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## An Unchartered Life of Self-Silencing An Artifactual Autoethnography Introducing “Trauma-Induced Subconscious Self-Silencing”

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***An Unchartered Life of Self-Silencing***  
**An Artifactual Autoethnography Introducing “Trauma-Induced Subconscious Self-Silencing”**

By  
Katherine L. Olson

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts  
In  
Communication Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

Mankato, Minnesota

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An *Unchartered* Life of Self-Silencing: An Artifactual Autoethnography Introducing “Trauma-Induced Subconscious Self-Silencing”

Katherine L. Olson

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s committee.

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Dr. Sachi Sekimoto, Advisor

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Dr. Ivana Guarrasi, Committee Member

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Dr. Lu Wendy Yan, Committee Member

### **Acknowledgment and Dedication**

Thank you to my thesis committee, Dr. Lu Yan and Dr. Ivana Guarrasi, my advisor, mentor and friend, Dr. Sachi Sekimoto, my parents, my sister, and my husband for advancing my scholarship, supporting my authorship, and believing in me.

This work is dedicated to all who hope to find meaning from pain. You are not alone.

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AN *UNCHANTED* LIFE OF SELF-SILENCING: AN ARTIFACTUAL  
AUTOETHNOGRAPHY INTRODUCING “TRAUMA-INDUCED SUBCONSCIOUS SELF-  
SILENCING”

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR  
THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN COMMUNICATION STUDIES  
JULY, 2022

ABSTRACT

Why do we say we’re fine when we’re not? To others and to ourselves? Why does our body nonverbally communicate socioculturally derived “normalcy” and wellbeing when we feel horrible? And why might we ignore messages our body tries to send us? Why do we silence ourselves? These questions transcend interpersonal communication and point at intrapersonal denial of embodied struggle. Using a new method, *artifactual autoethnography*, I attempt to understand self-silencing behavior through a communicative perspective and assess why self-silencing behavior is so difficult to break. I revisit a novel I wrote when I was 16 years old, *Unchanted*, to see if there were patterns in my self-silencing behavior, and find the relationship among sociocultural mechanisms, communication, embodiment, trauma, and self-silencing. As a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, I find in returning to my novel this trauma impacted my self-silencing behavior more than I assumed and propose a term for the multi-layered complexity of internal and external self-silencing behavior: *trauma-induced subconscious self-silencing*.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The car screeches to halt centimeters from the bumper ahead. I'm sweating and late. The driver's side mirror verifies I'm red-faced and trembling. I swallow the knives in my throat and repeat the mantra I learned from a Google search the day before, "I accept that I'm not on time." I wonder why it took a Google search to string those words together as I exit my car. Salt and flecks of rust from my 2003 Buick Century crunch under my feet. I race to the door, thinking of how I will excuse my absence to my writing partner. The mantra has not worked.

The scent of coffee beans and cinnamon caress my nose with the jingle of the bells dangling from the door. My writing partner sits ahead in a quaint wooden chair, undoubtedly picked up from an antique shop. He smiles as I slide onto the bench across from him, setting my backpack down with all the grace of a hippopotamus.

"Hey!" he says, sliding his headphones down around his neck. A half-finished coffee rests adjacent to his open laptop. I'm late for the twelfth week in a row. That reality sinks to the base of my stomach as I sit. His kind eyes and smile invite me to let go of my self-judgment. I can't.

"I'm late," I say, "And I'm mad at you for getting a coffee. You paid for mine last time, it's only fair I pay for yours."

My voice quivers as the words come out manically fast. He scoffs as he sips his coffee and shrugs, "It's fine."

The words I heard nineteen times before. The other nineteen times I delayed our writing session. His eyes parous my face as his smile falls.

"Why are you late?" he asks gently, "are you okay?"



I could tell him traffic was terrible on 394. I could tell him my car wouldn't start in the bitter cold. I could tell him my GPS told me Amore Coffee Shop was only 20 minutes from my house and it was wrong.

Or I could tell him the truth. I could say I was ready on time, about to walk out the door when an episode hit me like a runaway semi. It took 40 minutes to realize where I was after the flashback, the paralysis, the crying, the shaking, and the fainting. Today is a hard day. It would be great to be told I'm safe and secure. It'd be great to hear that I'm not crazy, I'm just healing. And healing is hard.

Rationally I know telling him the truth invites this comfort, forgiveness, kindness and understanding.

"I'm fine," I answer with a smile, tucking my long sleeve over my quivering hand, "I'm gonna go grab that coffee I owe you."

### **Topic and Background**

Countless scholars and theorists explore why we communicate (Craig & Muller, 2007). Endless literature seeks to understand why we say what we say and the optimal way to say it. We explore communication styles of passive, aggressive, assertive, and passive aggressive natures, under the implication that we communicate to persuade others to our way of thinking or to alter behavior in a way favorable to the speaker, to use words to signify our thoughts and feelings, to efficiently transport information, to understand our own behaviors, to understand each other, to maintain or challenge institutions of power, and use to create, foster, and experience authentic human connectedness (Craig & Muller, 2007). Communication serves varied purposes. Yet, as demonstrated in the opening anecdote, I chose to cut off every mentioned option communication

offers. Why? There is an equally important, less explored avenue of communication: why we silence ourselves (Du, 2020; Dingli, 2015).

Silence in the Communication Studies context surpasses the mere description of quiet or absence of sound. Silencing is a verb, an action. Silencing is something someone does. Traditionally, the definition of silencing ranges from unintentional interpersonal dismissal of related individuals to global intentional erasure of culture, thought, and people (the most classic example being the white colonization and attempted genocide of Native Americans and continual conscious ignorance of living Indigenous peoples today) (Hamad, 2020; Townsend, 2020; Tsfati, 2020; Dingli, 2015). Though I recognize the need for more research studying the active, conscious silencing of people of color by the white population, this thesis takes a specified approach to the relationship among silencing, misogyny, traumatic experiences, pain, and embodiment. As established, silencing is an action often associated with the act of someone silencing another person or group of people. Even less discussed within the silencing realm is why one might silence their own self. Self-silencing is the action of choosing to silence the self and I argue this habitual action comes from embodied pain from internalized messages and experiences that lead to self-silencing behavior (Du, 2020).

First, self-silencing is a learned behavior that manifests in the body. When societal pressures, messages, and abuse are heard and felt enough, they become internalized, and some traumatic experiences need only occur once to become embedded in the nervous system (Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Reyome, Ward, & Witkiewitz, 2009). The internalization and embodiment of oppressive messaging and traumatic scars manifest as pain (Ahmed, 2007). The pain lingers in the body, activated whenever a memory of the message or trauma is remembered, even if subconsciously (Ahmed, 2007).

For example, if parents spank their child when their child speaks and give the child positive attention every time the child is quiet, the child will eventually stop speaking to avoid the pain that comes with spanking. However, the fear of the spanking lingers within the child's body. So even at school when other students speak or a teacher encourages the child to speak, the embodied pain of the spanking and the fear of getting spanked again remains, forbidding the child from speaking. In this example, I use spanking as the catalyst for the silencing to clarify how self-silencing becomes embodied. Another dimension of this thesis seeks to explain why, in general, women self-silence more than men (Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017; (Bogar, Ganos, Hoormann, Bub-Standal, & Beyer, 2017; Watson & Grotewiel, 2016; Olson, 2010; Whiffen, Foot, & Thompson, 2007).

Second, self-silencing is internalized in the mind. In Bakhtin's (2001) theory of multivoicedness, Bakhtin asks, when a person speaks, "who is doing the talking?" Bakhtin recognized through a sociocultural approach to communication that humans internalize messages from our environment and therefore express these internalized messages interpersonally. For example, my 18-year-old student said George W. Bush was "great because he was a regular guy." Considering my student must have been 6 years old when Bush ended his term in office, I have to wonder, was this something my student is repeating based on what he heard from his parents? From Fox News? From an older sibling? Has my student repeated this phrase based on the social and cultural influences in his environment? When my student made this comment, who was really doing the talking? Expanding on this theory, Bakhtin (2001) also recognized this internalization of external messages works within the mind. Messages we received from authority figures as children including parents, religious institutions, teachers, etc. become internalized as an "authoritative" voice, so engrained in our mind that internal discourse with this

voice is impossible. Though I disagree with Bakhtin's claim of impossibility, I agree discourse, let alone recognition of this internalized voice is difficult and influences our behavior. Therefore, if authoritative voices told us to be silent, that voice stays within our mind long after the authority figure is gone, resulting in self-silencing. Bakhtin's question in this case could be, "who is telling you not to do the talking?" What aspects of socializing and culture cause women to self-silence?

Using the example of the parents spanking their child for speaking, though some women may not always be physically struck for speaking in public, we are often verbally struck for speaking, interrupted, dismissed, silenced, and ignored. We are subjected to sexist oppression from birth, teaching us that, our value as women is less than male value and our words are only worth hearing if they are what someone else wants to hear (Olson, 2010). And within the category of women, there is an added layer of historically systematic and normalized dismissal of children who survive sexual abuse (Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007).

Growing up with layers of normalized silencing for being a woman and normalized silencing for experiencing sexual abuse, self-silencing then becomes a tactic for survival. Us women and sexual abuse survivors learn to avoid pain by not speaking anymore (Hamad, 2020). Like the child in the example, when we learn to avoid pain by remaining silent long enough, it no longer matters if we are surrounded by encouraging, supportive people willing to listen. Our learned behavior built in trauma and oppression remains internal and the external world is useless in negating the internalization (Piran, 2017).

In other words, using Foucault's theory of the panopticon, we eventually no longer need a prison guard to strike their baton and scream that we get in line. We have internalized the sense of being judged and watched, our body remembers the pain of dismissal when we speak and fear

the strike of that dismissal again. We have internalized Bakhtin's notion of the "authoritative" voice that told us how to behave, what we should be as women, and how much space we're permitted by the sociocultural norms to take. We associate our silencing as safe and have learned through social conditioning that it is what we are "supposed" to do. In other words, we submit to the hegemonic pressure to silence ourselves because we are afraid there may be consequences if we speak up. However, adhering to the social rule to self-silence to avoid painful consequences, also causes pain. (LeBlanc, 2020; Watson & Grotewiel, 2016). The definition of self-silencing goes further into self-diminishment.

As women, we've also been conditioned that we must fit a predetermined role and anything about us that fits outside those constraints does not deserve space. Therefore, self-silencing also includes suppressing the emotions we feel that contradict with our sociocultural surroundings, suppressing our memories that we perceive may inconvenience someone else, shrinking our bodies to take up as little space as possible, and silencing all forms of expression of ourselves including emotional expressions and even protective expression. For example, in my experience, it's seen as unacceptable for me, as a woman, to tell a man not to touch me, or strike him or shove him away. The few attempts in which I tried, were met with emotional and physical violence toward myself. The self-silencing is protective, yes, but it also silences and suppresses so much of ourselves and the pressures to maintain this spliced, silenced, repressed version of self, for lack of a stronger term, hurts.

Existing in constant fear of pain and likewise feeling pain whenever oppressive memories are activated by our surroundings deteriorates mental, physical, and relational health (Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Erbes, Stillman, Wieling, Walter, & Leskela, 2014, Ahmed, 2007). As social beings, the self-silencing, though a learned survival behavior, becomes isolating, inevitably

causing more pain (Du, 2020; Tsafiti, 2020; Ahmed, 2007). Living is a constant navigation of what choices will cause the least amount of pain, with no hope that a life of lessened pain is possible. Strangely enough, psychologists and feminist scholars alike agree the path to liberation lies in the very action we are conditioned against: speaking (Piran, 2017; Bogar et al., 2016; hooks, 2000;).

### **Purpose and Significance**

Though I did not know it at the time, I wrote a book, *Unchanted* on the embodiment and socioculturally forced nature of self-silencing. Through artifactual autoethnographic reflection on my processes of writing and reading *Unchanted* for the first time in years, I hope to further understand self-silencing phenomena. As a person whose body freezes, swallows any form of expression, aches, hides my trembling, my tears, suppresses emotion, and even collapses at, what seems like, random, I hope to find answers in this thesis. Why is breaking the self-silencing so hard? How does it manifest as pain? What collisions with my sociocultural environment now cause the chronic pain, somatization, and dissociation within my body (Ahmed, 2009; Farley & Keaney, 1997)? Why did I write about childhood abuse and the associated self-silencing through a fictional character? And why did it take me so long to realize my character was an expression of myself? What is the correlation between trauma and self-silencing? And why is it so difficult to break self-silencing behavior? Why do I verbally and nonverbally communicate alignment with socioculturally constructed normalcy and wellbeing while in pain?

I hope this work does not only benefit me. I hope all who self-silence, experienced childhood trauma and sociocultural pressures, and live in pain recognize the depths of repressing all forms of expression. As I still struggle to give myself any form of grace in my self-silencing behavior and still repress the associated memories and pain, I can only hope others will learn

they deserve time to process and work through their self-silencing. Self-silencing is a behavior forced by sociocultural pressures and traumatic experiences (Du, 2020; Piran 2017; Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007). I particularly hope women and survivors of childhood abuse find some encouragement in the journey to break self-silencing and some resonance. From my own experience, one of the worst factors of sociocultural dismissal, is the added pain of feeling alone (Du, 2020; Ahmed, 2014). If nothing else, I hope other self-silencers, survivors, and those who live in pain feel less alone in their struggle.

### **Research Questions**

In conducting this thesis, I hope to answer the following questions:

R1: What is the relationship between sociocultural mechanisms, communication, and embodied self-silencing?

R 2: Why is breaking self-silencing behavior so hard?

### **Preview of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, I will summarize the self-silencing literature preceding scholars wrote. The articles and books will be divided into 4 categories: 1) Defining Self-Silencing; 2) The Social and Cultural Mechanisms of Self-Silencing; 3) The Consequences of Self-Silencing; 4) Phenomenology of Self-silencing. The last category, the Phenomenology on Self-Silencing is the theoretical lens through which I explore self-silencing.

Next, in Chapter 3, I will first define *artifactual autoethnography* as a method. Second, I will discuss the work of previous researchers who used autoethnography as the research method for their work. I will then talk about how using a critical, feminist lens with my understanding of Communication Studies and psychological treatment theories of trauma will drive my analysis.

Finally, I explain why this artifactual autoethnographic method is most appropriate for this thesis.

In the Analysis, Chapter 4, I first discuss my relationship to the novel I wrote, OUL. I apply theories from the scholars in Chapter 2 to the conception of *Unchanted* and my process of writing it. I will explain how the surrounding sociocultural mechanisms and embodied pain led to self-silencing and how this manifested in my writing process. Second, I will analyze my experience returning to my book. I will read the chapters that now haunt me to further understand how I tried to break my self-silencing while trying to avoid sociocultural and painful consequences. I will theorize why using a partially fictional, literary medium might have been the safest way to express my experience and how this expression relates to potentially changing self-silencing behavior.

In the Discussion, Chapter 5, I will discuss my findings from Chapter 4, summarize the contribution my thesis makes to Communication Scholarship and survivors of childhood trauma, and discuss future research on self-silencing.



## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Defining Self-Silencing

Self-silencing, as discussed in the topic and background section is the action of self-isolation, avoidance, and meaning making, out of determining it is more beneficial to the self to be quiet than to speak because of fear of potential or previously inflicted pain, shame, and survival threats. (Du, 2020). I found Du's (2020) work most helpful in defining and growing my own understanding of self-silencing. Through an interview with a young woman studying in London from Wuhan China, Du explained why she (Amy) self-silenced and the toll self-silencing took on her wellbeing. In the wake of the COVID-19 global breakout, countries blamed Wuhan China for the disease's origin and for the spread, adding to already existing Asian-targeted racism. While studying in London, Amy noticed the tension around her at first for her appearance and the London-natives association with blaming China, and all Eastern Asians then for the pandemic. She heard the racist remarks, the criticism of her country, the hate crimes (not thoroughly discussed, but alluded to in the article), against those of Eastern Asian origin, and the added hatred placed on Wuhan. Recognizing how her safety was threatened and would be worsened with more shame, judgment, and cruelty if she shared the name of her hometown, Amy isolated herself and didn't speak to anyone. In addition to these threats, Amy also said she isolated herself because she thought that would be best for herself and others, afraid of what her friends would think of her, if they would feel unsafe being around her, and that she did not have the knowledge to give her confidence to disagree with the Corona-virus hateful rhetoric. Amy also shared the added pressure of, if she got the virus, what that would do to the image of all Chinese people in the minds of the English. She also, then, silenced herself hoping to lessen the possibility of creating more violence against other Chinese international students in London or

adding to the offensive images of the Chinese prevalent in London. Du (2020) describes Amy's silence as, "a 'normative' way of meaning-making that distances oneself from the complexities embedded [within a topic] and thus helps to avoid the potential consequences (p. 2)." She logically concluded staying quiet and isolating based on all these factors and silencing herself became a daily experience to avoid danger and vulnerability toward herself and others, to avoid confrontational conversations no one equipped her with the knowledge to navigate, and to avoid potentially worsening or perpetuating the already negative perceptions of the Chinese people in London. Her motto became, "I don't want to talk about it," (Du, 2020). Amy reported feelings of depression, anxiety, and loneliness increasing over time harming her mental, physical, and relational health (Du, 2020).

Du (2020) describes this phenomenon of Amy "silencing herself" as a behavior created and enforced by her surrounding dominant culture. The "dominant discourses" (rhetoric, iconography, opinions in London) shaped, labeled, and forced Amy to silence herself. Amy was powerless against the juggernaut of the overriding sociocultural prejudice, expressing she felt helpless, "there was nothing to use to argue against it," (Du, 2020, p. 264). Du's work on Amy's story covers every aspect of self-silencing, providing the strongest definition of self-silencing I could find. To summarize, self-silencing is when one silences their own self due to the social pressures of the dominant culture, the dismissal and erasure perpetuated on marginalized voices by the dominant culture, the brainwashing ideological fallacy that one doesn't deserve a voice or to be heard, the consequences of speaking (on the group and the individual), and the internal, felt pain of speaking and being met with dismissal, hostility, violence, and shame. Though the act of self-silencing was an action Amy took, her self-silencing came from attempting to choose the action with the least number of consequences rooted in oppressive social and cultural

mechanisms. Self-protection is the driving force behind self-silencing. However, I think we can further define self-silencing if we dig deeper.

From reading Du's (2021) article, I also gather self-silencing includes stopping the self from communicating nonverbally. The student in Du's (2021) article isolated herself in her room. In isolation, her peers could not see her body language, facial expressions, or tears. I predict her self-silencing went beyond verbal transaction with her peers. Instead of only silencing her words, she also silenced all form of expression. Beyond the external expression of verbal and nonverbal communication, I also argue self-silencing manifests internally in the body.

