

## Politics of Anger and Trauma Disclosure in Michelle Bowdler's *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation and a Manifesto* (2020)

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ABSTRACT: This article focuses on the memoir manifesto as an intersection of forms and analyzes Michelle Bowdler's *Is Rape a Crime?* (2020) as being representative of this subgenre in the current 'manifesto moment.' Bowdler as author narrates through the lens of trauma, with an emphasis on the affects the political reflection of trauma evokes. Through the personal narrative, her anger about the injustices of rape culture is explored and affective truths are disclosed without adhering to the hegemonic narrative of overcoming trauma. Instead, the book narrates an emotional arc from lonely suffering to communal activism, engaging the reader in a mode of angry witnessing.

KEYWORDS: manifesto; memoir; trauma narratives; anger

[S]ometimes coming undone is precisely how one falls into place. Sometimes a breakdown doubles as a breakthrough. Sometimes a snap is a click.  
*Sometimes.*  
 (Bruce 14)

### Contemporary Manifestos and Anger

In the US, but also transnationally, an upsurge of manifesto publications can be observed since 2016, which is constructively representative of the transforming discourse landscape of current US politics. Julian Hanna identifies our current time as the third major 'manifesto moment' in history, with the preceding two coinciding with the first and the second wave of feminist movement(s),<sup>1</sup> as well as Modernist art manifestos in early twentieth century Europe and radical political and artistic manifestos of the 1960s. According to Hanna, "manifestos have once again become part of the media atmosphere of everyday life" (2). My research is centered on the characteristics of this renewed awareness of the manifesto form. I say awareness rather than re-birth since manifesto writing did flourish in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, especially online.<sup>2</sup> This moment of manifesto rediscovery in

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<sup>1</sup> Following Benita Roth, I am using the plural here to emphasize the plurality of feminism and want to acknowledge the still growing scholarship on how the organizations of white feminist social movements, in the 1960s and 1970s especially, suppressed and excluded the concerns of BIPOC feminists (3).

<sup>2</sup> Laura Winkiel makes a similar observation in 2012, when she anticipates what I call the current upsurge in manifesto publications (264). While Winkiel mostly references examples from the 1990s, such as Haraway's "Cyborg Manifesto" (1985), Lars von Trier's "Dogme 95" (1995) or the "Avant-Pop Manifesto" (1993), I

publishing then, is exemplified by the book I am discussing in this article: *Is Rape a Crime? A Memoir, an Investigation, and a Manifesto* (2020) by health professional, writer, and activist Michelle Bowdler. My reading is formalist, insofar as it approaches Bowdler's book as a memoir *and* manifesto, focusing on the way the author structures narrative tension to translate trauma through feminist anger. All while not being centered around overcoming trauma, but rather engaging with the queer temporality of living with it. Bowdler, in the simplest words, tells her life story as a raped woman struggling with the concept of closure, who discovers that pursuing justice for herself and others, specifically by participating in activist communities, enables her to find more "peace" (252) in her reality of post-trauma. The book is structured into three, unequal parts: "Part I: A Memoir," "Part II: An Investigation," both consisting of seven chapters, and the conclusory "Part III: A Manifesto," which is only one chapter long. All together they construct individual arcs as well as an overarching narrative driven by tension around the disclosure of the author's memories. A memoir is prone to include rhetorics of revelation, but here it is done with the transparent goal of also disclosing truths about the violent reality of rape culture to manifest social change, as a manifesto is prone to doing.

I argue that the manifesto is a meaningful channel of communication for affects, especially marginalized anger, and therefore can be highly influential for a contemporary understanding of the political potential of anger. The cultural work of the manifesto has been and is continually transformed by the publications claiming this label. In her book *Forms* (2015), Caroline Levine similarly observes that "literary texts [...] [are not] reflections or expressions of prior social forms, but rather [...] sites, like social situations, where multiple forms cross and collide, inviting us to think in new ways about power" (Levine 122). In the vein of Levine's argument, the author of *Is Rape a Crime?* consciously introduces the formal overlaps of her text in the full title, *A Memoir, An Investigation and a Manifesto*. Embedded in the framework of this *queer/feminist memoir manifesto*, we are reading about the author's rape by two home invaders in her early twenties and subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder, much intensified by her fundamentally indecent treatment by law enforcement and the ineffectuality of the legal system. This centering of the injustices she and victims of sexual assaults have to face—specifically police and legal prosecution's negligent handling of rape kits—consciously evokes anger. Through narrating her memoir with a *manifestor* persona, Bowdler firmly roots her personal experiences within the context of an oppressive legal system, which punishes rape victims while protecting perpetrators, leading to a powerful political text. It demands engagement, beginning with the rhetorical question of the title itself. Read with Levine, the two colliding forms of the queer/feminist manifesto and memoir invite us to think in new ways about patriarchal power.

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would also specifically highlight the contemporary trend to traditionally publish manifestos that have had online resonance beforehand such as Laboria Cuboniks' *Xenofeminist Manifesto* (2018), Legacy Russel's *Glitch Feminism – A Manifesto* (2020) or the "cybertwee manifesto" (2014), published in print in Breanne Fahs' anthology of feminist manifestos (2020).

