote this, with Aisha I did wonder how this would be different if I was more Yasmine, than Jasmine.

“I realise that is quite a bit of information to start with, especially for 9am, so any questions let me know... That’s it for admin, so we can start with what you would like to talk about? Or what you are hoping to get out of these sessions...?” I finished, settling back in my chair as I crossed my legs, the room growing silent as the last echoes of my words dissipated. Aisha only stared back at me from what seemed like the other end of the room as the clock took over the space.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

My thoughts moved to previous clients, how they had all been willing to jump in, but Aisha was not. Had I done something different then I had previously? Did she not hear me? Was she just organising her thoughts?

Tick, Tick, Tick.

Only five minutes into our session and the space only seemed to grow larger between Aisha and I, as if I had made room for an elephant to sit between us. The weight of it baring uncomfortably into my leg as I fought the urge to squirm in my chair to try and find relief.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

Aisha continued to stay silent, her gaze adjusting from me, to looking slightly behind me. I, in turn, focused on her face, trying to avoid any more stares into her hijab. My previous thousand words fill me with more shame and discomfort in my own fumbling of how I only seem to have perpetuated what Ahmed (2005) warns of in studying “whiteness”, where it becomes a narcissistic and anxious study which feeds on itself. How the power I had assumed to just be the power inherent to the role of counsellor in an agency (Proctor, 2017), realistically ignored the history and elephant who was most likely between Aisha and me. A history where Aisha, and her ancestors, were told to conform for their own good; whether it be western feminists believing they were saving Muslim women with their autonomous views of freedom that would rid Muslim women from their oppressive kin (Phipps, 2020; Olufemi, 2020; Hamad, 2020); or how many would assume Muslim women are better to spoken too than listened too (Olufemi, 2020; Hamad, 2020); going first in this session and suggesting what she would speak about potentially only repeated these narratives. My nerves had kicked me into autopilot, and in autopilot, I had been unintentionally insensitive to what historical narratives had followed Aisha into the room.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

The elephant’s weight only continued to push into my leg, asking me to do something to relieve the heaviness of reflections bouncing around in my head, echoing the white reactions Ahmed (2005) would receive when presenting upon racism and its colonised history. Yet, instead of action, I fought against such urges, as Ahmed (2005) argued, an impulse for action “can work to block hearing” (Online). In action there is no listening, only my privilege continuing to speak for others that do not have such privilege and face further oppression (Eric-Udorie, 2018).
would lead to no acknowledgement to what may be happening for Aisha, how I might perpetuate the potential dynamic of white women speaking for brown women.

Within counselling, Ladany et al (2004) have researched how therapists have used silence as a way to “give control of the session back to the client” (p 85). Though they acknowledge this as wanting to give control to the client when a client may not want to take control or wish for the therapist to “provide answers” (p 85); nevertheless, I wondered if silence may offer a chance for a power dynamic shift. Jacobs (2017) had acknowledged silence was a way of giving space and to prevent the therapist from intruding upon the client and what they may be expressing. If I kept silent then I could give space to Aisha, she could talk, and I could find a way for us to connect.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

If we could connect at such a distance and with an elephant in the way.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

Assuming silence was the right therapeutic intervention as Ladany et al (2004) also noted, silence could have a negative impact on the therapy as much as it may have a positive impact.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

I took a breath and focused back on Aisha as I tried to ignore the tick of the clock between us.

Tick... Ti-

Aisha finally spoke, “It feels hard to start. To be honest no one knows that I am even here. You would be the first person I told...” She said as she looked towards her hands she had begun to squeeze together.

My previous thoughts dissipated as Aisha reminded me why she was here in the first place. I had been so solely focused on my distress in sensing the weight of the elephant, that I had forgotten about the sexual violence which brought her to counselling in the first place. As I moved my focus back to Aisha’s trauma, I tried to get a feel for the weight of Aisha words and what she had been ruminating on in the silence.

I responded, “I am the first one?... That feels more significant than words can say... and also a bit scary...”

Another long pause and then Aisha replied, “... I guess it makes it more real? That it did happen, that...” Aisha paused as she looked towards the door and sighed, “That I am to start this process. That I was... that I was assaulted...”

I felt the room grow still as she paused to take a breath. I remembered my own attempts to break the silence and face the reality of what had happened. To say it was hard does not fully encapsulate the experience as it is also about the impact of trying to break the historical, and social cycle of something familiar. After someone has experienced sexual violence, most feel
the pressure, or are trained by the ideologies around them, to perpetuate the silence, to take on the shame and hold the trauma of what has happened within themselves (Atkinson, 2018). To do something different reminds me of the anonymous verse in a Baxter Detention Centre in 2005 that said,

“I do not know what will happen after I die. I do not want to know. But I would like the Potter to make a whistle from the clay of my throat. May this whistle fall into the hands of a cheeky and naughty child and the child to blow hard on the whistle continuously with the suppressed and silent air of his lungs and disrupt the sleep of those who seem deaf to my cries.” (Atkinson, 2018, p 49).

A small part of myself felt happy for the bravery that Aisha had found to do something differently, to blow on the whistle in this session. Yet, the overwhelming part was sad, sad that she had to blow on the whistle. Sad about how that whistle was built from the silent throats of those before her, as the narratives within sexual violence depicted Orient women as if they were mysterious, sexual beings (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Hamad, 2020), leading to a history of white men projecting their sexual fantasies onto them (Hamad, 2020). Something I had felt small echoes of in my nickname of “Brown Sugar”, with one ex-partner pushing me to belly dance to fulfil his own exotic sexual fantasy, and how I was quick to be what he wanted; ignorantly and -regretfully- happily forcing myself into this narrative to satisfy his sexual desires, although they did not echo mine.

I reflected back this sadness as I said, “To even say that is such a big step, but I am aware it also feels sad that you had to do that, that you had been assaulted.”

Aisha looked toward her hands in her lap. “It is sad,” She said, “but it is more than that... It is complicated... I mean the event, yes it was terrible, but the consequences are what are on my mind. What will it do to me? ... To my family.... what if they found out?”

I nodded along as Aisha spoke, one thing that was common among my clients were their worries, or difficulties in, how others had reacted to their assault. Taylor (2020) acknowledged how family and friends are central to how those who experience sexual violence will perceive themselves afterwards. Something Sanyal (2019) notes in how the individual’s environment may react to those who experienced sexual violence in a way which can create a feeling within said individuals “as if there is a wrong way” (p 77). These reactions from the environment being influenced by how sexual violence was first seen as destroying a women’s position in society (p 61) to becoming an internal wound on their psyche will inevitably lead to a total collapse of the individual (p 62). From this, it was common for some of the sessions to focus on how the family may, or have, reacted after the assault, hence there was no surprise in my empathic understanding of Aisha’s worries. Yet, I found myself struck by the thought of her family and how she had connected back to the consequence of if her family had found out. Sometimes in socio-centric and collectivist cultures, the consequence of sexual assault spreads beyond just the individual and has an impact of shame or embarrassment on to the family and community (Taylor 2020). Her mentioning of family led my mind to wonder if Aisha was raised within a collectivist culture. Perhaps there was a worry of how her trauma would impact her family? Would her family feel shame? Would she be ostracised for it?

I repeated, “Your family?” back to Aisha as I hoped she would say more.
Aisha took a breath as if she was going to reply, but stopped as she looked up at me. I noticed her eyes slightly narrow as she investigated me, only to then lean back and say, “Well it is not like they will disown me or anything. Just, you know, what it means to hear that your daughter has been assaulted, it has an effect. It must be heart-breaking.”

Aisha’s words felt barbed, and I sensed them startling the elephant who had begun to quietly rest between us. The question of family was supposed to form the first phases of therapy where the counsellor tries to understand the client’s world from their point of view (Spinelli, 2021). Yet once again, my own presumptions had gotten in the way. Jasmine had assumed Aisha’s family to be different. An assumption built off the spoon-fed reverberations of Muslim families portrayed in U.S. western media and even tinted with hints of narratives where Muslim women were at the mercy of “the patriarchal control of their fathers and brothers” (Olufemi, 2020, p 67; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Hamad, 2020). Jasmine had asked her question about family through the lens of the history of stereotypes, whereas if I had asked someone who was white, the same question would not have carried such stereotypes. Or at least the assumption for the consequences of the sexual assault would not have been an assumed to be further threat, and from the family itself.

The clock returned with a vengeance as we returned to sitting in silence.

**Tick, Tick, Tick.**

Aisha had crossed her arms and legs, leaning back in her chair as she stared in my direction. I could feel the air grow still once again, as if we were at an impasse. If I continued without acknowledging it, without acknowledging the elephant between us, I was at risk of a potential rupture of our new partnership of us working together, also known as the working alliance (Jacobs, 2017). Even worse, Jasmine’s worst fears were being realised as I was at risk of perpetuating the default tools that had been used on communities who have been oppressed, where silence and being muted compound with the feeling of not being able to question something. If you do question something then you would not be likely to be believed (Brathwaite 2020). Our impasse we faced was the default road colonisation had paved, both for us, and our exploration of Aisha’s sexual trauma.

**Tick, Tick, Tick.**

I took a breath as I tried to formulate my thoughts, “I would imagine it would be heart-breaking...” but paused as I decided how to finish my thought. It felt tricky to acknowledge the elephant who sat between us. A part of myself wondered if there was a need for another silence as a therapeutic intervention. But this time as an aid to give myself space and time to reflect on how I may want to respond to Aisha (Ladany et al, 2004).

If I were to just jump in and point at the elephant without giving space for Aisha to speak around it, I was worried it would feel as if I was just what Ahmed (2005) warns as an anxious performance by being a ‘good’ white person when I note it. Something Phipps (2020) also voiced her own concern of being white when she wrote her own book around white feminism, as if it were an attempt to “absolve” (p 3) herself. Both writers touching upon something I too wonder if I were to acknowledge the elephant, would that be my attempt at absolving me from my earlier faults?
Tick, Tick, Tick.

There was also the issue of power in how I started the session. If I were to just claim the elephant and my blunders without hearing from Aisha, I not only assumed the wrong, but echoed what Lola Olufemi (2020) wrote, “The Muslim women is spoke for, not spoke to; imposed upon, invaded, dissected; rale treated as an autonomous human being” (p 67). To jump from an assumption of difference to speaking about the experience of difference without hearing from Aisha was just another continuation of this. The idea was for us to acknowledge the repeated negations of both our positions within the counselling space and where they interweave into interpersonal and social positions (Gutwill, 2006). For Aisha and I to note the elephant. To do this, I felt as if I needed to hear Aisha’s experience and be with conflict then push away from it.

I continued where I left off, “And I noticed you emphasised that your family would not disown you...”

“Yes, I did say that.” Aisha answered coldly.

“You also crossed your arms and learned away from me.” I replied.

“Mhm.” Aisha said.

“Guess I am wondering if this isn’t just about it being heart breaking but something I said.” I finished.

Aisha opened her mouth but then paused, the clock continued to tick, tick, tick.

I tried to hold fast and not jump to speaking, I needed to listen to not assume. To be fully present in the way Rud (2018) argues is an important part of psychotherapy, specifically person-centred counselling, where the counsellor wades against the “prejudices, labels, and furor curandis, […] the panic of not knowing what to do, or how to be in silence” (p 23). Sitting in the discomfort of political narratives, of the ticking of the clock, and the pressure of the elephant who pushed itself further into my legs without breaking such a silence to attempt to escape it. Letting go of the control, of knowing the right answers, and being with what may arise.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

I noticed the elephant stirred with each tick of the clock; I resisted my own frustration of just wanting to kick it, to wiggle myself away from what may emerge in the unknown. A simple enough thought but it did not make the elephant’s weight any less painful.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

Aisha uncrossed her legs as she spoke, “I think people see the hijab and see ‘outsider’, I was born here. Even my parents were born here... But my hijab always seems to say otherwise-and I saw you looking at it, I was wondering who you saw. If you saw me or my hijab?”
I repeated her words, “If I saw you or your hijab…”

“Yes, if you see me, a human being. That I am not less than… Or going to be stoned to death by my family…” Aisha answered, squeezing her hands on either forearm.

Whether someone should have the option to wear a hijab, or even a niqab, has been challenged recently. Worldwide, courts have been making similar ruling of removal. In Canada, they debated whether sexual assault complainants should be allowed to wear a niqab as they testify against their assaulting (Bakht, 2015) and in the U.S., courts requiring the removal of the hijabs, threatening those to be escorted from the court room if they do not (Sheth, 2019). These rulings make it impossible for Muslim women to be able to use the court systems if they do not comply and have consequences for them outside the courtroom where Muslim women have been fired from jobs for breaking uniform requirements when wearing a hijab (Sheth, 2019). A reminder to every one of the othering that has continued to be depicted in western media around Muslim women, and a reason for why some have chosen to remove their hijab due to the harassment and violence in public spaces they receive for wearing them (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017). Aisha’s own reflection on if I saw her or her hijab was asking if I saw her as the human she was, rather than the political identity the narratives within western media had made her to be. A question that left both an anger towards myself, as well as a sadness in response to what she had to face spilled its way in here.

I uncrossed my own legs as I leaned forward, pressing into the elephant between us as I spoke, “I hear your question and I wish I could say that the question around family was without those tropes… But I hear my own accent, I know the U.S. is quite Islamophobic and I am not immune to how those may impact me. I don’t want to sound as if I am excusing that behaviour either. My intention was to know what it was like for you, and hearing you now it is clear it did not sound like that and makes me a bit angry with myself and a bit sad…”

Aisha raised her eyebrow as she echoed, “Sad? As in sad with yourself?”

“No, no, no.” I quickly replied, “Sad as in… sad that the tropes found their way in here. Sad about what those tropes do… Or at least how I could imagine they would feel.”

The silence returned as my words settled, Aisha once again narrowing her eyes to investigate me before she replied. “It is more annoying right now than sad…”

“Okay, so annoying…” I repeated.

“Yes, annoying. Because… Well, it wasn’t like I was expecting a Muslim counsellor… but when I saw you looking at my hijab I just felt as if there was an elephant in the room that we were just going to pretend didn’t exist.” Aisha uncrossed her arms as she spoke, placing her hands back in her lap.

“Yeah, I felt that elephant too, I was aware how white I was when you first came in to be honest.” I answered, mindful of how acknowledging the elephant only made its presence heavier against my legs.

Aisha appeared surprised by my comment. She went to speak before she stopped, and I waited for her to collect her words. I was unsure if I had, perhaps, been too blunt in the hope I could
speed past this part, to the ending where I present the reader with a happy ending. A solution for what someone can do in this situation. It was the ‘fix it’ mentality counsellors are asked to move away from as it ignores how the process is about the un-weaving and reweaving (Rud, 2018); instead of a repetition of the social narrative that most are seduced into believing how we can find happiness in quick fixes; such as a quick change of clothes, surgery, etc (Lemma, 1995). This wishful thinking ignored the reality of the situation as if I could somehow wipe away the history of Islamophobia, racism, and sexual violence with a few thoughtful words (Ahmed, 2005) and bring back the narratives of white saviours (Hamad, 2020; Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017) as I rescued Aisha from the ‘ism’ she faced, even if that may not be what she was looking for in these counselling sessions (Heshmati et al, 2021). A part of myself knew I needed to continue to wait to see Aisha’s own response, but it would be a lie if I did not say there was tension between Jasmine, who had been quick to say “white”, and the counsellor who was still picking through all the political narratives. Jasmine who wished for this conversation to be over, looking towards how the future may be, and the counsellor part of myself that knew it was best to stay in the moment.

Aisha interrupted my thoughts in her reply, “It was your accent... And maybe your speedy start... Just seemed like a whirlwind but not? Because there was this big elephant in the room.”

