The Genre of Rape: Women's Popular Literature and Contemporary Representations of Sexual Violence

by

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Dedication

For my grandmother, Suzanne Laws—

No one has ever believed in me more. I miss you.

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Preface

Writing about rape in the 2020s in the United States is to inevitably write in the context of the backlash to, and arguably the failure of, the #MeToo movement. It is to write having witnessed the public humiliation and villainization of the actress Amber Heard, who was sued by ex-husband Johnny Depp for libel after she wrote an op-ed describing herself as a survivor of domestic violence. Several video and audio clips of her testimony went viral and were treated as jokes, including a clip of her describing Depp raping her. Shortly thereafter, a similar case played out when rapper Megan Thee Stallion testified against her former boyfriend, Tory Lanez, who had shot her. Although Lanez was found guilty, Megan Thee Stallion became an object of broad derision, and the target of misogynist and racist vitriol. This decade has also already seen the Supreme Court's *Dobbs* decision and the fall of *Roe v. Wade*, so that already limited access to abortion has become impossible in some states, particularly for the most vulnerable. Girls and women, among others, have faced imprisonment for making choices about their own bodies, or for helping others do so. We are also in the midst of a virulent anti-trans movement that is spearheading unprecedented legislative assault on LGBTQ rights, particularly those of trans people—a movement that occasionally attempts to use the language of feminism to defend itself, but which is inextricably tied to gender essentialism and the debasement of women.

And in the last few months of working on this dissertation, I have also become a witness to a genocide on another continent, one that is both a humanitarian crisis and a feminist one. In Palestine, women have been forced to give birth without anesthesia, without sterile medical

equipment, without even a hospital. Palestinian mothers live every day in fear of their children dying. In addition to facing starvation, homelessness, maiming, and death, girls and women in Palestine must also go without menstrual products, further indignities on top of mass dehumanization. Palestinian political prisoners are also the targets of well-documented sexual abuse and assault. No fight against rape or misogyny will ever be complete until Palestine is free.

I am indebted to everyone who is fighting these many battles, working to ensure the dignity and safety of people of all genders

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Abstract

The Genre of Rape: Women's Popular Literature and Contemporary Representations of Sexual Violence argues that popular genres affiliated with women (as readers, as viewers, and as authors) offer important insight into the discursive production of rape in the contemporary. How do women become invested in, and simultaneously defined by, the genre of rape and its constitutive elements, such as femininity, masculinity, victimhood, and crime? Analyzing texts from three "women's genres"—memoirs, romance novels, and police procedurals centered on sex crimes—I find that some narratives serve to constrain the kinds of rape stories that get taken seriously by U.S. culture and literature, reinforcing racist, heteronormative, and carceral constructs of sexual violence. However, other texts self-reflexively draw attention to the constructedness of their own generic conventions in order to challenge rape narratives. In turn, those narratives can challenge and (re)shape the genre conventions that structure both literary and cultural conceptions of sexual violence—the conventions that create what I call "the genre of rape."

Building on both literary and rhetorical genre studies, I claim that analyzing rape and rape narratives through the framework of genre insists on the continuity between rape as both discursive situation and embodied, while simultaneously contextualizing a victim's experience with a constellation of conventions that may structure a situation before, during, and after a rape. Moreover, rather than drawing on a traditional theoretical model of sexual trauma as unrepresentable, I join literary critics such as Erin Spampinato and Michael Dango, who, in the

wake of #MeToo, have called for more attention to the work being done by rape narratives. I contribute to this growing field by suggesting that rape narratives are not only deeply embedded within the U.S. women's literary and popular culture, but rape narratives and "women's genres" have in fact co-constructed one another—and therefore also destabilize one another. As rape narratives proliferate, they stage a confrontation with the boundaries that U.S. society has historically attempted to draw around both sexual violence and the work of genre. Although these popular genres and the rape narratives they contain have at times been disavowed by feminism, I ultimately maintain that they, along with the women who consume and create them, participate in the shaping of the genre of rape as a rhetorical and a material reality.

Keywords: rape narratives, rape studies, genre theory, genre criticism, women's genres, romance novel, women's memoir, police procedural

Introduction:
Rape and/as Genre

When philosopher Susan Brison was raped and almost murdered during the summer of 1990, she relied on genre to understand what was happening to her. Writing about the experience more than a decade later, Brison reflects that she initially categorized what was happening to her as a "rape-in-progress" and then as what she calls "torture-resulting-in-murder."[1] Eventually, she writes, she came to identify the brutal attack as an attempted "sexual murder," but on that morning in July, she had no familiarity with that genre of violence.[2] As she explains, "Since I was not familiar with a literature of generic attempted-murder-victim narratives, I framed my experience in terms of a genre with which I was familiar"—that genre being Holocaust testimonies, in which she had read many descriptions of torture-resulting-in-murder.[3] Brison's dependence on genre for cues about how to interpret the attack in the moment demonstrates that genres not only describe rhetorical and situational types, but they in fact "actively generate and shape knowledge of the world," including knowledge of sexual and gendered violence.[4] In other words, genres are acts of worldbuilding; more than mere categories on a shelf, genres participate in the construction of discursive and material realities.

My dissertation argues that popular genres, particularly those affiliated with women (as readers, as viewers, and as authors) offer important insight into the discursive production of rape in the contemporary. How do women become invested in, and simultaneously defined by, the

[1] Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 88.
[2] Brison, *Aftermath*, 91.
[3] Brison, *Aftermath*, 88.
[4] John Frow, *Genre*, The New Critical Idiom (London: Routledge, 2005), 2.

genre of rape and its constitutive elements, such as femininity, masculinity, victimhood, and crime? To answer this question, I turn to texts from three "women's genres"—memoirs, romance novels, and police procedurals centered on sex crimes—in which the frequent representations of rape have been the subject of feminist consternation and critical opprobrium. In this study, I find that these "bad" genres, which are dominated by women at both the level of production and of reception, produce common narratives about sexual violence and gender in the popular imagination.[5] Although these common narratives, which repeat and vary throughout and across genres, frequently serve to constrain the kinds of rape stories that get taken seriously by U.S. culture and literature, I argue that some generic texts self-reflexively draw attention to the constructedness of their own generic conventions in order to challenge rape narratives. In turn, those (new or modified) rape narratives challenge and (re)shape the genre conventions that structure both literary and cultural conceptions of sexual violence.

Throughout this project, my use of genre is informed by both literary and rhetorical genre studies, as I strive to account for how readers, writers, contexts, and texts alike are shaped by the genre of rape.[6] Because literary criticism has historically treated genre as a matter of categorization, questions about "how participants use 'texts' in cultural contexts" and "how the texts and participants are shaped by the contexts"—two questions that animate this project—were not initially discussed as part of genre theory.[7] Working from what John Frow calls a "misreading" of Aristotle, theorists and critics instead occupied themselves for centuries by endeavoring to describe the relationships between various generic classes, enumerating what

[5] Joel Waldfogel, "The Welfare Effect of Gender-Inclusive Intellectual Property Creation: Evidence From Books," (working paper, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, 2023), https://www.nber.org/system/files/working_papers/w30987/w30987.pdf.
[6] Amy Devitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories of Genre," *College English* 62, no. 6 (2000), 703.
[7] Devitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories," 704.

genres exist and how they are defined.[8] Although there have been a variety of modifications of these taxonomic systems over the centuries, the most significant shifts in genre theory did not occur until the latter half of the twentieth century. Under the influence of post-structuralist theory, Gèrard Genette challenged the so-called Aristotelian model of poetic genres in order to show that the study of poetics should be not of the text but of the "architext": the multiplicity of literary and rhetorical genres that had been pigeonholed in literary theory as either dramatic, epic, or lyric.[9] Critics such as Frederic Jameson and Mikhail Bakhtin also eschewed typological accounts of genre in favor of other theoretical concerns. In Jameson's case, he warned against binarization in order to advocate for a dialectic and historicized approach to genre and its ideological functions,[10] while Bakhtin argued that genres such as the novel are in fact composed of multiple, heterogenous voices or discursive modes.[11] Rather than treating genres as fixed categories, these critics and their interlocutors showed that genres are complex, composite, and socially and contextually produced, and that they are therefore always dynamic.

Yet genres are more than dynamic—they are, as Jacques Derrida has influentially argued, "madness."[12] Attempts to impose order, to draw borders around genre, engender disruptions to those borders. Derrida proposed that, like a spreading cancer, as the texts that participate in a genre increase (through "repetition" or "re-citation"), they grow and exceed the genre's bounds.[13] According to Derrida, "a law of impurity or a principle of contamination" is in fact the "law of genre," and therefore as a genre propagates, it also inevitably stages its own

[8] Frow, *Genre*, 63.
[9] Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992; 1979).
[10] Frederic Jameson, "Magical Narratives: On the Dialectical Use of Genre Criticism," in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (London: Routledge, 2000), 167-192.
[11] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Discourse in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, trans. Michael Holquist and Caryl Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259-422.
[12] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," trans. Avital Ronell, *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 81.
[13] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 57-58.

dissolution.[14] Moreover, as literary texts both create and exceed the bounds of genre, so too do material situations refuse containment. When other kinds of genres attempt to contain meaning—by rigidly defining the limits of who counts as a woman or what counts as rape, for example—the repetition of stories within that genre will always perforate the boundaries it is simultaneously attempting to draw, inevitably mixing into other genres. What this teaches us is that, as Amy Devitt puts it, "genres and texts truly participate simultaneously in multiple genres, multiple functions, and multiple situations," and therefore genre is "necessarily unstabilized—forever."[15]

In the 1980s, rhetorical studies intervened in genre theory's focus on the literary function of genre to argue that "people use genres to do things in the world."[16] In a field-defining article, Carolyn Miller claims that, more than being defined by simply form or content, "genre can be said to represent typified rhetorical action."[17] Building on the work of Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Miller explains how, when faced with a recurring situation—a situation that, though not materially identical, is of the same "type," such as a parent explaining pregnancy to their child or an employee asking for a raise—individual intention often works through conventional responses broadly understood as socially appropriate and/or useful. For instance, the parent might give their child "the sex talk," or they might tell "a children's story" about a stork that delivers babies; the employee might engage in a "salary negotiation," perhaps following a "performance review." These types of discourses, which are everyday rhetorical genres, are not spontaneous responses but in fact "strategic response[s]" that are solicited by the

[14] Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 57.
[15] Devitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories," 714.
[16] Devitt, "Integrating Rhetorical and Literary Theories," 698.
[17] Carolyn R. Miller, "Genre as Social Action," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 151.

recurring situation.[18] What I ask, then, is what types of responses, what type of rhetorical genres, are engendered by the situation of rape?

One answer to this question can be seen in the moment of "relieved recognition" when Brison categorized her attack as a "rape-in-progress," which prompted her to employ a strategic response; she tried "enact[ing] rape-avoidance scripts [she'd] read about," at least until the attack progressed to attempted murder and she realized that there was "no more script for [her] to follow."[19] Brison's language here reflects Sharon Marcus's influential essay on rape prevention in which she defines rape as "a scripted interaction which takes place in language and can be understood in terms of conventional masculinity and femininity as well as other gender inequalities inscribed before an individual instance of rape," further explaining:

> The word "script" should be taken as a metaphor conveying several meanings. To speak of a rape script implies a narrative of rape, a series of steps and signals whose typical initial moments we can learn to recognize and whose final outcome we can learn to stave off.[20]

Working to identify several key points in a rape script where the script can be interrupted, Marcus argues that rather than seeing rape as inevitable and women as inherently rapeable, we should instead empower women to recognize and disrupt rapes before they happen—precisely as Brison attempted to do. In many ways, Marcus's use of script mirrors my use of genre: "a framework, a grid of comprehensibility which we might feel impelled to use as a way of organizing and interpreting events and actions."[21] However, while Marcus urges us to resist "the rape script's legitimacy," and not use its framework to organize the situation, it is worth noting

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[18] Richard M. Coe, Lorelei Lingard and Tatiana Teslenko, "Genre as Action, Strategy, and Difference: An Introduction," in *The Rhetoric and Ideology of Genre: Strategies for Stability and Change*, ed. Richard Coe, Lorelei Lingard and Tatiana Teslenko (New York: Hampton Press, 2002), 6.
[19] Brison, *Aftermath*, 88-89.
[20] Sharon Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. by Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (London: Routledge, 1992), 390-391.
[21] Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words," 391.

that Brison does not frame her response to the attack as an attempted rejection of a rape script, but rather an attempt to employ a rape-avoidance script.[22] The distinction is slight, but suggests that wholly rejecting a framework that structures knowledge is more problematic and more difficult than it may seem, especially without another framework to replace it.

It is also crucial to note that for many victims of rape, resisting the "script" in the moment is improbable, if not impossible. Rape can take place under the influence of alcohol or while victims are otherwise incapacitated; rapes are perpetrated against children and teenagers by people with power over them, as well as in other relationships of unequal power; rapes occur within abusive marriages and other domestic or romantic relationships where the victims must consider their long-term safety. What is a reasonable expectation of disruption on the part of the victim in these contexts? Even if, as Marcus asserts, "resistance does work … and often minimal signs of it—an assertive remark, a push, a loud scream, flight—can suffice to block a man from continuing a rape attempt," these attempts at resistance do not work universally and nor can they be unilaterally attempted by the most typical of victims.[23] My concerns here echo those of Carine Mardorossian in "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape" (2002), in which she critiques the rape script model proposed by Marcus for "focusing on women's reaction or lack thereof during an attack," ultimately "tak[ing] the focus off the rapist and plac[ing] it—along with the 'responsibility' for the outcome of a scripted interaction—on women and women alone."[24] While Marcus's heuristic may offer insight into the rhetorical structuring of rape, it ultimately relies too heavily on an idealized concept of agency, offering an individual solution to a social problem.

[22] Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words," 392.
[23] Marcus, "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words," 396.
[24] Carine M. Mardorossian, "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape," *Signs* 27, no. 3 (2002), 753.

For these reasons, I have turned the language of "genre" rather than of "script" when discussing rape. Like script, genre draws attention to and insists on the strong continuity between rape as a discursive situation as well as an embodied event, but while script highlights the verbal and gestural cues of sexual violence, as well as the expectations and agency of its actors, genre is a more elastic term, one that carries less implicit judgment than script. Although Marcus clarifies that a rape victim who does not resist her assault is not complicit for enacting the rape script, the entire question of victim-blaming can be skirted if we do not think in terms of whether the "actress" followed the script or disrupted it. Instead, by contextualizing a victim's experience within a generic framework—one that encompasses not only individual actors and the completed or interrupted act of rape, but an entire constellation of similar but disparate situations and narratives—can better analyze and address the elements that may structure a situation before, during, and after a rape. Given that this approach is less focused on individual agency, it therefore may not be as suited to conversations about rape prevention in interpersonal conflicts as Marcus's construct is. It does, however, provide a more capacious context to recognize the social, political, and aesthetic valences of representing rape and rape trauma in a narrative.

In conceptualizing rape as genre, I thus seek to bridge Marcus's intervention into the rhetorical construction of rape with the recent work of literary and cultural critics such as Michael Dango, Rebecca Wanzo, Tanya Serisier, and Robin Field, all of whom have written about the co-construction of representations of rape and specific genres of contemporary literature, television, and film.[25] These critics, conscious that genre is "both the product and the

[25] Michael Dango, "Introduction to the special issue: Genres of Rape and Putting Rape Into Genre: Sexual Violence and TV After #MeToo," *Television & New Media* 25, no. 5 (2024): 411-420; Rebecca Wanzo, "Rethinking Rape and Laughter: Michaela Coel's 'I May Destroy You,'" *LA Review of Books*, September 22, 2020, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/rethinking-rape-and-laughter-michaela-coels-i-may-destroy-you/; Tanya Serisier,

process that creates it," have shown that the rape narrative is a genre that produces the very conventions that in turn shape its organization and meanings.[26] In this project, I build on this work to argue that rape itself can be understood as a genre, one that structures our affective and aesthetic expectations of and responses to texts and situations alike; conversely, those texts and events shape and deform the genre of rape. Framing my analyses of rape in media through genre criticism and theory gives me language and tools to parse the enmeshment of the rhetorical, the representative, and the real in texts and beyond, without replicating what critic Tanya Horeck describes as the tendency of "discussions or literary and filmic depictions of rape … to pivot on the question of whether a depiction of sexual violence is 'positive' or 'negative,' 'good' or 'bad.'"[27] Although I may, at times, reference this moralizing framework in my analysis, my intention is that this study of the genre of rape joins a growing body of criticism that seeks to theorize and utilize new methods for analyzing representations and narrativizations of rape.

Representing rape: feminist criticism and discourses of sexual violence

Feminist debates about representations of rape have often centered, as Emma V. Miller notes, "not just [on] whether literature should depict sexual trauma, but also, if it is permissible, how to do so."[28] These debates have taken place across countless discourses and disciplines, including literary traditions, cultural theory, media studies, legal practices, feminist organizing, and pop

Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Robin Field, *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel in Late Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2020).

[26] Amy Devitt, "Generalizing About Genre: New Conceptions of an Old Concept," *College Composition and Communication* 44, no. 4 (1993): 580.

[27] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7.

[28] Emma V. Miller, "Trauma and Sexual Violence," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 229

culture commentaries, all of which have weighed in on the meaning(s) of rape and representations thereof. The years on which I primarily focus in this project, 2010–2019, represent a decade wherein discourses around sexual violence both multiplied and underwent major changes, partially in response to pop culture trends and major news stories, as well as (as I discuss at length in Chapter 1) emerging forms of technology and social media. The most significant cultural shift with regard to popular discourses regarding sexual violence was the #MeToo movement, which proclaimed with two small words that the problem of rape is not and has never been individual: it is not just *me,* it is me *too.*[29] To discuss representations of rape in the twenty-first century, then, requires navigating not merely the literary and media genres that I am analyzing, but also the genres of academic and popular analysis, feminist organizing and theorizing, literary and cultural critique, magazine articles, blog posts, and social media comments. It also requires that I briefly account for changes in narratives of sexual violence in recent decades, including the work of rape consciousness and anti-rape activism since the nineteenth century.

A history of the anti-rape movement in the United States must begin with the efforts of Black women who, as both abolitionists and anti-lynching advocates, spoke and wrote about the role of sexual violence in enslavement, after Reconstruction, and under Jim Crow. For instance, Harriet Jacobs's autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), described the sexual abuse she'd faced from both her enslaver and his wife before she eventually escaped to freedom.[30] In 1866, six Black women testified before Congress after the Memphis Riot of 1866, during which forty-six Black people had been massacred and five rapes had occurred, as well as

[29] Leigh Gilmore, *The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When We Believe Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023).
[30] Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: A Norton Critical Edition*, ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Frances Smith Foster (1861; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

hundreds of injuries. Among the women who testified was Frances Thompson, a formerly enslaved trans woman and seamstress who had been gang raped and robbed in her house, as well as her roommate, Lucy Smith.[31] In the 1890s, Ida B. Wells began her anti-lynching investigation, which revealed that rape allegations against Black men were largely fabricated or distorted to justify their torture and murder; she continued her anti-lynching activism until her death in 1931. Wells also argued that white society's preoccupation with the protection of white women and the demonization of Black men served as cover for the very real sexual abuses happening every day by white men against Black women.[32]

When the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s began, it was a multiracial effort, with women of color and white women alike bringing attention to the rape and abuse of women, and the punishment women faced for defending themselves. Rape crisis centers and consciousness-raising circles began to encourage women to tell their own stories of sexual and domestic violence, as well as misogyny more generally. [33] The purpose of these "speak outs" was not only to raise awareness about the circumstances women faced, but also to collectively theorize the conditions that enabled the violence about which they spoke and wrote. According to Maria Bevacqua, "between March 1968 and August 1973 more than 560 feminist periodicals were being published in the United States."[34] The articles in these periodicals included women's accounts of their own rapes, as well as political calls-to-arms and statements of solidarity.

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[31] The American Yawp Reader, "A case of sexual violence during Reconstruction, 1866," accessed March 20, 2024, https://www.americanyawp.com/reader/reconstruction/a-case-of-sexual-violence-during-reconstruction-1866/.
[32] Estelle B. Freedman, "'Crimes which startle and horrify': Gender, Age, and the Racialization of Sexual Violence in White American Newspapers, 1870-1900," *Intersections of Race and Sexuality* 20, no. 3 (2011): 491. See also: Ida B. Wells Barnett, *Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases* (1892; Project Gutenberg, 2005), https://www.gutenberg.org/files/14975/14975-h/14975-h.htm; Crystal N. Feimster, *Southern Horrors: Women and the Politics of Rape and Lynching* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).
[33] Robin Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 36.
[34] Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 43.

However, despite the anti-rape movement's origins in Black women's organizing and its indebtedness to the writings of Black women regarding sexual violence, particularly incest, the texts and narratives produced by this movement soon began to center the experiences of white women.[35] As more and more white women joined the movement, it began to ignore the imbrication of race and gender in understanding social identity, and it failed to discuss the impact of race on experiences of sexual violence.[36] White anti-rape feminists like Susan Brownmiller even reinforced racist stereotypes about predatory Black men, while minimizing or even outright ignoring Black women's historical and contemporary efforts to address the problem of rape.[37] Nevertheless, Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (1975) represented a significant shift in how rape was discussed, framing it as a political problem rather than a crime of passion.[38] As a result of the work of anti-rape activism by women and organizers of all races, by the 1980s and 1990s, popular culture, television shows, films, and books began to reflect the growing awareness of, and legislative responsiveness to, issues such as martial rape, date rape, and incest.[39]

As more narratives of sexual violence began to proliferate at the end of twentieth century, some of the feminist critics who turned to the literary canon—including Sabine Sielke, Sharon

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[35] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 35.
[36] For more critiques of white feminism and white feminist racism, see: Koa Beck, *White Feminism: From Suffragettes to Influencers and Who They Leave Behind* (New York: Atria Books, 2021); Rafia Zakaria, *Against White Feminism: Notes on Disruption* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2021); Ruby Hamad, *White Tears/Brown Scars: How White Feminism Betrays Women of Color* (New York: Catapult, 2020).
[37] Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting," *The Black Scholar* 9, no. 7 (1978): 25. As Davis argues, "The portrayal of black men as rapists reinforces racism's open invitation to white men to sexually avail themselves of black women's bodies" (27). For more on Black women's organized struggle against rape in the twentieth century, see: Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010).
[38] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1993). For a brief look at the book's legacy, see Sascha Cohen, "How a Book Changed the Way We Talk About Rape," *Time*, October 7, 2015, https://time.com/4062637/against-our-will-40/.
[39] Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape* (New York: NYU Press, 2001), 11-14.

Stockton, and Lynn Higgins and Brenda R. Silver—influentially argued that that historically, rape has not, and perhaps cannot be, represented in literature.[40] Instead, rape has continually stood in for something else: it could be a monstrous act that destroyed a white woman's virtue and demanded a Black man's death; a salacious scene of forbidden sexuality intended to titillate; a symptom of a family's decline into poverty, madness, and grotesquerie; or a tragedy that stained the rapist's honor and ruined the victim's life.[41] Rarely did these texts center the raped women themselves: they were symbols to defend and bodies to objectify, not human beings attempting to survive profound harm.

Indeed, according to Higgins and Silver, literature's historical "obsessive inscription" and "obsessive erasure … of sexual violence against women" has made rape a persistent trope while simultaneously failing to consistently address rape as a material and political act of gendered violence, or to center the complex psychological and embodied experiences of raped women.[42] Instead, as Sielke has argued, "to talk about rape does not necessary denote rape," because "transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts."[43] Stockton similarly reads rape narratives throughout the twentieth century as symbolic of anxieties regarding the waning power of men,

[40] For more on this history of rape in American literature, see: Sabine Sielke, *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002); Sandra Gunning, *Rape, Race, and Lynching: The Red Record of American Literature, 1890-1912* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Laura E. Tanner, *Intimate Violence: Reading Rape and Torture in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Robin Field, *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel in Late Twentieth-Century American Fiction* (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press, 2020).
[41] As Projansky writes in *Watching Rape*, rape narratives "have, among other things, operated historically to define the masculine familial subject; to structure women's relationships to love, family, and the law; to define property; to transform the structure of the novel; to justify and perpetuate U.S. colonialism; to define the nation; to produce masculine spectatorial pleasure predicated on illicit (violent) sexuality and culturally sanctioned racism; to perpetuate and justify slavery; to resist slavery; and to perpetuate racism" (7).
[42] Lynn Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, "Introduction: Rereading Rape," in *Rape and Representation*, ed. by Lynn Higgins and Brenda R. Silver (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 2.
[43] Sielke, *Reading Rape*, 2.

particularly white heterosexual men, within capitalism.[44] Stockon claims that literature's compulsive reinscription of rape stories insists that the "textual event or image [of rape] … signif[ies] something other than rape," and in so doing, "preserv[es] rape as a structuring component of Western culture."[45] By that token, not only do rape stories fail to authentically reflect the material reality of rape, but this failure also reinforces, rather than critiques, a social structure in which rape and rapeability are essential to the production of race, gender, and power.

This failure of representation is, Sielke makes clear, not incidental. Rather, when it comes to literary rape, failure of representation is treated as inevitable. Although rape is a material reality, its representation is "an altogether different matter, closed off by quotation marks from the unspeakable experience, the full horror that cannot but remain absent, elsewhere, and real."[46] Here, Sielke echoes one of the foundational claims of cultural trauma theory: that a traumatic experience (in this case, rape) is "unspeakable," and any attempt to translate the real experience into text must be plagued by gaps, silences, and elisions. Building on both Sigmund Freud's work on memory and the unconscious and Derrida's search for moments of irreconcilability and irresolution in his readings, traditional trauma theory suggests that the best approximations of trauma in literature, film, and narrative, then, are those that acknowledge its inherent irrepresentability, offering instead aporias, "significant moments of apparent contradiction or irresolution," moments that defy comprehension.[47] As I will discuss in the next section, this approach to trauma—figuring it as a psychic wound that the traumatized individual would be forever compelled to articulate in language, while also being forever doomed to fail—has since

[44] Sharon Stockton, *The Economics of Fantasy: Rape in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Columbus: The Ohio State University, 2006).
[45] Stockton, *The Economics of Fantasy*, 182.
[46] Sielke, *Reading Rape*, 189.
[47] Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 6-8.

been challenged among academics, but its central formulation has become, as Roger Lockhurst shows, embedded within cultural narratives themselves, including pop cultural narratives.[48]

In addition to these academic criticisms of rape in television, film, and literature, a growing body of popular criticism has been dedicated to the perceived rise of explicit sexual violence on television in the 2010s, a trend that is best represented by, and arguably was ushered in with, the popularity of *Game of Thrones* (2011–2019).[49] The representation of rape on TV and in film has prompted some critics to ask if a rape scene can ever be necessary or "well done,"[50] and to assert that rape storylines are a "bad idea" and "lazy writing."[51] Moreover, the demand for "trigger warnings" and "content warnings" when the subject of rape arises has expanded beyond classrooms, with numerous websites emerging that are devoted to providing readers and viewers comprehensive trigger warnings before they ever open a book or press play on a film.[52] This suggests that, in general, we have become more cautious about producing and consuming not only rape scenes, but rape storylines altogether.

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[48] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 97-105.

[49] Sophie Gilbert, "What the Sexual Violence of *Game of* Thrones Begot," *The Atlantic*, May 4, 2021, https://www.theatlantic.com/culture/archive/2021/05/game-of-thrones-the-handmaids-tale-them-tv-sexual-violence/618782/; Lisa Damour, "We Know It Harms Kids to See Smoking on TV. What About Rape?" *The New York Times*, September 12, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/12/well/family/we-know-it-harms-kids-to-see-smoking-on-tv-what-about-rape.html; Sonia Saraiya, "The truth about TV's rape obsession: How we struggle with the broken myths of masculinity, on screen and off," *Salon*, June 25, 2015, https://www.salon.com/2015/06/25/the_truth_about_tvs_rape_obsession_how_we_struggle_with_the_broken_myths_of_masculinity_on_screen_and_off/; Grace O'Neill, "When Will 'Woke' TV Shows Stop Using Violent Rape Scenes For Shock Value?" *Elle*, June 25, 2018, https://www.elle.com.au/culture/news/13-reasons-why-tyler-rape-scene-17882/; Karen Valby, "Hey TV: Stop Raping Women," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 27, 2014, https://ew.com/article/2014/02/27/tv-rape-scenes-downton-abbey-house-of-cards-scandal/.

[50] Angelica Jade Bastién, "What Does It Mean for a Rape Scene to Be 'Done Well'?" *Vulture*, August 9, 2019, https://www.vulture.com/2019/08/rape-scenes-movies-nightingale-classic-hollywood.html.

[51] Laura Hudson, "Rape Scenes Aren't Just Awful. They're Lazy Writing," *Vice*, June 30, 2015, https://www.wired.com/2015/06/rape-scenes/.

[52] Amanda Kippert, "Sites that Help You Avoid Triggers in Movies, TV Shows," DomesticShelters.org, May 16, 2022, https://www.domesticshelters.org/articles/taking-care-of-you/sites-that-help-you-avoid-triggers-in-movies-tv-shows. For more discussion of trigger warnings, see: Emily J. Knox, ed., *Trigger Warnings: History, Theory, Context* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

This caution also indicates that although rape may be more spectacular on the screen than on the page, debates about the representation of rape have not been limited to film. Amongst conservatives, there have been numerous bans targeting books that feature sexual violence (regardless of genre or intent), as part of a concerted effort to remove all discussion of sex, as well as race and racism, queerness and LGBTQ people, and large swaths of American history. [53] In a different political vein, some authors have pledged not to write about rape in the name of feminism,[54] others have vowed that they will never stop writing about it for the same reason,[55] and a brief Google search of "writing rape scenes" turns up dozens of separate websites, blog posts, and forums with writers and readers weighing in on whether and how to depict rape in fiction. For example, Jim C. Hines, a well-known speculative fiction author, warned fellow writers in his circle that most stories featuring rape are not just "offensive, shallow, uninformed," they are also "flat out bad."[56] In another instance where the literary use of rape was called into question, a new literary prize was announced for writing in the thriller genre that did not feature any violence against women.[57] Notably, the concerns that motivated this prize, like the concerns that inspired Hines's article, are not merely social concerns; they are also generic. With Hines

[53] Sam LaFrance and Kasey Meehan, "Don't Say Rape: How the Book Banning Movement is Censoring Sexual Violence," *Ms. Magazine*, March 4, 2024, https://msmagazine.com/2024/03/04/book-bans-censorship-rape-porn/.
[54] Seanon McGuire (@seanon_mcguire), "Things I will not do to my characters. Ever," *Livejournal* (blog), September 28, 2012, https://seanan-mcguire.livejournal.com/470626.html.
[55] Kaite Welsh, "I can't write about a world without rape – because I don't live in one," *The Guardian*, July 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2019/jul/05/i-cant-write-about-a-world-without-rape-kaite-welsh-staunch.
[56] Jim C. Hines, "Writing About Rape," *Apex Magazine*, January 3, 2012, https://apex-magazine.com/nonfiction/writing-about-rape/.
[57] Although intended to "challenge the proliferation and increasingly graphic nature of violence towards women in popular culture," the Staunch Prize was not universally seen as a feminist endeavor. Bridget Lawless, "Why Staunch Book Prize is not out to get you," April 25, 2019, https://www.bookbrunch.co.uk/page/free-article/staunch-book-prize-a-necessary-corrective/. Some authors characterized it as "yet another way of sidelining and silencing the female experience and voice," and even "a gagging order." Alison Flood, "Crime writers react with fury to claim their books hinder rape trials," *The Guardian*, July 5, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jul/05/crime-writers-react-staunch-prize-claim-hinder-rape-trials.

speaking to speculative fiction authors and the prize addressed to thriller authors, they are both interventions into generic traditions, norms, and possible futures.

Despite the controversy around rape narratives, however, critics have not been universally opposed to popular and literary representations of rape. In fact, given social resistance to hearing and believing women's (and others') accounts of rape, it is important to recognize that "fiction has provided a unique testimonial opportunity without the personally directed censure connected to the narrating of firsthand experience."[58] In their edited collection *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives* (2010), Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne have even claimed that "the most urgent task for feminism" in the twenty-first century "is to build on the work of late twenty-century feminism(s) by recognizing the subversive work being done by modern and contemporary writers on the subject of sexual violence."[59] Contemporary rape narratives, they suggest, are undertheorized and may offer crucial interventions into feminist theory and praxis.

In another vein, Erin Spampinato urges critics to reevaluate their readings of rape in the canon. Spampinato's analysis of canonical criticism of *Clarissa* (1748) and *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1892) finds that, historically, critics have "tended to treat literary rape as if it were real and understood their primary responsibility as readers to lie in the adjudication of what happened as if in a court of law, despite the text's fictionality," a practice she calls adjudicative reading.[60] This is problematic whether one is attempting to prove the rape didn't happen or attempting to prove that it did, because it "still allow[s] readings that center male experience to

[58] Miller, "Trauma and Sexual Violence," 229.
[59] Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha Gunne, "Introduction," in *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, ed. Sorcha Gunne and Zoë Brigley Thompson (London: Routledge, 2010), 4.
[60] Erin Spampinato, "Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon," *differences* 32, no. 2 (2021), 124.

set the terms of the debate about representations of rape and sexual violence."[61] Spampinato's intervention suggests that even in texts in which rape might be treated as literal—a representation of sexual harm—scholars too often read texts as evidence, failing to recognize that the literary "dramatizes a paradox that the law cannot resolve: that rape is both subjectively experienced and real."[62] Contrary to the claims of Sielke and others, rape narratives can offer meaningful representations of the subjective experience of rape, at least for those who are willing to read for them.

These critics calling for a renewed focus on rape in feminist literary studies are part of the emerging field that has been termed "the new rape studies," and is a direct response by literary scholars to the #MeToo movement.[63] The scholars innovating this field initially focused, like Spampinato, on seeking new approaches to canonical rape narratives, but the field soon also identified urgent questions about contemporary representations of sexual violence. For instance, Spampinato has also interrogated the tendency of contemporary literary and feminist criticism to circumscribe the identities and experiences of those it "allows" to write fictionally and nonfictionally about rape;[64] Catherine Brist has reckoned with the discomfort provoked by complicated and ambivalent rape narratives, especially by marginalized authors;[65] and Michael Dango has even asked the question that is implicit in the title of this dissertation: what is the genre of rape?[66] In a 2021 article for *Public Books*, Dango explores how four recent television

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[61] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon," 128.
[62] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon," 139.
[63] Erin Spampinato, "Theorizing the New Rape Studies at MLA 2019," accessed March 18, 2024, https://www.erinspampinato.com/theorizing-the-new-rape-studies.
[64] Erin Spampinato, "Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse and What Do We Let Them Say," *Electric Literature*, October 2, 2017, https://electricliterature.com/who-gets-to-write-about-sexual-abuse-and-what-do- we-let-them-say/.
[65] Catherine Brist, "Disclosure and Disavowal: Readers' Responses to 'Difficult' Narrators of Trauma," unpublished dissertation, University of Michigan, 2024.
[66] Michael Dango, "What Is the Genre of Rape?" *Public Books*, March 12, 2021, https://www.publicbooks.org/what-is-the-genre-of-rape/.

programs speak to the search for "the most appropriate genre in which to tell a story" of sexual harm, ultimately finding that no television genre has yet adequately accounted for the complexity of the Black male survivor's experience.[67]

For my part, while I see Dango's focus on male victims of sexual harm as an essential counterpoint to the tendency in feminist scholarship and rape studies to focus primarily on female victims, the questions of genre that underpin this dissertation differ from those he has addressed. This study is centered on experiences and representations of women, in large part because it is women who are frequently painted as the victims of (mis)representations of rape and of popular and commercial literature, despite making up a significant percentage of the authorship of genres such as romance, historical fiction, horror/paranormal, and mystery.[68] I am also less concerned about the search for "the right emotional genre for rape." I acknowledge that the question of how, when, and even whether to represent rape remains unresolved amongst critics, who are caught in "a feminist paradox between a desire to *end* rape and a *need* to represent (and therefore perpetuate discursive) rape in order to challenge it."[69] Yet rather than remaining stuck in this paradox, I am interested in what is made possible by moving past a concern about whether rape narratives are harmful or helpful and instead focusing on the genres and narratives that women actually read (or watch), those through and against which their performances of gender and sexuality are shaped.

In other words, whether particular rape narratives "should" exist or whether a particular genre is "appropriate" to contain rape narratives is beside the point: these narratives do exist within these genres, and they have been essential components of the (pop) cultural landscape for

[67] Dango, "What Is the Genre of Rape?"
[68] Rosie Cima, "Bias, She Wrote: The Gender Balance of the New York Times Best Seller List," *The Pudding*, https://pudding.cool/2017/06/best-sellers/.
[69] Projansky, *Watching Rape*, 19.

many female readers and viewers. Maggie Nelson compellingly describes this issue in *The Argonauts,* a 2015 autotheory memoir of gender and sexuality:

> You're looking for sexual tidbits as a female child, and the only ones that present themselves depict child rape or other violations (all my favorite books in my preteen years: *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, Clan of the Cave Bear, The World According to Garp,* as well as the few R-rated movies I was allowed to see—*Fame*, most notably, with its indelible scene of Irene Cara being asked to take her shirt off and suck her thumb by a skeezy photographer who promises to make her a star), then your sexuality will form around that fact. There is no control group. I don't even want to talk about "female sexuality" until there is a control group. And there never will be.[70]

Without this "control group" that Nelson asserts can never exist—a group of women who have never encountered, and were therefore never "form[ed] around," these ubiquitous narratives of sexual violation—then what is to be done? My assertation is that by reading contemporary rape narratives, both those that are consciously feminist and those that are not, within generic traditions produced and consumed primarily by women, I can articulate new and productive connections between the construction of gender and literary, discursive, and material rape in the twenty-first century. Women, I argue, encounter complex rape narratives even in seemingly simple, or "bad," genres. Whether these narratives should or should not be as popular as they are does not change the fact that many women use them to make sense of their own lives, including to shape and understand sexual experience, gender identity, and their relationship to rape as a cultural narrative and, as I discuss in the next section, as a form of trauma.

[70] Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2015), 66. Nelson's list of texts here is particularly interesting to me because of the mix of genres and forms it represents: coming-of-age autobiography, prehistorical epic, award-winning fiction, and teen musical drama. These scenes of rape and violation permeate through high and low culture, fiction and nonfiction, text and film; they permeated the entire cultural landscape in Nelson's childhood.

The age of trauma: on rape, postfeminism, and #MeToo

Trauma as we know it was largely an invention of the twentieth century. Prior to the advent of railway travel, references to "trauma" indicated bodily injury, but by 1900, the psychological after-effects experienced by those who'd survived train accidents came to be termed "traumatic neurosis."[71] Modern warfare, it was soon determined, was another source of psychological trauma: soldiers fighting in World War I dealt with "shell shock," while, years later, Vietnam veterans were labeled first with Post-Vietnam Syndrome and then with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which first appeared in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1980.[72] It is the Holocaust, however, that has been figured as "the paradigmatic trauma of the modern age,"[73] the "aporetic core of any discussion of trauma."[74] This paradigmatic trauma and the crises it represented—a crisis of history, of representation, of testimony—thus became the foundational event of trauma theory in the 1990s.

Initially developed by Cathy Caruth, and influenced by Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, the traditional model of trauma argues traumatic events, including and perhaps especially the Holocaust, defy narration because they defy comprehension.[75] This framework relies on a Freudian account of trauma as temporal disjunction: when the traumatic event is happening, it cannot be comprehended, processed, and assimilated into one's psyche, therefore the psyche must "restag[e] the traumatic moment over and over again" in an attempt to "process the

[71] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 34.
[72] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 49-60.
[73] Anna Hunter, "The Holocaust as the Ultimate Trauma Narrative," in *Trauma and Literature*, ed. J. Roger Kurtz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 68.
[74] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 69.
[75] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (London: Routledge, 1992).

unassimilable material" and "find ways of mastering the trauma retroactively."[76] Paradoxically, this suggests that only by finally narrating what cannot be narrated can the event begin to be integrated into one's past, instead of endlessly recurring in the present. It is precisely this "conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud" that psychologist Judith Herman describes as "the central dialectic of psychological trauma."[77]

As a literary critic, Caruth frames trauma as "an unsolvable problem of the unconscious that illuminates the inherent contradictions of experience and language," such that the traumatic event can never truly be represented; however, texts, like individuals, can show signs of unconscious attempts to restage and process the traumatic moment.[78] It is unsurprising, then, that Caruth urges the analysis of texts that utilize a "trauma aesthetic," including interruption, recurrence, fractured temporalities, fragmentation, and other tropes of dissociation and silence that convey the splintering of traumatic memory and reference.[79] Although this model of trauma was highly influential, informing the work of scholars such as Dominick LaCapra, Michael Rothberg, Laurie Vickroy, and Deborah Horvitz, it has been repeatedly challenged by disciplines as disparate as psychology,[80] disability studies,[81] postcolonial/decolonial studies,[82] Holocaust

[76] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 9.
[77] Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 1.
[78] Michelle Balaev, "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.
[79] Features of this "trauma aesthetic" can be described as follows: "it is marked by interruptions, temporal disorder, refusal of easy readerly identification, disarming play with narrative framing, disjunct movements in style, tense, focalization or discourse, and a resistance to closure that is demonstrated in compulsive telling and retelling." Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 88-89.
[80] Wulf Kansteiner and Harald Weilnböck, "Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma," in C*ultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning (Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 2010), 229-240.
[81] James Berger, "Trauma Without Disability, Disability Without Trauma: A Disciplinary Divide," *JAC* 24, no. 3 (2004): 563-582.
[82] Michael Rothberg, "Decolonizing Trauma Studies: A Response," *Studies in the Novel* 40 (2008): 224–34; Irene Visser, "Decolonizing Trauma Theory: Retrospect and Prospects," *Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2015): 250-265.

studies,[83] and queer studies.[84] In a rousing call to reimagine trauma studies and incorporate the work being done across these fields, Michelle Balaev proposes a "pluralistic" model, one that "moves away from the focus on trauma as unrepresentable" and "place[s] more focus on the particular social components and cultural contexts of traumatic experience."[85] Moreover, instead of treating unspeakability as a psychological truth, those working within a pluralistic model might treat it, as Barry Stampfl puts it, as "a trope, a particular kind of linguistic expression," which is itself socially encouraged or enforced within a culture that so often demands survivors stay silent.[86]

If we accept that rape is representable, that it can indeed be spoken, then there is no critical impetus to study only texts that evince what Luckhurst describes as the "Modernist aesthetics of fragmentation and aporia" above other literary and narrative forms.[87] In fact, like Luckhurst, I am invested in popular literature's and popular genres' "compulsive outpouring of attempts to formulate narrative knowledge," what he calls *narrative possibility*.[88] By investigating this narrative possibility within the genres of memoir, romance, and police procedural in the twenty-first century, I am also illuminating the connections between changing societal attitudes toward and awareness of rape and the stories about rape that get told. These connections, the places where the social meets the narrative, are where the genre of rape lives.

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[83] Anne Rothe, "Irresponsible Nonsense: An Epistemological and Ethical Critique of Postmodern Trauma Theory," in *Interdisciplinary Handbook of Trauma and Culture*, ed. Yochai Ataria, David Gurevitz, Haviva Pedaya, and Yuval Neria (Cham: Springer International Publishing AG, 2016) 181-194.
[84] Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).
[85] Michelle Balaev, "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," in *New Approaches to Literary Trauma Theory*,
[86] Barry Stampfl, "Parsing the Unspeakable in the Context of Trauma," in *Contemporary Approaches in Literary Trauma Theory*, ed. by Michelle Balaev (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 16.
[87] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 15.
[88] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 83.

For instance, as the result of feminist organizing, by the mid-1990s first-person narratives about sexual violence were considered overly "prolific, clichéd, and passé"—they'd become generic, in the sense of being common, which was problematic for those investing in minimizing rape as a social issue.[89] Theorists and critics who believed that feminism's work was done criticized speeches given through loudspeakers during Take Back the Night, bestselling memoirs about incest and childhood sexual abuse, and women's ambivalent reckonings with experiences labeled "gray rape" as contributing to "rhetoric of victimization."[90] These "postfeminists," including Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf, objected to what they saw as a feminist culture that encouraged women to take the role of the victim. As Rebecca Stringer has persuasively argued, this postfeminist view flattened "feminism's radical variants" into "a resentful, anti-democratic ethos of passive victimhood," an ideology that refused to acknowledge that the patriarchy, at least in the West, had been (according to them) mostly or entirely defeated.[91] The logic of postfeminism thus describes an ideological push that fuses neoliberal, individualistic politics with feminist rhetoric and presumes that, with feminism's work now done (as postfeminist thinking asserts it is), Western women may simply choose empowerment, including sexual empowerment. By these standards of postfeminism, the "rape crisis" feminists talked about was not a response to unprecedented awareness and therefore reports of date rape and campus rape; it was simply a sex panic in another guise.[92]

Although postfeminism does not deny rape entirely, it treats rape as extraordinary and rare, apparent only in instances of what Susan Estrich calls "real rape": those rapes that are

[89] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 165.
[90] Sielke, *Reading Rape*, 4.
[91] Rebecca Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times* (London: Routledge, 2014), 21.
[92] Katie Roiphe, *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1994), 27.

generic in the sense that they conform to narrow standards, including the use of force.[93] Yet as my earlier discussion of genre theory attests, the boundaries of a genre are always already being altered, challenged, reformed, remade. The genre of "real rape"—the extraordinary, unrepresentable trauma is always and only an act of unambiguous and unmistakable brutality, the victim's body a site of physical evidence and probative injuries—has become an increasingly unstable category as more and more stories of sexual violence are produced and witnessed. In other words, as rape narratives become more prevalent, the genre of "real rape" becomes less stable. After all, if we accept that since the 1980s, "sexual abuse has been the dominant aetiology of trauma," then can it really be said that rape is a rupture in normative life?[94] By this I mean, sexual violence and the threat thereof are not exceptional; they are, it could be said, quite mundane. Rape is of course a lived, embodied experience, but it is one that hundreds of thousands of people experience annually in the United States alone. Though these moments of violence can be shattering, they are also "everyday, repetitive, interpersonal events."[95]

Although the postfeminist framework of rape has its own generic conventions, ones that inform the genres that I discuss in each chapter, the twenty-first century has seen a new wave of anti-rape organizing that has challenged these postfeminist tropes in activism and media representations alike.[96] As I have already alluded to, multiple sexual abuse cases have shocked the American public and demonstrated the commonness of sexual assault and the culpability of organizations such as the Boy Scouts, professional and nonprofessional sports teams, university

[93] Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).
[94] Roger Luckhurst, "Narrative Matters: Trauma Paradigms and the Role of Popular Culture," *Child and Adolescent Mental Health* 23, no. 3 (2018): 295.
[95] Laura S. Brown, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma," *American Imago* 48, no. 1 (1991): 129.
[96] In the genres I read in the coming chapters, I note that the postfeminist tropes with which they engage tend to frame the (white) survivor as an exceptional, inspirational, and uniquely strong individual; the rapist as a deviant, perhaps pathological, individual distinct from a political or social context of patriarchal norms; and violence as the natural and ideal response to rape, enacted either through vigilantism (including by law enforcement) or the law.

and high school administrations, police departments, prisons, churches of various denominations, and political parties.[97] New conversations about rape on college campuses and in the military prompted questions about how to prevent rape, teach consent, and speak to men about sexual violence.[98] Then, in 2017, sexual violence became the biggest news story in the country, if not the world—and in doing so, it further shaped literary, critical, and popular responses to rape narratives. Contradicting postfeminist framings of rape as extraordinary, individual, and generically fixed (the "real rape"), #MeToo gained global prominence by inspiring an outpouring of stories from across the world, by women and others, who described varying experiences of sexual violence, harassment, humiliation, and other encounters with misogyny, all tagged with the phrase #MeToo.[99] The hashtag collected and connected these stories, imbuing those who shared their experiences with, in Leigh Gilmore's words, "the collective credibility necessary to be heard."[100] And with these collective stories came the stories of famous, powerful, and celebrated men whose downfall became the discussion du jour. Newspaper and magazine

[97] For coverage of just a handful of these cases, see: Savannah Walsh, "The Boy Scouts' Sexual Abuse Scandal No Longer Lives in the Shadows," *Vanity Fair*, September 6, 2023, https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2023/09/the-boy-scouts-sexual-abuse-scandal-no-longer-lives-in-the-shadows; Will Hobson, "Six Years Later, Penn State Remains Torn Over the Sandusky Scandal," *The Washington Post*, December 28, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/sports/penn-state-six-years-after-sandusky-scandal/; Michael Martinez and Jethro Mullen, "Victims Describe Assaults by Convicted Ex-Oklahoma City Cop Daniel Holtzclaw," *CNN*, December 11, 2015, https://www.cnn.com/2015/12/11/us/oklahoma-daniel-holtzclaw-verdict/index.html; Alysia Santo, "Texas: The Prison Rape Capital of the U.S.," *Newsweek*, April 4, 2016, https://www.newsweek.com/texas-prison-rape-capital-us-344729.

[98] Matt Gray, Christina Hassija, and Sarah Steinmetz, *Sexual Assault Prevention on College Campuses* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Christine A. Gidycz, et al., "Sexual Assault Prevention in the Military: Key Issues and Recommendations," *Military Psychology* 30, no. 3 (2018): 240-251.

[99] In 2006, Tarana Burke founded the "me too." Movement organization. A Black woman who worked with Black youth, Burke envisioned "me too." as a grassroots movement focused on provided "resources, support, and pathways to healing where none existed before." Since the hashtag #metoo (later stylized as #MeToo) was taken up in 2017 by (mostly) women speaking out about abuses within their industry (particularly the entertainment industry), the faces of #MeToo have been primarily white. However, Burke asserts that "me too." is dedicated to "assisting a growing spectrum of survivors—young people, queer, trans, the disabled, Black women and girls, and all communities of color." Tarana Burke, "History & Inception," *me too.*, accessed Sunday, March 17, https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/.

[100] Leigh Gilmore, *The #MeToo Effect: What Happens When We Believe Women* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2023), 2.

articles, interviews, profiles, and exposés: from every corner, victims and survivors came forward to share stories about sexual exploitation at the hands of public figures.