In this paper, I combine Linda Åhäll's feminist method of reading affective dissonance in the face of discriminatory common-sense narratives with an approach to the queer/feminist manifesto memoir as a narrative system as conceptualized by Judith Roof. Here, the structure of a narrative can be understood as consisting of a meaningful trace between self-aware meta-nodal points, where the reader is drawn into reflection about the reading process, the story, or the author. These meta-points of (in my case) genre self-awareness are connected by a recurring ordering principle, based on the concept of Deleuzian assemblages (Roof 55). What this theoretical lens means in methodological practice is zooming into the narrative to identify nodal points suggesting affective dissonance, points where affective narrative tension arises with a meta-reflection of reading. The affective dissonances I consider present themselves as frictions in connection to anger expressions or suppressions in plot and narration. The ordering principle of these nodal points becomes apparent by zooming out of the plot to examine the overall narrative structure and its formal overlaps, interactions, and mergers to get at the narrative conventions in the political structures of marginalized anger. In the case of Bowdler, this structure fosters a reader-manifestor relation that I will describe as angry witnessing in the context of E. Ann Kaplan's theory on the pro-social reading of trauma narratives.

The activist context and content of Bowdler's book informs my understanding of it as feminist literature and I draw from Rita Felski, who in her definition of feminist literature includes "all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of women's subordinate position and of gender as a problematic category, however this is expressed" (14). In the case of *Is Rape a Crime?* the scope needs to be broadened to queer/feminist literature and I would adapt Felski's definition to all those texts that reveal a critical awareness of gender as a problematic category and of the patriarchal subordination of what is gendered feminine. Bowdler demands a feminist reading insofar as she explores the misogyny of rape culture with an activist thrust, but narrating the gendered trauma of a lesbian rape victim calls for a queer approach to the role of voice in narrative structure and temporality.<sup>3</sup> There are various ways to approach the theoretical pairing of queer and feminist theories, entrenched in the question of what the 'object' of feminism is. I share Sam McBean's interpretation of the "queer/feminist divide [a]s a site of repetitious return," (139) and a topic addressed often within academic discourse. Instead of arguing for a divided or joint analysis of gender and sexuality in the context of cultural artifacts which evoke and address sometimes one, both or neither, I also use queer/feminist, not queer-feminist, queefeminist or any other possible spelling, to stress the multidirectional character of the relations between both perspectives that need to be employed separately and in various overlaps in the context of the contemporary discourses

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<sup>3</sup> I follow Susan Lanser here or, more precisely what can be understood as her recent update of the 'Lanser's rule,' where the voice of a narrator persona is always read as gendered according to what the reader derives from the author's textual inscription (T. Young 3). Therefore, Bowdler's narrative voice is queer, insofar as it is a voice "belonging to a textual speaker who can be identified as a queer subject by virtue of sex, gender or sexuality" (Lanser 13).

texts are contributing to.<sup>4</sup> I draw from McBean’s reading of Robyn Wiegman, when I argue for a queer/feminist object that is defined by “the dual analytics of *affect and time*” (McBean 138; emphasis added). Therefore, in this paper, I want to show how the affect of anger is utilized for illocutionary manifesto writing to move the readership towards realizing the scope and consequences of structural injustices rooted in the US-American justice system, fostering a queer/feminist consciousness in the reader. My endeavor is embedded in an observation of the recent ‘manifesto wave’ and I hope to contribute to the similarly revived interest in the meaning of manifesto writing in the contemporary discourse landscape of the United States (see Cooke 2020; Ariel 2021; Hanna and Ashby 2022; Tselenti 2022). My analysis takes the affective-narrative<sup>5</sup> characteristics of the form into account, which in the case of *memoir-manifestos* is highly relevant to consider, and I argue that Bowdler’s anger infuses the book with a narrative sequentially that suits the political aims of the text. The text establishes what can be termed a new narrative convention of manifestary<sup>6</sup> life writing—the trauma-to-activism-pipeline.

There has been much writing on the political relevance of affect in the humanities in the course of what has been called the ‘turn to affect’: *The Transmission of Affect* (2004) by Teresa Brennan, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) by Sarah Ahmed, or Kosofsky Sedgwick’s *Touching Feeling* (2003) being only three influential examples.<sup>7</sup> I follow Linda Åhäll when she states that “a feminist analysis is, per definition, already both political and affective” (38). Gender and sexuality as social constructs are only in existence within the confines of their spatiotemporal embeddedness, meaning in practice the performance of hegemonic, heuristic narratives. How these scripts are interpreted is again dependent on chronotopic social orders or, in the words of Åhäll, common sense or that what-“goes-without-saying” (42). Within narratives it should be the political affective-discursive aim of queer/feminist manifestos to counteract norms policed through “unconscious structures immediately mediated as common sense. It is communicated through a politics of emotion, often in everyday contexts, as affective judgments” (Åhäll 50). Affective judgements are thus the hinges that connect both

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<sup>4</sup> In his study *Legitimizing the Artist* (2003), Luca Somigli observes that manifestos are written as “machines to generate discourse” (26). I agree with this assessment, but want to stress that in this renewed manifesto moment, originality is not the central focus of contemporary discourse, contrary to the emerging modernist artist manifestos of the Fin de siècle period Somigli’s book analyzes. So, instead of generating, the manifesto might be more a machine accelerating discourse.

<sup>5</sup> I use this pairing here to stress that although manifestos are a non-fictional literary form in many ways, they are nonetheless possessive of narrative structure and qualities at least in part, which is central to my argument. Some manifesto scholarship agrees, specifically Majorie Perloff, who pinpoints F. T. Marinetti as the inventor of narrative manifestos with his introduction to the first Futurist manifesto (71).

<sup>6</sup> Following Galia Yanoshevsky’s example (262), ‘manifestary’ expresses the formal vagueness of the group of texts we do or could understand as manifestos.