“Sounds like my accent and pace was a bit disorientating for you.” I summarised.

“Kind of... Looking at my hijab instead of me wasn’t helping, though the elephant was probably going to be there even if you didn’t do any of those things...” Aisha answered.

“True, I should have looked at you.” I said as Aisha nodded.

“I also heard the elephant would have already been there.” I continued, “And what about now?”

“Like has it disappeared?” Aisha asked.

“No... I mean I wish it could just go away like that.” I light-heartedly replied, passing a quick smile to Aisha before I continued, “But I know that would be just ignoring it again. What I meant to ask was how are you feeling right now, when we talk about this? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“You are the counsellor, so you are supposed to ask.” Aisha taunted back before she looked towards the wall with a grimace, “I am not sure... I guess my annoyance is still kind of there... But maybe I feel a bit on edge?”

“So a bit of annoyance and also a bit on edge.” I repeated.

“Like when you are being watched, you know? With my bus ride here, an old lady kept staring at me. Every time I looked back at her she would look away, pretending she wasn’t. It was weird, I was almost waiting for her to call the police on me to be honest.” Aisha looked back from the wall to me as she spoke.

“The feelings of being watched...” I paused before I reflected, “Hmm, and it is like I am just like the old lady from the bus, looking at your hijab and not at you.”
“Kind of… Well, I would say you were…. But I think I feel as if I am waiting for it again.” She answered.

“Oh so the edginess is not me watching, but waiting for me to become the old lady again.” I said.

“Yes. That is the edge feeling.” Aisha shrugged.

“Hmm…” I said, as if I was thinking out loud.

Hamad (2020) had summarised this feeling in how the Islamophobic views of Muslim women presumed them to be either “Pets or Threats” (p 72) and it felt as if Aisha was tapping into the ‘threat’ strand of these narratives. A reminder to how these “threat” narratives have even entered law as the UK Prevention Duty act in 2015 exasperated Islamophobic views, asking those who work in schools to report an extreme ideology to prevent the support or creation of terrorist groups; with the Muslim community felt a stronger impact in schools, compared to their white counterparts (Jerome et al, 2019). Potentially increasing the pressure of being watched within the Muslim community, as they face the ramifications of being perceived as such a threat in either being unjustifiably detained. Or when white men can attack them without consequence due to the sympathetic narrative of white men being “patriotic”, protecting their country from these ‘outsiders’ (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017). A narrative that demanded Aisha to be vigilant of her surroundings, even when she sat across from me in the counselling session.

“With the old lady…” I continued, noticing myself releasing a bit of shiver as I spoke, “That feels really tense as well, or the tension that comes with being on edge, made me want to shake it off…”

Aisha nodded, “I do feel that in my legs... and shoulders.” Lifting an arm from her lap to squeeze her shoulder. Somehow Aisha appeared fragile in that moment, evoking a sadness from me in how I had not been able to stop these narratives of being watched from coming in, how I had been the continuation of the old lady for her.

A slight frown appeared on my face as I spoke, “I am sorry I have contributed to that feeling here... This space is supposed to feel safe but it sounds as if I had not been able to create that for you.”

Aisha dropped her hand from her shoulder back to her lap as she took the time to investigate me again before looking to the wall. “I don’t know what I am supposed to say.” She replied.

“To be honest, I don’t know either… I feel almost stuck? Or at an impasse... I am unsure, does that sound right to you?” I answered.

Aisha snuck a quick glance to me before she turned her glance back to the wall. “Maybe awkward? But I’m stuck as well...”

“Hmm,” I said as I took a quick glance at the clock. “I am aware we have fifteen minutes to go, I guess I am curious where you would like to go from here, Esha?”
Aisha was quick to turn her head back to me, pausing to investigate me once again with her gaze before she brought her hand to her throat. “It is Ahhne-Sha” she said as she tapped on her lower throat.

Taken aback by the change of pace, I quickly repeated, “HeeeeSha?”

Another pause before Aisha chuckled at my own hastiness, “Oh wow, that was worse than when I first tried it and I was six... Well, six I think, my nan used to put me on her lap and have me practise so I could remember my roots.”

Though still confused by the switch within the atmosphere, I found myself smiling at the warm image of Aisha and her grandmother, “Seems like quite a sweet moment.” I responded, still aware of the clock and the lack of time we had for our session.

“It was...” Aisha smiled before her face turned serious again, “But I do not know how to answer your question.”

“Oh, would it help if I lay out the options we have?” I asked. Aisha nodded and I continued, “So we have a few, the first is we agree to meet back next week to do another initial session to see how we feel after a week and continue this conversation... We could agree to contract anyways and just start these sessions... Or we could consider getting you allocated to another counsellor, but I am unsure of how fast that would happen and, it feels important to say this, I don’t know if it would be with another white counsellor... If you feel comfortable, I could ask the manager and find out in the next week and let you know if you are interested in that option...”

Aisha frowned as she looked towards her lap, quiet for a minute as she thought. The clock that seemed to taunt me in the silence came back.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

She looked back to me as she asked, “A white counsellor?”

“Yes, I know you said you did not expect a Muslim counsellor, but given this conversation, it just felt best to acknowledge it and maybe something we can think about?” I answered.

Recently there has been a nudge for considerations around clients who are ethnic or minority origins to be able to request a counsellor who holds similar heritage. This was not to say they should not be allotted with the opportunity to work with someone from a different culture but a question on if the client should have more autonomy in their choice to work with someone who may be able to understand their experience more than someone who does not hold such experiences which come from these heritages. With Heshmati et al (2021) and Goode-Cross et al (2014) noting how this can help to build a strong sense of empathetic understanding between counsellor and client, while also building a stronger sense of trust. Given the context of this session and tension from the ‘watching old lady’ Aisha had mentioned, it was something to wonder with her, though it felt as if there may not be enough time to do so. There was also the added complication of if this was something the placement I worked at could even offer. Perhaps Yasmine who was also in the room with us was the best my placement could offer and
yet I had still not spoken of her presence. Let alone reflected upon her role in the session. To jump in with Yasmine now felt strange, and it did not leave us with much room to impact how this may feel for Aisha.

I quickly jumped in before Aisha had a chance to reply, “I also want to add, I realised I dropped this question of another counsellor without a lot of time to explore it with you, or without a chance for me to research on my end about it... And I am aware that I do this wanting to say more but it feels as if I am just dumping all this last-minute information without much time for you to answer...”

Aisha raised her eyebrows again as she replied, “This feels like a theme with you... But maybe we could do another initial session one then? Give me time to think about it.”

"Of course,” I replied. “It feels like there is still more to say... Obviously. So, I feel that would be the best option as well.”

Aisha nodded, “Could you still find out the third option, the new counsellor one...?”

“Yeah, I could and then let you know next week? If anything happens between now and then, and you decide otherwise, just email us.” I answered, and Aisha did a quick nod, preparing herself to get up from her chair before she paused. She looked back at me with a small grin.

“Do I have to email, or can I just not show up?” She asked.

“Um... I mean you can...” I answered, surprised by her question.

“Okay.” Aisha replied as she gathered herself and her stuff as I got up to walk her out the door.

“Then I will either see you next week, email you, or not show.” Aisha said with a quick glance to me before she was on her way, her back to me as I muttered, “Hope to see you next week then.”

I walked back to the room, slumping back into my chair as the elephant continued to make itself at home between the two chairs. I felt as if her last comment was a bit of revenge for the session, leaving me on my toes, wondering if I would see her again. The clock once again returns to fill the silence.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

It was deflating, an end to a session without some resolution to what had occurred. Shame, anger, sadness, annoyance, and guilt all swarmed against me as the elephant’s weight returned to press onto my legs. Once again, the knee jerk response was to write myself out of this chair, out of this ending, to the happy one which sugar coated the Islamophobic narratives that presented themselves here.

Tick, Tick, Tick.

Yet I do not write myself out of this, I stay in the discomfort, with the elephant who sat in front of me.
*Tick, Tick, Tick.*

I let out a sigh as I brought my own hand to my throat as Aisha had done as I practised, “Ahhne-Sha... Ahh-ne-Sha…”

At the very least I still wanted to get her name right.
“Aisha’s Session” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2021
With most clients, therapists may experience moments of reverie; a daydream-like state the therapist enters where they use the thoughts and imagery formed in their consciousness to understand what may be arising within the therapeutic relationship (Stokes and Ross, 2019). For myself, these reveries can first be the fantasies as to how a first session may go when I read the self-referrals. Or they can emerge within the session itself, where I find myself whisked away into a daydream. Then they can be after a session, where I am mulling over what has already arisen in the room during those fifty minutes. In those moments I always found myself drawn into the reverie, even if they are uncomfortable, allowing myself to be fully enveloped into whatever those reveries may be. Yet there was one client who was different, where reveries no longer felt like an invitation for an adventure but a haunting I wanted to push away.

It was hard at first to even consider how to introduce them, as this client appeared not fully formed. It reminded me of televised ghost hunts where the participants argue whether the noises they heard were a phantom left to cry as they are trapped between this world and the next, or just an old door whose long life has given it the capacity to screech as the wind forced it open and close. The unknowns left me guessing, searching for an answer which may not be found and, in that way, Charlie presented themselves. Though we had a beginning, as I was first given their self-referral, it was not a fully realised beginning. Charlie’s self-referral was incomplete; they left parts blank, unfinished sentences in some sections, paragraph answers that did not fully answer the question in other sections, to then finalised the referral with their signature and date. It left me wondering what had happened as the haunting of the reverie asked, 

*Can I be me?*

Perhaps it was a technological issue, a prank, or perhaps they were intoxicated when they filled this out? If not, if this was on purpose, what were these half-written thoughts that finished without punctuation to be contrasted by paragraphs which did not tell me anything? These questions would circle within my reverie, only to form the Charlie phantom who started to haunt my life as I waited for our first session.

Instead of immersing myself in those reveries, I would just push those thoughts away as I felt the haunting pull myself into the unknown, especially as I found myself fixated on the three questions Charlie did not answer; if they preferred a female or male for their therapist, their
own gender, and their preference around a women’s only time for counselling this placement
offered. Questions of gender brought forth memories where I did not live in the expected spaces
of what I was told to be growing up as a woman within a republican and religious area(s) of
the U.S.. Memories of a young girl -where I must have begun to show signs of attractions to
all genders- whose grandmother would pull me aside to talk to me about the souls of lesbians
who were burning in hell. She would finish the conversation with tears as she cried, “I just
don’t understand why they just don’t love men as God intended...” Or other moments where
more liberal minded family members would say, “No one is attracted to both men and women,
they are just confused. It is either or, not both.”

These words embedded themselves in my skin as I would wake up from pleasurable dreams of
kissing a range of genders telling myself I had to pick, and, perhaps, it should just be men to
avoid eternal damnation. My thoughts only echoed both what I was told and the violent,
heterosexual pornographic images I was shown as a child where women were always the
pleasure device for men. A rule forever to be embedded in my body, I could not be for my own
pleasure, but instead, I must be for the pleasure of men.

As I grew into a teenager, this rule was reinforced when my mother would tell male peers who
could sleep with me. Who could be owed my virginity. Or when I was forced into one socially
acceptable space of what women ought to be from the reactions to my lack of being feminine
enough; across my appearance, my attitude, and my lack of dating. My mother would drag me
into the mall as she would say, “See? It can be easy to dress pretty and girly…” As she forced
me into tight, floral clothes and delicate underwear that I would rip off my body for more
comfortable clothes that were baggy and gender neutral as soon as I was out of the public
judgement. Teased by peers as they called me, “You’re definitely a boy with that voice…”,
“Nice moustache dude...”

The continued pressure to be the ‘ideal’ feminine woman, and opposition I faced when I did
not fit into those categories, made me feel the only way out was through a relationship with a
male peer I forced myself to kiss and hold hands with in order to escape the constant taunting
of my sexuality and gender appearance. The overarching embedded ideology was how I must
act and be with due to the gender I was prescribed as.

These reactions from my community in the U.S. were the ripples from the early settlers, who
colonised the country I grew up in. Where they established gender roles, religion, and sexuality
to be ones supported by their social framework while erasing other cultures. Actions which
continued to show itself in the ways we think of gender today (Iantaffi, 2021). These Western
Catholicism ideologies forced people into two binary genders, male and female, with the
accompanied expectation that followed them; females to the submissive one, to be the baby
maker, and to hold themselves in a delicate manner or else to be assumed to be mentally unwell
(Cleghorn, 2021). These ideologies reverberate in Trumpism and Alt Right politics and
influence how others respond to me as they shouted, “Stop being bossy…”, “If you exercise too
much, you’ll be too manly, and no one will date you…”, “If we don’t get you a push up bra,
how will the boys like you.?”

All these memories whispered to me as I knew the reverie of Charlie’s haunting was inviting
me to explore these moments. To return to the feelings of discomfort when parts of my identity
did not neatly fit into what my social environment wanted due to the ideologies that surrounded
myself and my social circles. I was nervous to return to those moments, and with Charlie, I was
scared if I would be even able to meet Charlie in this space after my lifetime of submission to
colonised gender identities. Not to mention, though these memories were located in the U.S., they echoed sentiments in the UK where parts of its media and politicians argued for these colonised views of gender through continued simplify rhetoric of sex and biology being the pinpoint of gender, even if western medicine has acknowledged sex biology as a spectrum (John, 2021). Most recently, the Prime Minister had blocked Scotland’s recent attempts to reform their gender recognition bill, with the explanation of how this legislation would negatively impact wider equalities legislation (Scott and Morris, 2023), as he mostly focused the importance of keeping the colonised view of gender being binary to keep separate spaces for the ‘two’ gender categories. It was another nod to how the US and UK had yet to fully embrace a more nuanced idea of gender. An idea which has been updated from this colonial view of male and female (Iantaffi, 2021: Halberstam, 2018) to something Iantaffi (2021) helped to define gender through the inclusion of biological, the social, and the psychological in its definition (p 21). Gender then becomes how we include the social and subjective views of how we express ourselves.

Yet, with my own subjective history in the U.S. and similar views in parts of the UK; could I hold Charlie delicately within the intersubjective space? A space which emerges when both Charlie and my subjectivity meet in the counselling room and does not demand for Charlie to assimilate to the sameness of myself (Benjamin, 1998) as others had done to me. Could I trust I would not push away Charlie’s subjectivity from the space due to my own discomfort, and instead allow them to present as they are, without expectation in a way that Rud (2018) suggest as a “mutual venturing” between counsellor and client “towards the encounter without intention to control” (p 22). To flow in my reveries, in session with Charlie, as we navigate these in between spaces in the session without definite labels and notice these influences of colonised ideologies.

The haunting of the reverie repeated,

*Can I be me?*

With my feet dragging, I tried to ‘flow’ with these reveries the few days before Charlie’s session. To sit with the discomfort of unknown and undefined spaces. A space I never truly found comfort in, as when the day finally arrived, I found myself nervously tapping my pen against the printed out incomplete self-referral sitting on a clipboard in my lap. There was a small part of myself hoping that if Charlie would appear, we could finish this self-referral and it would just be a mistake as they had very little computer literacy skills or a technological error when they were uploading it. Another small part of myself wondered if Charlie really was a phantom, one of those clients who would never appear, only to be one of the other names that I was left to be haunted by with what could have been. It seemed only a fitting end to the Charlie story that had unravelled so far. Yet the predominant part of myself waited for the in-between Charlie to appear, and as the nervousness of whether I could be with Charlie in an in-between space filled my stomach, I felt myself asking if I could do it, not get it wrong, and what would it mean if I could not.