Self-silencing includes dismissing our own internal voice. As Bakhtin (2001) discussed, we all have internalized voices in our minds consisting of the messages we've obtained through society and authority, the authoritative voice, and our own individual voice. Self-silencing extends to silencing our own individual voice, allowing the authoritative voice to overtake us. Since the authoritative voice mirrors the sociocultural mechanisms of our environment, which I discuss further in the next section, I argue the authoritative voice mirrors the oppressive sexism embedded in Western society. Therefore, though we may have an individual voice that questions and challenges the authoritative voice, when we self-silence our individual voice, the authoritative voice dominates our minds and bodies. When we silence our individual voice, we suppress the pain and emotions within us that challenge the social norms we've learned. When we silence our own internal voice in lieu of the authoritative voice, our internalization of the dehumanizing societal mechanisms of misogyny and oppression, we suppress our emotions, dismiss our experiences, minimize our bodies, and forget our memories. I argue Du (2021) found their participant also engaged in internal self-silencing.

Du (2021) found in their interview not only a silencing of vocalic expression, but also Du's participant shared a shame that festered so deeply about the place she was born. She was ashamed that she was from Wuhan. I infer then, as to me, a home comes with memories, with family, with culture, with the people who live there, with school, with celebrations, with neighbors, and childhood friends, she extended her external self-silencing to silencing her past. She silenced part of herself within herself: her home, her childhood. Her memories were no longer allowed any space within herself. This self-diminishment fragments us from ourselves, what once was our whole world. Self-silencing extends to silencing our own memories, our own origins, and fragments the self into pieces.

Piran (2019) wrote a book based on three main studies she conducted including interviews with 171 girls and women on embodiment, 116 focus groups with school-aged girls, and surveys with 1500 women. From her findings, Piran argued self-diminishment meant eating less and less to shrink the physical space our bodies take up. The women in Piran's research studies also shared themes I see resonating in the Dialectical Behavioral Therapy book by Peterson (2022) I read during my year of intensive therapy. It includes a list of our "Bill of Rights" as a person and a list of reasons to and not to apologize. I'll include these full forms in the Appendix, but the general idea of both show we deserve to take up the resources needed for our bodies to work without apology (food, water, a place to live), we deserve to be heard without apology, we deserve the space our body takes, and our emotions and thoughts deserve space without apology. Though, at a glance, these may seem obvious, reading them created a light-headedness in me, a nauseated convulsing, and tremors in my limbs. I realized for as long as I could remember, this list of things Peterson (2022) argued we are entitled to as beings were all things I not only apologized for but felt I did not deserve.

Similar to the women in Piran’s (2017) book and the woman in Du’s (2021) article, my self-silencing extended beyond suppression of utterance of words, forbidding myself from taking up space with my words, but also forbidding myself from taking up space with my body, forbidding myself the space or grace to be anything other than my finest attempts at performing the role of the “perfect woman” (which I talk more about in the next chapter), forbidding myself from allowing space for my past within myself, forbidding emotions within me to take up space internally or externally, and forbidding myself from taking up the resources my body requires for survival. Therefore, following this line of thought, breaking self-silencing also means ownership of our words, emotions, our expression in all forms, our past, our body, the resources our body needs, and of our space on this earth as women.

### **The Social and Cultural Mechanisms of Self-Silencing**

Self-silencing is a subconscious choice for literal and sociocultural survival (Tsftati 2020; Watson & Grotewiel, 2016). Sexism is the largest factor contributing to silencing and imposing self-silencing on white women in the United States. The main sexist mechanisms engrained in the sociocultural landscape of the United States forcing self-silencing include: 1) the perpetuated, fallacious “ideal woman” archetype (Piran, 2017); and 2) the sociocultural consequences of women speaking (Watson & Grotewiel, 2016; Olson, 2010; Kramarae, 2005; hooks, 2000).

#### *The Ideal Woman Archetype*

LeBlanc (2020) described her experiences as pregnant and postpartum walking in public as an internalized form of Foucault’s panopticon. She noticed strangers watched her and spoke to her with constant judgment, that eventually she internalized her perceived judgment. In other words, she soon associated anyone looking at her with judgment and heard what she imagined or replayed the judgments imposed on her in the past within her mind. She noticed the judgment did

not change in severity, only in specifics when her body transitioned from pregnancy to postpartum. Everyone seemed to have an opinion of how she should be or act as pregnant and how she should be or act as a mother. She was judged by her perceived “goodness” as a mother and the “usefulness” of her body. All the external critiques became internalized self-judgment. She compared this constant self-surveillance and internalized judgment to Foucault’s panopticon stating her external encounters with judgment happened so frequently, that eventually she did not need to interact with anyone else to harshly judge herself as a pregnant woman and as a mother. LeBlanc (2020) internalized the harsh critique of her social surroundings.

Unfortunately, LeBlanc’s experience is common. Though women are globally compared and judged based off an invented ideal woman, for the purposes of this thesis, I will focus on the United States (Saito, 2017; Rojas, 2009). Western society still upholds the idea of a “perfect woman” rooted in Ancient Greek and Roman mythology perpetuated through the Renaissance, anglicized Christianity, and modern media (Hamad, 2019; Rojas, 2009; Hilda, 2008; Machiavelli, 1531; Livy, 27 BCE). Women are all judged in comparison to the fallacious, socially constructed mythical ideal of a “perfect woman” who is: innocent, yet sexually enticing; quiet; thin; beautiful; chaste; submissive; helpless; wealthy; nurturing; in servitude to and dependent on men; childbearing; powerless; and white (Hamad, 2019; Rojas, 2009; Machiavelli, 1531; Livy, 27 BCE). To complicate matters further, even when matching many of the “perfect woman” attributes from an anglicized Christian perspective, the expectations are still impossibly conflicting and incongruent (Scott, 2014). How can one be a religious leader and still powerless? How can one be virginal yet be a mother? How can one be childbearing and thin?

In other words, meeting the social and cultural pressure to be the “perfect woman” is impossible, and yet women are still pressured to fit this archetype and harshly judged on our

“failure” to reach these standards. Like LeBlanc (2020), we as women face extensive external judgment and pressure from both men and women that we internalize the scrutiny, judging ourselves as others judge and we perceive others judge us (Trekels, Eggermont, Koppen, & Vandenbosch, 2018). The societal pressure to meet these impossible standards are so great, we women develop eating disorders, self-destructive and harming behavior, alcoholism, depression, and self-silence to avoid feeling the pain of our “failure” to meet these societal expectations and to avoid the pain of the sociocultural consequences of speaking (Masako & Preston, 2015; Piran, 2007; Waites, 1982).

### *Sociocultural Consequences of Speaking*

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the consequence women face for speaking up and speaking out when forced into the position of fitting the “perfect woman” are various and numerous. Though these topics overlap, for clarity, I will discuss the dismissal as consequence first and then the violent consequences when women speak. Both forms of these consequences silence women further forcing women to self-silence to survive.

First, we as women face dismissal when we speak. Using our voices inherently defies the “quiet” attribute of the perfect woman while simultaneously threatening the other qualities of powerlessness, helplessness, and dependence on men. Though, like LeBlanc (2020) some women find the internalization of these sexist pressures and work to comply with the “perfect woman” invention fitting as many of the attributes as possible, others try to resist. Unfortunately, there are consequences for compliance and speaking (Trekels et al., 2018; Masako & Preston, 2015).

Blumell & Huemmer (2017) and Olson (2004) discussed the silencing and dismissal of adult women trying to speak up in the social sphere against assault and abuse. Societal sexism

assumes women inherently hold fault and are deserving of abusive behavior and assault, dismissing any woman who speaks out against it. Women are silenced by the dismissal of our claims and manipulations of our words.

Blumell & Hummel (2017) described how the women who came forth to speak up about ex-President Donald Trump's sexual misconduct were dismissed and silenced by media. When women spoke about the disturbing and crass words caught on tape by Trump saying, "Grab 'em by the pussy. You can do anything" they were met with anger. When Ana Navarro, a Republican strategist on CNN repeated Trump's remarks to criticize his behavior, Scottie Nell Hughes, a representative for Trump asked her to be quiet and stop using "that word" because his daughter was watching the show. Trump's use of the word was played off as joking, not serious, and those who criticized him were chastised for threatening the innocence of little girls just for repeating his words. Blumell & Huemmer (2017) compared the Rape Myth Acceptance Scale developed by Payne, Lonsway, and Fitzgerald (1999) with references to Trump and found a common theme of minimizing and dismissing sexual assault and rape against women.

Olson (2004) argued her own experience with abuse in her romantic relationship was largely influenced by social messaging surrounding female identity development. In her relationship, her identity was first developed as submissive to her abuser, then her self-confidence and sense of self became enmeshed with his. In other words, her very identity was dependent on him. Though Olson (2004) mentioned in the last decade women have started to speak out to overcome the societal pressure to stay silent regarding abuse for fear of dismissal, silencing, and ramifications from abusers, she recognized the "grooming" process of domestically violent relationships are by products of interactions with others in society. Therefore, our susceptibility as women to this dependence forming on men and silence in the



wake of the abuse is socially constructed and often the social sphere of the “battered woman” works as a mechanism to further deny her voice, dismiss her abuse, and defend her abuser, therefore silencing her (Olson, 2004).

Shame is another significant piece of the sociocultural mechanisms forcing self-silencing (Schwartz, 2021). Schwartz (2021) noted the specified cultural framework surrounding social understanding of morality and harsh social judgment inflicted upon those who speak on topics outside the sociocultural realm of morality causes a division in those who experience domestic violence resulting in shame. Schwartz (2021) uses the notion of shame to understand the interconnectedness between individual experience and the socially structured narratives of morality. In other words, those who experience violence feel ashamed because of the sociocultural assumptions related to the immorality of violence. A victim will self-silence rather than invite a conversation that could lead to shaming (labeling the survivor a weak, complacent person, labeling them stupid for staying in the relationship, inventing a narrative where the aggressor’s acts are justified, etc.).

Survivors of abuse and assault rarely speak about their experiences knowing their pain will be met with dismissal and overshadowed by the narrative that a truly innocent woman (again, I theorize in reference to the “perfect woman” myth) would not have brought on such behavior in men. The woman is always at fault. The man is always innocent. Therefore, the external silencing, leads to internal silencing to avoid the pain accompanied with dismissal and manipulation of our experiences. Women are actively silenced or ignored, “only a shunned minority is heard speaking out for [women’s] side. Or nothing is heard at all” (Noelle-Neumann, 1989, 10).

In addition to the dismissive responses survivors experience from attempting to speak, scholars also find a direct correlation between actual violent acts of abuse and self-silencing behavior (Karakus & Goncu-Kose, 2022; Hassija & Cloitre, 2015; Erbes, Stillman, & Wieling, Walter, & Leskela; 2014). First, while studying self-silencing from violence in adulthood, psychologists Hassija & Cloitre (2015) and Erbes et al (2014) reported their clients diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder from abuse self-silence due to their psychological formation around the negative cognition that if they speak, they will be physically punished. Hence, these scholars focused the treatment of these clients on safely encouraging them to speak to unlearn this understanding. Likewise, while studying self-silencing behaviors in children, Karakus & Goncu-Kose (2022) found in their study on the relationship between Child Exposure to Domestic Violence with bullying and silencing-the-self behaviors that, after data was collected from 569 adolescents, there was a significant correlation between exposure to domestic violence and self-silencing. Though research directly related to the female childhood experience of sexual abuse and self-silencing behaviors was not found, I posit survivors of childhood sexual abuse, like myself, also self-silence for the same reasons based on the literature reviewed in this section.

### **The Consequences of Self-Silencing**

After understanding the sociocultural mechanisms that cause self-silencing, in the following paragraphs, I discuss how self-silencing behavior also creates adverse effects including perpetuation of the sexist, sociocultural structure that caused the self-silencing behavior, prolonging the issue for future generations, mental health struggles (alcoholism, depression, low self-esteem), and struggles with embodiment.

Self-silencing behavior inflicts sociocultural consequences by upholding the sexist sociocultural mechanisms that force women and survivors of domestic violence to embody the

self-silencing behavior. Waites (1982) found in comparing two case studies that the compliance of women feeding into the male ideal of the quiet, submissive, dependent “perfect woman” is a learned, defensive behavior but also perpetuates the “perfect woman” myth, societal fetishization of distorted views of women, and supports the male narcissism and patriarchal power. So, though the act of self-silencing is a sociocultural survival technique, another consequence of enacting voicelessness is upholding the sexism that caused the initial defensive behavior. Men stay in power, the “perfect woman” myth is unchallenged, and women suffer the additional consequences of self-silencing.

Self-silencing also harms the individual enacting the behavior. Hilda (2008) studied the women who attended Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) predicting there were numerous sociocultural factors contributing to alcoholism. Hilda found the women in AA reported their consumption of alcohol was a form of rebellion against the “perfect woman” archetype. In the face of societal pressure to perform as perfect and dismissed when they tried to speak of their unhappiness with judgement of their failures to meet the associated standards, they found drinking alcohol to be their own quiet form of rebellion, hidden from social judging eyes. Of course, over time, the consumption of alcohol to cope with the sexist pressures and dismissal of their voices led to alcohol dependence and related health problems. Hilda recorded the women in AA found sharing stories with each other and finding they shared the same struggles and societal pressure was empowering. In other words, breaking their silence was liberating and broke their isolation, a recurring hopeful theme in the chapters to come.

Maji and Dixit (2018) found self-silencing negatively impacts women’s health. In their literature review combining articles rooted in psychiatry, Maji and Dixit (2018) summarized how self-silencing leads to psychiatric disorders (depression, anxiety, etc.), eating disorders, and

reduces the body's resiliency to combat cancer, AIDS, and is associated with pre-menstrual dysphoric disorder. Similarly, Du (2021) and Whiffen, Foot, and Thompson (2007) all found self-silencing causes depression, anxiety, and conflict in relationships. Just as Du (2021) reported the student in her study shared feelings of depression, anxiety, increased distress and loneliness from her self-silencing, Whiffen, Foot, and Thompson (2007) found in their study of 115 couples that women are at a high risk of depression when we suppress our thoughts and feelings, but the self-silencing behavior also leads to marital conflict and symptoms of anxiety. Self-silencing also contributes to severed relationship with the body. Individuals who self-silence are prone to eating disorders, dissociation, and pain.

Piran (2017) studied the impact of sociocultural pressures on women's bodies. She found in a series of interviews, the sociocultural pressures listed above in the "Ideal Woman Archetype" section, caused women to both shrink their voice and shrink their bodies to fit the "perfect woman" mold. This "corseting process" in which women silence their voices and bodies to take up as little space as possible led to eating disorders. Piran (2017) found only after women started speaking with each other, breaking their silence, and taking up space, did they begin to reclaim their voice, their body, and their space.

Though no other specific article regarding these concepts was found within the last 25 years, Farley and Keaney (1997) found self-silencing behaviors in adults who experienced childhood sexual trauma worsened physical symptoms of chronic pain, somatization, and dissociation. The Mayo Clinic Health System (2020) states pain is labeled "chronic," when the pain is felt most of the time for three months or longer and hinders daily activities.

"Somatization" consists of bodily pain and physical symptoms without disease or injurious cause (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). For example, a migraine headache is considered

“somatic” when a medical professional cannot determine a physical cause and diagnoses “stress”, and “anxiety” cause the migraine. Last, the American Psychiatric Association (2022) describes “dissociation” as an episode of significant disconnection between a person’s body, thoughts, memories, feelings, actions or sense of self and loss of awareness of surroundings. Forms of narrative and talk therapy were recommended to lessen the symptoms over time. The chronic pain associated with trauma and self-silencing behavior will be further discussed in the final section of this literature review.

### ***Phenomenology of Self-Silencing***

As found in the previous section, there is a correlation between self-silencing and sociocultural mechanisms, and this correlation manifests in the body. I argue self-silencing is experienced and felt, and therefore requires exploration into the field studying embodiment and consciousness: phenomenology (Craig & Muller, 2007). Research directly connecting phenomenology and self-silencing is limited. However, I will discuss Cates’ (2018) work bridged with Ahmed’s (2014) description of felt pain and isolation to further explain the embodied pain discussed in *Consequences of Self-Silencing* in reference to self-silencing.

Influenced by the writings of Merleau-Ponty, Cates (2018) explained how the sociocultural pressures to silence our sadness manifests in the body. Cates (2018) discussed how the self-silencing of sadness leads to suffering loneliness, a similar theme found in Ahmed’s work. Cates described the consistent silencing of sadness turns into an emotional numbing causing dissociation, the disconnection from the body and feeling. The most primordial way emotions exist is through the lived body and therefore emotions create a central constituent of selfhood, therefore without feeling the body, she argued, we also lose our ability to be genuine. Ingenuity and severing connection to the body, Cates posited, the self loses ways of knowing and

sensing the world, and quoted Merleau-Ponty's argument that the body is what anchors all of us to the world.

Cates observed self-silencing her own sadness produced a repetitive spiral of shame and loneliness for, she argued, it is through knowing and feeling emotions that humans not only connect to an embodied state but also connect with other humans. Cates found in interviewing her participant, Ben, his chronic self-silencing behavior led to a lack of bodily expression and emotional knowing that he eventually had no words to describe his experience. His emotional vocabulary diminished in his self-silencing there for disconnecting him from his body and from other humans.

Cates' (2018) phenomenological approach was rooted in understanding meaning-making through lived experience. Therefore, if humans disconnected from the body due to self-silencing their emotions, we also could not comprehend or authentically sense our experiences. Cates found an example of this phenomenon in her second interview with Sasha who experienced abuse in childhood. Sasha's repression of her emotions led to a disconnection with her body that further led to self-objectification. Her body was a separated "it" rather than a unified, embodied, "I." Sasha reported regretting the choices she made throughout her life due to her self-silencing, making decisions out of touch with her embodied experience.

Cates' phenomenological lens examined a dualistic understanding of the mind/body experience in which those who self-silenced due to the sociocultural shame surrounding sadness experience the mind and body as separate entities. Ben and Sasha described "having a body" rather than "being a body." This separation severed Ben and Sasha's ability to sense, make meaning, and authentically experience their lives. Then, only in first connecting with their bodily

feelings of sadness, Cates (2018), argued could Ben and Sasha begin to stop the self-silencing behavior. Cates (2018) described a dissociative correlation with self-silencing and the body.