However, like the discourses of rape that circulated in the 1990s, #MeToo has been accused by some feminists of being a modern sex panic, meant to assuage anxiety regarding sexual discomfort and ambivalence, without actually calling for the structural changes necessary for true sexual liberation.[101] Others have cautioned that, particularly with white wealthy women as the face of #MeToo, the movement would only lead to more criminalization and incarceration, which would only endanger people of color.[102] In retrospect, however, the effects of #MeToo have been less totalizing than supporters hoped and critics feared; some laws changed and a relatively small number of men were incarcerated, but the primary effect of #MeToo was the production of a massive archive of survivor's stories that reached mainstream audiences.[103] Focusing primarily on who was "brought down" by #MeToo obscures the fact that, as Gilmore notes, "women have been telling their stories for a long time, and none of those factors [that sparked #MeToo] alone—not social media, celebrity, or even the sheer prevalence of sexual violence—explains why a global public heard them."[104] The power of #MeToo came not from the men who lost their reputations; it came from different people with different voices describing

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[101] Heidi Matthews, "#MeToo as Sex Panic," *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, eds. Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019).
[102] Aya Gruber, "#MeToo and Mass Incarceration," *Ohio State Journal of Criminal Law* 17 (2020), https://scholar.law.colorado.edu/faculty-articles/1291; Alex Press, "#MeToo must avoid 'carceral feminism," *Vox*, February 1, 2018, https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2018/2/1/16952744/me-too-larry-nassar-judge-aquilina-feminism.
[103] Arguably, several men also experienced genuine career setbacks, though many have begun staging comebacks, to varying degrees of success. Regardless, a career setback, particularly for a wealthy man, is not in my opinion comparable to incarceration. For more on what has happened since #MeToo, see: Gary Baum, "#MeToo, Five Years Later: No One's Fully Returned from 'Cancellation'—No, Not Even Louis C.K.," *Hollywood Reporter*, September 30, 2022, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/metoo-five-years-later-cancellation-comebacks-1235228191/; Wendy J. Fox, "What's Next for #MeToo Legislation?" *Ms. Magazine*, December 5, 2023, https://msmagazine.com/2023/12/05/me-too-legislation-forced-arbitration-sexual-assault-harrassment-work-women/.
[104] Gilmore, *The #MeToo Effect*, 2.

different experiences, but all under the same label, one that disclaimed exceptionality and embraced commonness, even genericness, to work toward mass healing and societal change.[105]

Like the movement at large, #MeToo in the literary sphere produced consequences beyond the identification of writers alleged to have harassed, assaulted, and/or abused women and others.[106] The emergence and identification of the "#MeToo novel" suggests that there was a generic response too, the desire to recognize a literary genre that speaks to the issues of gender, power, consent, and abuse that the movement brought into the spotlight.[107] However, as Robin Field has shown, there is already a rich tradition in America of what she calls "rape novels," texts that explore the experience of the rape survivor by representing rape "foremost as physical and psychological violence enacted upon a human being."[108] The rape novel and the #MeToo novel are the same genre by a different name, a label for primarily literary and upmarket fiction that "work[s] to educate … readers about what rape *is*" and "strive[s] to inspire social activism" by readers.[109] However, the emergence of the rape or #MeToo novel as a recognizable genre—and therefore as the avenue by which (literary) genre is tied to representations of rape—has perhaps foreclosed some serious considerations of how representations of rape in popular genres, especially women's genres, have also experienced significant change in the twenty-first century. If trauma is still the dominant paradigm for approaching representations of rape—a paradigm that demands and rewards textual difficulty—then how have genres that literary criticism and trauma theory have historically overlooked and dismissed, at least in part because of their

[105] Allison Page and Jacquelyn Arcy, "#MeToo and the Politics of Collective Healing: Emotional Connection as Contestation," *Communication, Culture, and Critique* 13 (2020).
[106] Alexia Underwood, "The #MeToo movement hit the literary world hard this week. It's not the first time," *Vox*, May 10, 2018, https://www.vox.com/2018/5/10/17323642/metoo-junot-diaz-allegations-nobel-literature-prize.
[107] K.W. Colyard, "15 Essential Novels of the #MeToo Movement," *Bustle*, September 27, 2019, https://www.bustle.com/p/15-essential-novels-of-the-metoo-movement-18803794.
[108] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 20.
[109] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 21.

perceived simplicity and/or their association with female authorship and readership, responded to #MeToo and other shifting discourses about sexual violence? How does a genre collectively, and a text individually, contribute to (and potentially challenge the boundaries of) the cultural and rhetorical construction of the survivor, the rapist, and rape itself?

As I discussed in the previous section, the proliferation of rape discourses has not resulted in a singular attitude regarding representations of rape, even and perhaps especially among feminists themselves. Women telling stories about rape—both fictional and nonfictional—has alternately resulted in acclaim, condemnation, and ambivalence, sometimes in response to the very same stories. By tracking the development of rape plots within specific women's genres, I do not seek to settle debates about the cultural value of such representations. Certainly, I deem some representations more thoughtful and nuanced than others, and I advocate for more generous critical attention to be applied to genres and texts that are too often discounted as unserious, but my primary claim is that women's genres and representations of rape (in conversation with feminist and popular criticism) have shaped one another in the twenty-first century. To understand how that shaping has occurred, however, we must first understand how the concept of a "women's genre" has been produced, and how I will use it going forward.

Gendering genre: tracing a women's literary history

In 1855, Nathaniel Hawthorne famously complained about the blight of sentimental fiction against which his work had to compete: "America is now given over to a damned mob of

scribbling women, and … the public taste is occupied with their trash."[110] The public acclaim and popularity of women writers in the nineteenth century represented, for male critics, a threat to men and an affront to women's "natural modesty."[111] Perhaps these texts were damnably, infuriatingly popular, because they were also damnably, infuriatingly generic: critics have long identified women with the gothic, the sentimental novel, the sensation novel, and domestic fiction, all genres that sold well.[112] In this section, I show that, at least when it comes to popular literature and culture, women and genre are indeed intricately and intimately bound, and the construction of the category of women's genres includes connotations of moral and aesthetic defects, as well as crass commercialism.

In focusing on women's genres, my intention is neither to reify the boundaries of gender nor of genre. I of course recognize that to refer to any genre as a women's genre might obfuscate, if not outright ignore, that many of texts within these genres are also written and read by men and people of other genders. However, following Lauren Berlant's argument that "the mass mediation of desires in women's genres constructs a deep affinity between them," I claim that many contemporary media genres that are produced and sustained by women solicit feminine identification (with the genre and with other women) through the compulsive repetition of rape

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[110] Quoted in John Frederick, "Hawthorne's 'Scribbling Women,'" *The New England Quarterly* 48, no. 2 (1975), 231. It was a complaint that could as easily have been made at the height of the romance novel boom of the 1970s, the memoir boom of the 1990s, or the popularity of "spicy" books (also known as "smut") today. For more on this last controversy, see: Lucy Knight, "Children exposed by 'spicy' adult fiction by BookTok influencers," *The Guardian*, February 17, 2024, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/feb/17/tiktok-children-exposed-to-spicy-adult-fiction-booktok-influencers; Maureen Lee Lenker, "Smut is not a dirty word: Author Sarah J. Maas (and romantasy at large) deserves more respect," *Entertainment Weekly*, February 1, 2024, https://ew.com/sarah-j-maas-smut-in-romantasy-books-deserve-respect-8557162.

[111] Brenda R. Weber, *Women and Literary Celebrity in the Nineteenth Century: The Transatlantic Production of Fame and Gender* (Abingdon, Oxon: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 4.

[112] For more the links between women and these genres, see: Kathleen Hudson, ed., *Women's Authorship and the Early Gothic: Legacies and Innovations* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2020); Faye Halpern, *Sentimental Readers: The Rise, Fall, and Revival of a Disparaged Rhetoric* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 2013); Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Lyn Pykett, *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing* (London: Routledge, 1992).

narratives.[113] In other words, the genres through which many women both tell and experience rape narratives are also genres that construct gender as a category of belonging. Certainly, anyone may engage with these genres, but the specific type of engagement I discuss here is a gendered one.

Before I continue, let me clarify three related, but easily conflated, terms. The first, "women's genres," is a concept I refer to throughout this dissertation, defined here as genres that have historically been, or currently are, assumed to be written and consumed primarily by women. In addition to the genres I cover in this dissertation, examples of women's genres include cozy mysteries, true crime, young adult fiction, "trashy" reality television, and soap operas. The genres I consider are also ones that, as I will detail in each chapter, have been and/or currently are frequently dismissed by critics, treated as inherently conservative and primarily motivated by the desire for profit rather than artistic expression.

The genres I analyze in this dissertation—the memoir, the romance novel, and the police procedural—are themselves enmeshed in, and responsive to, both feminist criticism and histories of women's writing. Each of these genres is rooted in or has been tied to eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions closely associated with female authorship and readership, the genres that Hawthorne's "mob of scribbling women" produced.[114] These are among the genres that in the 1970s, Ellen Moers, Elaine Showalter, and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, among others, reevaluated, responding to the historical marginalization of women's writing to recover forgotten and suppressed texts, reconsider the importance of texts once deemed frivolous, and to

[113] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 3.
[114] Simon Stern, "Sentimental Frauds," *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2011): 83-113; Michael Milburn, "By Fact Alone: Sensationalism in Contemporary Nonfiction," *The Midwest Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2011): 61-76; Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979).

establish a women's literary canon.[115] These works of feminist literary criticism are still regarded as foundational, and thus this work of uncovering and reconsidering connections between genre and gender, and how they have shaped literary history and canon, is rooted in a feminist literary tradition.

Women's genres, then, are deeply tied to the concept of "women's literature" writ large. Women's literature, the second term I wish to clarify, refers in part to this history and legacy of women's writing that feminist critics sought to uncover and illuminate. Note that, although the early work of critics like Moers and Showalter faced criticisms for its preoccupation with primarily white, heterosexual authors, Black and lesbian critics formed their own critiques and traditions, most famously in Alice Walker's *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983). When I refer to women's literature, then, I mean the complex, heterogenous, and ever-growing tradition of writing by women uncovered by those like Moers, Showalter, and Walker. However, women's literature also refers to contemporary writing by women that engages with that tradition.

I am aware of the artificiality of "women's literature" as a construct. In the 1970s, some found "the present interest in 'women's literature' degrading, and the teaching of women's literature in English departments a subversion of women's liberation."[116] Even in her own introduction to *Literary Women*, Moers acknowledges that she once "thought that segregating major writers from the general course of literary history simply because of their sex was insulting," though she eventually realized that "the time … that one must know the history of

[115] Ellen Moers, *Literary Women: The Great Writers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1977); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998; 1977); Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*.
[116] Minda Rae Amiran, "What Women's Literature?" *College English* 39, no. 6 (1978): 653-654.

women to understand the history of literature … is now."[117] Even those who might have agreed with Moers that focusing on women's literature was necessary in the 1970s and 1980s to combat women's erasure from literary history, may not agree that those same issues exist in the present. For instance, several women have advocated for doing away with women's literature prizes, considering them relics of the past that needlessly tokenize female authors.[118]

The last category that I wish to clarify is "women's fiction," a controversial category that many women have rejected as unnecessary or even harmful. For instance, in 2014, *Guardian* books editor Alison Flood has argued that the term women's fiction treats men's writing as the default and is indicative of the continued sexism within the industry and amongst the literary establishment.[119] In 2019, the popular book blog and news site *Literary Hub* published a piece entitled "What Do We Really Mean by 'Women's Fiction'?" in which an author reflects on others applying to her novel the label of "women's fiction," which she claims means it cannot be understood as literary fiction too.[120] And in 2021, novelist Lauren Groff posted a series of Tweets in which she expressed dissatisfaction with "feeling extremely reduced to a genre I don't identify with,"[121] adding sarcastically, "If I'm a woman and my characters are women, I must write women's fiction, I guess."[122]

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[117] Moers, *Literary Women*, xiii.
[118] Martha Gill, "Female novelists don't need their own prizes. Let's abolish them," *The Observer*, June 18, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2023/jun/18/female-novelists-dont-need-their-own-prizes-lets-abolish-them; Kristina Murkett, "Do we really still need a Women's Prize for Fiction?" *The Spectator*, September 10, 2020, https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/do-we-really-still-need-a-women-s-prize-for-fiction; Katherine Cowdrey, "Women's literary prizes are 'problematic' says Lionel Shriver," *The Bookseller*, March 9, 2016, https://www.thebookseller.com/news/womens-literary-prizes-are-problematic-says-lionel-shriver-324233.
[119] Alison Flood, "Women's fiction is a sign of a sexist book industry," *The Guardian*, May 16, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2014/may/16/women-fiction-sign-sexist-book-industry.
[120] Rachel Howard, "What Do We Really Mean By 'Women's Fiction'?" *LitHub*, April 10, 2019, https://lithub.com/what-do-we-really-mean-by-womens-fiction/.
[121] Lauren Groff (@legroff), "Feeling extremely reduced to a genre I don't identify with tonight," Twitter, March 19, 2021, https://x.com/legroff/status/1373034423877304332?s=46&t=Eh0eXpE3uMHXbIuvkgTE9Q.
[122] Lauren Groff (@legroff), "If I'm a woman and my characters are women I must write women's fiction, I guess," Twitter, March 19, 2021, https://x.com/legroff/status/1373035401301131268?s=46&t=Eh0eXpE3uMHXbIuvkgTE9Q.

Technically speaking, women's fiction is a genre, just as Groff's Tweet indicates, rather than a term that refers to all fiction by all women or a synonym for women's literature. It is, in fact, a women's genre, one that was once commonly referred to as "chick lit," and which typically describes contemporary mass market or upmarket novels in which the emotional development of a central female protagonist comprises the main plot. These novels can be highly sentimental, even sappy, but they can also be light-hearted and comic—the proverbial "beach read"—as long as emotional growth drives the character arc. Despite the technical differences between women's literature and women's fiction, however, the ongoing critiques of the categories are not dissimilar. Today both are thought by some to 1) render gender monolithic, implying that anything written by and about women must be about some universally-recognized or essentialized experience of womanhood; 2) segregate female authors into a category that is presumed to be neither literary nor of interest to men; and 3) reduce literature by women to being solely or primarily about gender and/or feminism, even when it is not.

But women's literature is far from the only field in which such concerns continue to arise. Consider, for instance, the titular question of Margo N. Crawford's *What is African American Literature*? In the introduction, Crawford acknowledges that it is "easy to critique the equation of black identity and black book," but whatever African American literature is, she suggests, it *is*.[123] Throughout the rest of the text, Crawford explores what possibilities are made available by thinking (and feeling) *with* the tradition that has marked texts as African American. While the question of "what is women's literature?" is not the central question of my project, by thinking *with* the tradition of women's literature, and women's genres in particular, I am also able to think with and across the history of feminist literary criticism, and the legacy of women's readership

[123] Margo N. Crawford, *What Is African American Literature?* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2021), 3.

and authorship, with which the texts I analyze in the following chapters engage both explicitly and implicitly.

In order to tease out the intersections between contemporary mass culture and these literary and feminist traditions, I have chosen to take up popular genres and texts, ones that have not received serious consideration as interlocutors in the development of rape consciousness. For the most part, the genres I consider are not meaningfully feminist; they are more "juxtapolitical," as Lauren Berlant puts it, than radical.[124] Moreover, as Berlant has shown, women's U.S. mass culture tends to voice dissatisfaction with the status quo of gendered oppression in order to manage women's ambivalence, allowing them the opportunity to reinvest in the institutions and structure that enable that oppression to continue. If the circulation of women's anxieties, disappointments, and fantasies, particularly regarding male behavior and (hetero)normative romance, are part of what enable women to identify with the genre of femininity, then in the texts I take up, rape becomes the mediated form of suffering through which texts produce an imagined sense of shared identity.[125]

However, unlike Berlant, who finds that women's popular genres (in her case, the sentimental) will almost always ultimately reinforce conventionality, I use my analyses of memoir, romance, and the police procedural to describe how they have contributed to shifting perceptions of rape.[126] At times, that has meant reinforcing narrow, normative, and postfeminist ideas about what rape is and whom it affects, but at others, this means offering challenging and generically-unstable representations of rape, ones that push readers to confront the boundaries that they have attempted to draw around both sexual violence and the work of genre. These

[124] Lauren Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 3.
[125] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 4.
[126] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 31.

popular genres, part of mass culture, offer engaging and important narratives to the real women who create and consume them, and shape the genre of rape as a rhetorical and a material reality.

Chapter overviews: archive and implications

Each chapter of this dissertation represents a case study of a popular women's genre, one that is commercially successful but not necessarily critically esteemed, at least in part due to its contested representations of rape, which have been deemed both aesthetically deficient and potentially harmful to victims and women more broadly. After describing how the history of the genre and its contemporary form is inextricable from the changing discourses of rape that I describe above, I analyze how narratives of rape within the genre shape understandings of what rape is and how it operates—who is raped, who perpetrates rape, and when it is considered a crime.

My first chapter, "The Memoir: Sentimental Solidarity and Identifying (with) the Survivor," argues that life writing and the memoir tradition have enforced and challenged the ways we conceive of rape survivors and victims. Popular memoirs of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries are artifacts of a popular trauma culture that defined survival as extraordinary and inspirational. At the same time, as Erin Spampinato has noted, memoirs describing experiences of rape and incest were also frequently met with accusations of "eroticizing sexual violence, exploiting the stories of victims... embellishing levels of violence, and just being generally unnecessary."[127] The 2010s, as I've already noted, saw a shift in public discourses of rape, with more stories of survivors entering the mainstream, both in the form of

[127] Spampinato, "Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse."

high-profile sexual abuse cases and the #MeToo movement. Situated within this context, this chapter explores the reactions of the public to the life writing of two different rape victims, both gifted writers who describe their experiences in frank, visceral terms, but one of them was celebrated as "the" exemplary survivor, while the other was admonished for her unsavory victimhood.

I begin with an analysis of the anonymous viral letter written by "Emily Doe," the victim in the so-called "Stanford rape case" who captivated a nation's attention. Even pre-#MeToo, Doe's letter created a sense of solidarity amongst rape survivors and women, who felt addressed by Doe's articulation of the feeling(s) of surviving rape. Ultimately, however, I argue that the solidarity produced by this letter called upon and engendered a version of survivorship that was white and respectable, with a largely unambiguous narrative of assault. Therefore, when Chanel Miller—the woman behind "Emily Doe"—unmasked herself as an Asian American woman in her memoir, *Know My Name* (2019), she racialized herself (and, by extension, her previously-anonymous viral statement). In doing so, Miller critiqued assumptions about her own whiteness and the genre of 'the survivor,' problematizing both the reinforcement of white supremacy within the court's and the public's rape narrative and the role of sexual violence in maintaining a system of oppression that can only be addressed if victims show solidarity across material difference. However, her memoir still affirms some of the carceral solutions implemented in the wake of her trial, and it reflects the public's desire to see victims of rape as survivors, resilient and inspirational. At the end of the chapter, I consider the controversial and anonymously authored memoir *The Incest Diary* (2017), in which the author is ambivalent about her abusive father and describes their sexual relationship in graphic terms, while refusing to offer an uplifting ending to her narrative. Although this text adheres more closely to a "trauma aesthetic," the

resulting outrage from readers suggests that when read within the bounds of the rape memoir, aporia becomes a liability and the inability to identify with the author's trauma a failing.

Just as Miller and the anonymous author of *The Incest Diary* complicate abstract expectations of "the" rape survivor, the works I describe in my second chapter reveal how the romance novel has created and upended its own generic conventions regarding the role of the rapist. In this chapter, "The Romance Novel: Rapists, Heroes, and Formations of Masculinity," I concur with critics such as Janice Radway and Tania Modleski that romance as a genre has historically been preoccupied with anxieties about men, masculinity, and the dangers of heterosexual desire. However, I push further by showing that various waves of romance novels have engaged the concepts of heroism and villainy to define masculinity vis-à-vis the act of rape.

It is true that rape in romance novels has, until recently, fueled feminist arguments that the genre is low entertainment that crudely articulates a patriarchal ideology, but a serious consideration of how rape has been represented and rejected in deliberate ways by romance novelists across the years finds that this feminist critique, as well as the genre's defensive responses to it, have in fact obscured some of the theoretical work being achieved by early romance. This theoretical work, I argue, has been continued and deepened in productive and sometimes consciously feminist ways by twenty-first century romance novelists who have drawn on romance's history to write rape narratives. The three historical romances I analyze—Alyssa Cole's *An Extraordinary Union* (2017), Courtney Milan's *The Countess Conspiracy* (2013), and Lorraine Heath's *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* (2010)—skillfully navigate generic expectations about the victimization of heroines and the role(s) of heroes in order to imagine alternative models of masculinity and heterosexuality under patriarchy.

While previous chapters show that various contemporary literary texts ask us to challenge critical commonplaces and white hegemonic assumptions, my final chapter, "The Police Procedural: Making Rape a Crime," begins with an analysis of the televisual genre of the police procedural, especially shows dedicated to criminal cases involving sexual and gendered violence. The police procedural's gendering has shifted over the years: once identified heavily with male audiences, it has at times become, because of its increasing focus on sexual crimes and female detectives, a women's genre. The women's police procedural is epitomized by *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999–), a show that, in its relentless and increasingly melodramatic depictions of sexual violence cumulatively enacts what I describe as a "structural pessimism." Because the show must always go on, forever constrained within the genre of the police procedural, *SVU* consistently acknowledges the law's inadequacies in addressing rape, but simultaneously refuses to imagine alternative ways of being. The result is that crime is always the dominant framework through which to understand rape, a framework that casts sexual violence as an affront to the social order rather than a method by which the social order of patriarchy is, in fact, maintained. At the same time, the show's increasingly large cast of victims and cases in some ways defies typical rape narratives and, as in Chapter 1, challenges ideas about the generic survivor as a cis, straight, white woman.

I then turn to writers who've remixed *SVU* and the genre of the police procedural to challenge the show's structural effects. Reading Carmen Maria Machado's "Especially Heinous" and a chapter from Elissa Washuta's memoir *My Body Is a Book of Rules*, I show how both writers use *Law & Order: SVU* as an intertextual reference and generic framework through which to tell stories of sexual violence, grounding their own stories in the familiar beats of the show while simultaneously refusing both *SVU*'s carcerality and its pessimism. Machado

imagines *SVU* through a lens of fantasy and horror that reveals the instability of *SVU*'s rendering of sexual violence as "especially" heinous when it is turned into constant spectacle. In this novella, Machado asks us to radically imagine a world in which sexual violence is not inevitable. Washuta, meanwhile, tells the story of her own rape through *SVU* dialogue, challenging the structural limits of the police procedural, and its reliance on a criminal framework, to contain the complexity of sexual violence and survival.

Throughout this project, I seek to make visible how shifts in popular narratives and the framing of rape can contribute to the production of what Erin Spampinato calls a more capacious reading of rape, or what I might term a more capacious *genre* of rape.[128] Like Luckhurst, who argues that looking to popular fiction can reveal the "reiteration of traumatic subjectivity in different kinds of register," I turn to these popular genres because they reiterate rape in registers that many women, as well as others, turn to as sources of entertainment, comfort, sentiment, and knowledge creation.[129] Although I discuss only three genres in this dissertation, the work that I argue is being done by memoir, romance, and the police procedural can be identified across many other genres, wherein, at different times, to different degrees, the genres of rape, rapist, and survivor are being made and unmade.

As genre theorists have demonstrated, genres build worlds: they offer a framework for comprehending all that we encounter, whether texts, rhetorical situations, or material acts. Genres allow us to make meaning, to draw connections, to form and subvert expectations. What I am proposing in the following chapters is that rape builds worlds too, structuring our relationships to and the meanings of gender, race, embodiment, sexuality, love, crime, justice. To live in a world made by rape—which is to say, to live in this world—requires reckoning with the

[128] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape," 142-146.
[129] Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, 15.

forces that circumscribe who and what survivors of rape are allowed to be, feel, and know, and how they are allowed to be known. Therefore, in asking how rape and genre shape each other, and moreover how they shape the world together, I am also asking how we begin to build a new world—one in which those who have experienced sexual violence can author their lives and their stories with support but without constraints.

Chapter 1

The Memoir:
Sentimental Solidarity and Identifying (with) the Survivor

You are not alone.

This is the promise made by rape survivors to rape survivors in contemporary discourse, a kind of sentimental identification that assures you that there are others who have experienced what you've experienced, who feel what you feel. This reassurance is generic, a kind of strategic response that has become the conventional mode of offering comfort to a fellow survivor.[130] It is also a balm to the social isolation and shame frequently reported by those who've been sexually assaulted. It is also an antidote to a judicial system that will, in the words of Chanel Miller—the rape victim and memoirist who is the subject of this chapter—"try to make you believe you are unlike the others, you are different, an exception … dirtier, more stupid, more promiscuous."[131] The power of *you are not alone*, then, is a denial, or at least a mitigation, of difference or exceptionality; it binds survivors into a cohesive group by asking them to not only feel *with* each other but also to feel *like* each other. Rape survivors seeking solidarity depend on politics of disclosure, representation, and publicness, and so solidarity comes at a price: for victims to reach a broad audience of other victims, they are expected to elide the deep imbrication of sexual

[130] Coe, Lingard and Teslenko, "Genre as Action, Strategy, and Difference," 6.
[131] Chanel Miller, *Know My Name* (New York: Viking, 2019), 252. The full statement was originally published (and can be read in its entirety) at https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ katiejmbaker/heres-the-powerful-letter-the-stanford-victim-read-to-her-ra. For consistency, I will be citing from the copy of the letter published as an appendix in *Know My Name*.

violence, misogyny, and racism, in favor of an understanding of rape survivors as ultimately rigidly generic. One survivor is every survivor, and every survivor can recognize every other, can sympathize with every other.

Unfortunately, the reality of survivor experience does not bear out this promise. Although the assurance that *you are not alone* serves an important psychological function for (some) individual survivors, it also ultimately conventionalizes "being a survivor" as an affective orientation rather than a product of systemic oppression, and in doing so, leaves some categories of rape victim outside of its generic frame. But what does it mean to *feel* like a survivor, or *not feel* like a survivor? How does a solidarity rooted in shared feelings produce a generic standard of "the" rape survivor? Who is excluded when being part of the community requires one to feel like that generic rape survivor? And how might turning rape survival into a unifying affective orientation obscure sexual violence's full capacity for harm?

In this chapter, I show that Chanel Miller's sexual assault case, and the texts she has produced in relation to it, reflect the ways that contemporary discourses of rape survivors solicit and produce what I am describing as affective solidarity, a solidarity rooted in sentimentality.[132] I argue that, although Miller's anonymous statement accrued its power in large part through sentimental identification, Miller's eventual claiming of her name and racial identity have produced new possibilities for political solidarity grounded in a fight against shared and interrelated oppressions, as well as affective motivation that extends beyond the sentimental.

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[132] Clare Hemmings describes "affective solidarity" as the result of seeing "affective dissonance" as "a productive basis from which to seek solidarity with others, not based in a shared identity or on a presumption about how the other feels, but on also feeling the desire for transformation out of the experience of discomfort, and against the odds." Claire Hemmings, "Affective solidarity: Feminist reflexivity and political transformation," *Feminist Theory* 13 no. 2 (2012), 158. Hemmings distinguishes such a solidarity from both empathy and sympathetic identification. However, the sentimental affective solidarity I describe in this essay may stem from dissonance (anger, shame, frustration, and sadness about the experience of rape and the failures of the justice system), but, as I show in this essay, the discourses produced by expressions of that dissonance often focus on the ways in which the feelings of survivors are *alike* and, more crucially, are coopted into sentimental projects that center white womanhood.

This case also shows that life writing, and the literary genre of the memoir in particular, can reveal the limits of sentimentality as a mode of engagement for anti-rape activism and survivor coalition building. I conclude my discussion of Miller by arguing that by centering her racial identity, her memoir deliberately puts pressure on the genre of the rape survivor as ideologically and affectively coherent: a recognizable kind of person, who has gone through a recognizable kind of experience. Her memoir also continues the work of her victim impact statement by recognizing that the harm caused by the justice system is more pressing than the actions of a single rapist. She thus contributes to a feminist tradition of theorizing solidarity by pushing rape survivors to support each other across difference by aligning their material demands not only with one another but also with others who have been oppressed, dismissed, and/or harmed by the state's criminal and judicial apparatus.

Solidarity, like sentimentality, has its limits. In the final section of this chapter, I consider a case where memoir evokes neither the strategic response promising sentimental solidarity nor a sense of political urgency. The anonymous and controversial memoir *The Incest Diary* (2017), which chronicles the sexual abuse of a young woman by her father into adulthood, is dark, ambivalent, and refuses the redemptive narrative in which a victim transforms into a survivor. It also provoked scathing criticisms, even from other survivors, for its graphic sexual content. *The Incest Diary*, and its unhappy reception, makes it clear that there are still some kinds of people, some kinds of experiences, that cannot be assimilated into even the more expansively political and affective project of solidarity that Miller describes. Even as the generic bounds of "the" survivor are challenged, then, *The Incest Diary* reminds us that "as soon as the word 'genre' is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one even attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And

when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind."[133] The limits drawn around the survivor imply the existence of that which is outside survival: victimhood, failure, loss. How can solidarity account for the victim too? How can it unmake the binaristic distinction drawn between the categories of victim and survivor, bad and good, deserving and undeserving?

Meet Emily Doe: sentimentality, memoir, and the victim impact statement

Initially identified in the press as "Emily Doe," Chanel Miller burst into the public eye during the summer of 2016, when Brock Turner, a freshman at Stanford University who'd been convicted of three counts of sexual assault after digitally penetrating an unconscious Miller outside a frat house on the Stanford campus, received a six-month jail sentence, which was widely perceived to be unfairly lenient.[134] At the sentencing hearing, Miller read a victim impact statement calling the sentence "a mockery of the seriousness of his assaults, an insult to me and all women," but it was the publication of this statement on *BuzzFeed News*, where it received hundreds of thousands of views within hours, that generated an outpouring of rage and sympathy from readers moved by the words of an anonymous young woman.[135] A number of people even published their own open letters to Emily Doe, including fellow survivors like Delaney Henderson and Sara Li, who both felt called to describe their own experiences with sexual assault and the judicial system, and to reciprocate and reproduce the feelings that Doe had voiced. As Henderson puts it, "I am writing this to tell you that you are not alone. I understand

[133] Derrida, "The Law of Genre," 56.
[134] Liam Stack, "Light Sentence for Brock Turner in Stanford Rape Case Draws Outrage," *New York Times*, June 6, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/us/outrage-in-stanford-rape-case-over-dueling-statements-of-victim-and-attackers-father.html.
[135] Miller, *Know My Name*, 354. Because he received credit for good behavior during his time served, Turner was released from jail after three months.

what you are going through because I am going through it with you. You are truly inspiring to me and to so many other survivors out there."[136]

Three years later, when Emily Doe unmasked herself as Chanel Miller, a Chinese American woman on the verge of publishing her first book, a memoir entitled *Know My Name* (2019), she revealed that her reasons for previously maintaining her anonymity were tied up in her concerns about how to maintain a sense of affective solidarity:

> The statement had created a room, a place for survivors to step into and speak aloud their heaviest truths, to revisit the untouched parts of their past. If I had come out with my identity the room would have collapsed, its roof weighted by distractions; my history, ethnicity, family … Instead, I became the lady with blue hair, the one with the nose ring, I was sixty-two, I was Latina, I was a man with a beard. How do you come after me, when it is all of us?[137]

Miller, concerned that the "distractions" of her identity might overburden the generic representative potential held by the unknown Emily Doe, firmly points the spotlight at the identity she most wants others to see: that of a rape survivor. If the statement "created a room … for survivors to step into and speak their heaviest truths," as she suggests, then those who coalesce around the statement do so as fellow survivors whose racial (and perhaps gender) identities are secondary. Instead, it is the mutual unburdening of their "heaviest truths" that binds them together, a letting-go of the weight that might attach to any number of feelings: anger, shame, grief, regret, sorrow. In the "room" opened up by the statement, those sensations are shared, communal, and unexceptional—a defense against the "singling out" that Miller describes as "one of the greatest dangers of victimhood."[138]

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[136] Delaney Henderson, "A Thank You Letter to Stanford Rape Survivor," *Bust*, June 29, 2016, https://bust.com/a-thank-you-letter-to-stanford-rape-survivor/.
[137] Miller, *Know My Name, 252*.
[138] Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.

Another way of understanding Miller's "room" is as an intimate public of rape survivors, one in which the emotional continuity of survivors is understood to overrule other kinds of differences. I identify this intimate public as a subset of the U.S. women's culture described by Lauren Berlant. Intimate publics are oriented around a fantasy of belonging: the idea that there exists "a world of strangers" who are "emotionally literate in each other's experiences of power, intimacy, desire, and discontent."[139] Though Berlant is ultimately critical of intimate publics, she makes it clear that the stakes of participating in one can sometimes be, or at least feel like, a matter of survival: intimate publics can "legitimate qualities, ways of being, and entire lives that have otherwise been deemed puny or discarded."[140] Certainly for one who has experienced sexual violence, or any kind of trauma, the question of how to survive, how to legitimate one's life, may feel particularly pressing. The intimate public of rape survivors offers just such possibilities and fantasies in ways that, due to the isolating nature of sexual violence, can matter very much indeed. Yet these fantasies are circulated by soliciting belonging, appealing to an assumed (and imagined) sense of continuity regarding the feelings and experiences of survivors. Such publics do not fulfill the liberal promise of a Habermasian rational-critical public nor the hope of resistance and transformation embedded within the notion of a counterpublic.[141] Rather,

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[139] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.
[140] Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 3.
[141] The theories of public and private spheres discussed in this essay primarily draw on and modify the work of Jürgen Habermas, who defined the public sphere as a "category of bourgeois society" in which rational-critical discourse exists outside of and can critique state institutions and private commercial interests. Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 12. As Hendler explains, some of the institutions that emerged as part of this public sphere include "cafes, reading clubs, subscription libraries, and in some countries, newspapers," institutions in which "interpretation could take place with a degree of freedom from the political strictures of the state as well as from the economic imperatives of the market" (13-14). This Habermasian model was influentially critiqued by Michael Warner, who argued that in the American context, the authority of print, which enabled publicity, depended on abstraction of the self that could only be accomplished by those who were white and male. Michael Warner, "Publics and Counterpublics," *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (2002), 86. Yet those outside such normative identities might form a "counterpublic," a public which "maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate

intimate publics evince ambivalence about a group's marginalization, "cultivat[ing] fantasies of vague belonging as an alleviation of what is hard to manage in the lived real" without requiring radical political action that would break with the conventional.[142] In fact, these fantasies actually disincentivize such action by making the conventional more manageable, more livable, through participation in white heteropatriarchal commodity cultures.

Berlant describes U.S. women's culture as an outgrowth of sentimentality, which she characterizes as "a promise of aesthetic recognition and redemption whose consumption is its own reward."[143] Sentimentality, which Berlant traces from the nineteenth century, is distinguished not merely by an abundance of feeling but by the deliberate circulation of feeling (through texts). Similarly, Glenn Hendler has argued that in nineteenth-century America we can see the formation of publics around circulating and shared feelings, mediated through texts. Hendler writes that sentimentality hinges on "the idea that, through the mediation of textualized sympathy, feelings and experiences can be communicated from one embodied subject to another," and he proposes that we understand the nineteenth-century culture of sympathy as a public, rather than private, one. [144] This means that the sentimental novel, which asks of its reader "sympathetic identification," serves not merely to induce psychological feeling within the reader, but, more notably, to prepare the reader to engage their private emotion in the public sphere.[145]

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status. The cultural horizon against which it marks itself off is not just a general or wider public, but a dominant one" (86). For instance, Warner considers the case of gay or queer counterpublics, where "the presumptive heterosexuality that constitutes the closet for individuals in ordinary speech is suspended" (86). Inherent in this formulation is a degree of resistance against the normative public space in order to reimagine, recreate, it; for Warner, a counterpublic is public as poesis (86).

[142] Berlant, *The Female Complaint,* 5.

[143] Berlant, *The Female Complaint,* 20.

[144] Glenn Hendler, *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 9.

[145] Hendler, *Public Sentiments,* 22.

The very publicness of these feelings—and their seemingly rampant circulation—has long been a source of consternation in Western culture. As Adela Pinch has shown, in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writings, feelings "frequently seem as impersonal, and contagious, as viruses, visiting the breasts of men and women the way diseases visit the body."[146] While Pinch does not perform a study of how feelings "actually" move, she demonstrates that for eighteenth-century writers, emotions were sometimes seen as extravagant, difficult, and transmissible, while at other times they were represented as eminently knowable and individual. Pinch argues that this literary and philosophical preoccupation with epistemologies of emotions indicates a peculiar tension between the rise of empiricism and concerns about the authenticity of emotions and the "evidence" they provide. Feelings were understood to travel through and between bodies regardless of logic, and for that reason they were not necessarily to be trusted.

Despite these fears about the movement of feelings and the lack of control individuals were thought to have over them, the sentimental was not necessarily a radical force. In fact, although the sentimental could certainly seem to be mobilized toward progressive social change, as in the works of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Charles Dickens, it was also simultaneously (sometimes with the very same objects for the very same audience) used to construct and reinforce traditional hierarchies of social difference. Laura Wexler, analyzing female photojournalists at the turn of the twentieth century, argues that these women contributed to a sentimental ideology of domesticity that was used as a tool of white supremacy and American imperialism. The project of sentimentalism, per Wexler, "aimed at the subjection of people of

[146] Adela Pinch, *Strange Fits of Passion* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 1996), 1. As I discuss later, the epidemiological analogy deployed here has its twenty-first century equivalent in online "virality" (e.g., viral videos, viral memes, viral news stories), which Kris Cohen describes as "the spread of little intensities" which, "once disseminated across a number of people and aggregated, for instance, as meme … are said to have become culturally significant." Kris Cohen, *Never Alone Except for Now* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 94. Once again, feelings (or "intensities") exceed the individual to become not merely widespread but public, culturally significant.

different classes and different races, who were compelled to play not the leading roles but the human scenery before which the melodrama of middle-class redemption could be enacted, for the enlightenment of an audience in which they were not even included."[147] In other words, marginalized populations became the objects whose suffering enabled the white middle-class to learn to feel in a morally right way. (This critique applies, for example, to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.)

Kyla Schuller takes this argument even further, arguing that "sentimentalism, in the midst of its feminized ethic of emotional identification, operates as a fundamental mechanism of biopower."[148] In the nineteenth century, sentimentalism functioned to distinguish "civilized bodies as receptive to their milieu and able to discipline their sensor susceptibility and as such in possession of life and vitality that required protection from the threat posed by primitive bodies deemed to be impulsive and insensate."[149] In this way, the categories of race, sex, and class became modes of distinguishing between those capable of being regulated by the circulation of feeling and thereby integrated into the population and those who lacked the "impressibility and relationality" to belong to the nation-state.[150] Like Berlant, Schuller emphasizes the circulation of feeling as a tool for creating and maintaining a category of person that appears cohesive and, in Schuller's case, materially-grounded.

As I proceed in my discussion, I wish to keep these critiques in mind even as I am careful not to reinforce paternalistic fears that women are overly emotional, that they are morally and aesthetically bad readers, or that they are especially, even dangerously, susceptible to

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[147] Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 101.
[148] Kyla Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling: Race, Sex, and Science in the Nineteenth Century* (Duke University Press, 2018), 2.
[149] Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling,* 4.
[150] Schuller, *The Biopolitics of Feeling,* 6.

emotionally persuasive argumentation over logic. In the Introduction, I mentioned that many texts have historically been treated as vectors of potentially dangerous feelings and sensations, particularly for women; as such, a multitude of popular genres have been the subject of broad moral panics, including gothics, sensation novels, romance novels, and, yes, memoir. As the memoir genre grew in popularity (especially among women) in the 1990s and 2000s, so too did the volume of complaints about the books and the people who read them. The genre itself was frequently characterized as narcissistic, too often "tainted with conceit or a desire for revenge or a wish for justification,"[151] or incapable of telling us anything more than that "helpless addiction and passive suffering are the most meaningful experiences you can have."[152] To some, readers of such memoirs might be worse than the books themselves: they are presumed to be "morbidly thrilled" by the tragedies they encounter through text, taking pleasure from "wallowing in the muck" of trauma.[153] Another complaint was that the books were too often all feeling and no style, moving readers only inasmuch as the events being described were sufficiently amazing, horrifying, or pathetic.[154]

Memoir has long centered around the development of the self and the triumph over adversity. As Julie Rak writes in her account of the memoir "boom," prior to Jean Jacques Rousseau's *The Confessions* (1782), memoirs were frequently written (anonymously) by

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[151] William Gass, "The art of self: autobiography in an age of narcissism," *Harper's Magazine*, May 1994, *Gale Academic OneFile*. https://link-gale-com.proxy.lib.umich.edu/apps/doc/A15172961/AONE?u=umuser&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=d6b57ba1 (accessed February 2, 2024).
[152] Benjamin Kunkel, "Misery Loves a Memoir," *The New York Times*, July 16, 2006, https://www.nytimes.com/2006/07/16/books/review/16kunkel.html.
[153] Brendan O'Neill, "Misery lit…read on," *BBC News*, April 17, 2007, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6563529.stm.
[154] "Sensational subjects don't always mask cheap literary goods, but they can bestow a veneer of quality upon writing simply by making it fascinating. … Even if one's life is fascinating, one must ensure that the expression of the facts, rather than the facts alone, justifies both the writing and the reading of the piece" Michael Milburn, "By Fact Alone: Sensationalism in Contemporary Nonfiction," *The Midwest Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2011): 62, 65.

prostitutes and other members of the demimonde and were "thought to be entertaining, but not literary and certainly not morally improving."[155] When Rousseau wrote *The Confessions*, however, he transformed the genre into "a literary account about higher issues" that "unite[d] the private life of the self to its public persona."[156] For centuries memoirs tended to fall into two categories: celebrity narratives of gossip and scandal, or edifying reflections from established writers and thinkers on their own lives, their growth as individuals, and their triumph over adversity—or, as critic Daniel Mendelsohn would have it, of suffering and redemption.[157]

However, in the 1990s and early 2000s, memoir, once the province of the accomplished and powerful, became a genre filled with the writings of everyday people who had survived exceptionally horrific experiences, such as childhood abuse and poverty, as well as addiction, sexual violence, and mental illness. Instead of relying on celebrities to produce memoirs, publishers turned memoir-writers into celebrities: the authors often participated in extensive promotion for their book, appearing in magazines, on radio shows, and most importantly, on daytime television, particularly *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, where they would describe what they had endured and the lessons they had learned.[158] This boom and the rise in so-called "misery memoirs," was, Anne Roth writes, "largely a result of [the genre's] reorganization around trauma."[159] Some of the bestsellers of this time, such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), received both critical acclaim and the praise of general audiences, but many were considered salacious, self-indulgent, and poorly written, "construct[ing] a melodrama of suffering and

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[155] Julie Rak, *Boom!: Manufacturing Memoir for the Popular Market* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2013), 5.
[156] Rak, *Boom!*, 5-6.
[157] Daniel Mendelsohn, "But Enough About Me," *The New Yorker*, January 17, 2010, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/01/25/but-enough-about-me-2.
[158] Anne Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 87-88.
[159] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 87.

redemption around ethically simplified conflicts of good verses evil embodied in the characters of villain and victim, and [relying] on kitsch's clichés and tropes to arouse teary-eyed sentiment in readers."[160]

In some ways, these critiques are not unlike those lodged against the genre in which "Emily Doe" was writing: the victim impact statement. Reading Miller's statement entirely within its original generic context of a legal document overlooks its mass dissemination into popular culture as a piece of testimonial life writing, as well as its engagement with the rhetorical genre of the survivor's reassurance to other survivors, but it is worth noting that the genre's reliance on feeling, its purpose of "arous[ing] teary-eyed sentiment," has been seen as in conflict with attempts to seek true justice. Madison Kemph, for instance, has argued that the powerful effect of Emily Doe's "raw and deeply felt" statement suggests that "it is worth reconsidering whether victim impact statements should still be allowed at sentencing."[161] Kemph suggests that such statements may prejudice judges and juries by focusing on the victim's feelings over the facts of the case. In reference to another case, law professor Susan A. Bandes even describes victim impact statements as "emotional manipulation" and explains that such statements "can make jurors so eager to punish that they search for evidence to validate their anger and ignore evidence in the defendant's favor."[162] In particular, some fear that "penal populism," which "cast[s] the justice system as overly lenient and offenders as irredeemable or monstrous," may be

[160] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 88.
[161] Madison Kemph, "Reconsidering the Use of Victim Impact Evidence," *The Georgetown Journal of Legal Ethics*, 31 (2017): 673.
[162] Susan A. Bandes, "What Are Victim-Impact Statements For?" *Atlantic*, July 23, 2016, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/07/what-are-victim-impact-statements-for/492443/.

strengthened by the "agitation" stoked by feminists advocating for more punitive responses to violence against women.[163]

It is certainly undeniable that Doe's statement drew the sympathy of many (survivors and nonsurvivors alike) who used her words and experience to reinscribe carceral solutions that center white victimhood and white womanhood. Yet to entirely dismiss the power of arousing sentiment—whether in memoir, in testimony, or in a victim impact statement—as merely or primarily a force of irrational injustice would be misguided. The forging of genuinely important sympathetic connections between survivors, the intimate public elicited by the circulation of feeling through and alongside Miller's writing, has provided a potentially life-saving intervention to many of those in need of it. By becoming an object of sentimental identification through her statement, "Emily Doe" enabled a public of survivors to feel seen, recognized by another survivor and the public at large. In the telling of her story and the feeling of her emotions, they might even feel as if they were telling and feeling their own.

Still, the concerns about sentimentality that I describe above offer essential insight into the limitations that arise when the category of rape survivor is constructed and maintained through the promise of shared feeling. When I claim that Miller's statement and her memoir must be understood within the context of the memoir, I therefore make this argument understanding that the genre of memoir participates in a project of sentimentality that has served as a tool for establishing and maintaining social hierarchies, while also helping to define survivorship (of many kinds of violence) in American mass culture.

In order to demonstrate Miller's participation in that project of sentimentality, I will now look more closely at the rhetorical strategies she used to evoke an affective response from fellow

[163] Nickie D. Phillips and Nicholas Chagnon, "'Six Months is a Joke': Carceral Feminism and Penal Populism in the Wake of the Stanford Sexual Assault Case," *Feminist Criminology*, 15 no. 1 (2020): 57.

survivors, thereby creating the anonymized and generalized idea of a rape survivor around whom a broad public could coalesce.

Survival as affect: an intimate public of survivors

Miller's statement is notable both for its forceful reprobation of Turner—addressing him directly on multiple occasions—and for its visceral descriptions of Miller's experiences, and it opens with a sentence that exemplifies these qualities: "You don't know me, but you've been inside me, and that's why we're here today."[164] It is a startling and powerful opening, yet the statement ends in a strikingly different tone, with a direct address to "girls everywhere" that harnesses the promise of sentimental identification to encourage the circulation of a feeling of solidarity. The passage reads:

> To girls everywhere, I am with you. On nights when you feel alone, I am with you. When people doubt you or dismiss you, I am with you. I fought everyday for you. So never stop fighting, I believe you. As the author Anne Lamott once wrote, "Lighthouses don't go running all over an island looking for boats to save; they just stand there shining." Although I can't save every boat, I hope that by speaking today, you absorbed a small amount of light, a small knowing that you can't be silenced, a small satisfaction that justice was served, a small assurance that we are getting somewhere, and a big, big knowing that you are important, unquestionably, you are untouchable, you are beautiful, you are to be valued, respected, undeniably, every minute of every day, you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you. To girls everywhere, I am with you.[165]

Here we see Miller making the promise of the rape survivor, saying *you are not alone*. This powerful ending (I still get goosebumps every time I read it) looks past the courtroom, past Brock Turner and Judge Aaron Persky, in order to speak to an audience that, inasmuch as it feels addressed by the words, may be understood as an intimate public.

[164] Miller, *Know My Name*, 333.
[165] Miller, *Know My Name*, 357.

What is this public and what characteristics is it presumed to have? What fantasy of affective continuity binds it? From Miller's words, it is evident that it is an intimate public that is framed as already recognizing themselves in her description of "girls everywhere," girls who sometimes "feel alone," who may be doubted or dismissed, who are already "fighting." In other words, the public Miller conjures into being in this moment is a public of girls who have been or will be victimized and misunderstood, but who still push on, a public that I am calling sexual assault and/or rape survivors. It is a public bound by the *feeling* of having-survived-rape. It is also a sentimental public, one in which the expression of feeling becomes its own form of solidarity.

A few comments from survivors regarding Miller's statement illustrate my point. In the comments section of article posted on *Jezebel*—a commercial website that winkingly describes itself in its tagline as "supposedly feminist" and publishes an assortment of articles daily on topics ranging from popular culture, politics, entertainment, celebrity gossip, and beauty—one user explains that while Turner's sentence seems minimal, her own rapist never saw a day in jail.[166] Quoting one of the lines from the statement ("My damage was internal, unseen, I carry it with me. You took away my worth, my privacy, my energy, my time, my safety, my intimacy, my confidence, my own voice, until today"), Kendra comments, "This. So much. Every word of this I feel, like a real physical sensation in my body."[167] By excerpting Miller, Kendra amplifies the affective power of her words while simultaneously suggesting a connection between herself and Miller (or, rather, Doe) as survivors who, despite differing circumstances, nevertheless share

[166] Kendra Forrest, June 3, 2016 4:20 PM, "Comment on," Stassa Edwards, "Ex-Stanford Swimmer Gets 6 Month Sentence for Rape Despite Victim Requesting 'Proper Punishment,'" *Jezebel*, June 3, 2016, https://jezebel.com/1780421894. Most commenters on *Jezebel* seem to use a pseudonym; however, because these commenters likely did not anticipate their words being used in an academic project, I only used comments from accounts that did not "link out" to any more personal profiles or details.
[167] Forrest, "Comment on."

something at the level of the body—something that Miller/Doe has been uniquely able to express. Another user, referring to the statement's emphatic distinction between rape and promiscuity ("rape is the absence of promiscuity, rape is the absence of consent"), explains, "I have often struggled to express this concept, writing/speaking for paragraphs to attempt an explanation of what I mean, and this is it, *precisely*."[168] By highlighting the accuracy of Miller's description, which gives voice to something they themselves have "struggled to express," they validate her rhetorical skill and authority while also expressing a sense of connectedness through her invocation of the feeling(s) of surviving sexual assault. Such comments show how the statement positioned itself, successfully, as a conduit for the kind of feelings survivors feel.

In fact, by drawing on Lamott's metaphor of the lighthouse, Miller positions her account of sexual violence as a form of outreach to others, one in which her "light" not only touches but is internalized by others: "by speaking today" she hopes others will have "absorbed a small amount of light." Rather than simple absorption, however, we see something more akin to resonance, not only in the sense of a sympathetic response, but also in its more scientific sense, as a "reinforcement or prolongation of sound by reflection or by the synchronous vibration of a surrounding space or a neighbouring object."[169] In this intimate public of survivors, Miller's affective power is prolonged through repetition by and resonance with her readers, whose own feelings may in fact be shaped through—and are evidently articulated by— Miller's.

Note that this passage from Miller's statement does not *only* address survivors. By speaking to "girls everywhere" (and not, for instance, to "survivors everywhere") Miller also

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[168] HaHaYouFool, June 3, 2016 4:01 PM), "Comment on" Stassa Edwards, "Ex-Stanford Swimmer Gets 6 Month Sentence for Rape Despite Victim Requesting 'Proper Punishment,'" *Jezebel*, June 3, 2016, https://jezebel.com/1780415982.

[169] *OED Online*, s.v. "resonance, n.," accessed May 08, 2020, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/resonance_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

addresses nonsurvivors who feel that they, by virtue of their gender ("girls"), have a particular relationship to the experience of rape and sexual victimization. We can see a similar sentiment in the works of many feminist scholars over the years: from Susan Brownmiller, who in 1975 wrote that rape "is nothing less than a conscious process of intimidation by which *all men* keep *all women* in a state of fear"[170] to philosopher Kate Manne, whose *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (2017) claims that rape is a tool of misogyny directed at women who threaten the patriarchal status quo.[171] In *Rethinking Rape* (2001), Ann Cahill specifically notes that she is "interested in rape as an embodied experience of *women*," citing statistics that "rape is a crime disproportionately committed against women."[172] Cahill claims that rape is "a means of social sexual differentiation" and therefore "women will experience individual acts of rape in a qualitatively different way than men will."[173] What all of these theorists have in common is an assumption that women are not only particularly vulnerable to rape—as reliable statistics confirm—but that women's phenomenological experience of rape differs from men's *because of* their gender.

Susan Brison's account of her own rape, which I discussed in the Introduction, offers a helpful formulation of this idea when she writes that girls in our society experience a "kind of prememory of what, at times, seems almost inevitable: one's own future experience of being raped. Postmemories (of other women's rapes) are transmuted into prememories (of one's own future rape) through early and ongoing socialization of girls and women, and both inflect the actual experiences and memories of rape survivors."[174] When Chanel Miller speaks to "girls

[170] Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1993), 15.
[171] Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2017).
[172] Ann Cahill, *Rethinking Rape* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 109.
[173] Cahill, *Rethinking* Rape, 121-122.
[174] Brison, *Aftermath*, 87.

everywhere," then, she is speaking to a public versed in the gendered experience of facing *or* fearing sexual violence, a public intimately familiar with the experience sexual violence, even if it is not (yet) their own experience. And she is speaking in a way that is meant to elicit feelings of sorrow, anger, pride, recognition, and most importantly, belonging. The generic reassurance she offers, then, exceeds its conventional context: she is not a survivor talking to another survivor, she is a survivor speaking to the world, inviting others to feel addressed by her.