I stood up and tried to shake myself from these thoughts. I wanted to find composure within myself, to step into the therapeutic space with Charlie where I would be fully open to possibilities that may arise in our session without the panic of not knowing and uncertainty taking over (Rud, 2018). To be able to be calm, ready to meet whatever would come, instead of fretting over the possibilities laid before me. Yet, I had not found a way to steady myself, knowing I would have to start with what started these reveries; the initial referral form.
The doorbell rang, leaving me to quickly trot over to the door with anticipation for who waited for me on the other side. As I opened the door, the anticipation regressed back to the nervousness from earlier as a phantom had appeared at the stoop. With dark, baggy clothes that gave no inclination to what shape may lie underneath, and shaggy, dark hair covering parts of their facial expression, Charlie stood in thick platform boots, leaving myself to guess who was standing in front of me.

“Hey, I have an appointment with Jaz?” They uttered in a voice that once again left me wondering instead of answering any questions I had bubbling in the back of my mind.

I gave a small smile, “Yes that’s me. Would you like to come through? It is the first door on the left.” I gestured to the room as I moved out of the way for Charlie to head through.

As I followed behind them, I tried to hold fast to the unknown, hushing the part of myself that begged to know who Charlie was. It was not as if I thought all of these were inappropriate, but some of them felt intrusive as I wondered who was underneath those baggy clothes. There were the usual thoughts I experienced with any new client; who are they, what brought them here, how would the work unfold, and then there were the intrusive thoughts. The ones, which I hesitantly type, who begged to know what Charlie was at their birth if they were male or female. How these intrusive thoughts pulled me back to the discomfort of the reverie from earlier as I wondered if this discomfort over the phantom sprawled across the chair in front of me, would tempt me to try to box them into something that would be familiar to me. To box them in the colonised language of binary gender.

I picked up the clipboard from the floor next to my chair as I sat down. “Charlie, was it?” I made eye contact with Charlie before I continued. “This is our first session, usually I like to start the session with some administration stuff, and I noticed that your self-referral was not completed... Is it okay if we spend some time finishing that today?”

Charlie paused as they adjusted in their chair to a posture that was less draping, but still slouching. They muttered, “Do we have to?”

Charlie’s question took me as a surprise and I quickly repeated, “Have to?”

Charlie moved their eyesight to the wall next to me as they answered, “Yeah, like do you need the information?”

I paused to consider Charlie’s question. This was the first time I had someone ask if we had to finish the self-referral form. A part of me was racking my brain for the fictive administration policies of this placement regarding the self-referral form, while the other part of my brain remembered the haunting before. How I had first fought those reveries, the need for definite answers, and my lack of comfort in those spaces due in part to the social environment I was raised in. Perhaps I was once again pushing for those definite and defined spaces. Maybe I needed to put the self-referral form to the side in order to be truly in those in-between spaces with Charlie.

The haunting of the reverie reminded me,

Can I be me?
“Hmm…. Depends on the information, as some information we may need due to legal requirements… But maybe we could put that aside for now.” I said as I put the clipboard back on the ground. I resumed, “I am curious to know why you don’t want to fill it out?”

Charlie moved around in their chair to sit more centred as they pushed their arms into the front pocket of their sweatshirt. They replied, “Ummm...” before they paused and continued, “I guess… I was being lazy. I was doing a lot of self-referrals for counselling. I am on a lot of waiting lists… But also, I wasn’t sure how to answer some of the questions…”

“So you were being a bit lazy and unsure of some of the questions.” I summarised.

Charlie stared at their high platform boots as they outstretched in front of them as they spoke. “Yes… actually, not just laziness… Maybe a bit of frustration? With some of the questions....”

“The questions were frustrating?” I asked.

Charlie replied with a few more “Umm..” and a sigh as they thought before they finally answered, “I mean it is about the gender questions: do I want a women’s only space, what gender for my therapist, what is my gender… It is frustrating because of where I am right now.”

“Huh...” I replied, “Usually those questions are to help individuals have a bit more say in what type of counselling may be best for them but for you, it seems that has been frustrating.”

Charlie looked to me as they spoke, “I am still trying to decide gender for myself, and sometimes it just feels as if it is such a focus now. And not just a focus, but a need to have labels for me and what gender I am... How can it not be frustrating?”

Charlie looked back to their boots. I could feel the rush of blood in my cheeks as they began to burn from Charlie’s words. They were right, gender was always a focus in society, and even in the room between us as I led the session with wanting to fill out the form instead of asking what Charlie’s process when filling out the self-referral was. I was embarrassed in how even after I mulled over my fear of my earlier reverie that led to my wanting to step out of colonised views of gender to be with Charlie, I had done the opposite. It was a reminder of how I had developed more confidence in more nuanced ideologies of gender was only through other labels such as bisexual or tomboy that I felt able to announce myself. It once again echoed earlier history where there was an emphasis on the classification of sexology, as “naming fixes bodies in time and space and in relation to favoured social narratives of difference” (Halberstam, 2018, p 8). How classification brought a sense of understanding which wove into what society already accepted, and an ease to how I could identify with myself. Language may have helped me, but Charlie was perhaps voicing being somewhere different, and it felt important to note how where Charlie was, as well as how the session started may have reflected those societal classifications.

A bit embarrassed, I adjusted myself in the chair. “You are right. Gender is a focus, whether it is gender bathrooms, clothes, or in forms” I said, as I nodded to the form sitting on the floor next to me. "I wonder if leading the session with filling out the form potentially emphasises that in this room. Between us.”
Charlie quickly looked back at me before they turned their gaze back to their boots as they mulled over my words.

As they pulled inward, I too found myself recoiling back to my own thoughts of what had occurred. I have presented an invitation to Charlie to explore how the intake form may have impacted Charlie and yet, I wondered how I completely missed the structural power of my presence that went beyond what was inherent in the role of a counsellor (Proctor, 2017). I was cis gender, meaning someone who identifies with the gender they were assigned at birth. While Charlie was potentially may be what Halberstam (2018) defines as trans*, an umbrella term of gender variants and, through its use of an asterisk, it can acknowledge the “shifting set of conditions and possibilities rather than to attach it only to the life narratives of a specific group of people” (p 5). Both of us were currently located in a society where most of our labels and understanding of gender were coloured by colonisation and dominated by cis gender, heterosexual narrative. Such a social world meant there were a lot of left out voices who did not fit these narratives (Phipps, 2020) and one again, for Charlie, they were facing an intake process where their voice was being forced into these narratives. Leaving out Charlie’s own voice, their own language.

The embarrassment, which burned my cheeks, was my counsellor-self becoming aware of how I had contributed to Charlie’s potential silence instead of helping them to discover their own language to become an active agent of change (Martínez Ruiz, 2020). The haunting reverie had attempted to remind me to attune myself to Charlie’s language and now, as Charlie and I both mulled over what had been said, I wondered how I could use the reverie to my advantage, rather than pushing it away.

Charlie finally spoke, “I guess?... A part of myself feels more worried when you bring it up. Why would you need it, what does that mean here? My gender, that is.”

“Are you asking how your gender may affect the service?” I enquired.

Charlie sighed, “Yes... As in sometimes it is a specific gender only space, especially with sexual assault. With this service, I was unsure what would happen if I answered. I saw there was a women’s only space or which gender I preferred for my therapist, which I guess makes sense to ask but all of it together... I was just unsure of what it meant for this service.... Or rather worried about what it meant?”

Charlie looked back at me after they finished. Their seeking of answers prompted the nervousness in my stomach to return. Charlie was once again correct in their reflection, when it comes to sexual violence counselling services, most of them were gendered and with a direct focus on having a woman’s only space free from any possibility of subjugation from cis gender men in the hopes of making it safe for the individual who may have experienced the sexual violence from cis gender men (Gottschalk, 2009). Of late, with gender terminology expanding and updating, there has been a huge debate among these centres on how to draw a line for these spaces and whether individuals who fall under the umbrella category of trans* should be able to access these services.

This was a debate my colleagues and I would frequently visit either due to our own personal ideologies or the ones imposed upon us. The nervousness in my stomach from Charlie’s inquiry was from how alive this debate was. When gendered services had been asked around inclusion of trans* individuals, most would either take the client on their word for their gender and most
admitted that they would not prod further (Gottschalk, 2009). Part of this was in recognition of how asking could be intrusive, while others reflected the research shows not only are the lifespans of a trans woman are forty-five years less than cis woman; individuals who are trans* experience sexual violence at twenty-one percent higher rates than cis woman as their rates fall around nine percent (Boe et al, 2021). Though, it was important to note these number may not be entirely accurately due to difficulties of reporting sexual violence for both parties; reading such numbers fills my stomach with dread. Individuals who are trans* need these spaces as much as individuals who are cis gender. It felt inhuman to exclude in these spaces and risk of harm when there is a refusal to those who have also suffered.

Yet, even with this research, with the updating of gender terminology and move towards inclusivity of gendered spaces for sexual violence services, there has been a push back due to an alliance between white feminist and conservatives who depict individuals who are trans* as potential rapists and suggest they must be kept from gendered spaces in the name of ‘women’s safety’ (Phipps, 2020). One of the biggest voices being famed author J.K. Rowling, who has continued to reverberate these ideologies as she has condemned Scottish government for wanting to reform the gender bill (Wheaton, 2022) and even opened her own counselling service for only cis gender women, condemning other services working with sexual violence for being more inclusive (Bulbul, 2022). Not to mention its impact on counselling sessions as a whole, as Throop (2023) acknowledges, “Process of marginalisation and radialization deeply affects the experience and expressions of empathy. In such cases, empathy is without a doubt unevenly and unequally distributed, with some persons deemed more or less worthy of “empathy”” (p 31). For those who may fall under the umbrella of trans*, and for Charlie’s experience so far of our first counselling sessions, the level of empathy they feel/were receiving can be less than their cis gendered counterpart.

The nervousness was also how these narratives felt as if they were a rabbit hole ready to pull me in, and if I was pulled in, there might be very real implications of harm for Charlie if I was not careful. There was a limitation on what I could promise for Charlie as, at the present, counselling centres who helped those who experienced sexual violence faced increasing political pressure to return to more colonial language (Halberstam, 2018). These ideologies have slowly formed into acts of violence and threats, forcing these services to barricade themselves in order to safeguard their workers and service users (Ramsay, 2022) from voices perpetrating the fear J.K. Rowling helped to insinuate in her worries of how gender reform would only give ‘dangerous men’ access to vulnerable women (Wheaton, 2022). Something that has made many cis gendered women fearful of any hidden phallus as some echo these pressures from J.K. Rowling and have even left a few angry emails in my inbox as clients demanded to know what was between my legs given ‘Jaz’ could be a man’s name. An expected exclusion ideology within the UK has been the reason for why such services in the UK have had a rise in transphobic and abusive calls on crisis lines, taking space away from those who need it, with some cisgendered women workers refusing to help those who do not fit into what they believe to be a ‘real woman’ (Mclean, 2021). Repeating earlier ideologies within the UK and U.S. history of how bodies felt the pressure to present as the assumed natural ‘femininity’ for women or face harassment, now a days we see examples of this Transphobia affecting everyone, including cis women as they face harassment when trying access public bathrooms due to not looking ‘feminine’ enough (Phipps, 2020). It created questions of whether Charlie could even access these sessions, and a question around safety, not only for myself as a counsellor, but for Charlie and how they may feel walking to our sessions, given all centres working with those who experienced sexual violence have become a target.
As this nervousness only rose further up in my body, I realised Charlie was beginning to enquire what they could expect from me, from this placement, and how it will impact their access to help. Yet instead of answering, I noticed I was quick to ask more questions. “Is the worry that if you do answer that you are unsure of your gender, then that affects the service? As in you will not get therapy, or might be pushed into one space and excluded from another?” I asked.

Charlie returned to a few “Umms…” before they sunk further in their chair. “I… I just want to know if… If… Well, I guess it feels like this is another space where I have to conform…” Charlie muttered as they looked from me back to their outstretched legs.

I went to reply, but paused, an awkward silence filling the room instead of my own words. It was as if we -or perhaps I- was unsure of how to approach the rabbit hole and the pressures from the political world, that I have noted above, within it. How my own nervousness had left me stuck in a tension from the ideologies invoked from the intake form.

When I first wrote this chapter, I went back and forth on whether I would make this fictive placement exclusive or inclusive. My worries were if I were to make it exclusive, I was then contributing to another story which leaves someone who was trans* without support; but in inclusivity, there was the helplessness of how these ideologies of gender, continued from the colonised view of gender, made it unsafe. Forming a question of if Charlie would even be able to access such a space without a fear of violence, especially if they, and the fictive placement I constructed, were visible and not hidden from the pressures of conservatives, Trumpism, Alt Right, and voices, akin to JK Rowling, to become these ideologies. As much as I asked for defined categories in the beginning, I was unwilling to do it here, to define it for Charlie of what I could offer them, what I could promise in a world that was not always safe for those who do not conform to these colonise ideologies of gender (Halberstam, 2018) (Iantaffi, 2021).

I was stuck in the tension these ideologies evoked, a tension which Charlie felt to be wanting to move through with me, and yet I was unsure of how to step forward.

The first urge was the saviour, as if I could once again save another client, in this case Charlie, from the world that pressures them to ‘pass’, or to present themselves to match the sociocultural gender norms of appearance (Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019). To erase how they were most likely seeking out counselling for sexual violence as, Kolysh (2021) and Matsuzaka and Koch (2019) argue, many cis gender men will attack someone if they realise the woman they were catcalling has a phallus, or rip off clothes to aggressively confirm what genitalia they are projecting their fantasies on.

Yet I knew this path, the socially ingrained path for me to take in the discomfort of transphobia, was not the one I should take as it may only lead to Charlie’s continued silence. I needed a path which felt to be what Ahmed (2017) describes as swimming upstream when we go against embedded cultural ideologies. A path from my own reflection where I recognised how in my reveries, I was solely focused on if I could recognise Charlie’s own subjectivity and had forgotten about my own (Benjamin, 1998). The parts of my subjectivity which did not want to define this fictive placement and face the points of helplessness, agitation, and grief from the transphobia; to face the feelings within the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) from forced patriarchal roles. How even if I echoed what others had argued for those who were trans*, specifically trans women or trans men, do live a gendered narrative similar to that of their cis gender counterparts (Bellot, 2019), I could not guarantee other counsellors or service users in this placement held such a belief. Nor could I promise those who wrote policies for this
placement and in parliament would come to such a realisation either. Charlie knew this, and it was unfair of me to pretend the political world Charlie walked through every day somehow vanished when they walked through the door of this counselling room.

The haunting of the reverie howled,

"Can. I. Be. Me?!"

“I realised there I have not answered any of your questions.” I began, breaking the silence. “To be honest, I did not want to answer these questions you have asked because I am nervous of those answers as well... and yet to not answer is unfair for you...”

Charlie looked from their shoes directly at me. “It is unfair.” They answered sternly.

I nodded as I continued, “You’re right, and to be fully transparent, this centre has been slower to update our policies but about two years ago we opened our services to all genders, women, men, nonbinary, trans*... But we have kept a ‘women’s only time’.”

“So, I can access this service even if I do not define my gender?” Charlie asked.

“Yes. As long as you are not accessing women’s only time... So far women’s only time is later today, so we just missed it... But it feels important to note that this inclusion has not come without repercussions. Like other sexual violence centres, we are facing harassment, and it may be something we need to consider when you travel here in person.” I answered.

Charlie let out a sigh as they continued to sink further in their chair, their outstretched legs covering the length of the space between us. They muttered, “It is always a witch hunt, isn’t it?”

“A what?” I asked, not quite hearing what they said.

“A witch hunt... Like they are always trying to find out if I am a witch or not... If I have the sign of the devil,” They paused to motion to their genitals, “or if I am ‘safe’.” Charlie finished with hand quotes, looking back at the wall, irritation spreading across their face.