<sup>7</sup> See Clara Fischer’s article “Feminist Philosophy, Pragmatism, and the ‘Turn to Affect’: A Genealogical Critique” (2016) for a critical genealogy of work in feminist philosophy on emotion that anticipated the arrival of the turn to affect in the twenty-first century.

my theoretical approach and the material itself, since reading manifestos is always situated on a meta-referential level.

When looking at queer/feminist discourses that are currently perpetuated in manifesto forms, anger is a highly charged matter. For example, Jessa Crispin writes: “If by declaring myself a feminist I must reassure you that I am not angry, that I pose no threat, then feminism is definitely not for me. // I am angry. And I do pose a threat” (xii). Other examples are *A Dirty South Manifesto* (2020) by L.H. Stallings, which includes a brimming hip-hop poem promoting abortion access for the Southern US called “T.R.A.P. (The Ratchet Alliance for Prosperity) Manifesto,” or “Trauma in the Academy,” the anonymous account of a woman frightened and enraged by her threatening work environment (132; 133). This current formalization of a seemingly fraught relationship between feminism or even womanhood and anger expression is unsurprising given the conflict-laden heritage of feminist movements. For example, Breanne Fahs pinpoints the anger of Valerie Solanas and her *SCUM Manifesto* as having led to a schism between the more liberal feminists of NOW (National Organization for Women) and radical feminists such as Ti-Grace Atkinson after the shooting of Andy Warhol in 1968 (Fahs 180-86). In another example, over a decade later, Audre Lorde’s now classic feminist text “The Uses of Anger” (1981) was first given as an opening address at the Third Annual NWSA (National Women’s Studies Association) Convention and then criticized for distracting from more important feminist issues with its focus on racism (see Rosenfelt). This latter case is also an example of white organizers in feminist movements lacking not only accountability, but antagonizing Black women because of their feminist (or womanist) anger.

To contextualize this historical tension in feminist movements around anger,<sup>8</sup> the cultural meanings of this affect need to be outlined briefly: philosopher Owen Flanagan describes anger as “a cultured passion [...] governed by complex psychosocial norms that provide scripts and permissions for what appropriately triggers anger, what warrants it, and what behaviors are acceptable when angry” (xii). In other words, anger, as well as narrative, are in essence highly-controlled and evaluated socially.<sup>9</sup> Judgment and justice are recurring central themes when it comes to anger; therein also lies its potentiality to be weaponized by the media for oppression as well as insubordination. The conditions of anger arising are usually a sense of injustice (see Bailey), but that can mean a variety of things within social settings. It is the consensus of several fields of study concerned with anger that it is connected to (partially) cognitive processes (see Kim) of value-based judgements (see Cherry, “Political Anger” 3-4) which are heavily culturally mediated concerning gender (Campbell 48) and race (Cherry, *The Case for Rage* 2) and inherently ethical issues (Massumi 8-11). In other words, the objects of

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<sup>8</sup> In their introduction, the editors of “Outraged/Enraged: The Rage Special Issue” of *Signs* in 2021 give a more detailed account of this tension within the academy (see Kaplan et al.).

<sup>9</sup> I share this observation with Sue Kim: “Just as narratives are one of the key ways in which anger, even as individually experienced, is culturally framed and constructed, so narratives serve as means of reflecting on not only experiences of anger, but also *how we think about anger*—its triggers, its deeper causes, its wrongness or rightness” (4).

our anger represent an offense to our sense of justice based on how we would prefer justice in society to work. In *Is Rape a Crime?*, anger incited by the fundamental injustice of US rape culture is of key importance. It is the lens through which the reader is drawn into an understanding of the depth of incommunicability of such a trauma. Michelle Bowdler incorporates studies, anecdotes, as well as a detailed disclosure of her own experience of rape as well as her subsequent experiences with sexist law enforcement. It is the disclosure of her ‘true’ memories that creates the narrative tension in the book’s first half, adhering to memoir conventions. However, it is also what gives the book its rhetorical force as a manifesto. The tactic of disclosure the narrative structure employs makes anger the crucial communicative tool between the manifestor persona and reader.

The terms rage, fury, and depending on the context also madness,<sup>10</sup> are conceptually closely related to anger,<sup>11</sup> and often used interchangeably in everyday life, but also regularly used in an effort to rhetorically discredit racialized or gendered subjects as has been observed notably by Elisabeth Spelman. Moreover, in her influential essay “Anger and Insubordination,” Spelman pinpoints anger as an emotional outlier in terms of social norms of acceptability and respectability: it is only ever completely accepted in the dominant power, not in the margins (see Spelman). For social movements such as feminist movements, this means that protest cycles, which are often accompanied by manifesto publications, rely on anger to motivate mobilization. Queer/feminist activism thereby has to overcome a stigma, while simultaneously being threatened by the consequences of evoking anger in their political opponents, for whom anger or outrage is a more accepted mode of political critique.<sup>12</sup> But, crucially, on an individual level, expressing anger in the face of oppression can be cathartic and productive, as bell hooks illustrates in her conceptualization of a ‘killing rage’: “My rage

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<sup>10</sup> There are two studies on madness I want to highlight at this point. One is by mad studies scholar Merrick Daniel Pilling, where he presents findings on the pathologization and the hegemonic mad/sane binary in relation to gendered discrimination (69). The other by La Marr Juelle Bruce conceptualizes rage as one of the four overlapping modes of racialized madness (next to phenomenal, medicalized, and psychosocial madness) (8). The label ‘mad’ can and has been ascribed to revolutionary artists and thinkers with anti-Black intentions, but Bruce shows how the term can be reappropriated under the flag of Black radical creativity. Therein, as a conceptualization of political aesthetics in general, his concept of madness lives on the same intersection of arts and politics as the manifesto form.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Anna Wierzbicka declares anger, fury, and rage, as well as indignation, outrage, appalled-ness, and shock to be part of the same emotional concept responding to a cognitive scenario summed up by the sentence “I don’t want this to happen” (87-97) in her linguistic approach to theorize diversity and universality in emotion across languages and cultures.