Though Ahmed (2014) does not specifically address self-silencing, I argue her arguments regarding embodied pain relate to the physical experiences associated with self-silencing from the articles mentioned in the earlier section on *Consequences of Self-Silencing*. Ahmed (2014) described pain as a private, lonely experience, accompanied with the sense that no one else could understand the depth of feeling. Ahmed noted “pain” and “hurt” are difficult to describe in the English language as the feeling/sensation is often negative, unpleasant, and beyond words. Ahmed stated this pain is held in the body and when humans interact, the bodily pain erupts when reminded of the cause of the pain. In agreement with somatization description of Farley and Keaney (1997), Ahmed argued medical professionals cannot yet fully comprehend how lived experiences create embodied pain and bodily damage without viral or injurious causation. Ahmed argued pain is affected by memory. She claimed pain is felt through lived experiences and therefore any bodily encounter reminding us of our past painful experiences causes us to feel the pain again.

Often in attempting to describe the sensation of pain, Ahmed (2014) observed, we describe an invented cause assigning the embodied hurt to an imaginary external object. For example, when trying to explain a stress-related migraine, I would describe the pain in my head as, “It feels like someone is crunching my skull in with massive fingers made of metal.” This visceral description is made attempting to alleviate the loneliness that comes with pain in which we perceive no one else could understand us through trying to create a narrative someone else might understand.

Ahmed (2014) referenced the impact speaking and self-silencing have on the feelings of pain describing that when we use words to describe embodied experiences of pain, we reshape the experience. Therefore, I believe, after reading the works by Hassija & Cloitre (2015), Erbes et al (2014), and Farley and Keaney's (1997) self-silencing individuals must work to break their own self-silencing behavior. Cates' (2018) interviews helped Ben and Sasha through encouraging them to speak and making space for their stories. Olson (2004) broke her own self-silencing behavior by writing down her experience in an abusive relationship. I argue only through working to assign words to the traumas causing the self-silencing behavior can self-silencers begin to express themselves, trust themselves, and live an embodied life.

Unfortunately, I could not find literature describing the lived, bodily experience of Bakhtin's multivoicedness related to pain and self-silencing, however I will explain the connected relationship of these concepts in the following chapters. In the following chapter, I will discuss my research method for this thesis.



### Chapter 3: Methodology

For this thesis, I propose a new method of research: *artifactual autoethnography*. I will draw upon the autoethnographic method, but my analysis will be directed in my experience interacting with an artifact: the novel I wrote. I argue through using a feminist, critical Communication Studies lens, and recording my experience and findings in my previously written text, I will be able to answer my research questions. First, I will define my proposed *artifactual autoethnography* method. Second, I will discuss my feminist and critical lens in conducting my method. Third, I will justify why I feel a feminist, critical *artifactual autoethnography* is the best methodology for this thesis and include a brief synopsis of *Unchanted*.

#### Defining “Artifactual Autoethnographic” Research

Autoethnography is both a process and a product (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010). Ellis and Adams (2014) define autoethnography as a qualitative research method using autobiographical means to further sociocultural understanding. Asad (2013) describes the autoethnography as a writing research method combining the fieldwork, or lived experience, aspect of ethnography with the personal (auto) reflection. Arguably the most personal of methodologies, autoethnography requires the researcher to reflect on their own lived experience to provide insight regarding the relationship between culture, society, and self (Ellis & Adams, 2014). Autoethnography resists the organized templates of quantitative methodology requiring many participants, and instead allows the researcher to explore self-consciousness, embodiment, and challenge sociocultural norms through collaborative, storytelling, and/or literary means. Unlike quantitative methods, the autoethnographer makes no attempt to eliminate, but rather highlights the researcher’s social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional positionality (Asad, 2013). However, I have yet to come across scholarly work that reports a reader’s reflection in

interacting with an object. The research method I find communication scholars use in finding patterns and answers in a specific text is content analysis.

Where content analysis is a useful method in finding meaning in text, there are several reasons why this method would not work for my purposes. In my experience, communication scholars use content analyses to find patterns and answers to their research questions in visual media and literature. Through the content analysis method, scholars use quantitative means to systematically find patterns in a text through categorizing the frequency of themes in visual and literary media (Fulcher-Rood, Castilla-Earls, Higginbotham, 2020; Hong & Lee, 2018; Lubna, 2015). Data analysis software can be used to find the frequency of terms used in a piece of literary, audio, or visual media and the goal is for the researcher to practice maximum objectivity (Graham & Walsh, 2019; Alberto, Padovani, Biban, Lavelli, 2018). (Graham & Walsh, 2019). Though sometimes content analysis is used in tandem with an interview or focus group method, the interview transcript or focus group transcript is used as the content to be analyzed. The content analysis piece is structured with the goal that future scholars could use the method and yield the same results as the initial scholar (Fulcher-Rood, Castilla-Earls, & Higginbotham, 2020; Alberto, Padovani, Biban, Lavelli, 2018). I found some Communication Studies articles proposing qualitative content analyses and critical analysis. However, the scholars acknowledge their lens and biases, but focus on the message in the text vs. their dialogue or relationship to the text (Venkatasubramanian, 2021).

In this thesis, I seek to understand self-silencing as a personal experience through interacting with what I wrote at the height of my self-silencing behavior. I see a gap between autoethnography and content analysis. Where autoethnography addresses the researcher's experience, text is not addressed. Where content analysis addresses text, the researcher's

experience is deemed irrelevant. To illustrate my point, LeBlanc (2020) uses autoethnography to describe the impact of other humans on her mental health, but she has no text or tangible content to use. Likewise, when Anderson, Holland, Heldreth, & Johnson (2018) use content analyses to describe how the Jezebel stereotype in media relates to sexual objectification of BIPOC women, they do not share how seeing images of or reading literature perpetuating the stereotype impacts their own experience. I need the missing elements from both methods for my thesis. Though I considered calling this new method a “content-based” or “textual” autoethnography, my authorship of the text adds another personal layer to the focus of my interactive experience: my novel. Therefore, I use Cole’s (1996) writings to propose the term “artifact” over “textual” for reasons rooted in anthropology, semiotics and phenomenology from the Communication discipline, and traditional cultural historical psychology.

I argue my novel is best labeled as an “artifact.” From an early anthropological perspective, an artifact was thought of as a material thing forged by humans. Further understanding of an artifact from a critical perspective, including interpretations by Marx and Hegel, shows artifacts are modified over time. Artifacts are both pure and material as relics of a time when they were forged by human hands. With this added critical perspective, artifacts imply human interaction both from those who made the material in the past and those working to make meaning from the artifacts in present time (Cole, 1996). A Communication Studies perspective adds the third layer of my term selection. Semiotics scholars in the Communication Studies field theorize the relationship between words and meaning. Hence, semiologists return to a triadic structure of a literal object, the word that symbolizes the object, and assigning meaning to the object through the word. Though recurring theme of the relationship between material and meaning is vital, the semiotics model is limited. The literal object in my case is the novel,

*Unchanted*. However, using this *artifactual autoethnographic* method, I expect I will now use words in writing my interpretation of the object that I have developed since writing. In other words, I will find deeper meaning in the words I wrote as a teenager re-reading them now. (Dimock, 2021). A purely semiotic lens fails to capture the continued interactive nature of returning to a human-made object and finding new meaning. Therefore, the term “artifact” better serves the purpose of my method because the novel is not “fixed.” Though the words on the pages have not changed and the literal meaning of the words retain the same linguistic English meaning, the entirety of the messages sent through the novel transcend individual symbolic words. The words are the same, but I understand them better now, interacting with the text. I expect in returning to the book, I will make meaning of the text I never have before.

Additionally, the Phenomenological Tradition from a communication perspective focuses on the individual experience, consciousness, otherness, authenticity, and dialogue. As I will record my embodied sensations (somatic pain, embodied memory, etc.), awareness of consciousness (dissociation, gaps in my memory, etc.), feelings of isolation and loneliness with the rawness of authenticity and genuine meaning-making, my method is not fully phenomenological either (Craig & Muller, 2007). Phenomenology reflects upon experience and dialogue with sociocultural constructs and surrounding humans, but I have yet to read a phenomenological study engaging in dialogue with written material. The phenomenological aspects of this study again draw me toward the “artifact” word choice. My proposed participation and engagement with the novel, while seeking the true purpose and meaning behind *Unchanted* through recording my embodied reaction implies the novel itself has an ideal meaning to be discovered. Cole (1996) argues the intersection of human cognition with engrained sociocultural meaning with material forged by human hands is called an “artifact” and “artifacts” reflect how actions of

everyday life exemplifies culture. In other words, engaging with artifacts help us understand our culture and our past. Through finding meaning in artifacts, we can discover why humans did what they did because, from a cultural historical psychologists' perspective, humans are inseparable from our culture (Cole, 1996). With this understanding of artifacts, I argue my method is an *artifactual autoethnography*. In summation, the novel I wrote as a teenager transcends "object" or "material" and is, instead, an artifact. *Unchanted* is a tangible substance symbolic of my teenage consciousness. Though the words I wrote as a teenager remain unchanged, in returning to and interacting with the novel with my wiser, older perspective, I hope to discover the sociocultural influences through what I recorded at the time. And through engaging with the emotions and sensations within my body that arise in interacting with the text, I hope to find the reasons behind my self-silencing and pain. Where "content" or "text" implies a neutral object, "artifact" emphasizes my human-made nature, embraces the ties to culture and societal meaning, and implies the novel is recovered. As I have gaps in my memory while writing and since writing *Unchanted* I argue the term "artifact" also captures the buried and rediscovered nature of my novel (Kazdin, 1977). Therefore, from an anthropological, critical, semiotic, and phenomenological lens, the novel itself is an artifact; a tangible product of my past consciousness recording my surrounding sociocultural environment and embodied experience through fictional means. As I synergistically engage with my artifact, I hope to understand my past (Cole, 1996; Wartofsky, 1979).

For these reasons, I feel the term *artifactual autoethnography* most accurately suits my method. Therefore, I propose *artifactual analysis*, a qualitative method both seeking patterns within my novel and recording my experience engaging in dialogue with my artifact. I also argue

using a feminist lens critiquing sociocultural structure will uncover the mechanisms that forced the self-silencing behavior I recorded as a 16-year-old when I wrote *Unchanted*.

### **A Feminist and Critical Lens**

I was sixteen in 2007 when I wrote my first draft of *Unchanted*. As a sixteen-year-old girl, I remember feeling a need to “fit in.” I remember internalizing scrutinizing myself for every difference I perceived in my body and my mind from my peers. I did not know the term “ideal woman” at the time. Nor did I have the knowledge of where this desired archetype comes from as I discussed in the literature review. I just knew the girls in my class who were pretty, thin, wealthy, angelic-seeming blondes, closest to the girls from *Laguna Beach* on MTV, received the most attention from the cute boys. Therefore, I wanted to be like them. I never voiced this drive to anyone, knowing showing a lack of confidence was also unattractive. I self-silenced and hated myself for mental health reasons I am sure will reveal themselves in my analysis, but I also for feeling so far from “normal.” I stood out. I remember my locker neighbor was also named “Katie Olson” and when people clarified which Katie they spoke of, they identified us as either “the redhead with big boobs” or the Katie whose “not a redhead with big boobs.” I interpreted this distinction to mean my hair was freakish and my body “dirty.” I did not fit in with the innocent, skinny, blonds. And because of that, I thought, no boy would ever like me, and if no boy ever liked me, then I was nothing. It never crossed my mind that it was rude of the other kids to distinguish us Katie Olsons through objectification. It never dawned on me that our high school culture centered around gaining white, male favor. It never occurred to me that perhaps these ideas about power and agency were problematic. It wasn’t until I was in college and learned about feminism and critical perspective that I realized, maybe I don’t need to hate and change myself to conform to socioculturally defined “norms.” Maybe the sociocultural structure itself

should be critiqued and changed. With feminist understanding and a critical lens, I believe my analysis will then find the flaws in the society and culture in the school and town in *Unchanted*. And critiquing the oppressive patterns in the sociocultural surrounding will help me understand why I did what I did and allow myself, as an adult, to free myself from self-hatred based on my differences from the socioculturally defined “norm.” If the “norm” is based on rules I now can see and name as misogynistic, oppressive, and dehumanizing, then my differences from these rules are good. Late 90s, early 2000s literature about the sixteen-year-old girl mindset revealed my self-hating, low-esteemed, desire to be like the “popular” girls was common (Button, Loan, Davies, Sonuga-Barke, 1997). Likewise, 2007 articles by feminist scholars critiqued how the masses outside of academia were unwilling to see or unaware of the oppressive misogynistic nature of the culture (Ely & Padavic, 2007; Lazar, 2007; McRobbie, 2007). As an *artifactual autoethnographer* analyzing an artifact from 2007, I argue using modern feminist and critical perspectives will reveal the sociocultural pressures to self-silence I felt but could not name or critique at sixteen.

A feminist perspective will help me analyze the power dynamics in *Unchanted* and how power impacted my self-silencing behavior. As previously stated, I was unaware of the unfairness of the society and culture I lived in when I authored *Unchanted*. As shown in my literature review from Chapter 2, patriarchal values silence women. In a patriarchal society, aggression, domination, hierarchal power, and gender inequality (hooks, 2000). Within this system, men are assumed to be inherently more valuable and hold all power. Women are reduced to roles that only serve men, like sexual objects and domestic caretakers. In other words, women are stripped of our humanity within this system (Rojas, 2009; hooks, 2000). For example, Moua (2018) described the severing of her identity within white, Western culture. Socioculturally,

Moua (2018) was reduced to being understood as solely a daughter, a graduate student, or a Hmong woman. Within the patriarchal system, the complex, multi-faceted dimensions of her identity were dismissed. Moua (2018) was socioculturally forced into these three separate categories. Where men are socioculturally embraced for all the parts of their identity, Moua (2018) was socioculturally degraded to subhuman, only recognized as one part of her identity. At sixteen, I accepted this patriarchal, misogynistic social system as “just the way things are.” I never considered questioning what “just is,” (Ahmed, 2014). In assuming the social system was natural and inevitable, I inherently accepted myself as less human than men. I conceded to having no agency or power of my own as a lesser being. Therefore, it was inconceivable to me that anything was wrong socioculturally. Now, having read literature of feminist scholars, I see now my sixteen-year-old self experienced harassment, sexualization, and abuse, and I see my BIPOC sisters suffer/ed beyond compare within this patriarchal system (Hamad, 2019; Rojas, 2009; hooks, 2000). As a graduate student, I now understand that feminism as the antithesis of misogyny. To paraphrase what hooks (2000) said, feminism is an ideology and movement against sexism. Feminist ideology values respect, cooperation, equality, and fairness. True feminism does not value one race, gender, or sex over another (hooks, 2000). Feminism humanizes all humans. In other terms, feminism does not dehumanize nor forces any group to submit to another. With this feminist knowledge I now have, I can see my past sixteen-year-old self as a human being worthy of being treated with respect. I believe with this feminist lens humanizing the protagonist in *Unchanted*, a version of myself, I will recognize the sexist aggression, sexualization, and domination men inflicted on me. I hope this recognition of misogyny will help me answer my second research question regarding why it is so hard to stop self-silencing behavior. I believe the power differences between men and myself will be revealed



in the book as enforcing self-silencing behavior (Olson, 2010). I also posit using a critical lens with this feminist perspective will help me further understand self-silencing behavior.

A critical lens will help me understand how the entire sociocultural structure of the world in *Unchanted* is flawed. Awareness of the flaws and external pressures outside of myself will help me determine what self-silencing behavior was my conscious choice and what self-silencing behavior was enforced by the sociocultural mechanisms described in the literature review. My sixteen-year-old-self aligned with what critical scholars Marx and Engels (1968) described, in so many words, as restricted consciousness. I was not aware I was within a working system. I was only aware of the rules. At the time, even if I miraculously became aware of the social system, I would not have critiqued it. In other words, I was like a goldfish in a bowl. I swam and ate when I was fed, but I was unaware I was in a bowl. I also could not imagine there might be a better, bigger, more freeing, beautiful ocean I would rather swim in. To gain consciousness of and determine the oppressive, trapped nature of the culture in *Unchanted*/the “bowl” in this example, I draw inspiration from previous scholars to solidify the helpfulness of critiquing sociocultural structures in autoethnographic work. Though my analysis will not predominantly focus on race, critical race scholars inspire me to see how sociocultural mechanisms impact our ways of thinking, communicating, and our relationship with our body. Sekimoto and Brown (2020) discuss how race, a social construction, is felt as multisensorial phenomena projected onto the authors by sociocultural means. Sekimoto recounts her experience as a Japanese woman living in the United States, recalling students mistaking her for professors of Chinese descent, and therefore looking in the mirror and wondering what about herself communicates herself as “Asian” to these white, American-born students. Brown recounts his experience speaking with white CEOs in Chicago and how uncomfortable they became talking about diversity and his

experience being harassed by police. These autobiographic accounts describe the personal collisions with the “ethnography” (the research of the depicted larger social or cultural group), revealing the impacts of hegemonic sociocultural pressure on an Asian woman and Black man living in the United States (Asad, 2013; Ahmed, 2009). Sekimoto and Brown’s (2020) critical approach to Western, patriarchal culture illustrates how sociocultural messages manifest in the body. In other words, yes, race is socially constructed, but the sociocultural messages cause race to be a felt, lived, experience phenomenon. Their work illustrates how powerful sociocultural messages are and how these pressures impact our everyday lives. Sekimoto and Brown (2020) explain “socially constructed” does not mean imaginary: race manifests through the senses and is embodied. Sekimoto and Brown’s (2020) work drives my hope that I will answer my first research question involving the relationship between sociocultural mechanisms, communication, and embodied self-silencing. Their autoethnographic work used a critical perspective to find the links between senses, race, sociocultural messages, and embodied phenomena. I hope in using a critical lens, as they did, I will find where sociocultural messaging forced embodied feelings of self-silencing.