One of the transphobic assumptions which have arisen out of these ideologies was how having a phallus was what made someone powerful, as if a penis was what created a patriarchal ambiance (Boe et al, 2021). Something Sanyal (2019) has noted to be part of narratives around rape where anyone with a penis was supposed to fight against their sexuality for “‘rape is in your genes’” (p 6). Men were then deemed to always be dominant in the hierarchy of gender, which, according to Lazard (2020), supported heterosexuality ideologies of men to seek out sex with women and if one pushes out of that ideology, then they may be attacked violently resulting in sexual harassment and sometimes even sexual violence.

The ideological assumption of a powerful penis was built from a history where the penis was an object of admiration as the superior genitalia by many doctors in the UK and U.S. (Cleghorn, 2021), and famously Freud, as the object that brings forth men's inherent beast they force upon women. With such admiration came power, and the penis soon was known as a dangerous weapon that could “bypass” the brain and be “uncontrollable” once aroused (Bourke, 2007, p 420). As if the penis somehow had a will of its own, and in turn, such ideologies continue to
infiltrate how we think of the penis in discourses around sexual violence. However, as Bourke (2007) wrote,

“This dangerous inverted phallic worship can be criticized from two perspectives: the first addresses the supposed relationship between aggressivity and the penis in the context of empirical studies of sexual performance in rape; the second emphasizes the theoretical inadequacies in its conception of the male sexed body” (Bourke, 2007, p 418)

To criticise these ideologies was not to discount anyone who had been at the mercy of a weaponised penis, nor was it to discount experiences where someone had felt that power over them. It was to note how a penis was not inherently a weapon, and to acknowledge how in ‘bestowing’ this much ‘authority’ (Bourke, 2007, p 421) onto the penis creates ideologies which have affected how we research sexual violence, how we talk around sexual violence, and have even influenced laws there. In the U.S. and UK, it was only recently that rape has changed from something that could only be forced on a female and must involve penetration by a penis (p 7). As Sanyal (2019) summarises, “only women could be raped and only men could be rapist” (p 7). Rape was depicted to be something that could not be done by any gender, nor could any gender be raped; a continued ideology of where vaginas were always to face violence from their genital counter parts, the penis. To summarise, the scapegoating narrative of genitalia ignores the patriarchal system that supports such ideologies and has been echoed in how Trumpism and Alt Right will scapegoat their behaviours.

This patriarchal power, and forced gender roles, once again echoed the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) we faced in this session. As I typed these words, they conjured up my own irritation towards the imagery of a witch hunt Charlie faced. The continued imagery of an intrusive, violent hunt, stripping Charlie with the excuse it was for the best. There was no consideration for Charlie and their own autonomy of their body.

This witch hunt further aggravated the irritation as this was an echo of the sexual violence I have written above. The violence of not conforming to what these ideologies bodies’ genital destiny. Seen in thought out time in the witch hunts before the 1800s and the ripple effects of these accusations (Sollée, 2017; Cleghorn, 2021). As well as during the suffragist movement where medical professionals would force feed protesters with twenty-inch tubes orally, anally, and vaginally as these bodies did not succumb to what was expected of them, their genital destiny of femininity and baby incubating (Cleghorn, 2021). Charlie was looking for help. Their genitalia should not be a factor in that help. At least that was what my own anger was screaming at me. An anger which continued to bubble away as I sat across from Charlie, aware of how a silence had begun to form.

The haunting of the reverie grumbled, 

*Can I be me?*

“I… well I am aware I feel quite angry about the thought of you going through this intrusive witch hunt.” I replied.

Charlie only continued to look at their feet as they said, “I would say it is more tiring as it is something that happens every day... I have to think about it when I need to go to the bathroom in public, or when I buy clothes... I just want to get help without this being a thing...”

I noticed Charlie’s eyes well up as they continued to look towards their feet, mimicking how my own nervousness and fear welled up from where our conversation was leading. Even if I
were to work on my own innate transphobia which was informed from these political narratives, I could not control the transphobic laws intruding upon this session, the violence stemming from voices who perpetuated these political narratives, and the fear of how others, including those counsellor workers in this placement, may react to Charlie.

“So not anger but tiring, tiring to do this every day... Even when you need help.” I echoed, trying to move myself to be closer to where Charlie’s eyesight was, hoping they would look back towards me. But they only continued to look at their feet, forcing myself to wiggle further in my chair as I noticed the sense of wanting to ‘fix it’ return. Something which may be what Rud (2018) summarises as “an eagerness to help” but takes away the client’s power as it does not give room for the subjectivity of the client, and what may be happening in the intersubjectivity (p 20-21). The ‘fix it’ was the attempt to move away from the despair in these ideologies (Kearney, 2018) that affected both of us, in our actions, and in how we can help. It was important to stay with the tiredness, to validate how tiring it could be for Charlie. How this was not something wrong with them, but a reflection of how these legislative and political ideologies impacted on them.

Charlie exhaled loudly as they looked up towards the ceiling.

“I just want to not be tired, for it to not be a thing. To just come here and get help...” Charlie grumbled.

“Yeah,” I echoed. “The idea of just getting help, without gender being a barrier, seems as if it should be intuitive.”

Charlie continued to look at the ceiling as they spoke, “I know why we have to talk about it... but also wish we didn’t have to have this conversation, like you could just help me, and my gender identity not be a barrier...”

Charlie dropped their gaze from the ceiling back to their toes, as if a weight had landed on their head, pressing them further into their chair. Their slump deepened in their chair, and I too noticed my own slump in my chair increase in response to Charlie. It was heavy, the tiredness Charlie had vocalised. A pain of how this tiredness continued to impact and prevent Charlie from getting the help they needed. From being able to be who they are.

I spoke, “I feel this tiredness physically pushing me into the chair... It’s heavy... and I feel as if it just asks, "can I be me?"”

“...Can I be me...” Charlie repeated, added another audible exhale before they said, “It is heavy...”

“Mhm.” I responded with a nod as we continued to slump from the tiredness that weighed on the session.

As the silence settled in, Charlie only looked towards their platform boots, occasionally tapping them together as I switched my gaze between Charlie and the tapping. Neither of us spoke as we experienced the tiredness that asked us to pause in our flow.

To feel the slump from how heavy it was.
To notice the impact these barriers had on Charlie’s and I first session together.

A mostly silent observation as I could occasionally hear Charlie take an exacerbated inhale and exhale.

Then finally a stirring as Charlie shifted slightly and out of habit, I too mimicked their shift as I adjusted myself in the chair. I began to wonder if I should check in with Charlie or let the silence continue when Charlie looked at me as they spoke, “But I can access these sessions?” Breaking the heaviness which had settled for a few minutes.

“Yes.” I replied.

Charlie lifted themselves up in their chair a little, “At least there is that…”

Another pause.

Charlie went to speak but stopped. I could see they were trying to figure out what to ask next, leaving me to stay silent to give them space to formulate their question.

“But you can face harassment?” They finally asked.

“The centre can, at the moment I am only aware of it being on the phone and social media… But we can think about it here. There is safeguarding we can do as we have done with other service users.” I replied.

What looked like visible frustration crossed Charlie’s face as they said. “Okay... though it would be easier if people would stop being assholes...”

“Yeah...” I muttered, not quite sure how to respond as this felt to be a larger topic than we had time for.

Charlie nodded and as they looked back to their boots, noticing the form sitting on the floor across from them as they asked, “And the form?”

“Well... we do need to confirm a few of your answers... but the gender parts, I need to double check with my manager if we must have it. Then, if we decide to continue with these sessions, I can confirm it with you in the next session...? If you are comfortable with me mentioning this, not what we talked about but to ask the question.” I answered.

Charlie looked towards the wall as they thought and then they looked back at me as they said, “Yeah that sounds fine... Let's get started on this form then and we can skip the gender bit.”

“Oh,” I reached for the form, placing it back on my lap taking a quick glance at the clock, “We have about 10 minutes left... so we can get as far as we can in five-ish minutes and maybe next week we can do another initial session to discuss what you are hoping to get out of these sessions?”

Charlie quickly glanced at the clock as well. “Oh,” They said, “Yeah... Is that okay? Didn’t realise that much time had passed...”
“Yes, we won’t finish it today anyways due to the questions I need to check, but let’s just correct some other bits and then go from there?” I replied.

Charlie nodded as I looked back to the clipboard, ready to finally finish the form that had first formed the haunting reveries of Charlie.

Or at least, parts of the form as the haunting of the reverie prompted, 

Can I be me?
Irritation.

Exasperation.

Tension.

I stumbled around in the bathroom before my last counselling session as I changed. My menstruation had made an unexpected appearance and left me flustered as I both tried to ready myself for the next client while cleaning up the blood. For ten years I had found regularity in every flow, knowing how my mood would drop before my cycle, and how my confidence would rise during ovulation. I could use this awareness to observe how these changes would even affect my client work, aware of how this cycle may be the reason, for what Therese Benedek observed as the effect of oestrogen levels on emotions and behaviours directed to the outer world (Kolod, 2010). Noting how I responded to who sat across from me may change depending upon where I am in relation to my menstrual cycle. With parts of my cycle being the cause for why I may feel more ‘receptive’ to others, versus feeling less receptive to others as I focus on more ‘inward-directed activity’ (Kolod, 2010, p 87) due to the hormonal changes.

And then my menstruation became irregular. It would lengthen or disappear entirely. My blood flow would increase or decrease while my cramps only amplified as I crawled to my gynaecologist for help. After reviewing my options, she had suggested switching my birth control from the copper IUD (Intrauterine device) to the hormonal one and after one painful procedure, suddenly my hormones-menstruation-irregularity moved from just affecting my physical body to affecting my emotional-self as I adjusted to this new IUD. Tears flowed down my cheeks at the sight of sensitive TV scenes while I would feel my own rage bubble upwards to the slightest of inconveniences. The sensitivity to my reactions only continued, as I had hoped the two weeks I had taken off from client work would have been enough, but as I walked back into the counselling room, the new sensitivity only remained as my emotions stayed heightened from the additive of hormones rushing through my system. My supervisor had suggested this offered a chance for radical empathy, with what Givens (2021) argues as the first step required an individual to be open and willing to be vulnerable. These heightened emotions could get me closer to the vulnerability arising out of the session and help me to both
recognise, step into, and respond to others emotional state (p 27-28). The hope of how I could use this sensitivity to respond to my clients at a deeper empathetic level through the use of radical empathy from the vulnerability of my current state.

Nevertheless, I could not hide from the voices who followed the exaggerated emotions and new hormones. The voices who I quoted earlier in this thesis where Trumpism argues women are just overly hormonal; rooted in the western history of menstruation where it was an illness which “handicapped” and made menstruating individuals inferior (Cleghorn, 2021, p 260).

“You are being irrational from your emotions...”, “You are acting hysterical...” reverberated off the bathroom wall as I finished changing, my nerves rising as I wondered how I could be with my last client. A client who my supervisor also suggested, “Maybe this client requires you to be more vulnerable...”

I tried to shake the thoughts away, to focus on my next client Elena who surprised me in our first session by how well she presented herself after she had written in her self-referral how she felt as if she had started to “collapse inwards”. Elena had originally been recommended to self-refer by her doctor after she had revealed that the reason why she needed anxiety medication stemmed from a recent experience of sexual harassment within her workplace, for which she was now working her way through the complaint process. Elena had already had experiences of a sexual assault in college, and following the recent harassment, the doctor thought it was best she went into counselling.

Yet, it felt as if Elena was anything but collapsing inwards. In our first session, she burst through the doors, glistening with sweat, and with her hair tied into a tight ponytail. Her well-presented aura was infectious as I too matched her energy, correcting my posture to sit upright in my chair across from her and pulling my shoulder blades back to keep myself from hunching forward. We were quick to find rapport around our shared love for fitness, as we were both fitness instructors - myself coaching fitness classes throughout the week, and Elena coaching a running group before our Tuesday evening appointment-. She reminded me of when I had started my career as a coach at an all-women’s gym. Narratives of female empowerment entered the space between us as we focused on her running group that she had started after she felt there were a lot of women who were scared to run on their own due to the potential violence women faced when running. These discussions would then always circle back to the politics of women rights which we would discuss analytically, as if we were two professional coaches trying to make a difference; rather than a counselling session where we related to ourselves and the environment we found ourselves in (Tudor, 2018). The politics of women’s rights were the sole focus in our first two sessions as Elena and I connected to our activism, and anything more felt unfamiliar territory that we both were unready to explore. Any question of what may lay underneath were met with, “Uh I guess I was sad?... No, frustrated but I mean who isn’t frustrated with men and what they can get away with...” as Elena would redirect back to the fight against the patriarchy.

I had taken our avoidance to supervision a week before I had left for my procedure to change IUDs, where my supervisor and I had used the time to explore the countertransference, that is the counsellor’s feelings towards the client that can be both a reaction to the relationship as well as from the counsellor’s own personal life (Jacobs, 2017). The pull back to being in an empowered fitness space brought forth specific memories where I had ‘empowered’ myself similar to how Rottenberg (2018) notes of a new emergence of feminism, which she labels as neoliberal feminism. Rottenberg (2018) pinpoints the continuance and emergence of neoliberal feminism to work like Ivanka Trump’s book Women Who Work that helps to promote such
ideologies. A neoliberal feminist subject was the “woman-as-stock” (p 1074) model where ways to ‘empower self’ circles around the ideas of women are only successful through a business model of constantly improving, investing, and networking (p 1077). Lazard (2020) also noted how an individual frames their life around their ambition and success (p 10). There was less, if any, acknowledgement of how structural inequalities may impact the individual (Lazard, 2020) and suggested how a woman must ‘proactively’ create their success “through continuous labour and perseverance” (Rottenberg, 2018, p 1074). For neoliberal feminism, if a woman was unsuccessful, if a woman had a less than impressive life, it was due to their own failure and/or their own laziness.

The neoliberal feminist ideologies had echoed in the actions of my younger self where I had exercised constantly. I dieted, I studied, I worked. I created a persona on Facebook depicting a young woman who was the ‘healed’, ‘happy ending’, ‘stronger than ever’ post trauma survivor. A woman who could somehow squat their way out of the ‘double bind’, or what it was like to be forced into the narratives of how a woman ‘should’ act (Heriot, 2021). Blissfully ignoring how structural oppression and inequalities impacted my own subjective experience of the world. Ignoring my own privilege, I may, or may not, hold. Ignoring how those inequalities would still have an impact on who I was, hoping that next bicep curl would be the one to fully erase any traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) I had encountered, and ignoring any distress rising from the awareness within recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavina, 2007). The allure of how I could ‘empower’ myself out of the vulnerability from acknowledging it may not always be in my control, potentially mimicking Elena’s own pull from the vulnerability to the activist in our sessions. I had been quick to collude with her, to move back to my previous neoliberal feminist self and, as I finished cleaning up, I once again found the pull to the neoliberal feminist. It felt safer than the idea of radical empathy (Givens, 2021) and vulnerability. To be able to ignore the emotions from the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018) and recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavina, 2007) as we moved to the safe waters of ‘fix it’ activist mode. The idea of vulnerability, to back track to my counselling self and try something that may be more vulnerable within feminism that Elena had brought to our sessions felt akin to a wounded healer where a counsellor pulls from their own trauma experiences to connect at an emotionally deeper level with their clients (Zerubavel and O'Dougherty, 2012). How could I be with Elena when I felt my own trust in my emotions slipping? How could I silence the voices in the back of my head labelling me as an overly hormonal therapist? How could I be a counsellor as I continued to adjust to my new birth control that can take up to six months to settle? How could my hormonal-self meet Elena’s wounded-self?