The responses that Miller received in the form of emails and letters make it apparent that readers had deeply embodied reactions to what they'd read. She reveals that "almost every message I received opened with someone telling me the location of where they were crying," messages such as "I wept for your pain and wept for your triumphs" and "I feel sick to my stomach after reading your article" and "I may or may not have almost thrown up at work given my ability to relate to a lot of it."[175] All of these messages, even those that do not make explicit mention of being a survivor, are not merely sympathetic, but sympathetic at the level of the body, manifested in tears, nausea, and even vomit. Moreover, the sharing of these sympathetic reactions works in some ways to redeem them, to make them useful by transforming them into an act of solidarity. By crying with/for "Emily Doe," these respondents mark themselves as part of the public whom she addresses and in whom she attempts to evoke a sense of solidarity. *I am with you,* she tells them, and their tears say that they are with her too.

The statement thus opened a rich space of affective connection, one full of reciprocal addresses between Miller and many members of an intimate public. Not only did readers resonate with Miller's words but Miller resonated with the responses of her readers. In an interview with Nylah Burton, Miller mentions the "many unnamed survivors" who wrote letters

[175] Miller, *Know My Name*, 246-247.

and "confessed their own stories" to her, saying that in times of difficulty, "Those letters sustained me ...While writing, every time I got stuck, I would just pull out a few and they would remind me why I was doing this and tell me to keep going. So it's these survivors that have propelled me forward."[176] By emphasizing how the letters "sustained" her, motivating her to continue work on her memoir, Miller draws attention to the audience whose reaction to the statement most affected her, the audience for whom she understands herself to be writing the memoir. If resonance here refers to a feeling of being sustained through reflection, then we can see this type of resonance at work in the interplay between the original statement, the words and feelings of respondents, and Miller's own responses in the memoir and elsewhere. The feeling being sustained, in this case, is the feeling of being a survivor, of belonging to a group that identifies with and cares about other survivors.

I use the word "survivor" deliberately. Miller's statement invites readers to attend to the feeling of being a survivor, not only the bodily sensations and the psychological toll of victimhood, but also, importantly, a positive and transformative vision of survivorship, one in which "girls everywhere," whether they know it or not, are in possession of strength and power and resilience. In a statement published in *Glamour* after Emily Doe was named Woman of the Year, Miller wrote, "Victims are not victims, not some fragile sorrowful aftermath. Victims are survivors, and survivors are going to be doing a hell of a lot more than surviving."[177] To a degree, this statement echoes the anti-victim neoliberalism that Rebecca Stringer has critiqued, writing that "the ''victim problem' is repeatedly linked to the psychology of resentment,

[176] Nylah Burton, "Sexual Assault Survivor Chanel Miller Opens Up About Reclaiming Her Power and Defining Herself," *Shondaland*, September 27, 2019, https://www.shondaland.com/inspire/books/a29255443/chanel-miller-new-book/.
[177] "Stanford Sexual Assault Case Survivor Emily Doe Speaks Out," *Glamour*, November 1, 2016, https://www.glamour.com/story/women-of-the-year-emily-doe.

construed not only as an inability to let go of suffering, but as a pathological psychological attachment to suffering."[178] Stringer identifies a postfeminist trend that arose in the 1990s and early 2000s, wherein thinkers on both the right and the left warned of the dangers of "citizens tak[ing] up victim identity instead of taking personal responsibility."[179] In this construct, to identify with victimhood was thought to be irresponsible and psychologically harmful, a sign that one is holding on to the past and refusing to move on, perhaps even choosing to be permanently disabled by trauma. The near-inescapable pressure to "move on" from the experience of rape requires rape victims to perform resilience, forgiveness, and healing to prove that they can still be productive members of the capitalist order.

Miller's *Glamour* quote also underscores the implications of the victim impact statement's closing rallying cry: a call to "girls everywhere" to recognize themselves in the descriptions of vulnerability, strength, solidarity, and survival. Those who did recognize themselves, or perhaps merely wished to, were then inspired to match her tone, often quoting her very words, as they told their own stories or described their own feelings. *You are not alone* was no longer a unidirectional reassurance, a standard response within an interpersonal interaction; it was now a promise echoing back and forth between individuals. Survivorship—in contrast to victimhood, as Miller's comments for *Glamour* make explicit—thus became about participating in this affirming affective project. At the end of this chapter, I will discuss this distinction between survivorship and victimhood further. For now, however, I merely want to emphasize

[178] Rebecca Stringer, *Knowing Victims: Feminism, Agency and Victim Politics in Neoliberal Times* (London: Routledge, 2014), 11.
[179] Stringer, *Knowing Victims*, 3. This trend is postfeminist inasmuch as it relies on a neoliberal reaction to feminist progress, whether that means believing that feminism has "finished" its work (women are no longer systemically discriminated against) or that it has gone too far in allowing women to blame society on their failings rather than personal choices. In *Knowing Victims*, Stringer argues against this framework, suggesting that victimhood can be a productive political identification and a source of social and cultural connectedness that highlights the faults in society, not the "problems" of individuals.

that Miller's statement engenders positive affective sympathies between those who have been made to feel fundamentally disconnected from others and even from themselves, such that the mere sharing of the statement becomes a way of building sentimental solidarity amongst thousands of people, if not more.

As I've already mentioned, rape and other forms of intimate gendered violence can be uniquely isolating experiences, with survivors both experiencing ostracization and distancing themselves from others. They are often, as Miller rightly points out, made to feel alone, but isolation can also be a method of self-protection. In her theorization of rape, Cahill argues that the central harm of rape is that one person exploits and violates the porous boundaries between humans. Bodies are not independent and impermeable but the ideal relation between bodies is one of intersubjectivity, wherein it is a mutual exchange when bodies interact, whether in the form of a handshake, a hug, a shared elevator, or intercourse. To penetrate a body without that mutuality is to impose one's subjectivity on someone else, thereby denying the victim's subjectivity, "a threat to the possibility of the bodily integrity of women, and therefore as a threat to her personhood."[180] A victim, having experienced a violation of the boundaries of social interaction in which her agency and her body were pried apart, may be understandably wary of others: so while society puts walls around the survivor, the survivor also puts walls around herself, a necessary measure for safety. As Miller explains, "What I never say out loud is that rape makes you want to turn into wood, hard and impenetrable. The opposite of a body that is meant to be tender, porous, soft."[181] To not feel alone in your feelings, to believe that your feelings are themselves an act not only of empowerment but of connection—all of this helps one to not feel so very much like wood. That is the power of an intimate public, and it is a testament

[180] Cahill, *Rethinking Rape*, 10.
[181] Miller, *Know My Name*, 263.

to Miller's efficacy and power as a writer that she was able to motivate so many to participate in this show of affective solidarity, connecting with her and one another through their responses to the statement. Yet, as I will discuss next, the assumption of emotional continuity that underpins this intimate public—and of the identity of "the" survivor—depends on the exclusion of those who may be most isolated.

Going viral: anger, algorithms, and whiteness

In the previous section, I showed how a survivor's intimate public can form, as well as how affect circulates through it, but I have thus far failed to consider one crucial fact: that this public formed not around Chanel Miller but rather around an anonymous young woman known only as Emily Doe. The affective solidarity at play in this instance relied on a figure of sentimental identification. As I will argue, the racial anonymity of that figure enabled readers to respond to her as a white woman, a white victim, whose suffering garnered not only sympathy but also feelings of protectiveness and anger, feelings that provoked not merely the circulation of words and affects, but also sparked a political response rooted in carceral logics.

Within hours of being posted, Emily Doe's victim impact statement received thousands and then hundreds of thousands of views.[182] Two weeks later, it had been read and shared more than fifteen million times.[183] In other words, it went viral: it was posted and reposted on Facebook, Twitter, and other forms of social media; it was republished in several major media outlets, including the *New York Times*; and it received multiple public, high-profile responses,

[182] Miller, *Know My* Name, 246.
[183] Soraya Chemaly, "Why Did Judge Aaron Persky's Stanford Rape Decision Go Viral?" *Rolling Stone*, June 16, 2016, https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/why-did-judge-aaron-perskys-stanford-rape-decision-go-viral-76507/.

including an open letter from then-Vice President Joe Biden.[184] To speak of sexual violence in that moment was to conjure the statement, which became a flashpoint, and a shorthand, for discussing what U.S. Representative Cheri Bustos called a "horrible, horrible epidemic" of rape on college campuses and sexual assault more generally.[185] To speak of survivors was to summon the specter of Emily Doe, and to speak of Emily Doe was to conjure "the" generic rape survivor.

When I call the statement's transmission "viral," I do more than simply point out that it was read broadly and received significant attention, that Emily Doe was a figure of international interest. "Virality" carries with it the bodily connotations of its epidemiological origin. Note, for instance, the above use of "epidemic" to describe the phenomenon of widespread and underreported sexual assault in the U.S.; though not a disease or an illness, rape is nevertheless a public health crisis, an epidemic that is understood to be embodied. Kris Cohen describes online virality as "the spread of little intensities," which, "once disseminated across a number of people and aggregated, for instance, as meme … are said to have become culturally significant."[186] These "little intensities," essentially affective responses, are generated and propagated through human action and algorithmic curation alike (and in tandem).

Mark Wood, Evelyn Rose, and Chrissy Thompson make a similar point in their discussion of what they evocatively term "affective contagion," another phrase that draws on the epidemiological in order to describe a virtual phenomenon.[187] Beyond being emotionally compelling, an object such as Doe's statement becomes affectively contagious when its

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[184] Tom Namako, "Joe Biden Writes an Open Letter to Stanford Survivor," *BuzzFeed News*, June 9, 2016, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/tomnamako/joe-biden-writes-an-open-letter-to-stanford-survivor.
[185] Jasmine Aguilera, "House Members Unite to Read Stanford Rape Victim's Letter," *New York Times*, June 16, 2016, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/17/us/politics/congress-stanford-letter.html.
[186] Kris Cohen, *Never Alone, Except for Now: Art, Networks, Populations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 94.
[187] Mark Wood, Evelyn Rose, and Chrissy Thompson, "Viral Justice? Online Justice-Seeking, Intimate Partner Violence and Affective Contagion," *Theoretical Criminology*, 23, no. 3 (2019): 377.

circulation "generates intense responses" by engendering a "sense of connectedness" amongst those who are circulating it.[188] Discussing a selfie that went viral in 2015, in which a woman who'd experienced intimate partner violence displays the injuries her boyfriend inflicted on her, Wood et al. explain that part of what made this particular image affectively contagious was the shared "vigilante sentiment" among many viewers, the desire to seek justice outside the law, which was felt to have failed the young woman in this case.[189] This shared sentiment accrued affective intensity over time, with each retweet and repost working to incite anger and a desire for a particular mode of justice in those who saw it. Yet, just as Cohen claims of virality, Wood et al. say that affective contagion is also shaped by "algorithmic gatekeepers that filter the content social media users receive according to varying weight measures."[190] In other words, the more people who click on and/or "like," for instance, an article on Facebook, the more Facebook shows that article in people's feeds, which thus allows more people to see, click, and "like" it.

Moreover, Jonathan Cohn has shown that these "algorithmic gatekeepers" are not arbitrary or neutral; rather, they shape contemporary understandings of race, gender, and class, "privileg[ing] white heteromasculinity as not just the dominant but the best identity."[191] In promising to show us more of what we desire, recommendation algorithms simultaneously "define and shape our desires, our decisions, and ourselves."[192] Users may subvert and repurpose the expectations attached to recommendation algorithms, of course, and recommendations in particular are messy and occasionally fail spectacularly, but Cohn makes it clear that such algorithms are deeply embedded in contemporary society, near-invisibly shaping our options, our

[188] Wood, et al., "Viral Justice," 384.
[189] Wood, et al., "Viral Justice," 384.
[190] Wood, et al., "Viral Justice," 382.
[191] Jonathan Cohn, *The Burden of Choice: Recommendations, Subversions, and Algorithmic Culture* (Rutgers University Press, 2019), 6.
[192] Cohn, *The Burden of Choice*, 7.

choices, and ourselves. In a similar vein, Safiya Umoja Noble's work on search engines makes the case that algorithms reinforce racism. One illustrative example is how a Google search for "black girls" yields results on the first page such as "Black Booty on the Beach" and "Sugary Black Pussy."[193] She finds that "racism and sexism are part of the architecture and language of technology"; when algorithms produce sexist and anti-Black results, it is "not just a glitch in the system but, rather, is fundamental to the operating system of the web."[194]

Algorithmic barriers and social prejudices alongside lack of familiarity with online norms can circumscribe the reach of any given website or online document. While Doe's letter racked up views, any number of stories of rapes go unheard. In case studies of three different women who used the internet to share their experiences with sexual assault, Michael Salter finds that not all girls and women have equal access to the resources of new technologies, nor are their stories all equally likely to circulate broadly, even within feminist and anti-rape circles, and thereby be lent the weight of public opinion or solidarity. In one of the cases Salter analyzes, an older woman calling herself Georgia Grimes created a blog in 2005 to publicize her claims of being gang raped in 1962 by members of a fraternity; however, her blog received minimal attention compared to cases involving younger women, particularly those with greater social media literacy (e.g., familiarity with Twitter, hashtags, crossposting), and in 2013 the blog was deleted following legal threats from those it named as rapists.[195] Consequently, Salter concludes that the "lack of public or counter-public interest in her account left Georgia differentially vulnerable to the enforcement of the dominant legal view of her speech as libel."[196] Whether hindered by

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[193] Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (NYU Press, 2016), 64.
[194] Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression*, 9-10.
[195] Michael Salter, "Justice and Revenge in Online Counter-Publics: Emerging Responses to Sexual Violence in the Age of Social Media," *Crime Media Culture* 9, no. 3 (2013): 234-237.
[196] Salter, "Justice and Revenge," 237.

algorithmic gatekeepers, a cultural obsession with youth, or some combination of the two, Georgia Grimes did not receive the kind of affective sentimental solidarity that Doe did. Few, if any, reassured her that she was not alone, and, for all intents and purposes, it seems she was.

The metaphor of virality, then, is in some ways no metaphor at all. Like an infectious virus, the replication and spread of which is encoded in its DNA, viral content is not simply spread by people deliberately sharing it with each other; it spreads because its purpose is to spread and because it exists in conditions which encourage its spread. At the same time, like a virus, its spread is not an entirely random or neutral process. As we have seen with the COVID-19 pandemic's spread in the United States, structural barriers and systemic racism have affected the course the virus has taken, with studies showing that (at least prior to the release and subsequently politicization of the COVID-19 vaccine) Black and Latinx people were contracting and dying of the virus at several times the rate of white people.[197] Virality, whether epidemiological or technological, relies on a number of factors that often result in the privileging of white, wealthy bodies.

So, then, we may ask: If not all stories of rape go viral, why did Emily Doe's statement go viral? It is impossible to determine every factor or to know how algorithms factored into its spread, but I count four main features that may have set the stage for the statement's virality. The first factor is that the content and language of the letter is truly powerful, affecting, and, as I discussed in the previous section, capable of stoking and shaping the feelings of its readers to create a sense of solidarity. The second critical factor is that the case involved a high-profile university (Stanford) and a high-profile offender (an Olympic hopeful), details that make for eye-catching headlines and highly trafficked Tweets. As memoirist Lacy Crawford explains in a

[197] Donald J. Alcendor, "Racial Disparities-Associated COVID-19 Mortality among Minority Populations in the US," *Journal of Clinical Medicine* 9 no. 8 (2020). https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm9082442.

poignant but tongue-in-cheek piece for the *New York Times* entitled "How to Sell Your Rape Memoir," "media gatekeepers" are "much more likely to pay attention if A) your assaulter is someone famous and powerful or B) the rape took place on the grounds of an elite institution."[198] The third factor that influenced the statement's virality is that it was posted on *BuzzFeed*, a website that, particularly in the 2010s, turned producing viral content into the basis of its business model, regularly posting listicles and personality quizzes as well as celebrity gossip, breaking news, and investigative journalism. Using social media and branding, as well as tapping into its regular readership, *BuzzFeed* could promote an online object well beyond what a personal blog could do. The fourth factor, and the one I will discuss for the rest of this section, is that as an unknown entity, Emily Doe was a racially anonymous figure, a quality that I believe lent her the presumption of whiteness.

The white girl as *the* figure of sentimental identification in American literature is perhaps most famously embodied by Little Eva from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the young white girl whose angelic nature touches the heart of enslaved and enslaver alike.[199] As Robin Bernstein notes, Little Eva is the "archetype" of the "white and sinless" sentimental heroine of the nineteenth century.[200] With this statement, Bernstein draws on Ann Douglas's argument in *The Feminization of American Culture* that "Little Eva gains her force not through what she does, not

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[198] Lacy Crawford, "How to Sell Your Rape Memoir," *New York Times*, July 6, 2020. https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/06/opinion/lacy-crawford-memoir-rape.html.

[199] Though it was known Emily Doe was not literally a child, because she was a young woman in her early 20s, particularly one who (as I am suggesting) was read as white, I do think she may have been strategically afforded the innocence of girlhood. Robin Bernstein characterizes childhood as performance, noting that adult bodies can be "effigies that surrogate adulthood," as when adult men on trial are referred to as "boys," asserting their embodied innocence as a strategy for arguing their legal innocence. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 24. Note also that Miller herself invited people reading her statement to understand her as a girl; after all, she addressed "girls everywhere" as her implicit peers, not "women everywhere."

[200] Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 6.

even through what she is, but through what she does and is to us, the readers."[201] Douglas suggests that Little Eva inspires not simply sentimentality but sentimental identification; her significance can be located in her ability to affect us, and to do so not despite but *because* her characteristics and her death are "essentially decorative," stirring feeling and drawing tears without markedly affecting the plot or striking a blow against slavery within the novel.[202] Who is the "us" in this formulation, however? Eva's tragedy, her popularity, and her innocence are tied to her white femininity and the ability of (many white, female) readers to identify with her tender feelings and her ability to cause us to contemplate our own tender feelings. "Her only real demand on her readers," Douglas explains sharply, "is for self-indulgence."[203] Bernstein elaborates on this self-indulgence, showing how the material culture surrounding *Uncle Tom's Cabin* encouraged, even scripted, the production of that "teary-eyed sentiment" so loathsome to critics today.[204]

The ability of the innocent, tender, tragic white girl to prick "our" emotions relies on other identities being co-constructed as not innocent, not worthy of sympathy. Bernstein describes how this occurs in her history of how innocence came to be identified with *white* childhood and how, by excluding Black children from innocence, American culture sought to exclude them from the category of child altogether. Importantly, innocence included the ability to *feel,* to be tender, both in the literal sense of feeling pain and in the emotional sense that Schuller describes as impressibility.[205] As such, Black children were deemed less worthy of sympathy and less deserving of protection. Moreover, while white girls could be seen as

[201] Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 3.
[202] Douglas, *Feminization*, 4.
[203] Douglas, *Feminization*, 4.
[204] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 69-91.
[205] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 35-36.

"fundamentally innocent of sexual desire … a fully present, embodied state of purity"—that is, while their tender bodies precluded them from innate sinfulness—Black girls "were assumed to be ineligible for sexual purity."[206] They too were understood as embodied, but their bodies were insensate, lascivious, and ultimately inhuman.

Chanel Miller is not Black, and I will discuss her Chinese American identity shortly, but it is impossible to discuss the history and politics of white womanhood without referencing the work of Black feminists, who have long argued that white girls and women's association with the categories of femininity, vulnerability, and innocence was produced in contrast to, and through the exclusion of, Black girls and women. In 1851, Sojourner Truth gave her now-famous "Ain't I A Woman?" speech, where, confronting white abolitionists with the idea that the strength she'd been forced to show due to enslavement did not exclude her from womanhood, nor did it mean she did not "cr[y] out in a mother's grief" when her children were sold into slavery.[207] Ida B. Wells documented the long history of whites lynching Black men for supposedly raping innocent white women, when, as her studies found, few of these men were ever even accused of rape and "in every incident in which white women were said to have been assaulted, the facts had actually been distorted out of recognition."[208] Wells herself faced threats of lynching for daring to suggest that white women often consensually took Black men as lovers; she showed that it was rarely the actual sexual experiences of white women that mattered, but rather, as Vron Ware puts it, "white womanhood as an ideological component of American racism."[209] Meanwhile, Black women were regularly raped with impunity by white men, and the obsession with preserving the purity of white

[206] Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, 39-42.
[207] "Sojourner Truth: Ain't I A Woman?" National Park Service, Accessed February 26, 2024, https://www.nps.gov/articles/sojourner-truth.htm#.
[208] Vron Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (New York: Verso, 1992), 181.
[209] Ware, *Beyond the Pale*, 197.

womanhood served as a cover for the violence enacted upon Black women. As Dorothy Roberts succinctly summarizes, "The nineteenth-century image of the True Woman was delicate, refined, and chaste. … All of her attributes were precisely the opposite of those that characterized Black women."[210] She goes on to show how assumptions about "Black women's sexual impurity" fed into increased criminalization, incarceration, and death for Black women; how it condemned them as unfit mothers, treated them as chattel to be bred, and used them as subjects for medical experimentation.[211]

Kimberle Crenshaw's foundational articles on intersectionality show that the law itself can read white women as victims of oppression but leaves women of color, and especially Black women, undefended. She also explains that, when it comes to violence against women, the "violence that many women experience is often shaped by other dimensions of their identities, such as race and class," yet "contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities of women of color."[212] That is to say, white women are explicitly and implicitly centered within feminist and reformist circles, making the experiences of white women much more visible than those of women of color.[213] Their victimhood is taken more seriously. This point is made with startling frankness in a blog post written by Jamilah

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[210] Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, rev. ed. (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2014), 10.
[211] Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 11.
[212] Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43 no. 6 (July 1991), 1241-1299.
[213] Though I am not here discussing antiracist discourses, we can see an attempt to address such erasure within that context in the rise of the #SayHerName hashtag and movement, which was launched in 2014 to bring visibility and justice to the many Black girls and women who have been victims of police violence. On the initiative's official page, it challenges the more popular #BlackLivesMatter hashtag and movement, which has historically oriented itself around the deaths of men, by noting that "including Black women and girls in police violence and gender violence discourses sends the powerful message that indeed *all* Black lives matter." In another vein, journalist Gwen Ifill coined the memorable phrase "Missing White Woman Syndrome," highlighting the disparity in coverage of and concern for missing people of color compared to that of white women. David Robinson II (Missing White Woman Syndrome), interview with Juana Summers, *Consider This from NPR*, podcast audio, June 8, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/06/06/1180499403/.

Lemieux contemplating the differing reactions from whites and the media at large to Harvey Weinstein's victims versus R. Kelly's Black victims:

> This may offend my political connects, but I will admit that there is one element of white feminine identity that I wish me and my sisters could access: the ability to be valued as that delicate flower of womanhood that is only seen in fields of white. I want the world to see red and want blood when we have been harmed, or, at the very least, I'd like for our abuse to inspire the sort of performative compassion and outrage afforded the women who have spared so little for me and mine.[214]

Given these differences in how victims of color versus white victims are perceived, I am suggesting that Emily Doe's anonymity allowed white readers, including many of those who mobilized in response to her case, to read her as white and therefore more readily identify with her pain, take umbrage at her sexual violation, and make legal changes to protect her (or at least girls like her). Though I have thus far argued that the statement encouraged readers to understand their affective responses as an act of solidarity in and of itself, the virality of the statement also mobilized the kind of response it failed to have as a legal document: it encouraged readers to ask for a harsher penalty for Turner, or, failing that, for perpetrators like Turner, and it spurred some to support punishing the judge for his perceived failure to respond appropriately to the affective power of the document.

These legal changes were largely supported by Miller (as she details in her memoir), but the heart of her critique of rape culture in the statement is not answered by these punitive measures. How does instilling a new mandatory minimum for some rapists help Brock Turner "get it"?[215] How can removing a single judge from the bench address the fundamental alienation of a rape

[214] Jamilah Lemieux, "Weinstein, White Tears and the Boundaries of Black Women's Empathy," *Cassius*, November 2, 2017, https://cassiuslife.com/33564/white-women-dont-look-out-for-black-victims/.
[215] Miller, *Know My Name*, 354.

victim within the court system? And why did the cultural momentum created by the statement turn almost exclusively toward carceral solutions?

This last question has been partially answered by Ashley Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann in their study of the response to the Turner case, which was written prior to Miller's revelations about her identity and with the assumption that Doe is a white woman. They argue that the efforts to recall Judge Persky following the mass public outrage regarding Brock Turner's sentence reflect not simply an affective response—not simply tears, nausea, sympathy, and frustration that bound together an intimate public of survivors—but it was a specifically *white* affective response, one that took for granted the righteousness of its feelings and proposed solutions. They argue that those behind the recall comprised a "White intimate public … [that] mobilized through White rage in response to the judge's abdication of a paternal social contract."[216] While the affective power of the statement may account for much of its power, Mack and McCann claim that the campaign to recall Persky involved an implicitly raced intimate public that coalesced around a feeling of betrayal that the state had failed in its duty to protect its (also implicitly raced white) citizens. To such a public, incarceration seems a desirable solution and deterrent to sexual violence, but Mack and McCann argue that by demanding stronger and more punitive responses from the state, this white intimate public endangered those most vulnerable to incarceration, particularly people of color.

Terming this affect white rage, Mack and McCann explain that even when this public espouses supposedly just goals, such as supporting survivors of sexual violence, its outrage is in fact fueled by and props up white supremacy through the concept of white victimhood. Specifically, Mack and McCann seem to imply that despite the whiteness of both Persky and

[216] Ashely Noel Mack and Bryan J. McCann, "Recalling Persky: White Rage and Intimate Publicity After Brock Turner," *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43 no. 4 (2019), 373.

Turner, and even though much of the outcry about the sentence objected specifically to the way Turner's white privilege influenced his sentence, what is more important to the white public is the protection of white femininity. They ultimately describe the Turner case as that of "a privileged White man accused of raping a White woman," which "catalyzed a forceful response" in which anger was directed toward reshaping, reallocating, and strengthening state power, rather than dismantling it.[217] This "forceful response" may have critiqued white privilege as it benefited Turner, but in its turn to incarceration as a solution to sexual violence, Mack and McCann argue that this response also allowed white liberals and white feminists to shore up the power of white feminine victimhood.[218] By continuing to see the figure of the white woman (or girl) as the object of protection by the state, this white intimate public draws on and enforces entrenched white supremacist logics.

As I've already shown, far more than rage motivated Miller's supporters, so Mack and McCann's reading of the response to Doe's letter is overly, even uncharitably, narrow, but their intervention is nevertheless an important reminder that anti-rape activism requires skepticism toward policing and prisons. Not only are policing and prisons institutions of systemic racism and sites of pervasive sexual violence, but empowering the state's carceral arm often results in the criminalization of rape victims.[219] Mack and McCann also underscore my point that the assumed whiteness of Emily Doe served to engage a wide swath of people who, through participation in the public, could make the feelings that had been aroused (rage, yes, but also sympathy, grief, and recognition) seem meaningful, even useful. If Emily Doe had been known

[217] Mack and McCann, "Recalling Persky," 378.
[218] Mack and McCann, "Recalling Persky," 376. Of course, not only white people align with the objectives of whiteness.
[219] For more on the criminalization of survivors of gendered violence and the problems with relying on carceral solutions to solve that violence, see: Leigh Goodmark, *Imperfect Victims: Criminalized Survivors and the Promise of Abolition Feminism* (University of California Press, 2023).

to be a woman of color, the broad public response to her surely would have looked different; the sentimental response to her likely would not have been as powerful.[220] However, by remaining anonymous, Emily Doe's race was unmarked and therefore often read as white. Sometimes even those who knew her real name but had never seen her, such as a probation officer with whom she spoke, assumed she was white.[221] (The rape victim is also constructed of many rhetorical and everyday genres, including, it turns out, paperwork; in checking the ethnicity box for "white" on a routine form, the probation officer followed the conventions of the rape genre, which has reserved victimhood for white women, rather then asking Miller and challenging the genre.) As frustrating as this assumption was to Miller, however, she also clearly understood the potential benefits of racial anonymity when her statement went viral. In fact, her memoir reveals that she made strategic use of that anonymity so that the statement could have the impact that it did. Identity, she feared, would undermine the message's power to produce the feeling of solidarity that her statement sought to achieve.

For that reason, she envisioned the statement as "a room … for survivors to step into and speak their heaviest truths" without the potential barriers of her specific identity, understanding that the people coalescing around the statement were not necessarily doing so as women or Asian Americans but fellow survivors. This, she implies, is the most salient detail that binds them together, a shared experience or feeling that they can inhabit through the words of the statement, which in turn lends them new strength. Regarding the parole officer's marking her as white,

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[220] One survivor, Danielle Beavers, makes precisely this point when discussing her own reaction to the Emily Doe case for *USA Today*: "I think the anonymity of Emily Doe—not having a face, or a concrete name to pin to it—helped bring out that compassion from people. ... But I thought that if this was a black girl walking around Oakland, would it even have gotten written about in the paper?" Alia E. Dastigir, "Emily Doe's letter to Brock Turner: 1 year later, 5 survivors speak out on the letter that inspired millions," *USA Today*, June 2, 2017, https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/2017/06/02/emily-does-letter-brock-turner-1-year-later-5-women-speak-out/354824001/.

[221] Miller, *Know My Name*, 220.

Miller writes, “This single check mark was a testament to how little time she’d taken to know me, making the assumption I was white over the phone without bothering to ask,” but if to know Miller is to know (among other things), her race, then fostering a sense of felt solidarity required her not being known.[222] Being Emily Doe meant not being half Chinese.

Indeed, Miller’s comments in her memoir make it clear that Emily Doe’s anonymity allowed others to identify with her, to see themselves in her, regardless of race, age, appearance, and perhaps even gender. Yet there is something slippery in Miller’s move from the “distractions” of her “history, ethnicity, family” to the triumphant power of “How can you come after me, when it is all of us?”; something suggestive of what she feels must be sacrificed by individuals for an intimate public of survivors to flourish. Briefly but vividly, Miller explains, “The few that had discovered my identity had taken screenshots of my old spoken word videos, leaked with the caption, *Brock Turner has yellow fever. Wouldn’t put my nuts in her chink chute. Crazy gook. Asian women can’t handle their alcohol. Asian glow, red faced, lightweight, slut*.”[223] This racist litany reveals the stakes of Miller’s decision to remain anonymous in 2016—the kind of vitriol she wanted to avoid—and yet by tucking her comments about “distractions” within the room she’d created for survivors, she implies that her race may distract more than just rape apologists and Turner supporters. It might also distract those who might otherwise stand with her, including other survivors. Her race might prevent her from becoming a figure others can identify or sympathize with.

In her statement, Miller addressed what are broadly considered common traumas and barriers women face in response to sexual violence and the law: victim blaming, shaming, minimization of the harm inflicted, as well as experiences with depression, fear, and other

[222] Miller, *Know My Name*, 220.
[223] Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.

emotional reactions. She wrote of survivorship in terms of a generalized affect, the move from isolation to the promise of *you are not alone,* and with that solidarity a sense of triumph. However, none of the experiences she describes specifically address any of the racialized attacks and assumptions she faced as an Asian American woman in particular. "In my anonymity," Miller writes, "I tried on [other survivors'] lives and watched as they tried on mine."[224] In becoming Emily Doe, a life for others to try on, she became the idea of a survivor, a sentimental heroine in a contemporary tale.

Yet "the" survivor wasn't a role that Miller felt comfortable, or even capable of, playing forever. With her memoir, she reclaimed her identity, prioritized the importance of her racial background, acknowledged the complexity of her survival, and contextualized her story within a history of violent oppression. The specificity of her identity as a Chinese American woman, as well as the political context in which her assault and the media blitz that followed occurred, work to restructure responses to her rape, pushing readers to move beyond an identificatory orientation toward her and asking them to engage in a more expansive politics of solidarity.

Know her name: Chanel Miller, trauma culture, and the memoir genre

The "core character of popular trauma culture," Anne Rothe writes, is "the transition from the victim to the survivor."[225] In her discussion of popular literature, particularly memoir, and the daytime talk shows that promote that literature, Rothe calls the accounts of suffering and redemption marketed that are to American audiences "pornographic" and "voyeuristic."[226]

[224] Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.
[225] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 82.
[226] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 90, 95.

Regardless of the precisely type of trauma depicted (her book references accounts of abuse, addiction, and the Holocaust), Rothe writes,

> media spectacles of popular trauma culture remove these experiences of victimization and suffering from their socio-political contexts by reducing them to their smallest common denominator of a body in pain. They proclaim that, no matter what happens, whether genocide or child abuse or lesser evils, there will always be a happy ending when good wins over evil, victims become survivors, and perpetrators are punished.[227]

Moreover, as Leigh Gilmore has observed, trauma survivors are often compelled to share their stories in the form of testimony, including memoir: "Survivors of trauma are urged to testify repeatedly to their trauma in an effort to create the language that will manifest and contain trauma as well as witnesses who will recognize it."[228] Another way to frame this point is that trauma and the experience of survival have, at least in the contemporary, largely come to be known through the autobiographical.

Because memoir cannot be divorced from the expectation that it is a testimony of trauma, incidents in which memoirists have been found to have falsified details of their books have caused further scrutiny and criticism of the genre.[229] As Gilmore writes, memoirs are "testimonial projects [that] require subjects to … enter into a legalistic frame in which their efforts can move quickly beyond their control, become exposed as ambiguous, and therefore subject to judgments about their veracity and worth," leading some authors to "move away from

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[227] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 5.
[228] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 7.
[229] James Frey's bestselling and Oprah-endorsed *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Doubleday, 2005) is the most well-known example of a memoir that turned out to be more fiction than fact. For critics who have discussed the implications of generic and cultural demands of authenticity and confession, see: Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*; Timothy Dow Adams, *Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990); Simon Stern, "Sentimental Frauds," *Law & Social Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2011): 83-113; Christopher Grobe, *The Art of Confession: The Performance of Self from Robert Lowell to Reality TV* (New York: NYU Press, 2017); Patrick Hayes, "Intimate Memoirs," in *The Oxford History of Life Writing, Volume 7: Postwar to Contemporary, 1945-2020* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 191-223.

recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography's central questions."[230] For those who choose to write autobiographically about trauma, therefore, they must contend not only with assumptions regarding the literariness of their work but also about the truth of it.

Remarkably, Miller's memoir—despite being a widely-publicized book distributed in grocery stores and airport kiosks, whose author, like James Frey and Elizabeth Gilbert before her, sat down to speak with Oprah Winfrey and other interviewers to promote her bestseller—dodged most of the critical opprobrium that many memoirs with surface similarities may have encountered. In part, this may be because the latter half of the 2010s saw women being encouraged by the media to share their rape stories, particularly in the wake of #MeToo. Yet even with the context of #MeToo, many feminist still doubt the political and feminist value of rape narratives, even autobiographical ones. As one critic argues, "Becoming a product means being tied to the rules of the market, which makes sexual assault stories subject to the kind of evaluations that accompany any story: Is it fresh? What's the angle?"[231] Even if one can get published, is a survivor merely (wittingly or unwittingly) providing prurient details for nonsurvivors to linger over?[232] Or even simply arousing sentiment for the sake of sentiment? Are they just reinforcing what Rothe describes as "the gospel of trauma culture," which claims that "knowing a victim's story in every horrific detail will protect others from a similar experience, not because it contributes to legal convictions of perpetrators but because it teaches core life, or rather survival, lessons"?[233]

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[230] Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography*, 7.
[231] Sarah Liss, "Rape Memoirs: Our Other True Crime Obsession," November 2016, https://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2016/11/rape-memoirs-our-other-true-crime-obsession/.
[232] Liss, "Rape Memoirs."
[233] Rothe, *Popular Trauma Culture*, 89

I suggest that Miller's memoir escapes such harsh scrutiny for multiple reasons, including sheer literary skill.[234] Additionally, though the memoir is "about" trauma, Miller resists the trappings of the "misery memoir" by, as I will discuss in further detail below, using her memoir to center the societal and structural problems of racism and misogyny, including within the justice system, rather than focusing entirely on the "villainy" of Brock Turner. Thus, she connects her situation to broader societal issues, and challenges (though does not entirely eschew) the familiar narrative of the victim shedding her personal weakness to become the strong survivor.

In addition to these factors, I argue that Miller's ability to so successfully contextualize and politicize her experiences was possible because she was able to leverage the support she received as Doe, as well as the sentimental responses she inspired, in order to retell and reframe the story of Emily Doe as the story of Chanel Miller. In an Instagram post, Miller offers advice to readers on how to approach the memoir, and it is evident from what she writes that she expects her readers to also be survivors, or at least powerfully sympathetic to survivors. In a hand-drawn comic she tells readers is it okay, and even necessary, to takes breaks while reading the book, because it may be visceral and upsetting for them.[235] One panel depicts a crying woman with a cartoon heart sitting on her shoulder; the heart is also crying (Fig. 1.1). It is a sentimental image if there ever was one. The text reads, "As you read your body will be talking to you. From time to time it will tug on your sleeve, telling you it is panicked or scared or needs

[234] This is no guarantee of critical acceptance, however. As Gilmore writes of Kathryn Harrison's *The Kiss*, "Reviewers accused [Harrison] of marketing incest for profit and fame, exposing her own children to an impropriate story, and subjecting her family members (who are unnamed) in the memoir to unsought scrutiny. Unlike reviewers who accepted the factuality of Harrison's incest account, one critic faulted her for writing a memoir too aesthetically successful to stand as a believable index of injury." Leigh Gilmore, "Jurisdictions: *I, Rigoberta Menchù, The Kiss*, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma," *Signs* 28, no. 21 (2002), 695.
[235] Chanel Miller (@chanel_miller), "Thank you for reading 🤍," Instagram, December 7, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B5y3wdggKk8/?img_index=1.

to rest … and you will tend to it."[236] In this way, Miller again reaches readers at the level of the body, aware that her audience may be smaller but the defining characteristics of the intimate public whom she addresses remains unchanged. Moreover, by still framing her memoir within this framework of feeling and sentiment, Miller implicitly instructs readers to show sympathy to the complex and imperfect Chanel Miller as they did for the representative heroine of survival, Emily Doe. For the most part, it seems that her gambit was successful. Consider this comment (Fig. 1.2):

> This is so sweet. I'm saving this to share with my recovery group—we all have trauma and talk about ways to unpack it a little at a time so that we can make a gorgeous quilt out of our experiences; all of them. Our hearts are bigger and we're able to share and hold spaces for emotions when we've seen and muddle through the muck of the deep ravines of a life's journey. Thank you, thank you for so eloquently sharing yours.[237]

In addition to praising Miller's eloquence, this commenter also articulates how survivors make community and solidarity through each other's stories, and how Miller is now as much a part of that process as Doe was.

[236] Chanel Miller (@chanel_miller), "Thank you for reading 🤍," *Instagram*, December 7, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B5y3wdggKk8/?img_index=2.
[237] "Comment on," Chanel Miller (@chanel_miller), "Thank you for reading 🤍," *Instagram*, December 7, 2019, https://www.instagram.com/p/B5y3wdggKk8/?img_index=2.

Figure 1.1 Panel from an Instagram comic by Chanel Miller

Figure 1.2 Comment on Chanel Miller's Instagram post

Furthermore, in choosing to treat race as a centrally important element of her story, Miller challenges readers to extend their sympathy to a woman who may not fit what they assume a survivor looks like. Just as she understood that her anonymity as Emily Doe offered strategic value, so too does she strategically reveal her race not only to make herself known but to draw attention to the assumptions of whiteness that had been made. As early as the introduction of her memoir, she tells us, "I am also half Chinese. My Chinese name is Zhang

Xiao Xia, which translates to *Little Summer*."[238] In "finally nam[ing] [her]self," Miller explicitly links her identity, and her name, with being half Chinese: "'Xia' sounds like 'sha.' Chanel."[239] From the beginning of her retelling, Miller wants us to understand her story as the story of a Chinese American rape victim; to know her name, as the title of the memoir commands us to do, is to know her race and ethnic background. She is also letting us know that, whatever assumptions we had made about Emily Doe, we only ever had part of the story.

In claiming her race and ethnicity, Miller recontextualizes the assault, the trial, and the media's response, demanding an intersectional reckoning of her experience and of the generic rape culture Emily Doe was supposed to represent. In other words, her race changes her story, but it also changes the story Doe's statement was used to tell. In an article for the *New York Times*, Lisa Ko explains that "Ms. Miller is more than her racial identity alone, but the knowledge that she is Asian-American necessitates a new understanding of what she experienced and how she was perceived—as a woman of color, assaulted by a white man, trying to obtain justice in a courtroom presided over by a white male judge."[240] Ko, herself Asian American, writes that when she first read the statement she "connected with Emily Doe's fury," as so many readers did; however, upon learning that she's Asian American, she connected with Miller in a new way, reflecting on how Miller defies stereotypes and faces particularly racialized barriers, writing that "contrary to stereotypes of Asian-Americans as silent or submissive, we continue to speak out against sexual violence."[241] In other words, while victims and women are generally silenced by courts and by society, Asian American women face a particular expectation of

[238] Miller, *Know My Name*, viii.
[239] Miller, *Know My Name*, viii.
[240] Lisa Ko, "Why It Matters that 'Emily Doe' in the Brock Turner Case is Asian-American," *New York Times*, September 24, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/24/opinion/chanel-miller-know-my-name.html.
[241] Ko, "Why It Matters."

silence that Miller's long, unapologetic, and widely-read statement rejects. Another commentator, Hannah Bae, describes her reaction when she "saw [Miller's] face for the first time," writing that "as a fellow Asian woman, my mind jumped to one question immediately: Would his sentencing have been so light if Chanel had been white? The heartbreaking answer is most likely not."[242] More than that, Bae wonders how racism may have shaped not only Turner's sentence but also his decision to assault Miller, alluding to the "legacies of imperialism, fetishization and objectification of Asian women" that are the context of the assault on Miller.[243]

Scholars agree that Asian American women's sexuality must be understood within "a history of denigrating stereotypes about Asian women's deviant sexuality, erotic sensibilities, and exotic sexual practices," as well as Asian women's "unique relationship to prostitution and the sex industry."[244] For instance, Celine Perreñas Shimizu has described the racialized sexuality of Asian women as a "double bind," writing that "Asian women cannot be imaged out outside of perverse sexuality or non-normative sexuality ascribed to racial identity."[245] According to Leslie Bow, "notions of the fetish so pertinent to Asian American Studies" because

> Asian American fetishization in the United States is neither repressed nor cast as deviant but is, on the contrary, celebrated. "Yellow Fever" does not indicate an abject, untoward, dark confession of secret desire, but is seen as a natural expansion of Asian representation in the United States, blurring the lines between public and private, individual desire and collective projection.[246]

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[242] Hannah Bae, "Why Chanel's Asian-ness Matters," URGE (Unite for Reproductive and Gender Equity), September 23, 2019, https://urge.org/why-chanels-asian-ness-matters/.
[243] Bae, "Why Chanel's Asian-ness Matters."
[244] Patti Duncan, *Tell This Silence: Asian American Women Writers and the Politics of Speech* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2004), 174.
[245] Celine Perreñas Shimizu, *The Hypersexuality of Race: Performing Asian/American Women on Screen and Scene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 26. Shimizu advocates for "embracing perversity as political" (23), arguing that "to reject the hypersexuality of Asian women is to reject how we are shaped by and wrestle with these images. Rejecting hypersexuality as external to Asian/American women, something imposed entirely by others, seems as equally insufficient as accepting it as entirely essential and internal to us" (22).
[246] Leslie Bow, "Fetish," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, ed. Rachel Lee (London: Routledge, 2014), 123.

Moreover, for Asian American women who become the victim of fetishized and sexualized violence, the law has rarely offered protection or restitution. Historically, legal systems have explicitly and implicitly "sent the message that violence against Chinese women" is acceptable, while "the state continues to enact violence on Asian women today through surveillance and policing of migrant and sex worker bodies."[247] Miller may not have been among the most vulnerable groups of Asian women, but perception of her sexuality as well as her treatment in the court cannot be divorced from this broader cultural and racial narrative.

In the Burton interview, Miller confirms that race played a significant part in how she herself understood her assault and the trial. She "felt really alienated going into the court process" and, unlike Turner, was not "used to having people in positions of power that look like" her.[248] Moreover, in terms of sharing her own story as an Asian American woman, Miller says, "There's so much that is lacking in terms of how much space we're given to present ourselves as a diverse group, in terms of our backgrounds, personality traits, interests, and yes, how we move through the world and experience violence and recover from it. There's just not enough room to talk about any of it."[249] Despite her claim that her statement "created a room" for survivors, Miller still feels that there's "just not enough room" for Asian Americans to talk about their experiences. Anonymity and the presumption of whiteness may have, in some ways, extended the reach of Miller's statement, but it also closed down certain possibilities and points of recognition. Ko ends her article with the claim that "[Miller] is no longer anonymous, and the power of this specificity lies in its creation of an even stronger sense of solidarity."[250]

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[247] Anna Soojung Kim, "'Eliminating Temptation': Anti-Asian Fetishization, Criminalization, and Violence in America," *UCLA Asian Pacific Law Journal* 26 (2023): 67.
[248] Burton, "Chanel Miller."
[249] Burton, "Chanel Miler."
[250] Ko, "Why It Matters."

Central as race and ethnicity are to Miller's account, they are not the only important contexts that she gives in the memoir. Claiming her identity also means claiming the specificity of her experiences and the world that she lives in, and in doing so, Miller offers a systemic analysis not of a single sexual assault but of oppressive violence in American society. She tells us, for instance, that she was a student at UC Santa Barbara when Elliot Rodger murdered seven people as part of his quest to punish women for not finding him attractive. She remembers watching a video he'd recorded that was circulating amongst the students as rumors flew and sirens blared outside. Recalling the fear and anger she and her friends felt, she remembers thinking dazedly, "He is coming to Isla Vista to kill girls, we are girls in Isla Vista, but we can't be who he is talking about."[251] Afterward, there was concern that "there'd be copycat crimes, some men glorifying Elliot's actions, hailing him as their leader, the *supreme gentleman*."[252]

Shortly following her assault, Miller couldn't stop thinking about Elliot Rodger and his misogynistic rage, and she worried what Turner might do. "I could not live with myself if he hurt anybody," she explains, adding that she "contemplated it obsessively," fearing he was "angry with Stanford and [would] wreak havoc on the campus," or that he "really did believe his life was over and [might attempt] suicide."[253] Aware that men's anger, isolation, and pain could lead to devastating violence, Miller decided that "she wanted accountability and punishment, but [she] also hoped he was getting better."[254] Her wish that he would truly "get it" was borne not only of a desire that he hold himself accountable, or even a wish for justice for herself, but also of an intimate knowledge of the dangers of misogynistic men who believe they have nothing to

[251] Miller, *Know My Name*, 88.
[252] Miller, *Know My Name*, 89.
[253] Miller, *Know My Name*, 91.
[254] Miller, *Know My Name*, 91.

lose. As she puts it, "I didn't fight to end him, I fought to convert him to my side."[255] She never disavows wanting Turner to face punishment, but the specific insight she gained after the Isla Vista shooting shaped her sense of justice, as well as honed her awareness of the dangers of leaving misogyny unchecked.

The last few chapters of Miller's memoir cover the election of Donald Trump, including the the infamous tape in which he says he grabs women "by the pussy"; the murder of Philando Castile and the not guilty verdict issued to the officer who shot him; the Bill Cosby trial; the downfall of Harvey Weinstein; the conviction of Larry Nassar; the #MeToo movement; and the accusations of Christine Blasey Ford against then-nominee to the Supreme Court Brett Kavanaugh. In making many of these references, she draws connections between the harms she faced and those that emerged at these flashpoints, including virulent victim-blaming and being made into a joke, as well as the commonness of sexual violence committed by powerful men. In one memorable passage, she intersperses Trump's words with Turner's, showing how they seem to echo each other in their logic of male entitlement:

> *I just start kissing them. Just kiss. I don't even wait.* "I kissed her," Brock said. "And you didn't ask her permission before you kissed her, did you," my DA said. "No," Brock said. *I moved on her like a bitch.* "I kissed her cheek and ear," Brock said. "I touched her breasts. I moved her dress down." *Grab 'em by the pussy.* "I took off her underwear … and then I fingered her." *I did try and fuck her*.[256]

This moment cleverly strips away any veneer of respectability, of prestige, from both men. Turner's words, juxtaposed with Trump's more vulgar comments, can be seen for the description of violence that they are. Meanwhile, as Miller puts it, "We live in a time where it has become difficult to distinguish between the President's words and that of a nineteen-year-old

[255] Miller, *Know My Name*, 91.
[256] Miller, *Know My Name*, 278.

assailant."[257] A privileged Stanford student's explanation of the assault he committed is no less horrifying than crass "locker room talk." The President's comments, crude and arrogant, reduce him to the level of a teenage rapist.

Miller is not only concerned with misogyny, however, even as it manifests in the upper echelons of power. When she turns from a discussion of Donald Trump to one of Philando Castile, Miller forces readers to confront the deep injustice apparent in the difference between the two men: one's bad behavior can be overlooked in order for him to succeed, while another's imperfections are used as justification for his murder—the stark difference between the value of white life and Black life. She also compares Castile to Turner. The officer who shot Castile explained that if Castile had the "guts and the audacity" to smoke marijuana with his five-year-old daughter in the back seat of his car, then it was perfectly reasonable to assume he was a violent threat and shooting him was justified; meanwhile, evidence of Brock Turner's history of drinking and drug use weren't held against him during his trial.[258] Moreover, whereas Turner's potential future, his swimming career and his desire to be a surgeon warranted a more lenient verdict, Castile's potential future—including the rest of his life with his family and his daughter—meant nothing to the court that failed to convict his killer.

Yet it is in a comparison of her own situation with that of Philando Castile that Miller makes her most pointed and intersectional analysis. Unlike her comments that suggest that she and other survivors may share something at a bodily level, Miller recognizes that the justice system she and Castile encountered failed them both in interrelated ways, even as their situations and their embodied circumstances were entirely different. Miller recognizes the officer's comments about Castile's drug use are just another form of the "familiar expectation that a

[257] Miller, *Know My Name*, 278.
[258] Miller, *Know My Name*, 280.

victim be flawless, in order to be worthy of life," but she is perfectly clear about how that expectation affected her and how it affected Castile.[259] For Miller, her own inebriation meant being deemed deserving of rape. For Castile, it meant deserving death. She also notes that her testimony was considered incomplete and difficult to believe because she'd blacked out during the night of the assault, and because "victims are always expected to think clearly."[260] But Castile "couldn't testify because he was dead, couldn't even attend his own trial."[261] Miller's anger about being silenced and discredited doesn't prevent her from acknowledging the very different, and very permanent, silencing of Philando Castile.

Miller cannot say to Castile that he is not alone. He is dead, and she lives. She cannot promise an affective connection, an understanding of what his body went through when it was shot with a bullet fired by a racist policeman as his fiancée and daughter watched. Instead, Miller sees how race and gender have affected each of them in entirely different ways while simultaneously identifying that they both came into traumatic contact with a system that wasn't built for them, that might actively seek to do them harm. "In this system," she asks, "who is untouchable? Who is disposable? Whose lives are we intent on preserving? Who goes unaccounted for? Who is the true disrupter, the one firing, the one fingering, who created a problem where there never was one?"[262] When Miller asks *who is the true disrupter*, she suggests that despite the many salient differences between herself and Castile, they shared the experience of their lives being disrupted by white heteropatriarchal power. Miller survived that disruption, but she sees any fight for justice for herself as inherently linked with any fight for justice for him.

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[259] Miller, *Know My Name*, 280.
[260] Miller, *Know My Name*, 280-282.
[261] Miller, *Know My Name*, 279.
[262] Miller, *Know My Name*, 282.

It is this kind of political solidarity that I see Miller ultimately espousing. Even as she continues to prioritize the affective connections between herself and other survivors, she is not content to tell them *you are not alone*. Or, more accurately, she tells them that they are not alone in their struggle for justice, that the systems they fight hurt more than rape victims, more even than women. Solidarity, Miller seems to suggest in her memoir, is more than the feeling of connection; it is the active work of recognizing shared and interlocking oppressions and fighting to dismantle all of them. Even when you can't reach someone at the level of the body—even when they do not feel they belong in the "room" you create—you still owe them solidarity. In this way, she contributes to a long tradition of feminist theorizations of solidarity.