<sup>12</sup> In a highly interesting study, Dannagal Goldthwaite Young theorizes the prevalence of right-wing politics to be discussed in ‘outrage media,’ while left-leaning political formats utilize satire and humor. Both modes of political communication and meaning-making have emerged in the US in the second half of the twentieth century: “the need and opportunity for a second generation of satire and outrage (around the year 2000) to thrive on the left and the right” (6) was created. Since then, the legacy of this phenomenon was complicated by the political discourse around Donald Trump and it is no coincidence that Bob Woodward’s 2020 book about the Trump presidency is called *Rage*. Arguably, angry queer/feminist texts formalized as manifestos are exactly one of the complicating factors of the irony-outrage dichotomy, however, this context is useful to keep in mind.

[...] burns in my psyche with an intensity that creates clarity. It is a constructive healing rage” (hooks 18). Being affected by anger here is cleansing, freeing, and, produces knowledge, maybe even a form of sacred violence, but most significantly fuels agency. It is a nuanced, powerful affect to evoke in the manifesto form, where aesthetics are in service of politics (or the other way around). It seems in the context of queer/feminist manifestos, anger in fact must be conjured to communicate the need to change the content of these politics in the first place. This is illustrated most pointedly by a quote from La Marr Jurelle Bruce, a long version of which I chose to start this article with: “Sometimes a snap is a click” (14).

This rough foray into the overlapping contexts of theorizing anger and queer/feminist writing, leads me to conclude here that anger and its social expression is central for the political imagination of marginalized people and has become a renewed focus in queer/feminist discourse. I am not alone in arguing that since the 2016 US election, queer/feminist movements increasingly express politicized anger and argue for utilizing affect for political means (see for example Chemaly). These opinions on anger surface in manifestos to counter oppression as the ‘post-discrimination’ affective landscape of the early twenty-first century gives way to an awareness of the current ‘crisis of hegemony’<sup>13</sup> in the US and beyond (see Fraser 9). Contemporary manifestos could be attempts at bridging the current gap between hegemonic, or ‘mainstream’, liberal understandings of feminism and queer/feminist theory and activism, wherein affects and especially anger can take a prominent position.

## **Memoir Manifestos and Narrating Trauma**

In this section I explore how a new formalist approach to the memoir manifesto—based on the work of Caroline Levine—is useful to get at how and why Bowdler’s book is neither manifesto nor memoir, but both. Thereby, I am discerning that the ambition of the text is to be an illocutionary act, which needs to evoke both forms. Levine considers the dynamic affordances of forms instead of set characteristics and puts the practice of formalization under a microscope. Most crucially, Levine theorizes this new formalism to eclipse the often-forced methodological separation between politics and aesthetics. This may be criticized for being too generalizing compared to other genre theories, since Levine’s definition of form encompasses “all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy Fraser has adapted Gramsci’s conceptualization of the hegemonic bloc, which in a given society incorporates politics of distribution (economic division of goods) and politics of recognition (moralized conditions of belonging), to analyze the political crisis with economic, ecologic, and social strands, caused by “a dramatic weakening, if not a simple breakdown, of the authority of the established political classes and parties” (8). In her analysis, she states that the progressive (recognition) neoliberalism (distribution) of the US has been challenged by the formerly counter-hegemonic hyperreactionary neoliberalism of the Trump presidency, neither of which is promising a sustainable future for marginalized populations. The author pinpoints the end of capitalism as the solution for the current ‘un-dead-ness’ of the US hegemonic and counter-hegemonic blocs.

and difference” (Levine 3).<sup>14</sup> But Levine’s concept of form does not supersede a concept of genre and instead distinguishes it as being a situated form: empirical evidence of genres can be traced as they are limited in spatiotemporal terms. In the case of the manifesto, the Avantgarde wave ranging roughly from 1896 (the Symbolist Manifesto) to the beginning of the First World War (but being mostly represented in scholarship by its highpoint in the 1909 *Futurist Manifesto* by Marinetti), established many conventions of the manifesto form, but as a genre it can be easily distinguished from the activist manifestos of the mid twentieth century. Nonetheless, there is a traceable legacy transported, for example in the formal habit of listing.

Levine’s forms, being repeatable and portable throughout material or context, specifically also across nations, qualify as an approach for theorizing manifestos as this acknowledges their variety throughout the history of the form. Also, I speak of the manifesto as a form instead of genre to stress how they inherently embody politicized aesthetics and/or aestheticized politics to differing degrees. They are associated with certain discourses but are also characterized by performativity and vagueness. While the manifesto label is consciously claimed by the contemporary text I am looking at, the form also has oftentimes been attributed to certain texts due to “manifestary” (Yanoshevsky 265) qualities, such as a polemic or violence, being prescriptive and programmatic, or embodying a spirit of theoretical invention (Yanoshevsky 26-5). Nana Ariel goes so far as to potentially declare formal convention as obsolete: “Conceptualisation of a text as a manifesto [...] does not require the identification of inherent textual characteristics, but depends mainly on context” (4). Therefore, for a form as conceptually hard to grasp as the manifesto, new formalism is a fruitful basis of analysis.