### **Justification for My “Artifactual Autoethnographic” Approach**

I believe using an *artifactual autoethnography* with a feminist lens and critical perspective is best for deepening my understanding of self-silencing and answering my research questions. Like Olson (2004) who conducted an autoethnography to further understand her enmeshment in an abusive relationship, I feel I can only understand my own self-silencing behavior through a personal method. Due to the embodied, felt nature of my study, I cannot answer my questions regarding my own self-silencing behavior through reading, analyzing, or observing anyone else’s experience. I am lucky that I have an artifact that recorded my self-

silencing behavior and sensations as a self-silencing teenager. Through engaging with *Unchanted*, my artifact, I believe I will observe patterns regarding self-silencing that I did not see when I wrote it. I also hope returning to my novel will unearth my buried memories, awakening the past events my body has internally self-silenced. Using my artifact, *Unchanted*, provides a window into my sixteen-year-old experience. This integration of a literary artifact in this study is strengthened by Bakhtin's (1981) theory of multivoicedness. I predict the voice in Brynn's (the protagonist's) head, which I will explain further in the synopsis below, captures the traits of the authoritative voice as fixed, distanced, and without context. Though this voice is inside Brynn's head, the voice is male and raspy. It is not her own. The voice provides no explanation for how he became embedded in her mind. Brynn obeys the voice and often accepts his opinions as facts. He holds power over her. I predict in applying Bakhtin's (1981) theory to *Unchanted* I will find that Brynn's self-silencing stops her from Bakhtin's (1981) internally-persuasive discourse. Instead of challenging the authoritative voice or her sociocultural surroundings as she would through internally-persuasive discourse, Brynn succumbs to the male authoritative voice in her head. As Brynn is a fictionalized version of myself, having the same lived experience I had/have, the artifactual piece of my autoethnography provides an added layer of personal experience to analyze. I argue analyzing *Unchanted* through a feminist lens will help me understand the significance of the internalized, male authoritative voice. I also believe a feminist lens gives me the best chance of understanding the shrinking feeling, the powerlessness that often accompanies my self-silencing (Piran, 2014). I assume I will find patterns of male dehumanizing behavior that contributed to a fear of consequences and shame within me that align with the sociocultural mechanisms listed in Chapter 2. I also hope using a feminist approach will help me humanize my past self as a person impacted by the unfair misogynistic

values of a patriarchal system rather than solely a subhuman freak. Similarly, I assume I will find more reasons for my self-silencing behavior using a critical perspective. I expect to find an overwhelming pattern of sociocultural pressure to silence myself. I wonder if I will find, like Sekimoto & Brown (2020), sociocultural messaging became internalized and embodied within me. In other words, I wonder if I will find that sociocultural pressures to self-silence forced internalization and embodiment of the behavior. I also believe if I use feminist, critical perspective to challenge the “norm” as socially constructed based on values I disagree with, then my self-hatred for not fitting that “norm” dissipates. I believe using a feminist, critical *artifactual autoethnography* with components of Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of multivoicedness will address the personal, artifactual, and sociocultural elements of this study.

I am already participating in the *artifactual autoethnography* feeling the twinges in my nauseated gut and coils tightening around my throat. The highly personal nature of this study forces me, willingly, into an uncomfortably vulnerable position. I will examine parts of my life that I never admitted were mine until now. Before this thesis, I explained my novel as entirely fictional. I refused to admit to others and refused to admit to myself the main character, Brynn, was me with only a few alterations. Using *artifactual autoethnography* both as a process of understanding and the product of my now understanding that Brynn was an expression of my experiences, I dig into the depths of self-silencing. I hope through this *artifactual autoethnography*, I can break some self-silencing behavior, comprehend the mysteries of my body’s internalized pain and reactions to certain stimuli, begin to heal, answer my research questions, and claim the experiences I gave to Brynn as my own.

In the next section, I will provide a brief synopsis of *Unchanted* so readers have some context for my analysis. Though the story is told through 4 different narrators, I will focus on

Brynn's chapters/narrations until I share the final reveal. The final reveal of the book is told through a different narrator and Brynn is not made aware of this revelation.

### **Synopsis of *Unchanted***

Brynn Bennet is a high school senior in the Minneoka, Minnesota based on the town I went to high school in Minnesota. She has nightmares of a wolf-monster, hallucinations of this same monster, and hears a commanding male, raspy voice in her head. Everyone in town is white, conflict-avoidant, and exudes images of perfection, including one of Brynn's two best friends, Ashley. The only person who critiques the misogynistic hegemony of Minneoka is Brynn's other best friend, Lena, a woman of color and the daughter of a History Professor. When Lena's father dies, she leaves Minneoka, leaving Brynn to conform to her sociocultural surroundings. With Lena's absence, the voice in Brynn's head speaks more frequently, telling her she will be abandoned by her friends and family if she tells anyone about him or about her nightmares and hallucinations. When Brynn tries to speak of her struggles, she feels horrible pain in her body and is dismissed by her friends and family.

One day, Brynn is forced into the Music Hallway at school. This hallway triggers more voices in her head and Brynn becomes aware she has blank spaces in her memory. She dissociates when the raspy voice in her head tells her not to try to remember but dismiss the voices that stem from the hall as her own "insanity." Her old choir teacher from freshman year emerges and when he puts a hand on her shoulder, Brynn's body cannot move.

After returning to the Music Hallway, her body hurts more, her nightmares worsen, and she finds she has to self-harm increasingly to avoid constant dissociation. But when Brynn meets a college boy who seems to like her, Brynn is temporarily freed from her hallucinations,

nightmares, and the raspy voice in her head. But, he lives far away and sees her intermittently, so her moments of relief are scarce.

Brynn's family hosts a Christmas Eve Dinner to which Lena, Ashley, and extended family are invited. Brynn's little sister mentions an older male cousin who is not present. At the mention of his name, Brynn's mind sees herself as a child who no one can see or hear but the wolf monster in her nightmares. Only now, he stands on two legs instead of four. Her body throbs in pain when she realizes she cannot remember this cousin, and her body quickly dissociates. No one at the table seems phased by the mention of this cousin, so Brynn believes the raspy voice when he tells her this is more proof that she is crazy. So, when Brynn's mom asks why Brynn is so quiet, Brynn says she is fine and runs away to self-harm. The raspy voice tells Brynn her friends and family don't care about her and with their, what she interprets as, apathy for her, she believes the voice. She soon sees Grayson, the college boy, as the only person who can save her from the monster she sees. The raspy voice seems to agree, telling Brynn if she does everything Grayson asks, if she obeys him and the voice without question, talks to no one else, and tries not to remember the gaps in her memory, her nightmares will get better, her pain will go away, the dissociations will stop, and no one will abandon or neglect her as she fears.

In one of the final chapters, Grayson comes over to Brynn's house and pressures her to have sex. Grayson and the raspy voice argue with every reason Brynn puts forth as to why she'd rather not have sex. Eventually, the voice reminds her she promised to obey everything Grayson and the voice said, and Brynn gives up and gives in. Immediately after intercourse, Grayson leaves. Brynn collapses seeing the one person she thought could save her abandoned her like she feared. The wolf monster appears in front of her with human legs and a wolf's upper body. It speaks to her and she realizes the raspy voice in her head is the wolf's voice. He tells her there is

no escaping him, so Brynn attempts suicide. Her sister walks in on the act and calls Brynn's parents who take her to the hospital.

It is revealed by a different narrator while Brynn is in the hospital that Brynn's cousin, the one mentioned at Christmas Eve sexually abused her as a child. The hospital psychiatrist posits Brynn's subconscious remembers her cousin as the wolf monster and the raspy voice in her head are the remainders of his mental abuse. The hospital psychiatrist shares it is common for survivors of childhood abuse to have gaps in their memory and clearly Brynn does not remember what happened, though her subconscious is trying to process the past through nightmares, flashbacks, somatic/bodily pain, and hallucinations. She also shares it is common for survivors of such abuse to become detached from family and friends because abusers of this nature target isolated children and make them further isolated. Brynn's parents share they knew of the abuse, but thought since Brynn didn't seem to remember it was best they acted like everything was normal. They shared they didn't know what to do and the psychiatrist gives them advice to spend more time with her, invite her to speak, but not tell her what she doesn't remember. Brynn's friend Lena figures out Brynn witnessed a statutory rape in the Music Hall at school between the choir teacher and a girl in their class freshman year. The psychiatrist says that event, though Brynn doesn't fully remember it, might have been the catalyst sparking Brynn's subconscious to process her own trauma.

The book ends with Brynn still unaware of what happened to her, but in therapy, trying to open up more to her friends and family, though the process is very slow. She decides to go to college but live at home and continue working on her mental health. She still self-harms, but her friends and family know about it and ensure she has disinfectant to protect her from staph infection as she works on harm-reduction strategies. She is no longer in contact with Grayson.

And though she hallucinates the image of the wolf-monster at graduation, she finally has hope that someday he might go away.

In the next chapter, I will start my analysis with an autoethnographic exploration of conceiving, writing, and pitching my novel.



## Chapter 4: Analysis

In this chapter, I develop an autoethnographic analysis of my novel, *Unchanted*, by first sharing the background of the novel's conception, then describing the events that led to my disconnect with the novel itself, and finally, explaining how, upon reflection, these events ignited the spark in my mind that I struggle with somatization and dissociation regarding silencing myself in both vocalics and expression in any form, including literary. My hope is in returning to my novel with the theoretical knowledge from the literature review and critical feminist lens I have grown into, I will understand how sociocultural pressures force an internalized, embodied impact causing pain and repression of expression, and silencing the self in numerous forms.

### **How *Unchanted* Came to Be**

At age 11, sitting on a light blue surface aged over so many years it could only be called a couch in a liberal sense, I watched a mother trying to drown her daughter on the television screen wondering why my own hands began to tremble, my throat closed, and I could not breathe. Thus, I began the labors of writing OUL.

*The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom* was a miniseries I watched with my father. Consisting of a colorful array of protagonists: an icy New York waitress turned cold and distant from the world due to her mother's abandonment when she was a child, Virginia, her oafish father, an escaped half-wolf convict from the 4<sup>th</sup> kingdom, a different dimension in which the Grimm Fairy Tales were real, and the prince of the 4<sup>th</sup> kingdom, Snow White's great-grandson, trapped in the body of a Golden Retriever. I watched the misadventures of this quartet as they navigated the dangers of the fairy tale realm far different from the Disney cartoons I grew up with. They encountered drug addicted trolls who threatened to peel off their skin and force fired metal shoes on their feet,

crazed mobs trying to burn them at the stake, a living, intoxicating forest that sought to engulf them into its very soil, and an evil queen who sought to kill them all at every turn.

In the final installment, if I recall correctly, Virginia and her father see the evil queen for the first time and recognize her to be Virginia's mother. "I never told anyone what happened the night your mom left," Virginia's father admits frantically pacing and rubbing the back of his neck, as the scene changed to a 7-year-old Virginia settling into a bath. Her mother scrubbed her vigorously, then, placed both hands on her shoulders and forced her under the water. Struggling for breath, Little Virginia desperately tried to lift her head above the water, but her mother pinned her back down.

"She was trying to drown you," Virginia's father says, voice breaking with tears as the scene changed to an adult Virginia sobbing, "It's not true!" she cries.

"If I'd have come home a second later, you would have been dead."

When the sugarcoating of Disney's bastardization of the Grimm Fairy Tales melted away, revealing their true horrific nature, the stories finally resonated with me. But as a princess myself, in the sense that in our segregated small town in Indiana divided into the gated communities on the golf course, the trailer park for the poorer whites, and the "black" side of town literally on the other side of the train tracks, I was white, with married parents, living on the golf course constantly reminded of my placement in a Curriculum Enrichment Program due to my unacceptably high intellect, my debutant-in-the-making status as one invited to the elite "Muncie Cotillion," and my New England Origins by my less privileged peers, I could not understand why.

Still, without yet knowing why, for the first time, the reality of these fairy tales awakened understanding and similitude within me. As Snow White said in *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom*, "Can you

imagine being so horrible that your own family wants to kill you?” Though no words formed in my mind and my already self-silencing body didn’t dare express to a soul, I could imagine such a truth. In fact, it was a truth my body knew, though my mind didn’t remember yet.

The remnants of *The 10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom* lingered in my mind. I recalled Virginia’s swollen, squinting eyes, tears escaping so fast water pooled into droplets in her eyelashes, the loud anguished cries of breaking the denial of a truth, a life experience so horrible, her mind blocked it from her memory. Her body curled over her guts, spine hunched, and neck arched back. Her body mirrored the horror in her scream, “It’s not true!” In that moment, watching the embodied and vocalized expulsion of her pain transform from internal manifestation of immeasurable hurt to external expression, though I did not move an inch and remained silent, I felt less alone. I wondered why in the moment, watching Virginia bawl as her father expressed the truth of what happened the night her mother left, my guts ached as though a dull knife slowly pierced through my skin, my muscle, then my organs, why my shoulders crept to my ears, the bones crunching at every joint as though the cartilage had melted away, and my throat closed as though a firm forearm pressed against my neck with their full body weight. Then I realized that was the first time I had felt my body in as long as I could remember. A further realization followed; I couldn’t remember my childhood before that moment.

Since that evening watching that scene, feeling my body’s pain for a moment amongst the timeless sea of numbness, at age 11, I wrote the first draft of OUL. The first draft included middle school girls acting with the cruelty of evil stepmothers and witches who lured children into candy houses. When I was 14, I solidified a protagonist in a second version of the novel, one who mirrored *Sleeping Beauty* with her struggles with depression forcing her into the dissociative state I felt, feeling nothing but exhaustion and a constant state of disconnect as

though she watched herself, a body she saw in the mirror but could not recognize as hers, move clumsily through life with the awareness of a zombie. I patted my young self on the back for modernizing a character so different from my own experience. Or so I thought.

At 16, my third draft added another protagonist, the queen bee of the fictional school in my novel, a beauty unrivaled, yet obsessed with her looks, her mirror, and slowly destroying her body in an eating disorder she claimed was due to reaching her dream of modeling in the Big Apple. In my mind, my Snow White was a clever take and I commended myself for the reinvention of a character so disconnected from myself. Or so I thought.

At 18, my fourth draft added two more fairy tale princesses fit for the early 2000s: a Cinderella who, though she worked hard every day, dreamed of a boy to rescue her from the confines of her homelife and a Belle more than happy to bury herself in the theoretical, the abstract world of academia, criticizing people from afar, unmatched in beauty and seen as peculiar for her strong feminist stance, assertive language, aversion to male attention, and multiracial identity. Belle's beast was an aggressive and emotionally explosive young man and struck her often, though her eventual admittance of love for him softened him. Again, I patted myself on the back for adding two characters who could not be any more unlike myself. Or so I thought.

At 19, a few of my college friends asked to see my fourth draft. Their brows crinkled as they read soon followed by their expressions:

“Are you depressed? This Sleeping Beauty sounds like you?”

“Yeah, and I've noticed you haven't eaten much and when you do, you rush to the bathroom. Do you have an eating disorder?”

“What’s with this girl? She works so hard but has no confidence in her own ability to move her own life forward. Do you really think that?”

“Whoa. You do realize this is messed up right? This guy is beating up your Belle character and she still falls for him? Have you been abused like this? This is concerning to us.”

I have no memory of the initial pain that surged through me, only that I know it soon expanded into an unquenchable need to speak, but not the truth.

I laughed, “I’m fine. Why would you ask me all that?”

“You wrote it.”

Though no comprehensible words came to mind. With that, I swallowed the urge to expel. Expel words? Feelings? I didn’t even know what. Only the shifting discomfort of my consciousness grazing my body. Only this time, with the reconnection of pain, I was completely alone with no Virginia to resonate with me. Though I remembered the pride in myself for writing characters I thought separate from myself, in that moment, when faced with the fact, “you wrote it,” I could not comprehend it. Even now, I still wonder how such a simple expression of fact could force me to realize the arm’s-length distance I kept from my own work. Just as my consciousness disconnected from the body I was told I had, yet felt no ownership of nor sense of being from, I completely disconnected from my own work that I’d spent years on. There was a desperate need to distance myself farther as though any form of expression, about me or not, was dangerous and needed to be silenced.

I did not touch my book for years and spoke of it to no one as though the constant disconnect from my own body wasn’t enough. I needed to remove myself from the “totally fictional” book I wrote.

At 25, after some Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, I returned to OUL. Only now, Sleeping Beauty was replaced with a young woman constantly trying to leave her past forgotten, seeking to outrun her pain at every turn, yet plagued with the internalized voice of the Big Bad Wolf. Though she did not know what evils he inflicted upon her in childhood, her body held his words as law, and though he was not there, she saw him, felt him, and heard him in her mind, dictating every move of hers through misogynistic social pressure, manipulation, and fear. Little Red Riding Hood, I realized, was a better protagonist I thought, and for the first time since *10<sup>th</sup> Kingdom*, I again resonated with someone. Strangely, though I resonated with her and wrote her into being, it was unfathomable at time for me to even consider parts of myself might have been expressed through her.

As protagonists and plots changed, the two things that did not change in every version were that sociocultural pressures forced these women into their distressed positions and that I always included the main protagonist's inner thoughts and arguments within herself, though it wasn't until the modernized Little Red Riding Hood appeared in my story that her inner thoughts were assigned a voice other than her own.

At 27, my own hallucinations, self-harming behavior, suicidal ideations, and attempts proved too much and I left my first attempt at earning my master's degree. I left academia and spent every day writing and polishing OUL.

I spoke with successful authors and asked their advice, I revised the novel 6 times, and I hired a professional editor. She called me after reading the novel, concern in her voice when she asked, "Who is the main character?"

I replied, "There really isn't one."

“I disagree,” she said. “I think the Little Red Riding Hood, Brynn is the protagonist. Her story is the most interesting and I think it’s okay to streamline the other stories around her. Right now it feels fragmented, like the pieces don’t fit together. Focus on Brynn. People will like her and gravitate towards her. She’s a lot like you.”

My insides surged with dread, soon followed by the numbing emptiness. I performed the appropriate, polite social exchange. I told her I would consider what she said, thanked her for her time, and hung up.

Her words crept up into my mind over the next month I edited her detailed notes, yet I forged ahead, sending literary agents letters to get my book out there. I perfected my formula:

*“Dear Mr./Ms. Literary Agent,*

*Sentence revealing I know their work. The pitch: though they don’t know it yet, all the girls at Minneoka High are connected. Brief synopsis of each of them: Ashley is a modern Cinderella, Lena is a modern Belle, Brynn is a modern Little Red Riding Hood, and Hailey is a modern Snow White.*

*Thank you for your consideration,*

*Katherine L. Olson”*

Every single one responded. Every time they wrote me, I was shocked, expecting to be ignored. But they all wrote back. They all kindly said it was interesting, but not a good fit for them at the time, but also urged me to keep writing and submit again when the market shifted toward my style of book.

Why were they all responding? I wondered while taking a walk behind my apartment complex. Why are they all so kind to me? And do they actually like the material?

At the thought, my hands trembled, porcupine quills spiked through my throat blocking nutritious, soothing breath in and cathartic words or feelings out. I took walks, pondering the editor's words again, the connection she drew between Brynn and myself. At the thought of someone else recognizing the internal resonance I felt within, I folded my arms across my chest, certain everyone in the world could see me naked, exposed, vulnerable, my soft underbelly ready to be sliced and my back calling everyone to stab.

Even scarier were her words reappearing in my mind, "People will like her and gravitate towards her. She's a lot like you."

The words replayed in my mind. Even within the story, no one cared about Brynn. Her friends never invited her to speak, nor noticed her distress. Her own parents never noticed the scars on her arms, and her one escape from her confined, painful world was the boy she liked who pushed her into sex. Only when her sister caught her in a suicide attempt did anyone even realize something might be wrong and rush her to the hospital. If no one noticed or liked Brynn within the context of the world I created and the relationships with other characters I invented around her, why would any reader like her? It wasn't possible. Yet each literary agent responded, and responded with respect and kindness.