In their overview of solidarity in feminist theory, Jo Littler and Catherine Rottenberg note that "feminist scholars have diverged on how they understand solidarity and its political potential" due to "the varying theoretical commitments of each theorists, and, just as importantly … to the multiple significations that solidarity seems to encompass."[263] They argue that solidarity has been variously understood as an affective orientation, a mode of communication, a form of political alliance, and the "reality or promise of support for some form of political action."[264] Miller's developing notion of solidarity is similar to Jodi Dean's influential notion of "reflective solidarity," which calls upon feminists to use "dialogic engagement" to recognize difference and find connection through it.[265] She invites her readers, the community of survivors she has sought to cultivate, to join her as she engages in the imaginative work of bridging the experiences, struggles, and goals of those unlike herself. Moreover, by rooting her analysis in the

[263] Jo Littler and Catherine Rottenberg, "Feminist solidarities: Theoretical and practical complexities," *Gender, Work, and Organization* 28, no. 3 (2021), 866.
[264] Littler and Rottenberg, "Feminist solidarities," 866. Among the theorists they discuss are bell hooks, Clare Hemmings, Jodi Dean, Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Amy Allen, and Shirin Rai.
[265] Littler and Rottenberg, "Feminist solidarities," 867.

specific movements of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter, Miller also echoes the work of Amy Allen, who understands solidarity as "the result of *action*, conceived as a kind of collective power generated through struggle, arising from acting-in-concert in order to attain certain political goals."[266]

In contrast, the version of solidarity envisioned in Miller's statement relies on survivors being able to feel a particular way: like girls who are strong and unsilenced, untouchable and beautiful, powerful, or like girls who want to be that. It requires believing the promise that you're no longer alone, that Doe is "with you." As beautiful as her sentiment is, and as moving, there is a triumphant quality to Emily Doe that sits at odds with the particularity of suffering that an individual victim faces. What happens when you can't see yourself in the suffering of Emily Doe? Can the rhetorical move of *you are not alone* encompass those who do not, and may never, feel like survivors?

At times even Miller struggles to see herself in that anonymous figure, the unknown young woman who became the heroic model of a survivor. When a new therapist recommended her own statement to her, saying "something about thoughtfulness and power," Miller found she merely "wanted to be known as Chanel, in all my fumblings, my confusion, managing everyday life, before being seen as Emily, who was defiant and courageous, who seemed to have all the answers."[267] In other words, Emily Doe had come to be representative of survival in its most schematic form, a figure of empowerment and inspiration. With Turner ostracized, Persky off the bench, and Emily Doe named one of Glamour Magazine's Women of the Year, what room was left for Miller's continued grief and trauma? Could Emily Doe ever be weak, uncertain, or afraid? Could she be a victim, and not only a survivor?

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[266] Littler and Rottenberg, "Feminist solidarities," 867.
[267] Miller, *Know My Name*, 252.

By coming forward, Miller can acknowledge her own specific and imperfect victimhood, explicitly rejecting the triumphant arc that had been built around her story: "Victims exist in a society that tells us our purpose is to be an inspiring story. But sometimes the best we can do is tell you we're still here, and that should be enough."[268] Miller owns the strength and the talent of Emily Doe, but she refuses to be limited to being a mere inspiring story. In other words, despite Miller's intentional cultivation of recognition and resonance among other survivors through anonymity, Miller's memoir resists attempts to render her a figure of sentimental identification. Instead, she calls for a situated and intersectional approach to solidarity between rape survivors and amongst other victims of systems of injustice.

However, while memoir may allow Miller to work toward a vision of solidarity that encompasses many, and though she acknowledges that she herself still has aspects of her trauma that she has not worked through, it is still difficult not to read her as providing what is ultimately just a more nuanced version of the victim to survivor narrative arc. Even the original cover of her book, inspired by the Japanese art of kintsugi, suggests a sense of triumph, however fragile. Kintsugi emphasizes the beauty of imperfections, most notably by taking a broken piece of pottery and refashioning it with gold along the broken seams. "People grow up," she writes, "victims grow around; we strengthen around that place of hurt, but the vulnerable core is never gone."[269] Yet the metaphor of kintsugi implies not only becoming whole once more, and stronger, but also more beautiful for the breaking.

Miller's victimhood and survivorship may be complex, but her memoir is inspirational, and hopeful, and incredibly beautiful. It offers a nuanced political vision, but it still retains something of its affective promise, the promise of survival and strength she once made to "girls

[268] Miller, *Know My Name*, 312.
[269] Miller, *Know My Name*, 307.

everywhere." It is also a drastic contrast to a memoir of sexual violence published two years earlier, in 2017, which activated many of the anxieties regarding memoir that Miller's statement and book did not. What accounts for the difference in reception? The affective responses engendered by *The Incest Diary*—responses like confusion, shame, disgust, and even arousal—are not ones that create a sense of affinity, and the anonymous author-narrator of the book does not make herself available for sentimental identification. Nor does she offer any sense of triumph. Rather, her story suggests there is little hope that there is any redemptive conclusion to the abuse she has faced, offering only a sense of the enduring alienation and hopelessness that preclude her from being recognized as a survivor.

Those who don't survive: *The Incest Diary* and the limits of solidarity

Published in 2017, just over a year after Emily Doe's pseudonymous statement went viral, *The Incest Diary* is an anonymous memoir of sexual abuse and incest in childhood and beyond that received none of the public acclaim that the viral statement did or that Miller's memoir eventually would. *The Incest Diary* offers is an unflinchingly account of how the anonymous author's sexuality, her relationship with her body and with desire, were fundamentally shaped by and through incest. The author describes how, even as a child, she found herself experiencing pleasure when her father raped her, how at times she longed for him to have sex with her; she also describes fearing and despising him, imagining his violent death.[270] While some critics praised the intensity of its feeling and the complexity of its story,[271] many readers and reviewers—including survivors—found the book grotesque and exploitative, even questioning its

[270] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2017).
[271] H.C. Wilentz, "The Challenge of 'L'Inceste' and 'The Incest Diary,'" *The New Yorker*, February 15, 2018, https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/the-challenge-of-lincest-and-the-incest-diary.

authenticity entirely.[272] After all, how could a real rape victim write a quasi-erotic, emotionally ambivalent account of not only childhood sexual abuse by her father, but also of the shameful but intense sexual desire for her father as she grew into adulthood? How could she write about initiating sex not only as an adult but also as a child? How could she write in explicit detail about sometimes *liking* that sex?

The incest memoir is a subgenre all its own, with a complex history. Since *Kiss Daddy Goodnight* by Louise Armstrong was published in 1978, a number of women have published literary accounts of father-daughter incest, including *My Father's House* (1987) by Sylvia Fraser, *The Kiss* (1997) by Kathryn Harrison, *Two or Three Things I Know for Sure* (2004) by Dorothy Allison, and Dylan Farrow's 2014 open letter regarding the allegations that her father Woody Allen molested her.[273] Alongside the proliferation of incest and child sexual abuse narratives, so too have there been a number of self-help and therapeutic books addressed to survivors, including *The Courage to Heal: A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse* (1988) and *Secret Survivors: Uncovering Incest and Its Aftereffects in Women* (1998). These texts have not been without controversy—Harrison in particular faced scrutiny for her story of her incestuous relationship with her father as an adult—but they have contributed significantly to bringing father-daughter incest and childhood sexual abuse into public awareness and are usually distinguished from misery memoirs that have been described in major media outlets as

[272] For more on the accusations that the book is not truly autobiographical, see: Rich Smith, "*The Incest Diary* Afflicted Me With as Much Trauma as the Written Word Can Transfer from One Body to Another," *The Stranger*, July 19, 2017, https://www.thestranger.com/books/2017/07/19/25304800/the-incest-diary-afflicted-me-with-as-much-trauma-as-the-written-word-can-transfer-from-one-body-to-another.

[273] Note that *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* by Maya Angelou was published in 1969, about a decade prior to Armstrong's book. A wide-ranging memoir that explores themes of coming of age, racism, and family, *Caged Bird* also tell that story of a childhood rape by the author-narrator's mother's boyfriend. This is not framed as incest per se, and Angelou's book clearly has a much more significant literary lineage beyond rape narratives, but it is worth noting that in some ways it may have foreshadowed the child sexual abuse and incest memoir trend.

"emotional striptease[s]" marketed to readers who "revel in the pornography of misery."[274] Those memoirs, many of them ghostwritten or (it is believed) invented wholesale, tell increasingly harrowing tales in brutally graphic terms, with little concern for literariness, seeming to appeal only to a desire for "reading endlessly about child torture."[275]

Many of the responses to *The Incest Diary* seem to want to position it as more akin to these misery memoirs than as part of a feminist literary tradition of life writing. The language of pornography, so prevalent in critiques of misery memoirs, appears again and again in discussions of the *Diary*. Reviewers like Allison Pearson at *The Telegraph* snark that the book's "major problem … is that the reader who would like it best is a paedophile."[276] In *The New York Times*, David Garner puts forth a familiar critique of too-much-feeling, claiming that the book "offers more sensation than perspective" and espousing discomfort with the Diarist's use of "porn lingo."[277] In both cases these critics are obviously concerned about the affective response the book might provoke: not solidarity, but, horrifyingly, arousal. One woman, writing in *Publishers Weekly* about her inability to sell her own memoir of surviving incest to a publisher, refers to *The Incest Diary* as a "prurient, graphic account written by an anonymous author."[278] This comment, in addition to scolding the book for its depravity, emphasizes the author's anonymity in order to imply that she may in fact be no incest victim at all, merely someone hoping to exploit a

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[274] Danuta Kean, "The pornography of misery memoirs," *Daily Mail*, October 10, 2007, https://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-486478/The-pornography-misery-memoirs.html. For more on the critique of Harrison, see: Gilmore, "Jurisdictions"; Spampinato, "Who Gets to Write About Sexual Abuse."
[275] Tim Adams, "Feel the Pain," *Observer*, January 29, 2006, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2006/jan/29/biography.features.
[276] Allison Pearson, "This ticks all the boxes of a bestseller—but I hated it," *Telegraph*, July 23, 2017, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/what-to-read/ticks-boxes-bestseller-hated/.
[277] David Garner, "A Dive Into the Abyss in the Anonymous 'Incest Diary,'" *New York Times*, July 18, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/18/books/review-anonymous-incest-diary.html.
[278] Tracy Strauss, "On Cowardice in Publishing: A writer struggles to sell her memoir about incest," *Publishers Weekly*, March 30, 2018, https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/columns-and-blogs/soapbox/article/76474-on-cowardice-in-publishing.html.

shocking narrative in order to get published and make money. Indeed, this is precisely Pearson's accusation when she sneeringly suggests the *Diary* was written to "sell a shedload of copies."[279]

The assumption that the story must be fictional has been frequently espoused by nonprofessional reviewers on sites such as Goodreads and Amazon.com. One reviewer, invoking major memoir scandals of the past, writes, "I think [the author] is a girl who spent too long on Tumblr and who has no damn clue what incest is really like. I have no idea, absolutely NO idea how this got published as a memoir. Haven't publishers learned from JT LeRoy? A Million Little Pieces? Anything?"[280] Another says that the *Diary* "is not believable, in fact I have doubts as to whether the writer is actually female. It seems more like the improbable ravings of an adolescent boy."[281] Not only is the author's anonymity suspicious, indicative of deceit, but one reader even claims that her "anonymity is pornographic in that, like so many porn videos, faces are rarely seen, just the genitalia that are the focus of the 'action.'"[282] Despite assurances from the publisher that they have done their due diligence in fact checking the *Diary*, including consulting medical files, readers would rather assume that the author of the book is a liar than that its contents might be real, the feelings that it conjures authentic if uncomfortable.[283]

Formally, the *Diary* is an exemplary traumatic text, with many the of aesthetic hallmarks that trauma theorists have praised: an elliptical narrative, a fragmented temporal structure, a refusal of closure.[284] Published by Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, which is known for its literary and

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[279] Pearson, "Ticks all the boxes."
[280] Shira Lev, review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, *Goodreads* (July 29, 2017), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2075884934.
[281] James Elliot Leighton, review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, *Goodreads* (July 18, 2017), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2064028539.
[282] Sanslenom, review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, *Amazon* (August 15, 2017), https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R2G7PGXZPULICP/ref=cm_cr_dp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B01N1UV5YG.
[283] For more on the evidence to support the authenticity of *The Incest Diary*, and the ramifications if it is in fact a hoax, see: Smith, "*The Incest Diary* Afflicted Me."
[284] See: fn. 79.

award-winning books, *The Incest Diary*, it might be argued, ought to have been received enthusiastically by readers and critics as a work that grappled seriously and artistically with immense trauma. However, the expectations of authenticity that attach to memoir, particularly a memoir about sexual trauma, combined with the author's anonymity, prevented the book from being widely read for its literary quality. Readers wanted to identify with the narrator, and/or to become inspired by her triumph, and they were frustrated that they could do neither. Emily Doe's anonymity, tied as it was to the assumed legitimacy of the legal system and deliberately crafted to reflect the experiences of many other survivors, allowed Miller to extend the reach of her story and earned the praise and admiration of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of readers. The anonymity of the author of *The Incest Diary*, on the other hand, makes her less relatable, less trustworthy. Though her anonymity may obscure her racial background, and therefore might suggest to some that she is white, that (possible) whiteness is not enough to inspire sentimentality in the face of her bleak and stomach-turning story.

The author was reportedly motivated to write *The Incest Diary* because "if she had read such book, it would have made her feel less alone," but the book's review pages are not flooded with people telling her how much they can relate and how much hope she gives them.[285] Certainly, there are some reviews or responses online from people saying that they've experienced similar violence, or that the work was moving and meaningful to them, but even many positive reviews seem to find the author's experience entirely alien; they merely advocate sitting with the discomfort it provokes, rather than assuming that is a sign of its fraudulence.

More significant still are the reviews that more or less accept the authenticity of the book but find fault with its unwillingness, perhaps inability, to offer consolation to its readers—a spark

[285] Smith, "*The Incest Diary* Afflicted Me."

of hope, a promise of survival. Although the author technically *has* survived, she makes the case that abuse of the kind she has experienced can fundamentally alter the course of your life in ugly ways. Through the course of *The Incest Diary*, we learn that the author breaks off her relationship with her father when she is twenty-one and eventually even confronts him over his abuse, but neither of these actions frees her from the consequences of what he has done to her. Reflecting on when she was date raped by an acquaintance at twenty-one, she comments, "The truth was what happened that night didn't really get to me. I also felt partly responsible for it. We can smell these things. I had a weakness that he sensed."[286] Although she is not, we know, responsible for what happened to her, she believes that her father's actions made her into someone vulnerable to violence, who perhaps even craves violence. At the time of writing the memoir, she is in a relationship with a man named Carl, with whom she has violent, painful, consensual sex and who says "he imagines [her] as a little girl" when they have sex. She writes that she "knew he was the one" when she first saw his penis: "The size, the shape, the pink of the head. Just like my father's."[287] The book closes on a vignette of violent oral sex in which it takes a moment to understand who is "thrusting and moaning while he fucks [her] little face," Carl or her father.[288] It is her father. In the memory, she is six.

It would be too simplistic to say that the author has replicated her relationship with her father in her current boyfriend; despite their fantasies, she is not a child, and BDSM is not inherently pathological, nor is it a natural consequence of childhood abuse. However, by ending the *Diary* as she does, she has unmistakably invited readers to think that at least part of her is still

[286] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 116.
[287] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 126.
[288] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 131.

that little girl being orally raped and finding some way to enjoy it, a coping mechanism that has shaped her very selfhood.

Adding to this sense that she is stuck in that moment, as the child self she once was, is the fact that the narrative weaves back and forth through time, rejecting any sense of linear growth or healing. In fact, the book begins with an account of her confrontation with her father as an adult, a moment that would represent a major turn in a typical trauma narrative. Yet this confrontation offers no catharsis or satisfaction. The father initially defends himself by saying that he'd been lonely and she'd been a precocious and seductive even as a toddler.[289] He then informs their extended family that she is making "allegations" against him, which causes several relatives to turn against her and her brother to drop out of school and lock himself in his room, not knowing who to believe.[290] She ends the first chapter with the following vignette:

> I felt completely responsible for my brother's breakdown. … I was afraid he would kill himself. So I told him not to worry, that it didn't happen. I told him it must've been someone else who raped me. My brother started to get better. He and I have never spoken about it since.
>
> When our father came back [from a trip], I took him out to dinner at a place I liked. … I told my father someone else must have raped me, and from then on I wasn't going to talk about the past. I told him that it didn't matter anymore. My father didn't say anything. Then he asked me if would like to go see a movie in a couple of weeks. I said sure, even though I didn't want to, but I felt relieved that the family was getting back to normal.[291]

There is no triumphant moment of overcoming for this victim; instead of asserting her truth, she ultimately lies to preserve the illusion of normalcy, and to spare her brother from the burden of having to decide whether to stand by her or not. There are no heartwarming stories of solidarity, beyond the occasional acquaintance who expresses sympathy. It is perhaps unsurprising, then,

[289] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 6-10.
[290] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 10.
[291] Anonymous, *The Incest Diary*, 11-12.

that one reader disapprovingly comments that "the way the book ends was abrupt and left me feeling empty and dirty. There is no conclusion, no hope, no nothing. Just a repeat of what she has been experiencing her whole life."[292] Another reader notes, "There are other memoirs written by women describing the incest they endured as children and perhaps as teenagers from their fathers or stepfathers, and all of them are far superior to this piece of porn. There is no growth or redemption, although there is raw insight. A hard read."[293]

No conclusion, no hope, no growth, no redemption. This, I believe, is the fatal flaw of *The Incest Diary*, the reason it garners so much disapproval. The author might hope that this text can help make someone else feel less lonely, but it is not necessarily meant to make anyone feel better; it offers sensation, leaving readers feeling "empty," "dirty," "afflicted," but it does not offer sentimentality. The only conclusion of the abuse is the book itself, an artifact of precisely how cruel and meaningless traumatic violence can be, a reminder that not everyone who survives is necessarily a survivor, at least as the category has been socially constructed.

What, then, does it mean to be in solidarity even in these circumstances? What genre of survivor can contain such an event? What kind of reassurance can be offered? Chanel Miller begins to theorize the possibilities when she discusses Philando Castile, but unlike Castile, the author of the *Diary* has not been silenced by an oppressive state. Instead, when she speaks out, she is censured by those in whom she had hoped to find solidarity. Her testimony seems to one reviewer to be "self-indulgent. … I wonder what is really useful for other victims here."[294] The

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[292] V Duffy review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, *Amazon* (January 8, 2019), https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R5JJYPWQ6FCN4/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B01N1UV5YG.
[293] Lori, review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, Goodreads (August 3, 2017), https://www.goodreads.com/review/show/2081856052.
[294] J. Holiday, review of *The Incest Diary*, by Anonymous, Amazon (January 24, 2017), https://www.amazon.com/gp/customer-reviews/R31GW1FG9MKN4F/ref=cm_cr_arp_d_rvw_ttl?ie=UTF8&ASIN=B01N1UV5YG.

troubling power of *The Incest Diary* is that it refuses to make the experience it describes *useful*, even to other victims, pushing readers and those who want to be in solidarity with survivors to reckon with the kinds of experiences and victims that go unspoken and unrecognized. Instead of extending a promise to Anonymous that she is not alone, expanding the genre of reassurance to those unlike herself, the reader is instead frustrated that she has not been comforted instead. In the end, Miller's complex survivorship asks anti-rape advocates to accommodate difference, but the anonymous author of *The Incest Diary* challenges us to confront our discomfort, even disgust, with the imperfect victim, the one whom we cannot treat as a sentimental heroine who has repackaged her pain and wisdom for our consumption.

If the genre of memoir has, as I've argued, been part of the discursive shaping of the figure of "the (good, white, triumphant) survivor," then how have we come to understand "the rapist"? In the next chapter, I will turn to the genre of the romance novel and its vexed relationship with masculinity, sexual violence, and the idea of heroism in order to explore the various ways "the rapist" factors into fantasies and anxieties of heterosexual desire and love under patriarchy.

Chapter 2

The Romance Novel:
Rapists, Heroes, and Formations of Masculinity

On September 11, 2019, romance novelist Nicola Davidson posted a screenshot on Twitter excerpting a *Guardian* article in which author Melanie Milburne is quoted as saying, "It takes a village to rape a woman, and romance writers are part of that village."[295] Davidson did not hesitate to make her outrage clear, tweeting "I am fucking speechless," and within hours, more romance writers began to respond.[296] One particularly incensed author, typing all caps, castigated the comment as "ANOTHER RIDICULOUSLY IGNORANT & OBNOXIOUS ASSAULT ON THE ROMANCE GENRE!!!"[297] Despite the clamor amongst these authors to defend themselves and the genre, however, this "assault" came not from an outsider unfamiliar with romance but from a romance novelist herself.[298] Milburne, who writes for the major

[295] Ben Butler et al., "Revolutionary romance novels and Bookers on beer coasters: what we learned at Melbourne writers' festival," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2019, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/sep/09/revolutionary-romance-novels-and-bookers-on-beer-coasters-what-we-learned-at-melbourne-writers-festival.
[296] Nicola Davidson (@NicolaMDavidson), "This is a screenshot from a Guardian article about the Melbourne Writer's Festival. I am fucking speechless," Twitter, September 11, 2019, https://twitter.com/nicolamdavidson/status/1171937978421104640.
[297] Lise Horton (@lisekimhorton), "ANOTHER RIDICULOUSLY IGNORANT & OBNOXIOUS ASSULT ON THE ROMANCE GENRE!!! (yes. I'm f'ing screaming)," Twitter, September 11, 2019, https://twitter.com/lisekimhorton/status/1171942125816156160.
[298] Other authors who tweeted unfavorably about the quote include Beverly Jenkins, Suleikha Snyder, Jeannie Lin, Bree Bridges, Tasha L. Harrison, Katee Robert, and Zoe Archer/Eva Leigh, and Sheryl Nantus; their work spans subgenres (historical, contemporary, paranormal, erotic), suggesting their responses came from many different parts of the massive genre that is romance. For an overview of the entire incident, including more Tweets from romance authors, see Laura Vivanco, "Taken Out of Context or Taking Responsibility: Rape, Abortion and the Romance Writer," *Teach Me Tonight* (blog), September 12, 2019, http://teachmetonight.blogspot.com/2019/09/taken-out-of-context-or-taking.html.

romance publisher Harlequin Mills & Boon, is the author of more than eighty novels, and her controversial quote came in the midst of a Romance as Resistance panel discussion about #MeToo and the history of the genre. Milburne's "ignorant & obnoxious" comment was in fact part of her attempt to reckon with the skeletons in her own backlist: books she'd written that, to her mind, were complicit in the normalization of sexual violence.[299] Once apprised of this context, some authors spoke out in support of Milburne specifically, and more still admitted to agreeing with her broader point, if not the statement itself. Davidson ultimately acknowledged that while she "agree[d] that robust discussions on consent and culture are important and worthwhile … the phrase used was an extremely poor choice of words."[300] As this controversy shows, however, suggesting there may be an enduring link between romance and representations of rape is often perceived as hostile by the various writers, readers, reviewers, and critics who make up the romance community.

The subject of this chapter, however, is precisely that enduring link—and the critical and creative ways romance novels have represented and theorized not only rape, but the rapist and, by extension, masculinity in relation to sexual violence. In Chapter 1, I discussed how some critics have tended to regard rape memoirs as particularly problematic when the victim-narrator depicts her relationship with her abuser as ambivalent, erotic, or even romantic, as in *The Incest Diary*. How much more of a problem is it, then, when rape becomes the subject of romantic and erotic fiction? Building on the challenges and capabilities of a genre-informed approach to rape

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[299] Jodi McAlister, chair of the panel in question, wrote in Milburne's defense that "Melanie was explaining that romance has occasionally been complicit in the past with some narratives which are harmful to women, & she doesn't want to perpetuate that in the future." Jodi McAlister (@JodiMcA), Twitter, September 12, 2019, https://twitter.com/JodiMcA/status/1172098689986228224.

[300] Nicola M. Davidson (@NicolaMDavidson), "I've seen the context and I've seen the context, and agree that robust discussions on consent and culture are important and worthwhile. Doesn't change my opinion that the phrase used was an extremely poor choice of words, and as a rape and sexual assault survivor, I hope to never see it again," Twitter, September 12, 2019, https://twitter.com/NicolaMDavidson/status/1172147180154454016.

that I developed in my first chapter, I show how twenty-first century popular romance has been shaped by authors' and readers' attempts to react to and, typically, distance themselves from the association of rape and romance that has been foundational to the genre and criticism thereof. In making this argument, I am suggesting that the feminist critics who drew attention to the troublesome depictions of rape and rapists in romance helped entrench rape as a generic expectation to such a degree that romance novelists today continue to write with this expectation in mind. Moreover, the representations of sexual violence produced by such novelists has been under-explored and underestimated by both critics who work on rape and critics who work on romance.

This chapter is arranged in three broad sections. After a brief discussion of terminology, genre, and scope, the first major section provides an overview of the literary and critical history of rape in romance, ending with the current stakes of representing rape and rapists within the genre. Feminist theorists and critics have historically tended to read the existence of rape in romance—especially in light of the "repetitive" or "formulaic" happily ever after that is guaranteed by the genre regardless of the hero's actions—as the endorsement, indeed the romanticization, of male violence against women. The genre has faced explicit accusations of complicity in the abuse and degradation of women since at least 1970 when Germaine Greer famously proclaimed that the women who read and wrote romance "cherish[ed] the chains of their bondage."[301] Any discussion of the use of rape in romance today therefore reverberates with decades of ideological condemnation. While some within the romance community see these debates regarding the feminist value of romance as productive, many fans, objecting to an impression of the genre based on outdated texts, see the frequency with which rape is brought up

[301] Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (New York City: McGraw Hill, 1971), 176.

even in the present as misguided at best; at worst, it is an attempt to delegitimize an increasingly feminist genre. For these fans, invoking "bodice-rippers" from the 1970s and 1980s as representative of current generic norms constitutes yet another misinformed "assault" on romance.[302]

Whether they agree with critiques of rape in romance or not, multiple contingents within the romance community make it clear that they want to (in the words of editor Kate Cuthbert) "call ourselves a feminist genre … hold ourselves up as an example of women being centered, of representing the female gaze, of creating women heroes who not only survive but thrive."[303] The second major section of this chapter, "Rejecting the rapist," explores how some romance novelists in the contemporary have sought to make romance a feminist genre specifically by engaging the topic of sexual violence and countering common objections to the depiction of rape and valorization of rapists in romance. Aware that the genre has been haunted by accusations of romanticizing rape, these novelists take on the topic in their work in order to exorcise the specter of sexual violence and its attendant negative connotations from cultural perceptions of the genre. However, while this project of exorcism may indeed have shifted how some critics approach romance, it has had the simultaneous effect of limiting how expansively the genre can tackle the issue of rape, how much it can refract and transform the features of its own genre to tell new and necessary stories. In particular, a wave of popular romances beginning in the 1990s that feature what I call anti-rape alpha heroes—traditionally masculine heroes who understand rape as an

[302] For example, see: Samantha Leach, "Want to Know What Consent Looks Like? Start Reading Romance Novels," *Glamour*, December 4, 2019, https://www.glamour.com/story/consent-romance-novels; E. Ce Miller, "Romance Novels Might Be Some Of The Most Rebellious Books You Can Read Right Now," *Bustle*, October 25, 2018, https://www.bustle.com/p/why-romance-novels-should-be-part-of-your-regular-feminist-reading-12103225; s.e. smith, "For the Love of Independence: Romance Authors are Literature's Unsung Heroines," *Bitch Media*, February 5, 2018, https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/the-case-for-romance-authors.
[303] Vivanco, "Taken Out of Context."

essentially weak, effeminate act—engage in a new problematic of rape representation that does little more than invert expectations about women as victims and men as rapists. In these novels, not only is the threat of rape cast outside of the space of heterosexual desire and the construction of masculinity, but the focus that early romance had on women's experiences and anxieties regarding sexual violence (an exploration, however imperfect, of women's vulnerabilities under patriarchy and men's power over them) shifts to a focus instead on men as protectors. Thus, the happily ever after constitutes a denial of the experience or fear of male violence in women's (sex/love) lives, and implicitly affirms a neoliberal anti-victim ethos; the heroine, because she has won and/or been won by the virile and protective hero who abhors rape, is empowered by choice and free from the threat of sexual violence forever.

In the last part of this chapter, I perform three in-depth close readings to explore alternative approaches to romance's "rape problem" that some authors writing since 2010 have taken. Rather than focusing entirely on rejecting the handling of rape in romance in the past, the novels I discuss use the conventions of romance to grapple with the subject of rape and the ongoing problem of patriarchal control and female vulnerability in heterosexual relationships. The novelists' evolving genre-reflexivity and fluency with generic conventions and reader expectations (i.e., their skill as writers, and specifically as romance writers) have allowed them to do carefully innovative work around rape that is grounded in articulating the ways in which an institutionalized rape culture—one with racist, sexist, and imperialist foundations—can shape and affect desire on a systemic level even as romantic love may offer the possibility of individual joy or liberation. In close readings of the historical romance novels *An Extraordinary Union* (2017) by Alyssa Cole, *The Countess Conspiracy* (2013) by Courtney Milan, and *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* (2010) by Lorraine Heath, I show how these texts demonstrate both the

feminist and literary possibilities of romance by returning to the genre's much-criticized roots: they center the experience of sexual violence in an exploration of heterosexual love and desire, yet they do so in ways that consciously push the genre forward in terms of generic expectations, feminist politics, and representations of masculinity.

By considering Cole's, Milan's, and Heath's novels in some depth, I want to emphasize them as extraordinary examples of individual novels that demonstrate what Eric Selinger and Sarah J. Frantz have described as "the interplay between convention and innovation" in the genre, something that has not been sufficiently studied within the field of popular romance studies.[304] Instead, critics' preoccupation with the feminist value (or lack thereof) of romance has meant that "popular romance scholarship has rarely attended in any detail to individual novelists, let alone individual novels," resulting in a critical history that has tended to treat romance novels as essentially homogeneous across decades and subgenres.[305] As the defensiveness generated by Melanie Milburne's comments on rape in romance shows, however, it is not only critics who've narrowed the terms of critique to purely ideological grounds; in arguing that romance is in fact uniquely feminist, sex-positive, and/or consent-oriented, romance authors are simply offering a new answer to "a very old, patently moralizing question: 'Are these books good or bad for their readers?'"[306] Instead of falling into moralizing this framework, I wish to show how these individual novels work through anxieties about sexual violence and masculinity within the context of heterosexual desire by responding critically and creatively to their genre's history. Cole's Civil War-era interracial romance exposes the whiteness inherent in romance's traditional

[304] Eric Murphy Selinger and Sarah S.G. Frantz, "Introduction: New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction," in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Frantz and Selinger (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012), 6.
[305] Selinger and Frantz, "Introduction," 6.
[306] Selinger and Frantz, "Introduction," 5.

and more recent formulations of rape, heroism, and desirability, offering an explicitly Black feminist vision of love under white supremacy, while *The Countess Conspiracy* uses rape to reassess the relationship of historical romance to heteronormative futurity and the propagation of the British imperial project, embodied in the figure of the titled aristocratic lord. Finally, Heath's *Pleasures* calls on one of the genre's most sensational tropes—amnesia—to rehearse the very problems and possibilities of writing rape into romance, and how narratives of male heroism eclipse the lived realities of female pain.

Happy endings: a brief note on terminology, genre, and scope

Throughout this chapter, I use terms that, although likely familiar, have specialized meanings within the context of the romance genre. For example, the phrase "Happily Ever After" (HEA) denotes not merely a cliche sentiment but rather a key generic feature of all romances. As author Gwen Hayes writes in her guide to story structure in romance novels, "If love doesn't conquer all at the end of your story, you didn't write a romance."[307] Similarly, the Romance Writers of America association defines romance novels by identifying two basic elements: "a central love story" and "an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending."[308] Increasingly, Happy For Now (HFN) endings are also viewed as acceptable; these are typically found in more "realistic" romance fiction which unites the lovers but leaves their ultimate fates more ambiguous, "providing a resolution that implies a positive outcome, if not guaranteeing it."[309] In novels with HFNs, the text does not reassure readers that the couple remains together for the rest of their

[307] Gwen Hayes, *Romancing the Beat: Story Structure for Romance Novels* (self-pub., CreateSpace, 2016), 6-7.
[308] "About the Romance Genre," Romance Writers of America, accessed February 12, 2024, https://www.rwa.org/Online/Romance_Genre/About_Romance_Genre.aspx.
[309] Sarah Nicolas, "If It Doesn't Have an HEA (or HFN), It's Not Romance," *Bookriot*, April 10, 2018, https://bookriot.com/if-it-doesnt-have-an-hea-or-hfn-its-not-romance/.

lives; HEAs, on the other hand, do provide such assurances, often through the use of formal features such as an epilogue that flashes forward to the couple's happy future. Even without an epilogue, the inclusion of a binding ceremony or contract such as (but not necessarily) marriage and/or a declaration of eternal love also serves to reassure readers of the HEA.[310]

Following many critics and general readers, I here refer to the female protagonist of a romance novel as the heroine and the male protagonist as the hero.[311] As I discuss in the next section of the chapter, the archetype of the rapist hero has become a kind of bogeyman of the genre, haunting conversations about romance for writers, fans, and critics alike. This hero is one whose rape of the heroine typically serves as an obstacle to the HEA, but who sometimes makes amends and is always forgiven. This type of hero appears with less frequency than it used to, but an archetype closely associated with it is the alpha hero; alphas are "strong, dominating, confident men, often isolated, who hold a tortured, tender element within themselves that they rarely let anyone see."[312] While an alpha hero is not always a rapist, a rapist hero is often if not

[310] For an example of a novel that uses a binding ceremony or contract that isn't marriage, see *A Lady's Guide to Celestial Mechanics* by Olivia Waite (2019), a lesbian historical romance in which the heroines commit to one another through a business partnership that requires their close proximity for the rest of their lives. Paranormal romance also has common modes of signaling the lovers' commitment to a lasting bond; for instance, Kresley Cole's ongoing Immortals After Dark series (2005–) features a range of immortal creatures, including vampires, werewolves, valkyries, witches, and demons who all have their own specialized modes of claiming their eternal mate (most of which involve a ceremonial bite).

[311] It is worth noting that romance featuring queer and trans protagonists will likely use alternate terms; a romance between two men or two women will obviously not have a single ("the") hero/heroine, while nonbinary characters may not be identified with either of these gendered terms. Recently, readers and reviewers have begun to use the terms "Male Main Character" (MMC), "Female Main Character" (FMC), and "Nonbinary Main Character" (NMC but because I am discussing the genre's historical connections to representations of masculinity and femininity, the connotative and generic distinction between a "main character" and a "hero(ine)" is one that strikes me as important to this chapter and the dissertation's overall thesis.

[312] Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches' Guide to Romance Novels* (New York: Fireside Books, 2009), 77.

always an alpha hero. However, as I will discuss, distinguishing the alpha hero from the rapist has been a project of recent romance novels.[313]

Generic distinctions may also be somewhat confusing to those less familiar with romance, particularly given that there are many popular subgenres (e.g., paranormal, suspense, inspirational, erotic, young adult), all of which carry their own conventions and expectations. In this chapter, I am writing exclusively about historical romance, which refers to any romance novel set in the past, in any part of the world, with common subgenres of the historical being British Regency, Scottish Highlanders, and American Western. I've chosen to focus on historical romance because many of the external and internal critiques of the romance genre as a whole have been (sometimes implicitly) lodged against this subgenre in particular; after all, historical romances are the novels primarily associated with the derisive designation of "bodice-ripper," a phrase that invokes and evokes the idea of sexual(ized) violence.[314]

The historical subgenre is also, in many ways, the "face" of what Jayashree Kamblé calls the Media Romance, the "fantastic combination of sexual comedy and literary tragedy" that the romance genre has popularly been represented as.[315] Kamblé describes the Media Romance as "a creature stitched together from bits of romance novel covers, whose design elements were standardized by publishers like Harlequin Mills & Boon and Avon over the last century, the most recognizable of which is a couple frozen forever in romantic contact"—also known as the "clinch" cover.[316] A stereotypical clinch will "feature a woman whose breasts and limbs

[313] As Wendell and Tan note, the term "alpha hero" has become "strongly associated with the cruel, brutal rapist heroes prevalent in Old Skool romance," the kind of hero that they refer to as "alpholes" (a portmaneau of "assholes" and "alphas"). A rapist alpha, by their categorization, would be an "alphole." Wendell and Tan, *Beyond Heaving Bosoms*, 77.
[314] Micaela Marini Higgs, "Why We Still Call Them Bodice Rippers," *Racked*, October 31, 2017, https://www.racked.com/2017/10/31/16507794/bodice-rippers.
[315] Jayashree Kamblé, "Romance in the media," *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (London: Routledge, 2021), 269.
[316] Kamblé, "Romance in the media," 270.

overflow her clothes, crushed against a partially undressed muscular man"; sometimes, though not always, the woman's bodice is indeed ripped.[317] While clinch covers are not exclusive to historical romances, many of the most outrageous and stereotypical examples, including those featuring the model Fabio Lanzoni, were historicals.[318] Per Kamblé, the continued use of such covers into the 1980s and 1990s despite the decreasing popularity of rape narratives "increased the critical tendency to associate romance—all romance—with that old, short-lived narrative of sexual abuse."

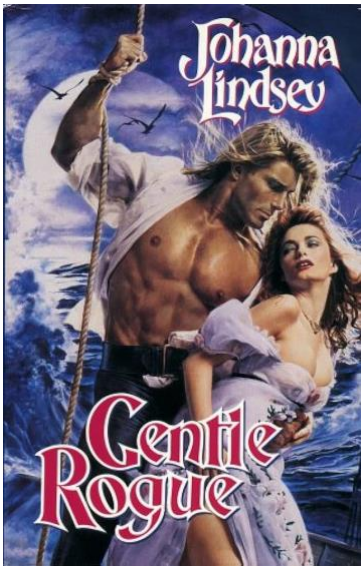

Figure 2.1 Clinch cover of Johanna Lindsey's *Gentle Rogue*, with art by Elaine Duillo

[317] Kamblé, "Romance in the media," 276.

[318] For examples of classic clinch covers, especially classic Fabio covers, see Johanna Lindsey's oeuvre. The cover of *Gentle Rogue* (1990), painted by the artist Elaine Duillo, is representative (Fig 2.1). It shows a large, muscular white man with long blonde hair (Fabio) holding on to a rope with one hand and a woman's midsection with the other. His shirt is open, exposing his tanned chest, and his expression is serious as he looks down at the woman clutched against him. The woman, who is white with loose auburn hair, wears a semi-sheer white dress, her nipples almost visible as her cleavage spills out the top of her bodice. She is clearly wearing blue eyeshadow and dark pink lipstick. I read her expression and body language as conveying reluctant arousal—passion and attraction, but distrust too, based on the way her body is turned away from him even as her face turns toward him. It is apparent that the couple stand on a ship, with the blue waters of the ocean crashing behind them. In addition to Duillo, some classic clinch cover artists include Pino Daeni, Sharon Spiak, and Robert McGinnis. For more on clinch covers, check out @ArtOfTheClinch on Twitter.

Therefore, when I discuss the subgenre of the historical romance, and particularly historical romances about monogamous, cisgender, heterosexual relationships, I am doing so in part because the history I trace relies less on the actual publishing record of romance—which is more diverse than is often assumed—than it does on stereotypes about the so-called bodice-ripper or the Media Romance. Keeping in mind Selinger and Frantz's cautions regarding making claims about romance as a whole, the generalizations I make in this chapter are therefore not meant to assert the genre's homogeneity, but rather to speak to its evolving reputation and the authors attempting to shape its public image, particularly in terms of its relationship to the figure of the rapist.

Romancing the rapist: a history of the rape/romance connection

As Kamblé's work on the Media Romance suggests, the assumed link between rape and romance that many critics have articulated is sometimes only skin deep: the memorable style of bodice-ripper covers (a style that is rarely seen anymore) has generated an image of romance that seems stuck in the past. However, even romance novel fans in the contemporary are willing to admit that rape was once an uncomfortably common aspect of the genre, and one that many still do not quite know how to talk about. Consider the blog post from 2005 on the popular romance review website *Smart Bitches Trashy Books* (SBTB) in which site-founder Candy Tan expresses surprise that she hasn't written about "the R word" sooner: "I can't believe this blog has existed so long without us taking a long, hard (huh huh, long and hard) look at the presence of rape in romance."[319] Interestingly, when Tan disrupts her introduction to a serious topic with a sex joke,

[319] Candy Tan, "Talking About the R Word," *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*, September 14, 2005, https://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/2005/09/talking_about_the_r_word/. Note that "so long" in this instance is not actually particularly long; the website was created the same year as the post. Evidently, even *months* is too long to talk about romance without bringing up the presence of rape in the genre.

she replicates in miniature the very dilemma that renders the post necessary, the seeming dissonance between the serious and the tawdry, between rape and sex. Her euphemistic use of "the R word" in the post's title further hints at discomfort with the concatenation of rape and romance: to state the word "rape" baldly feels harsh, judgmental—at least until Tan cushions it with a joke—and yet anyone familiar with romance knows precisely what "the R word" in this context must be.

The meaning is obvious because the link between rape and the modern romance novel is approximately as old as the genre itself. There is, of course, no single point of origin for "the" romance novel, though critics like Pamela Regis have traced its lineage to the eighteenth century, with Samuel Richardson cited as not merely one of the first novelists but also the first *romance* novelist.[320] Jane Austen and the Brontë sisters are similarly considered forerunners and models of the modern romance novel. Regis links the popular romance of the twentieth century to Georgette Heyer's historical (primarily Regency) romances, and to the rise of Canadian publisher Harlequin beginning in the 1950s; when Harlequin partnered with and eventually acquired U.K. publisher Mills and Boon in 1971, the company solidified itself as the biggest distributor of category romance in North America.[321] However, as Angela Toscano has shown, the genre in its contemporary form—a juggernaut of publishing and sales—also owes much to the mid-century flood of gothic romances modeled after Daphne DuMaurier's *Rebecca* (1938).[322]

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[320] Pamela Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). It worth noting the important role rape plays in both *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1747), the latter of which is the subject of Erin Spampinato's "Rereading Rape," which I discuss in the Introduction.

[321] For more on Harlequin, see: Laura Vivanco, *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Tirril, Penrith: HumanitiesEbooks, 2011); Hardesty Sutton, "Marketing Love: Romance Publishers Mills &Boon and Harlequin Enterprises, 1930–1990," *Enterprise & Society* 23, no. 3 (2022).

[322] Angela Toscano, "Gothic Romance," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (London: Routledge, 2021), 99-117. Regis (*A Natural History*) also includes modern gothics in her history of the romance novel, as part of the development of a romance mass market. Lori Paige's *The Gothic Romance Wave: A Critical History of the Mass Market Novels, 1960-1993* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2018) offers a more complete overview of the genre.

Toscano further argues that these later gothic novels are also the subjects of "the first forays of scholarly criticism on the popular romance," criticism that "established the terms and methods for approaching popular romance" that would be used by later critics of the genre.[323]

Female readers of the modern gothic were as concerning to contemporary critics as their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts had been, the sort of women whom Jane Austen satirizes in *Northanger Abbey* as too credulous, unable to tell fact from fiction. It is fair to say, as Toscano does, that critics have "often regarded all instances of the romance genre, and rape within that genre, as a kind of field study of women's sexuality" (and, I would add, *white* women's sexuality in particular, though race is not always or even often marked by these critics). Toscano continues that even for contemporary critics of romance, "Rape and romance [have] come to be viewed purely as windows into women's sexual fantasies or as a representation of their complicity within a patriarchal system."[324] It should be no surprise then that popular romance's earliest critics viewed the popularity of novels seemingly invariably about "a dark, magnetic, powerful brooding, sardonic Super-Male, who treats [the heroine] brusquely, derogates her, scolds her, and otherwise shows contempt for her," leaving the heroine "vehemently attracted to him and usually just as vehemently repelled or frightened" with suspicion.[325] Joanna Russ (1973) argues that such novels "validated, justified and glamorized" feminine passivity.[326] Kay J. Mussell (1975) claims that gothics reassured female readers who might be questioning their place in society that "if women fulfill traditional roles, the family can

[323] Toscano, "Gothic Romance," 99.
[324] Angela Toscano, "A Parody of Love: the Narrative Uses of Rape in Popular Romance," *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, April 2012, https://www.jprstudies.org/2012/04/a-parody-of-love-the-narrative-uses-of-rape-in-popular-romance-by-angela-toscano/.
[325] Joanna Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me and I Think It's My Husband: The Modern Gothic," *Journal of Popular Culture* 6, no. 4 (1973): 668.
[326] Russ, "Somebody's Trying to Kill Me," 686.

be a viable institution."[327] In "The Utopian Impulse in Popular Literature," Janice Radway (1981) characterizes modern gothics of the 1960s-70s as "useful guides to the emotional and intellectual turmoil" of women in the midst of Second Wave feminism, but found that the texts ultimately "[reestablish] the basic structure of patriarchy … by demonstrating to the reader that in the heroine's world, sexual submission wins a woman both the protective care of another *and* an opportunity to realize her truest self."[328]

From these discussions, it is apparent that feminist critics were concerned, implicitly if not explicitly, with the way in which gothic romances justified male (sexual) dominance and encouraged female (sexual) passivity, the makings of rape culture if not depictions of rape itself. However, it was not until the publishing of *The Flame and the Flower* (1972) that the modern rape/romance connection was firmly established as a generic norm, and, perhaps more importantly, a widespread negative cultural association.[329] Kathleen E. Woodiwiss's novel tells the story of a beautiful, orphaned young woman's kidnapping and rape by—and eventual marriage to—a handsome sea captain, with whom she eventually falls in love. In this novel, sexual dominance and submission are no longer *implicit*; the first chapter shows the heroine, who

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[327] Kay J. Mussell, "Beautiful and Damned: The Sexual Woman in Gothic Fiction," *Journal of Popular Culture* 9, no. 1 (1975).

[328] Janice Radway, "The Utopian Impulse in Popular Literature: Gothic Romances and 'Feminist' Protest," *American Quarterly* 33, no. 2 (1981): 160.

[329] This association was very widespread, extending beyond North America and the U.K. For instance, a 1977 article in an Indian newspaper included the following description:

> Avon have now introduced the *erotic historical novel*, an essential ingredient of which, is what the publishers refer to as the *rape factor*. Women, they believe, right from the early teens to well past middle age, are frustrated and unfulfilled, because the men in their lives are disappointing and boring, or quite simply because there are no men in their lives. Rape is a subconscious wish or an overt fantasy and anything that helps them to indulge this fantasy is bound to be a highly lucrative field. The books are not for the intelligent, sophisticated woman, nor for anyone who is into women's lib. They appeal to a basically more simple and naive type who constitute a large proportion of the women in the United States.

The article dismissively describes Avon's output in the following way: "All they need is a story which does not have a contemporary setting, a hero who is beautiful, sullen and brooding, and a heroine who is violated against her will, written to a book length of 75,000-80,000 words." Nergis Dalal, "The Rape Factor," *The Times of India*, September 1, 1977, 6.

has been mistaken for a prostitute, fighting off the hero's advances before he finally overpowers and rapes her.[330] The details are graphic. We are told that she feels "his hardness … probing between her thighs," and, in a "panic to escape, she surge[s] upward" as a "burning pain seem[s] to spread through her loins."[331] Although she is "unresponsive," the hero nevertheless "thrust[s] deep within her" and "with each movement" she feels she will "split asunder."[332] Radically, the novel does (as Radway notes) admit "the legitimacy of its readers' growing interest in sexual fulfillment" when the heroine eventually enjoys consensual sex, but she is only allowed to pursue that sexual fulfillment through marriage to her rapist.[333] On the heels of *Flame*'s success, and to the concern of critics, romance publishers and imprints such as Harlequin, Avon, Zebra, and Bantam produced many more novels "featur[ing] spirited heroines fighting tooth and nail but constantly being ravished—in both senses of the word—by handsome, virile, often angry men."[334] While this story was far from the only type of romance on the shelves, the formulation did become an industry standard. As Tan colorfully puts it, "Between 1972 and about 1988, you couldn't swing a dead cat without hitting a rapist hero in the face."[335]

What, however, is wrong with the rapist hero? Why does he cause such consternation? While critics do not agree on a single reason, his presence in romance novels is often condemned as part of what supposedly makes romance novels so harmful to the real women who read them.

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[330] Toscano ("Parody of Love") describes this situation as the "rape as mistaken identity" trope, with the heroine being mistaken for someone else: "Brandon [the hero in *Flame and the Flower*] rapes [Heather, the heroine] despite her repeated resistance because he adduces her consent not from her words, but from her social role. Who she is, is entirely determined from her social context. Thus, because Heather is seen as a prostitute, Brandon presumes her *a priori* consent to the sex act."
[331] Kathleen E. Woodiwiss, *The Flame and the Flower* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), 34.
[332] Woodiwiss, *The Flame and the Flower*, 34.
[333] Radway, "Utopian Impulse," 161.
[334] Daphne Clair, "Sweet Subversions," in *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women*, ed. Jayne Ann Krentz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992; New York City: HarperPaperbacks, 1996), 85. Citations refer to the HarperPaperbacks edition.
[335] Tan, "Talking About the R Word."

Even when critics discuss other "harmful" aspects of romance novels, the rapist hero is still the implied subject of critique. For instance, Regis claims that it is actually romance's "universal" tendency to end in marriage or the promise of marriage that "elicits the fiercest condemnation from its critics" but critiques of the happy ending cannot be divorced from anxieties about the rapist hero.[336] It is not only *that* the heroine marries, but *whom* she marries, that has led to the conclusion that women who read romance may be negatively affected by the genre.

One commonly expressed anxiety relates to the normalization or romanticization of rape. In what is widely considered the most influential work of romance criticism, *Reading the Romance* (1982), Janice Radway, dismissing the need to elaborate at length on the issue of rape in romance because its effects are so apparent, claims that "little need be said about the way the romance's treatment of rape probably harms romance readers."[337] She offers only the following brief analysis:

> Although their distaste for 'out-and-out' violation indicates that these women do not want to be punished or hurt as so many have assumed [e.g., Greer], their willingness to be convinced that the forced 'taking' of a woman by a man who 'really' loves her is testimony to her desirability and worth rather than to his power suggests once again that the romance is effectively dealing with some of the consequences of patriarchy without also challenging the hierarchy of control upon which it is based.[338]

Radway acknowledges that among the small group of readers she profiles, the majority explicitly note that they do not care for plots in which heroes rape heroines, and that they in fact rate it as "the most objectionable feature" of a romance novel, more objectionable even than an unhappy ending.[339] Even so, according to Radway, the women who read romance are "probably" being

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[336] Regis, *A Natural History*, 9.
[337] Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, rev. ed. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 216.
[338] Radway, *Reading the Romance*, 216.
[339] Radway, "Reading the Romance," 73.

harmed by the genre's handling of rape. Without evidence, she indicates that how one reads a fictional rape must mirror one's understanding of actual rape; if the fictional heroine will accept, forgive, and love a man who hurts her, this logic seems to suggest, so too must the real female reader.

Other critics see the rapist hero as an expression of women's repressed, unarticulated feelings. In *Loving With a Vengeance* (1982), Tania Modleski takes as one of her central questions the problematics of the rapist hero by reading him as part of a rape fantasy that is an unconscious manifestation of women's (the writers' and readers' alike, presumably) ambivalence and fear regarding men's violence. Like Radway, Modleski rejects Greer's claim that romance readers are simply masochistic, instead making a psychoanalytic argument that "the so-called masochism pervading these texts is a 'cover' for anxieties, desires, and wishes which if openly expressed would challenge the psychological and social order of things."[340] In her reading, "the desire to be taken by force" seen in the rape romance fantasy "conceals anxiety about rape and longings for power and revenge."[341] For Modleski, romance novels voice women's discontent, often through the heroine's "taming" of the strong, powerful, violent hero who is brought to his knees by her; at the same time, these novels neutralize that discontent through the heroine's assimilation into heteropatriarchal marriage.

