

My Body Keeps Your Secrets

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My Body Keeps Your Secrets

Lucia Osborne-Crowley

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‘Sometimes what hurts us the most is the aftermath, the everyday challenge of living in a body that has been damaged and disrespected and shamed’, Lucia Osborne-Crowley provocatively asserts in the opening chapter of her second non-fiction work, *My Body Keeps Your Secrets* (26). The recent #Me Too movement has focused on uplifting the voices of survivors of sexual assault and sexual harassment, encouraging them to speak out about their experiences in order to demonstrate the prevalence of rape and the insidious culture of misogyny that male violence is unquestioningly constructed upon. Osborne-Crowley’s work shows the capacity and need for progression beyond attention centred around survivors’ experiences of the moment of rape and sexual harassment, focusing instead on ‘the years and years and years ... that come after the assault’ (25). *My Body Keeps Your Secrets* gives prominence to survivors’ experiences of exactly that, survival, and how they cope with both the aftermath of violence and abuse, and the impact that growing up in an oppressive society takes on female and non-binary bodies.

Osborne-Crowley shares not only her own experiences of rape and the traumatic aftermath, but also the experiences over a hundred female-identifying and non-binary individuals in order to consider how bodies carry the shame and secrets of sexual abuse. As she convincingly argues, and as the testimonies within demonstrate, experiences of trauma, especially sexual trauma, have a physical and tangible impact on survivors for the remainder of their lives.

Her argument is also bolstered by her extensive engagement with intersectional theoretical works by feminist scholars such as Brené Brown, Bri Lee and Audre Lorde, who have highlighted how women's voices, bodies and spaces have been treated by misogynistic societies, as well as engagement with scholarship focused more broadly on trauma and the body, such as that of Gabor Maté and Bessel van der Kolk.¹

The interviews conducted by Osborne-Crowley and the experiences she details cover myriad ways in which female-identifying and non-binary bodies and minds have consciously and unconsciously coped with the aftermath of sexual assault and harassment, including, but not limited to, the development of varying eating disorders, chronic illnesses, mental health issues, unconsciously seeking out abusive relationships and alcohol and drug dependencies. The broad range of survivors' stories featured by Osborne-Crowley highlight the complexity, diversity and depth of experiences of trauma, as well as how these are compounded by societal pressures of race, class and gender. Olivia's story, featured in Chapter 11, sheds light on the systematic racism and sexism inherent in the United Kingdom's healthcare system. She learns 'again and again, that the young Blak body is so hyper-sexualised that she simply couldn't get a doctor to take [her] seriously' (240). Osborne-Crowley details the serious and lasting implications of this ingrained oppression: 'here's the kicker: ignoring women's pain not only inhibits the process of healing, it actually makes it more likely that the pain will become permanent' (224).

Osborne-Crowley's work is deeply intimate, extending beyond stories of masculine sexual violence perpetrated against female-identifying and non-binary individuals to interweave stories of emotional and physical abuse in both heterosexual and queer relationships. She also insightfully explores seemingly 'rape-adjacent' abuses such as Pema's experience of

1 Brené Brown, *I Thought It Was Just Me: Women Reclaiming Power and Courage in a Culture of Shame* (New York: Gotham, 2007); Brené Brown, *Men, Women and Worthiness: The Experiences of Shame and the Power of Being Enough* (Louisville, CO: Sounds True, 2012); Bri Lee, *Eggshell Skull: A Memoir about Standing up, Speaking Out and Fighting Back* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2018); Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984); Audre Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You* (London: Silver Press, 2017); Gabor Maté, *When the Body Says No: The Cost of Hidden Stress* (London: Vermilion, 2019); Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma* (London: Penguin Books, 2014).

stealthing in Chapter 7, which Osborne-Crowley names as rape.² The book does lack an examination of structural forces of violence against women and an analysis of the construction and conditioning of masculinity of the perpetrators. However, given that Osborne-Crowley's focus is on the experiences of victims, not perpetrators, it is understandable why such an examination is beyond the scope of a book that already breaks new ground in literature surrounding assault and the body.

There are not necessarily clear sections to the book. Instead, the stories and voices of survivors in each chapter compound upon each other to reinforce Osborne-Crowley's argument and experience. They culminate in her concluding remark in which she details the singular reaction experienced 'three or more years, ten years, a lifetime after [abuse]: vulnerability, by which I mean strength' (304). Indeed, while it is not the easiest read in terms of potentially triggering subject matter to some (or many), Osborne-Crowley's argument and the first-hand evidence and testimonies within provide a necessary progression to conversations about trauma and assault, and a poignant insight into how female-identifying and non-binary individuals have managed this bodily trauma months, years and decades after the initial assault. With an impassioned tone and accessible, sharp prose, *My Body Keeps Your Secrets* is a pertinent work I would recommend to anyone with a vested interest in discourses of gender and power, anyone wanting to broaden their understanding of the long-term impact of violence and abuse for female-identifying and non-binary individuals, or for anyone who has survived trauma and those who love them.

2 Stealthing, according to Osborne-Crowley, references to the practise where 'men or people with penises covertly remove or break a condom after consent has been given on the condition of the use of the condom'. While only considered 'rape-adjacent' at the time of Pema's experience, it has been illegal in the UK since 2017, and a landmark German case in 2019 determined non-consensual removal of a condom to be a form of rape. Many jurisdictions have since followed suit in classifying stealthing as rape, and scholars such as Alexandra Brodsky have highlighted that practises such as stealthing may not have been 'considered part of the recognised repertoire of gender-based violence—but [were] rooted in the same misogyny and lack of respect' (143). Osborne-Crowley, *My Body Keeps Your Secrets*, 143. See also Alexandra Brodsky, "Rape-adjacent": Imagining legal responses to nonconsensual condom removal', *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 32, no. 2 (2017): 183–210.

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