I was less than a month in.

I had less than ten minutes till Elena would arrive.

I felt less sure of myself.

I checked myself in the mirror to make sure I had not missed anything, aware of how I was delaying leaving the bathroom. To return to the introduction where the bathroom helped me to hide from what may be lurking outside of it. Even if I would eventually have to leave to be with Elena, the uncertainty in myself potentially pulled me into the Kleinian theories of the ‘paranoid schizoid’ and ‘depressive position’ which explains the former as a state of anxiety where the individuals split the world into binary labels of ‘perfect’ and ‘unacceptable’, where the latter is the ability to view someone as ‘whole’, both good and bad (Roth, 2001). How our sessions -how my new IUD- created impressions of activism as good and vulnerability as bad.
‘Fix it’ as good, ‘emotions’ as bad. Neoliberal feminist self as ‘good’, hormonal therapist as ‘bad’. To slip into the ease of black and white labels even though, once again, my counsellor brain reminded me how the world was really a murkier spectrum.

I knew from supervision this could be part of the countertransference. My own uncertainty in myself may be the cause for a projection of what I feel was unacceptable in myself and may hide where Elena may be in hers if she was even in the paranoid schizoid position as well. I needed to resettle myself, to be okay with my hormones, to push away the voices who haunted me, and step out of the bathroom.

I did a small shake, letting out a deep breath when I heard the bell ring for the arrival of what was most likely to be Elena. With no more time, I exited the bathroom to walk over to the entrance.

I opened the door to Elena as I said, “Come on in...”

Elena let out an inaudible mumble as she pushed past, bee-lining for our room to collapse into the chair across from mine.

With an exacerbated sigh she spoke to me from across the room, “You think they will remember me as a good feminist?”

“What?” I replied. I had not quite heard what she had said as I had only just shut the door to the entrance and was still trotting over to our room.

“Am. I. A. Good. Feminist?” Elena spoke louder, enunciating each word to make sure I had heard.

“Um...” I paused as I shut the door to our room and moved to the chair across from Elena. I finished my reply as I sat down, “Sorry let me just settle in, are you asking me if I think you are a good feminist?”

“Yeah, you know, what people will say when I leave the room... Do you think it is that I am a good feminist?” Elena paused as she looked towards the wall before she continued, “I think I am a good feminist but maybe not...”

“Okay...” I responded.

Confused.
Flustered.
On edge.

My hormones struggled to grapple with what Elena had brought as well as the Elena who sat across from me. Elena’s usual activewear was swapped for formal blouse and trousers; her upright posture was exchanged for a slump, as if she was in foetal position in the chair. For a few seconds I noticed my thoughts wandered to if perhaps I had taken someone else’s client.
Elena consistently had started our previous sessions with something that had happened to her in the week confirming her hatred for the patriarchy, such as men cat calling at her running group or a male co-worker that made a joke of Elena filing a sexual harassment complaint. This was a completely different Elena, a formal attire Elena, who was focused on both herself and how others would define her. It brought me back to supervision, the paranoid schizoid (Roth, 2001), and thoughts of neoliberal feminism as good and vulnerability as bad.

However, this felt slightly different to my own thoughts from earlier, as I was aware of my countertransference, hence, the difference made me wonder what it meant for Elena. It was not that Elena had just focused on the outside world, but how others had seen her and if it matched her own idea of herself. It was a shift towards something Judith Butler theorises as the subjective perception being interwoven with how society symbolises it, especially in “experience of a subject who’s raced or gendered subject positions’’ (Mintchev, 2018, p 243). Perhaps Elena’s idea of a ‘good feminist’ was not just the simplicity of Kleinian categories, but the complexity of the layers of historical context, society, and others who surrounded Elena. It was not Elena’s internal world of good and bad, but what politics had impressed upon what a ‘good’ feminist was which Elena had focused on. This left me to wonder, was Elena also in her own world of anxiety that required her to split the world into good and bad? And, if so, what was the ‘badness’ she may have been protecting herself from?

“Are we wondering about how others see you as a feminist?” I finally added.

Elena continued to face the wall as she spoke, “Yeah... It is hard to explain but I know objectively I am a good feminist. I created this running group. I am doing the complaint process at work... I am doing this.” She paused to look towards me to emphasise counselling before she continued, “Then I was at an art fundraiser event for a woman’s aid centre...”

“I noticed the new outfit.” I interjected.

“Yep, no running tonight,” Elena shrugged and then looked back to the wall as she continued, “Anymore, at the event they asked for women to share their stories to help others, but I did not raise my hand to volunteer... I wondered if I should have...”

“So, you felt you should have done more? And because you didn’t, then maybe you are being a ‘bad’ feminist.” I reflected, noticing how I felt I was starting to grasp what may have prompted this question and the different Elena who sat across from me.

“Yes... Well, it is more than that, I guess... The running group is good, but what about everything else...?” Elena trailed off as she shifted herself in her chair.

“Everything else...?” Was all I had replied as the little grasp I felt earlier slipped away. I was torn between if she truly wanted me to answer this question for her or what had been stirred up for when she found she was unable to speak. I asked, “To be honest I am a bit lost, I guess I am wondering if you are asking the question because you want me to answer-?”

“No, you are biased.” Elena interrupted me.

“...Okay so you are not asking me but just wondering...” I replied.
“I guess.” Elena answered as she shifted in her chair to angle herself towards the wall, away from me.

“...To be honest I am still lost.” I said.

Elena did not respond as she continued to look at the wall.

I continued, “Maybe talking about how you are feeling after the fundraiser may be helpful.”

Elena began to fiddle at the seams of her blouse and furrowed her brow.

A small pause before she finally spoke, “I don’t know, a bit of F.O.M...”

“As in fear of missing out?” I asked.

Elena nodded, “I didn’t really enjoy the event, I was missing my running group and thinking about the run they were doing tonight without me... It feels as if that’s when I really do feel like a good feminist, when I am coaching. To see how my runners achieve a personal best- you know that feeling- how proud you are for your runner.” Elena smiled as she looked to the window behind me as I noticed myself mirroring Elena’s smile.

The thought of her as a ‘good feminist’ in her running group had felt sweet, something I could connect to as it was akin to how my own feminist side first blossomed. It felt Elena and I had both found fitness as an empowering way to face the aftermath of sexual violence, similar to the artist Luciano Garbati’s rendition of a seven-foot statue of Medusa who was to be placed across the New York County Criminal Court where high profiled sexual violence cases like Harvey Weinstein stood trial. Medusa's original story was one of sexual violence only to be banished, created into a monster who destroys men, and was eventually killed by Perseus. However, in Garbati’s display, Medusa holds Perseus head in hand making Medusa the victor in response to the aftermath of feminist movements #MeToo, where it tried to put sexual harassment in the spotlight, demanding and seeing justice to those who were called out (Solomon 2020). Maybe this was Elena’s own way of holding Perseus’s head in her hands. To be a ‘good feminist’ meant a heroic tale in her eyes where she fought against her attackers by using her story to help others and through the creation of her running group.

“Yeah, it is exciting to see someone you coach achieves something...” I replied before I paused.

There was still confusion.

Disconnection.

Apprehension.

I was unsure of what my hormones were attaching onto in Elena’s experience; if Elena felt the confusion in the question she was grappling with, if Elena felt the disconnection as she had turned away from me in session, or if she felt the apprehension to approach what may be behind this question. The thought of Elena at the event, the lack of enjoyment, the want to be in a group where she felt like she could be a ‘good feminist’, and for some reason not actively participating felt, somehow, to not be good enough. It brought me back to the ideologies of neoliberal feminism where women are the ones responsible to turn their tragedy into a
comeback story or within the workplace where they are the ‘gatekeeper’ in both their behaviour in prevention of sexual harassment but also men’s behaviour as well (Lazard, 2020). The emphasis on how women ought to be the ones empowered enough to be agents of change to escape their own oppression (ibid). The neoliberal feminist aspects of how “polarisations around agency as good and passivity as bad” (Lazard, 2020 p 63) felt as if it had crept its way into Elena’s own thoughts around her moment of passivity instead of agency at the event.

But my own apprehension stopped me from opening up to Elena with my reflections. How could I trust I was accurate in these observations with my hormones out whack? Perhaps Elena was just annoyed she did not speak up? Perhaps Elena was annoyed she went to this event she did not enjoy instead of coaching her running group she adored? Or perhaps the event evoked Elena’s own annoyance towards the patriarchy?

“And?” Elena spoke up, interrupting me from my thoughts. Her gaze had returned from the window to me.

“Oh... I guess I am trying to feel into it, I am stuck on the thought of you being at the event.” I answered.

“And?” Elena repeated.

“Well,” I took a second to shake off the apprehension, “I noticed you turned away from me when I asked what was behind the question... and then there was the comparison of the event versus your running group... Guess I feel a bit of disconnection and maybe apprehension.”

“Disconnection and apprehension?” Elena echoed, turning back to face the wall before she adjusted herself slightly more towards me.

“I guess I am feeling frustrated to be honest…” Elena said.

“So, frustration.” I echoed.

“Yeah... I... I don’t know if I mentioned it here, but I have been struggling with my voice. At first, I thought I was yelling too much when coaching...” Elena said.

I nodded.

“But then it kept happening. I went to the GP, and they told me it was laryngitis, he gave me some throat spray, then lozenges... Even examined me and said apparently it isn’t my tonsils and it was ‘in my head’ or something...” Elena said.

“In your head?” I asked.

“Yeah, as in psychological...” Elena crossed her arms as she spoke, “It is just another way of saying I got sexually assaulted and couldn’t handle it. The usual patriarchal stuff that we are all hysterical. Women, I mean... Which they kept saying at the fundraiser ‘survivor’ but maybe I am just a victim... or whatever label they are using now for us...a whore... a bomb waiting to go off, damaged, a liar...”

Aggressive.
Volatile.

…Vulnerable?

The labels I could feeling pouring out of Elena were labels I had heard repeatedly within my work counselling sexual violence within the UK as they were echoes from the UK and U.S. history where doctors would diagnose women with hysteria when they would try to speak out about the sexual violence they faced (Sanyal, 2019). Or, more recently, how the media within news outlets within the UK and U.S. would label the individual as ‘deserving’ of the violence they had experienced as they had worn revealing clothing or taken a back alley (Solnit, 2020). How the implicit labels of ‘liar’ and ‘whore’ arose from the questions women were asked, as in what they did to prevent it, or even worse, what they did to incite it (Taylor, 2020). Those labels had even found their way into research, during the rise of neoliberalism in the U.S. and UK, where researcher who wanted to understand what made sexual violence prevalent focused on ‘victim responsibility’ and, arguably according to Lazard (2020), designed studies which “reproduces victim blame as a reasonable and legitimate thing to do when making sense of sexual harassment” (p 21). It brought forth back how neoliberalism, and neoliberal feminism, continued the rhetoric of ‘agency’, influenced by “white, middle-class privilege” (p 63), forced a pressure of how someone may be and react after sexual violence.

It had not been a surprise to hear these labels pour from Elena, but what was surprising was how with each label Elena’s voice rose and her slumped posture changed into an upright tension as if she was about to fight. How the frustration turned towards what felt to be aggression and volatile reactions to losing her voice and in her doctor’s comments around the loss of her voice. Even in how, though Elena’s frustration felt palpable in the room, I noticed a tightness in my throat, the same tightness I have before I cry, as my hormones whispered of a vulnerability.

The labels which poured from Elena brought with them the dark memories of my trauma from my own mind. “Are you a whore?” my mother had asked when I tried to tell her what had happened. “No one would believe you, who would fuck a fat chick...” he said to me when I had tried to speak out. “Well, you are just depressed...”, “...anti-social”, “... a liar” different therapists and doctors had told me. My own labels, which had embedded themselves within me, reacted to Elena’s and I wondered if perhaps my hormones were reacting to what was in the room, if they were right in there was perhaps a vulnerability underneath there.

I responded, “Let’s pause, these labels, whore, hysteria, survivor, victim... and the loss of your voice...”

Elena mumbled, “Yeah...” before she had turned her head back to the wall, her arms were still crossed.

I tried to collect my thoughts. I was still apprehensive to be, what person-centred counselling would name as congruent, where a counsellor was able to use “what is experienced at the gut level” (Wyatt, 2003, p 83) in relation to what the client was expressing and what was being felt in the moment (Wyatt, 2003). With congruence, the counsellor should be aware of their own frame of reference and through this awareness, a counsellor may choose to express as it relates to the client's frame of reference to aid in the therapeutic process (ibid).
The difficulty lay in my uncertainty of my own frame of reference and distrust towards my own gut as I continued to find myself at the mercy of these new hormones. Part of this was from the narratives written above, a history where people who menstruate were considered irrational, crazy, and inferior (Cleghorn 2020) for it. Even if I had begun to unravel such a narrative within the countertransference in supervision, I was aware of how it continued to appear here with Elena. The voices in the back of my mind which asked if my hormones were right in the vulnerability. What if I was just being overly hormonal? What if poking at the vulnerability distracted from what was truly present, the frustration that was clearly painted across Elena’s face and tightly held in her arms.

And yet…

“I... Well, listening to you, I can feel, and see, the frustration and then there is also the tightness…” I spoke carefully, attempting to be as congruent as possible, “A tightness in my throat that is similar to a tightness I feel before I cry…”

Elena shifted slightly in her chair as she continued to look toward the wall, a silence formed as I waited for her response. I noticed her eyes narrow, her sigh, her own introspection from my words, and my own nerves rise with the growing silence. It was hard to not jump in and drown out the voices in my head which asked if I was right to attempt to be congruent about the vulnerability.

The voices ask if it was once again only my hormones, maybe there was no vulnerability.

But if I did not name it, if I was not congruent, then would we not just return to the re-enactment of us just being activists? My counselling part was telling me perhaps the congruence would help to be open to the vulnerability as the feminist, or rather more accurately named, the wounded feminist (Zerubavel and O'Dougherty, 2012) that I had discussed with my supervisor. Naming the vulnerability could be a way to help us to move away from the neoliberal feminist ideas of if women were victims, then women were powerless and passive to their male counterparts due to neoliberal feminist reinforcement of heteronormative ideals (Lazard, 2020). Where vulnerability can be confused with victimhood and prevented us from noticing the more difficult, messier emotions of what sexual violence leaves us with as the pull to return to the paranoid schizoid (Roth, 2001) makes everything safer when it can only be one or the other. The good or the bad.

Could this be the way for Elena and me to acknowledge how part of the process may be to feel the more vulnerable, powerless emotions without judgement on our character?

Was I just overthinking all of this?

“I guess-”

“Elen-”

We both spoke over each other and then stopped, waiting for the other one to start again. Elena unfolded her arms and shifted awkwardly in her chair in the silence.

I shook my head as I replied, “Sorry, go ahead…”
Elena shifted again in her chair as she spoke, “What I was going to say was, I feel that tightness in my throat too and it makes me miss my coaching voice… I don’t like the vulnerable bit, this person that cannot talk.”

“Person that cannot talk…” I echoed.

“Yeah… I want to be the one who can always be the loudest, the strongest, always improving. To not speak and be vulnerable is not like me.” Elena responded.

Ivanka Trump’s book, Women Who Work, flashed in the back of my mind when Elena spoke. As Rottenberg (2018) warns, the continued message of women to only be successful in how they face “obstacles with resilience, initiative, and creativity, while one's ability to thrive is described as ‘limited only by one's own hunger, drive, passion, and execution’” (p 1074) pressure women to constantly grow, act, and invest in self. There was no space for reflection or noticing of how these feelings may tie back to the social politics of our environment as the two-hundred-page book only spends one page on structural obstacles and every other page on the labour women must complete to succeed (ibid). To hear Elena’s own opinions of how she must continue to improve felt as if it reflected these ideologies neoliberal feminism. Where the business strategy and moral view of “one's own market value as the ultimate aim in life” (p 1078) changes the relationship between both how we react to the world, and to ourselves. A relationship where our business value was more important than attending to our vulnerable feelings of what it means to be at the mercy of patriarchal laws and ideologies which affect us in the U.S. and UK.