Modleski openly links the problem of the rapist hero to the happy ending, which supports my point that the critique of the resolution of desire into marriage/betrothal has become entwined with assumptions about the hero as sexually dominant or aggressive, despite the fact that these two issues need not be related. Emphasizing the repetitiveness of romance novels, Modleski

[340] Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1982; New York: Routledge, 1990), 20. Citations refer to the Routledge edition.
[341] Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 48.

argues that the restrictive plot and character guidelines provided by Harlequin lead to the "peculiar result ... that the reader who reads the story already knows the story, at least in all its essentials."[342] Specifically, the reader already knows the ending, the character change that the hero must undergo in order to live happily ever after: "[T]he transformation of brutal (or, indeed, murderous) men into tender lovers, the insistent denial of the reality of male hostility towards women, point to ideological conflicts so profound that readers must constantly return to the same text (to texts which are virtually the same) in order to be reconvinced" (Modleski 111). In this interpretation, not only is reading multiple romances returning to "the same" or "virtually the same" text, but this return is fundamentally pathological, offering insight into the conflicted and unconscious psychology of female readers.[343] The aesthetic "defects" Modleski sees in the texts in fact "reveal the contradictions in women's lives under patriarchy."[344] Kay Mussell (1984) makes a similar argument when she writes that the happy ending of romances, which supposedly deny the reality of patriarchy, is "so unsatisfying that the story must be told over and over."[345]

The insistence that all romance novels are essentially the same—and fulfill the same psychological function—because they are predictable, or because the end is already known, strikes me as odd, given that readers frequently approach books "already know[ing] the story, at least in all its essentials." This can happen because the plot has entered the cultural consciousness (e.g., *Romeo and Juliet*), or because it's a work within a genre that has several signature features, such as the noir detective story, which is expected to contain stock character types (the loner detective, a series of suspects, femme fatales), a variety of clues and red herrings, and scenes of the hero in danger, before concluding with the successful solving of a

[342] Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 32.
[343] Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 111.
[344] Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*, 111.
[345] Mussell, "Beautiful and Damned," 220.

crime. Surely it is how the known story is told that matters. In an essay on voice and authorship in romance, An Goris claims that romance's "success" depends on "its ability to integrate familiarity with innovation, thus offering its readers experiences of both comfort and surprise."[346] In arguing that the "highly conventional nature of the romance genre paradoxically facilitates recognition of individuality, creativity, and authorship in the text, or at least it does to fluent, experienced readers," Goris helpfully establishes that it is precisely the *interplay* of convention and innovation that allows romance readers to discern which novels they love, which they hate, and which they return to.[347] Contrary to Modleski's and Mussell's claims, to the experienced romance reader, romance novels are far from interchangeable.[348]

Romance novelists, facing a legacy of criticism that painted them as bad writers who churned out book after book with the same problematic plot, have attempted to defend their work as well by dismissing the critiques of Modleski, Mussell, and Radway. In 1992, several romance writers released a collection of essays, *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women: Romance Writers on the Appeal of the Romance,* in response to common critiques. From this title, it should be apparent that the book responded to the terms of critique set by feminist critics as well as popular ideas about the Media Romance; while some authors in the collection defended the literary quality of their work,[349] the majority of essays are dedicated at least in part to that which

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[346] An Goris, "Loving by the Book: Voice and Romance Authorship," in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Frantz and Selinger (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012), 76.
[347] Goris, "Loving by the Book," 82.
[348] Selinger and Frantz make a similar point on 6-7: "As Thomas J. Roberts' *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* points out, 'genre reading is system reading,' and whether the genre is romance, science fiction, or mystery/detective fiction, competent readers … take their pleasure in individual texts by reading them at once within and against the traditions and possibilities of that system. Take their pleasure—and their *displeasure* as well."
[349] Some of the essays in *Dangerous Men* about literary quality and technique in particular argue that romance novels are, in fact, complex fantasies for which there is no simple formula (Jayne Ann Krentz, "Introduction," 5), with "hidden codes" of conventional language (Linda Barlow and Krentz, "Beneath the Surface: The Hidden Codes of Romance," 17-36) and in which decisions about point of view (Laura Kinsale, "The Androgynous Reader: Point of View in the Romance," 55-64), references to a romantic literary tradition (Robyn Donald, "Mean, Moody, and Magnificent: The Hero in Romance Literature," 101-104), and questions of reader pleasure (Kathleen Gilles Seidel, "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," 199-227) all play roles.

seems to most discomfit detractors: the appeal of the classic romance hero, the eponymous "dangerous man," who is described in turns as "angry, aggressive, sexually charged";[350] a "domineering male";[351] "big, tough, powerful";[352] "strong, dominant, aggressive";[353] "arrogant and short-tempered, ruthless, tough, even cruel";[354] "a man larger than life, a man capable of killing";[355] "fierce, almost savage";[356] and "obsessed with the heroine, driven by a primitive passion to possess her in every sense of the word."[357] Some of these essays, like that by Mary Jo Putney, linger over specific texts and heroes, unspooling the particularities of *that* novel which make the violent hero, the rapist hero, a necessary element of the story being told. Writing of her own novel, *Dearly Beloved* (1990), in which the hero rapes his new bride when he is a young man, Putney explains, "The result was rape as rape really is: an ugly, violent crime that was damned near unforgivable, with nothing erotic about it."[358] Most of the novel takes place years later as the hero, himself a survivor of childhood incest, comes to terms with his past and works to "forge a healthy, loving relationship" with the heroine.[359] For Putney, the fantasy of being able to heal both as an individual and in a relationship "makes it possible to confront emotions too painful to deal with in a more realistic context."[360] Her use of rape, then, is not to her mind an attempt to romanticize abuse or to spin a fairy-tale in which love solves all problems; rather, it allows her as a writer to use the unrealistic space of the romantic fantasy to tackle universal human themes of pain, betrayal, forgiveness, healing, and recovery from trauma. In many ways,

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[350] Linda Barlow, "The Androgynous Writer: Another View of Point of View," in *Dangerous Men*, 61.
[351] Susan Elizabeth Phillips, "The Romance and the Empowerment of Women," in *Dangerous Men,* 69.
[352] Clair, "Sweet Subversion," in *Dangerous Men,* 88.
[353] Doreen Owens Malek, "Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know: The Hero as Challenge," in *Dangerous* 93.
[354] Donald, "Mean, Moody, and Magnificent," in *Dangerous Men,* 102.
[355] Anne Stuart, "Legends of Seductive Elegance," in *Dangerous Men*, 107.
[356] Elizabeth Lowell, "Love Conquers All: The Warrior Hero and the Affirmation of Love," in *Dangerous Men,* 113.
[357] Mary Jo Putney, "Welcome to the Dark Side," in *Dangerous Men*, 123.
[358] Putney, "Dark Side," 126.
[359] Putney, "Dark Side," 126.
[360] Putney, "Dark Side," 127.

the promise of the happy ending gives her the space as a writer to explore unusually dark themes.[361]

However, while essays like Putney's do address the place of rape as a literary device, many of the writers in the collection devote more time to rebutting the psychological claims about the harm the novels do to women. In these essays, the writers typically argue that rather than showing that women are submissive to men, romance novels empower women precisely *because* the hero is a challenge, and despite his strength and power, he is ultimately helpless against the heroine. As Susan Elizabeth Phillips puts it, "All his muscle, wealth, and authority are useless against her courage, intelligence, generosity, loyalty, and kindness … He is the mightiest of the mighty, the strongest of the strong. But, because he has been tamed by our heroine, because she exerts such a powerful emotional stranglehold over him, his almost superhuman physical strength is now *hers to command*."[362] These writers flip Modleski's reading on its head: the reader does not return again and again because she is unconvinced by the power fantasy but because the texts actually enable her to tap into a previously unknown or discredited strength—a distinctly feminine strength. Another author in the collection, Stella Cameron, makes this point when she writes, "Romances have existed and continue to exist because they are a joyous celebration of the strengths women most value within themselves."[363] Contrary to claims that romance novels encourage submissive women, the authors of *Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women* argue that their novels in fact empower women.

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[361] Contemporary romance novelist Helen Hoang made a similar point (although I do not claim she would defend the use of rape in romance) when she said, "When readers trust that everything is going to be O.K. in the end, they open their hearts to a wider range of emotion, because they're not protecting themselves from pain. That's something special to the genre." Annabel Gutterman, "How to Write a Romance Novel in 2021," *Time*, July 8, 2021, https://time.com/6078820/how-to-write-romance-novel/.

[362] Phillips, "Empowerment," 71.

[363] Stella Cameron, "Moments of Power," in *Dangerous Men*, 176.

Where does that leave critical discussions of rape in romance (and romance more broadly) today? According to critic Mary Bly (who also writes romance as Eloisa James), the field still tends toward "theoretically naive" scholarship that represents patriarchy as "a monolithic and inexorable opponent, dictating women's lives through reading practices."[364] Consequently, "the novels in question, the patriarchy itself, and the readers of romance fiction are reduced to ciphers in an ideological argument whose wide parameters diminish its value."[365] Although many works of popular romance scholarship such as *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction* (2008) (in which Bly's essay appears), the comprehensive *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction* (2021), and many of the articles published in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* have broadened the study of romance, works such as Catherine Roach's *Happily Ever After* (2016) and Maya Rodale's *Dangerous Books for Girls* (2015) have continued to frame romance novels as, for the most part, inherently empowering, particularly sexually. Roach, for instance, cites Hélène Cixous's "The Laugh of the Medusa" to suggest that "a woman becomes a feminist by putting words on paper or screen in order to 'break out of the snare of silence,'" and ultimately argues that romance novels constitute a form of feminist porn.[366]

Similarly, in popular discourse, many writers, readers, and reviewers now assert that not only is romance a feminist genre, but that the near-total banishment of rapist heroes from

[364] Mary Bly, "On Popular Romance, J.R. Ward, and the Limits of Genre Study," in *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays*, ed. Frantz and Selinger (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2012), 60.
[365] Bly, "On Popular Romance," 60.
[366] Catherine M. Roach, *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2016), 98.

mainstream romance constitutes proof of its value for women readers.[367] When that feminist value comes into question—as when Milburne called romance writers "part of the village" that rapes women—authors and fans are quick to assert how far romance has come. As legendary romance novelist Beverly Jenkins pointed out in response to Milburne's comment, "But consent is at the center now and has been for years. We're basically leading the charge on that."[368] According to this thinking, romance is, or ought to be, a feminist genre, and therefore sexual violence has no place in it (and hasn't for some time).[369] Those who, like Milburne and Cuthbert,

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[367] Articles abound by readers and writers of romance claim that "finding a lack of consent sexy" is "something [romance] fans are proud to say is a thing of the past" (Leach, "What Consent Looks Like"), that "romance novels teach readers that all partners are equal participants in a sexual relationship" (Bea Koch, quoted in Jennifer Weiner, "We Need Bodice Ripper Sex Ed," *New York Times*, January 20, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/20/opinion/sunday/romance-novels-sex-ed.html), that "they re-vision women's sexuality, making her a partner in her own satisfaction instead of an object" (Jennifer Crusie, "Romancing Reality: The Power of Romance Fiction to Reinforce and Re-Vision the Real," *Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres* 1, no. 2: 81-93). In other words: they're feminist, really!

Another response to rape in romance has been to argue for the feminist value of rape fantasy. A 2015 article on the pop feminist website Jezebel defends books with rapist heroes, telling readers about "My Hot, Consensual Introduction to the Rape Fantasy Romance Novel" (Natasha Vargas-Cooper, *Jezebel*, May 19, 2015, https://jezebel.com/my-hot-consensual-introduction-to-the-rape-fantasy-rom-1705332424), and author Claire Foster ("The Difference Between Rape Fantasy in Romance Novels and Real Rape Culture," *Foreword Reviews*, January 4, 2017, https://www.forewordreviews.com/features/feature/interested-in-the-past-young-adult-books-from-winter-2017/), writing on the feminist power of romance novels, contends that a "rape fantasy is different from a rape reality." For Foster, rape in romance allows women a space to work through the "sexual baggage" of existing as a girl or woman in a patriarchal culture; though the heroine may be brutally victimized (even by the hero), she always has a happy ending, and for "women who read romance novels, that's not a guaranteed experience, especially now." Note that these arguments relate to the reader's presumed psychological experience of the book.

[368] Beverly Jenkins (@AuthorMsBev), "But consent is at the center now and has been for years. We're basically leading the charge on that. I had a heroine who had an abortion. I don't know. Maybe I'm just too dense. I'm still confused by that quote," Twitter, September 12, 2019, https://twitter.com/authormsbev/status/1172146809763958785.

[369] While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to conduct a quantitative analysis of the presence of rapist heroes, those familiar with the genre seem to agree that the trend has lessened considerably. In *Dangerous Men*, Seidel and Krentz have also both commented on a push from within publishing houses starting in the mid-1980s to make romance novels more respectable. Krentz writes that "reforming editors" targeted the alpha male, the "heroes feminist critics despise" (Jayne Ann Krentz, "Trying to Tame the Romance: Critics and Correctness," 132). In addition, the convention of what Krentz calls "the aggressive seduction of the heroine by the hero" which is occasionally "so forceful that it has been mislabeled rape by critics" also came under fire by these reformers (134). Seidel, writing in 1992, comments that in "the last eight to ten years, romance novels have been extremely responsive to the social issues raised by mainstream feminism," and "in the mid-1980s there was considerable editorial pressure on writers to conform to at least the appearance of a more feminist fantasy," pushing authors away from the "macho, domineering hero" (Seidel, "Judge Me," 213-214). While both Seidel and Krentz defend the place of the alpha male and the fantasy of sexual domination, few romance best-sellers in recent years (particularly outside

have spoken in favor of grappling more with romance's history of representing rape in problematic ways have also indicated that their motive was a feminist one. Therefore, whether one sees rape as an ongoing issue in romance or understands it as a problem of the past, the only reason to discuss sexual violence and consent in romance is to characterize the genre as currently or aspirationally feminist.

It could be said that for those invested in the "feminist" project of romance, the presence of nonconsent constitutes a failure of the genre. Consider the SBTB review of a 2019 marriage-of-convenience historical romance, in which the novel is excoriated in part for a scene of "non-consensual voyeurism" (a husband masturbating as he spies on his wife in the bath) that the reviewer calls "incredibly creepy" and "super gross" as she vehemently discourages readers from buying the novel.[370] Although there is no rape in the book, even a sexual moment understood to be non-consensual becomes a significant reason for giving a romance novel an "F" grade in a review. In fact, a perusal of the "F" grade tag on SBTB yields several reviews in which the "F" is entirely due to an act or threat of sexual violence between the leads; a romance with a rapist hero or heroine is de facto understood to be a failure.

One of the voices within the romance community suggesting alternative modes of interacting with rape storylines is scholar Angela Toscano, who has provocatively asked critics to reject the ongoing "assumption that the representation of rape within romance mirrors directly the social and cultural problems of a patriarchal system," and notice that there is a real *narrative function* that rape performs in popular romance: "to serve, simultaneously, as bond and as

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of the specific subgenre of "dark romance") have featured heroes who rape the heroine. For an overview of the publication history of historical romance and the move away from rapist heroes, see also Kelly Faircloth, "The Sweet, Savage Sexual Revolution That Set the Romance Novel Free," *Jezebel*, December 6, 2016, https://jezebel.com/the-sweet-savage-sexual-revolution-that-set-the-romanc-1789687801.

[370] Elyse, "An Inconvenient Match by Susanna Malcolm," *Smart Bitches Trashy Books*, March 19, 2019, https://smartbitchestrashybooks.com/reviews/an-inconvenient-match-by-susanna-malcolm/.

obstacle, as the barrier and the attraction between hero and heroine."[371] In many cases, the hero's rape of the heroine "reveals the inadequacy of his perception and exposes through its violence and its violation the false underlying assumption that one can know the Other by outward signs."[372] For instance, for the Heather and Brandon, the lovers from *The Flame and the Flower*, rape makes apparent Brandon's misreading of Heather as nothing but a "fresh young thing for his pleasure," assuming that she is a prostitute based on her clothing and her presence at the docks.[373] At the same time, the rape and subsequent pregnancy bond Brandon and Heather by necessitating their marriage. In taking up the question of the narrative or aesthetic purpose of rape in romance (rather than its effect on readers), Toscano has made a bold declaration for the necessity of approaching the topic from a less moralizing standpoint, but, as Milburne's controversial comment and the Twitter storm that followed it make clear, attempts to grapple with romance's past (and, at times, its present) are unlikely to lose their ideological weight any time soon.

Though in this chapter I do not follow Toscano's lead in performing a primarily structuralist reading of rape in romance, I too want to reconsider the seemingly feminist turn in romance and the cultural and critical assumptions regarding how rape is and should be represented in the genre. I'm also building on the work of critics who have already noted the ways that "the genre has distanced itself from bodice-rippers" while still "continu[ing] to play with the look or feel or meaning of non-consensual sex and what's sometimes called 'dubious consent' or 'dub-con' sex."[374] (McCann and Roach 422). In their analysis, it is current BDSM

[371] Toscano, "Parody of Love."
[372] Toscano, "Parody of Love."
[373] Woodiwiss, *The Flame and the Flower*, 37.
[374] Hannah McCann and Catherine M. Roach, "Sex and sexuality," *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (London: Routledge, 2021), 422.

romance that "represents a version of a response to the earlier bodice-ripper, one in which partners gain trust and negotiate consent in advance before engaging in scenes of power exchange, including punishment and bondage."[375] However, I have found that even texts that are not explicitly engaging in "consent play" may be responding to the bodice-ripper in ways worthy of examination.

Next, I argue that authors of mainstream historical romance frequently respond to the expectations regarding rape found in the bodice-ripper; yet these responses do not always intentionally engage the problematics of masculinity, nor do they consistently and successfully present a feminist vision of consent. In these texts, rather than simply choosing to only write scenes of enthusiastic consent (i.e., to exclude all scenes of sexual violence), or to represent the kinds of "consent play" found in BDSM romance that may explore the erotic valences of rape fantasy, some authors have continued to represent rape—but only as a (temporary) threat to the heroine from which the hero will inevitably save her. In these texts, rape is used to simultaneously romanticize the hero's anti-rape ethos and to characterize rapists as inherently weak, unromantic, and even effeminate. As I discuss in the next section, such a book thereby draws attention not to its valuing of consent but rather to its rejection of the bodice-ripper and its embrace of a new model of masculine power and male desirability for female readers, a model I am calling the "anti-rape alpha." The anti-rape alpha is not merely *not* a rapist; he is a man whom the author goes out of the way to contrast with, as one modern alpha phrases it, "the kind of sorry bastard who rapes women": a pathetic failure of masculinity.[376]

[375] McCann and Roach, "Sex and sexuality," 422.
[376] Joanna Bourne, *My Lord and Spymaster* (New York: Berkley Sensation, 2008), chapter 3, Kindle.

Rejecting the rapist: the anti-rape alpha's (new?) masculinity

In the second chapter of *Happily Ever After: The Romance Story in Popular Culture*, scholar Catherine M. Roach stages a playful dialogue with her romance novelist alter ego, Catherine LaRoche, debating the value of romance novels. Naturally, the issue of rape arises. Roach, a professor of gender and culture studies, plays the aggressive feminist critic and demands to discuss the "issue of rape and domination": "Why in God's name is the romance hero is so impossibly dominant—the 'alpha male,' you call him, right?"[377] She is worried, she explains, that "the seduction by this dominant and powerful alpha male can sound like rape."[378] LaRoche's subsequent explanation exemplifies recent attempts to distinguish the rapist hero from the new anti-rape alpha:

> In romances … the hero is typically some version of the quintessential male but with the assurance that he is a figure of honor who will do no harm. So, yes, the heterosexual romance with the alpha hero upholds the patriarchal ideal of masculinity but with the feminist twist that this hero's power is never used against the heroine. In fact, his power is never misused at all, for any unjust purpose of exploitation.[379]

Another novelist, Saralee Etter, puts it more plainly: "A hero will stop, if his partner says no. The failure to ask, or failure to stop, is an excellent way to show when a character is *not* a hero."[380] In Etter's estimation, the rapist hero is a paradox. He cannot, and should not, exist. Curiously, however, in many romance novels with non-rapist heroes, the hero does not *merely* stop when his partner says no; his unwillingness to commit rape does not go unremarked as a basic

[377] Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 65.
[378] Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 66.
[379] Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 66.
[380] Saralee Etter, "The Dance of Consent," *Romance Writers* Report 35, no. 3 (2015): 21.

expectation of behavior. Instead, he is frequently afforded the opportunity to express his vehement and violent disgust for rape, casting a dislike of rape as in and of itself heroic.

That is to say, these novels still allude to the problem of rape that heroines must face, but now it is not a wrong committed by the hero but rather one *prevented* by him. If rapist heroes have grown less common, it is not at all unusual to read of alpha heroes who establish their claim to the heroine and their superior strength by preventing other men from raping her.[381] As I will show, by including these scenes, authors frame rape as the act of a weak man and the condemnation of rape as heroic, implicitly invoking the rapist hero in order to reject him in favor of a more enlightened, and sometimes feminist-minded, hero. They also relocate the threat of rape from within the central relationship to an external force that pushes the lovers together; the threat of masculine violence no longer originates in the central male character. As LaRoche points out, the anti-rape alpha still "upholds the patriarchal ideal of masculinity," and yet, by virtue of being a "real" hero, a true alpha, he is de facto exempted from complicity in patriarchy.

My purpose in establishing the trend of the anti-rape alpha is twofold: first, to show how generic expectations regarding rape have re-shaped the genre; and second, and more importantly, to argue that some novels, in attempting to respond to feminist critiques of rape in romance, have in fact elevated a postfeminist generic norm in which sexual violence is merely a matter of individual choice rather than a product of structural misogyny. In other words, the anti-rape

[381] Books with classic rapist heroes may also feature scenes in which the hero saves the heroine from rape—by others. The difference, in these cases, is usually that the condemnation of rapists is not inclusive of the act of rape writ large but rather of individual bad actors. Moreover, whereas the anti-rape alpha will protect the heroine from rape prior to knowing her, the rapist hero only protects the heroine once she is considered "his." Similarly, only as he begins to know her and have feelings for her is he likely to show any remorse for his own rape of her. To return to Heather and Brandon of *Flame and the Flower*, his remorse does not come with the knowledge that he violated her; it comes once he understands that he misread her as a prostitute, and again once he has fallen in love with her. Her goodness and innocence are what render the rape wrong, not the act's immorality itself.

alpha redeems the cultural construct of masculinity as a *solution* to gendered violence rather than recognizing masculinity as a *root* of gendered violence.

To better explain what I mean, I will briefly consider the scene of rescue from rape that typically marks an author's effort to distinguish the hero as not just not-a-rapist but specifically as an anti-rape alpha. While there is no one "formula" for a rape rescue scene—in which the hero charges in just in time to physically intimidate or incapacitate another man (or men) who are attempting to rape the heroine—there are three beats that the scene tends to hit: (1) an emphasis on the objective desirability of the heroine, to whom the rapist(s) explicitly make clear their sexual interest, often (crudely) praising the heroine's beauty; (2) the hero's performance of the "right" kind of masculinity, both powerful enough to protect the heroine and enlightened enough to revile rape, which is ultimately associated with weakness; and (3) the exposure of the hero's feelings for the heroine, which he has heretofore hidden or suppressed (or, if this is his first time meeting her, his feelings are initially roused by this moment of peril and rescue). These attempted/averted rape scenes are integral to the narrative of the lovers' romance *because* they assure readers that the hero is indeed a "figure of honor" worthy of the heroine: no matter how aggressively he asserts himself, he will never abuse his power. They also directly counter feminist critiques that the genre romanticizes male violence against women. Instead, the hero represents idealized masculine strength, while the villain, who attempts but (pathetically) fails to commit rape, is treated as the object of derision.

There is a representative scene of exactly this type in *Dreaming of You* (1994) by Lisa Kleypas, a novel that has been lauded as one of the first historical romances to feature a working-class hero, and which often appears on recommendation and Best Of lists to this day. In one pivotal scene, the novel's heroine, Sara Fielding, finds herself lost and alone on the streets of

London in the middle of the night during a riot. As she tries to make her way to safety, she is approached by "three chortling men, all reeking of liquor" who, despite her protestations, decide she "shouldn't mind a bit of folly with a few randy bucks."[382] Sara tries to fight the men, but to no avail. However, before they can do much more than frighten her, brooding hero Derek Craven, who rejected Sara a few scenes earlier, appears out of the darkness to rescue her. When Derek attacks the men, one attempts to appease him by offering to "share, if you want a taste of her first," but Derek "growl[s]" that "She's mine" and sends the injured men scuttling.[383] This scene corresponds exactly to the pattern I have identified: it (1) establishes Sara's desirability, with the attempted rapists referring to her as "enchanting," a "sweet bit o' skirt," and a "young, pretty wench."[384] It also, (2) demonstrates Derek's masculinity and the rapists' cowardice by showing him chasing the men away without difficulty, even though they outnumber him. Finally, (3) this scene reveals Derek's feelings for Sara. Though it was only pages earlier that Derek believed he and Sara were too ill-suited to be together, in saving her from the drunken men, he feels compelled to verbally claim Sara. Derek thereby confirms to Sara (and to readers) his physical strength, his possessiveness, and his fierce protectiveness, while also confirming himself as possessing an honorable quality that the drunk men do not: in other words, he confirms that he is an alpha hero.

A few chapters later, Sara and Derek attend a country house party, where the villainous Lord Granville sneaks into Sara's bedroom and attempts to rape her:

> "Quiet, quiet," he grunted, eagerly raking up her gown. "Lovely creature. I watched you tonight...those magnificent breasts swelling out of your gown. Don't struggle. I'm the best cocksman in London. Relax, you'll enjoy it. You'll see."[385]

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[382] Lisa Kleypas, *Dreaming of You* (New York: Avon Books, 1994), 161-162.
[383] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 163.
[384] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 161-162.
[385] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 284.

Though Sara is unable to cry out for help, Derek discovers that she is in danger and arrives just in time to interrupt the assault, pulling Granville off of Sara and brutally beating him. Once again, (1) Sara's desirability is established ("eagerly," "lovely creature," "magnificent breasts"). The scene also (2) demonstrates Derek's masculinity with his aggression toward Granville, and skewers Granville's masculinity in the process: over the course of the rescue, Derek is described as "growling murderously" as he threatens to "take your head off and pull your guts out through your neck," while Granville "whimper[s]," "crawl[s] backwards to the door," and "blubber[s]" in terror.[386] Finally, the near-rape (3) serves as the impetus for Derek and Sara's marriage; after he and Granville are discovered in Sara's bedroom, Derek agrees to marry Sara to salvage her ruined reputation, reinforcing his honor and bringing them closer than ever.

The obvious problem with *Dreaming of You*'s critique of rape is that it indicts class without indicting patriarchy itself. Kleypas offers a structural account for sexual violence, but in her narrative, part of what separates Derek's idealized masculinity from the effeminate and craven rapists is their class status, not their investment in male power: the rapists Sara encounters are all gentlemen with aristocratic backgrounds, while Derek, the anti-rape alpha, grew up "in an underworld of crime and sin, brought up in brothels, flash houses, and the streets of the rookery"; currently the owner of a gambling club, he speaks of past experiences as a chimney sweep, a mudlark, and a graverobber.[387] He is marked by the physical labor he has performed and the criminal world he has lived in. When he rescues Sara from the drunken men, she recognizes him by his "scarred face … harsh as a primitive war mask, lit by red firelight," and for a weapon he carries "a neddy, the weighted club preferred by rookery brutes."[388] Like Sara, the rapists

[386] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 284-285.
[387] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 170-172.
[388] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 163.

instantly mark his class difference, and they waste no time positioning themselves as his superior as they attempt to "buy" Sara from him: "Well-dressed for a cockney, aren't you? … I'll give money for more. You'll be the Beau Brummell of the East End."[389] Despite their attempt to remind Derek of his place in social order (a "cockney" from the "East End"), they are the ones who must scamper away in self-preservation. Similarly, Granville's lordly facade is a mere mask for his cowardice and physical weakness; he attempts to urge Derek to "discuss this like civilized beings," but Derek continues to behave like a "wild beast" until Granville "clutch[es] at [a] servant's ankle," begging for protection from a man of lower class.[390] It is only the servant's "brave" intervention that keeps Derek from killing Granville.[391] In this way, Kleypas ties Derek's alpha qualities, including his dislike of rape, to his working-class masculinity, a masculinity that aristocratic men lack.

Scenes similar to those I describe above are relatively common in historical romance, particularly (but not exclusively) white, heterosexual historical romance, though the nuances of how masculinity operates frequently vary.[392] For instance, there is a scene in Julia Quinn's *An Offer from a Gentleman* (2001), the third book in her popular Bridgerton series, that echoes Sara's near-rape during the riot and includes the same three beats of establishing desirability, proving masculinity, and revealing feelings.[393] Yet the class dynamics are entirely different. In this instance, the novel's heroine is a maid, Sophie Beckett, who is cornered one night by the

[389] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 163.
[390] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 284-285.
[391] Kleypas, *Dreaming of You*, 285.
[392] A brief selection of historical romances that feature the hero saving the heroine from rape include: Jeannie Lin, *The Dragon and the Pearl* (2007); Joanna Bourne, *The Spymaster's Lady* (2008); Lorraine Heath, *Midnight Pleasures with a Scoundrel* (2009); Julia Quinn, *Ten Things I Love About You* (2010); Karen Hawkins, *A Most Dangerous Profession* (2011); Candace Camp, *A Summer Seduction* (2012); Stacey Reid, *The Irresistible Miss Peppiwell* (2014); Lorraine Heath, *The Last Wicked Scoundrel* (2014); Shana Galen, *No Earls Allowed* (2018); Shana Galen, *The Claiming of the Shrew* (2019).
[393] Julia Quinn, *An Offer from a Gentleman* (New York: Avon Books, 2001), 92-101.

drunken son of her aristocratic employer and his equally intoxicated friends. These men (1) praise her beauty and demand sexual favors, but, luckily, Benedict Bridgerton, younger brother of a viscount, was also invited to the house party. Noticing the altercation, he (2) rushes over to intimidate the men, who put up a weak fight before he forces them to release Sophie into his care. Although he has only just met Sophie (at least to his knowledge), (3) Benedict is immediately attracted to her and quickly asks her to become his mistress, the attempted rape scene having sparked his protectiveness of and desire for her.[394] Though she refuses his proposition, he nevertheless extends his protection to her by finding her a position as a maid in his mother's household, from which proximity he falls in love with her.

In this scene, Benedict distinguishes himself from the rapists despite their superficial similarities. All are entitled aristocrats without a fixed place in the world, guests at an alcohol-fueled house party, but by stopping the rape, he proves that he is categorically different from them. Though less aggressively an alpha than Derek, Benedict exhibits a "worthy" masculinity, and in rejecting camaraderie with the rapists, he is also rejecting their indolent and selfish lifestyle. In protecting Sophie, he takes his first step away from the idle young men with whom he's previously identified and decides to it is time to pursue his own career, something he has avoided until now. In this way, Quinn ties the act of rape to character flaws rather than the institution of patriarchy.

In *The Guardian* by Margaret Mallory (2011), we see yet another iteration of an averted rape, with the same three beats. A medieval Scottish romance with a warrior hero and supernatural elements, the tone of the novel is quite different from Quinn's Cinderella-inspired Regency romantic comedy and Kleypas's gritty Victorian world, yet there is only a little

[394] In fact, Sophie and Benedict met years earlier at a masquerade ball, but at this point, Benedict has not recognized her.

variation in how attempted rape works in the narrative, primarily in how it reflects the Scottish politics of the novel's setting. The heroine, Sìleas, is saved by her estranged husband, Ian, moments before she is raped by Queen Margaret Tudor's lover, the Scottish nobleman Archibald Douglas, (1) who calls Sìleas "a verra lovely lass" and a "pretty virgin." [395] Ian saves Sìleas (2) by threatening Douglas's life, impressing both Sìleas and Douglas with his bravery, and in doing so, (3) he decides to fully commit himself to her, stating that "the lass is my wife … And she will remain so as long as there is breath left in my body."[396] In this instance, the novel's distinction between the hero and the rapist is less a matter of physical strength, class politics, or moral fiber; rather, it has a nationalist bent. Douglas's inferior masculinity lies in his ties to the English. As the lover of Margaret Tudor (regent of James V), Douglas is a Scotsman who has aligned himself with Englishness, and serves an instrumental role in ending uprisings in the Highlands, bringing Scotland even further under England's rule. Though he is sexually aggressive with Sìleas, it is implied that his relationship with the queen demeans him, as he trades undesirable sex (he describes himself as "having to bed that Tudor cow") for power, relying on his sexual submission to an English authority in order to gain more control over Scotland.[397] Meanwhile, Ian's arc in the novel involves embracing his Scottishness; having been away for five years, his growing attachment to Sìleas mirrors his deeper connection to his Highland roots. When Ian follows Sìleas to Edinburgh, he even has the chance to rekindle an affair with the Englishwoman he once loved, but, unsurprisingly, he chooses his Scottish wife—chooses Scotland—instead. The will to rape thus becomes a product of national allegiance rather than gendered relations.

[395] Margaret Mallory, *The Guardian* (New York: Forever, 2011), 212.
[396] Mallory, *The Guardian*, 221.
[397] Mallory, *The Guardian*, 212.

Each of these three novels was published in a different decade, with innumerable influential bestselling romances between them (many of which also hit the three beats of the rape rescue scene I have described), and each novel has its own unique pleasures and presents its own anti-rape alpha in a distinct way. Yet the deep structure of the rape rescue plot across these novels shows the persistence of the anti-rape alpha as a response to the pervasive association of romance and rape. At the same time, in so wholly rejecting romance's links to rape and treating sexual violence as solely the province of insufficiently masculine men, these texts do not truly acknowledge the complexities of the rape/romance association; instead, by essentializing the rapist as pathetic, unattractive, submissive, and/or weak, the novel exempts the hero from the rape culture in which we are all embedded, not because of his rejection of ideals of masculinity but because his very desirability and strength—his alpha qualities—preclude him from the category of the "pathetic" rapist.

What this shows is that although romance novelists have written anti-rape alphas in an attempt to refute feminist critiques and perhaps move the genre toward more admirable heroes, they've established a generic norm which, arguably even more than early bodice-rippers, treats rape as a mere bad choice unrelated to masculine ideals or patriarchal culture—or, even more problematically, frames rapists as a species apart, innately cruel, weak, and effeminate. In doing so, such texts also imply that the heroines need no longer fear rape if they make the right choices and partner with an appropriately masculine man. In the Introduction, I mentioned how postfeminist critiques sparked a backlash to stories of female victimhood in the 1990s. As the rise of the anti-rape alpha shows, those same years were characterized by many romance novels becoming exemplary objects of postfeminist pop culture, espousing a vision of sexual "equality"

and female empowerment that failed to acknowledge the entrenchment of patriarchy and the impossibility of resolving male violence against women on a purely individual level.

The shift from the rapist hero to the anti-rape alpha has had another troubling effect: a subject that was once understood as a means of exploring (however imperfectly) the experiences of a woman under patriarchy and the dangers, anxieties, and hopes that accompany heterosexual desire has become instead a tool through which to characterize masculinity as positive. The books I look at the for the rest of the chapter, on the other hand, theorize the relationship between rape and romance in more complex terms than simple rejection or denial. In these texts, heroes cannot "alpha" themselves out of their entanglement with patriarchal systems, and rapists are not implicitly exceptionalized as simply lacking "real" masculinity. Most of all, each of the following authors—Alyssa Cole, Courtney Milan, and Lorraine Heath—have their heroes engage with the topic of rape by decentering their own masculinity and instead centering the harms experienced by women desiring heterosexual love within a violent patriarchy.

Innovating rape in romance: close readings

Thus far, I have argued that feminist critiques of early (1960s–1980s) popular romance, and particular of the sexually explicit historical romance known as the "bodice-ripper," have influentially shaped how historical romance novelists represent rape even into the twenty-first century. Many authors, wanting to show that the heroes of their novels are not comparable to the genre's infamous rapist heroes, have turned to a formulation in which rape is configured as an avoidable threat: the act of inherently weak men that can be thwarted by a truly masculine man. In these novels, the fantasy offered to readers is one in which the possibility of sexual violence is acknowledged and neutralized at once. While such novels are not identical in how they represent

sexual violence, I suggest that the trope of the anti-rape alpha is not in fact an especially feminist innovation and its own calcification as a trope is as worthy of critique and scrutiny as rape romances of the past. In the following close readings, I show that romance can critique male violence and embrace a truly feminist ethos while still addressing the issue of sexual violence, and that it does so by engaging with romance tropes and readers' expectations regarding violence and masculinity in creative and critical ways, not by wishing them away.

Embracing an ethic of love in An Extraordinary Union

One aspect of the bodice-ripper and the historical romance in general to which I have only alluded is the genre's whiteness.[398] Prior to this century, few of the most well-known historical romances featured lead characters of color. Although there were some exceptions, including the acclaimed African American historical romances of Beverly Jenkins, most of these exceptions came from subgenres that quite clearly catered to the white gaze, such as the orientalist Sheik romance and romances about Native American men and white women they have taken captive.[399] While these texts may therefore technically represent a somewhat racially "diverse"

[398] The history of romance's whiteness is a fascinating and complicated one. While romance has never been solely the genre of white authors—as critics such as Jayashree Kamblé, Julie E. Moody-Freeman, Rita B. Dandridge, and Ann Yvonne White have shown—it is also plagued by controversies regarding the lack of diversity among authors published by major presses, as evidenced in the yearly "State of Racial Diversity in Romance Publishing Report" released by the proprietors of romance bookstore The Ripped Bodice. Similarly the Romance Writers of America (RWA) professional organization, although originally co-founded by prolific romance editor Vivian Stephens, a Black woman, has faced a major backlash over its ineffective responses to complaints of racism within the organization. This backlash began in 2019 when Chinese American author Courtney Milan, whose work I discuss later in this chapter, was censured for Tweets she had made calling out other romance novelists for racism. For an overview of this controversy, see Constance Grady, "Bad romance," *Vox*, June 24, 2020, https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2020/6/17/21178881/racism-books-romance-writers-of-america-scandal-novels-publishing.

[399] E.M. Hull's The Sheik (1919) has been described as "the ur-romance novel of the twentieth century," in which the exotic hero who is initially read as Arab (but, the reader eventually learns, who is actually white) abducts, imprisons, and rapes the white heroine (Regis, *A Natural History*, 115). As the taboo of interracial romance lessened (or, at least, as publishers became willing to profit from the titillation the taboo provided) more "desert romances"

array of heroes, the heroine's whiteness has been an essential and unifying component of many historical romances. Critical assumptions that female readers "identify with" these heroines, and/or that they offer an insight into readers' psyches are therefore based on a reading of the rape of *white women* in romance as evidence of *any* (female) reader's fantasies, ambivalences, or anxieties regarding rape. However, Black women's relationship to rape (and rape narratives) cannot be conflated with that of white women, because Black women have, as I discussed in both the Introduction and Chapter 1, been historically constructed as lascivious, unrapeable, and unworthy of protection.

The novel I consider in this section, *An Extraordinary Union* (2017) by Alyssa Cole, offers a pointed subversion of the typical scene of rescue in which a text demonstrates to the reader that it has rejected the trope of the rapist hero in favor of a strong but entirely (in fact, *definitionally*) safe hero: the anti-rape alpha. Instead of imagining a world where the heroine is free from the threat of violence, Cole instead offers a radical Black feminist vision of interracial heterosexual love within a violently white supremacist society. While every romance involves a

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were published featuring heroes who were actually men of color. Some titles of this sort include *Captive Bride* (1977) by Johanna Lindsey; *The Golden Barbarian* (1990) by Iris Johansen; *Sheik* (1997) by Connie Mason; *Kismet* (2010) by Monica Burns; *The Governess and the Sheikh* (2011) by Marguerite Kaye; and *The Sheik and the Slave* (2014) by Nicola Italia. Contemporary sheik romances are also popular, with several sheik titles as part of the Harlequin Presents line published by Harlequin Mills & Boon. For a critical perspective on sheikh/desert romance, see Hsu-Ming Teo, *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012).

Examples of "Indian romances" include *Nakoa's Woman* (1972) by Gayle Rogers; *White Witch* (1988) by Bronwyn Williams; *Savage Dreams* (1989) by Veronica Blake; *Passion's Savage Moon* (1989) by Colleen Faulkner; *Comanche Moon* (1991) by Catherine Anderson; *White Bear's Woman* (1997) by Candace McCarthy; *A Whisper in the Wind* (2016) by Madeline Baker. For one analysis of Native American captivity romances, see Kate McCafferty, "Palimpsest of Desire: The Re-Emergence of the American Captivity Narrative as Pulp Romance," *Journal of Popular Culture* 27, no. 4 (1994): 43-56. Interestingly, in the novels McCafferty considers, the white heroine's "experiences always include a dangerous encounter with at least one lecherous white villain, an army officer in 80 percent of cases studied. Although there are 'black-sheep' Indian males in these tales, unlike whites none ever attempts to force his sexual attention on a woman" (McCafferty, "Palimpsest of Desire," 50). The "noble savage" of the captivity romance might be an anti-rape alpha by another name, one whose masculinity is linked to his "native blood." Romance historian Steve Ammidown has also written extensively for public audiences about "Indian" romances: see, e.g., "A Brief History of 'Indian Romance,'" *Romance History*, August 3, 2021, https://romancehistory.com/2021/08/03/a-brief-history-of-indian-romance/.

negotiation of unequal power dynamics, Cole's attention to the structurally-embedded identities of her lovers requires her to describe the circumstances that could enable their happy ending, engaging her readers in act of world-imagining that is neither utopian nor cynical, but more radically searches the possibility of happiness for marginalized people within a social order built on their exploitation and dehumanization, and the necessity of hope while worker toward a better world. Cole's novel, I argue, espouses what bell hooks calls an "ethic of love," in which love is communal, political, hopeful, and ultimately "a practice of freedom."[400] As part of this practice, hooks calls for those invested in Black liberation to turn away from despair and what she describes as the "militancy of masculinist black power," in favor of a decolonized model of liberation in the traditions of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who chose to prioritize love for mankind and Black self-love (rather than patriarchal power), respectively.[401] Both of these forms of love are necessary to the struggle for freedom, and necessary to the vision of happiness presented by the characters in the novel.

Set in Virginia during the Civil War, *An Extraordinary Union* features a Black heroine named Elle Burns, a spy for the Union Army and a formerly enslaved woman who, now free, poses as a mute slave within the household of a prominent Confederate family. The novel's hero, Malcom McCall, is also a Union spy, a white man pretending to be a Confederate soldier. Their paths cross and their missions merge, but because of their respective races and precarious positions, they cannot fill the expected roles of endangered woman and male protector in the

[400] bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations* (New York: Routledge, 1994; New York: Routledge, 2008), 289. Citations refer to 2008 edition. Elsewhere, hooks describes the concept of a "love ethic" in slightly different, but related, terms: "Culturally, all spheres of American life—politics, religion, the workplace, domestic households, intimate relations – should and could have as their foundation a love ethic. … Individuals who choose to love can and do alter their lives in ways that honor the primacy of a love ethic. We do this by choosing to work with individuals we admire and respect; by committing to give our all to relationships; by embracing a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet." bell hooks, *All About Love* (New York: William Morrow, 2001), 87-88.
[401] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 290-295.

ways the more conventional (and racially homogenous) rape rescue formula allows. Clearly fluent in the genre's history and conventions, Cole structures her romance in such a way as to make apparent the insufficiency of the anti-rape alpha as a Black fantasy by including several scenes that read like uncanny versions of scenes in white romances.

For instance, as a Black woman, Elle has vulnerabilities that render the possibility of a traditionally structured romance narrative more difficult for her than a white heroine's vulnerabilities do. This is clear from the moment Elle and Malcolm first meet, when they feel an instant attraction for each other—a common occurrence in romance novels—but Malcolm's attempt to flirt with Elle terrifies her. Though his compliment on her beauty makes her blush, a moment later "realization set[s] in":

> She was alone in a room with a man in a Rebel uniform, and he was smiling at her. … She backed away from him, watching his smile recede as quickly as her feet did. After only a few steps, she found herself pressed against the dining table.
>
> *He wouldn't … he couldn't in the dining room, could he? Surely he wouldn't be so brazen?* Elle had known there would be a risk of this, of being taken advantage of by a man who merely saw her as a vessel in which to slake his desire.[402]

This scene echoes those uncomfortable scenes in early romance where the rapist hero, finding himself alone with the heroine, proceeds to show his attraction by violating her boundaries and her body. Consider again *The Flame and the Flower*: despite Heather's clear discomfort and growing awareness of the danger she is in, Brandon remains oblivious to or unconcerned about her unwillingness to have sex with him; he rapes her believing that if she is a prostitute then she is consenting; her (misread) identity renders her always already consenting. Similarly, if the white man in a Confederate uniform chooses to have sex with Elle at that moment, her (non)consent would be irrelevant (if not impossible) in the society in which they live and

[402] Alyssa Cole, *An Extraordinary Union* (New York: Kensington, 2017), 115-116.

presumably meaningless to the man himself. As Saidiya Hartman has discussed regarding the sexual abuse of enslaved subjects in *Scenes of Subjection*, white stereotypes about "insatiate black desire presupposed that all sexual intercourse was welcomed."[403] Elle's "consent" is thus implicitly assumed by whites due to her race, much as Heather's is by Brandon due to her supposed profession. Unlike Heather, however, who is not in fact a prostitute—and whose powerful friends and aristocratic background result in Brandon being forced to take responsibility for the rape by marrying her and thereby legitimizing her child—Elle's race is not a misreading. She has no recourse for rape, not in the law and not in the narrative of a love story. In fact, Elle's rape by a white man *could not* be the first chapter in a romance because her rapist would owe nothing to her.

Although Malcom does not rape or hurt Elle, the reality of their racial and sexual difference, and the fraught histories attached to that difference, color all future interactions between the two as their true identities and goals are revealed and their desire for one another deepens. As she reminds him later, once they've come to care for each other, "In the eyes of society, I'm nothing more than a wench for you to bed."[404] Even if Malcolm believes that Elle is a subject capable of granting or refusing consent, and even if he rejects rape as an abhorrent act, he cannot unmake the structural forces that treat her not merely as his inferior but literally as an object to be owned. White supremacy holds that Elle is not a woman; she is a slave.

This distinction echoes Hortense Spillers's theorization of the Black female body as historically "unprotected female flesh … female flesh 'ungendered.'"[405] The meanings of gender imposed on "the female body" do not apply to Black women under slavery; instead, the "African

[403] Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 86.
[404] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 82.
[405] Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 68.

female subject is not only the target of rape—in one sense, an interiorized violation of body and mind—but also the topic of *externalized* acts of torture and prostration that we imagine as the peculiar province on male brutality and torture inflicted by other males."[406] The brutality of enslavement cannot be accounted for in standard accounts of "the female body," because the Black female body—the captive body—is rendered as mere flesh imprinted with "externally imposed meanings and uses … becom[ing] the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality," and "at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing."[407] Elle's reduction to flesh, the pornotroping that objectifies her as the focus of violent (and) sexual desire, thus complicates both what it means for a white man to be attracted to her and what it means for her to become the lover of that white man. Although not truly enslaved (though perpetually in danger of it), Elle's experience raises at least one of the questions Hartman brings to her reading of *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*: "What does sexuality designate when rape is the normative mode of its deployment?"[408]

As I previously discussed, rape rescue scenes in romance novels often serve to emphasize a heroine's desirability, but this trope, however problematic, loses coherence entirely when its normative whiteness becomes apparent. For a Black heroine in the context of slavery, threatened or attempted rape does not successfully emphasize her as a desirable woman, or even a desirable body, but rather underscores her as ownable flesh. When white men speak of Elle('s body), they reduce her to a thing to be used. Senator Caffrey, the prominent Confederate upon whom she's spying, says of her, "Can you imagine having that under you, and her not able to make a sound?"[409] Elle is both "that" and "her"; to the slaveholder and the white male subject, there is

[406] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67-68.
[407] Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 67.
[408] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 85.
[409] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 31.

no difference. The fetishization of Elle's (feigned) muteness further emphasizes her reduction to mere flesh to be acted upon. Black, enslaved, and (apparently) disabled, Elle is considered to be without subjectivity, and it is that very lack of subjectivity that Caffrey sexualizes.

Moreover, the white hero cannot claim the Black heroine as Derek Craven did Sara in *Dreaming of You*; for Malcolm to tell another white man "she's mine" regarding a Black woman would be understood by the other man (and possibly by Elle) not as a profession of love or even mere erotic desire but a statement of possession, reinforcing her status as chattel. Even when he does attempt to defend her, he can do so only by playing into the role of Confederate soldier. For instance, when a white man named Willocks inquires as to why Malcolm is standing with Elle on the street, Malcolm explains that she was delivering a note from Senator Caffrey. Willocks replies, "Ah, so she's only the messenger then … I could think of a few other uses for her."[410] To put him off, Malcolm insults Elle: "This one? She's nature's own fool. … Can't even talk. No fun in that, is there?"[411] To divert Willocks's interest in Elle, Malcolm resorts to implying that she would not be "fun" to rape due to her muteness, implicating himself (even if superficially) in not only Elle's ongoing objectification but the objectification of enslaved women as a whole. When Elle's muteness doesn't stop Willock's interest ("As long as the parts down below work, who cares if she's a little soft in the head?"), Malcolm instead orders Elle away, treating her as a slave in order to spare her further threat.[412] Despite promising Elle that she's "safe from any … unwanted advances" and that "no one will harm" her while he's around, Malcolm realizes that the precarity of their situation, and particularly of Elle's position, demands that he hold his temper and let her endure these insults while he plays along.[413] At one point he castigates

[410] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[411] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[412] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[413] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 33.

himself, “Hadn’t he offered her his protection and now he stood grinning at a man who harassed her?”[414]

Yet even his barely tethered fury that he cannot defend Elle shows how different their positions are, and it illuminates the insufficiency of the anti-rape alpha’s righteous fury when it comes to real change and to expressing a true love ethic that “leads us beyond resistance to transformation.”[415] Malcolm is accustomed to expressing his anger through physical violence; for instance, he thinks at one point that Willocks is “damned lucky” that Malcolm must remain undercover to complete his mission, or else “the lecher would have tasted Malcolm’s back hand for the next week.”[416] Meanwhile, when Malcolm asks how Elle manages to hold in her anger at the treatment she receives, she makes it clear that she doesn’t “have the luxury of being outraged.”[417] Simply venting righteous anger won’t liberate her people or build a new future; it will only endanger her and her mission. Rather than Malcolm valiantly defending Elle in a confirmation of his masculinity, then, Malcolm can only feel “impotent rage,” the articulation of which only further reveals his privilege and naïveté.[418] At his suggestion that perhaps “the only way for this country to be cleansed of its sins is to burn them away,” she once again reiterates the need to think beyond resistance to transformation: “Even if everything from the Eastern seaboard to the furthest territory out West was razed to the ground, it couldn’t make up for the injustice. And if you think that’s what I’m fighting for … then you’ve misunderstood everything. You’ve misunderstood me.”[419] The heroic show of protection that Malcolm cannot perform, the feelings of emasculation (his rage is “impotent”) produced by that lack, and the selfish privilege of his

[414] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[415] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 297.
[416] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[417] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 82.
[418] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 75.
[419] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 83.

anger stand in direct opposition to the experiences of heroes whose protection of white femininity serves to reveal not only the depth of their connection to the heroine but also the hero's own unique masculine worth. Instead, Malcolm fails to live up to the ethic of love and orientation toward transformative justice that Elle understands as necessary to their cause, instead espousing the "profound nihilistic despair" that bell hooks cautions against.[420] Although Malcolm is white and therefore not the primary subject of hooks's critique, his despair and his prioritization of militant power as the primary solution to racism ultimately aligns him with a version of masculinity that abets the patriarchy rather than ensuring freedom for all.[421]

In a clever reversal of expectations, the scene in which the novel in which Cole reveals and rejects the traditional construct of male saviorism and female desirability is a scene in which Elle faces a threat of gang rape, like so many other romance heroines before her. However, rather than hitting any of the beats that allow such scenes to function as romance, the scene shatters the expectations that the set-up arouses: the beautiful heroine in distress, the powerfully masculine hero, and the hero's realization of his feelings. In fact, in this scene, Elle is not represented as especially beautiful or desirable; she is traveling in disguise as Malcolm's male slave when she is nearly kidnapped by slavers who do not, at first, realize her true gender. For a moment, Malcolm doesn't understand what's happening, noting that "Elle was dressed as a boy, so it seemed discordant that the bandit was looking at her with such a covetous gaze."[422] What Malcolm reads as sexual desire is in fact the desire to capture, torture, and sell an enslaved man, revealing the overlap between rape and enslavement and the reduction of the Black body to flesh. Eventually

[420] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 292.
[421] For Cole's critique of Black masculinity and turn toward a love ethic for Black men specifically, read Alyssa Cole, *An Unconditional Freedom* (New York: Kensington, 2019). The hero of this novel is a Black man mired in despair after escaping slavery and who initially rejects the transformative potential of love.
[422] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 169.

one of the slavers realizes that Elle is a woman, "ripping aside the lapels of Elle's jacket and running a hand over her bound chest"[423]—an assault simultaneously meant to confirm and reinscribe her role of Black female, with "sexual violence establish[ing] the link between racial formation and sexual subjection."[424] Even then, however, her "desirability" has nothing to do with why she fears rape from the slavers or why their discovery of her gender is so calamitous. Moreover, even if her gender wasn't discovered, the sexual abuse of enslaved boys and men was not uncommon, so the erotics of the "covetous" desire displayed by the slavers are tied less to gender than to race and captivity, what Hartman describes as "the full enjoyment of the slave as thing."[425]

In addition to not emphasizing Elle's beauty/desirability, the scene also does not allow Malcolm to prove his strength and masculinity by defeating the would-be rapists. Instead, it is Elle who takes advantage of the slavers' surprise regarding her gender in order to wrestle a gun away from one man and shoot him; only then does Malcolm join the fray and the two of them escape.[426] Nor in fact does the shooting allow Elle to prove her own strength and worth; this is not a simple "empowering" role reversal in which the heroine saves herself. Instead, having killed a man, Elle "flushe[s] hot and [feels] her gorge rise, wonder[s] if she [is] going to pass out," and admits to herself that "even though she knew [the slaver] intended her serious harm, she wishe[s] she hadn't seen his last bloody gasp, which [will] be engraved indelibly in her mind."[427] Rape and enslavement are indicted as two aspects of the violent white supremacy upon which the nation was built, and, Cole suggests, there can be no triumph of erotic connection in

[423] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 173.
[424] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 85.
[425] Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 86.
[426] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 173-174.
[427] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 174.

that context. More than that, Elle must allow herself to feel the grief and horror of committing violence, of killing a man, because even though she acted in self-defense, death is not the foundation upon which Elle seeks to build a future. Violence might, at times, be necessary, but to become numb to that violence, let alone to celebrate it, would betray the love ethic both she and the novel stand for.