My knees buckled with a flutter of reattachment to my body. With the sensation of touch returned for a moment, I felt the giant spider, 3 times my size crushing my spine and shoulders with its massive weight. I felt its eight legs, each strategically restricted my body: two crunching my ribs so the ribs broke and pierced my lungs, the two squeezing around my chest with its dagger-sharp feet stabbed into my heart, the hot sticky blood running down my abdomen as the



pain worsened with every beat of my heart, scraping further against the arachnid's razor legs, and four legs compressing my throat so tight that my larynx pierced through my the belly of my neck muscles. I could not breathe in or out. I could not make a sound.

I fell from the pain to the melted snow-soaked ground outside a skatepark next to the water tower as I realized, maybe the story wasn't an invention of my imagination. Maybe the story was an entirely personal attempt at trying to express my experience and trying to process and expel the pain residing in my body and soul, but with the safety of distancing myself from that knowledge as I'd distanced myself from my own body, and the distance I thought I created with those around me. How terrifying it was to realize the editor described me in a way I never imagined for myself and viscerally disagreed with: likable.

With this moment of bodily awakening to truth came with all the pain of feeling my body and feeling my silencing along with it. So, naturally, I abandoned the thought and returned to my chronic dissociative state, dismissing the notion as "crazy." After all, I told myself, I was crazy and continued sending out letters, now not reading their responses. I knew they would all refuse to sign me as an author anyway.

And so I went on like that until my writing group read OUL. One boy said quickly, "It was good, but like, it's not my kinda story, you know? It's a girl story," I nodded, "Yeah, it's definitely a girl thing."

My writing partner frowned.

"Yeah, so, as a guy," the boy continued, "It's just not gonna make sense, see in my story—"

He went on for 10 minutes talking about his work and why it was far more relatable to him than mine. I smiled, I nodded. Thinking nothing of the sexism and self-centeredness that emerges in my mind now upon reflection.

Then my writing partner interrupted, “I disagree. I’m a guy and I thought it was relatable. I thought it was great, but I have some thoughts.”

A twinge of nervous pain throbbled in the cradle where my neck meets my shoulders, a feeling that only came with an awareness of having a body.

“Brynn is really interesting, but when you narrate for her, things happen around her and she says and does nothing. It’s like everyone in the scene forgets she’s there and we as the readers forget she’s there too.”

“Yeah, that’s the point,” I snapped, a lighter in my gut sparking, little flames intermittently burning the scarred flesh around my bones and muscles, “She’s not that interesting. Who cares what she thinks?”

“I do,” he said, his usual joking demeanor replaced with a serious tone, “She’s the most interesting of the four and it’s like you’re stifling her, trying to hide her in the story. She doesn’t have her own voice, even in her own head, all the dialogue is the raspy ‘Big Bad Wolf’ voice. I want to know more about her. I want to hear more from her. You haven’t let us in enough to understand why she’s doing what she’s doing. It’s like you don’t even give the reader the chance to care about her.”

White crept around the computer screen. His words turned to gibberish in my ears. I wanted to close the laptop, but my fingers wouldn’t move. I stared at my long fingers, grayer than usual, their pink tint diminished. I urged them to move in mind. They couldn’t. My throat closed completely shut and whiteness covered the entirety of my vision.

The next thing I knew, my boyfriend sat on the bed next to me, cleaning blood off my arms. I had no idea what happened in between.

The next day, I sat at my desk to write a letter to a literary agent. My fingers danced along the keys until I reached the pitch and tried something new:

*“Empathic and reserved Brynna Rose Bennet is plagued by the wolf no one else can see. He haunts her thoughts, nightmares, and stalks her in the light of day, but with her best friends at her side, Brynn is determined to conquer senior year. Until tragedy strikes tearing her group apart, forcing Brynn to face the questions:*

*Is the wolf real?*

*Is she crazy?*

*Or worst of all...both?”*

The pitch was better. Streamlined, intriguing, and mysterious. I was proud for a second, until the face of a wolf appeared in the window above my dog’s kennel.

I felt the hole in me I never wanted to feel. The chasm from my closed throat to my navel of nothingness, surrounded by the bloody, raw, burned flesh and bone that once connected to the other side. Everything went white, and I woke up on the ground with my dog’s tongue sliding across my forehead. From then on, every time I sat at my computer to work on OUL, write a query letter to a literary agent, or even talk about the book to anyone, I collapsed.

Eventually, I gave up trying and devoted myself to a year of intensive Dialectical Behavioral Therapy attempting to understand why.

Trying to send the novel out into the world, and then soon fainting any time I tried to pitch it, speak of it, or send out literary letters doing my best to explain it proved I struggled with expressing emotions, connecting to my own story, feeling my body, and speaking about myself. I

performed the role I knew I was supposed to perform, the sociocultural role of a reserved, selfless woman.

Yet working through therapy and continuing to write proved that role did not work for me. The disconnect from my body, from my emotions, meant separation from pain, but also separation from self. The next step in connecting to self is connecting to what I expressed in OUL, with my understanding of my similarity to Brynn. As I silenced her, I always silenced myself. I loved what I created as a carefully constructed narrative, interweaving different voices into a collective story. And I hated what I created as a reminder of my dissociation, suppression, and the pain that lay beneath. I cared for the work and nurtured the work until I could no longer deny it was about me.

Even now, recounting these events, my relationship to my novel, I am seconds away from my consciousness floating outside myself, looking down at the pale, red haired girl typing on her computer. The tightness in my chest and constriction of my throat and weight on my back pushes me to close the laptop and call a friend to ask how they are doing and escape into their story for a while. The woman in the booth opposite me as I finish Part 1 of my Analysis section is sharing her story of transitioning to her confidant, and I find the ears of the head I am floating within and without turn to her, yearning to listen, to comfort, to express compassion to anyone but myself. To write about anything that is not mine. Even in writing, in the process of trying to understand the relationship between sociocultural mechanisms of self-silencing, self-silencing behavior, and the resulting embodied consequences, I am still drawn to silence myself. To hush the emotions, the sensations, the memories, that arise with expression and the fear that comes from knowing three people will read this, reminding myself they will not take a knife to my back or slice across my belly. A self-talk striving against the intrusive authoritative, internalized voice grows

stronger, but still a whisper compared to toxic sociocultural pressures and traumatic experiences telling me to cease typing and never attempt to connect with my body or understand or find answers to my research questions again.

With this understanding, this dialogic approach to the self-silencing intrusive thoughts knowing I have a voice too outside the authoritative, knowing these voices have been internalized from outside sources of the sociocultural mechanisms in Chapter 2, and the consequences of continuing my self-silencing, and accepting the inevitable pain, but loss of denial of the similitude between Brynn and myself, I will read *Unchanted* again, reminding myself I deserve to understand. After each chapter of the novel, I will analyze the themes of sociocultural causes for self-silencing, the self-silencing behaviors, the silencing social encounters, self-silencing consequences, embodied pain, internalized messages, and authoritative voice to understand why breaking self-silencing is so hard and what impact self-silencing has on the body and silencing all forms of expression.

### **Returning to *Unchanted***

My fingers are stained dusty orange and popcorn kernels slice between my teeth and gums. Every time I think about returning to *Unchanted*, my body craves to forget. My body craves the calories, the high-caloric, artificial substance that barely resembles food. It's as though my body does not want to go back. It's as though my guts don't want to remember and seek silencing through consumption. It's not that my mind fears returning to the novel I wrote. In fact, my reason mind collaborates with my intellect, approaching this project with curiosity and excitement to apply theory to my own experience. It's my body that does not want to remember. It is the embodied pain Ahmed (2009) spoke of. The memories that hurt, the experiences my body wants to avoid at all costs. It's the raw parts where our protective skin is scraped off

exposing a vulnerable nerve. And my body knows to return, is to scratch that exposed flesh, bone, and nerve (Ahmed, 2009). Yet, I know if I never go back, I will never go forward.

Using the artifactual autoethnographic method discussed in Chapter 3, I read *Unchanted* again. In the following analysis, I will divide my understandings and findings into categories regarding how self-silencing is triggered by stimuli, is behavioral, and is embodied to help me answer my research questions. The categories include: 1) Trauma-initiated self-silencing; 2) Socioculturally triggered self-silencing; 3) Self-silencing as protective; and 4) self-silencing as rebellion.

### ***Trauma-Induced Self-Silencing***

Self-silencing is clearly trauma-initiated from the first page of *Unchanted*. Brynn describes bleeding into a bathroom sink, seeing a monster in the mirror behind her, and has no recollection of where she is or how she got there. Brynn panics in realizing her amnesia and seeing the wolf monster behind her. And when she hears a familiar voice ask how she is from outside the bathroom, she responds, “I’m fine. How’s [our other friend]?”

In this case, the self-silencing behavior manifests as interpersonally communicating wellbeing. As the novel is first-person, even if I hadn’t written it, as the reader, I am in Brynn’s head and know she is struggling, terrified, and injured. But she communicates the opposite to her friend outside the door. The self-silencing behavior, in this instance, is clearly trauma-initiated. Though “trauma” can mean many things in our modern world, psychologists and psychopathology scholars argue a trauma disorder like Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder manifests in hallucinations, lost time (memory gaps), flashbacks, nightmares, embodied memory (the body emotionally reacts to something incongruent with environmental surroundings), intrusive thoughts (self-hatred, hopelessness, difficulty maintaining relationships, detachment from family

and friends, difficulty feeling positive emotion), numbness, hypervigilance, self-destructive behavior, feelings of guilt and shame, somatic pain, and avoidance (Audette, 2022; Mayo Clinic, 2022; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2018). I argue throughout the book, Brynn's self-silencing behavior responds to these symptoms or the sociocultural triggers I will address in the next section. In the first section I described, before Brynn self-silences by communicating wellness to her friend, she experiences PTSD symptoms including hallucination (the wolf monster), lost time (having no memory where she is or how she got there), feelings of shame (she's embarrassed she doesn't know where she is), and somatic pain (she realizes her head aches, her stomach is nauseous, and she is not breathing). After these symptoms of trauma disorder arise, Brynn self-silences to her friend.

Similarly in later chapters, when Brynn sees her old choir teacher, trauma symptoms trigger self-silencing behavior internally and externally. Her choir teacher is remembered by her body but not her conscious mind. Brynn avoids the music hall, though she doesn't know why. And when extenuating circumstances force her back into that music hall space, her body reacts. Whiteness encroaches around her eyes; she hears the exclamation "what have you done?" in her head. She first feels great pain, and then feels as though her consciousness split in two, separated from her body, both existing in the past and in the present. And when her choir teacher emerges in the hallway, places a hand on her shoulder, and asks her how she is, she cannot speak. She says nothing to him and, as a first-person narrator, tells the reader, though she can see his hand on her shoulder, her shoulder cannot feel the pressure of his resting hand. This instance with her choir teacher is another example of how trauma triggers and symptoms cause self-silencing and dissociation (Monat & Chandler, 2015). The self-silencing manifests interpersonally as her inability to speak to the choir teacher. Self-silencing manifests in her body as silencing a

traumatic memory involving him, separating her consciousness from her body, and in silencing her bodily sensation of his hand on her. Though in the novel, Brynn never remembers, we find out from other characters that when Brynn was 14, she witnessed this choir teacher engage in intercourse with a fellow freshman. Brynn's mind categorizes this instance of statutory rape as a reminder of the sexual and physical violence inflicted upon her in childhood. Therefore, Brynn's brain buried the instance of her choir teacher in the depths of her subconscious along with Brynn's memories of her own molestation. Associating the abusive acts inflicted on Brynn as a little girl, then, with the choir teacher's statutory rape in the music hallway, Brynn's body associates both, and likewise the very space, as a threat to her survival (Mayo Clinic, 2022). In other words, Brynn's body decides the music hallway is not safe and tries to avoid it. And when avoidance isn't an option, the space triggers buried memories of survival threat which initiate self-silencing behavior.

This pattern of trauma-disorder symptoms triggering self-silencing behavior remains constant through the book. Brynn experiences several horrific nightmares, but when her sister notes that she seems distressed, Brynn says she is "just tired." After experiencing emotional numbness, Brynn self-harms in the form of cutting her arms and hides the evidence from everyone, nonverbally silencing any chance to communicate her pain to anyone. In Chapter 9, Brynn's extended family comes over for Christmas Eve. Brynn describes sensations of self-shame, disgust, and paralysis when a cousin is mentioned she cannot remember. As the author, I know when I wrote this chapter, I recorded the feelings and body sensations without understanding what initiated my paralysis. However, having now undergone years of therapy, I see that the cousin mentioned in the chapter, mirroring my own experience, was the pedophilic sexual predator who abused me, and mention of his name triggered PTSD symptoms. Though



Brynn has no idea that is what initiated her symptoms, just like I didn't as an adolescent, the link is now clear to me. After her feelings of shame and disgust, Brynn cannot move. She recalls the cousin exists but cannot consciously remember him. Her consciousness is internally silencing the memories too horrible for her mind to handle. But her body still holds the survival mechanism of avoidance. Hearing his name, the body completely shuts down to a partially aware dissociative state where her consciousness separates from her body. When her mother asks her if she is okay, Brynn answers that she is "fine." This piece of the novel illustrates multiple forms of self-silencing derived from one stimulus that triggered PTSD symptoms: hearing the cousin's name.

Countless examples in *Unchanted* illustrate how Brynn's self-silencing behavior is triggered by reminders of trauma she experienced and by PTSD symptoms. The self-silencing both manifests as external, in which she communicates wellbeing to friends and family while experiencing distress, and as internal, when her mind buries memories and disconnects from her body. Brynn's voice is self-silenced as well as the messages her subconscious and body are trying to communicate to her conscious mind. Though this phenomenon disconnects Brynn from herself and others via self-silencing, I will explain in the "Self-Silencing as Protective" section, why Brynn's mind and body subconsciously enact the self-silencing behavior. Unfortunately, the sociocultural values and norms of Brynn's environment also trigger her self-silencing behavior.

### ***Socioculturally Perpetuated Self-Silencing***

In reading *Unchanted*, I realized sociocultural triggers also caused self-silencing behavior. Brynn's town of Minneoka, Minnesota and high school, Minneoka High, mirror the sociocultural mechanisms for self-silencing discussed in the literature review, including idolization of the "ideal woman" archetype, patriarchal values, and consequences of raising female voices. Some additional sociocultural characteristics evident in *Unchanted* include

general avoidance of disrupting the status quo and conflict avoidance. These mechanisms all perpetuate Brynn's self-silencing.

As discussed in the "ideal woman" myth, I argue, embedded beyond layman detection in Western culture, the closer a woman is to male desire, the safer and happier she will be (Trekels, Eggermont, Koppen, & Vandenbosch, 2018; Waites, 1982). With this mindset, female currency lies within male approval (Hopcroft & McLaughlin, 2012; bell, 2000). Brynn's trauma history (that she does not recollect in the novel) of male abuse is therefore supported by her sociocultural environment. In other words, when she was little, men held all the power over her mind and body, and society tells her that's how it should be. Brynn has internalized this reality to the extent that only male voices, not her own, can influence her thoughts, behavior, and body sensations (Piran, 2014; Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007). As her sense of self, which was already dwindling, shrinks, all men gain more power over her (Arroyo, Woszidlo & Janovec, 2020; Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007; bell, 2000). The "raspy" voice and intrusive thoughts, all male sounding, are quiet when the college boy catches her attention. For a moment, she escapes her fears and pain. Then another male voice points out an error in the college boy, and Brynn's smile fades again. This passage highlights the power men have over Brynn. Her authoritative, intrusive thoughts are male, the wolf hallucination is male, and only a rescuing action from another male grants her solace from these for an instant. Then Cameron's, another boy's, voice ends her moment of happiness and hope. From a psychological standpoint, men and women with mental health struggles self-silence, so the power these men hold over Brynn's voice and body in this instance is largely rooted in the sociocultural mechanisms supporting male power and the related specific trauma she experienced (that will be discussed in detail later) (Duarte & Thompson, 1999).

When Brynn's one friend who challenges the sociocultural norm leaves Minneoka after her father's death, Brynn is surrounded by those who embrace the sociocultural norm including her other friend Ashley, her family, and the raspy, male voice in her mind. In the first chapter, Brynn tries to share with her friend, Ashley, that she is struggling. But Ashley meets Brynn's attempts with dismissal. This occurrence happens again in chapter 3. Brynn tries to break her self-silencing behavior here. She tries to communicate to Ashley, an already nearly impossible task, with her somatic pain and the toxic voice. So, for her strain for communication to be immediately dismissed again, forces a surrender of sorts. What is communicated by her family and friends fuels the raspy voice's power and ability to control Brynn. In other words, when Ashley doesn't listen, and that hurts, the voice gains more credibility in Brynn's mind. Brynn isolates, someone asks her if she is okay, Brynn tries to speak, someone dismisses her, and Brynn isolates. This interpersonal punctuating pattern causes Brynn further isolation and for those around her to see less of her pain and struggle (Du, 2020, Beavin, Jackson & Watzlawick, 1967). Brynn also sees the dismissal of those who questions the status quo. Her best friend Lena (who leaves at the end of chapter 1) is a woman of color, is an educated feminist and the only person in the book who challenges the surrounding misogyny. However, her beauty and standing as the only woman of color in the school aligns her with the "ideal woman" archetype I discussed in the literature review. The surrounding sociocultural norms dismiss Lena's rebellion as her being "spicy." And when her words are dismissed as exotic sexuality, she succumbs to using the rules of the patriarchy to silence the boys. She silences one boy with attacking what he values most: his masculinity as defined by patriarchal values (hooks, 2000). Specifically in this boy's case, she infers he has a small penis. Though this act goes against what she believes, she prioritizes

saying something she hopes will cause his departure. Brynn witnesses the one woman who speaks up against the system meet the consequence of dismissal.

Everyone else submits and embraces the social norms. Ashley exhibits no critical thinking capabilities and encourages the norm, dismissing the feminist progression Lena inhabits. Ashley represents an arguably normative authoritative voice, embodying the pressures to be “normal.” In other words, Ashley wants to be the same as everyone else and projects stereotypical tropes toward anyone who dares to question the norms she lives by. She justifies and embraces the misogyny, seeing male attention as the only way a woman can succeed and be happy. She favors the patriarchal system because she understands it and acts as she thinks a woman “should” and finds comfort when men act aggressive, dominating, sexual, power and money-seeking, and athletic, how she thinks a man “should” be (hooks, 2000). Ashley’s further support for the sociocultural status quo occurs when she and Brynn attend a football game. In that chapter, the football coach screams at his son and throws him to the ground. In witnessing this, Brynn experiences symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder: triggers, somatic symptoms, bodily memory, intrusive thoughts, and amygdala hijacking, and overwhelming shame triggered by external stimuli and worsened by dismissal that all combine to support self-silencing behavior (Audette, 2022; Farley & Keany, 1997). Brynn witnesses the football coach hit his son. Everyone at the game sees an adult holding authoritative positions over an adolescent abuses that power with physical violence. Yet no one seems to notice or care. So, Brynn further withdraws inward, feeling dismissed and strange for having a somatic reaction to something Ashley sees as “normal.” This sparks the symptoms of distancing from Ashley and further self-silencing with Ashley (Craig & Bolls, 2003).