In the same breath, neoliberal feminism has helped in feminist movements such as #MeToo, started by Tarana Burke, where the popularity of its ideologies within high-powered corporate women and celebrities who could be the loudest voices in #MeToo movement helped to gain its traction (Rottenburg, 2018: Lazard, 2020). But once again, by such powerful women having the loudest voices in the ideologies around sexual violence, it can erase the multiple narratives of inequalities women may face (Lazard, 2020). Including narratives around victimhood within sexual violence. Neoliberal feminism makes it difficult to return to more nuanced conversations around victimhood due to more inclusive narratives risk “secondary victimisation” (Lazard, 2020, p 62). A risk which felt present in how I felt a potential fragility in how I could approach Elena and her vulnerable self she seemed to be wrestling with in this session.

The awareness of how this conversation may potentially open up the pandora box of victimisation in victim blaming and lack of agency. Not to mention the very obvious parts of myself who, thirty minutes earlier, hid away in the bathroom due to the fear of her own sensitivity and fear of her perceived overly hormonal self that may overwhelm Elena in the vulnerability.

It was not just Elena who wanted to rid herself of this vulnerability, it was myself as well.

“To be honest, I don’t think anyone likes to be vulnerable.” I spoke, “And I can understand why you would want to be your coach self and not vulnerable. I think there is a lot of pressure on how you should ‘act’ or ‘be’ after sexual violence and sometimes that can seem like you should not be vulnerable.”

“Yeah but…” Elena had started to say before she sighed louder, slumping back into her chair.
“What?” I asked.

“Ugh... I just... I don’t know if this reminds me of when I first went to counselling when I just felt weak. It was when the other incident happened in college and every time I felt as if someone didn’t believe me, I would go to that counsellor a wreck and needed her to tell me I was okay... My entire life circled around what happened. I no longer felt like me... I remember just wanting to be something else. To be something other than ‘Elena the rape victim’ but it felt like that would never happen.” Elena had returned to stare at the wall when she spoke.

“Elena the rape victim...” I repeated.

“Yeah... Well, that is how everyone sees me. And here we are again... I am just a rape victim, or survivor and,” Elena had suddenly shot up from her slump as she got louder with each sentence, “if I am in counselling, I am believed and then I go to work and I am not, and then I go to the running group and I am. And it is always what others think right? It isn’t what I feel, it isn’t that I am human, I am traumatised. My doctor says I need this because I am falling apart, my running group says I am strong and rock for them... And you... Well, you are just going to repeat what every other counsellor says... What if I am a bad feminist? What if I am just weak or crazy and that’s why I am losing my voice? What if I could have done something to stop it? But you therapists never acknowledge that, no one does. Everyone argues against me, that I have these feelings. Maybe that’s why I am a bad feminist because I don’t want you to tell me otherwise, I don’t want you to disagree with me...”

Resentment.
Dismissed.
Pain.

Elena’s words had felt as if they cut through me as she reminded me back to why I had named her Elena during my process of creating her for this fictive case study. I had been inspired by Lucia Osborne-Crowley’s (2019) book, *I Choose Elena*, where Osborne-Crowley presented her own journey to be ‘seen’ after facing sexual violence and I had set out to write this chapter to truly ‘see’ Elena and move away from the parts of sexual violence where the diagnosis laid blame on the individual to be wrong, instead of something wrong done to them (Sanyal, 2019, p 72). To step away from how neoliberal feminism only provided a very narrow path of ‘victimhood’ (Lazard, 2020) and business merit value (Rottenburg, 2018). To see Elena as the human being she was and how hard that can be for someone after sexual violence as Sanyal (2019) warns, “trauma doesn’t just have a personal dimension, but a social and political one as well” (p 83). It felt this was the pain that was buried underneath the always improving activist.

I took a breath.

“I hear the struggle. How you have been met with everyone else’s opinion without anyone hearing yours... or seeing you and how that happened here. How I did not acknowledge that.” I said.

Elena, who had leaned forward in our earlier exchange, returned to slumping back in her chair. She exhaled loudly before she spoke. “Guess it feels difficult still... I just feel like I am waiting
I felt myself sigh automatically, the ‘bad’ Elena mentioned was tied to Spring’s (2020) definition of [childhood] sexual violence where the trauma leaves you with the feeling of something being truly wrong within yourself. A part of myself I had described in my own counselling sessions as a tarred kitten who gets pushed from the litter before it could contaminate the others. The part of us who gorges itself on the circulation of ideologies within the political environment which laid blame on you as the one responsible.

“A fear that you are just bad…” I echoed, before I stopped and sighed again. The ‘cuts’ from Elena words stung, and I wondered how I could use congruence (Wyatt, 2003), as I had done previously, to be able to fully articulate the throbbing from these wounds. Words sometimes did not feel enough and as I watched Elena continue to stare at the wall, I wondered if they would be able to encapsulate the metaphorical swim which Solnit (2020) argues was a part of the trauma due to the ideologies within the environment. Elena’s and my own intersubjective experience of these ideologies labelled on how we should act, be, and feel after sexual violence. A swim Elena and I have not had rest from as we both continued to navigate our social circles and how they may see us after our trauma.

Somehow, this swim felt to be part of the congruence (Wyatt, 2003) I wished to convey to Elena, but once again, I felt my own hesitance to express the imagery flowing through my thoughts. Congruence inevitably related to a counsellor’s ability to be vulnerable with their own experiences emerging in relation to the client’s (Wyatt, 2003), echoing parts of what Zerubavel and O’Dougherty’s (2012) argued for counsellors when they wrote of the wounded healer. Both asked of me to be with my vulnerability, with the feelings of this metaphorical swim (Solnit, 2020) through these ideologies of gender and their impact on Elena and me.

Between neoliberal feminism on how one ought to be (Rottenburg, 2018; Lazard, 2020), and Trump’s continued remarks on his ownership over the “pussy” (Rhodes et al, p 745, 2020), left little room for my own reflections and considerations around myself in relation to congruence within the session. Yet, as Wyatt (2003) reminds us, when the therapist was vulnerable in relation to the client, “the connection between two ordinary people is highlighted” (p 86). As much as I wished to hide behind my own professionalism, my counsellor self was aware that if I was asking Elena to consider stepping out and exploring her “bad feminist”, I needed to be willing too as well.

Potentially one way would be sharing this image.

“It is making me think of swimming… but not in a good way. Almost swimming for your life in the ocean during a storm, without break… With cuts that sting and a heavy feeling overwhelmed and tiredness that almost risks you sinking.” I said.

Elena stopped fiddling with her blouse as she looked at me.

“What?” She asked.

“Oh… that was probably out of the blue…” I acknowledged, “I just had an image in my head of you swimming in a storm because being bad reminded me of a book that spoke of how living in a patriarchal world and the trauma it creates can just feel like an endless swim.”
“Oh...” Elena said as she looked back to her blouse and resumed her fiddling. “I guess it can feel like that... Especially as if I am sinking, and it feels as if everyone else’s words are what makes me sink...”

I nodded along with Elena.

“And I don’t know if I want others to see me sink...” She continued.

“Okay,” I answered, “and does that include me?”

“Sometimes.” Elena looked back from the wall to me as she added, “Today was okay... but maybe that was enough...”

“If you are feeling overwhelmed, we can take a break.” I replied.

“Maybe.” Elena paused abruptly and returned to fiddling with her blouse before she continued, “But I think it is I don’t want people to see myself sink because that means I have to admit I am sinking.”

“I think they say the first step is usually denial.” I said with a small smile.

“Yeah... and in...” Elena peered towards the clock, “… ten minutes, I am going to have to go back to the real world and how will that help me there? Sinking and not being able to speak?”

Elena looked directly to me for the answer, and it reminded me Johnson (2020) who acknowledges the innate challenge in being honest to the oppression women face as recognizing it in session can leave the client feeling as if they were “respected as equals” rather “than patronised with partial truths” (p 184). It was important to mirror this reality back to a client, but the challenge becomes how could I both mirror it and not potentially demonise the vulnerability. Part of the challenge I felt was Elena pushing against why vulnerability was important when it may not serve her when she walks through the door.

“Hmmm... You are right, walking through that door feeling as if you are sinking and cannot speak feels scary.” I answered, “And I feel as if I don’t say it’s important to be vulnerable, I am undermining the sink.”

“Yeah, but all you counsellors think vulnerability is good.” Elena replied sarcastically.

“Of course, I wouldn’t be a counsellor if I didn’t believe in its strength.” I said, “And, I guess I want there to be room in these sessions for something other than just your activist self, whether that is vulnerability or sinking or bad feminist.”

A slight pause before I quickly added, “And, I hear that we need to make sure you feel okay enough when you leave this room.”

Elena let out a quick snort, “Yeah it would be nice to feel a bit more okay before I leave, but what happens if I only want to be an activist in this space?”
“Then be an activist. I guess I’d be curious to why, same with why I was curious you were asking about being a bad feminist.” I shrugged.

Elena’s eyes narrowed a bit before I saw her smile.

“To be honest,” Elena started, “I thought we were just going to rant about the patriarchy, it feels like a different side to you today.”

“To me?” I asked.

“Yeah, you…” Elena trailed off, again her eyes narrowed as if to quickly investigate me, leaving me to feel exposed to her stare. Almost as if she could see the new hormones rushing through my system and new sensitivity I had tumbled with throughout the session.

I opened my mouth to reply before I closed it. We had five minutes before the end of the session, and I wondered what it would mean to respond to Elena’s observation. To note my hormonal therapist self when I still felt an insecurity around it, aware of how even bringing it to my male supervisor felt to be a risk. As Kolod (2010) notes, the menstrual cycle’s impact on someone’s psyche has been under researched due to the sexism and stigma attached to it; noting the few theorists who began to open psychoanalytic theory to menstruation. But even in reading Kolod (2010), it did not bring focus to a hormonal therapist, most research -the few I could find- were around menstruating clients and therapists in menopause. It was not to say there was no research out there but with so little I could find; would it be okay to then speak of it with Elena, especially when not only was there stigma within psychoanalytic tradition as well as neoliberal feminist who do not always promote the vulnerable self.

There was no blueprint to how to do this.

There were no reflections of this in my training as a counsellor.

And with three minutes, there was potentially no time today.

“Hm, I kind of wish there was more time today because this feels important, if you would like we can chat about it further next week? I am just aware we have four minutes, and we still haven’t checked to see if you are okay.” I answered.

“I am okay, I think I moved past the ‘sink’ a while ago.” Elena answered.

“Okay, so next week, same time then?” I asked.

“Yes, but back with sweaty clothes.” Elena said with a smile, getting up out of her chair.

I let out a small smile back to Elena, escorting her to the entrance and back to the world out there. Walking back to the room, I noticed the red dot on my chair, cursing under my breath as I hurried over to it.

“Really? Could you give me a break uterus?” I grumbled, ripping the cover off the chair to see how it had bleed through. There was an irony in how, even with best attempts to clean and pad, it still had left a mark within the session. A mark I wondered if Elena had seen and was the reason why she noted my ‘difference’ in session.
I let out a large sigh, straightening up as I stared at the mark with hands on my hips. I felt myself left with the same question I had asked myself at the end of each chapter, the same question which haunted me as I tried to stay in tension during session as I hope to find transformation with clients in their experiences.

What do I do with the stain?
“Elena’s Session” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023
Chapter 7: Conclusion- What Has Been Gathered from the Streams

“...And they all lived happily, ever after...?”

I paused, before hovering my finger over the backspace button. Once again, how many times have I rewritten this section? How many times have I attempted to find the conclusion to a thesis I wish for there to be no conclusion for? Not out of a selfish desire to keep writing, rather it was the acknowledgement of how I knew a nice, neat conclusion was something you, the reader, may ask of me, and yet I was unsure of how I could provide it. An expectation which had fed, once again, my need to rewrite, edit, delete, and question how I can be with the boundaries and limitations of this thesis. Summarised as the analogy by Solnit (2020), collecting the flotsams when the whole river cannot be written.

These boundaries and limitations whispered to me the flotsams (Solnit, 2020) I could not collect, where U.S. political news circled around Trump as he faced the courts for indictment with a news station reporting seventy percent of republican voters -according to their news poll- still support Trump even with these added criminal charges (Murry, 2023). How the U.S. was impacted by Andrew Tate as he continued to promote toxic masculine ideologies to young boys and in turn, these boys to continue these oppressive ideologies of women to be the weaker, submissive gender (Artsy, 2023). With some U.S. states mass shootings only escalating while legislators ban drag shows to help save U.S. children (Thakker, 2023) only adding to the ideologies of how the threat is not from lack of gun control but from not conforming to colonised views of gender. In the UK the articles told similar stories of these ideologies where UK conservative ministers continued rhetoric of asylum seekers to be criminals who threaten the Britain nationals impacts proposed migration bills (Forrest, 2023), worsening the theories of a us versus them mentality. UK politician, Kemi Badenoch, wondered if changing the defined law of sex to be ‘biological’ amidst transgender equality debates (Dickson, 2023) and in turn could encourage the categorising of genders from colonised views of gender. Even how the UK government passed an anti-strike law, a law giving the government the power to enforce minimum levels of service during strikes. This means it can prevent current professions and professionals from being able to protest (Morris and Bulbul, 2023) and impacts how certain populations who face oppression may be further silenced.

These flotsams who have evaded my grasps call out to me from the river, telling me these ideologies around gender and race were not gone, only evolving in how they may emerge in the power domain (Yates and Hiles, 2010) enacted in legislation or in the stories we tell. There were no nice, neat endings to these ideologies in the political world this thesis had lived in, begging the question of how was I supposed to create one here?

I pressed down on the backspace, deleting what had been written. With reflexivity to be the core of the process for this work, I am once again reminded of Emirbayer and Desmond (2012) who argued reflexivity was an ongoing engagement. Something Pillow (2003) argued for and added the need for it to be balanced with our endeavours to find meaning in the political. The hope then becomes, in these next thousand words for this chapter, will to be finding such a balance between the ‘messy examples’ (Pillow, 2003, p 192) of uncomfortable reflexivity, summaries of what has been represented and the meaning we have found in the political (Pillow, 2003), while continuing the endeavour for the perpetuation of reflections and wonderings. With the last flotsams I attempt to grab -or at least acknowledge- for you, will first be the limitations of what I cannot write and the implications of these limitations. Next will be to check in with the fictive clients, Aisha, Charlie, and Elena to provide a chance to see what
they have internalised and leave space for their stories to be open ended. Finally, it will be my own turn to acknowledge what has been internalised and provide potential therapeutic outcomes I had gathered from the different moments of tension. From this, you may be able to leave this thesis not as a conclusion to your own reflections, but rather this was to be a start - or perhaps just another step- on a long journey of reflection, considerations, and wondering how we may approach our clients and each other in the aftermath of sexual violence.

**The Other: Flotsams Missed**

In the five entities who have emerged from this thesis, you, Aisha, Charlie, Elena, and me, only parts of our identities have been written. These flotsams, the ones who have been missed, collectively make up the other aspects of our identities. The other stories which go beyond our single stories (Adichie, 2009) this thesis had confronted in the tension of gender and race politics within counselling those who have experienced sexual violence.