Bowdler’s book is not alone in its formal overlap between memoir and manifesto with a queer/feminist aim. There are already three fellow works that have been published in this hybrid form since 2020, all written by queer/feminist activists based in the US, and all having a similar approach to the narration and disclosure of their trauma.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, similar to these other memoir manifestos, a central theme of *Is Rape a Crime?* is making sense of lived experiences in the context of specifically gendered oppressions, grappling with narrating lives and histories in a meaningful way. Memoirs are often written by already platformed voices such as public figures with an already existing audience. As a memoir manifesto, however, Bowdler presents a narrative of personal memories principally informed by the gendered

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<sup>14</sup> Although genre scholars such as John Frow have also acknowledged the discursive quality of genres (2).

<sup>15</sup> The three books I mean here are: firstly, George M. Johnson’s *All Boys Aren’t Blue: A Manifesto Memoir* (2020), written for a Young Adult demographic by a non-binary activist “to give a voice to so many from marginalized communities whose experiences have not yet been captured between the pages of a book”(Johnson viii). Another publication is Edefe Okporo’s *Asylum: A Manifesto & Memoir* (2022), where the Nigerian-born Okporo details his experiences with the systemic violence inherent in US policies on asylum. Sasha Velour’s *The Big Reveal: An Illustrated Manifesto of Drag* (2023) is part cultural history and theoretical conceptualization of drag as a highly politicized artform and part memoir. It is the visual outlier of this group with its aesthetic nods to queer zine culture through introductory and concluding comic-collages and highly stylized page margins.



politics of affect and the meta-emotions of political reflection of experience. Indeed, the book's rebellion against normative common sense lies within its affective-discursive emphasis. However, my analysis of a life narrative has to be framed by some theoretical background on the relationship between remembering, imagining, and trauma in general. Since Maurice Halbwachs's groundbreaking work on memory, the general consensus is that memory is not necessarily only individual, but is rather also socio-cultural. In the words of Jan Assmann, the function of memory "is orientation, not the storage and reproduction of true and objective representations of the past" (Assmann 68). Concerning its relation to culture, Assmann continues that memory is "[the] original and traditional locus of cultural texts [...] (for storage and transmission)" (Assmann 81). Transmission, or communication, is also central to Emily Keightley and Michael Pickering in their concept of mnemonic imagination, meaning "bringing the past to active account in the present for the sake of the future" (12). In their study we can find a noteworthy approach to the relation of narrating memories of experiencing traumatic violence. They state that on an individual level, trauma "entails a failure of the autobiographical project [...]. The self of the traumatized victim cannot remember itself to itself, and cannot imagine itself whole" (Keightley and Pickering 168). Trauma is said to limit the mnemonic imagination by engaging with the past without an engagement of a future vision. The authors also critique the frequent, social use of the term today: "trauma becomes an overused and imprecise descriptor for any past experience of a difficult, problematic or contentious nature" (Keightley and Pickering 176). Therefore, for their study they distinguish trauma as "anti-memory syndrome" conceptually from painful pasts, meaning "devastating experiences [...] to which [...] individuals accommodate themselves in their memories" (172) when contemplating the degree to which life experiences can be weaved into a purposeful life narrative. It is the mad rage of trauma in Bowdler's *memoir* manifesto, however, that translates the traumatic experiences into a narrative of a painful past, which not only paints a social portrait of rape that does not mince words about painful truths, but ends up giving an account of her own life as an example of the healing that can be found in a community of victims. Affective dissonances act as the narrative's orientation of this affective memoir: the righteous anger of Bowdler as a manifestor acts as the structural principle that self-consciously guides the reader through the limbo of traumatic memories. Keightley and Pickering's dismissal of trauma as the antithesis of mnemonic imagination is alleviated in *Is Rape a Crime?* when it incorporates a narrative structure driven affectively instead of following a linear narrative temporality. The memoir manifesto uses mnemonic imagination in the sense that Bowdler offers a narrative of her past trauma to reframe 'common sense' understandings about the legal system in order to engage people in fostering a future that is different. As a work itself, and the first step towards a different future, the book puts a grievous injustice at its center, asking the inconvenient question why rape is not a punished crime, but rather just evokes a deep indifference to the suffering of so many within the legal system. Bowdler, in her activist work, aims to support victims and reveal the failings of this legal system. The readers are challenged to break silences and no longer accept sexual violence as a given in

society. Bowdler does all this without failing to present an ‘autobiographical project,’ since a holistic feeling of narrative structure is achieved within an active engagement of the queerness of traumatic memories.

That queerness complicates hegemonic concepts of temporality and historicity has been a central issue discussed in queer studies (see Edelman; Halberstam), leading Jesse Matz to state that narrative temporality itself can be queer practice, “that narrative itself functions as a form of temporal pedagogy” (245). Instead of tracing how queer subjects assimilate to narrative normativity, a theorist of queer narrative must question how form accommodates for queer temporalities when the subject is queer. The memoir, in contrast to the autobiography, does not necessarily need to narrate a ‘complete’ life; it is more often than not a narrative remembering of a life through a certain lens or covers only a partial timeframe or topical aspect. For Bowdler’s book, in its focus on rape culture, the manifesto’s aspiration goes beyond organizing memories into a narrative for self-representation. Based on Felski’s emphasis on confession in postmodern feminist life writing, I argue that the memoir form is befitting for Bowdler’s performance of disclosure, in the sense of tactically enacting a ‘true’ confession about the memoirist’s life experience. This strategic creation of narrative tension is quintessential to the memoir. If anger as an effect of trauma is used as the affective and narrative frame through which a life-narrative is told, the memoir affords representation of traumatic memories and their temporality. The overlapping form of the memoir manifesto presents narratives which exemplify the personal—political equation that is the basis for many queer/feminist demands. Therefore, perhaps memoir manifestos could “exemplify alternative possibilities in developing an oppositional political aesthetic within contemporary society” (Felski 6).