The constant socioculturally-derived support for male aggression and dismissal of female personhood continues one-on-one when Brynn is on a date with a boy she likes, Grayson. Brynn notices when Grayson is near, the raspy voice in her head is quieter and her hallucinations are less frequent. She uses the mythology of the ideal woman archetype/the fairy tale that another man can save her from a hurtful male voice to, again, dismiss her own pain and the problems going on in her body. This distraction works, until Grayson pressures Brynn to perform oral sex on him. Here is this pressure from the culture to serve men and submit to their wishes, the idea that a woman who succumbs is closer to the “perfect woman” and will be happy. Brynn’s body reacts with hurtful sensations, that she then dismisses as well. There is a further disconnection from self where natural survival instinct, illustrated here as gut sensations, is silenced by toxic thoughts and sociocultural messages. Further disconnection from self manifests as dissociation from the actual gut feelings of wariness and concern. Protective natural instinct loses to protective instinct born in trauma. Then, the wolf’s voice and Grayson’s voice become one. Brynn’s power is further diminished. She begins to trust more and more the very voices that cause her pain and distance herself further from her own voice. Even the words, the answers she speaks are all to receive his approval, meaning to keep the voices at bay. Her very act of surrendering what little power she has to him is protective (Olson, 2010; Reyome, Ward, & Witkiewitz, 2008; Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007) Her implicit understanding is forged in trauma and patriarchal sociocultural constructs. Self-silencing advances to self-dismissal, not just interpersonal dismissal (Shotwell, 2012).

Though as an author I don’t initially reveal the raspy voice and the wolf Brynn saw in the mirror are the same, I disclose for the sake of this study, they are. The raspy voice is authoritative as commanding, engrained, and is omnipresent with no identifiable beginning. The

voice in Brynn's mind is male, insistent on her silence, insistent to her submission to other males, and threatens Brynn will be ostracized and abandoned if she does not align with the norm. The voice's threat of ostracism and abandonment adds to the sociocultural consequences of women speaking from literature review in Chapter 2, including dismissal, shame, and violence. There is an unspoken dismissal embedded in the sociocultural structure of Brynn's school and town: that white men have and deserve their voice, attention, and power. Therefore, to even think critically about the nature of Minneoka's (the town in the novel) opinion of "normal" men is already grounds for authoritative dismissal.

Upon rereading the novel, the predatory nature of grown, white, cis, straight men is blatant. However, I recall while writing this chapter, I did not see it. Though I wrote two of the adult white men as powerful, ravenous wolves, they are never punished for their behavior. And neither are the other white men who take advantage of their power in the book. I was so engrained in my high school culture, I, as the author, did not even give Brynn the lens to criticize it. The symbolism of dangerous males manifest in a dream of a literal wolf disguised, at first, as a helpful guide who then attacks her and a moment of noticing her choir teacher's sharp canines. Yet, while writing this book, I never thought it strange that the choir teacher still holds his power in the school, still sleeps with his students, and when Brynn's cousin who abused her is mentioned at the family gathering, no one criticizes him. No one says an ill word of him, though they all know he abused Brynn as a little girl. I see now as a 31-year-old returning to the text, this is how I saw the world as a 16-year-old, and I accepted the male privilege as reality without questions. My knowledge now of critical and feminist scholars including LeBlanc (2020), hooks (2000), Anderson et al. (2018), Griffin (2012), etc. provide a lens for the power imbalance. My basic understanding of wild animals acknowledges the dangers of a giant timber wolf and my

familiarity with werewolf folklore instructs wariness toward any talking canines. Only my recent understanding of trauma responses including flashbacks, lost memory, lost time, dissociation, hallucinations, and “freeze” responses explains Brynn’s reactions (Audette, 2022; American Psychiatric Association. (n.d.), Cates, 2018; Hassija & Cloitre, 2015). Though, as previously discussed, trauma stimulus causes Brynn’s self-silencing behavior, the entirety of the sociocultural norms also triggers and perpetuates self-silencing behavior. Psychological reaction and power difference lead to Brynn’s self-silencing in this passage. Brynn is dismissed every time she tries to speak of what is not “normal,” furthering the power of the male, raspy voice in her head, her nightmares of the male timber wolf monster, and continuing her self-silencing behavior. It hurts to speak and be dismissed.

Every time Brynn sees what is deemed “normal” for her society and culture, she feels further isolated. She sees how she does not align with the “norm” and wishes to speak even less. After insomnia-filled nights with horrific nightmares, she sees her sister drying her hair in the bathroom and hears her parents cheerfully talking in their room. Her inability to relate to their seemingly easy morning yet attempt to still fit in shows a self-silencing to alleviate her otherized feeling (Ahmed, 2014). Then, Brynn’s little sister focuses on Brynn’s shirt for Homecoming. Brynn freezes, thinking for an instant her sister, Ciara, noticed Brynn’s self-inflicted scars, but instead, her little sister criticizes her for not wearing the “class shirt” for homecoming. Brynn feels an immense isolation between herself and her sister. Brynn’s observes her sister as normal, and therefore it is “normal” to worry about wearing the designated shirt for her class where Brynn is worried about seeing a giant wolf monster appear and disappear. Brynn already feels othered from her family and fears, along with the added bullying of the authoritative voice, further isolation, and abandonment. Therefore, she does not attempt to broach the subject with

her parents or sister fearing speaking will worsen her state (Ahmed, 2014). However, her self-silencing causes pain every time her family dismisses her pain (Du, 2020).

Reading the “unspoken” dismissal pages now, as both an observer reading the text for the first time (due to my buried memory) and then recalling from the reading how I felt in the moment while writing, I see the both/and phenomenon. The sociocultural norms of interpersonal communication require stimulus and response. How one-party responses is usually due to an initial communication of another (Craig & Muller, 2007). From the family’s perspective, Brynn communicates wellbeing and that she fits in with them. Except for Ciara’s notice of Brynn’s tiredness and failure to remember the designated social obligations for the day (wearing her “class shirt” for Homecoming), the family does not, or cannot know the somatic and mental pain Brynn experiences. In other words, since Brynn communicates that she is fine, her family believes she is fine, and responds likewise. However, Brynn’s attempts to communicate general wellbeing further isolates her from her family, since they do not know she is in pain or needs any help. Even in her slight breach in self-silencing to tell her sister she is tired, her sister’s response, “just sleep” causes pain. Within this context because they are unaware of her struggles. Her self-silencing communicates wellbeing rather than a reflection of her reality.

I remember this. I remember wanting so badly to fit in. I remember the fear of a consequence for speaking including abandonment. I remember the fear of doing or saying anything that could lead to more somatic and mental pain. I remember the slightest comment from my sister, like, “just sleep” dismissing every shard of glass tearing into my nervous system. And, like Brynn, I self-silenced more to avoid the pain of dismissal. With every dismissal, my personhood withered. My sense of being a human, or of having a self, faded further (Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017). I was aware others could see me, judge me, and held the power to hurt me. So,



like Brynn, I further withdrew to avoid instances that scraped against the raw parts of me (dismissal in this instance). Brynn believes in this passage, as I did, that communicating alignment with the society around her was protective. But this corseting behavior of communicating normalcy while struggling did the opposite (Piran, 2017). Brynn's continued withdrawing, led to further isolation, leading to more hypervigilance, self-judgement, and fear (LeBlanc, 2020; Cates, 2018; Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017; Ahmed, 2014). Brynn is aware that others see her and is worried about their perception of her. This is also reflected in the authoritative voice that is within her, but also is separate from her own voice. This understanding of Brynn's experience, interacting with the text I wrote with my current knowledge and allowing the text to spark my memory of my adolescence, further explains my own behavioral patterns. Yes, Brynn submits to the sociocultural perpetuation that only those aligned with the "ideal woman," the patriarchal ideas regarding male power, and the pain for dismissal. However, the sociocultural pressure for Brynn's self-silencing continues in the other consequences for self-silencing: shame and violence.

The raspy voice in Brynn's head continually draws upon negative cognitions and shame. Where shame is a common symptom of PTSD, shame is also perpetuated by fear of judgment (Schwartz, 2021). Toward the end of the book, Brynn experience as sexually coercive experience with her crush, Grayson. Once in her bedroom, Grayson advances by first implying he wants to have sex. Brynn's internal dialogue already exhibits shame without the internal male authoritative voice or Grayson's response. Brynn wonders, "How could I be excited to be alone with a guy I liked and terrified at the exact same time?" To summarize, she wonders how she could want him to see her as "ideal woman," yet wants him to leave at the same time. Then the authoritative raspy voice interjects, blaming her cognitive dissonance on being a hysterical, crazy

woman. Upon rereading *Unchanted*, I see the internalized, sociocultural messaging regarding female stereotypes. Having already felt the pain of dismissal, Brynn is further subject to the shame associated with being seen as “crazy.” This is particularly painful because she already fears she is insane. Brynn does not see the benefit males gain from female shame. Brynn lacks the ability to think critically about the sociocultural hierarchy of her surroundings and therefore cannot challenge the ideas. Still, Brynn first replies to Grayson that she does not want to sleep with him. Immediately Grayson argues, again furthering Brynn’s feelings of shame. Brynn tells the reader it stings even when Grayson calls her “weird.” As though any deviation from the “ideal woman” moves her toward unsafety. The authoritative voice aligns with the sociocultural mechanisms designed to keep women below men in terms of hierarchical power. In Brynn’s head the dialogue continues: “He looked at me, and I felt small. Not in a dainty, or feminine way. But in a powerless, defenseless way...The way I felt in front of the wolf...” Then the raspy authoritative voice capitalizes on her shame, saying “*Ugh, stop whining, you dramatic girl...*” Brynn experiences bodily sensations including the feeling of ice around her organs and a sharp, heavy stone turning in her gut. Though upon reading this, I associate these sensations as wariness or warning signs of danger, Brynn is so disconnected from her body from the perpetuated internal self-silencing, she has no understanding of what these sensations mean. She has so self-silenced her body, she does not know what it feels like in the body to be suspicious of someone. The surrounding sociocultural pressures to yield to male voices encourage her internal self-silencing. The raspy voice calls her a “dramatic” girl and labels her wariness as “whining.” The raspy voice dismisses Brynn’s senses as irrelevant, illogical feelings of a histrionic, hysterical woman. These judgmental, dismissive claims distance Brynn from what is socioculturally understood as attributes of the “ideal woman.” And both Brynn and the values of her

sociocultural surroundings equate alignment with the “ideal woman” as “good” and distance from the “ideal woman” as “bad.” Brynn is so corseted by her surroundings, as Piran (2017) would say, and she cannot even see the strings tied around her ribs, crushing them together. The more Grayson touches her, moves closer to her on the bed, the more Brynn’s internal dialogue intensifies and her external communication shrinks. The authoritative voice in her head, as previously distinguished, fueled by a toxic, abusive authority who shaped her as a child, pressures Brynn to succumb to Grayson’s wants and wishes. The raspy authoritative voice uses shame, calling Brynn dirty, disgusting, and unwanted. He accuses her for wanting sex with Grayson saying her body is “begging for it.” The voice continues to play on her shame as though she is so horrible no one could ever want her. And if this boy, Grayson, is willing to spend time with her, then she owes him sex for his charity.

In her head, this raspy male authoritative voice is not Brynn’s own. He is the internalization of Brynn’s abuser as a girl combined with the anti-woman tropes she’s heard all her life growing up in a patriarchal society (Rojas, 2009; hooks, 2000). Brynn holds no control over it. The internalized words of her abuser are supported by her sociocultural pressures to adhere to male opinion and power, and the authoritative voice simultaneously commands her to submit to Grayson’s wants and wishes in turn, using shame as a weapon. Brynn’s internal and external world are penetrated by male desires. When Grayson first brings up sex, he asks without saying the word, but implying the act. Brynn says she doesn’t think she wants to, and both the authoritative voice and Grayson fight against her. Grayson laughs at every reason Brynn gives him for not having sex, “we’re not married,” “I want to wait until I’m in love.” With two against one, the voice in her head and Grayson pressuring Brynn, she curls up smaller and smaller as her voice gets meeker. Soon, both male voices overtake her with Brynn saying nothing. Grayson

argues, drawing further upon shame, “You worried people are gonna call you a slut? No one has to know.” “Modern women don’t worry about antiquated marriage rules. Aren’t you a feminist?” “So, you don’t love me, but you like me, why isn’t that enough?” “And, I mean, someday when you do find someone you love, don’t you think they’d like it better if you had some experience?” Eventually, Brynn scratches out a faint, “I think...” to which Grayson responds, “So you think, but you don’t know. That means you haven’t made your decision yet.” Eventually, Brynn assesses Grayson won’t back down and the voice in her head won’t back down either. Seeing no escape, with both male voices overpowering her, she emits a faint, “ok” before she completely dissociates. She describes her arms going limp as Grayson removes her shirt. She says he grips her wrists and presses her against the mattress. Then she describes the dissociation: “I stared at the ceiling, at the white stucco designs, that faintly resembled snow. There was pain. And then there was nothing. My consciousness completely left my body. There was no time and endless time. I had no voice. I had no power. I had nothing to say. I had no thoughts. I was not a person. I was not a human. I was whatever he wanted me to be.” The sociocultural pressures support what Brynn learned from her childhood trauma; that there is no way out. The men are bigger, stronger, more powerful, and there is nothing she can do. She is disgusting, horrible, and dirty, and the men are better than her anyway. She is ashamed of herself and deems herself so far from the “ideal woman” (virginal, pure, pretty, small, innocent, etc.) that when the raspy voice says she is lucky to have Grayson’s attention, Brynn does not argue. Shame is the underlying catalyst supporting her self-silencing her voice to Grayson with each argument he mocks. Shame works in conjunction with her trauma responses to self-silence the messages from her body. Yet, another final consequence emerges with women in the novel who challenge the sociocultural norms: violence.

As previously stated, Lena is the only person in the book Brynn knows who challenges the sociocultural norms. Though she leaves Minneoka, she still has some contact with Brynn. In one of their conversations, Lena shares she gets assaulted by the very boy she silenced in the first chapter. Justin, the boy Lena humiliates in the first chapter, takes Lena's challenges to his masculinity as an identity crisis. After consuming alcohol, Justin sees Lena walking in the dark and attacks her. He makes sexual comments objectifying her body and ethnicity. He throws a hammer at her shoulder, forcing her to the ground. He then gets on top of her and pins her to the pavement. With her dislocated shoulder, Lena strikes his knee with the hammer and runs away. Though the assault ends with Lena's escape, the raspy authoritative voice in Brynn's mind repeats to Brynn that Lena, the only woman who fought against the "norm" was attacked. The raspy, male voice in Brynn's head grows angry and threatens her, saying if she doesn't do what it says, what it interprets is demanded by the sociocultural structure, the same physical and sexual violence will befall Brynn. Sadly, though Brynn does not remember, the voice comes from an abuser who inflicted physical violence on Brynn every time she spoke as a child. The sociocultural reality around Brynn, hearing what happened to Lena, supports her internalized reality of the consequences of speaking. Due to the sociocultural values of the "perfect woman" archetype, patriarchal power, the surrounding pressure to maintain the status quo, and the consequences of female voice including dismissal, shame, and violence, it is clear sociocultural mechanisms triggered and perpetuated Brynn's self-silencing behavior. In the next section, I will discuss how self-silencing behavior is therefore protective for Brynn.

### ***Self-Silencing as Protective***

While re-reading *Unchanted*, I noticed these patterns of self-silencing being a protective behavior, which I will explain below. However, I didn't understand how that worked, seeing as

Brynn's state worsens with every episode of self-silencing. I recognized in myself this same behavior of self-silencing to avoid more dismissal, pain, numbness, etc. yet the self-silencing worsened other symptoms of my PTSD including isolation from friends and family, negative cognitions, dissociation, and nightmares. I asked an expert in psychopathology if 1) I was noticing an accurate correlation in her opinion and 2) if so, how does this work. Not only did Audette (2022) explain self-silencing is a form of self-protection, and the pattern of adhering to the protective self-silencing also worsens other symptoms, but she also explained why from a neurological and sociological standpoint. I decided not to go back and insert this new information in the Literature Review because it was only through the method of engaging with the text that I noticed this pattern and wanted to understand it. My inquiry and Audette's (2022) answers, I feel, ground the analysis I will share after discussing Audette's answers.

Audette (2022) both explained and directed me to psychology literature and models used by the Mayo Clinic to first explain how the brain develops. Audette (2022) and the Mayo Clinic (2022) explained the brain controls everything in the body from the nervous system, specific function, controls everything from heart to mood. The brain grows from the back, forward, developing motor function and automatic organ functioning first. However, the external stimulus surrounding a growing mind effects the chemistry of the brain and how the brain, and every part of the body under the brain's control (everything) responds. The frontal lobes, responsible for planning, organizing, problem solving, and control thinking develop last. The occipital and temporal lobes process information from the senses and store memories. The brainstem, which is first developed even in fetus form, links the brain to the spinal cord and is responsible for functions vital to living like heart rate, blood pressure, breathing, sleeping, etc. The peripheral nervous system refers to most of the nerves in the body. This system signals us something is

dangerous and subconsciously tells us to pull away from what our senses deem dangerous. For instance, if a kid touches a hot stove, the peripheral nervous system snaps the hand back and away from the stove without the child having to consciously think about moving their hand. With this understanding of neurodevelopment, Audette (2022) explained how healthy brain development as a child is vital to develop adaptive survival responses. Unfortunately for children who experience abuse of any kind, we learn strategies to survive in childhood that become maladaptive as adults. And these strategies are engrained in our bodies because our brain had not developed enough to understand these abusive instances were tied to one person. In other words, when abuse happens before the frontal lobes have developed, the brain absorbs the abuse as reality and learns how to survive in that. So when/if the abuse ends, even if the child has grown to adolescence or adulthood, the survival mechanisms for dealing with the abuse are embedded in the brain, the nervous system, the organs, the entire body (Audette, 2022; Mayo Clinic 2022; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2016; Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Worsening this phenomenon is the communication the child receives from the abuser and stores in the brain, which then drives how the child communicates interpersonally and intrapersonally. And when the child grows into adolescence and adulthood, these once adaptive, but now maladaptive communication strategies remain unchanged. In this case, Brynn's body, my body, is convinced self-silencing is needed to survive. And though I did not have this neurodevelopmental information prior to returning to *Unchanted*, the experts' explanation directly applies to Brynn's experience.

