

Phase Four

Theory

CATALYST

During the middle of my high school years, my English teacher Mrs. Geaman brought in a PhD student to teach our class a rape culture prevention unit. In small-town Midwest America, this was an unheard-of precedent. I was profoundly moved by the class. It led me to form a bond with that PhD student who later became my mentor, Dr. Victoria Dickman-Burnett. Throughout the years we've talked, researched, and wrote together about rape culture and girlhood. It was my catalyst. There is one part that I have been waiting to incorporate into this research: design.

While the majority of our publications have revolved around rape culture and sexual violence prevention, I intentionally chose a different but related path. Rape culture is a deeply misunderstood concept and with that comes with its own challenges to try to encompass all its influences.

For my thesis, I felt I needed an umbrella topic that was just as deeply rooted but less vexed in its impressions. Leaving room for discussions surrounding rape culture without it becoming a mutually exclusive relationship or needing to be the main point of discussion.

I thought about trauma, girlhood, permaculture, heirlooms, etc. None of these felt like the correct vehicle for the outcomes I wanted to achieve. Throughout the research process, the discoveries started centering around femininity. It was the grounding topic to lift off from.

INITIAL RESEARCH

Before I arrived at the conclusion to focus on femininity, I began to rewatch our group meeting recordings.

During COVID -19 summer, Victoria and I began writing about the relationship between girlhood and rape culture. This time we had another member, Trinity Shaya. At the time she an ungrad in art therapy not she is in the Peace Corps.

Together we discussed each week for weeks. In total there were over 100+ hours of footage

I used this footage to ignite thoughts for my capstone. Within the lots of ideas in my head , I split the notes up into words, thoughts, questions, and polarities. These were some of the guiding questions I had:

Is girlhood lost? Are their parts that are lost? Can we get them back?

When its lost how to we deal with the devistation?

How to make experiences of awareness end with empowerment not heaviness?

How is the idea of girlhood changing?
Has it always been the same,
we just uncover the soft belly?

When are the times I feel most in my power,
in my feminine?

Then I made a mind map.



INITIAL RESEARCH

I started to think about Mother Nature, Traum, and Girlhood. Sonone of it seemed right. Then I looked into heirlooms which lead me to symbols. There I started to find feminine stymbols. This lead me to my main question "What do we associate with femininity?"

Femininity encompasses all of my wishes as a topic for this project. Not too vexed or heavy it can be extended. It however also directly is affected by the problems of the world with violence, power, and greed.

In her book, On Our Best Behavior, Elise Loehen, breaks down the toll of what it takes to be a woman by splitting it up into chapters of each seven deadly sin.

These are some parts of the reading that stuck with me.

"We fear crossing a line we can't see" XXIII

"Giving away our power and accepting exhaustion resentment despair and disconnection" XXIII

"The path to connection is balance, the middle" XXIV

It is important to note that with complex topics such as femininity and rape culture have a delicacy to them. Like any design problem, we have to think outside the box even when the box is really really big. While there are layers, it doesn't mean solution-based answers don't exist. Currently, the majority of products are only solving the first layer of complex issues. Products like mace spray only act as bandaids. Throughout my research with Victoria and Trinity, we found a theme.

**OUR BURDENS BECOME
LIGHTER WHEN WE SHARE
THEM. OUR STRENGTHS
BECOME CLEARER WHEN
OTHERS SEE THEM. IT IS
CLEAR THE SOLUTION
TO NUANCED TOPICS IS
THROUGH SHARING OUR
EXPERIENCES.**

WHAT IS A PART OF THE FEMININE EXPERIENCE?

SO MINDFUL SO DEMURE

In short, you tell me.

I am not setting out to define a final truth of what femininity means or is or prove if it is valid. Rather I am here to pull out the truths we pass down.
We define acts, words, images, and so much more as feminine.

While truth is debatable, femininity lives. It's existence is in our language, theories, associations, ideas, and stories. Thus, it is a reality in our culture. Social truths come from collective thoughts. There are many experiences
we can share to
uncover these social truths.

In times of change, each of us experiences catalysts for thought. My thesis is grounded by the idea that such complex concepts like femininity aren't about immediate solution-based responses. Rather, it is about curating catalysts. Highlighting the good, bad, and the grey through dialogue about real conditions.

THE FEMININE EXISTENCE

Whether it be the estrogen hormone, emotional capacity, fashion, yin, mother earth, crossed legs, weaving, the color pink or acting demure ...it is all associated with femininity.

THIS IS NOT A PROJECT ONLY ABOUT OR FOR WOMEN.

It could be the embodiment of your mom or the moon or being called “sissy” or spinning around or wanting the “tea” or shedding a tear or religiously watching reality television ... it has all be upheld as feminine. I want you to tell me what it is to you. I hope that whoever you are, you can connect to something within this thesis. The questions proposed in this capstone are for all to ponder.

**YOU MAY SAY POP OR SODA OR
MAYBE FIZZY BEVERAGE
BUT WE ALL ARE ALL TALKING
ABOUT THE SAME THING.
JUST WITH DIFFERENT CONTEXT
AND BELIEFS BUT MUTUAL
UNDERSTANDING CAN BE ACHIEVED.
REGARDLESS OF A TRUTH.**

WHY NOW?

It's no lie that currently, in the year 2025, there is a lot happening in the world. There are rifts of polarization. I have found myself begging the question, how do I connect to both sides? Is there a middle point? Can I exist in the grey zone?

Within these polarities the scale is tipped. Femininity is easily seen as wrong, inferior, and negative. It is going unnoticed. It goes beyond women, men, or any gender. It is about the way we think about its influences.

"WHILE FEMININITY IS NUANCED, THE ANSWERS DON'T NEED TO BE. IT CAN BE AS CLEAR AS IT REPRESENTING OF PINL THAT IS A SOCIAL TRUTH. THERE IS TIME TO THINK HARD AND THEN THERE ARE TIMES TO GIVE UNCONCIOUS THOUGHTS LIFE.

The polarity of femininity has largely leaned towards being seen as inferior.

This is magnified within western culture norms. It is attached to things to appear negative or weak. For instance, being emotional is largely associated as a feminine characteristic. Since we have upheld it as feminine we must ask why is it considered weak and only a characteristic of women?

The primary focus is extract out the range of things we connect to femininity. It allows us to then challenge as well as celebrate thus rethinking the legends of the past.

The state of the world is complicated but I don't think it's ever been easy.

There is space for grey. There is space for practical actions in nuanced topics. That is how we reach understanding of what's being passed down or around.