The non-linear temporality of remembering painful pasts is made palpable by Michelle Bowdler’s first mention of being raped early in the text. While describing suffering from post-traumatic stress twenty years after the assault in the 2000s, middle-aged Michelle states “I spent most days feeling as if there were still a knife at my throat” (Bowdler 7). This is one of many references to the queer, embodied temporality of traumatic experiences, which opens up the emotional state of the narrator to the reader’s meta-reflection. Bowdler further mentions phases of shock without any reference to time (“I have no idea what day it is”; see 45) and how her body is haunted by violent memories: “Time is unreliable. Was I still twenty-four or in my forties? Which body did I currently inhabit?”; see 176). Stylistic devices figuratively also emphasize the sensory embodiment of traumatic memories, such as comparing it to a lightning strike (Bowdler 2, 27) or drowning in a “dark ocean” (Bowdler 40). In her study on feminist literature, Rita Felski points out that feminist life writing had already helped break the mold of sequential, male-biased public autobiographies in the course of the twentieth century and promoted more fragmented, disjointed forms of life narratives (86-87). Not chronological progress, but the “associations of the experiencing subject” (Felski 99) are the organizing principle of the text. Therefore, it is unsurprising Michelle Bowdler follows this

convention of life writing in her recounting of her thought processes and emotion over the course of the narrative.

The queer temporality of trauma is formalized most significantly, I argue, in one outburst of anger by the narrator. Here, Bowdler sees her mother for the first time after being assaulted and this is preceded by two sections elaborating on the complex relationship between mother and daughter. Firstly, Bowdler recounts how she declined a visit by her mother directly after the rape, but her mother's acceptance secretly caused internal conflict and many years of resentment. She declined because she associated her mother's initial reaction to her attack with one of the police officers calling her lucky for surviving:

My mother had also expressed relief I hadn't been killed, and I worried this had clouded her ability to see what I might need emotionally from her. In my fog, I believed having my mom come to Boston in the immediate aftermath would have been my taking care of her. So I said don't come, and I meant it.// At least I thought I did. (Bowdler 65)

Secondly, the narrator jumps in time to after her mother's death, when her sister reveals the mother was resolved at the time to disregard Bowdler's wish. Only after being accordingly advised by a rape helpline, could she accept her daughter's boundary, which lets Bowdler find solace that her mother "thought she was doing the right thing, that she was doing what she was told"(69). Only then, in the last section of the chapter, the narrator recounts her angry reaction to a reunion with her mother after the attack. She cannot relate to her mother's expressions of gratitude that she is alive and this is her breaking point: "with no warning, every bit of rage I've been holding explodes. // 'Well, that is better for you, but the jury is out on whether I think that was better for me'" (Bowdler 70). Bowdler cannot bear the gratitude, because it reminds her of the police: "[the] officer's words become a refrain in [her] head: *lucky, lucky, lucky, lucky we didn't find a body, so gosh darn lucky, lucky, lucky*" (71)). Bowdler continually revisits how the treatment of the police scarred her and is a significant cause of traumatic stress (for an example see 180). This arrangement of sub-sections within the 'mother' chapter signifies an affective dissonance in the narrative: although it is known that the narrator found closure in the relationship with her mother, this is not the section the chapter closes with. Rather it ends with the angry confrontation of the mother, echoing the non-linear memory workings of trauma. The affective dissonance of not closing with reconciliation but angry confrontation also structurally sets the tone for the affective landscape of the following chapters: the rift between mother and daughter stresses the isolation Bowdler feels in her rage at this point in her life.

In the next chapters Bowdler's emotional suffering and struggle with self-worth in the years following her rape is specified as impacting the trajectories of her personal relationships and career, in addition to the ableist discrimination she faces externally. The narrator describes the aimlessness she felt in this time as due to being caught up in shame spirals for not feeling 'normal,' but feeling 'mad' because of the intensity of her emotions, being her "own self-imposed catastrophe"(Bowdler 80). Crucially, three helping female figures are brought up early in chapter four, who enable the author to carve out what she sees as a purposeful career:

Shelley, a colleague at a temp job, Leslie, a new boss, and also psychiatrist Dr. Judith Herman.<sup>16</sup> The introduction of these figures here highlights the need for community and connection structurally after the emphasis on isolation in the previous chapter and Bowdler also stresses the different levels and scopes queer/feminist behavior can encompass. Chapter five, meanwhile, centers on the narrator's embodied PTSD and the subsequent consequences of the rape trauma on her sexual identity (Bowdler 96), while chapter six focuses on the struggle to feel safe in a home. In the closing section, a fellow rape survivor helps Bowdler with finding her first own living space after being assaulted. The personal anecdote is mentioned as an important healing milestone, a "small kindness" (Bowdler 109) that resonated lastingly with a, at this point, fundamentally disconnected narrator.

This leads me to conclude that the scene of anger closing chapter three formalizes not narrative (meaning plot) tension, since its consequences in Bowdler's life story are pre-empted, but to affective tension of emotional alienation all within the associative subject of her relationship with her mother. The tension is maintained throughout the following chapters until the key supporting figure of the whole book, Michelle Bowdler's wife Mary, learns about Bowdler's traumatic past, although only many years into their relationship. In this pivotal affective shift at roughly the halfway point of the book, the alienation Bowdler feels is overcome through sharing all her detailed memories of being raped for the first time – not only with Mary, but the reader as well.