Finally, while typically such scenes are used to reveal the hero's feelings for/to the heroine, in this case, it is Elle who realizes that she cares for Malcolm, and when she does so, she must weigh those feelings against a more encompassing love for justice—a love ethic in which romantic love is only one facet. Although the crisis of seemingly imminent death and denial of subjectivity makes her realize "what might have been [between them] despite the rules of a sick society that was destroying itself from the inside out," Elle realizes that at that moment, she cannot claim Malcolm, and must in fact attempt to send him away in order to pass along the information they recently discovered regarding the Confederate Army's plans.[428] Following their escape from the slavers, Elle does finally tell Malcolm that she cares for him, but even after doing so, she still reprimands him for not leaving her behind to ensure their mission was fulfilled. "What we're doing is more important than you and I," she asserts, recontextualizing the near-kidnapping and near-rape as an event with significance beyond the narrative of their relationship, and placing it into the structural and national issues with which the novel is concerned.[429] Stopping those slavers may have saved her from rape, she acknowledges, but it is the institution of slavery and the ideology of white supremacy that are the true enemies.

In much the same way that Cole refuses to allow the attack on Elle to be individualized as a case of men who are simply bad, unworthy, and/or unmasculine, she also questions the limits

[428] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 171.
[429] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 180.

of the lovers' HEA or even the HFN by gesturing toward the fraughtness of the world in which Elle and Malcolm's relationship is but one part:

> "Do you think things will ever be put aright?" he asked. "All of this devastation, all of this loss?"
>
> She sidled up against him beneath their warm blanket. "I don't know," she said. "I want to tell you yes, but I can't see into the future. The only thing I know for sure is that I love you, and I think I always will."[430]

Though Elle's profession of love certainly fits the bill of a HEA—especially placed as it is, within the novel's epilogue, after the characters have married—Cole's inclusion of Elle's uncertainty about the future of the war, the nation, and slavery tempers the optimism of the ending; or, more radically, it calls for the romance reader to imagine what kind of love may be required to offer a genuinely happy ending, one free of injustice.

In an author's note at the end of *An Unconditional Freedom*, the third book in the series that starts with *An Extraordinary Union* (each of which features a different central romance), Cole talks about writing a Civil War-era romance in 2018:

> As I was writing this book, it seemed that every other day brought a new story about a Black man or woman being killed by police. As I was writing this book, opening social media meant seeing the casual cruelty of the current government's policies. As I was writing this book, I couldn't help but succumb to sadness and defeat because what promise could I make a character like Daniel [the Black hero of *An Unconditional Freedom*, who is kidnapped into slavery as an adult] about America, knowing that in 2018 it had reverted back to everything he feared? How could I give him a happy ending in a country that was so set against him having one?[431]

Although Cole did not share these thoughts until publishing *An Unconditional Freedom*, in retrospect, her reflection on the connections between past and present remains relevant to *An Extraordinary Union*. How can a novel promise a HEA to Elle, when within her historical

[430] Cole, *An Extraordinary Union*, 252.
[431] Cole, *An Unconditional Freedom* (New York: Kensington, 2019), 269.

context she faced a lifetime of bigotry and danger, and when the contemporary promises little more? Simply put: it cannot. However, the choice to write Elle's and Daniel's stories as romances rather than tragedies suggests that there can, and must, still be hope for a more just future.

Ultimately, rather than dismissing sexual violence as a problem of individual actions, Cole offers an expansive critique of sexual violence that recognizes how it enforces gendered *and* racial oppression, yet also offers a glimpse into how one might intervene in those systems to create a better world; it suggests how to ethically orient oneself to make change. Cole's critique encompasses the function of rape in anti-rape alpha narratives, showing how the individualized approach—one in which avoiding rape and violence is the matter of choosing the right man for protection—leaves all but the heroine out of the promise of safety implied by the HEA. Instead, rape is represented as one facet of a larger system of social control and violence that extends beyond individual action. While the hero and heroine of the novel may manage to show their moral goodness and achieve a lasting relationship built on mutual respect and consent, individual virtue and romantic love cannot reshape the structural conditions that cause suffering and inequality.

Yet that doesn't make love unimportant. Love is never unimportant in a romance, and for all that it bucks convention, *An Extraordinary Union* is unquestionably a romance and the embrace of the core tenets of that genre is deliberate. In this novel, although one loving relationship may not solve the problem of rape, or redress any broad social injustice, love itself matters because it is more than a feeling: "choosing love" is "the ethical foundation for politics," from which "we are best positioned to transform society in ways that enhance the collective

good."[432] To return to Elle's response to Malcolm's question about whether "things will ever be put aright," her claim that the "only thing I know for sure is that I love you" may not offer the reassurance one might expect from a traditional HEA, but it does something more important: it affirms the centrality of love in her vision of the world's future.

Resisting reproductive futurity in The Countess Conspiracy

In *An Extraordinary Union*, Cole shows how sexual violence operates as one facet of broader societal injustice, but Courtney Milan's *The Countess Conspiracy* positions the heroine's experience of rape as a kind of refraction point through which to interrogate, explore, and experiment with some of the most calcified tropes within the genre, especially in terms of the hero. These tropes include: the narrative focus on the aristocracy and upper classes of English society, as seen in the publishing toward novels about earls, viscounts, and especially dukes;[433] the primacy of phallocentric vaginal intercourse as a mode of intimacy;[434] and the treatment of reproductive futurity, seen in the continuation of the paternal family line, as perhaps the defining feature of a happy ending.[435] Milan's careful attention to representing the experience of surviving rape and the societal structures that enable and normalize it allows her to offer a counter-

[432] hooks, *Outlaw Culture*, 294
[433] Amy Burge, "Class and wealth in popular romance fiction," in *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Romance Fiction*, ed. Jayashree Kamblé, Eric Murphy Selinger, and Hsu-Ming Teo (London: Routledge, 2021); Jackie C. Horne, "Dukes: The 0.0001735%" *Romance Novels for Feminists*, November 22, 2013, https://romancenovelsforfeminists.blogspot.com/2013/11/dukes-00001735.html; Nancy Herkness, "Dukes and billionaires: why do we love them so?" *USA Today*, July 21, 2015, https://www.usatoday.com/story/happyeverafter/2015/07/21/nancy-herkness-ceo-buys-in-billionaire-appeal/30423683/.
[434] Christine Cabrera and Amy Dana Ménard, "'She Exploded into a Million Pieces': A Qualitative and Quantitative Analysis of Orgasms in Contemporary Romance Novels," *Sexuality & Culture* 17, no. 2 (2013).
[435] Babies are such a common feature of romance epilogues that they are known as "babylogues." See also Maya Rodale, "About babies and HEAs…" *Hidden Herstories* (blog), February 8, 2023, https://mayarodale.substack.com/p/about-babies-and-heas.

narrative to feminist critiques regarding the troubling, romanticized invocation of rape in romance. More intriguingly, she also shows that writing about rape may in fact offer romance novelists and readers new perspectives on the genre itself, suggesting that as romance self-reflexively grapples with its history and reputation, rape may not be a topic to shy away from. Rather, it may in fact be worth representing in greater depth.

One of the main critiques Milan makes of the genre is achieved by linking sexual violence with the project of maintaining the British aristocracy. Lady Violet Waterfield, the heroine of *The Countess Conspiracy*, is the victim of long-term marital rape as part of her husband's relentless desire for an heir to his earldom; with no legal recourse for his behavior, she endures his abuse until his death in 1862. After her husband dies, Violet finds herself reluctant to pursue or accept romantic love and sexual attraction, instead throwing herself into the study of the breeding of plants and flowers, so that by the start of the novel's timeline in 1867, she has (pseudonymously) become the world's foremost expert on reproductive biology whose research has outraged the Victorian public and captivated the scientific community. Much of the novel involves Violet coming to claim her work as her own, but, given that *Countess* is a romance novel, it should come as no surprise that Violet also finds love, marrying her best friend and scientific partner, the notorious rake Sebastian Malheur. Through Sebastian, the novel presents a vision of masculine power that is enacted through the support of women, not the protection of them. Moreover, by positioning Violet's research alongside her childlessness as key features of her HEA, the novel imagines and encodes as romantic a nonreproductive futurity that critiques the historical romance subgenre's reproduction of British imperial logic in its attention to inheritance and titles, and advances alternatives to the heteropatriarchal inheritance model that shapes its characters' world and its readers' expectations.

The novel makes the relationship between rape and the aristocratic model of inheritance quite explicit, allowing Milan's representation of sexual violence to serve as the primary vehicle through which she problematizes the relationship of the historical romance to normative reproductive futurity and the romanticization of aristocratic heroes. Violet's experiences of sexual violence within her marriage are intimately tied to her husband's desire for not just a child but "his heir," a male child to inherit the earldom.[436] However, all of Violet's nineteen pregnancies result in miscarriages. As she explains partway through the novel:

> The doctor said we had to stop trying. That it was taking too much out of me. … That if he didn't stop, I was going to die. But my husband didn't want to stop. He wanted his heir. … I told him no, you understand. I told him no, and he never forced me when I did. But my no never stuck. He'd come back and argue. He'd wheedle and explain. He told me I was selfish to withhold myself. That the earldom needed its heir, that it was bigger than just me. I could have refused, if it was just that one no, but he only had to get one yes. One yes, and he'd be on me again. One yes, and he'd make me feel like nothing—like my whole life, my whole body, was worth nothing more than the chance to get me with child. And I was a selfish, conniving bitch for wanting anything else.[437]

I want to take a moment to grapple with the complexity of the harm being articulated here, and the way it demands what Erin Spampinato has called a more capacious conception of rape; she argues that in literary analysis (rather than law enforcement contexts), any representation of "sexual violation as a structure of gender oppression" should be understood as rape in this capacious sense.[438] In reframing readings of rape in this way, Spampinato suggests that we can account for the "the lives of millions of people throughout history whose experiences of sexual violence were illegible to their societies."[439] The reason Violet cannot, within the context of the novel, name her experience as rape is not merely because her rapist was her

[436] Courtney Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy* (self pub., 2013), 129.
[437] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 129-130.
[438] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape,"143.
[439] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape," 146.

husband. While marital rape may have been legal at the time the novel is set, Victorian opinion was far from unanimous about its acceptability, with nineteenth-century reformers, feminists, and physicians objecting to a husband's right to non-consensual intercourse with his wife, and the Divorce Court even allowing legal separation on the grounds of "matrimonial cruelty" as of 1870.[440] Milan, a meticulous researcher, was likely aware of the controversial status of marital rape in her chosen setting. However, as this speech shows, Violet's situation sits outside the boundaries of that which would easily be recognized as rape, violence, or cruelty even today, not (just) because of her marital status but because, as she feels compelled to admit, "he never forced me." Moreover, the harm doesn't rest exclusively in the act of the rape, but in the more socially sanctioned act of striving to maintain the social order of British rule and inheritance, and ultimately the strengthening of the British Empire through forced pregnancy. Thus, every pregnancy Violet endured was itself an ongoing assault, an attempted murder even, made for the sake of the nation; at the same time, it was a reproductive injustice inextricable from the rape that caused it and the system that encouraged it.

In addition to representing the complexity of the violence Violet experienced, the novel never frames Sebastian's impulses toward violence (even on Violet's behalf) as heroic. Although the speech above is the moment Sebastian first learns of the abuse Violet experienced, the book does not use the opportunity to position him as an anti-rape alpha. He is furious about what he learns, but he realizes that he must push away "the anger that well[s] up in him," aware that it has "no object save a dead man, no place in this conversation."[441] As he comforts Violet, he also resists the urge to kiss her, understanding that although such a kiss "would be sweet and tender

[440] Doreen Thierauf, "*Daniel Deronda*, Marital Rape, and the End of Reproduction," *Victorian Review* 43, no. 2 (2017): 252.
[441] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 130.

and loving" (a contrast to her treatment by her husband), "it would not be the right thing to do, not while she was still this close to tears."[442] Ultimately, instead of retroactively trying to assert Sebastian's essential heroic quality via violent masculine disgust at rape and a show of sexual possession of Violet, the novel shows Sebastian showing his love for Violet by decentering his anger and focusing on her feelings and her experience as she tries to articulate them for the very first time.

This is important because, as I've suggested, Violet's articulation of her experience indicts an entire societal system, not a single man. Unlike the rapists seen in the novels I described in my discussion of the anti-rape alpha, who are framed as effeminate, weak, and pathetic failures of masculinity, the rapist figure in this novel is a representative of normative masculinity. In fact, the book spends very little time on Violet's husband at all, even to cast him as uniquely villainous: we never learn his name, and while it is apparent that he was a cruel person, his abuse of her was as structural as it was personal; that is, it was never simply about him being morally reprehensible. This is apparent when Violet explains to Sebastian that "I have it on the best of authority … that I'm worthless as a woman."[443] Note that her use of the present tense extends not only to her self-conception ("I am worthless") but also to the "authority" who designated her as such. Her husband may be dead, but his authority—the authority derived from his status as man, as husband, as an earl—is still with her. Her own sense of worth cannot be disentangled from the sexual abuse enacted against her, abuse that stems directly from the aristocratic heteropatriarchal structure that demands she prove her womanhood through sexual submission and childbearing. Not incidentally, these reductive definitions of womanhood are also precisely what romance novels have so often been accused of promoting.

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[442] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 131.
[443] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 111.

Thus, in addition to implicating British aristocratic patriarchy in sexual violence, Milan also complicates feminist critiques of the romance genre as cavalier or problematic in the representation of rape. If the heroine of the Media Romance learns passion through force, then Milan's inclusion of Violet's insistence that her "frigidity" renders her "scarcely a woman" can be read as a commentary on the ways in which "female qualities" (in society and in romance novels) are constructed around receptiveness to male desire.[444] The heroine who deserves and finds love is the one who responds to the appropriately masculine hero with passion (sometimes against her will or better judgment), which is something that Violet actively resists.[445] When she finds herself fantasizing about Sebastian, she tries to remind herself that "she [is] ice"; she "remember[s] what it felt like to touch, the sensation of skin sliding against her own … a memory more luxurious than the softest silks," but "just as surely she recall[s] what it had turned into: the slide into icy nothingness, every thrust of his hips attempting to erase her from the world."[446] Here, the trauma of rape overlaps with the trauma of sexual desire; she "remember[s] it all," both the pleasure and the violence, and fears that to want the former is to accept the latter. Is it any wonder then that when Violet realizes her attraction to Sebastian, she initially recoils from expressing it? She used to be attracted to her husband too, but now she sees sex as an act that proves, even reinforces, her lack of innate worth. To desire sex, she thinks, is to desire self-annihilation. In contrast to the Media Romance heroine who comes alive in the wake of the hero's punishing kisses—the reluctant but overpowering lust of the woman being constrained in a man's arms on a clinch cover—Violet shuts down when she imagines Sebastian being like the Media Romance hero: powerfully seductive and sexually aggressive.

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[444] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 111.
[445] Read more about the common trope of the punishing or forceful kiss: "Forceful Kiss," TV Tropes, accessed February 29, 2024, https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/ForcefulKiss.
[446] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 113.

At the same time, perhaps counterintuitively, Milan's attention to how heterosexual female desire under patriarchy can itself be traumatizing builds on the work of the "bodice-rippers" whose reputation she counters. Although I read critics such as Russ, Radway, and Modleski as overstating the psychological harm of rape in romance for readers, their textual analysis is sound: the rapist hero and the victimized heroine serve as potent explorations of the entwinement of sex and fear, desire and trauma, in the lives of women, with the male lead himself serving as both hero and villain. Yet in these older novels, the ambivalence that the heroines feel toward men and sexual desire must be shunted aside or wholly overcome for the happy ending to make sense. On the other hand, when recent novelists and critics such as Crusie and Roach contend that the power of romance novels lies in their ability to represent unabashed and liberated female desire, they indicate that female heterosexual ambivalence can be solved through individual empowerment and the love of a good man. *Countess* offers an alternative that is grounded in the reality of an ongoing rape culture; instead of resolving the ambivalence of female desire either by rendering it needless (via the anti-rape alpha) or by ultimately redeeming the rapist hero, Milan allows that ambivalence to remain, shaping the story and even the HEA.

For instance, when it comes to pursuing sexual pleasure, *Countess* recognizes that just because the hero is "a good man," that does not mean he does not need to account for both Violet's trauma and the disabling, potentially even deadly, possibility of pregnancy. When Violet and Sebastian do pursue physical intimacy, therefore, Sebastian proposes expressions of sexual pleasure other than penetrative penile-vaginal intercourse, the form of sex that is most typically associated first and foremost with male pleasure. It is also the form of sex most frequently associated with romance novels. A 2012 study of romance novels found that 94% of the time in

the novels they surveyed, male characters achieved orgasms through penile-vaginal sex.[447] The small sample used for this study (and its disregard of all queer and trans romance) certainly raises questions about the accuracy of its conclusions, but the authors of the study do persuasively situate their findings within a body of research that has found that "penile-vaginal intercourse is the most commonly-endorsed behavior in sex surveys," indicating, at least, its primacy in the popular imagination and everyday practices.[448] In other words, heterosexual sex is often equated to a single act of penetration, especially for men. It therefore seems deliberate that the text represents a variety of non-penetrative and/or non-reproductive sex acts, including masturbation, oral sex, and manual stimulation, as well as other forms of sensual intimacy, such as massages, all of which are framed as physically and emotionally satisfying. As Sebastian explains, between abstinence and intercourse "there are innumerable possibilities. And I'm very, very, very … interested in discovering which ones you like."[449] When Violet fears Sebastian will resent her if she never or rarely engages in penetrative intercourse, he reminds her, "If matters get dire over here, I've got a working left hand."[450] At moments like these, a variety of sexual practices—including those that don't necessarily lead to orgasm, or that aren't performed together—are shown to be legitimate and desirable for both parties.

In the end, the novel brings together its critiques of and innovations on the genre by describing a nonreproductive HEA that implicitly challenges aristocratic and imperialist norms within the romance novel alongside a more explicit critique of heteroreproductivity. This can be seen in the subject of Violet's work, the success of which becomes a crucial part of her happy ending. Her area of study is no accident; in her own words, "When it became clear that I would

[447] Cabrera and Ménard, "She Exploded into a Million Pieces," 199.
[448] Cabrera and Ménard, "She Exploded into a Million Pieces," 207.
[449] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 174.
[450] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 176.

not make something of myself in the way that women normally do, I started to breed snapdragons."[451] Her perceived failure as a woman motivates her investment in the logic and mechanics of plant reproduction, seeking a less conventional form of fertility. Moreover, like sex, her work with plants is something that she and Sebastian do together; it is a form of intimacy that rejects a gendered dynamic that casts men's desirability in their strength and women's in their vulnerability. Rather, it is a partnership built on nurturance: for years, they have attended to the embodied work of maintaining a greenhouse together—potting and repotting plants, watering and fertilizing them—work that carries the seeds of the future already in progress. Both lovers come together to produce an emergent future through plant life, rather than a generational one through the patriarchal and aristocratic structure of inheritance that often also underpins the logic of the historical romance.

Here I see a form of Sarah Ensor's concept of a "spinster ecology" in play, as she builds on Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's work on the avuncular to theorize the figure of the spinster aunt. As Ensor writes, "there are many names for the spinster's relationship to the future, none of them conventional or readily recognized as contributing to traditional sociality. Perhaps one would be avuncular: often an aunt, the spinster stands in a kind of slanted or oblique relationship to the linear, vertical paradigms of transmission that govern familiar notions of futurity."[452] In other words, the temporal orientation of the spinster aunt, whose future cannot be understood in terms of a reproductive biological legacy, allows us to imagine not only different futures (as Segwick has argued) but also to reconsider what, and when, the future is. For the spinster, Ensor says, the

[451] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 110.
[452] Sarah Ensor, "Spinster Ecology: Rachel Carson, Sarah Orne Jewett, and Nonreproductive Futurity," *American Literature* 84, no. 2 (2012): 416.

future must be understood "not simply in generational intervals," but rather "as a somehow medial *condition of emergence*."[453]

Although Violet is a widow, her childlessness provides some overlap with the figure of the spinster, and the alternative to generational intervals that Ensor describes can be seen in Violet's participation in a network of female intellectuals, a network she did not create but which she tends. This network includes those to whom Violet is literally an aunt: in one important subplot, she offers to pay for the education of her niece who, inspired by Violet, refuses to marry. But Violet also sees her decision to come forward and claim her research, despite facing social and possibly legal repercussions, as an act done not just for herself but also on behalf of "every wife who has disappeared behind her husband," referring both to the common practice in which women's work was credited to their husbands, and to the broader experience of coverture and marriage under patriarchy.[454] One of the novel's key moments occurs when Violet, puzzling through a difficult problem in her research, turns for help to another female scientist, one who has secretly co-authored papers with her husband; the women are further aided by Frederica Marshall, a suffragist who runs a controversial feminist press. In a moment of alternate history, the combined influence and intellectual labor of these women leads to the discovery and naming of the chromosome. From Violet's experience of rape and reproductive abuse, the novel thus spins out an ending that challenges views of the romance novel as solely invested in normative visions of love and future.

Of course *The Countess Conspiracy* does end happily, as is required by the genre. Violet becomes a celebrated scientist, and she and Sebastian marry. Yet within this happy context, Milan's decision for Violet to remain childless is a surprisingly bold one. Historical romances

[453] Ensor, "Spinster Ecology," 419.
[454] Milan, *The Countess Conspiracy*, 167.

featuring heroines who cannot (or do not) have children are extremely rare; while many heroines struggle with miscarriages and fertility issues, they tend to give birth to healthy children by the end of the epilogue. By connecting the sexual violence Violet faced to her husband's quest for an heir, Milan makes it clear that Violet's happy ending requires her to not only be able to take pleasure in sex and believe herself worthy of love (lessons most romance heroines learn), but to do so while rejecting the Victorian demand—and the romance reader's expectation—that she carry on the line to preserve the aristocratic class and ultimately the imperial project. She does this with the support of a hero who rejects a model of masculine violence that the novel itself invokes through its critique of common tropes. In the end, although the novel is not as openly critical of British imperialism as some of Milan's other works, in focusing on the centrality of sexual violence and masculine power to maintaining the British aristocratic order, she indicts and reinvigorates a genre that has historically relied on the romanticization of both rape and aristocratic heroes, growing the perceived boundaries of the genre to claim new literary and feminist possibilities for popular romance.[455]

Ceding narrative authority in Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman

While Cole's and Milan's novels rework the generic conventions of the twenty-first century historical romance novel, using the representation of rape, rapists, and heroes to offer critiques of

[455] In other novels, Milan has explicitly critiqued the aristocracy as a white patriarchal imperial project. Milan, who is Asian American, has written multiple historical romances with characters of color, including *The Duke Who Didn't* (2020), in which a Chinese-British duke rejects the expectations and trappings of his rank to live as an "everyman" with a Chinese wife in a racially and culturally diverse British village. Her ongoing series The Worth Saga (2015–) tells the story of a family whose father and brother were tried for treason after they intervened—against British interests—in the opium trade in China, in the hopes of preventing further exploitation of the Chinese for the sake of less expensive tea. *The Duchess War* (2012), which is the first book in the series of which *The Countess Conspiracy* is a part, features a duke who prints seditious pamphlets actively arguing for the abolition of the aristocracy and the House of Lords.

the institutional structures that use rape as a tool for maintaining a variety of oppressions, Lorraine Heath's 2010 *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* is a complicated meta-commentary on the process of telling and reading rape stories, both within romance and more generally. The problems of testimony and witness faced by women making allegations of rape are particularly relevant when considering this novel, in which only one witness to the rape—the victim—is capable of testifying to the event, and the story she tells is not always consistent. This tension plays out in *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* when the amnesiac hero, who once intervened in a rape he now cannot remember, must decide how to understand the heroine's "testimony." Yet in this novel it is not (only) the facts of the rape that are in question; the *meaning* of the rape is a central site of disagreement. By making the rape the foundational event of the lovers' relationship, Heath ultimately challenges the hero to relinquish his need to interpret the event. Instead, the heroine is allowed to tell and re-tell the story, at times fulfilling and at times subverting the expectations of the hero and her own uncertainties about whether her rape has a place in her romance.

In addition to demonstrating alternative modes of narrating rape, the text shows how we might read rape narratives in romance. Like many critics of romance novels, the hero initially interprets the rape in dichotomous terms: the heroine must be a victim or a villain; he himself must be a hero or a failure; the story he is told is either true or false. In other words, *Pleasures* shows its hero as a what Erin Spampinato calls an "adjudicative reader," who believes his "primary responsibility [is] in the adjudication of what happened as if in a court of law."[456] Spampinato suggests that, instead of we might consider "locating rape not in the body, social location, or gender of the victim, but in the meaning of the act to that person."[457] As the hero of

[456] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon," 124.
[457] Spampinato, "Rereading Rape in the Critical Canon," 146.

Pleasures faces the consequences of his adjudicative reading of rape, he finally recognizes that the heroine has articulated her own understanding of the harm that she suffered and, just as importantly, the ways that he helped her heal; ultimately he must accept how she frames the rape rather than attempting to interpret it for her.

Like many romance novels with an amnesiac protagonist, *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* boasts a convoluted plot, which I will attempt to describe as briefly as possible. A young woman, Mercy Dawson, arrives at the home of the aristocrat Stephen Lyons with a baby she claims is his son. Two years earlier, Stephen, a carefree womanizer, had been sent as a soldier to the Crimea on "a mission to build character" at the behest of his disappointed older brother, while Mercy served as a wartime nurse working under Florence Nightingale.[458] One night in Scutari, Stephen and a man under his command came across Mercy being assaulted by a group of fellow soldiers. By the time he reached her, she'd already been raped once, but his intervention prevented further harm from coming to her. Afterwards, Stephen held Mercy through the night, comforting her and tending to her injuries, and she has loved him ever since; however, they were never sexually intimate. Now, more than a year later, Stephen has returned home to England with a brain injury and no memory of his time at war or of Mercy. Nevertheless, when he meets Mercy and the baby, he agrees to marry her, believing that the child is theirs. (The baby *is* in fact Stephen's, but unbeknownst to him the birth mother is Stephen's former mistress, who abandoned the baby into Mercy's care. Mercy lets him believe that she is the birth mother because she fears the baby will be taken from her otherwise.) Eventually, Mercy tells Stephen the story of when she was attacked, but in her telling, Stephen arrived *before* the first man had raped her. It is a pleasant fantasy of rescue that paints Stephen as an anti-rape

[458] Lorraine Heath, *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* (New York: Avon Books, 2010), 9.

alpha, but when he learns that he in fact failed to prevent the first rape, the fantasy gives way to a new testimony that redefines both Mercy's and Stephen's understanding of the *truth* of that night, even as Stephen never regains the memories he lost.

One key expectation of amnesia romances is the full recovery of memory, which is why Heath's decision to leave the holes in Stephen's memory deserves closer attention. Although a popular trope within the genre, amnesia in romance has received curiously little critical attention, but Jen Prokop of the podcast *Fated Mates* has persuasively claimed that the narrative purpose of amnesia in romance is to "magically erasing, at least temporarily, the thing keeping [the lovers] from being together," and much of the tension lies in the "dread" of "what's gonna happen when the memories do come back?"[459] From the blatantly absurd *Pregnesia* by Carla Cassidy (2009) to Judith McNaught's quintessential *Until You* (1994) to Meredith Duran's complex and beloved *A Lady's Code of Misconduct* (2017), the amnesiac's recovery of their memory is a pivotal part of the narrative.[460] We can even compare *Pleasures* to another of Heath's books, *Once More, My Darling Rogue* (2014), which similarly features both amnesia and sexual violence as key plot

[459] Some romance fan spaces have discussed amnesia, with the popular romance podcast *Fated Mates* chiming in that "it's like this amazing symbol … it's about identity, everyone" (Jen Prokop and Sarah MacLean, "Amnesia Romance Novels," November 13, 2019 in *Fated Mates*, produced by Eric Mortensen, podcast, audio, 1:12:21, https://fatedmates.net/episodes/2019/11/11/s0210-amnesia-romance-interstitial) and the website All About Romance begging romance writers to "please stop romanticizing head injury" ("Amnesia in Romance [AIR Syndrome]," *All About Romance* (blog), January 15, 2001, https://allaboutromance.com/amnesia-in-romance/). However, scholars have written little about amnesia in romance, though they have written about the use of amnesia in soap opera (Martha P. Nochimson, "Amnesia 'R' Us: The Retold Melodrama, Soap Opera, and the Representation of Reality," *Film Quarterly* 50, no. 3 [1997]; Hannelie Marx, "Archetypes of memory and amnesia in South African soap opera," *Tydskrif Vir Letterkunde* 41, no. 2 [2004]), film (Sallie Baxendale, "Memories aren't made of this: amnesia at the movies," *BMJ* 329 [2004]), and canonical and postcolonial literature (Sebastian Dieguez and Jean-Marie Annoni, "Stranger Than Fiction: Literary and Clinical Amnesia," in *Literary Medicine: Brain Disease and Doctors in Novels, Theater, and Film*, ed. Julien Bogousslavsky and Sebastien Dieguez [Basel, Switzerland: S. Karger, 2013]). Many of the themes and archetypal meanings these critics uncover, however, transcend medium and genre.

[460] A Goodreads curated list of "amnesia-themed romances" has more than 250 titles on it. Some amnesia-themed historical romances of note include *A Heart Possessed* (1988) by Katherine Sutcliffe; *Caroline* (1994) by Cynthia Wright; *The Law and Miss Penny* (1994) by Sharon Ihle; *Lovers Forever* (1996) by Shirley Busbee; *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1998) by Lisa Kleypas; *A Kiss to Remember* (2001) by Teresa Medeiros; *Slightly Sinful* (2004) by Mary Balogh; *Loving a Lost Lord* (2009) by Mary Jo Putney; *The Accidental Wedding* (2010) by Ann Gracie; *Tempting the Bride* (2012) by Sherry Thomas; *A Lady's Code of Misconduct* (2017) by Meredith Duran; *When the Marquess Was Mine* (2019) by Caroline Linden.

points. In that novel, the heroine, who was molested and raped by her uncle, loses her memory following a head injury and, having forgotten both her identity and her trauma, she is tricked into becoming the housekeeper of a man she previously despised. Her memory loss allows herself to become unguarded enough to fall in love with him, but for that story to work, it is crucial that those memories return before she can attain her HEA, both because the hero's deception must be revealed and because she must reconcile her past with the future she now knows she wants. In *Pleasures*, however, Stephen's missing years remain a void, despite his desperation to regain his lost memories of both Mercy and the war.

Stephen's initial refusal to accept the loss of his memory—and therefore his narrative authority—is evidenced in his repeated framing of his lack of knowledge as a failure, and particularly a failure of his male authority—suggesting that his trauma renders him unworthy, even as he attempts to comfort Mercy regarding her trauma. For instance, he describes "his inability to draw up memories" of the men who served under him as something that "dishonor[s] them, disgrace[s] him"; it is not merely tragic, but a moral failure on his part, one that is "disgrace[ful]" precisely because he was a commanding officer.[461] Similarly, he sees the limits imposed on him by his amnesia as indicating his lack as a father, husband, and lover: he cannot forgive himself for failing to remember the woman with whom he believes he fathered a child. More than that, however, he wants to understand Mercy better without "burden[ing] her" with requests to speak of the war.[462] One particular moment with Mercy leaves him feeling especially helpless. After waking from a nightmare, Mercy cautiously begins to tell him about the night three men attacked her outside the hospital where she worked. Like Sebastian hearing Violet speak of her abuse for the first time, Stephen immediately grows tense, but his frustration is

[461] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 24.
[462] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 271.

exacerbated by the fact that he believes he should *already* know what Mercy is going to say. Stephen feels "haunted with the realization that if he'd not lost his memories, she'd not have to tell him. He would have known. He could have spared her this torment."[463] Aware that Mercy is revealing a traumatic memory, his preference would be to "spare" Mercy by having his own narrative of what happened that night. However, although Stephen's desire to know Mercy's past without having to ask is rooted in care for her, he is also expressing a desire to know her past through his own judgment rather than relying on her interpretation. Unused to not being the narrative authority of his own life, Stephen is uncomfortable having to ask for that which he believes he should already know.

As Mercy navigates her narrative power over Stephen, she, like the early scholars of trauma studies, characterizes "trauma as an unrepresentable event."[464] She repeatedly asserts that words cannot adequately capture the experience of war, commenting that "for all the correspondents writing so passionately about the intolerable conditions into which we blithely sent our soldiers, words on paper are not the same as blood on hands."[465] Later she frustratedly tells Stephen, "No matter how many accounts you read, you will never *feel* what you experienced on that battlefield."[466] However, her actions undermine her claims, because the real reason she does not want to speak about the war is that she fears her words will be enough to trigger Stephen's memory, alerting him to the fact that they were never lovers. When Stephen questions her about her nightmares, she particularly fears that telling him about the attackers will enable him to "remember their ugliness, their debauchery."[467] The trauma of her rape is

[463] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 164.
[464] Balaev, "Literary Trauma Theory Reconsidered," 1.
[465] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 61.
[466] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 272.
[467] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 166.

unspeakable at this moment not because it is unrepresentable in language but because she believes in the power of representation to conjure the event into Stephen's consciousness.

Therefore, when she does finally tell him the story, she rewrites the events of that night so that he believes he reached her in time, and afterward they spent "the most wondrous night of [her] life" together.[468] Although Mercy never states that she and Stephen slept together that night, she allows him to assume that they did, creating an alternative narrative in which not only did the rape never happen, but where the only sexual contact that occurred was between herself and the man she loves. Indeed, she reimagines the incident to fit into the typical rape rescue formula, with Stephen demonstrating his superior strength to the rapists (she tells him in detail about how her attackers "were like animals" but how easily he beat them, hitting one man "with such quickness he had no time to react and with such force that I heard the sickening crack of his jawbone," while the other two men "ran off"), followed by the lovers coming together to consummate their relationship.[469] In other words, Mercy offers Stephen a narrative of rape that elicits the interpretation of the events that she wishes him to have: that he is a hero who saved her and that they spent a night of intimacy together afterward.

Like romance novelists' turn to the anti-rape alpha, this narrative of rape violently rejects the actions of "pitiful specimens of men"[470] in favor of a hero who, "so strong, so cocky," easily banishes the threat of sexual harm.[471] In such narratives, the fear of rape is displaced onto the violent outsider, who is no match for the hero; in claiming the heroine, the anti-rape alpha is essentially assuring her that she will never be raped, the very fantasy articulated by Susan Elizabeth Phillips when she writes of the hero whose "almost superhuman strength is now [the

[468] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 166.
[469] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 165.
[470] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 151.
[471] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 165.

heroine's] to command."[472] She adds, "No more fear of dark alleys! No more worries about things that go bump in the dark!"[473] In the Roach/LaRoche dialogue I mentioned earlier, LaRoche describes the appeal of a hero similarly: "getting a good man to love and having him commit" may offer "physical protection in a world where women live within the shadow of rape culture."[474] Roach's rejoinder is apt, however: "When a woman is sexually assaulted, it's usually by a man she knows. It's the boyfriend or husband or ex or acquaintance who poses the greatest threat to a woman in terms of rape—not the faceless guy in the alley."[475] The absolute denial of the threat of rape articulated by Phillips and LaRoche is difficult to reconcile to women's real life experiences, particularly in an age in which growing awareness and visibility of issues such as acquaintance rape, campus sexual assaults, and institution-wide cover-ups of sexual abuse make the "fear of dark alleys" feel almost quaintly outdated. Even in Mercy's case, when her attackers *were* strangers who dragged her into a dark alley, Stephen was still unable to guarantee her safety. The reality of rape intervenes in that fantasy of heroic masculinity.

Thus, Mercy's attempt to rewrite her rape may offer her momentary comfort, but the harm she endured cannot be displaced so easily. Her narrative may offer Stephen what she considers the most salient details, but it elides her own suffering in favor of centering his masculine saviorism, and by telling this alternative version of that night's events, Mercy sets herself and Stephen up for a complicated and potentially difficult wedding night. When they consummate their marriage, he is under the impression that they've had sex before—that, if nothing else, she knows what to expect—whereas Mercy is frightened and somewhat repulsed by the idea of intercourse:

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[472] Phillips, "Empowerment," 71.
[473] Phillips, "Empowerment," 71.
[474] Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 65.
[475] Roach, *Happily Ever After*, 65.

> She knew she had nothing to fear from him. But tonight she would know the full measure of his coupling. As much as she desired it, she couldn't help but fear she'd be fumbling and disappoint him. He expected her to know what he liked, to know how to receive him….
>
> Stephen had shown her passion, he had shown her the wondrous sensations that a woman should find with a man. But when it was time for him to push inside her—
> She didn't know if she would be able to bear it. Nor could she bear to tell him why.[476]

Open communication between them is impossible as long as she maintains her fiction. Finally, she entreats him to "pretend that it's our first time together—for both of us" and says that she will "lock the memories of [their] previous encounter away, and not even think about them tonight."[477] Her sexual reality cannot sustain the happier version of the story she told, the one in which she and Stephen have already engaged in loving, consensual intercourse.

At the climax of the novel, when Stephen learns of Mercy's deceptions regarding his son John, Stephen reinterprets—rereads—Mercy's narrative in a far more condemnatory fashion, this time adjudicating not merely its meaning but its likelihood at all. Mercy's lies render her untrustworthy, causing Stephen to be skeptical about all of the claims Mercy made regarding the night of the rape, up to and including the rape itself. After another woman claims to be John's birth mother, Stephen decides that Mercy's story cannot be trusted, and ultimately—like judges requiring the physical evidence of rape to believe a victim's testimony—Stephen relies on the physical evidence of the child's genetic relation to his former mistress: their shared eye color. This physical resemblance convinces him to send Mercy away from himself and his son. In fact, the moment he recognizes the child's eye color, he claims, "I know everything, Mercy, *everything*," that single piece of physical evidence enough for him to deem untrue everything she has told him.[478]

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[476] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 208.
[477] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 210.
[478] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 323.

Doubting her account of the night he saved her and realizing that he never "ma[d]e love to [her] in Scutari," he concludes that "this wondrous night you spoke of was nothing but fiction."[479] Mercy denies it ("It was real. It happened. You stayed with me, comforted me. We just didn't—"), but Stephen, unsympathetic, tells her in a "voice seething with barely controlled rage," "Damn you, damn you to hell for giving me a false memory!"[480] This moment in the novel maps onto the part of a typical amnesia romance plot where the hero(ine) remembers whatever it is they've forgotten and realizes that they've been manipulated or otherwise misled, but without those memories, Stephen instead relies on physical evidence to paint Mercy as a liar: because the child was birthed by Fancy, Mercy was lying about being his mother; because the night he and Mercy spent together was not sexual, Mercy lied that they had been intimate. For her part, Mercy, though aware she has not been entirely forthright, also believes that "in [her] heart, the words were true."[481] She is the baby's mother in every way that matters, and she has never been more intimate with a man than she was the night Stephen came to her aid. Stephen characterizes her truths as his "false memory"; while letters from fellow soldiers describing the war cannot make that event real for him, Mercy's narrative, her representation, takes on the status of a memory. This slippage between a memory and a story he's been told suggests the direction of the book's conclusion and its complex portrayal of the power of testimony.

Shortly after Stephen banishes Mercy, he finds out that she had in fact been raped the night she was attacked, and the knowledge undermines his understanding of himself as a hero as well as his faith in his own interpretative abilities. While sharing a drink with a fellow soldier—the very man, he realizes after a few moments of conversation, who'd been with him the night of

[479] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 326.
[480] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 325-326.
[481] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 325.

Mercy's attack—the soldier mentions Mercy, commenting, "Shame what happened to her that bloody night. … Fortunate for her that we got there when we did, you and me, although I'm a-betting she was a-wishing we'd gotten there before the first blackguard was finished with her and the second was queuing up."[482] He knows nothing about Stephen's night with Mercy afterward. This is the only piece of testimony that Stephen encounters about the attack that doesn't come from Mercy; instead of clarifying matters, it throws him into confusion as he attempts to convince himself that the soldier is simply wrong, because "Mercy had told him that he'd arrived there in time. He'd saved her."[483] Having internalized the belief that he'd "saved" Mercy—that is to say, prevented her rape—he struggles to accept that he hadn't, and immediately leaves to confront her, asking why she lied to him. With the soldier's account in mind, he goes to Mercy with his own understanding of what really happened: "You told me I got there in time to stop them, in time to save you. I didn't."[484]

However, by centering his own horror and rage regarding the rape and his own failure to stop it, Stephen initially does not realize that, from Mercy's perspective, she didn't lie: he *did* save her, and his inability to remember the rape itself is a blessing. Rewriting the rape for Stephen gives Mercy a sense of dignity and security that his knowledge threatens, and her instant response to his declaration is a plea: "Tell me you don't remember. Please, dear god, tell me you don't remember my shame and humiliation."[485] Although he assures her that the "shame and humiliation" belong to the rapists alone, still she insists that she doesn't want him to remember something so "ugly."[486] Instead, she explains that "if you hadn't held me afterward, touched me

[482] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 357.
[483] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 357.
[484] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 359.
[485] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 360.
[486] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 360.

so tenderly, comforted me, I'm not sure I would have ever been able to stand the touch of another person," going on to describe in more detail about the ways in which he comforted her, "murmur[in]g such sweet words" and washing her "so tenderly where the brutish man had been."[487] It is her wish that he never remember the rape, but she still wants him to understand the care he took with her following it, because to her, that was the important part, the part that bound them together.

Stephen, reevaluating his assumptions, begs Mercy, "Can you ever forgive me for doubting you?" before, in a more drastic move, he promises Mercy that he "won't search for memories anymore," expressing his willingness to be content simply to be with her for the rest of his life, knowing only the version of the past that she chooses to share.[488] Consequently, when he eventually asks her to tell him about "every moment I spent with you that I can no longer recall," including the night of the attack, the only dialogue reported describes the events following the rape: "You laid me on the bed, examined me so carefully, so gently. … You washed me. Then you held me, told me you cared for me. You gathered my tears with kisses. You made me believe that everything would be all right. That I would survive it. And so I did."[489] In this moment, she rewrites the story once again, rejecting both the rape rescue formula that would cast Stephen as an anti-rape alpha *and* Stephen's framing of the incident as one of his own failure. Instead, she casts Stephen's heroism not in the physical assault of the rapists, or his prevention of rape, but rather in the care that he showed her, which enabled her to survive the experience. With no memories of his own regarding that night, Stephen not only accepts Mercy's account of that night but also accepts her reframing of the event, moving away from the violence of the

[487] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 360-361.
[488] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 361.
[489] Heath, *Notorious Pleasures*, 367-368.

assault and centering instead the harm that he helped to heal. The power of her testimony thus does not rely on either reading beneath/between the gaps in her story, or in seeing physical proof of the attack, in order to seek "the truth," but rather in trusting her ability to interpret and theorize her own experience—and, sometimes, his.

With each version of the story of the attack, Heath further subverts reader expectations regarding the heroic savior, reframing sexual violence through the lens of the victim's experience rather than the hero's worthiness. By finally locating Stephen's heroism not in his ability to prevent rape but instead in how he helped Mercy survive it, as well as by continuing to withhold Stephen's memories of the rape, the novel offers a conclusion in which the heroine, though victimized, also has sole authority over her story while the hero must cede complete knowledge of his own life. She is the writer of the story; he is the reader who trusts her. This novel asks that the hero accept the heroine's interpretive authority, even without corroborating testimony or physical evidence, as she parses the meaning of both of their experiences, including but not solely the story of a rape. This act of narrative and interpretive submission, *Pleasures of a Notorious Gentleman* suggests, may be the ultimate act of heroism—and the most powerful approach to reading a rape narrative in romance.

As this conclusion to Stephen and Mercy's story indicates, the problems of truth-telling and the representation of rape are as relevant to the genre of romance as they are to the rape memoir, and critiques of both are concerned, at least in part, with how these narratives distort the public understanding of rape, especially for majority female readers who consume them. While memoirs can propagate an idea of "the survivor" that flattens the complexity of victims and imposes a teleological narrative structure, romances are understood to render the figure of "the rapist" as extraordinary: extraordinarily deviant, extraordinarily seductive, a figure of violent

masculinity that is both threat and desire, but in either case is powerful because it is dangerous. For the women who read those romances, the appeal of these "dangerous men" has been considered pathological and regressive by some, empowering and transgressive by others. As a highly self-reflexive genre, however, romance's explorations of the theme of sexual violence are far more multivalenced, complex, and grounded in the genre's history and changing reputation than has been traditionally understood. This genre does not merely represent reflections of women's conflicted psyches, or even utopian dreams, but experiments with expectation and innovation to conceptualize new relationships between romance, masculinity, and rape, in fiction and in the world at large.

This chapter has only addressed a small portion of the work being done in the romance genre to write and re-write rape narratives, narratives which have been at the heart of romance writing and criticism from the beginning. A longer study of the genre might consider the depictions of female-on-male rape that are the subject of occasional controversy; the surprisingly common appearance in both straight and queer romance of heroes who've experienced sexual abuse, usually as children; or the ways in which texts in the subgenres of dark fantasy and paranormal fantasy continue to represent sexually predatory heroes as objects of romantic fantasy, often less controversially than subgenres such as historical romance or contemporary romance might. Furthermore, given the steady rise in book bans and moral panics regarding children encountering sexual content in the early 2020s, it is incumbent upon scholars of romance to recognize the political ramifications of romance novels and erotic writing today.

Having described how survivors and rapists have come to be constructed through the work of genre, and how genre has transformed in responses to representations of survivors and rapists, I turn in Chapter 3 to the act—the crime—of rape itself. Beginning with an overview of

the televisual genre of the police procedural, and particularly shows that center solving and punishing rape, I argue that this genre, and particular *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, have been caught between a desire to correct rape myths and critique the law, and a need to continue producing more and more episodes. Then, reading two authors who use genre play to remix and reinterpret *SVU*, I show how the category of rape comes to be generically recognizable only when it is both codified into and enforced by the law, and how challenging this lens of crime allows more survivors to tell their stories.

Chapter 3

The Police Procedural:
Making Rape a Crime

In her 2013 history of rape law in the United States, Estelle B. Freedman writes that "at its core, *rape* a legal term that encompasses a malleable and culturally determined perception of an act," and therefore "legal definitions play an essential role in understanding the narratives of rape that vary over time."[490] In other words, cultural perceptions of rape in the United States are inextricably tied to the various legal and juridical constructs of rape as a crime: a crime of property, a crime of seduction, a crime of violation. Historically, rape law's purpose was to regulate and penalize men's illegitimate sexual access to other men's female relatives, usually their daughters or wives.[491] Therefore, when feminists began working to reform rape law in the 1970s, they challenged the traditional characterization of rape as "carnal knowledge by a man of a woman, not his wife, by force and against her will."[492] To prove the sex had truly been "against her will," victims were expected to have physical defensive wounds or otherwise have physical evidence to confirm that they had either resisted or, due to incapacitation, had been incapable of resistance.

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[490] Estelle B. Freedman, *Redefining Rape: Sexual Violence in the Era of Suffrage and Segregation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 3.
[491] Sally Gold and Martha Wyatt, "The Rape System: Old Roles and New Times," *Catholic University Law Review* 27 (1978): 696-705.
[492] Gold and Wyatt, "The Rape System," 701. At the time, underage rape laws only applied to girls ten years old and younger. Raising the age of consent was another project of rape reform, and today the age of consent in all fifty states ranges from 16-18.

Even then, if she was still believed to have consented, the man could not be found guilty of rape. Given that many groups of women were de facto assumed to be unable to refuse consent, including (as I discuss in previous chapters) Black women, physical injuries were not always sufficient to result in a conviction. Women's (presumed) sexual history could also be used against them, with the assumption that women who dressed provocatively, were sexually active, performed sex work, and/or otherwise failed to fit the image (genre) of the innocent and chaste victim must have consented or perhaps even had no right to withhold consent. In cases without physical injuries, consent was often assumed to have been granted regardless of the victim's testimony. Matthew Hale's famous pronouncement that rape was "an accusation easily to be made and hard to be proved, and harder to be defended by the party accused, tho never so innocent" was published in 1678 but has been central to rape law and the fear of false accusations for hundreds of years since.[493]

However, since the 1970s, the project of rape reform has been successful in numerous ways: it has "broadened definitions of sexual assault, strengthened criminal due process protections for victims, improved the medical response to rape, and raised the public profile of sexual violence."[494] Rape shield laws now circumscribe the extent to which defense attorneys can use a victim's sexual history as evidence against her. Gender-neutral rape law has also emerged as an important and ongoing area of reform, one that acknowledges the existence of male victimization and female abuse, which would allow victims of same-gender sexual violence and female-on-male violence alike to be recognized under the law. Legally, the landscape is quite different than it used to be, and according to some feminist critics, these reforms have in

[493] Frances Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," *Representations* 20 (1987), 89.
[494] Rose Corrigan, *Up Against a Wall: Rape Reform and the Failure of Success* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 2.

fact "virtually transformed public perceptions of rape and its victims."[495] In other words, feminist efforts to redefine rape have resulted in an expansion of cultural awareness about the many faces and facets of sexual violence.