These other stories make up for the complexity of our identities, and, as I have written in the methodology section, this thesis does not attempt to write these encounters with the single stories (Adichie, 2009) as what will happen when working with the ideologies of gender and race with those who have experienced sexual violence. The complexity of subjective experiences from the aftermath of sexual violence and ideologies of gender and race which emerge in the counselling room suggest each individual interaction will be different to ones I have written here, even if there may be similar themes. The attempt was how in meeting these single stories, in the tension it creates, we can find transformation, however, that does not mean this attempt comes without limitations. This thesis could only cover one moment, one session between therapist and client as my fictive clients and I navigate what emerges from moments of recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavinga, 2007), and the traumarchy (Atkinson, 2018). In what has been missed, moments of further complexity in marginalised communities within gender and race, risk perpetuations of single stories (Adichie, 2009).

These moments may arise from within myself, such as the parts of my identity which relate to the internalised oppressor, she may blind me to the microaggressions and biases I may have
unintentionally written here. There is also the internalised oppressed, the parts of myself unable to explore further, even though fiction, for her wounds were still raw. There were also the bits I may be unable to know of due to the amount of time I had for reflections as this thesis had a deadline.

Other limitations may arise in the limitation of experience I am able to pull from due to both how this thesis draws upon stories form marginalised communities within race and gender as well as sexual violence. Arguably, these areas have been missed within research either due to a “universal spokesperson” (Langridge, 2017, p 176) within research -as mentioned in the methodology section- and/or the difficulty in gathering accurate data around sexual violence due to shame, discrimination, and risk.

These limitations suggest the need for further research within the impact of ideologies of gender and race around sexual violence. Including, but not limited to, how counsellors may reflect upon their own ideologies and how ideologies may emerge in the counselling room when working with those who have experienced sexual violence as well as individual’s own experience of counselling after sexual violence. It feels important for both populations to have space for their own stories in this area of research and as we come to the limits of this thesis, I will attempt to give space to my own fictitious clients. These next few sections will be one last chance to check in the fictive clients Aisha, Charlie, and Elena as we hear from the fictive clients themselves.

Aisha’s Reflections: An Oat Latte

The bell chimed as Aisha opened the door to the café. Aisha had just finished another counselling session and decided to grab a hot drink for comfort when she noticed to her own surprise that she had attended another three sessions after the first ill-starred one. Well, to say ill-starred may have been unfair but, as Aisha stood in front of the counter peering towards the menu of hot drinks, she remembered how unfortunate her first session felt. It started with how nervous she was on the bus ride to the first session. How those nerves rose and formulated into discomfort as an older woman on the bus stared at her down. Aisha could see how the older woman’s thoughts were turning to formulate whether Aisha was a “threat” or another oppressed Muslim woman due to Islam (Hamad, 2020; Olufemi, 2020). Aisha felt herself being interrogated from the older woman’s gaze and tried to hide herself behind her phone as the discomfort grew. A discomfort which followed her from the bus to the steps of her counselling session where Aisha’s soon to be counsellor stood in the door frame fumbling Aisha’s name and continued to glance back at the hijab draped around Aisha.
Aisha had tried to shake the feeling of discomfort when she had followed her counsellor to the room but noticed she could not stop thinking of the old woman at the bus. The feeling of being watched to see if she was a perceived threat, and, with her counsellor carried on with the administrative information, Aisha had pondered if she should bring up her own discomfort. Would this new counsellor be able to hear Aisha’s discomfort or would she react as most would by pushing it away with an anxious performance of ‘fix it’ (Ahmed, 2005). This question grew in Aisha’s mind as it created arms, legs, ears, and trunk. Soon it was an elephant who nestled itself between her counsellor and her. It left Aisha to wonder who would be the first to bring it up. Maybe Aisha should? Or maybe she should ignore it? Would it be worthwhile to bring it up or would it just make it worse? Maybe-

“But that’s it for me, so we can start with what you would like to talk about? Or hoping to get out of these sessions... maybe what brought you here...?” Her counsellor had interrupted her thoughts when she finally turned the session towards Aisha. With her counsellor’s questions, Aisha was brought back to the session, to the reality of what these counselling sessions were for, and how she had yet to tell anyone she was seeking help for an incident only the perpetrator and herself knew of.

Aisha’s family had made vague inquiries to what was wrong as they had noticed how she had been more closed off and frightened of leaving the house. But Aisha was not ready to tell them how at a party a peer at her university had escalated from his ‘jokes’ of her being a ‘terrorist’ to a ‘exotic whore’ and assaulted her as he trapped her in the bathroom. How he had forced his own sexual fantasies of the colonised Muslim women into her (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2017; Hamad, 2020). When Aisha’s counsellor had prompted Aisha with her question, Aisha was reminded of the dread that had formed in her abdomen after the incident and soon returned to replace the discomfort from the earlier bus ride. It was the dread of being assaulted due to these sexual narratives from colonisation around Muslim women. The dread of how her family would feel when they found out. The dread of how her social environment may react to her racialized body being sexually assaulted. The dread of her counsellor may also perceive her in these Islamophobic tropes.

The dread grew, feeding the elephant between her counsellor and Aisha. It was stifling, pressing into Aisha as she was unsure of where she should start or even how she could speak to what was occurring inside of her.

“Excuse me, miss?” The café worker asked, interrupting Aisha’s thoughts.

“Huh?” Aisha replied, bringing her thoughts back to the café and the noise around her.

“What can I get you?” The café worker repeated for, who knows, maybe the fifth time Aisha wondered.

“Oh um, can I just get an oat latte?” Aisha answered. The café worker nodded, taking Aisha’s money before Aisha moved to the other end of the counter to wait for her latte.

Aisha leaned against the café wall, watching the barista make her latte. She remembered how, eventually Aisha had broken the silence to start to untangle the dread in her abdomen and her counsellor had eventually mentioned the elephant between them. Though, Aisha questioned if her counsellor had done so a bit haphazardly, almost as if it felt her counsellor was unsure how
to do so. It reminded Aisha of her cat when he sees something he has never encountered before, nervously batting it with his paw before he settles with its existence. Aisha had felt her counsellor similarly batted at the elephant, careful to wait for Aisha to announce its presence before her counsellor would then jump in with a surprising comment of her own awareness of it. Aisha was unsure if her counsellor was attempting to find a balance between letting Aisha formulate her own opinion of it, validating Aisha’s experience, acknowledge how her counsellor contributed to it, and figuring out how to adjust for the session. Her counsellor had even surprised her in how quickly she had offered to investigate if the counselling centre could offer Aisha the chance to work with a counsellor who has minority origins. An offer which justified Aisha’s own fantasy of if her counsellor was not white, then perhaps her counsellor would not have been so haphazard with mentioning of the elephant (Heshmati et al, 2021; Goode-Cross et al, 2014). Equally it made Aisha wonder if her counsellor was also attempting to avoid the Islamophobia conversation with her by sign posting her to someone else.

Nonetheless, in the ‘batting’, the haphazard observation of the elephant, and the offering; Aisha had noticed an ease to the dread. Or, if not an ease in the dread, at least a small comfort in knowing, perhaps, her counsellor would be able to have these discussions of Islamophobic tropes and how Aisha experienced them. This small comfort helped to encourage Aisha to return for two more sessions where she noticed her counsellor had gotten her name right and switched from quick glances at her hijab to maintaining eye contact with Aisha. Her counsellor even had brought back the conversation of how it felt to be offered to be seen by a counsellor with ethnic organ, waiting to hear how Aisha felt about the offer, and even confirmed this offer would potentially not be available for a few months due to the other counsellor’s availability.

These small changes Aisha observed in her counsellor continued to encourage the growth of the small comfort and pushed Aisha to even attend a fourth session where she noticed herself opening up about her own emotional experience of the assault. She felt her counsellor and her were able to move from speculating if the session would work to trying a few sessions together. Somehow, Aisha had found enough trust from those past three sessions to give her counsellor a chance to see if they could work together.

At least for now, Aisha thought as she knew to write how she found enough trust was not the full answer. A part of the reason Aisha continued was due to if Aisha decided to say no, she would either need to get on another waiting list or stay with this counsellor centre as she potentially waits for a few months to be seen by another counsellor who she may not even like. Either way, both options meant more waiting and Aisha was at the point where she felt she could no longer go on with hiding in her room. It seemed logical, to Aisha, to see her counsellor for a few more sessions before she made a final answer to if she took up the offer of being seen by another counsellor.

“Here you go.” The barista handed Aisha her oat latte.

Aisha eagerly took her latte and trotted over to an empty table to sit down. Aisha wrapped her hands around the mug and let the heat travel up from her hands to her arms, up to the vulnerable bits in her chest to console her after the exploration of her emotional experience from the just recent counselling session. Aisha could feel the tightness in her chest relax in response to the warmth, her shoulders relax, and even a small smile appeared as she let out a sigh. The counselling sessions may not be perfect, but, as Aisha lifted the latte for a drink, she felt at the very least it was something.
What that something would be, though, had yet to reveal itself.

Charlie’s Reflections: A Rainbow Beer Can

Charlie noticed the woman who had sat down on the empty table next to them in the café. How happy the woman had looked when she cradled her hot drink, to the joyful sigh, and smile widening after her first taste. It was hard for Charlie not to look away and hold in their chuckles at how blissful this woman contrasted with how on edge Charlie was in anticipation of the counselling session they would be attending in the next twenty minutes. It was not as if Charlie did not want to attend or that Charlie did not like their counsellor. Rather, Charlie had been scrolling through social media as they waited for their session and noticed most post which appeared were in regard to a U.S. beer company who had made a beer can for a social media influencer who was tran* to celebrate the influencer’s one year anniversary of coming out as tran*. Though some posts were in support, the majority of posts flooding Charlie’s social media were from celebrities and other social media users, who aligned themselves to the far right and alt right, protesting this rainbow beer can as they filmed videos of them threatening this social media user -or anyone else who was tran*- as well as videos of them shooting this specific brand of beer (Morrow, 2023). Each post felt to be a drop of lead in Charlie’s stomach, leaving them to be on edge, as Charlie suddenly became more alert to their surroundings at the intrusive thought of if one of those social media users may appear in this café. Charlie’s fear fed from the once again violent reminder of how those embedded ideologies of colonised gender may cause others to act in violence against those who do not fit neatly into the binary view (Kolysh, 2012; Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019). Charlie had been unfortunate enough to experience such violence, and with continued escalation of threats in social media, Charlie worried if they would have to face more violence in the future.

Charlie sighed heavily. They had not spent long looking at these violent posts as they were quick to turn their phone screen off and flipped it over in front of them to prevent any urges of returning to scroll through the transphobic posts. Nevertheless, it reminded Charlie of the first session they had with their newest counsellor where their counsellor acknowledged how the counselling centre they attended their sessions at had also been experiencing harassment due to the transphobic rhetoric within legislation and in social media (Ramsay, 2022; Mclean, 2021). Their counsellor’s acknowledgement then followed with an offering of safeguarding for Charlie, which Charlie had been appreciative of as it gave Charlie some autonomy in how they wished to access their sessions and validate their experience (Johnson, 2020). But Charlie was aware of the heaviness which followed their conversation, a heaviness, and soon emerged
tiredness, of how the one space which was supposed to be safe for them was at risk of being attacked or even being taken away. It was a reminder for Charlie how infectious the witch hunt mentality transphobia was, beginning in colonised language of gender (Halberstam, 2018; Iantaffi, 2021), progressing to how Charlie was harassed in public as others became more obsessive with knowing someone’s genitals, (Phipps, 2020; Kolysh, 2012; Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019) and was, arguably, a catalyst for their assault.

Rewinding back to a year or so ago when Charlie was able to leave home and gain financial freedom, Charlie was able to fully explore the parts of themselves they had to hide away due to their religious upbringing. During this time of transition for Charlie, their partner at the time had mostly been supportive until Charlie noticed this support did not appear when they were having sex. Charlie’s partner at the time had forced them to continue to do certain sexual acts which made them uncomfortable with the reason, according to Charlie’s partner at the time, this was what Charlie’s body was naturally meant to do, pleasure their partner (Bourke, 2007; Cleghorn, 2021). When Charlie protested, their partner became more adamant and eventually escalated to a night which left Charlie bruised.

Charlie was able to escape to a friend’s flat who helped Charlie to leave the relationship and start the process of seeking out help; but the assault had left Charlie with less hope in the world where these witch hunts may stop. This hope only further dwindled in the re-emergence and worsening transphobia in the aftermath of Trump’s presidency in the U.S. Or, closer to home, in the UK with J.K. Rowling continuing to repeat such transphobic narratives (Wheaton, 2022). It added to Charlie’s anxiety post assault and left Charlie with fears of leaving their friend’s flat in case they may face another witch hunt.

This fear and anxiety of being attacked followed them everywhere, staying as a small, dreaded, dormant ember in their abdomen only to ignite itself anytime Charlie wandered across a transphobic post, conversation, and action they witnessed. This ember of dread had even followed them to their first counselling session, where Charlie’s bruises had just disappeared from their skin when their counsellor told them, “I… well I am aware I feel quite angry about the thought of you going through this intrusive witch hunt... But I am curious what you feel about it?”

Charlie remembered how their counsellor’s question reminded them of their bruises and how those bruises represented the long, arduous journey Charlie had been on to become themselves. Charlie had sometimes felt the anger their counsellor had mentioned, but in that moment, Charlie only felt tired of this witch hunt and journey they continued to endure.

Charlie’s phone vibrated in front of them, drawing Charlie’s attention away from their thoughts and back to the café. A bit apprehensive to see the notification, Charlie quickly lifted their phone for a quick peek, noting a sigh of relief at the sight of it being a reminder for their counselling session. Only twelve more minutes they thought before placing their phone screen back down to face the table surface. They reached for their tea which had long been finished, mimicking how the women who had cupped her drink in hope to find some of the bliss she seemed to have experienced.

Charlie knew they could bring this anxiety to the session. If anything, they were sure their own counsellor was aware of the social media posts which had prompted their anxiety given their counsellor’s accent was from the U.S., or at least that was what Charlie assumed. Even so, another part of Charlie was annoyed that their story once again circled around transphobia. For
Charlie, they wished their counselling sessions could focus on themselves as a human being instead of another day fighting for the validation of their existence. Or even a counselling session where they could celebrate who they were, which seems strange to ask for when seeking help after sexual violence and yet Charlie was growing tired of the transphobic tropes. Much of what can be written around trans* lives can be dark, haunting stories rather than celebratory stories.

Charlie felt stuck in such a story.

The dread in their abdomen began to stir again.

Quick to rid themselves of their annoyance and stuck feeling, Charlie took time to notice the sensations around them, drawing their attention to how their toes felt in their boots, the legs felt against their seat, and how the mug felt in their hands.

“My toes feel warm... The seat is slightly cold... The mug is smooth and curved...” Charlie paused as a new thought crept into the back of their mind. What happens if they brought these emotions to therapy and their counsellor was also bored of it? Or worse, what would happen if their new counsellor cannot understand Charlie’s feeling of being stuck and tired?

Charlie continued to wonder what their new counsellor would say to them, would she suggest staying in the essence of being stuck for both wanting a celebratory story and not having one currently? Would she understand Charlie’s tiredness and want a change in story?

Either way, Charlie knew they had to leave to make their appointment. Shoving their phone in their pocket, Charlie began wrapping themselves up in their coat as if to mask themselves from the world. Charlie knew their journey from café to counselling centre was usually safe, but with the recent social media post, Charlie still wanted extra security to ease their own anxiety.

Tightly gripping their coat around them Charlie left the café, huddling inwards to make themselves a bit smaller. For all the questions Charlie asked earlier, and still played on the back of their mind, Charlie knew the source of them all was the one they were still afraid to ask their new counsellor, even if their new counsellor had already mentioned it.

“Can I be me there?” Charlie mumbled as they set out for their journey.