### **Queer/Feminist Confession and Epistemic Injustice**

In this section I aim to elaborate on the political relevance of communicating trauma and the role anger plays in Bowdler's manifesto. Part I of the book, titled 'A Memoir,' closes with a detailed description of the author's rape, as already mentioned, structurally framed by the narration of the first time it was ever relayed to Mary, the author's wife (Bowdler 111-20). This is significant in multiple ways. Firstly, on the level of function, the vignette structure manipulates reading tempo and therefore manages to convey the tone of simultaneous demand to witness the violence and awareness of the impact of such a confession. Secondly, the chapter represents the affective core of the memoir narrative: it is a performative disclosure of the true violence the narrator experienced and therein carries a certain narrative catharsis. Rita Felski states that "feminist confession continually refers to the question of truth as its ultimate legitimation" (Felski 100). The truth of the violence matters, therefore, after the book has explored the social, economic, and health consequences of the rape. Thirdly, the beginning of the second part of the book, 'An Investigation,' where the author describes her journey to activism, is crucially contextualized by the already mentioned narrative frame: the author includes the reader in the intimate moment when Bowdler tells her wife the detailed

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<sup>16</sup> Bowdler's feeling of connection to Herman's theories on trauma are so pronounced that Herman, together with Emily Dickinson, are both quoted in the book's epigraph.

story of ‘that night.’ Mary is described as the ideal listener, who not only gives the narrator the emotional security to open up, but also actively encourages Bowdler to break the silence that “doesn’t serve” her (Bowdler 115), implying that the telling of her story can also ‘serve’ beyond Bowdler as an individual.

*Is Rape a Crime?* thereby makes the injustice of rape culture felt by translating Bowdler’s experience of trauma into a manifesto memoir narrative, engaging its readership as witnesses of the manifestor’s trauma narrative, which is exemplified crucially by a lesbian relationship between Michelle and Mary within the book. In her study of cultural conventions of trauma narrativization, E. Ann Kaplan centers the political implications of trauma narratives. She observes that individual and cultural trauma (such as the effects of rape culture) are often interconnected in complex ways (Kaplan 2) and inevitable receptions of mediated trauma (depending on the representation) can often lead to the re-traumatization of individuals. This difficult differentiation between personal or vicarious trauma in media consumption leads Kaplan to declare an ethical need for pro-social trauma translation. Kaplan calls this the mode of witnessing:

For in bearing witness [...] one not only provides a witness where none was there to witness before, but more than that, one feels responsible for injustice in general. Witnessing involves wanting to change the kind of world where injustice, of whatever kind, is common. (122)

A narrative that presents trauma to elicit a mode of witnessing, prompts ethical responses in the reader, which “leads to a broader understanding of the meaning of what has been done to victims, of the politics of trauma being possible” (Kaplan 123). Witnessing simultaneously evokes and subordinates the personal feelings of the reader without invalidating their range, and does not limit the potentialities of depicting non-linear, complex, and nuanced life stories. Kaye Mitchell can be understood to reiterate Kaplan’s point in her study of contemporary feminist life writing, by stating that solidarity in collective action rather than empathetic identification creates durable political change (Mitchell 220). This mode is engaged by Bowdler’s narrative mainly through centering her queer relationship and the homosociality of women. The anger of the reader is incited not only by the injustice of what happened to Bowdler, but what her life experience represents for society. Alongside Bowdler in the course of reading, we face truths about our society and become angry together when we realize that, in the words of Mary as relayed in the memoir manifesto: “You [meaning Michelle Bowdler] aren’t crazy; what happened to you is crazy” (Bowdler 8). The feeling of ‘craziness’ at the root of rape culture, hinging on a sense of injustice and revealed through affective dissonance, becomes a central theme and induces angry witnessing: Anger is the mark when personal suffering becomes political. The alternation between a focus on personal experiences and their contextualization with statistical evidence in *Is Rape a Crime?* structurally emphasizes that the trauma of the narrator is embedded in the systemic violence of rape culture, but also that there is a community of victims. We realize that in this community, mad outrage against rape culture is shareable in a productive way, as the author does within the narrative of the book (Bowdler 215). At the same time, the continuous interspersing of personal memories

with facts on rape culture in Bowdler's memoir manifesto—for example, on pages 27 until 29 and pages 41 and 42, sub-chapter sections are inserted after the emotional revelations of her experiences in the hospital (pages 18-28) and at the police interrogation (37-40)—affords a continuous source of affective dissonance of the reader with the changes in emotional depth, channeling the readers' affects into angry witnessing instead of self-centered empathetic anger.

Before Bowdler's experience of 'that night' is disclosed, small details about the assault reappear without more context in the narration as they do in the narrator's consciousness for years: the perpetrators being strangers who broke in, being threatened with a knife, being tied with a phone cord. These particulars even involuntarily become a "new mantra: blindfold, knife, phone cord, scarf" (Bowdler 91) during her first post-rape attempt at sexual intimacy. The recurrence of these details without context represents the impossibility of relating to anyone after experiencing them (for example Bowdler 24, 65). The sequential, matter-of-fact disclosure when it happens, after this structural build-up and framing, creates a position for the reader as the angry witness<sup>17</sup> exactly by not dramatizing through tone, but structure.