That said, while some high-profile court cases have given Americans insight into these reformed laws in action, we know that perceptions of crime and law are not constructed solely in courtrooms and prisons. They are also constructed in popular culture, and in the American context, there is perhaps no genre and medium more essential to shaping understandings of crime than the television police procedural. As Sue Turnbull argues, genre "has often played a critical role in bringing current social issues and anxieties into the public domain, thereby unsettling what may once have been taken-for-granted assumptions about law and order," and as this chapter will discuss, the police procedural has served a an important epistemological function in audiences' knowledge of the crime of rape.[496]

In Chapter 1, I argued that the genre of the memoir has helped shape the category of the survivor in contemporary discourse, but that some texts, such as *Know My Name* and *The Incest Diary*, challenge readers' assumptions about survivorship and reconsider the solidarities that can, and can't, be built between victims and survivors. Chapter 2 contended that representations of masculinity in romance novels have been deeply intertwined with changing conceptions of the figure of the rapist, from the violent lover to the impotent weakling to the soldier of the patriarchal order. In each of these cases, the genre and its participating texts can be understood to

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[495] Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 195-196. Note that though many tout the rape form movement's success in rewriting rape laws, Rose Corrigan notes despite these changes, in practice "victims are still likely to face overwhelming resistance, reluctance, and even outright contempt from legal and medical systems targeted by the feminist anti-rape movement of the 1970s. The goals of justice and care for rape victims are still largely unfulfilled." Though rape laws may have improved on paper, the implementation of those laws has not been enough to fully counter the pervasive anti-victim bias of institutions. Corrigan, *Up Against a Wall*, 4.

[496] Sue Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, TV Genres (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 2.

be simultaneously constructing and unsettling some of the generic expectations of what makes rape rape: who experiences it, who perpetrates it; in other words, the characters who make and experience the genre of rape. Building on these examples, the first half of this chapter will analyze how rape itself comes to be constructed as a crime in police procedurals in general and on the long-running show *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (*SVU*) in particular. As a crime first and foremost, rape is treated as a (frequently pathological) threat to the social order that must be contained by the mechanisms of policing and incarceration, rather than an act borne out of inequitable gender relations and the subordination of women.

Like the other genres and texts I study, the police procedural can be ambivalent. It can voice female complaint as well as genuinely feminist critique, but it also ultimately undermines efforts to radically break from the normative structures whose continuance requires the very violence the genre claims, narratively, to solve. This is a feature I call "structural pessimism." To put it more simply, there can be no more crime drama without more crime, and there can be no more heroes who catch and prosecute rapists without more rapists. Although I do not necessarily agree that "the prime-time detective genre … cannot represent feminism or women in a complex manner," I argue that the cumulative effect of *SVU* is to create the sense of a world where rape is inevitable, eternal, and ubiquitous.[497] It cannot be predicted or intervened upon, it will be massively traumatizing, perhaps disabling, and it cannot be addressed on a societal scale except through more violence. Even as *SVU* questions and critiques the juridical structures that circumscribe rape's meaning, and even as it offers more capacious representation of those who experience rape, the procedural genre in which it participates reinforces the primacy of crime as the most salient framework for understanding and responding to sexual violence.

[497] Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 4 (2006): 304.

In the second half of this chapter, I describe two creative retellings and interpolations of *Law & Order: SVU*: the novella "Especially Heinous" by Carmen Maria Machado (published in Machado's 2017 collection *Her Body and Other Parties*) and the chapter "Sexually Based Offenses" from Elissa Washuta's generically experimental memoir *My Body is a Book of Rules* (2014). These two texts rehearse the same tension between genericness and specificity that underpinned Chapter 1, drawing out how that tension comes to the fore in the police procedural genre, but each text reveals the limitations of a criminal framework for rape by deconstructing and remixing *SVU*'s narrative and generic beats. With this turn to genre play, "Especially Heinous" and "Sexually Based Offenses" invite readers to re-experience and reconsider the generic forms that structure their knowledge of rape and violence, and to acknowledge the dissonance that occurs when experiences of sexual harm do not fit those generic forms. These texts ask: What does it mean to understand and respond to rape without relying on a framework of crime? How does challenging the generic expectations of the police procedural enable us to imagine a world in which rape is not inevitable? And what is made possible when we envision such a world?

Rape on TV: police procedurals, female cops, and crimes of a sexual nature

The police procedural has historically been considered a male genre, but as I discuss in this section, an increased focus on female detectives and storylines involving violence against women has produced a significant and popular subgenre that markets to and is primarily enjoyed

by women.[498] Before I describe this subgenre further, however, it is worth taking a moment to discuss the history of the crime television genre as a whole. Crime television has been the subject of extensive study and debate since its creation in the mid-1900s, but whether arguing for genre's inherent conservatism or its generic diversity, critics have tended to agree on its social importance.[499] According to one critic, because "most people have had little interaction with the criminal justice system," many "rely on mass media for information about crime."[500] Echoing this point, Jonathan Nichols-Pethick says in his study of police dramas that the genre "play[s] a vital role in the way we understand and engage issues of social order that most of us otherwise experience only in such abstractions as laws and crime statistics.[501] I may question the assumptions behind the "we" of Nichols-Pethick's claim (for whom are laws and crime statistics only "abstractions"?), but it is undeniable that television is often not only an individual's introduction to the concept of crime, but for many if not most Americans, television programming continues to shape cultural understandings of criminality, policing, and the justice system throughout their lives.

The police procedural serves a particularly important epistemological function because it offers an ostensibly realist glimpse into crime and policing. In contrast to detective fiction and stories of amateur sleuths, wherein individual genius is the mystery-solver's greatest asset, police

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[498] The treatment of police procedurals as male is likely due to the subject matter and traditional centering of male characters more than due to viewership demographics, as studies suggest that even in the 1980s. This is a good reminder that the gendering of genre is a matter of public perception and aesthetic expectation, rather than any objective standard. See: Linda Heath and John Petraitas, "Television Viewing and Fear of Crime: Where is the Mean World?" *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 8, no. 1 (1987): 97-123.

[499] Turnbull has persuasively argued for the crime drama's instability as a genre (or collection of genres), describing the "competing impulses and demands" that make it especially difficult to pin down. See Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 1-10.

[500] Jared S. Rosenberger, Valerie J. Callanan, and Darcy Sullivan, "Whose Stories? Victims and Offenders on Televisions *Law and Order*," *Mass Mediated Representations of Crime and Criminality*, ed. Julie B. Wiest, Studies in Media and Communications (Leeds: Emerald Publishing, 2021).

[501] Jonathan Nichols-Pethick, *TV Cops: The Contemporary American Police Drama* (London: Routledge, 2012), 3-4.

procedurals feature mysteries that are solved using "the procedures followed by policemen in real life," with police officers "using informants, tailing suspects, and availing [themselves] of the resources of the police laboratory."[502] The police procedural is thus considered an "almost journalistic" representation of the "presumably standard crimes confronted by typical investigators."[503] Given these connotations of the genre, then, the representation of rape in police procedurals could be said to speak to cultural understandings of what constitutes the "standard" rape.

This assumption is indeed borne out in Lisa M. Cuklanz's study of changing depictions of rape on television from 1976-1990, in which she finds that "the crime of rape on prime time television … evolv[ed] from the basic plot formula of violent stranger rape and victim helplessness toward more realistic representations of date and acquaintance rape."[504] While earlier examples from Cuklanz's sample overwhelmingly feature brutally violent stranger rapes committed by straightforwardly "evil" men against helpless, unsuspecting victims, by the late 1980s, television episodes increasingly portrayed instances of date rape and acquaintance rape committed by "normal" men who rely on coercion rather than weapons and extreme violence. Although Cuklanz notes that these episodes were sometimes more ambiguous in their moral judgment, the increasing realism of how rape was represented suggests that by 1990, the rape

[502] George N. Dove, *The Police Procedural* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green University Popular Press, 1982), 2. Dove adds, "This qualification almost automatically suggests another one: the policemen in the procedurals almost always work in teams, sharing the responsibilities and the dangers, and also the credit, of the investigation, with the result that the resolution of the mystery is usually the product of the work of a number of people instead of the achievement of a single protagonist" (2).
[503] Eddy Von Mueller, "The police procedural in literature and on television," in *The Cambridge Companion to American Crime Fiction*, ed. Catherine Ross Nickerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 104.
[504] Lisa M. Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), 60.

reform movement's key messages had reached mainstream culture, even if they had not been fully embraced by it.[505]

One of Cuklanz's key findings about rape on crime shows mirrors my own observations about the romance genre and the rise of the anti-rape alpha. Cuklanz argues that, during the period she studies, crime dramas used rape to center and redeem masculinity in much the same way I argue many romances have done the same: crime shows, like romance novels, respond to feminist critiques of sexual violence by spotlighting male protagonists who "demonstrate reformed or enlightened views about rape as compared to other characters," in order to reaffirm a commitment to masculine power and violence.[506] For instance, Cuklanz points out that in the late 1980s, male protagonists began to espouse "proto-feminist beliefs" regarding rape, but these dramas nevertheless continued to "underscore the vulnerability of women and imply that rape is primarily a symbol of failure in fulfilling the norms of masculinity."[507] And like the anti-rape alpha, the lead detective of the police drama proved his moral rightness and normative masculinity by responding to the rape of women and children with anger and violence. However, while the anti-rape alpha is a reassuring fantasy of female desire, the male protagonist of the police drama in the 1980s served as a model for men of normative masculine behavior.

In the twenty-first century, however, we have seen a significant shift in the police procedural toward stories about and directed toward women, and which are largely orientated around crimes of rape and violence against women. This trend is exemplified by *Law & Order: SVU*, the police procedural that premiered in 1999 and was dedicated almost exclusively to sex crimes. This shift put female detectives at the forefront of crime narratives about sexual violence.

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[505] Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time*, 40-43.
[506] Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time*, 18.
[507] Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time*, 15.

When *SVU* first aired, many considered it a gamble: would audiences really want to watch a show that week after week forced viewers to confront gruesome and graphic cases of rape, assault, and molestation? The answer has turned out to be a resounding *yes*: audiences not only want such a show but have shown a profound hunger for it. As I write today in 2024, *SVU* remains on the air, making it the longest-running live action prime time television show in U.S. history, and certainly one of the most popular. The show's star, Mariska Hargitay, as well as the character she portrays, Olivia Benson, have become (pop) feminist icons and sought-after voices in national conversations about sexual violence and anti-rape activism. In 2016, Joe Biden appeared as himself in an episode of SVU discussing the national rape kit backlog, an issue that the show has taken up repeatedly and about which Hargitay has advocated over the years.[508] During the height of the #MeToo movement, Olivia Benson was hailed as "the female role model we need."[509]

Before discussing *SVU* in further detail, I want to stress that the trend of rape-centered crime shows that I'm identifying is not limited to *SVU*. Nor is *SVU* or any other show I discuss here the first in which female investigators encounter cases of rape. Although masculinity may have been the primary project of the first generations of crime shows, Turnbull has shown that "women have always played an integral role in the television crime drama," and landmark shows such as *Police Woman* (1974-1978), *Cagney & Lacey* (1982-1988), and *Prime Suspect* (1991-2006) all tackled the place of women in the police force while also occasionally touching on the topics of rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment.[510] However, the twenty-first century has

[508] Jessica Glenza, "Joe Biden to appear on Law & Order: SVU to talk rape kit backlog," September 28, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/sep/28/joe-biden-law-order-svu-cameo-rape-kit-backlog.
[509] Melissa Blake, "Why Olivia Benson is the role model we need right now," *CNN*, September 27, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/09/27/opinions/law-and-order-svu-20th-season-mariska-hargitay-melissa-blake/index.html.
[510] Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 153, 160-177.

seen a number of successful crime shows that treat sexual violence as their "standard" form of crime (rather than a sporadic or special problem) without centering masculinity or male detectives. These dramas tend to feature a female investigator working through trauma of her own as she becomes involved in a case or cases involving the rape and possibly murder of a woman and/or child. Examples of these series include *Top of the Lake* (2013-2017), *The Fall* (2013-2016), *Unbelievable* (2019), *Happy Valley* (2014-2023), and *Jessica Jones* (2015-2019).[511]

In these dramas, like those that Cuklanz describes, villains still ventriloquize misogynistic language and victim blaming, but now, the focus is not on a male protagonist's feelings about rape and his assertion of masculine superiority over the rapist. Instead, the show's heroine(s) are given the opportunity to speak out against misogyny and rape in overtly feminist ways. She is often also afforded the opportunity to not only reckon with her own experience of rape, but to confront the man responsible—and usually several more men like him. Once called "the least feminist of genres," the crime drama now offers extensive interventions into common myths about rape and confronts instances of victim blaming.[512] For instance, in one episode of *The Fall*, Detective Superintendent Stella Gibson (Gillian Anderson) delivers a powerful speech in response to a man wondering why his wife had not fought back against a rapist: "In that state of fear she might well have been compliant. She might well have submitted. But that does not mean she consented." An article in *Cosmopolitan* summed up the public reaction: "People are applauding *The Fall* for its powerful, important writing around consent."[513]

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[511] Although these shows are not all American in origin, they were all made available in the U.S. through services such as BBC America and Netflix. Each of these shows is about police officers, except for *Jessica Jones*, which is about a private investigator.
[512] Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time*, 14.
[513] Ellen Scott, "Stella Gibson gave a brilliant speech about consent on 'The Fall,'" *Cosmopolitan*, September 30, 2016, https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/news/a46265/stella-gibson-consent-speech-on-the-fall/.

It also worth noting that implied by its very coverage in a publication like *Cosmopolitan* is that some significant portion of *The Fall*'s audience is presumed to be female. While research on the relationship between women and crime entertainment has been primarily limited to the genre of true crime, these feminist-minded female-led dramas at least seem to be expected to appeal to a substantively if not predominately female audience.[514]

In calling these shows feminist-minded, I mean that they articulate feminist positions about rape, including, at minimum, rejecting victim-blaming, explicating the power dynamics of sexual violence, and recognizing the complex humanity of women. However, that is not to say that these shows are simply empowering feminist fantasies. *Top of the Lake*, for instance, is about a female detective who returns to her hometown in New Zealand to investigate how a young girl named Tui ended up pregnant, and it is as bleak as it is cathartic in its representation of male violence and female survival. The work of Oscar-winning writer-director Jane Campion, *Top of the Lake* prominently features a women's commune that becomes a refuge for the girls and women escaping the pervasive misogyny of their community, as well as a space to mourn for those subjected to male violence and mistreatment. This commune provides an essential sense of strength and solidarity, but the show makes it apparent that one safe space it is not enough to combat the male entitlement embedded within the local systems of capital and power. The show's protagonist, Detective Robin Griffin (Elisabeth Moss), ultimately unravels a conspiracy in which respected police and businessmen drug and rape local children and teens.

[514] For more on women as fans of true crime, see: Amanda M. Vicary and Chris R. Fraley, "Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?" *Social, Psychological & Personality Science* 1, no. 1 (2010): 81-86; Kelli S. Boling, "It's That 'There but for the Grace of God Go I' Piece of It": Domestic Violence Survivors in True Crime Podcast Audiences," *Mass Communication & Society* 26, no. 6 (2023): 991-1013; Kathleen Rodgers, "'F*cking politeness' and 'staying sexy' while doing it: intimacy, interactivity and the feminist politics of true crime podcasts," *Feminist Media Studies* 23, no. 6 (2023): 3048-3063.

Moreover, the town's problems are understood to be deep, institutional, and generational: at age fifteen, Robin was gang raped and became pregnant, much like Tui. Robin eventually learns that her rapists had faced punishment, in a way, by a community leader: they had been sexually assaulted themselves, one of them forced to lick the anuses of the others. This humiliating lesson did nothing but enforce the idea that sexual degradation is an acceptable mode of exerting power. Nor did Robin have any support following her rape, as she was forced by her mother to carry her pregnancy to term and then to give the baby up for adoption. Little has changed in the intervening years between Robin's rape and her return home to investigate Tui's rape. But between Robin's efforts to uproot the system that harmed Tui and the commune of women that houses Tui after she gives birth, viewers are assured that this time, things will be different. The collective efforts of women who consciously choose each other and reject patriarchal norms offers a sense of hope, including for men. After all, Tui's baby is a boy.

Shows like *Top of the Lake* and *The Fall* are about police doing police work, but I contend that they are not quite police procedurals, nor do they carry the connotations of the police procedural. Rather, these shows are anchored in the realm of "prestige" television. Although prestige TV has recently been an object of interest among media scholars, the category remains a contested one, recognizable more because of its form and conditions of production than because of specific generic markers. Some of what characterizes prestige television is the high production value, the vision of an "auteur" creator/writer/showrunner, and a serial narrative rather than an episodic one.[515] It is this latter trait that most distinguishes the other shows I have mentioned thus far from *Law & Order: SVU*, which has aired for twenty-five seasons in a largely

[515] I am indebted to Olivia Stowell for her insights into the characteristics of prestige television. For a more extensive list of the characteristics of prestige TV, see Chris Comerford, *Cinematic Digital Television: Negotiating the Nexus of Production, Reception and Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2023), 5-6.

episodic format, although at times its narrative is closer to what Turnbull describes as "hybrid." A hybrid series "embrace[s] both an episodic and serial narrative, with story arcs that can last the length of a season or even continue across seasons" alongside episodic storytelling with a new crime to solve each week.[516] It is ultimately this hybrid format, combined with the show's subject material, that creates *SVU*'s structural pessimism: a combination of serial melodrama and episodic criminal procedure, that produces a sense that the crimes being shown are endless and ever-worsening.

SVU's longevity problem: from structural critique to structural pessimism

To better understand the structural pessimism of *Law & Order: SVU*, it will be useful to briefly discuss the show's origins, success, and longevity. *SVU* is one of many spin-offs of the popular police procedural *Law & Order* (1990-2010; rebooted 2022-), created by Dick Wolf. Other spin-offs include *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-2011), *Law & Order: Trial by Jury* (2005-2006), and *Law & Order: Organized Crime* (2021-); however, as of today, *SVU* is the most successful and enduring of these spin-offs. The innovation of the original *Law & Order* was to explore, in the words of the series' famous opening sequence, "two separate yet equally important groups: the police who investigate the crime and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders."[517] In a time when "serial drama was the current trend in television crime drama," *Law & Order* was "determinedly episodic."[518] By contrast, *SVU* focuses more heavily on the

[516] Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 71.
[517] *Law & Order*, created by Dick Wolf, featuring Jerry Orbach, Jesse L. Martin, Sam Waterson, and S. Epatha Merkerson, 1991.
[518] Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 84.

"order" than the "law," and, as I already mentioned, adopted a more hybrid structure.[519] Its opening sequence makes its priorities clear as an authoritative male voice narrates: "In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses are considered especially heinous. In New York City, the dedicated detectives who investigate these vicious felonies are members of an elite squad known as the Special Victims Unit. These are their stories."[520]

As this statement suggests, the show's primary focus is on the Special Victims Unit of the NYPD, sometimes also known as the "sex crimes" unit, whose responsibilities include crimes involving sexual violence and abuse and/or crimes (both sexual and nonsexual) in which children, the elderly, and disabled people are victims. *SVU* was initially led by a male-female pair of detectives named Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) and Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay). In many ways, Stabler embodied the model of hegemonic masculinity that Cuklanz critiques; known for his anger problems and his physical handling of suspects, Stabler's horror of rape emerges both in his protectiveness of his young daughters and his willingness, perhaps even eagerness, to use violence against rapists and pedophiles.[521] When Meloni left the show in 2011, Hargitay became the face of the show and the sole lead, supported by a rotating cast of fellow detectives and attorneys. As one fan puts it, "Benson is the heart, soul and legacy of the show."[522] A writer at TVGuide said it even more simply: "Olivia Benson *is* the show."[523]

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[519] Court proceedings still take up a significant part of the show, but the focus remains primarily on members of the Special Victims Unit and the work that they do, as well as their personal lives, rather than on the attorneys. Typically, there is only one series regular attorney at any given time; by the most recent seasons, the ADA with whom the SVU works is in fact a former SVU detective.
[520] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, created by Dick Wolf, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Christopher Meloni, Richard Belzer, and Ice-T, 1999–, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/series/720ef5c1-fc77-4924-98c5-491455a06895.
[521] Kristen Lopez, "'*Law & Order: Organized Crime*' Makes Us Question Whether a Bad Cop Can Find Redemption," *IndieWire*, April 6, 2021, https://www.indiewire.com/features/general/christopher-meloni-law-order-organized-crime-stablers-back-1234628048/.
[522] Mariah Smith, "Why Do So Many Women Love 'Law & Order: SVU'?" *Vice*, September 25, 2019, https://www.vice.com/en/article/3kxv38/why-do-so-many-women-love-law-and-order-svu.
[523] Sadie Gennis, "7 Reasons Why Women Love Law & Order: SVU So Much," *TVGuide*, November 4, 2014, https://www.tvguide.com/news/reasons-women-love-svu-1088704/.

However, even before Meloni's departure, the show paid close attention to Olivia's psychological relationship to sexual violence: like the female investigators of more prestigious dramas, Olivia faces her own trauma through the course of her work. We learn in the show's first episode that Olivia was conceived when her mother was raped as a college student, a traumatic origin that she explores while working with the SVU. As the seasons go on, she also faces significant trauma, not only witnessing horrific acts of sexual violence and abuse but also enduring kidnapping, torture, and attempted rape.

The result is that Olivia's work is deeply personal, inflected with both empathy and first-hand knowledge. This is exemplified in an episode where Olivia, speaking to an unsympathetic coworker about a woman who murdered her abusive husband, explains,

> You have no idea what utter terror is. What pure and utter terror is. … You don't breathe because you're scared that it might upset him. And if you get a cramp in your foot, you tell yourself, 'Just let it throb,' because you'll live through that pain. And that's a hell of a lot better than what he'll do to you. … You pray. You pray, "Please, God, don't let him climb on top of me again."[524]

Hargitay's performance in this scene is deeply affecting, her voice breaking as she exposes her own vulnerability, and yet there is a wry matter-of-factness that speaks to both her resilience and her weariness. Scenes like this make it clear that Olivia is deeply connected to the women and other victims she encounters. They also begin to suggest why, as Olivia Benson, Hargitay has reached the status of pop feminist icon. *SVU* is Olivia Benson, who is Mariska Hargitay, who is a champion of justice for real rape victims.

The slippage between Mariska Hargitay and Olivia Benson, and Olivia Benson and *SVU*, can be seen in a flurry of media coverage celebrating all three. In a profile at the *New York*

[524] *Law & Order: SVU*, season 20, episode 14, "Part 33," directed by Alex Chapple, written by Michael S. Chernuchin, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, and Kelli Giddish, aired February 7, 2019, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/ff6f10c6-e451-4851-95f3-543ab39f8a13.

Times, Hargitay is described as a "feminist hero" with a dressing room decorated with Ruth Bader Ginsberg and Wonder Woman memorabilia; we are told that "Olivia Benson would be proud."[525] A 2017 Mic.com listicle of "14 feminist TV characters we need more now than ever" describes Benson as "a true champion of justice";[526] not incidentally, Hargitay had appeared a few years earlier in singer-songwriter Taylor Swift's music video for the song "Bad Blood" as a vigilante superhero named Justice.[527] Another article describing "4 Reasons Why Olivia Benson is a Feminist Icon" lists as one of its reasons the fact that "her activism extends outside the show," referring to the foundation Hargitay started to support survivors.[528]

Hargitay has also featured in and directed public service announcements, post-episode calls to action, and behind the scenes features in which she discusses sexual and domestic violence, often while dressed and styled as, or similarly to, Benson: lightly made-up with a plain black blouse or blazer.[529] This inevitably invites the conflation of her character's advocacy for rape victims and her own. I emphasize this conflation not to delegitimize Hargitay's charitable efforts but rather to suggest why fans have identified Hargitay so strongly with Benson in a way that they have not done for other characters on the show.[530] Hargitay has spoken about receiving

[525] Ilana Kaplan, "As 'SVU' Makes History, Mariska Hargitay Makes Olivia Benson's Mission Her Own," *New York Times*, September 25, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/25/arts/television/mariska-hargitay-law-and-order-svu.html.
[526] Marilyn La Jeunesse, "14 Feminist TV Characters We Need Now More Than Ever," *Mic*, April 7, 2017, https://www.mic.com/articles/167584/14-feminist-tv-characters-we-need-now-more-than-ever.
[527] Taylor Swift, feat. Kendrick Lamar "Bad Blood," directed by Joseph Kahn, May 18, 2015, music video, 2:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QcIy9NiNbmo.
[528] Katia Fernandez, "4 Reasons Why Olivia Benson is a Feminist Icon," *Her Campus*, October 17, 2017, https://www.hercampus.com/school/fsu/4-reasons-why-olivia-benson-feminist-icon/.
[529] USA Network, "Law & Order: SVU – Mariska Hargitay Interviews | Behind the Scenes | on USA Network," October 12, 2019, YouTube video, 6:16, https://youtu.be/9jDA-TTbhD0?si=LJdIFW1mVH1PlfhU. Joyful Heart Foundation, "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit – Episode 3 'Behave' Call to Action feat. SVU Cast (HD)," September 29, 2010, YouTube video, 2:56, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nG-LhhWmyoE.
[530] Some of this may be attributed to the fact that Hargitay has been on the show since the beginning, but Ice-T joined the cast in 2000 and has remained on the show since as well. However, it is worth noting that aside from a few music video and short film appearances, Hargitay has not portrayed a character other than Olivia Benson in nearly 20 years.

"hundreds, then thousands of letters and emails from survivors disclosing their stories of abuse, many for the first time" since *SVU* began airing, inspiring the creation of Hargitay's foundation, Joyful Heart, which is dedicated to empowering and connecting survivors of sexual assault, domestic violence, and child abuse.[531] In language not dissimilar to Miller's assurances to other survivors that they are not alone, Hargitay, sensing that the survivors who wrote to her were "isolated in shame and in the fear of the consequences of speaking out," wanted to "play a role in healing that pain, ending the isolation, and honoring the great courage survivors were showing by reaching out for help."[532]

In January 2024, *People* published an essay by Hargitay describing a rape she experienced in her 30s and about which she had not previously spoken publicly. In it, she acknowledges the concatenation of associations between real and fiction rapes, and real and fictional survivors, describing how the show and the response to it have affected her:

> Survivors who've watched the show have told me I've helped them and given them strength. But they're the ones who've been a source of strength for me. They've experienced darkness and cruelty, an utter disregard for another human being, and they've done what they needed to survive. For some, that means making Olivia Benson a big part of their lives—which is an honor beyond measure—for others, it means building a foundation. We're strong, and we find a way through.[533]

Like Chanel Miller and her impact statement, Mariska Hargitay, Olivia Benson, and *SVU* have offered support to survivors, while offering honest, determinedly feminist insight into women's vulnerability to sexual violence. At least, that is the claim made by those attempting to explain

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[531] "Our Story," Joyful Heart Foundation, accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/about-us/our-story.
[532] "Founder's Corner," Joyful Heart Foundation, accessed March 10, 2024, https://www.joyfulheartfoundation.org/about-us/founders-corner.
[533] Mariska Hargitay, "Mariska Hargitay Shares Her Experience in Her Own Words: A Rape. A Reckoning. A Renewal (Exclusive)," *People*, January 10, 2024, https://people.com/mariska-hargitay-experience-rape-renewal-reckoning-8424247.

why women in particular love to watch the show.[534] It has been argued that *SVU*, "which has always been about protecting the rights of victims, helped open up a space for processing their own experiences with misogyny and sexual assault."[535] Certainly Hargitay's account of the letters she has received from survivors disclosing their experiences, often for the first time, supports this understanding. A generous reading of *SVU* might even position it as a "lighthouse" like the one Miller tried to provide to "girls everywhere," illuminating an experience that is all too often obscured, and inspiring others to become lights themselves, telling their own stories.

However, Miller's statement and memoir are carefully structured narratives, each with a beginning and end; they are explicitly and implicitly addressed to a public of survivors, intended to elicit solidarity; and they were written by a single author, in a single voice. *SVU*, on the other hand, is created by innumerable writers, directors, and actors, and its "competing impulses" include "the desire to document crime as a social problem in order to educate and inform" and "a desire to distract and entertain," as well as reassurance, sensation, and formula.[536] *SVU* is also, as I have already alluded to, an exceptionally long-form narrative, one that (so far) shows no sign of ending, stuck in an "indefinitely expandable middle."[537]

With more than 540 episodes at the time of writing, *SVU*'s hybrid narrative shifts between procedural and melodramatic modes, with the melodramatic mode becoming more pronounced the longer the show airs: the stakes grow ever higher for Olivia, the squad, and—

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[534] See: Smith, "Why Women Love *SVU*"; Gennis, "7 Reasons"; Ashley Fern, "The 24 Reasons Why Every Woman Loves 'Law & Order: SVU,'" *Elite Daily*, February 24, 2014, https://www.elitedaily.com/women/reasons-women-love-law-order-svu; Lindy West, "What Is It With Women and *Law & Order: SVU*?" *Jezebel*, September 25, 2012, https://www.jezebel.com/what-is-it-with-women-and-law-order-svu; Victoria Hannah, "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit: a strangely comforting show about the most heinous crimes," *The Guardian*, September 6, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/sep/07/law-order-special-victims-unit-a-strangely-comforting-show-about-the-most-heinous-crimes.

[535] Smith, "Why Women Love *SVU*."

[536] Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 8-9.

[537] Dennis Porter, "Soap Time: Thoughts on a Commodity Art Form," *College English* 38, no. 8 (1977): 783.

when the SVU becomes involved in foiling an international terrorism plot—the entire world. At its best, *SVU* offers grounded depictions of gendered and sexualized violence, including nuanced and sensitive depictions of victims and occasionally even perpetrators, and frank explorations of how and why assault happens. For instance, one episode features a sheltered college student who texts a nude selfie to her rapist the morning after the assault, holding out hope that he still likes her. The same episode includes a frat boy who, after participating in a gang rape in order prove he fits in with his peers, eventually agrees to testify against his friends.[538] On several occasions, *SVU* "reiterate[s] feminists' claim that violent masculinity is facilitated by society at large," with multiple episodes highlighting how institutions such as universities, churches, and the police themselves cover up sexual violence and protect predators.[539]

The show also consistently problematizes the expectation that victims must be perfect to be considered trustworthy, and explicitly rejects several common rape myths, including "the assumption that only virtuous and sexually chaste women can be violated."[540] In one episode, some members of the SVU doubt the account of a young woman because she met up with several male friends at a bar immediately after her rape; beyond that, she is also described by her foster mother as unstable and attention-seeking, with a history of "crying rape" to get out of trouble. However, when it becomes apparent that she has been telling the truth, the team must make amends and earn back her trust in order to catch her attacker.[541] Another episode shows the SVU team pushing back when their superiors refuse to try a rape case in which the victim, a

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[538] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 14, episode 20, "Girl Dishonored," directed by Holly Dale, story by Robert Brooks Cohen, teleplay by Warren Leight and Julie Martin, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice-T, and Kelli Giddish, aired April 24, 2013, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/39f82b8b-5921-4069-ae60-8fc4c84bf403.
[539].Cuklanz and Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism," 310.
[540] Cuklanz and Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism," 308.
[541] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 19, episode 2, "Mood," directed by Michael Pressman, written by Allison Intrieri, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice-T, and Kelli Giddish, aired October 24, 2017, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/eb5f03f0-357c-4a61-ae39-02472236228c.

working-class Latina woman named Crystal, had consensual sex with three different men in the days before she was attacked and raped in her home. Olivia's boss, Chief McGrath, warns her, "There's no case here." Only when the white daughter of a police officer is attacked by the same rapist does the DA agree to bring charges, and even then, the rapist still isn't charged for Crystal's rape. In a powerful final scene, Olivia confronts McGrath:

> **Olivia:** SVU's obligation is to help victims become survivors, not traumatize them all over again.
> **McGrath:** Don't you think a trial would traumatize Crystal?
> **Olivia:** I think that it should have been her decision. Not yours. And just to be clear, as I told you before in my office, I won't turn my back on any victim. And if you stand between me and any victim of sexual assault ever again, you can take my shield and my gun.[542]

In some ways, the show's long run has also enabled it to make significant strides in its portrayals of marginalized groups. In particular, the show's move in the 2010s to represent more and more diverse trans characters has been a welcome change. In its early seasons, *SVU* featured trans characters, many of them Black, whose role in the show was an unnamed sex worker to be questioned, pitied, and sometimes misgendered by the police; these characters were unimportant, treated as mere colorful scenery on the streets of New York City. The show also memorably featured an episode in which a trans woman is convicted of murder and sentenced to serve time in a men's prison.[543] However, it wasn't until the 2010s that trans characters, and particularly trans women, became a meaningful part of the ever-expanding repertoire of *SVU* victims about whom Olivia and her colleagues care and to whom they show compassion and respect. For

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[542] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 23, episode 4, "One More Tale of Two Victims," directed by Michael Pressman, written by Denis Hamill and Monet Hurst-Mendoza, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, and Kelli Giddish, aired October 7, 2021, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/95380286-33d3-4bfc-8459-277de697fc84.
[543] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 4, episode 21, "Fallacy," directed by Juan José Campanella, written by Barbie Kligman and Joshua Kotcheff , featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Ice T, aired April 18, 2003, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/b8499b34-16a8-4451-911f-78e37625b550

instance, in a relatively well-received episode from 2015, a transgender teen is accidentally killed by bullies, and her death is understood to be the tragic result of prejudice and ignorance.[544]

To me, the most affecting story of trans victimhood that the show has told took place over a two-episode arc during the 2019-2020 season.[545] Like the show's early episodes, this arc features a trans woman sex worker, one who has been violently raped by a john who targets trans women. Rather than portraying this woman as two-dimensional stereotype, however, she is given a nam—Lakira—and a life. We learn about her relationship with her mother, her friendships with some of the fellow trans women she knows, and witness both her skepticism about the law's ability to help her and her burgeoning hope that Officer Tamin, the young Latina officer from SVU who is working her case, may actually care about pursuing justice for her. At the end of Lakira's first episode, she tells a disappointed Tamin that she has decided to take a payoff from the rapist rather than risk losing in court. When Lakira next appears, we learn that her rapist has struck again, but this time he has escalated, having raped and murdered one of Lakira's friends. Shaken and devastated, Lakira vows to testify this time, and the killer is convicted. When Lakira pushes aside her well-earned pessimism regarding the justice system in order to protect and show solidarity, love, and affection for other trans women, it echoes all of the moments in seasons past when Olivia urged cis victims to testify not only for themselves but for the sake of others. It is

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[544] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 17, episode 2, "Transgender Bridge," directed by Arthur W. Forney, teleplay by Jill Abbinanti and Céline C. Robinson, story by Julie Martin and Warren Leight, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, Kelli Giddish, and Peter Scaravino, aired September 30, 2015, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/418d0bd9-b231-4286-8975-3a1a4d8e93ba. *The Advocate* praised the episode, saying that it seemed to indicate "a change in direction … to showcase trans characters in a more sympathetic light." Dawn Ennis, "What's the Story Behind the 'Transgender Tragedy' on *Law & Order: SVU*?" *The Advocate*, September 30, 2015, https://www.advocate.com/arts-entertainment/2015/9/30/whats-story-behind-transgender-tragedy-tonights-law-order-svu.

[545] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 21, episode 5, "At Midnight in Manhattan," directed by Peter Werner, teleplay by Kathy Dobie and Micharne Cloughley, story by Briana Yellen, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, and Kelli Giddish, aired October 24, 2019, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/402850ef-3728-464e-84e7-296c589dd7c0; *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 21, episode 20, "The Things We Have to Lose," directed by Juan José Campanella, written by Warren Leight and Julie Martin, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, and Kelli Giddish, aired April 23, 2020, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/402850ef-3728-464e-84e7-296c589dd7c0.

heartening this women's genre, centered on violence against women, not only represents trans women as victims but also as survivors and even heroines, part of the solution (or at least *SVU*'s solution) to sexual violence. In expanding the stories the genre tells, the show is also expanding the genre of the survivor. At the same time, however, the show always recommits itself to the framework of crime and the power of the police in addressing sexual violence, even as it allows characters like Lakira to doubt and question their efficacy.

Moments like these show that although *SVU* articulates carceral logics and sanctions the role of police as enforcers of laws, it does not do so without complexity. It is true, as Moorti and Cuklanz point out, that the show's "fictional narratives of sexual assault have, on a weekly basis, asserted that the police and legal systems offer the best, if flawed, possible solutions," but those flaws are occasionally explored in great depth.[546] Even *SVU*'s debut episode, "Payback," suggests the very tensions that the show itself can never resolve: an immigrant cab driver is found murdered, his genitals mutilated, but as Olivia and her partner Stabler continue their investigation, they learn that the cabbie was in fact a Serbian war criminal who committed ethnic cleansing and mass rape.[547] His killers, it turns out, are two women whom he'd brutally victimized. Stabler reminds Olivia that "we don't pick the vic"—in other words, the gruesome murder is still a crime, even when perpetrated against a horrific criminal—yet Olivia's misgivings about pursuing the suspected women see her threatened with being booted from the SVU altogether. Ultimately, when the women are arrested, Olivia advises one not to speak to the police without a lawyer; the other woman kills herself, whispering to Stabler to let her die so that

[546] Sujata Moorti and Lisa Cuklanz, *All-American TV Crime Drama: Feminism and Identity Politics in* Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 3-4.
[547] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 1, episode 1, "Payback," directed by Jean de Segonzac, written by Dick Wolf, featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Dann Florek, aired September 20, 1999, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/f7bbd181-d36e-409b-b712-bd906efe9a6e.

she can be with her family. Despite evidence that the murder of the cabbie was premeditated, Olivia and Stabler sign off on charging the remaining woman with a plea deal of manslaughter in the second degree, which will result in a sentence of eighteen months in a psychiatric facility. The head of the unit is displeased by this seeming evasion of justice, but he tells Olivia this was her "Get Out of Jail Free card." The limits of law enforcement and carceral punishment are on full display here: the war criminal evaded punishment, making a new life in the U.S. where he married and had children; his victims, meanwhile, remain haunted by his actions—one raising the child that resulted from rape, another mourning her slaughtered family and choosing death rather than imprisonment. Without quite condoning the women's vigilante violence, the show questions who is served through their prosecution and incarceration.

Another season one episode, "Nocturne," investigates a piano teacher who's been caught recording video of himself molesting his students.[548] One of his victims, Evan, now an adult and a piano teacher himself, agrees to testify, but during the investigation, the SVU learns that Evan once molested one of his own students. Evan recognizes that he's done wrong and has neither the intention nor the desire to ever molest a child again, but he is of course arrested, charged, and presumably imprisoned, at the insistence of his victim's father. The show recognizes the tragedy in this cycle of abuse, and the unit's intervention leaves viewers wondering whether the solution is the right one. Still, the show seems to suggest, what other solution can there be? And if there could be another solution, where does it fit within the show's titular parameters of "law" and "order"? Where does it fit into 42 minutes plus ads, before moving on to the next story, the next rape, the next tragedy?

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[548] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 1, episode 21, "Nocturne," directed by Jean de Segonzac, written by Wendy West, featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Dann Florek, aired May 12, 2000, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/70b23739-6197-4015-89ff-2c96920fb092.

As the show has progressed, it has continued to critique the limitations of the justice system, but it also increasingly become "a melodrama" that "rehearses repeatedly the contestation between good and evil."[549] Victims are often ordinary women, children, and men, complicated and imperfect; we understand, watching *SVU*, that almost anyone can be a victim.[550] However, perpetrators tend to be "especially heinous." As Moorti and Cuklanz argue in their full-length study of *SVU*, perpetrators are increasingly "presented as predators, perverts, or pathologically ill," with sexual violence the result of "individual idiosyncrasies, rather than as a symptom of social structures. Consequently the response to sexual violence has been more violence, incarceration rather than rehabilitation."[551] Indeed, rehabilitation is shown to be ineffective, perhaps even harmful. In season 14, a ten-year-old boy named Henry Mesner who has been physically abusing his younger sister is diagnosed as a psychopath and sent to a mental health facility for juveniles.[552] Eight years later, during season 22, Henry is released from his facility, with his therapist assuring the parole board that he has "broken diagnosis" and is ready to rejoin society and his family. Henry subsequently rapes a college student, murders his father, stepmother, and five-year-old brother, and kidnaps his sister. When confronted with these crimes, Henry's therapist admits that Henry may have simply spent eight years "learning how to appear completely sane."[553] Therapeutic interventions, even for a minor, are demonized by the

[549] Moorti and Cuklanz, *All-American TV Crime Drama*, 3.
[550] That said, at least one study has shown that *SVU* does not accurately represent the demographics of crime reported in New York. In particular, it underrepresents Black victims, underrepresents women as rape victims, overrepresents men as victims, and overrepresents female perpetrators. John Sides, "The surprising racial and gender bias in 'Law and Order,'" *Washington Post*, January 3, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/01/03/the-surprising-racial-and-gender-bias-in-law-and-order/.
[551] Moorti and Cuklanz, *All-American TV Crime Drama*, 35.
[552] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 14, episode 9, "Born Psychopath," directed by Alex Chapple, written by Julie Martin and Warren Leight, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Danny Pino, Kelli Giddish, and Ice T, aired April 3, 2013, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/70b23739-6197-4015-89ff-2c96920fb092.
[553] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 22, episode 14, "Post-Graduate Psychopath," directed by Noberto Barba, teleplay by Brianna Yellen and Micharne Cloughley, story by Brianna Yellen and Warren Leight, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, Kelli Giddish, and Peter Scaravino, aired May 20, 2021, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/9bf98501-45c0-4e86-b002-79c6c9ba15a5.

show, although it has repeatedly implied or outright claimed that pathological psychological issues, if not pure psychopathy, are to blame for rapists becoming rapists.

In addition to multiple child psychopaths like Henry, the show features several violent serial killers, sadistic serial rapists, and monstrous parents, particularly mothers. Cuklanz and Moorti note a troubling trend in which the "dysfunctional family is a cause of crime, rather than the symptom or result of larger institutions and social problems," and that in many instances, "bad mothering is much more frequently depicted as the cause of criminal behavior by adult children than is bad fathering."[554] Indeed, throughout the run of the show, rapists rape due at least in part to their trauma, often instilled by women. In one instance, a young man sexually abused by his female babysitter attempts to rape a woman and makes a false accusation of sexual assault against Stabler when he is arrested.[555] In another, when a man falsely accused of rape is exonerated, he is so traumatized by 16 years in prison that he ends up raping and murdering the daughter of the rape victim who misidentified him. When testifying, this woman breaks down in tears over her part in sending him to prison in the first place: "Every time he was beaten or raped, it was my fault. I turned him into a rapist, a monster. And it was my fault. I'm the guilty one here."[556] Even the show's most notorious villain, a sadist serial killer and serial rapist named William Lewis who kidnaps, tortures, and assaults Olivia, attributes his pathology in part to a monstrous woman: when Lewis was a child, his babysitter, who was also his father's lover, performed fellatio on him; his father came upon this scene and responded by brutally raping the

[554] Cuklanz and Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism," 314.
[555] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 12, episode 23, "Delinquent," directed by Holly Dale, teleplay by Dawn DeNoon, featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Ice T, aired May 11, 2011, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/e854ee2e-8d98-49a9-bbc3-5665a553ff71.
[556] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 18, episode 2, "Making a Rapist," directed by Michael Smith, written by Kevin Fox, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Ice T, Kelli Giddish, and Peter Scaravino, aired September 28, 2016, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/0624d929-d0a5-46b8-9ab3-0c31a9f2ee29.

babysitter in front of Lewis before taking him out for ice cream.[557] The father's behavior would have been sufficient background to pathologize Lewis, but the addition of the babysitter's assault on Lewis adds a new level of horror, the motherly figure who betrays her role.

Women are certainly capable of being sexual predators, and it is to the show's credit that it highlights the often-unrecognized experiences of male victims. However, *SVU*'s overrepresentation of female perpetrators and its regular attribution of male violence to women's behavior creates a dynamic wherein "sexual violence … is disarticulated from social systems of gender."[558] Instead, sexual violence is the product of profound individual dysfunction, usually expressed in a heightened, melodramatic mode: even though in reality 90% rapes are committed by a single offender, 75% of rapes are committed by a person known to the victim, and only 11% of rapes involve the use of weapons, on SVU the rapes are usually more gruesome, the rapists more inhuman, the criminality always greater in scale than those statistics allow.[559]

The William Lewis arc is perhaps the most emblematic case of the show's melodramatic tendencies. During this six-episode arc, Olivia is kidnapped from her home, brutally beaten and tortured, force-fed liquor, forced to watch William Lewis rape another woman, handcuffed to a bed, and threatened with rape. Eventually, Olivia manages to subdue Lewis, nearly killing him in the process, but he survives to stands trial and is imprisoned. This was an already extraordinarily dramatic plot, and Olivia was dealing with her PTSD, but *SVU* pushed the drama, and the trauma, further. Not long after he is convicted, Lewis escapes prison, kidnaps a child, and forces Olivia to play Russian Roulette with him until he shoots himself in the head directly in front of

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[557] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 15, episode 1, "Surrender Benson," directed by Michael Pressman, written by Julie Martin and Warren Leight, featuring Mariska Hargitay, Danny Pino, Kelli Giddish, and Ice T, aired September 25, 2013, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/25a186f5-1702-4e5e-ac20-21f751c59e06.
[558] Moorti and Cuklanz, *All-American TV Crime Drama*, 35.
[559] "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics," RAINN, accessed March 22, 2024, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence.

her. And that was only season 15. Where can the show go from there? In season 17, *two* serial rapists and killers who caught in the previous season escape prison. (The implication, one can't help but think, is that for some rapists even incarceration is not enough to keep the public safe; only death can stop them from raping again.) As viewers, we are always waiting for the next great horror; or, as Elissa Washuta puts it, "every new rape is more gruesome and heart-wrenching than the last."[560]

Jane Feuer, writing about daytime and primetime soaps, has asked what happens when "the representational field of melodrama takes the form of a serial drama that has no real beginning or end but only (as one critic describes it) 'an indefinitely expendable middle'?"[561] Though *SVU* cannot be characterized as a soap opera, its increasingly serial elements, including Olivia's multi-episode kidnapping arc and her subsequent PTSD diagnosis, undermine the episodic format's traditional, if temporary, sense of resolution. It would be too neat to say that crime TV is "all about reassurance," but *SVU* has provided closure in ways that real life has not.[562] As Alex Hughes extols, "In the *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*–verse the Stanford rapist is quietly weeping in his cell right now … The Jian Ghomeshi SVU stand-in is currently locked up thanks to a particularly feisty courtroom sequence."[563]

However, as the show marches on into perpetuity, there is an uncanny effect: perpetrators reappear, breaking out of prison and reoffending; the same types of rapists appear, frat brothers and serial killers and mask-wearing strangers; and actors show up again and again in slightly

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[560] Elissa Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," in *My Body is a Book of Rules* (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press, 2014), 95.
[561] Jane Feuer, "Melodrama, Serial Form and Television Today," *Screen* 25, no. 1 (1984): 12.
[562] Turnbull, *The TV Crime Drama*, 2.
[563] Alex Hughes, "'Law & Order: SVU' is an Alternate Reality Where Assault Survivors Are Taken Seriously," *Vice*, June 10, 2016, https://www.vice.com/en/article/avaw45/law-order-special-victims-unit-offers-women-justice-and-thats-why-i-love-it.

different roles, a killer one episode and an attorney another, a pedophile one episode and a murder witness another. Any given week the man who'd been put behind bars a year or two or ten earlier might appear again, or if he's not quite the same, you can't tell the difference. Maybe ADA Barba is there or ADA Carisi or ADA Novak, maybe John Munch or Nick Amaro or Amanda Rollins is currently on the squad, but it doesn't really matter because Olivia Benson is there. Olivia is always there, and so are the rapists. The result is a kind of atemporality: details layer over each other, compounding, until past and present are difficult to differentiate and closure is increasingly tricky, perhaps impossible, to grasp.

Feuer claims that the "moral universe of the prime-time serials is one in which the good can never ultimately receive their just rewards, yet evil can never wholly triumph. Any ultimate resolution—for good or for ill—goes against the only moral imperative of the continuing serial form: the plot must go on."[564] The same, I argue, is true for *SVU*. This is part of the structural pessimism of *SVU*, one that suggests that not only will rape and abuse continue forever, but the best and only intervention to be had must come afterwards, via policing and punishment, and even then, it may not be enough: the rapist will always return, resurrect, reincarnate. Any given episode may offer a nuanced critique of rape culture and policing, but, as Moorti and Cuklanz argue, "by highlighting a number of institutions and structures that contribute to rape culture and remain unpunished, in its totality the series cultivates the sense of sexual assault as a crime with no end in sight and with an ill-defined cause."[565] On *SVU*, the police and the justice system are far from perfect; there is corruption and bureaucracy, untested rape kits and victim-blaming cops, but the work of imagining alternatives cannot exist within the show, which must trudge on, season after season after season. Rather than inventing new ways of being in the world, the show

[564] Feuer, "Melodrama," 12.
[565] Moorti and Cuklanz, *All American TV Crime Drama*, 10.

can only invent new ways for women and children to suffer, flinching anew at the same old shadows, the same villains in slightly different guises.

In what remains of this chapter, I argue that both Elissa Washuta and Carmen Maria Machado do the important work of reimagination by engaging in formal and generic play, remixing and combining the police procedural of *SVU* with memoir and horror, respectively. Their hybridized texts, rooted in an ambivalent attachment to *SVU* and Olivia Benson, make it clear that genre is not destiny: not only can new stories be told, but rape itself—the act, the crime—need not be inevitable.

"Especially Heinous": speculative possibilities

Despite its grim title, Carmen Maria Machado's "Especially Heinous"—which draws its name from the introductory voice-over at the top of every episode of *Law & Order: SVU*—is as notable for its playfulness as it is for the gruesomeness of its plot, in which eyeless ghosts of raped and murdered girls haunt and possess Benson, desperate to be remembered. By drawing on the conventions of horror and fantasy to make the world of *SVU* her own, Machado remixes generic conventions to produce a surreal but still-recognizable version of *SVU* that slyly pushes readers/viewers to confront the procedural's paradoxical rendering of the genericness of sexual violence as *especially* heinous.

By "remix," I mean an "artefact and practice, noun and verb" that "involv[es] the distributed reassembly, reconfiguration and circulation of pre-existing cultural and material elements."[566] Rooted in a history in 1970s dance music and reggae, and now associated in

[566] Andrew Whelan and Katharina Freund, "Remix: Practice, Context, Culture," *M/C Journal* 16, no. 4 (2013), https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.694.

literary and cultural theory with digital and transmedial adaptation and appropriation, the notion of the remix is a way into Machado's work that emphasizes not only her own position as both consumer and creator—she is the viewer who internalizes and reshapes the popular rape narratives of *SVU*, even as she also the author at work—or, better yet, at play. When I use remix to describe Machado's work, I am drawing on the concept of "genre play," which Dustin W. Edwards defines as

> constructing a text that blends, repurposes, or otherwise moves in and out of genre expectations. Signaled by phrases such as "remixing the book," "remixing the essay," or "remixing traditional scholarship," genre play refers to the ways in which rhetors playfully re-conceptualize reified norms, working both within and against those socially constituted ways of doing and knowing.[567]

I argue that through this kind of remix, Machado invites readers to re-experience *SVU* and, ultimately, the generic norms of sexual violence that it represents. Although the novella is undeniably horrifying, it is also, as I will discuss, underpinned throughout by a playfulness that draws attention to its own rhetorical and aesthetic strategies, including the use of genre conventions. In doing so, the novella recognizes readers as active participants in the storytelling process: remix is the work of many hands. The reader of Machado's remix, likely also a viewer of *SVU*, is thus awakened to the work of genre and realizes that genre is neither inherent nor inevitable.