In the book, Brynn's internal self-silencing intrusive thoughts manifest as a male voice, telling her what to say and what not to say. He, the voice in her head, also warns her not to explore her somatic symptoms or the gaps in her memory. He is avoidance personified within Brynn's body. He speaks with increasing frequency throughout the book as more traumatic

stimuli emerge. However, though Brynn does not know this, I see now he is a subconscious memory of Brynn's abuser. The voice instructs Brynn as an adolescent to lie and communicate wellbeing to her family and friends by threatening they will abandon her if they know how "dirty, horrible, evil, disgusting" she is. Brynn does have a crippling fear of abandonment he feeds upon. However, upon returning to this book, I also see that this voice in Brynn's head, in my head, is the remembered fragments of what Brynn/my abuser said. As a little girl, Brynn's cousin traumatized her, and then soon instructed her silence. When Brynn obeyed his instructions, he did not physically punish her. Therefore, as a child, Brynn was groomed to believe self-silencing was safe whereas speaking was dangerous. And the physical, mental, and sexual abuse inflicted on her developing brain became part of her survival mechanisms. Maladaptive as they are in adolescence for her, the self-silencing as a child protected Brynn from her cousin's further abuse. In other words, her cousin's words became the most powerful authoritative voice in Brynn's mind, driving her self-silencing behavior to avoid further pain. The authoritative voice, poisoned by her cousin, constantly self-silences Brynn to others and to herself out of a protective avoidance strategy. It's as though Brynn's subconscious knows the triggers, the places, the people, the memories that are too much for Brynn to consciously be aware of, and does everything possible, even manifesting in this voice, to avoid the triggers, places, people, and lock away the memories so Brynn's survival isn't further threatened.

Audette (2022) further explained the brain stores the graphic trauma away so the person can continue functioning as much as possible. When in survival mode, past memories or the reality of horrific experiences do not serve the body. But when removed from the direct trauma and survival mode is not omnipresent, the brain dips in and out of processing the trauma and locking away the trauma. As I understand it, this leads to the flashbacks and bodily memories



and sensations Brynn experiences. In other words, when external stimulus reminds Brynn's brain of the horrific memories stored in the earlier-developed lobes (those that control her nervous system and organs), the other parts of her brain silence those memories immediately. Hence, the internal self-silencing is also protective, as the brain deems those memories too painful to process, though they are still stored in the brain. For Brynn, this internal self-silencing becomes so strong, it severs her from healthy survival mechanisms. There is a steady progression of self-silencing throughout the novel. In this last passage, self-silencing festers into distancing and silencing from self-instinct. What Brynn's gut is trying to communicate to her, i.e. wariness and fear, is dismissed. With Grayson's words, with Grayson's approval, the "sharp stone vanished." Additionally, we see how "humor" is used to excuse sexual and how this leads to Brynn's dismissal of her discomfort (Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017).

*"Jesus, Brynn, it was a joke. You're supposed to laugh," he looked concerned, "And now I just feel like a jerk. I can try and lay off the sarcasm, if you can't handle it..."*

*And with that, I suddenly felt a need to prove to him that I could handle his sense of humor and said, "Oh no, that's okay, it's my fault. I misunderstood."*

Brynn's hypervigilance of how she's perceived leads to self-judgment and a need to prove herself to Grayson (LeBlanc, 2020). The leading catalyst in this passage for her submission is that Grayson addresses Brynn's appearance. His words made her feel pretty, and therefore she feels the need to maintain his favor (Trekels, Eggermont, Koppen, & Vandenbosch, L, 2018). She submits to his words as reality and dismisses her own (Reyome, Ward, & Witkiewitz, 2008). In other words, she self-silences to avoid further judgment.

Unfortunately, this progression of replacing any spark of Brynn's own voice and self-efficacy with the reality of the male voices around her inevitably leads to more traumatizing

harm for Brynn. Her self-silencing behavioral attempt to protect herself from external dismissal, as shown in the first few chapters, advances to self-silencing of her own thoughts. This self-silencing process advances to a complete disconnection, a complete silencing of Brynn's authentic, internal voice. Isolation from family, friends, and disconnection from self, advances. With the progression of surrendering her voice completely, Brynn surrenders to further trauma-inducing experiences. The irony in this is not lost on me as I return to this text, I wrote with the knowledge I now have. To protect the self, Brynn put herself in the most danger. Sadly, this is not uncommon with survivors of childhood sexual abuse as Audette (2022) explained.

I procrastinated returning to the sections on sexual pressure, phenomenological self-silencing, and self-harm and attempted suicide most. Not only does my vague memory of them scrape across the traumatized wounds I diligently work to heal, but these are also the least fictional (Ahmed, 2014). Despite a few changes, these passages are nearly nonfiction. They were adapted for this novel from notes I took immediately after these experiences. I see now, in rereading these passages, I even silenced writing these chapters within myself. I distanced myself from the writing not only by assigning the sensations to a fictional person, Brynn, but also in forgetting I wrote them. My relationship to even writing the text mirrors Audette's (2022) explanation of protective self-silencing. Though part of my mind wanted to process what happened in my body, the rest of me was not ready to address the horrific experiences of my past. Therefore, forgetting writing these pieces was protective and writing them as Brynn's was protective as well. Silencing the memories internally protected my body and silencing my voice and instead giving pieces of my story under the cover of "fiction" was an act of self-protection from consequences should anyone find out I spoke about my experience. I say "anyone" in this case referring to the family members and friends I feared would abandon me if they knew and

the physical punishment that would befall on me from my abuser. Protective self-silencing is exemplified in Chapter 12 of *Unchanted*.

Chapter 12 begins with Brynn and her parents hosting extended family, Ashley, and Lena over for Christmas Eve dinner. Both Brynn's friendships with Lena and Ashley are advancing in estrangement. Further self-isolation advances from Brynn's closest circle, here. Though psychiatrists argue it's natural for teenagers to pull away from their parents to some degree, Brynn reaches the point of paranoia in this passage (Siegel & Bryson, 2012). Her embodied self-silencing combined with her undiagnosed PTSD, and her family's seeming indifference, leads to unbearable pain when breaking self-silencing is attempted. With Lena and Ashley preoccupied with their own lives, the wolf's voice/intrusive thoughts in Brynn's head have free reign to further silence Brynn and manipulate what her friends' responses mean. There are no external voices available to challenge or counteract the toxic voice. The raspy authoritative voice tells Brynn that, if she tells her friends and family what she sees and hears, they will dismiss her, abandon her, or her body will hurt more. In returning to this passage, I am sadly reminded that, though the internalized voice is toxic, it's words are not false. In reading this passage, my understanding of sociocultural mechanisms transcends media and greater society to the intimate familial culture. It was true until recently that I was expected to cordially celebrate holidays, weddings, and family reunions with family members who raped, abused, and likewise covered-up or remain indifferent to the rape and abuse. Like Brynn, I did not have a cognitive understanding of the events. In fact, like Brynn, as a teenager, all memories of my abusive cousin pre-aged 16 were gone. Unlike Brynn, my cousin was always present at these family functions. I used the "Uncle" in this passage to distance Brynn, and simultaneously myself, from the reality that these words were said to me as an adolescent by the cousin who molested me. Again, this is

an example of protective self-silencing on a meta level. For Brynn in this passage and for myself, self-silencing is/was multilayered: 1) Self-silencing interpersonal communication out of the fear of repercussions of challenging the sociocultural norm of a “polite family dinner” or “ruining” the event for everyone; 2) self-silencing interpersonal communication for the repercussions of being labeled “insane” which would lead to further painful dismissal; 3) internal self-silencing in the form of the authoritative voice warning against tapping into painful somatic sensations and feelings; 4) the self-silencing of bodily sensations with the dissociative response; 5) the subconscious self-silencing of the memories of the initial, repeated childhood trauma manifesting as erased memories; 6) the self-silencing of the subconscious attempts to break the silencing through veiled flashbacks through a grounding act of self-harm. My throat tightens now at this realization that, at the time, perhaps the self-silencing made sense within the context. Perhaps what happened to me as a child was too much, at the time, for my being to handle, so my mind suppressed/silenced it. But with each reminder, with each interpersonal and intrapersonal trigger scraping against these silenced horrific occurrences, my body felt the memory of the sensations before my mind did. To paraphrase what Cates (2018) said, the body knew before the mind. The body, though still self-silenced, held more memory than the mind. Perhaps that is then why the mind, why my mind and Brynn’s mind, worked so hard to self-silence the body through dismissal and disconnection. Brynn’s mind and body were trying to protect her through self-silencing. The self-silencing was still protective, though the behavior caused more isolation and pain from outside sources that could potentially help, like family and friends (Du, 2020). Yet, sadly, the paranoia also makes sense to me in returning to this passage. Brynn’s flashback, though altered with childlike symbolism of ghosts and werewolves, maintained the true nature of the family’s denial and neglect. Though unintentional, Brynn needed her family to protect her at

a time when they did not. Therefore, I also guess the self-silencing comes from a place of abandonment and fear that her family will always leave her “to the wolves” so to speak. Therefore, she does not want to say or do anything to prompt their neglect. In other words, she does not want to give her family any reason to leave her vulnerable again to the “monsters.” Again, then, her self-silencing around her family is protecting her from potential neglect. I also posit the fictionalization of her abusers is another form of protective self-silencing. There is an innate distance between reality and folklore, and “remembering” the past as filled with ghosts and monsters sociocultural deemed fictitious maintains plausible deniability of the subconscious. Therefore, I also think silencing the “reality” of my experiences, not only through the fictional character, Brynn, but also in relating my abuser to a lycanthropic creature proven not to exist is also subconsciously protective self-silencing. If the abuser is “remembered” as a fairy tale creature, then I can still claim the abuser was not real, subconsciously protecting myself from the reality of my past.

Now I pause, with my throat closing, head pounding, fingers trembling, and hip joints locking. My stomach churns, my chest concaves, and I feel the numbness described in the first chapter: the numbness that claws up my calves and overtakes each muscle as it climbs. As I write, seeing the behavior as both protective and harmful, both learned and maladaptive, I am peeling back the layers of self-silencing. It is now when I feel most desperate to distance myself from Brynn. Now, in acknowledging these passages are nearly nonfiction, I am tempted to abandon this study. Even the act of writing my experiences as someone else’s was a way to safely break self-silencing. Therefore, in now seeing we are the same, the protective layer of distance fades, and I feel old pain. In typing my understanding on these pages, I am no longer protecting myself through the only way I know how: through silence. The hairs on the back of

my neck stand up, terrified in breaking my silence. In admitting my similarity to Brynn, I make myself vulnerable to memories. In understanding the self-silencing behavior was initially learned as a survival mechanism responding to how my abuser and the surrounding sociocultural structures communicated with me, I make myself vulnerable to dismissal/denial, socially imposed shame, and violence. What if my parents read this, see it does not paint them as idyllic and abandon me? What if my thesis committee reads this and decides I'm insane? What if this thesis is turned into a paper and my cousin reads it? Though as an adult I made it clear to his family I never wanted to see any of them again, I still fear him. The acts, I remember he committed against my mind and body and how he justified them through his toxic, abusive communication, were horrific. I do not wish to have them repeated. I also don't want to remember the acts I've locked away in my memory. Even now, admitting this, my shoulders crunch up to my ears and I feel my eyes dart to the front door of my apartment to make sure it's locked. I find I keep forgetting my train of thought even as I write. Again, clearly, my self-silencing both interpersonally and intrapersonally is protective, though self-silencing communicates the opposite of how I'm feeling.

### ***Self-Silencing as Rebellion***

Having established self-silencing was triggered by trauma, perpetuated by sociocultural mechanisms, and was a learned survival behavior, I recognized one last theme in *Uncharted*. Self-silencing was also a form of rebellion. Proceed with caution. This is a trigger warning to let readers know I discuss self-harm and suicide in this last section of my analysis.

In the second section of the analysis, I shared how self-silencing was perpetuated by Brynn's sociocultural surroundings. Her PTSD symptoms worsened though Brynn did what she'd learned to do to survive as a child: self-silence. However, in Brynn's final chapter before

the novel's resolution, Brynn faces a moment where her survival is so threatened that her protective behavior is useless. Therefore, she sees her only escape from her torture is rebellion and uses the only behavior she knows how: self-silencing.

Men hold all the power in Brynn's life as I established. The authoritative/wolf voice's appearance progresses from sporadic interruption to constant conversation. At nearly all times, Brynn is having a conversation with both another human being and the male and raspy voice in her head. With her self-silencing, with her self-isolating behavior, though protective, the stronger the voice grows. There are no other conversations directly related to her fears and anxiety to counteract the toxic thoughts. As the sociocultural norms around her seemingly supportive male authority, to the extent of internalization, there is nothing to help her escape. Except for another male. There's the sociocultural argument within Brynn's head. The toxic voice and sociocultural messaging work together. The intrapersonal dialogue highlights the conflicting, incongruent traits needed to be the "ideal woman" (Scott, 2014). Brynn is white, young, wealthy enough to have her own room and a laptop. Yet, the expectation to be innocent and virginal yet dependent on men clash when Grayson instructs her to lose her virginity. This cognitive dissonance adds to the paralysis of her trauma. She tightens her body into a ball, feeling her ribs concave, mirroring the corseting effect Piran (2017) describes. After self-silencing to give into his urges, having decided there was no way out of that situation, Brynn expects the pain in her body to alleviate, the raspy voice to quiet, and for her to feel loved and cared for when the intercourse ends. The raspy voice in her head has continuously promised her throughout the novel that if she stays quiet, if she obeys male desires, if she keeps the men in her life happy, she won't get abandoned, neglected, or hurt. Considering Brynn's previous instances with Grayson made her feel pretty and she believes, then, from the sociocultural messaging of "ideal woman" alignment, she

assumes she will feel safe and desired immediately after Grayson is done with her body. Brynn gives in to Grayson and trusts the raspy voice is right. Yet after the internal struggle, the symptoms, the fear, and the need for his approval, Grayson leaves immediately. He says to Brynn while zipping up his pants, “I don’t know if you know how this works, but we have fun, then I leave.” His leaving mirrors the abandonment and neglect of Brynn’s family alluded to in her subconscious in Chapter 9 (Audette, 2022; Reyome, Ward, & Witkiewitz, 2008). In other words, her survival mechanism of self-silencing to avoid abandonment doesn’t work. Grayson leaves. The added shame of herself, her urges, her symptoms, her thoughts, leads to further self-silencing, saying nothing when Grayson leaves (Schwarz, 2021). So, the only person Brynn believed could alleviate her pain triggered her fear of abandonment. The raspy voice in Brynn’s head who swore his demands were in her best interest lied. Worst of all, the intercourse reminds her subconscious mind of the sexual abuse she experienced as a girl. Brynn falls to the ground on her knees, feeling pain from her childhood. She feels the helplessness of needing protection and receiving none. She feels the sting of abandonment and neglect from Grayson that subconsciously mirrors how her family left her alone with her cousin, her abuser. In that moment, the entire outside world feels like it is communicating to her that she is unsafe, unwanted, unloved, and deserving of neglect and abandonment. The sociocultural environment of Minneoka supports these feelings toward her as a woman. Then, she sees human feet on the carpet in front of her knees. The raspy voice in her mind sounds far away, echoing in her ears. Her eyes tilt upward, and she sees the entirety of a giant monster, half wolf, half man standing in front of her. At first, she is paralyzed with terror. Then the monster opens his mouth to speak, and she realizes the monster she hallucinates, the one that haunts her nightmares, has the same voice as the authoritative voice in her head. She gasps, realizing they were one in the same. That



he's a creature more powerful than a wolf and more powerful than a man. "He was a mystical monster with powers I could never defeat," Brynn says, "If he wanted to kill me, if he wanted to do anything to me, he could. And there was nothing I could do to stop him." Brynn realizes here her protective form of external self-silencing holds no power against the monster. He holds all the power. "*And I told you that, didn't I,*" he says in the same raspy voice she hears in her head. "*I told you you'd always be mine. You move when I permit. You speak only to me and only when I allow.*" His words spark a sense memory in Brynn's mind. She realizes she had heard those words before but doesn't remember when. The wolf manifestation of her cousin continues telling her she can never escape him. She shouldn't even try, because he will always find her, and he will always be in control. Brynn whispers faintly again that the voice promised not to hurt her. The voice promised nothing bad would happen if she just obeyed him. Then continues saying, "You haunt me in my sleep, I'm always scared I'll see you when I'm awake, you control my body, take away my voice, and manipulate my thoughts. You've taken my humanity. You've taken over my whole life..." Brynn recognizes in that moment that nothing will completely free her from him. Yet he lives in her mind and lives in her body. Her protective self-silencing won't allow her to communicate this to anyone. So, Brynn does the one thing she can think of to take some power back and rebel: attempt suicide.

Brynn's embodied pain, internalized sociocultural pressures, her surrender to all the male voices, reaches the unbearable point where her only understanding of retaining power comes from ending her life. In other words, she sees her only escape is suicide, and with no voice and no human connection, as a final act of trying to regain power, she acts on it. Like the women in Hilda's (2008) study who maintained alcoholism though it destroyed their bodies, Brynn needed to revolt against the sociocultural mechanisms that forced her into her powerless position.

Though suicide is debatably the most harmful act one can commit to the self, it is a form of rebellion against the sociocultural mechanisms and male power that progressively crushed Brynn's voice and sense of self. Finding her dead body would communicate her pain to everyone without her being alive to feel the repercussions. The ultimate act of bodily self-silencing would rebel against and communicate her struggle and pain to the sociocultural structures around her. In death, she assumes, the internalized self-silencing and pain could no longer hurt her either because everything would end.

Though I don't condone this, nor think my past suicide attempts were positive, upon re-reading this passage, I see now why I saw suicide as my only option. I see now how when silenced by the world, then self-silencing from the world, then from friends, family, and then embodying the pain of self-silencing, and losing any potential escape from that torture, why, in those moments, I wanted to communicate my pain though I could not speak. I see why I wanted to rebel against friends and family who failed to protect me, yet did not want to give them any reason to abandon me. I see now, as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse, an adolescent in a patriarchal sociocultural system, surrounded by friends and family who dismissed what happened to me for their own reasons, why I self-silenced to the point of attempted suicide. I see why Brynn and I were apologetic for our very existence and saw the only semblance of control we had left, was to destroy our existence (Peterson, 2022; Hilda, 2008).