While the scene of disclosure to Mary is positioned as the factual end and narrative culmination of what is determined as the 'memoir portion' of the book, the author's personal anecdotes, of course, do not stop here. The proceeding chapter jumps to the same point in the author's life 'A Memoir' started with, her PTSD relapse twenty years after the assault when she is a professionally successful wife and mother. Despite all these positive developments in her life, the injustice of the trauma haunts her. The memoir section concludes with an emphasis on action:

Some would say that I moved on, but many know that this is never truly the case. Years from this moment, I would return to the fact that the police had been silent and ask them to be accountable, not to make them feel better, but because what and who they were ignoring needed to stop being overlooked—for my sake and for thousands like me. (Bowdler 120)

Michelle Bowdler's personal trauma is inextricably linked to the experiences of thousands and we are launched into the second part, the author's investigation, which covers her beginning involvement in social activism. Here, the author also gives the reader information on the common criminal practices of police in obstructing justice against prosecutions of rapists. By performing the disclosure of truth as a step towards relationship intimacy in this way, overcoming imposed silence is made out as the first step needed towards social reconnection and personal healing, but in a process that is consciously non-linear. It is the first step leading her to activism, which becomes the foundation of a better mental condition.

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<sup>17</sup> Another theorist on trauma witnessing, Martina Kopf, who not coincidentally also draws from Judith Herman's book *Trauma and Recovery* (1997) even goes as far to state that in the communicative process of trauma translation, finding modes of listening/witnessing is of just as much importance as the paradox of narrating trauma memories (43).

When the author revisits the titular question in ‘Part III: A Manifesto,’ she reiterates “The fact that these conditions [meaning rape culture] existed at all and for so long is a tragedy and an outrage” (Bowdler 260). The book’s titular question causes affective dissonance by confronting the reader with the discomfort of having to admit ‘unfortunately, it often appears that it is not.’ Due to the fact that the persecution of rapists in the US is so scandalously discriminatory towards the victims of these crimes and ineffectual that, in practice, rape seems not be considered a violent crime at all.<sup>18</sup> This outrage, however, only finds an outlet when the queer/feminist subject can escape the double bind of what Alison Bailey calls anger-silence-spirals. Bailey defines them as, “closed hermeneutical systems in which the speaker suffers a double epistemic injury—neither her testimony nor her anger get uptake, and she is left with a dense, hot, swelling rage in her chest” (98). Michelle Bowdler gives many examples for the workings of silencing, such as being “rendered mute” (47) by the indifference of the police and finding her voice in activism (188) and the affective consequences of being silenced. She was not only treated crudely and insensitively, but the detective assigned to her case never filed her rape kit as evidence. It is missing to this day, and still when Bowdler inquired about the state of the investigation she was patronized, all the while this policeman never had the intention to investigate at all. Only after years of reflection, the narrator is able to describe unmistakably the specific double-bind of an anger-silence-spiral this caused her to experience:

At the time, I thought it was shame I felt, but now I realize that there was rage bubbling below the surface—anger at this crime’s impact, anger at all the ways I’d seen and heard it minimized, anger at the thunderous silence from the Boston police. And since there was no other place yet for this rage to go, it stayed inside of me—in every single cell, in my twitching back muscles, and in the tear ducts I struggled to keep dry. (Bowdler 183)

It is exactly the personal connection to the collective trauma of rape culture through activism which enables the author to escape this spiral and communicate openly, all while acknowledging the irony of beginning this work without having conventionally ‘worked through’ her trauma beforehand. Bowdler, however, states “But if I didn’t act, who would?” (Bowdler 197), a decision caused by her anger and longing for justice not only for herself but all victims. Her investigation towards healing is enmeshed in political activism, because her personal trauma is enmeshed in collective traumas of our society.

*Is Rape a Crime?* ends up founding a narrative convention of (memoir) manifestos itself, which can be called the trauma-to-activism-pipeline: the author details her emotional journey of personal and cultural traumas, and how personal well-being was dependent on becoming

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<sup>18</sup> As already mentioned, Bowdler’s book gives an array of statistical facts and news stories on the specifics of rape culture (3-7) in addition to the personal experiences of the author, she also elaborates on effects of race and class as well, such as in her discussion of figures such as Anita Hill (133-6). Most significantly, however, the book speaks of the enormous backlog of untested rape kits and the frequent dismissal of rape cases on the ground of delegitimizing the victim.

involved with and relating to other people (with similar experiences), and eventually incorporating being helped with helping others. The authorial legitimization as a manifestor is derived from contextualizing a self-narrative in social relation and striving for solidarity in words and deeds.

## Conclusion

The formal overlap between memoir and manifesto can represent the affective dimensions of trauma in a way that utilizes politicized anger. I conclude that while the narrative tension of memoirs arises from the disclosure of a personal (emotional) truth, the narrative tension of the manifesto aims at disclosing an emotional truth about society. Therefore, the memoir manifesto seems uniquely suited to represent the feminist aphorism that “the personal is political,” as Michelle Bowdler has shown in hers. In its overlapping, merged forms, the text invites a reading mode of bearing witness that can translate the queer temporality of trauma experiences. Furthermore, in bearing witness the groundwork is laid for exposing and mobilizing against injustice. In addition, I argue that contemporary memoir manifestos are relevant in how their disclosure of affective and emotional truths, especially anger, reveal the sense of justice (restorative or punitive) these manifestors follow in their imagination of the future.<sup>19</sup> The mode of angry witnessing in *Is Rape a Crime?* leads to an impactful pro-social translation of trauma to affect readers and further the book’s queer/feminist goal to counter the injustice of rape culture.

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<sup>19</sup> At this point I do want to mention a critique I have of Michelle Bowdler’s *Is Rape a Crime?*: What the book lacks is a broader, intersectional critique of the police force and ‘copaganda,’ especially in connection to rape culture. Her critique of media is often much too general, and even when such programs as *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (NBC, 1999-) are mentioned (Bowdler 21; 237), its cultural relevance is not dissected in favor of more statistical facts.



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