_Elena’s Reflections: A Trial Run_

_Elena’s Reflections“ - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023_

Elena was in the midst of mapping out the run she would take her running group on, attempting to find a path which would reach the group’s distance goal of ten kilometres when she noticed
the black cloaked figure leaving the café. The figure almost seemed to be hunched in on themselves, as if the figure wanted to stay as hidden as possible from view. It immediately brought forth Elena’s own memories of when she had worn baggy clothes and hunched over similarly to try to hide herself after the assault she experienced as an undergraduate. This younger self, in Elena’s current mind, was a weaker, more vulnerable Elena as she easily succumbed to rape culture rhetoric where women were constantly blamed for the violence they received (Taylor, 2020; Solnit, 2020). How each time she felt the raw, emotional, wounds of her assault were poked, Elena would be left in a panic as she would run to her therapist for reassurance. It truly was a difficult period for Elena, and now, as she was brought back to those memories, Elena realised how much resentment she held towards her past, vulnerable self. How much resentment she had for the past self who could not defend herself and bent over backwards to please anyone else out of the fear of facing conflict. The Elena who she had dubbed as “Elena the rape victim”.

Elena, the coach and feminist, shivered slightly to shake off these unpleasant memories and resumed her quick jogging pace, noting the distance of eight and half kilometres on her fit watch. Passing the café, Elena turned right and continued towards a nearby park she had seen on google maps when she first researched this potential run. With beautiful views, a snaking path along the stream which loops back around, and a wide meadow for stretching, Elena was hoping this would be the perfect end to the ten kilometres her running group would participate in tonight. Though, Elena knew this was not the main reason she had scoped out such an area. The main reason why Elena chose this park was its proximity to her counselling appointment she had after the run. Something she usually would have avoided except she had noticed her recent counselling session had shifted to her feeling drained from the session, almost as if she had also been running in the session, rather than just before it.

The shift had appeared last week when Elena saw her counsellor after a charity event. With Elena’s different attire and a more aggravated tone, Elena’s counsellors seemed to have matched her transition to something else where they did not spend the time discussing the patriarchy as they had previously. Instead, they had focused on Elena’s opinion on whether she thought of herself as a ‘good feminist’ or ‘bad feminist’. A question Elena had thought was a bit trivial and yet, shocked Elena from what had poured out of her. Something that could be summarised when her counsellor said, “It is making me think of swimming... but not in a good way. Almost swimming for your life in the ocean during a storm, without break... With cuts that sting and a heavy feeling overwhelmed and tiredness that almost risks you sinking” It had been a long time since Elena had thought about “Elena the rape victim” and since the session, Elena had noticed how frequently she was brought back to her mind. With every memory, Elena only felt aggravation and embarrassment as she tried to shove the memories back into the mental safe she had locked them away in some time ago.

After the assault during her undergraduate year, and after a year with her previous therapist, Elena had felt her environment was no longer supportive of her process of healing, with most of her undergraduate professors, friends, and even a few family members indirectly telling her, “Really? You still aren’t over it?” As the comments piled up, Elena noticed her anxiety shifting from the rape culture around her, to inward and how she had felt she was no longer ‘progressing’ in therapy. In a desperate need for change, Elena quit therapy and began looking for answers through strengthening herself. She attended every self-help workshop, reading every book written on sexual assault and healing, and found herself drawn to presenting herself as the ‘survivor’ of the rape. With Elena’s transition to a more ‘empowered woman’, her
environment changed with most responding positively, “Oh you are so inspiring!” and for those who reacted negatively only gave her more reason to continue to seek answers in feminist spaces. If she was stronger then she could not be hurt, or at least this was what had been Elena’s reasoning. Something which started off as a mental goal and manifested into a physical goal as well. The “the rape victim” part of herself was soon hidden from view as the “feminist and coach” part took over.

With a new presence, Elena did not have space anymore for “the rape victim” and decided to hide her in the late-night hours of drinking alone at home, in her nightmares, and in unnecessarily long runs. Or this was were “the rape victim” was supposed to be and now Elena could feel how she had been the one creeping into Elena’s throat and making it hard to speak. She was the one which poured out of Elena in her last counselling session and was once again greedily ready to come out.

Elena noticed her pace had quicken at the fearful thought of “the rape victim” coming out in session again. Almost as if there was no room within Elena for there to be both as Elena believed in order for her to get better, she had to become stronger. Most [neoliberal] feminist argued for continuous investment in oneself (Rottenberg, 2018) and Elena had been doing just that until her work incident happened. Elena could reason the first time had not been her fault, but a second time? With the added pressure of how [neoliberal] feminism suggests she must be the source of her own agency, Elena was fearful the second time may be skewed as her fault, as if she did not do enough to prevent it (Lazard, 2020). Elena had done so much to no longer be “the rape victim”, she was fearful of if “the rape victim” part of herself re-appeared, it would cause her social surroundings to no longer find her ‘inspiring’. Even worse, it may mean her environment would go back to condemning her and blaming her for what had happened.

Elena suddenly noticed her own gasping from air due to her increase in her running pace. Slowing to a walk, she placed her hands onto her head to open her diaphragm and aid her lungs in gathering more oxygen for her poor, tired muscles. With deep breaths, Elena both sent oxygen to her muscles and attempted to soothe her fear, noting how she could feel the roots of it stirring the dread up in her abdomen. This dread was born from the rape culture which sowed it, fed from her social environment’s accusatory comments, and in the wake of the return of the “the rape victim”, it once again threatened to pour out of her.

Elena took time to count the trees around her to ground herself, just as her previous counsellor in her undergraduate year had taught her. With every count, Elena wondered if she would bring this to counselling. How much had been stirred from the re-awakening of this “the rape victim” inside of her, her own fears, and her own dread. The want to bring this process Elena was experiencing to counselling was the hope her counsellor would do something similar to what she had done towards the end of the last session, almost as if Elena had felt the counsellor had been with her in emotions. Yet, the other part feared Elena’s counsellor would repeat what Elena had experienced with parts of her environment as they indirectly blamed Elena for what had happened to her (Spring, 2020; Sanyal, 2019). A fear which provoked the dread further in her abdomen.

As she walked with her hands still on her head, Elena took a quick glance up to her watch. Nine point eight kilometres flashed on her watch as she grimaced. Moving back to a running pace, Elena quickly reached that last point two kilometres before she laid in the meadow to stretch. Reaching for her toes, Elena noticed almost as if a wave of melancholy had crashed over her, somehow from annoyance towards the “the rape victim” and the fear from it, Elena had shifted
towards softer feelings for her. Perhaps a sadness for what she had gone through, a sadness for what she had to fight through afterwards, and even a sadness to how much she was hated, even by herself.

Elena could not help but chuckle slightly at the last thought. “Oh boy, this is new…” Elena whispered to herself. Getting up, Elena dusted off any grassy bits of the meadow attached to her leggings and headed towards the nearest bus stop.

After seven years Elena remembered something her first counsellor had told her back in the first few sessions of therapy during her undergraduate year.

“Vulnerability doesn’t have to be just a weakness…” Her past counsellor had said and as Elena stood at the bus stop, she wondered, perhaps there was some truth in that statement after all. Maybe it was not just about being ‘seen’ as ‘survivor’ but about being open to being seen as the other complicated parts of her experience, including the ones she may not like about herself.

Elena chuckled, “Maybe… but I will have to wait…” She said to halt her thoughts. She did, after all, still had another run to get through before her counselling session that evening.

My Reflections- Not A Conclusion But A Breath:

“Counselling Room” - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2021

With every ending, as clients sat across from me one last time in the counselling room, we considered the internalised impression of our work together. What had emerged from the work, what had we been left with, and what will we take with us as we move forward. Similarly, I find myself wondering what had emerged from the river (Solnit, 2020) in relation to the ideologies of gender and race; contextualized in a post Trumpism world when counselling those who have experienced sexual violence. How, as I was swept away within the reveries (Stokes and Ross, 2019) of interactions between you, Aisha, Charlie, and Elena, I had begun to learn how I may have found my own language for political awareness in psychotherapy and counselling when working with clients who have experienced sexual violence. As well as the meaning I had found in the political which I will summarise here.

What first started as a wondering to how one may be able to approach these political ideologies emerging in the counselling sessions with the client who have experienced sexual violence in a post Trump’s era, formed into an elephant, a witch, and a wounded feminist as I wonder where these oppressive ideologies tied into my own identity. To explore these aspects of identity I used fictional writing (Ketelle, 2015; Bruce, 2019) to reflect upon the sessions.
The first being a session where an elephant sat between Aisha and I as we wondered how we could connect to each other in a world where Islamophobia deeply engrains itself into U.S. and UK history from colonisation and the continued sexualisation of Muslim bodies (Hamad, 2020) potentially leading to an increase of sexual violence. Noting how being raised in the U.S. led me to question my internalised Islamophobic beliefs and confront the white narcissistic aspects of my identity who want to turn away from the recognition trauma (McKenzie-Mavina, 2007). Through the use of silence (Ladany et al, 2004; Jacobs, 2017) as a therapeutic intervention, I attempted to transform the tension of Islamophobia in the counselling room by finding a way to give space back to Aisha for her to voice her own subjective experience. What we found through the fumbling and silence was moments of reflections on how Aisha experienced myself as a potential hostile observer who could deem Aisha as a “threat” (Hamad, 2020), leaving her with feelings of uncertainty around our ability to work together.

Implications for Aisha and my work together can help practitioners wonder how they may also use silence as a therapeutic intervention when considering power dynamics between counsellor and client (Proctor, 2017). Especially in light of power dynamics interplay of racialized bodies in the aftermath of sexual violence and how it may be important to not fall into traps of ‘saviourism’ by filling the space with talking due to white anxiety of racism and colonisation (Ahmed, 2005). Indeed, it may be important to note how silence may provide opportunity for the client to step into the space and speak of their own experience and provide opportunity for counsellor and client to work together around such ideologies.

The subsequent chapter provided a session where a haunting of colonised narratives of gender (Iantaffi, 2021; Halberstam, 2018) led Charlie and I to wonder how ideologies from Transphobia both impacts why someone may experiences sexual violence (Matsuzaka and Koch, 2019; Kolysh, 2021) and how an individual receives counselling for sexual violence. First beginning in a reflective process of how colonised views of gender (ibid) impacted how I was raised, how I may define myself, and, later, how I attempted to minimise or push away the Transphobia Charlie had faced as I struggled to be with the vulnerability, anger, and tiredness from its impact within the counselling room. Later evolved to Charlie and I noting how these ideologies around gender infected how we come to speak of sexual violence in a gendered way as well as the legislation it influences. Specifically focusing on sexual violence centres and the populations they may help -or arguably not help-.

Through reflections over the reveries (Stokes and Ross, 2019) and the haunting which came with it, provided me with opportunities to consider Charlie’s own subjective experience of the intake form from our first session as it related to current ideologies around gender. By fully immersing myself in the experience of the reverie, instead of fighting it, I was able to better connect to how Transphobia had impacted Charlie in our session and aid Charlie in their first steps of becoming an active agent of change through naming of their experience (Martínez Ruiz, 2020). In turn, the implications of this chapter provide practitioners opportunities to wonder how they may make use of reveries as a therapeutic intervention in the counselling room when working with gender and sexual violence. How it may be important to listen to such reveries instead of fighting or pushing against them and, in turn, provide clients an opportunity to articulate some of the more silenced stories within trauma.

The final chapter of fictitious case studies circled around a session with a hormonal feminist who sat across from a wounded feminist; both were confronted with their own hatred towards their own vulnerability. In this hatred within the paranoid schizoid split (Roth, 2001), Elena’s
questions of ‘good feminist’ led me to reflections of my own process where I had previously been drawn to the ideologies of neoliberal feminism viewed as a way out of oppression rather than being able to acknowledge how the oppression was embedded in the legislation and politics which surround myself (Rottenberg, 2018). From this, I began to wonder of Elena’s own paranoid schizoid split (Roth, 2001) being imbedded in her own societal ideologies as Judith Butler theorises (Mintchez, 2018), leaving us to wonder how rape culture and neoliberal feminism impacted Elena’s view of self after her experience with sexual violence (Lazard, 2020). Notably within moments of vulnerability due to how neoliberal feminism may create conversations around “secondary victimisation” (Lazard, 2020, p 62) rather than encourage conversations of exploration for messier feelings which arise after sexual violence.

With congruence (Wyatt, 2013), inspired by Zerubavel and O'Dougherty (2012) idea of wounded healer as a therapeutic intervention, I tried to find an alternative way of connecting for Elena and I which could include the messier and more vulnerable bits of ourselves after sexual violence. The implications for this chapter were considerations to how counsellors themselves may use congruence as a way to approach their clients more ‘messier bits’ while being aware of how these ‘messier’ and vulnerable parts may not feel accessible due to narratives around how one ought to be in the aftermath of sexual violence. With congruence and reflections around these narratives, counsellors may be able to provide space for their own clients to reflect together on how these may impact the counselling space and the clients’ ability to fully process what has happened to them.

To summarise, from these sessions I have learned the history of sexual violence within the U.S. and UK and how it has re-emerged in the counselling room as it affects the process my client and I go through. I have learned how important it was/is to stay within the process of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004; Pillow, 2003; McDonald, 2016; Emirbayer and Desmon, 2012) as I work with populations who face oppressive ideologies as the aftermath of Trump’s presidency only created a further evolution to how these ideologies re-appear in the power domain (Yates and Hiles, 2010). Creating an awareness of this impact on the sessions between my fictitious clients and I as we slowly peel away the layers of one’s own constructed image of self and wonder how these ideologies impact who we are, what has happened to us, and what we may need versus what we may feel obligated to do after experiencing sexual violence.

But, in this conclusion as I tie together what I have learned, I recall Manning (2019) who wrote, “I cannot give you the ending” (p 149) on the last few pages of her own story in the aftermath of sexual violence. According to Manning (2019) “The chapters I am not going to write are the missing chapters. They are the Mystery chapters. They are the chapters that offer a conclusion. They are your conclusion. They are for you to write.” (p 147). Similarly, here, I have found what was left were the ‘missing chapters’ who, instead of saying goodbye to Aisha, Charlie, and Elena, they reverberate in my mind every time I sat across from a client as the political environment continues to unfold around us. They reverberate every time I read another news article that notes how these ideologies have continued to infect how we think and behave towards one another. These ‘missing chapters’ and the last of what I have learned from this journey was how these reflections I have made will continue to reverberate, to move, and change as they react to every evolving political world around us.

Thus, instead of an ending, I offer us to take a breath as we observe how these ideologies fight against the nice, neat conclusion of being fully formed as their own constant movement of being wove and unwoven (Rud, 2018) influences how we must always be receptive to these
changing conditions. As Brown (2019) notes, anti-oppressive practice was “not stagnant because conditions and issues shift and require responsivity.” (p 54). An observation which will continue here as I imagine these chapters will continue to change in my reflections, in my own responses to how I speak to you, the reader, and in myself as I face my own oppressed and oppressive narratives. To how this may also edit the questions I asked to Aisha, in what expectations I articulate to Charlie, and in how I see myself in Elena who mirrors a similar journey to mine as these stories continue to evolve and change with time.

To take one last breath as we wondered how I would not only reflect on these ideologies but bring them back to the session to discuss with the client, and, in turn, wonder how the reader may begin to do the same. To write their own stories, their own ‘missing chapters’ as they note on their own ideologies and begin the process of wondering how they may begin to discuss this with the client.

It is not then a conclusion I write, but a breath, a pause, a reflection, as we take another step on this journey of consideration for our clients, for those we may interact with, and for ourselves.
"Not a conclusion" - Excerpt from Personal Journal 2023
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