For years, I hid my suicide attempts and self-harming behavior, just as Brynn is in the novel. I self-silenced, telling no one of my pain. But, eventually, like in the book, my parents noticed the cuts I could no longer conceal. Eventually, my parents saw my body react to nightmares. Eventually, my mom saw me run into the bathroom and lock the door. She knew I was in there with hordes of medication and knew I wanted to end my life. I still don't know what

made me open the door. She raced me to the hospital immediately, just as the family rushes Brynn to the hospital. The nurses asked questions I couldn't answer. The psychiatrist asked questions I couldn't answer. Again, in the novel this is reflected through Brynn. Not permitted to speak, but also not permitted to harm myself in the hospital (watched 24/7, all wire, strings, jewelry, writing utensils taken away), Brynn and I shared one last form of self-silencing rebellion. We wouldn't let anyone see us cry. That was ours. That was the one last piece of our body, our mind, and our communication we had under our control. At the time, I did not recognize this was a form of rebellion within the confines of my mind, body, and sociocultural surroundings. I see it now. As a little girl, forced into self-silencing to avoid pain and abandonment, my body vulnerable to the perverted whims of a man, the one thing I could hold back was my tears. *At least he doesn't get to see me cry.* Self-silencing the tears, the ultimate emotional expression, is the last layer of rebellion. Though I used to hate that I never let others see me cry, blaming my body for never communicating to others that I needed help, I see now that rebellion was the last shred of control I had. This must be why Brynn never cries in the novel.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

Through the process of working on this thesis, I realize the prominence of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. When I first started conceptualizing this thesis with my advisor, I did not think my lens or experience was that different from other women. Though my committee told me my experience as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse seemed to drive my perspective and writing, I did not understand them at the time. I did not include more trauma-related literature in my literature review, assuming my analysis would go in a different direction with self-silencing. I was wrong. They were right. I wonder then, if perhaps my internal self-silencing habit was at work even then. My consciousness wanted to forget my meeting with three women I greatly admire. Having completed the analysis, I see how prevalent the trauma piece of this study is. I feel this realization that the childhood trauma matters and still alters my life and perspective contributes to my personal wellbeing. However, I also believe this thesis contributes to communication scholarship and, hopefully, can help others in the future. I argue my thesis expands Bakhtin's (1981) theory of multivoicedness, adds understanding to the "self-silencing" phenomenon by using a Communication Studies-derived feminist, critical approach, and my analysis invites a multilayered understanding that self-silencing behavior is not always a conscious choice. I propose a new term combining psychological scholarship and Communication Studies ideas that encapsulates the embodied nature of self-silencing in this context: *trauma-induced, subconscious self-silencing*. These contributions answer the research questions from Chapter 1: R1) What is the relationship between sociocultural mechanisms, communication, and embodied self-silencing? And R2) why is breaking self-silencing so hard?

### **Expanding Understanding of Bakhtin's Theory of Multivoicedness**

Bakhtin's (1981) literary theory of multivoicedness, focuses on discourse within a written text. However, I argue my autoethnographic experience engaging with my artifact, *Unchanted*, broadened Bakhtin's discourse from an internal discussion between the author's words, to a dialogic phenomenon between author and reader. Bakhtin (1981) posits the self is not independent from society. He poses the question of whose message are we truly relaying when we speak and theorizes, via literary analysis, the fixed authoritative voice (a combination of sociocultural messages learned from childhood) structures the world for characters in a novel. The authoritative voice is a combination of political, social, and cultural understanding that monologues as law. *Unchanted* does not only operate under the authoritative voice of Minneoka, but also the authoritative voice of Brynn's abuser. As the abuser was an integral part of her childhood, shaping how she interacted with the world, he manifests as law along with the sociocultural mechanisms she implicitly understands (Shotwell, 2011). *Unchanted*, as a novel, illustrates the embodied encouragement of conforming to sociocultural norms and the somatic symptoms of internalized self-silencing. Both the normative and abusive authoritative voices push Brynn to behave "normally" and self-silence to communicate "normality." The authoritative voice reigns in *Unchanted* and Brynn displays minimal resistance. In other words, Brynn barely engages in internally-persuasive discourse. Since Brynn reflects my sixteen-year-old self, this makes sense. At the time I wrote *Unchanted*, I was incapable of engaging in any dialogue with my sociocultural surroundings. As discussed in Chapter 3, I did not question the society or culture in which I lived. *Unchanted* shows my sixteen-year-old self recited the self-dismissive, abusive, and misogynistic phrases embedded in my head. I did not even seek a voice of my own, unaware I could. In writing the novel, I succumbed to the authoritative voice in my head. I was so ashamed of myself, I subconsciously distanced myself from my own experience

and name, claiming my writing was “fictional” and the main character was “Brynn.” At the time I unconsciously succumbed to the authoritative voice, as *Unchanted* shows. However, through conducting this study, retelling my experience again, critical of the sociocultural system, I engaged in internally-persuasive discourse.

Bakhtin (1981) argues the more a character engages in internally-persuasive discourse, critiquing the authoritative voice and embracing their own voice and word choice, the more power the character holds over their own words. This means when a character finds their own voice separate what they’ve been told throughout their life, they become more self-actualized and more human. Though Bakhtin’s (1981) theory refers to critique and dialogue within the text, I believe his concepts of authoritative voice, internally-persuasive discourse, and dialogue transcend the confines of literary text. In the act of returning to *Unchanted*, I invited dialogic discourse. Though Bakhtin (1981) described dialogic discourse within literature, the different styles of writing, the prose, the different “languages” of writing within one novel engaging in a dialogue with each other, he did not discuss the dialogue an author can have with their past self through returning to written work. Through my artifactual analysis, I engaged in dialogic discourse, exchanging my new understandings of sociocultural structures and feminism with the sixteen-year-old Katie who wrote *Unchanted*. I see upon return, what I once thought was law, as solitary reality of sociocultural misogynistic pressures combined with words and actions of my abuser, was not an objective truth. The reality shared in *Unchanted* does not reveal the motives or origins of the authoritative voice because sixteen-year-old Katie did not know the authoritative voice; 1) came from an abusive person, 2) was combined with oppressive sociocultural messaging, 3) could be challenged. Sixteen-year-old Katie did not think the voice in her head nor the way the world worked around her was something to criticize or challenge.

Therefore, only in returning to the novel now, can I engage in the dialogue with the novel that exposes the true, subjective, selfish nature of the sociocultural messages and abuser's messages that brainwashed Brynn/me. While reading the words of the male, raspy voice I recorded in *Unchanted*, I critiqued them with the knowledge of a thirty-one-year-old graduate student. As a reader, I could finally question and critique the authoritative voice. I could finally show empathy and validation to the sixteen-year-old Katie captured in the pages. As a reader and an author, I could engage in a dialogue, bringing the sixteen-year-old Katie that resides in memory to the present moment. I now see her struggle in the pages, recognize all the pressure crashing down upon her, and see what she was trying to communicate through her self-silencing. In returning to *Unchanted* and engaging in this dialogue, I see I was trying to say that I was suffering. I see that I needed help. Sixteen-year-old Katie needed to be seen and heard despite her self-silencing. Through internally-persuasive discourse, peeling back the layers of her confines, I see her. I hear her. I acknowledge my younger self. Through this dialogue I finally see what I tried to communicate back then. I understand myself through the PTSD symptoms, through the pain, through the sociocultural pressures, through the assaults, and dismissal, and I am no longer ashamed of my younger self. I no longer judge myself by what the authoritative voice said or says. I have my own voice now.

Through reading, conducting an *artifactual autoethnographic* study, and critiquing the patriarchal sociocultural system and trauma written as authoritative voice, I became more self-actualized (Bakhtin, 1981). The sociocultural hierarchy and the abuser that combined into an authoritative voice had/have ulterior motives. The cultural norm, marinated in misogyny, denial, disconnection, etc. thrives when untested and unquestioned. As Bakhtin (1981) theorized, the authoritative voice holds rules all until dethroned. Those who thrive under this authoritative

reign, the status quo, need the status quo to feel some sense of stability, despite the broken nature of said status quo. And the abusive authority, the man who initially sexually, physically, and verbally tortured Brynn, who told her to be quiet and inflicted pain when she wasn't only sought to protect himself. He implanted toxic ideas in Brynn's head to maintain power over her and avoid consequences for his actions. In other words, the original authoritative voice groomed Brynn to be quiet and submissive so he could do what he wanted to her without getting caught. Through reading *Unchanted*, I recognize his motives now. Through this internally-persuasive process of returning to *Unchanted* and recounting my new understanding of my story, I took my power back. Through internally-persuasive discourse between my current self, my sixteen-year-old self and the characters in the pages I have dethroned the authoritative voice. My new understanding of the authoritative voice removes its hold over me, making what was once all-powerful obsolete. I understand now the authoritative voice is not law, but came from other humans with selfish intentions. As illustrated above, Bakhtin's (1981) theory of multivoicedness transcends characters within a text. Through engaging in a dialogue with the text, I was finally able to engage in the internally-persuasive discourse that helped me understand the significance abuse and trauma had over my self-silencing behavior .

### **Proposal for "Trauma-Induced Subconscious Self-Silencing"**

The answer to R1 is simple and obvious after the analysis: childhood trauma relates embodied self-silencing to interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and is perpetuated by sociocultural mechanisms. Brynn has embodied her abuse. In other words, part of her childhood abuser still lives in her body and mind, though she doesn't even remember him as a past memory. In fact, she remembers her past abuser as her child-self saw him: a ravenous monster. This embodied abusive-authoritative voice controls Brynn's body as he silences her voice and



causes her pain. Even typing this now, I pause realizing Brynn and I are the same. I don't want this to be true, hence why my fingers want to stop typing to silence the painful realization. My abuser lives in me as well and still holds more control than I admit. My advisor, Sachi Sekimoto, suggested Van der Kolk's (2015) work would support my findings that childhood trauma is internalized and therefore affects the body, the mind, interpersonal communication, and intrapersonal communication. She was right. Van der Kolk (2015) Perfectly described the embodiment of past-trauma and communicative patterns I learned. I came to understand through this *artifactual analysis* I still resist the recalling the memories that cause me pain. However, I endure daily pain that I self-silence. Van der Kolk (2015) argues trauma leaves remains. No matter how much we suppress and self-silence, trauma does not disappear. We only silence the memory, the experience, the pain a little longer. For the trauma, Van der Kolk explains, resides in the depths of our brain dedicated to survival. Brynn's traumatic experiences are stored in this neurological vault, controlling her nervous system and organs. That is why she her body reacted at any inkling of danger. Likewise, this is why I feel intense pain right now as my brain emits stress hormones fearing impending danger from documenting and revealing my experience. As Van der Kolk argued, our relationship with our body determines how helpless or in control we feel. Hence, both Brynn and I would rather feel pain through self-harm, than not feel our body at all. Brynn's dissociative episodes, based on my own dissociations create this sense of numbness, detachment, and lack of control. Yet, dissociation in itself is a bodily reaction to trauma. Van der Kolk further validated my experience discussing how societal dismissal of trauma, of Van der Kolk's proven work, even, worsens the experience for traumatized individuals. At the beginning of the book, he discusses the shockingly high rate of survivors of trauma. The listed experiences, abuse, rape, war, etc. are all inflicted by other humans. The interpersonal causes of trauma and

the collective sociocultural determination to dismiss these causes supports my finding that Brynn's self-silencing behavior was not solely her fault. In other words, I have found self-silencing was not necessarily my own conscious choice. Other people forced this behavior through inflicting harm and collectively enabling and participating in a misogynistic culture supporting aggression and domination. I internalized self-silencing to survive, both interpersonally and intrapersonally. But, as Van der Kolk shared, my trauma never went away. My experiences remain in the pain of my muscles and fascia, the turning of my stomach, my shortness of breath, constricted throat, hypervigilant nervous system, and the depths of my mind. Van der Kolk's work validated and grounded my experience in psychology, sociology, and neurobiology. Where his work strengthens my arguments, I also argue adding a communication perspective to self-silencing provides an even more holistic understanding.

Along with Van der Kolk's (2015)'s psychological perspective, I also believe my thesis adds a communication lens vital to a holistic understanding of the self-silencing phenomenon, and answers R2 (why is breaking self-silencing so hard?) through revealing self-silencing behavior is a multi-layered, embodied, socioculturally perpetuated phenomenon. Though I adhere to the psychology scholars and experts in this thesis, I see the communicative aspect of self-silencing is not addressed in their literature. They describe neurodevelopment, symptoms, and patterns they observe in survivors of childhood sexual abuse, discuss the health ramifications of untreated Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in relation to self-silencing, and explain through the act of speaking with a trained professional with different kinds of therapy, self-silencing can be broken (Audette, 2022; Karakuş, & Göncü-Köse, 2022; McLaughlin & Lambert, 2017; Monnat & Chandler, 2015; Erbes, Stillman, & Wieling, 2014; Miller, Cardona, & Hardin, 2007; Farley & Keaney, 1997; APA, n.d.). However, Communication Studies addresses the importance of

exchange and message transmission regarding self-silencing. Through the Communication Studies lens, self-silencing is explained as both interpersonal and intrapersonal, learned, and maladaptive, and enforced by sociocultural mechanisms. Communication studies goes beyond the brain and explores how human interaction causes and affects human behavior. For example, in *Unchanted*, where a psychology expert might limit Brynn's diagnosis to PTSD and solely address her self-silencing as psychological, a communication studies scholar, a feminist scholar, and a critical scholar can recognize the sociocultural mechanisms that perpetuate the behavior. And only through understanding the sociocultural pressures and messages can self-silencing behavior be truly broken. Through the communication lens, the focus can broaden from solely looking at an individual and the individual's behavior to the entire system that encourages self-silencing on top of the trauma. Feminist and critical scholars discuss societal silencing of BIPOC women, white women, mothers, and daughters. Understanding the societal messaging of how all women are or/should be extends the concept of self-silencing to an interactive behavior. In other words, Self-silencing is more than just a symptom of a trauma disorder, but a way women are taught to survive socioculturally (Jean, Neal-Barnett, & Stadulis, 2022; Anderson, Holland, Heldreth, & Johnson, 2018; Trekels, Eggermont, Koppen, Vandenbosch, 2018; Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017; Piran, 2017; Masako & Preston, 2015; Ahmed, 2014; Griffin, 2012; Rojas, 2009; hooks, 2000). Communication studies allows for understanding and critique of the sociocultural mechanisms that also cause self-silencing. Understanding the patriarchal system that upholds men in power allows the self-silencer to critique the system itself rather than solely blaming themselves for their self-silencing behavior. Engrained existing societal ideals are integral in self-silencing (Watson, L. B. & Grotewiel, M., 2016).

From a communicative perspective, messages are exchanges of cause and response. It is clear the patterns of external dismissal and self-silencing are linked. The self-silencing pattern is punctuated by interaction with other humans, not solely the chemistry of the brain (Beavin, Jackson, & Watzlawick, 1967). In short, through extending the concept of “self-silencing” to a psychological, communicative, and embodied phenomenon, it is clear how complicated and multilayered the self-silencing behavior is (Bogar, Ganos, Hoorman, Bub-Standal, & Beyer, 2016). However, seeing self-silencing as communicative allows space for friends and families of trauma survivors to play a part in healing. Though there is little a friend or family member can do in terms of engaging the survivor in Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing therapy, or “Parts” Therapy, understanding self-silencing as also a communication phenomenon shows friends and family are not helpless. Seeing the self-silencing process as an exchange, friends and family can minimize dismissing the survivor, partake in active listening, and engage in societal critique of silencing women and survivors of abuse. For example, if I was sitting with my husband watching TV, and Donald Trump came on the screen with news anchors talking about how women lie about getting raped all the time, are “dramatic,” “hysterical,” or “not hot enough to even what to have sex with,” my husband could critique this socioculturally derived media message. Just being in spaces with someone who acknowledges the dismissal of female voices, silencing mechanisms of female stories, the consequences when women do speak up, and the shame instilled in victims of assault, takes power away from the authoritative voice in my head berating me with these same messages (Blumelle & Huemmer, 2017). In other words, once self-silencing is seen as socioculturally developed as well as neurologically developed, both parts can be addressed in breaking the self-silencing behavior.

Not only does this holistic lens, combining perspectives from communication studies and psychology, offer ways friends and family can communicate support, love, and critique the systems that uphold the self-silencing behavior, it also answers the research question: why is breaking self-silencing so hard? After rereading *Unchanted* and recording my autoethnographical experience relating to my artifact, I see many reasons why the self-silencing behavior is nearly impossible to break. The analysis found psychological, neurological, social, protective, and rebellious reasons why I self-silenced. The analysis showed self-silencing is not a conscious choice like the term implies. I was not always ready with words to say but decided not to say them. I never consciously decided to disconnect from my body. I never chose to feel pain in my body when my throat closed shut. I could not control when my nervous system panicked in fear, causing paralysis of my body including my voice. Self-silencing was not a chosen behavior of silencing me. My mind learned from both the authoritative voices in my sociocultural sphere and from my abuser that self-silencing was how to survive. I remember in returning to *Unchanted* my own experience as a little girl and adolescent. Now I see the self-hatred, the self-silencing, and the dissociation were not all under my control. I hate admitting that. I hate acknowledging the reality of helplessness as it takes me back to a child's mindset of needing grownups to help, but they're not available. Of crying out and no one hearing. Of trying to speak and the bigger, stronger, older, boy gripping my throat. I remember mentioning something to my parents my abuser did not like. I remember him punishing me for speaking by slicing the tips of my fingers, pouring hydrogen peroxide down my gullet, and shoving objects inside me. I see the self-silencing from both the surrounding culture and from my abuser's actions was not chosen, but instinctual. Therefore, I propose a term that encapsulates unknowingly using self-silencing behavior as survival means called *trauma-induced, subconscious self-silencing*. I propose this

term acknowledges the automatic bodily and subconscious nature of self-silencing behavior supported by Van der Kolk's (2015) findings.

I wish I knew this term as a teenager. The implicit understanding of "self-silencing" as a conscious choice creates shame for those of us who cannot directly speak up. This term, *trauma-induced subconscious self-silencing* also addresses the phenomenological, embodied nature of the behavior. When the self-silencing is caused in trauma, the nervous system, the body, the parts of the brain we have no awareness of, drive our behavior. I hope if any survivors of abuse of any form read my thesis, there is a relief in the pain of isolation Ahmed (2014) describes. I hope for those who self-criticize and attack themselves for communicating alignment with sociocultural "normalcy" and wellbeing when they are hurting and struggling find some validation in this work. I hope those with friends and family who survived trauma see they are not powerless in the healing process but can critique sociocultural mechanisms encouraging self-silencing behavior and minimize dismissing their loved one. I hope those who dissociate or feel somatic pain start to question what messages they are self-silencing in the body and seek expert therapeutic help. I hope now all readers understand through the term, *trauma-induced, subconscious self-silencing*, the answer to the questions society asks us regarding our silence, "why didn't they just say something? Or show they were in pain?" is because it is not that simple.

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