In addition to the playfulness that Edwards articulates, he argues for understanding remix within a rhetorical history of imitation that is "connected to invention, style, memory, ethics, and being," and "celebrates a sort of community stockpile from which composers can continuously invent and reinvent."[568] By drawing on both the show and the "community stockpile" of cultural

[567] Dustin W. Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically: Toward A Typology of Transformative Work," *Computers and Composition* 39, no. 1 (2016): 50.
[568] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 43.

narratives of sexual and gendered violence that *SVU* itself pulls from and contributes to, Machado locates her novella within a communal and multivocal project of narrativizing sexual and gendered violence. Edwards suggests that understanding remix within this tradition "positions remix as a process whereby rhetors are productively and ethically—not haphazardly—working with other texts, communities, and people."[569] It is Machado's playfully ethical orientation that constitutes the novella's intervention into *SVU*'s structural pessimism. By remixing the structure, Machado can produce something beyond pessimism.

"Especially Heinous: 272 Views of Law & Order: SVU" takes the form of 272 brief episode synopses of *SVU*, each named for real episodes, but together forming a fantastical, occasionally humorous, and altogether disturbing narrative in which characters known only as Benson and Stabler encounter doppelgängers, ghosts, and a mysterious drumming at the heart of Manhattan.[570] Somewhere between fan fiction, parody, and adaptation, "Especially Heinous" gives readers some of *SVU* as they may already know it—the, to use a narratological term, kernels by which the show is identifiable, particularly the characters of Benson and Stabler and the sheer, relentless violence against women that fills the hour week after week—but rather than

[569] Edwards, "Framing Remix Rhetorically," 43.

[570] Machado's body of work reveals an enduring interest in genre play alongside recurring themes of violence against women. Her short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties* (2017), combines horror, folk tale, fantasy, and gothicism, among other genres. Alongside "Especially Heinous," the collection features seven short stories, including a folktale-inflected marital drama about a husband's determination to violate his wife's boundaries; a catalogue of a woman's sexual exploits in a post-apocalyptic world that uses its desolate setting to highlight the necessity and fundamental vulnerability of human connection; and an eerie tale in which a woman recovering from sexual assault believes that she is telepathically connected to those she sees performing in pornography, helplessly conscious of their ambivalence, discomfort, and lack of real desire. Genre also serves as the organizing structure of *In the Dream House*, a memoir that tells the story of her abusive relationship with another woman through a series of generic and conceptual frames such as "Dream House as Picaresque," "Dream House as Lesbian Cult Classic," "Dream House as Noir," "Dream House as I Love Lucy," "Dream House as Chekhov's Gun," and, in an especially memorable section, "Dream House as Choose Your Own Adventure." Through this frenetic and unstable use of generic framing, which asks readers to constantly ask what kind of story they are reading, Machado critiques the lack of models for discussing queer abusive relationships, particularly between queer women, and shows the various genres she must "try on" to understand her experience. Carmen Maria Machado, *In the Dream House* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019).

spending time on the procedural elements of *SVU*, the novella offers an ongoing serial narrative that reimagines the crime drama through the structures and conventions of horror.

At times this reimagining is tongue-in-cheek, as when upon first being haunted, "Benson starts sleeping with a crucifix and pungent ropes of garlic, because she does not understand the difference between vampires and murdered teenagers."[571] It is apparent that Benson is not quite aware of what genre she is in—a ghost story, not a vampire one—and so turns to the wrong conventions to solve her problems. When garlic and crucifixes do not deter the ghosts, Benson approaches the issue again as a police officer, briefly attempting to fit the specters into the grooves of the procedural. By learning to decode the ghosts' messages, she thinks she can solve their cases and locate their bodies; instead, Benson finds herself riding the subway all night with nothing to show for it, nothing except for a "feeling" that the "two-toned heartbeat" she can hear beneath the ground is connected to the dead girls: "I've been all over. It's the whole fucking city. The heartbeats. The girls."[572] While the show creates "a sense of sexual assault as a crime with no end in sight and with an ill-defined cause," Machado literalizes that impression of unfathomable largeness, of inescapability, with a turn to cosmic horror. In a section evocatively entitled "Sacrifice," Benson "knows that New York is riding the back of a giant monster. She knows this more clearly than she has known anything before."[573] And what is the titular sacrifice? For Machado, the mystery of the girls' rape-murders exceeds the bounds of the crime genre; it is Lovecraftian, chthonic, a "hungry beast that lives below."[574]

[571] Carmen Maria Machado, "Especially Heinous," in *Her Body and Other Parties* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2017), 69.
[572] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 79, 76, 79.
[573] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 76.
[574] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 105.

Or, as in "Authority," the beast is above. In this unnerving vignette, a drunken Stabler becomes aware of himself as character, and, "star[ing] up at the sky," begs, "Stop reading. I don't like this. Something is wrong. I don't like this."[575] Readers are positioned here as the ones with the agency to stop the story, and with it, the characters' pain. Rather than configuring reading as witness or sympathetic exchange, Machado momentarily frames the reader as a sadistic god taking pleasure in the horrors they watch. More broadly, she implicates viewers/readers in the experience of genre and genericness produced by the show; we may not take *pleasure* in the characters' pain, but we participate in it, taking cues from it as we come to understand the genre of sexual violence. This moment suggests, in other words, that the audience's desire to watch the rape-based procedural is somehow a support of, a desire for, rape culture itself.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the characters of Henson and Abler, doppelgängers who act as dark mirrors of the televised version of Benson and Stabler, representative of the show's ability to continue without cease. They are the main antagonists of the novella, their narrative function primarily to distract, threaten, and unnerve Benson and Stabler, to keep them from doing their jobs, so that Henson and Abler can do those jobs instead. They are, as Abler's name implies, more able to adhere to the expectations of a procedural crime drama: perfect police officers, they work without allowing emotion to interfere, solving crimes quickly and efficiently within single "episodes;"[576] they are practically unkillable, and the bullets that strike them appear in the bodies of innocent bystanders instead;[577] most of all, unlike Benson and

[575] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 111.
[576] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 83.
[577] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 85.

Stabler, they are willing to accept and even enable the endless violence that the city—the show—demands.

Ultimately, this may be because the New York City of "Especially Heinous" *is Law & Order: SVU*, and when Stabler and Benson hear a pulse beneath it, described as a "deep drumming, two beats" and a "two-toned heartbeat," it can only be the famous "dum-dum" sound effect heard in every episode of *Law & Order*, the clang announcing that you are about to consume another hour of rape, abuse, and murder.[578] Henson, who, Scheherazade-like, distracts her lover the DA from her work with a series of tales, explains it as follows:

> "The sixty-fifth story," Henson whispers into her ear, "is about a world which watches you and me and everyone. Watches our suffering like it is a game. Can't stop. Can't tear themselves away."[579]

Henson's implication is clear: because "viewers and readers actively participate in the endless cycle of hyper-violent crimes by continuing to consume the story … [t]hey are as much the horror villain as the doppelgangers."[580] It is tempting to assume that this is the ultimate message of the novella, at least as far as the television show goes, but its relationship to the show demonstrates far more ambivalence than such a pat conclusion allows.

As I noted in the previous section, the detectives of *SVU* are not cold arbiters of state justice; at times, they question the system, and the violence they see, enact, and otherwise experience affects them profoundly. Consider, for instance, the doppelgangers in "Undercover," whose "faces so unnerve [the police commissioner] that he crosses himself"; we know they are ruthlessly efficient and subtly inhuman, and it is this coldness, this flatness, that seems to

[578] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 65, 76.
[579] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 108.
[580] Clarissa Susan Goldsmith, "Hope Despite Horror: Theorizing Oppositional Horror and Aesthetics of Resistance in Multicultural Horror," PhD diss., (Arizona State University, 2022), 45.

unnerve the commissioner.[581] Compare this Henson to Olivia Benson in the episode "Undercover," where she goes undercover as an inmate in a prison to investigate a rapist guard, and, in a truly harrowing scene, she narrowly escapes being raped herself (Fig 3.1). The episode ends on Olivia's haunted expression as she tells Dr. Melinda Warner that it is the "closest [she's] ever come" to being raped.[582] As viewers we are unnerved not by Olivia's coldness (as with the commissioner and Henson) but by our encounter with her vulnerability.

Figure 3.1 Olivia Benson is almost raped by a prison guard while undercover in *SVU* 9.15 "Undercover"

This implied juxtaposition between "Undercover" the vignette and *SVU*'s "Undercover" shows how Machado uses remix to produce intertextual and intergeneric effects beyond critique: remix iterates, replays, samples, re-makes and renews. Therefore, the novella's undeniable critique of the endless impersonality of sexual violence in the show butts up against the explicit reference to this episode, often considered one of the show's finest, due in large part to Hargitay's performance of Olivia's near-rape and her traumatized response, which forms part of the serial narrative of Olivia's life. At the same time, a viewer of *SVU* will recognize that

[581] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 111.
[582] *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, season 9, episode 15, "Undercover," directed by David Platt, written by Mark Goffman, featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Diane Neal, aired April 15, 2008, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/7ca95ebf-15bb-472e-bdca-5a62afec7fa1.

although Olivia remains at the center of the show, the Black teenager found unconscious, beaten, and raped at the beginning of the episode is shuffled offscreen by the end of the hour, only to be replaced in the next episode by another victim, and another, and another. In the novella, however, she remains symbolically present, represented by the girls-with-bells-for-eyes who remain with Benson until she can finally set them free.

If the doppelgangers represent the basest possibilities of *SVU*, filtering police proceduralism and its attendant injustices through a lens of horror, the girls-with-bells-for-eyes speak to the show's and the genre's potential, magnified by its contact with horror. The girls-with-bells-for-eyes, ghosts of raped and murdered girls who haunt Benson, confront readers not only with the scope of sexual violence and gender-based murder but also with the traumatic repercussions of that violence, on both an individual and a cultural basis. It could be said that *SVU* confronts viewers in the same way, but *SVU* is frequently more preoccupied with the horror of rapists and crime, while "Especially Heinous" asks us to focus on the horror of rape victims. More than that, it asks us to focus on what rape victims experience and suffer outside of the genre of crime, offering readers a chance to "generate and shape knowledge of the world" in a new way.[583]

Earlier, I referenced the "genericness" of sexual violence in *SVU*, a phrase that I here mean both its quality of being generic, i.e., nonspecific in the aggregate, and its own categorization within genre(s), e.g., horror, crime, romance, pornography. Indeed, what "Especially Heinous" demonstrates is that these two aspects of genericness can be co-constituitive. The nonspecificity of rape in *SVU*, because of its regularity (or atemporality) within the show, is what makes it, for Machado, horror. Yet in recognizing sexual violence as

[583] Frow, *Genre*, 2.

horror story, "Especially Heinous" reveals precisely how generic that violence is, with the ghostly girls-with-bells-for-eyes an uncanny reflection confronting us with the endless rotation of voiceless victims-of-the-week on *SVU*.

The first of these ghosts, an underage model buried in the wrong grave, appears to Benson one night with "bells for eyes, tiny brass ones dangling from the top of each socket, the hammers not quite touching her cheekbones… the right bell tinkling faintly, and then the left, and then the right again."[584] It is important that she was buried in the wrong grave, her body mistaken for her also-dead, also-raped model twin sister, a facetious rendering of the problem of the surface interchangeableness of the show's victims. The ghost's identity has been lost, rendering her generic, one of soon-to-be-many girls-with-bells-for eyes. We are offered some identifying details of the ghosts. For instance, there is "a small girl with hair in a tight cornrow and no mouth" and "a pack of small children" with bells that are "especially tiny," but for the most part they are an undifferentiated mass, with bells that "ring, ring, ring through the night," demanding that Benson find their bodies and uncover their identities, asking her to—in the same sense evoked by Chanel Miller's memoir—know their names.[585]

It is worth pausing here to consider the imagery of bells in the dead girls' eyes. Machado's move to relocate Benson to the genre of ghost story makes sense, given the sheer amount of death that the character has both witnessed and dealt. However, the bells-as-eyes is a detail unique to Machado, one that simultaneously distinguishes her ghosts from the broader concept of a ghost while simultaneously, symbolically, underscoring the ghosts' genericness. Eyes, after all, are supposedly the "windows to the soul," symbols of individuality, but these ghosts have bells instead, carrying in their eye sockets not their own selfhood but the peal of an

[584] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 68-69.
[585] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 71, 78, 81.

announcement, an alarm, perhaps a warning. Bells, not unlike the *Law & Order* "dum-dum," call one to attention, a broad announcement that asks of its hearers some specific task, such as to wake up, to leave class, to come to church, to pay attention to a TV show. In this case, the bells make the girls' desire(s) intelligible, expressing the urgency of their demands, which Benson eventually translates by learning Morse code: "*Give us voices. Give us voices. Give us voices. … Find us. Find us. Find us.*"[586]

The bells also suggest another formulation: "to ring a bell." The phrase "to ring a bell" means to remind you of something, perhaps something you can't quite name. The girls "ring a bell" with Benson, with the reader; they are familiar but unnamed, so generic as to be recognized—the category of raped, murdered girl already imbued with meaning—without actually being known. There is also the matter, discussed previously, of recurring villains, victims, and actors on *SVU*: a character might "ring a bell" if they have a familiar face or an M.O. that you've seen before. The girls-with-bells-for-eyes become a stand-in for the sense of déjà vu evoked by the show's casting and narrative, a hint at how the viewer may hover in the liminal space between knowing and not knowing, general familiarity and genuine recognition.

In addition to the girls-with-bells-for-eyes serving as a collective representation of the show's raped and murdered and forgotten characters, the novella uses horror conventions, in the form of a possession, to discuss the bodily trauma the girls have experienced. The first possession occurs when Benson is asleep, and the original girl-with-bells-for-eyes, the teen model, "takes her fingers and presses them into Benson's mouth," "pushes herself, in and in, and when Benson's eyes open, Benson is not opening them."[587] The description of the girl "pressing" and "pushing" "in and in" to a sleeping Benson echoes the language of sexual assault,

[586] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 78.
[587] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 96.

emphasizing the violation as "Benson-who-is-not-Benson takes off her nightgown and touches her grown woman's body, inspecting every inch."[588] At the same time, there is something mournful in this description of a dead teenager girl admiring "her grown woman's body," a claim to adult sexuality that the girl-with-bells-for-eyes now can never make. This failed claim is taken further when Benson-who-is-not-Benson goes to Stabler's house, knocking on his door and kissing him—a kiss that Benson, waking in her bed later, dismisses as a dream.[589] Here, the ghost, without access to her own selfhood, attempts to become Benson, but the identity she takes on is no more her own than the dead sister in whose grave she has been mistakenly buried.

This episode is reminiscent of a troubling moment in Alice Sebold's *The Lovely Bones* (2002), another text that combines an unflinching look at sexual violence with the genre of horror. *The Lovely Bones* is narrated by a young girl named Susie Salmon who was raped and murdered and now tells her story from beyond the grave. In a scene that takes place several years after her murder, Susie possesses the body of Ruth, one of her former classmates who is now a grown woman. While the possession of Benson leaves Benson "curled up in the corner of her mind … see[ing] through her eyes distantly," Ruth temporarily vacates her body, ascending briefly to the afterlife.[590] Meanwhile, where Stabler "wipes his mouth with his hand" and then "shuts the door" on Benson-who-is-not-Benson, Susie successfully convinces Ray, her childhood sweetheart, to have sex with her, allowing her to experience consensual sex and a taste of the adult sexuality of which she has been deprived.[591] Unlike in "Especially Heinous," all of the characters involved consent to what happens: Ruth agrees to the possession, and Ray knows that it is Susie's soul in Ruth's body. However, I concur with Sarah E. Whitney's estimation that

[588] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 96.
[589] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 97.
[590] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 96.
[591] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 97.

"*The Lovely Bones* soberly and straightforwardly addresses the physical and psychic damage of rape in the opening pages, thus making Susie's invasion of Ruth's body, and her later borrowing of the body to engage in sex, problematic."[592]

In many ways, the possession scene in "Especially Heinous" offers a similar account of a dead girl seeking the pleasurable adult sexuality she'd been denied in life, but whereas Sebold suppresses what is so disturbing in her version of possession, Machado consciously draws attention to the dynamics in her text. When Benson-who-is-not-Benson kisses Stabler, we are told that the real Benson "cries into the darkened walls of her own skull," a description that calls to mind disassociation, a common survival strategy among rape victims.[593] At the end of the episode, Benson feels hollowed out, "heavy as an unanimated golem," and the girl-with-bells-for-eyes tells her she is sorry.[594]

In the episode "Cage," Machado touches briefly on the problem of cycles of abuse: "The rapist is raped. The raped are rapists. 'Some days,' the prison doctor says to a resident as they stitch up a torn rectum. 'I wonder if the bars make the monsters, and not the other way around.'"[595] In addition to being one of a several passages in "Especially Heinous" that straightforwardly critiques the American criminal justice system, "Cage" also offers a framework for understanding this initial possession attempt, with the girl whose body was violated showing a disturbing willingness to violate someone else's body. Though this psychologized explanation is like those provided by *SVU*, the difference is that Benson responds with not only compassion but also an attempt to address the girls' trauma rather than considering them beyond help. In a

[592] Sarah E. Whitney, *Splattered Ink* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 34. This scene is also disconcerting because Ruth is a lesbian, and while she consents to the possession seemingly knowing what Susie intends with Ray, a man, it is disturbing to read the events, as Whitney notes, within the book's own politics.
[593] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 96
[594] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 96
[595] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 105.

moment that shows that Benson has come to care for the girls as holistic beings rather than merely crimes to be solved, she invites the ghosts into her body.

This scene occurs only after Benson has lost the ability to communicate with the girls. Henson steals the hammers from the girls' bells, rendering them "quieter than they have ever been," and at first Benson makes a few haphazard attempts to fix the situation.[596] In another funny moment, she googles "dead girls bells eyes missing hammers" and "ghost fixing," only to be met with ads trying to sell her "brass bell sets, ghost hunting equipment, video cameras, CDs of bell choirs, dolls, shovels."[597] Later, in "Loophole," she attempts to give the girls-with-bells-for-eyes new hammers, but this doesn't work.[598] At last, she tells the ghosts, "All right … Come in":

> And they do. They walk into her, one at a time, and once inside she can feel them, hear them. They take turns with her vocal cords. "Hello," Benson says. "Hello!" Benson says. "This feels really good," Bensons says. "What should we do first?" Benson says. "Now, wait," Benson says. "I'm still me." "Yes," Benson says, "but you are legion, too."[599]

Compare this scene to the first possession in "Intoxicated," even the title of which implies impaired judgment, an inability to consent. Here Benson finds a workaround, a loophole, to the problem at hand, inviting the girls-with-bells-for-eyes inside of her, allowing them to use her vocal cords to speak with words instead of chimes. Their intrusion is intimate, perhaps uncomfortable—"she can feel them, hear them"—but she accepts it, understands herself as part of the whole; she does not become Benson-who-is-not-Benson. Instead, she is "still me" but "legion, too."

[596] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 100.
[597] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 102.
[598] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 106.
[599] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 106.

Taking the ghosts into her is not an idyllic state. The work of freeing the girls becomes ever more urgent, compelling Benson to begin to count—the girls, the rapes, the deaths—"tallies, hatch marks in groups of five," covering "pages and pages and pages," and in the aftermath of that frantic numbering, Stabler finds Benson lying on the kitchen floor, saying only, "There are so many of them."[600] More, the girls' deaths begin to feature every night in her dreams, in an episode aptly titled "PTSD": "She slips in and out of stabbings and shootings and stranglings and poisonings and gags and ropes and *No, no, no*s."[601] In one horrifying episode, a new ghost appears, of a girl who has been "raped, murdered, and lit on fire," and rather than the already disturbing ringing of bells that Benson had become accustomed to, this girl "comes into Benson's head screaming, smoke curling off her burned skin" in what "is the longest night of Benson's life so far."[602]

When the girls were not inside of Benson, they existed at a remove: she had to translate their ringing, could escape them by staying overnight with men she went on dates with. With the girls inside of her, however, their pain is constant, but so too can she share with them her pleasure, offering them some of what the twin model sought in her nonconsensual possession. In one episode, the girls are with her on a date, though they "screw it up by referring to themselves in the collective."[603] In another, Benson "takes herself and the girls inside her out on the town for dancing, for sweaty bottles of beer, to show them all a good, good time."[604] They are, in a way, their own intimate public of rape victims, a community bound by a common affective

[600] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 108.
[601] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 113.
[602] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 119.
[603] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 113.
[604] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 110.

experience, brought together within the body of Benson—a ghostly version of the web of survivors that has Mariska Hargitay at its center.

Despite the harshness of Henson's characterization of the audience as "watching [their] suffering like a game," or even Stabler's drunken plea that the reader stop reading, bringing an end to the pain, I therefore cannot read Machado's work as a wholesale rejection of *SVU* or condemnation of its audience. Rather, she imagines what the show makes possible in remix when instead of the perfect police that are Henson and Abler, we get the novella's Stabler and Benson, human, traumatized, literally and figuratively haunted. Are we able to reimagine the work and meaning of the Special Victims Unit? Are we able to reimagine what the pursuit of justice entails?

At the end of the novella's penultimate season, Abler and Henson are at last killed in a shootout with Stabler and Benson. This is another moment of structural remix as compared to *SVU*, because with Abler and Henson gone, no more doppelgangers appear, no villainous faces that "ring a bell." With them gone, the novella begins to offer possible new ways of imagining the place of rape in the world and the work of seeking justice for survivors. In Season 12, Stabler and Benson "go back to old files," rededicating themselves to finding and freeing the dead women.[605] Having accepted the girls into her, Benson finds that now she simply "knows" where and who the victims are: "They walk the length of the Hudson. They locate eight bodies—different murderers, different years. She names them as the gurneys go rumbling past her."[606]

The girls begin to leave her, individuals now, specific, but the sense of togetherness, of community—of, in a sense, genericness—that was cultivated is not forgotten. In a touching scene, the last girl remaining inside Benson "clings to the inside of [her] skull":

[605] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 120.
[606] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 120.

> "I don't want to be alone," Benson says. "I don't, either," Benson says, "but you need to go." Stabler comes into Benson's apartment. "Her name is Marcela Tierra. She was twelve. She was raped by her father, and her mother did not believe her. Her father killed her. He buried her on Brighton Beach." Inside, the girl shook her head, as if to dislodge the sand in her hair. "Go," Benson says. "Go." The girl smiles and doesn't, her bells barely rocking. "Thank you," Benson says. "You're welcome," Benson says. There is a sound—a new sound. A sign. And then, she is gone.[607]

As the ghosts are at last recognized and freed, there are also signs that the justice system may not be as broken as it previously seemed. Arrests are made; charges stick; perhaps most crucially, Benson and Stabler can focus on the prevention of violence rather than merely reacting to it: "Benson and Stabler take out the kidnapper before he even reaches his destination."[608] At another moment, what they take to be gunfire turns out to be tiny fireworks.[609] More powerfully still, we are offered mere glimpses of scenes that suggest that perhaps, one day, there can be a world without rape. In "Behave," we are told "They start responding to no" and in "Penetration," we witness a dialogue in which an expression of nonconsent is seemingly finally understood and respected: "'No.' 'Yes.' 'No.' 'No?' 'No.' 'Oh.'"[610]

SVU's existence is predicated on rape; it is a generic feature without which it would not exist. Yet in this novella, Machado remixes *SVU* with horror to produce the utterly unexpected possibility of a world a world where rape is not an inevitability, where it can truly be "*especially* heinous," and although there may be a beast beneath the city that "demands sacrifices," we know "it can only eat what we give it."[611] More than that, Machado's turn to horror and away from the police procedural encourages readers to imagine what it might mean to write rape outside of the framework of crime. Machado's Benson does not give the girls-with-bells-for-eyes arrests and

[607] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 122.
[608] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 121.
[609] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 121.
[610] Machado, "Especially Heinous," 120, 121.
[611] Machado. "Especially Heinous," 123.

conviction, she gives them their names and their bodies. She hears them, no matter how painful, and does not resort to the mechanisms of policing and adjudication to quiet them. She invites them inside of herself, and she finds a way to let them go too. The remix of the novella playfully restructures the show's pessimism and ethically takes up cultural narratives of sexual violence in order to recenter them on rape victims. Recentering the victim is also what Elissa Washuta does, when she uses real lines from *SVU* as way to structure the story of her own rape—and to show where the structure fails.

"Sexually Based Offenses": between the lines of *SVU*

Elissa Washuta's memoir, *My Body is a Book of Rules* (2014), tells the story of her young adulthood through a series of formally and generically playful chapters modeled on, among other things, an annotated bibliography, a patient's medical history, an undergraduate sociology essay, sex advice from *Cosmopolitan*, and, as I will discuss here, a scripted exchange that juxtaposes lines of decontextualized dialogue from *SVU* with Washuta's narrative of her own experience of sexual violence. While the book as a whole is an example of remix, working with and against generic expectations and pre-existing material, as she asks readers to (re)encounter narratives of indigeneity, mental illness, disability, and sexual trauma, it is in the chapter "Sexually Based Offenses" that Washuta cuts, stitches together, and reassembles lines from *SVU*—now attributed to flattened archetypes such as "Good Cop," "Bad Cop," and "Villain"—to attempt to fit her own rape(s) into the structure of the police procedural.[612] Machado remixes the procedural with horror to emphasize how the ubiquity of rape in *SVU* paradoxically renders the victims of "especially

[612] Elissa Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," *My Body is a Book of Rules* (Pasadena, CA: Red Hen Press), 95-114.

heinous" violence generic; the show's cumulative effect is that the (ever-worsening) crime of rape becomes more central than the victims of it. Washuta, on the other hand, undercuts *SVU*'s serial (melo)drama by stripping back everything but the dialogue of the police procedural, positioning them as generic responses prompted by the rhetorical genre of reporting a rape. Rather than juridical, criminal account of rape that the dialogue seeks to construct, however, Washuta substitutes her own subjective narrative and defies what *SVU* has attempted to script. In doing so, Washuta highlights the gap between the expectations set by a framework of the televised crime drama—"portrayed," as she writes, "in episode form, neat, sectioned, with closure"—and the cruel mundanity of everyday sexual violence, the rapes, assaults, hurts, violations large and small, that must be endured if she is to survive.[613] Thus, by producing what Thomas O. Beebee calls "generic noise"—the points of friction where a genre calls attention to its failure to conform with itself—Washuta demonstrates the ideologies at work in *SVU*'s representation of rape-as-crime and destabilizes the show's construction of a genre of rape that prioritizes criminality over harm.[614]

The chapter opens with a brief commentary from Washuta that explains her own connection to *SVU*, which she has been watching since she was fourteen years old, before describing the familiar rhythms of any given episode of *SVU,* the beats that make it itself: from the opening voiceover ("In the criminal justice system…") and what Washuta calls, "the *Law & Order* sound," which she renders *bomm bomm*; through the investigations, including the requisite

[613] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 97.
[614] Thomas O. Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre: A Comparative Study of Generic Instability* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), 17. "One important aspect of noise is self-referentiality: Noise calls attention to itself by working against the systemic in music, by deriving its meaning from its opposition to what already exists. Noise probes the unknown and unarticulated, and alludes to the apocalypse by foregrounding itself against the background of familiar form, by defining itself over against the already known, the 'tradition' recognizable in the imperatives of genre" (179).

mid-episode twist and occasional legal digressions; and finally to an ending that "always, without fail … really makes you think."[615] After all, though some episodes end in such a way that "the problem wasn't actually solved … at least everybody knew there was a problem."[616] Partway through the chapter, Washuta breaks in twice more, first reflecting on the convention of the mid-episode twist, then describing—presumably in place of a commercial break—a PSA produced by NBC that features Mariska Hargitay telling survivors that if they've "ever been a victim of rape … it's never too late to get help."[617] With these moments, Washuta cleverly mirrors the structure of an episode of TV, as well as the procedures of detection and prosecution, but the dissonance of her personal narrative within that structure draws attention to what it cannot adequately contain. At the end of the chapter, Washuta contemplates the nature of endings, ultimately articulating the pain and the hope that are engendered when one's rape narrative cannot conform generically to a criminal framework.

Aside from brief sections of essayistic commentary like I describe above, the chapter organizes its text into two columns: the left labeled "SVU" and compromised of "lines from the show that reminded [Elissa] of [herself]," and the right labeled "Elissa," populated by italicized blocks of text that tell the story of being raped by a boyfriend when she was twenty and later being assaulted by a friend-of-a-friend. Crucially, neither instance easily meets a standard definition of rape, the one made available to American culture through media such as *SVU*. Washuta's juxtaposition of fictional dialogue and lived experience demonstrates the insufficiency of the show's generic responses and urges readers to consider a more capacious understanding of rape.

[615] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 95.
[616] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 96.
[617] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 112.

A typical exchange in the script portions of the chapter offers a back-and-forth between Elissa and the archetypes into which the *SVU* dialogue has been absorbed:

BAD COP:
Why not just fight back? Predictions of violence are notoriously unreliable. Nobody can say what he might have done. Did you ever say no?

I remember thinking, okay, I could shove him off me. But he throws things, punches things sometimes, and now he's got me pinned.[618]

Often, Elissa's lines seem to be a direct response to the *SVU* dialogue, as above, when explaining why she didn't fight back. This is the scene in which a crime is reported, when the police take a victim's statement, but Washuta's responses do not easily indicate where the "case" can go from there.

Sometimes the connection between the dialogue is more tenuous, as in the exchange below:

VILLAIN:
She does whatever I tell her to do. Whatever I say, whatever I want. And in the end, two little words will set me free: reasonable doubt.

Bad guys do what good guys dream.

I had sex with him four more times. It made me feel like a grown-up. It was also hard to turn him down. One night, I told him over the phone that I wasn't going to see him anymore but he said he was outside my building. Another night, my roommate let him in.

Those other times, I screamed, pretended I liked it. I wanted him to come so I wouldn't

[618] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 98-99.

> *have to finish him off with my mouth. I guess I was just trying to convince myself I was into it.*[619]

Although it is unclear if the Villain is meant to represent the "him" that Elissa describes, or if Elissa is meant to be the "she" of the Villain's chilling comment, Elissa's lines unsettle and complicate the TV dialogue, refusing or failing to participate in the genre the dialogue attempts to create. Her words offer insight into why the victim whom the Villain speaks of might do "whatever [he] want[s]": not because he is extraordinarily powerful or menacing, but because of the mundane circumstances that made giving in feel easier than fighting. Moreover, by situating the phrase "whatever I want"—dripping with sexually salacious implication—within the concrete and painfully human details of what that might entail, Washuta renders the potential salaciousness ordinary, sad, and familiar. Pretending to enjoy sex in the hope that it will end sooner is a well-documented behavior amongst women. In a study on discursive practices used by women in the context of consensual but unwanted sex, researchers found that "faking orgasm is a discursive strategy for dealing with 'problem' sex where sufficient language does not exist to name and legitimize" such experiences.[620]

In addition to undercutting moments like these, in which the villainy veers into melodrama, she also complicates some of *SVU*'s most celebrated liberal feminist messages through clever pairings of dialogue. For instance, when Good Cop says that "the way [to] handle something traumatic" is "by acknowledging that it affects you," Elissa's dry response suggests she already tried to acknowledge the trauma. She says that although she "*called the university*

[619] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 101-102.
[620] Emily J. Thomas, Monika Stetzl, and Michelle N. Lafrance, "Faking to finish: Women's accounts of feigning sexual pleasure to end unwanted sex," *Sexualities* 20, no. 3 (2016): 296.

help line," the man who picks up said she "*wasn't raped, that women who are raped are beaten up, sometimes they die.*"[621] The man on the university help line delegitimizes Elissa's experience by comparing it to the most violent and horrifying representations of rape; it is a symptom of what happens when rape is defined through *SVU* and its lens of "especially heinous" crime, even as the show ostensibly attempts to correct rape myths. Again, the dissonance Washuta creates in moments like this draws attention to the ways that the show, even in its attempts to offer comfort to victims, cannot speak to most victims' decidedly uncinematic experiences.

In an article for *Vice*, Hughes suggests that *SVU* "offers an alternate reality where sexual assault survivors are taken seriously," but admits that it is bound by its "mandate to be popular."[622] Consequently,

> It's hard to imagine viewers tuning in for a six-episode arc about a date rape occurring in the privacy of a bedroom between two people who had just been out on a date, and the subsequent he-said-she-said, and maybe there was booze, and did I mention she texted him after, and it took her six months to disclose what happened to the police. That's just not "good TV."[623]

That scenario may not make "good TV," but it adheres more closely to the kinds of sexual assault that happen every day. Even when the show does address these more commonplace forms of rape, we are almost always provided "hard" proof: if the rape itself isn't shown on screen, assuring viewers that it really happened, then there will be DNA evidence from a rape kit, or a photograph or video recovered from a cell phone, or a witness who comes forward to corroborate. The show is frank that cases without such evidence are difficult to pursue legally—and therefore, it seems, they are rarely worth depicting.

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[621] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 103.
[622] Hughes, "Alternate Reality."
[623] Hughes, "Alternate Reality."

Washuta reverses this valuation by challenging criminal justice as the most meaningful framework for representing rape. Here we reach the "law" portion of the show. When Good Cop says, "I have never known a single victim who regretted testifying against a rapist … but I have known plenty that wish that they had," Elissa responds, "*How could I have gone to the police? I said no and then yes. Nothing else matters. No and yes are the most important words in the world.*"[624] Elissa even makes the same point that Hughes does, explaining, "*What I knew about rape came from* SVU: *man is bad, woman says no, man fucks her anyway. What kind of episode would 'No—well, okay, maybe, since you're in there anyway' make?*"[625] She understands that she in fact would have regretted testifying, not only because, at the time, she "*would've rather let him ruin [her] life then put something into motion that would ruin his, too*," but also because, fundamentally, she knows that when it comes to juridical definitions of rape, "*no and yes are the most important words in the world*."[626]

In writing this statement, Washuta has Elissa articulate the stakes of an ongoing debate within feminist philosophy and legal scholarship regarding the standard of consent in rape cases. Some of these discussions center on the fact that, from a legal perspective, sexual nonconsent is particularly difficult to disprove. As Catharine MacKinnon has written, relying on a standard of consent "attribute[s] victimization to the victimized, ultimately to their state of mind, even if that is legally measured by their behavior," and it also "makes the legal case turn on what the alleged victim was thinking and feeling at the time, or on what she said or did as an expression of what she thought or felt," rather than on the harm that the perpetrator did.[627] Frances Ferguson similarly notes that the crime of rape, defined as nonconsensual sex, presents an interpretive

[624] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 102-103.
[625] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 100.
[626] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 102-103.
[627] Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Rape Redefined," *Harvard Law & Policy Review* 10 (2016): 453.

challenge because it requires proof of a subjective state (the thoughts of the alleged victim and perpetrator), and traditionally, as a result, the rape victim's "body is thus converted into evidence, having become the text that bespeaks not only her intention not to have consented but also the perpetrator's intention to have overridden that refusal to consent."[628] In other words, the question of if an incident was rape rests in the victim's body, which the law must attempt to read.

While reformers in the U.S. have, in many cases successfully, advocated to do away with a legal standard that requires proof of "force or a threat of severe bodily harm" in favor of defining rape solely through nonconsent, this returns us to the problem we began with: How do we prove nonconsent?[629] Moreover, as Daniel Loick notes, "social interactions can be consensual *and* still be violent." [630] This is MacKinnon's argument too: "Consensual is a fall-back stand-in for 'it wasn't so bad.'"[631] In her 2021 manifesto on women and desire in the contemporary, Katherine Angel further argues that "consent has a limited purview, and it is being asked to bear too great a burden, to address problems it is not equipped to resolve."[632] Although "we don't always know and can't always say what we want," consent is a fixed legal standard: did she want it or didn't she?[633] Did she say yes or no? In Elissa's case, although she had clearly expressed that she "*wasn't ready for sex*" and told her boyfriend to stop when she woke up with him on top of her, she "*was also thinking, let's get this over with…. I went ahead and let him do it because I was thinking, next time will be easier*."[634] In the eyes of the law, did Elissa consent?

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[628] Ferguson, "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," 91.
[629] Scott A. Anderson, "Conceptualizing Rape as Coerced Sex," *Ethics* 127 (2016), 56.
[630] Daniel Loick, "'… as if it were a thing.' A feminist critique of consent," *Constellations* 27, no. 3 (2019), 413.
[631] MacKinnon, "Rape Redefined," 452.
[632] Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (London: Verso, 2021), 27-28.
[633] Angel, *Tomorrow*, 39.
[634] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 98-99, 101-102.

In some ways, what Elissa describes here has more in common with Lili Loofburow's 2018 essay "The Female Price of Male Pleasure" than it does with a typical episode of *SVU*. Loofburow, writing in response to accusations that #MeToo had gone too far, argues that as we reckon with the pervasiveness of sexual violence in America, we cannot only look at the most egregious cases—the Weinsteins, the Cosbys—but must also reckon with a culture of sex that "sees female pain as normal and male pleasure as a right." [635] Discussing the concept of "bad sex," Loofburow notes that for men bad sex tends to indicate a lack of pleasure or failure to orgasm, while for women it refers to the presence of pain. That difference in meaning corresponds with Angel's argument that "bad sex emerges from gender norms in which women cannot be equal agents of sexual pursuit, and in which men are entitled to gratification at all costs. It occurs because of inadequacies and inequalities in access to sexual literacy, sex education and sexual health services."[636] For instance, it is widely accepted that this pain should simply be endured; after all "the very first lesson the typical woman learns about what to expect from sex is that *losing her virginity is going to hurt*"—an expectation reflected in Washuta's account.[637] If she got it "*over with*," after all, then maybe "*next time will be easier*."

Elissa does not, ultimately, consign this encounter to the category of bad sex, although it takes "*a year to use the word 'force'*" and "*another couple months to use 'rape.*"'[638] However, the sex she had with him afterward, "*trying to convince [herself] she was into it*," might qualify.[639] Regardless, what her story makes clear, and what the juridical desire for simple boundaries between rape and bad sex does not allow for, is that these categories are intrinsically

[635] Lili Loofburow, "The female price of male pleasure," *The Week*, January 25, 2018, https://theweek.com/articles/749978/female-price-male-pleasure.
[636] Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, 27-28.
[637] Loofburow, "The female price of male pleasure."
[638] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 104.
[639] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 102.

linked—not because, as Bad Cop suggests, "women who have sex and later regret it" make "drastic" accusations of rape, accusations to which they are not entitled, but rather because rape and painful sex are part of a spectrum of disregard for women's bodies and pleasure.[640] When a woman describes sexual harm, the response prompted by the genre of crime is *Did you consent?* but this normative response marks another place of dissonance where the police procedural fails to contain the reality of sexual assault, producing noise.

This noise only grows louder and more discordant when, years later, Elissa is once again violated in a way that does not adhere to the bounds of traditional criminal definitions of rape:

> *We were on the couch and he put his hand up my skirt. And then half his hand was in me, like he was looking for something in the glove box. He took out his nasty little dick and wrapped my hand around it, but my hand didn't want it. He flipped my body over, came up behind, and pressed against me. … I just wanted to grab, twist, and pull like they taught me in middle school, wanted to run, but for some reason I also wanted to stay alive, so I shut up. For a little while, I was in his possession. … But then I snapped out of it and said, no, not without a condom. … So in the end, he didn't penetrate me. I'm supposed to be happy about that, like what I got was nothing. Look how happy I am. … I went upstairs to puke at some point. He ate me out at some point. Let's try this, I think he said. I don't know what happened after I passed out. Probably nothing, I hope.*[641]

In this account, which I have abridged for length, Washuta characterizes Elissa's nonconsent in unexpected ways that continue to draw attention to the instability of consent as a legal standard. Instead of saying that she didn't want to touch the man's penis, she says that her "*hand didn't want it*." In one reading, by locating her nonconsent in the body rather than the mind, Washuta rejects the assumption that consent is an inaccessible mental state, as well as the idea that the body's "proof" of nonconsent must necessarily take the form of physical injuries. Her hand didn't want his penis: what signs did it give? Was her hand slack? Did her fingers refuse to close

[640] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 100.
[641] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 106-109.

around him? Would a court take an open, uncooperative palm as seriously as it would take bruises on her body?

By another reading, Washuta is bifurcating mind and body; by locating the nonconsent in her hand, she attempts, perhaps, to restrict the violation to that appendage. However, this attempt does not work. As she writes, Elissa is "*supposed to be happy*" that he didn't penetrate (rape) her, but her grief in the wake of the violation is palpable. More, because she cannot fit her story into a neat definition of rape, instead she sees in *herself* a generic type, but it's not the resilient survivor we see in Chapter 1; it is the kind of woman with "a history of emotional problems" and "promiscuity" that leads her to reflect that this second violation was "*inevitable*": "*Hadn't I always known that the first time unbound me, opened me up for more? I had been waiting for my next pillaging. It was only a matter of time.*"[642] Because she has "*done things with [her] body, consensually, that [she] is ashamed to admit*," she doesn't "*think [she's] allowed to complain about being touched, not anymore*."[643] She is not a strong survivor or a perfect victim; he is not a violent rapist; and this is not the crime of rape.

In the introductory section, Washuta writes that she "watched [*SVU*] for plot points that would remind me of me so I could tell myself I was a victim," but during the PSA section, she acknowledges that she "spent years vexed by the notion that if I can't see [the assault] in my head the way I can see *SVU* in my head, it never really happened."[644] This central tension characterizes her ambivalent relationship with the show: because it is generic, she looks to it to see aspects of herself, but because the violence is "especially heinous"—and, as she herself acknowledges, the violence has only grown "more gruesome and heart-wrenching," *more*

[642] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 110-111.
[643] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 111.
[644] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 96, 112.

heinous, as the show has continued—it eclipses her recognition of the violence she has lived through, which could never compete with *SVU*.[645] Unsurprisingly, therefore, the lines Washuta inserts from *SVU* in response to this account are particularly harsh:

> **DEFENSE ATTORNEY:** Please. There was never penetration.[646]
>
> **BAD COP:** Rape is a violation of body and mind. A violation that comes through penetration. If you weren't raped and there's no evidence of assault, then there's not a lot we can do.[647]
>
> **DEFENSE ATTORNEY:** No judge would ever let this go before a jury. There is no case here. Why are we even debating this? My client has done nothing illegal, so good luck getting an indictment. There were no signs of a struggle in that room. Where's the crime? What you know about law could fit in the palm of my hand. Forget him, girl, he'll bury you.[648]

Only one comment validates her pain, and even it, from Good Cop, is woefully inadequate: "That sounds like a terrible ordeal."[649] Yes, it was an ordeal, it was *a pillaging*, but "where's the crime?" Once again, the rhetorical genre of reporting rape (that is, placing rape into the genre of crime) prompts narrow and ill-fitting responses to Washuta's reality, attempting to impose a rigid juridical framework for understanding sexual violence.

The "episode"—the dialogue section—closes with Elissa's reflection that she "*ha[s] a nice life*" now: "*I take five pills a day to keep my moods straight. I don't think about jumping in front of a train anymore. … I don't need to see a therapist, call a help line, because I've got it together*."[650] Yet sitting directly beside this assertion is a quote attributed only to COP: "It will kill you. Every horror, every torment afflicts your body like a cancer. It's devouring you and you

[645] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 95.
[646] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 109.
[647] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 110.
[648] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 111.
[649] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 111.
[650] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 113.

can't see it. Open your eyes."[651] One ending seems to provide closure, however imperfect, while the other promises more suffering, spreading like cancer. Despite Washuta's claims that *SVU* is "neat, sectioned, with closure," the show's structural pessimism bleeds through with this final exchange. Tellingly, although this line is attributed to a cop, it was in fact originally spoken by one of the show's villains, a man guilty of rape, pedophilia, incest, murder, and kidnapping.[652] In a sense, it does not matter who is speaking—a good cop or a bad one, an attorney, a villain—because in the end, none of them can speak for a victim, none of them can tell her story.

Despite the "closure" that this final sequence simultaneously forecloses and makes possible, Washuta is not done. She continues, in traditional prose, beyond that "black-screen space" after the credits rolls:

> And then black, and then credits, and then the other side stretches out long and dark across the continent, enveloping Maryland and New Jersey and Seattle, coursing through every meeting with boys who say 'Suck it' when I don't and 'Shut up bitch' when I won't, the boy who doesn't think I deserve the waste of a condom and leads me looking and feeling like I've been rubbed in gravel, the one who fucks me and steals my credit card, the one who pulls a knife and hides a gun, the dear friend who touches me even when I beg him not to and who cries later when he tries to understand what he's done—these boys exist in that black-screen space. They are the aftermath that television suggests and real life provides.[653]

This passage retains the aesthetic frame of the television show, claiming the "black-screen space" after the credits so that she may do work on the edge of genre: a series of boys and bad sex that demonstrates that whatever resolution the "episode" may offer, real life continues, unstructured, nothing truly solved because the world in which women are sacrificed to male pleasure remains intact. Yet in this genre edge-space, she finds a glimmer of hope, saying that

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[651] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 113.
[652] *Law & Order: SVU*, season 6, episode 7, "Charisma," directed by Arthur W. Forney, written by Tara Butters and Michele Fazekas, featuring Christopher Meloni, Mariska Hargitay, Richard Belzer, and Diane Neal, aired November 16, 2004, Hulu, https://www.hulu.com/watch/4e5998b6-7029-415b-9d0d-4aa3f6f6f564.
[653] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 114.

"alongside these psychic stab wounds, I've got what television can barely suggest: the self-repair that my brain performs in the years after the detectives would have moved on."[654]

It should be clear by now that one of the key concerns of "Sexually Based Offenses" is how *SVU* has shaped cultural understandings of what rape is, that is, what constitutes a "sexually based offense." While *SVU* acknowledges the limitations of the law's ability to account for rape, particularly in terms of what is prosecutable, it does not and cannot do more than gesture at those places of inadequacy. By interpolating *SVU*'s dialogue into her own story, Washuta shows that despite her concern that her story would not make a very good "episode," it nevertheless makes a compelling and moving narrative—just not one that is a police procedural. Beebee argues that ideological struggles can be seen in "the struggle against or the deviations from genre," locating literature in texts "where the battle is most intense."[655] Washuta uses juxtaposition throughout the text to alert readers to that struggle, that dissonance, and in doing so, pushes readers to question the ideological frame of the popular genre of the police procedural that demands we understand rape only through a legal framework.

It is worth noting here that, while *SVU* is undoubtedly a popular text, I am aware that neither of the literary texts that I read in this chapter (particularly Washuta's) are especially popular, but as my analyses suggest, they rely on popular culture and popular narratives to make meaning. Throughout this dissertation I have talked about the feedback loop between readers and writers: Emily Doe's statement inspiring other survivors to write, and their writings inspiring Chanel Miller to complete her memoir; one generation of romance novelists responding to and critiquing the romance novels they've read by producing new norms, before the next generation

[654] Washuta, "Sexually Based Offenses," 114.
[655] Beebee, *The Ideology of Genre*, 19.

responds and critiques them. Machado and Washuta too are both the audience and the creator, writing their own self-reflexive narratives of *SVU* that reimagine the show and rework the genre.

In this chapter, I have shown how authors use remix to challenge the ideological claims of the police procedural, revealing the tension between the genericness of sexual violence in *Law & Order: SVU* and the emphasis on exceptionality; not only are the victims in the show "special" victims, but the crimes perpetrated are "especially" heinous. In "Especially Heinous," Machado leverages the horror genre to recognize that it is not the grotesqueness of *SVU*'s sexual violence that makes it "especially heinous"; it is the taken-for-granted ubiquity of it, the acceptance that it is forever inevitable. If so many girls are raped and murdered, Machado suggests, that is a crisis; alarm bells should sound—and so they do, in the eyes of the ghosts that haunt Benson and drive her to know their personhood beyond their victimhood. In "Sexually Based Offenses," Elissa Washuta experiments with fitting her experience of sexual violence into the form of the police procedural by putting real *SVU* dialogue into conversation with her narrative of being raped. It is an experiment that is doomed to fail, but in engineering that failure through her deliberate juxtapositions of lines, she can then explore what those failures mean and how, rather than changing her story to fit the shape of the genre—not only the genre of the police procedural, but, more importantly, the genre of rape itself—the genre might grow to accommodate the shape of her story.

Coda:
The Podcast and the Pop Song

If genre offers a framework for reckoning with the constraints of rape as a category, and if representations of rape have in turn both constructed and challenged the bounds of particular genres, then where does that leave anti-rape activism and rape studies now? What discourses and genres of rape are essential to understanding the present moment? So far, I have claimed that in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, popular rape narratives have revealed the limits of readerly identification with the rape survivor, have defined and redefined masculinity through and against the figure of the rapist, and have recognized the inadequacy of our current criminal justice framework for responding to rape while simultaneously refusing to imagine alternative ways of being. I have also shown how shifting discourses of rape in the 2010s, including the #MeToo movement, have contributed to the production and (re)evaluation of a multitude of rape narratives in media (both fictional and nonfictional, across genres and forms); this has also led critics and consumers to express growing awareness of the power of storytelling to reflect, define, and suppress the problem of gendered and sexual violence. However, in focusing on how these shifts have occurred in women's genres, I have neglected to discuss an important question: Are these narratives of rape reaching and affecting men? And if not, then what narratives are?

I do not want to discount the fact that men can and do read trauma memoirs and romance novels, just as they can and do watch *Law & Order: SVU*, but these genres are unmistakably marketed to and focused on women. In fact, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation, the centrality of rape within these genres is inextricable from their desire to speak to the lives,

concerns, and identities of women. Explicitly and implicitly, these genres address female audiences by assuming both that sexual violence matters to them because they are women and that they are women because sexual violence matters to them. That does not mean, however, that women's genres are the only spaces in which rape narratives have been constructed and received in changing ways throughout the twenty-first century. In fact, men's genres—the genres that are produced for and consumed by primarily men, and through which masculinity is defined—have also responded to the factors I discuss in the Introduction, including feminist advocacy, high profile rape trials, and the #MeToo movement. And like women's genres, men's genres create and reproduce their own conceptions of rape.

In particular, the rise of the so-called manosphere—what Lisa Sugiura defines as "a decentralized network of websites, gaming platforms and chat rooms imbued with misogyny and satire, and a compelling overlap with other violent ideologies, most notably right-wing extremism and white supremacy"—has enabled the dissemination and evolution of ideologies of anti-feminism, including discourses of rape that blame and doubt victims and justify sexual violence.[656] Within the manosphere, rape victims are represented as liars, false allegations are believed to regularly ruin men's lives, and the "abuse of women, particularly feminists, is encouraged" in order to put women in their place: below men.[657] One of the key figures of this movement, "manfluencer" and podcaster Andrew Tate, was even arrested on rape and human trafficking charges; his narrative, and the narrative repeated by his fans, is that these allegations are merely proof that society hates free-thinking, powerful men, and will stop at nothing to bring

[656] Lisa Sugiura, *The Incel Rebellion: The Rise of the Manosphere and the Virtual War Against Women* (Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2021), 23.
[657] Sugiura, *The Incel Rebellion*, 23.

them down.[658] The manosphere creates a generic expectation of rape as rare, if not nonexistent, because women are fundamentally untrustworthy and promiscuous—or, perhaps an even more disturbing possibility, because whether or not rape exists does not matter to those who believe men are owed sex regardless of women's wishes or intentions.[659]

Although the manosphere has been documented since at least the early 2000s, the backlash against #MeToo in the latter part of the 2010s and early 2020s has helped it grow, with several popular "manfluencer" podcasts acting as pipelines to more radical content. The trend of the male podcasters who—like Tate, Walter Weekes and Myron Gaines, and arguably even Joe Rogan—belittle "females" and insist on men's natural superiority, is so well-established at this point that is has been the subject of multiple parodies.[660] Like the heroes of many romance novels, the men hosting these podcasts tend to identify as "alphas," but they have no interest in women's romantic or sexual fantasies, or the reason that alpha heroes were for a time a romantic ideal; their fantasy is one of male power and domination.[661] They call men they deem weaker "low-value males," "betas," and "cucks," fostering similar beliefs among male listeners, many of them already upset and anxious about changing gender relations.[662]

Many of the boys and young men who find themselves drawn to these podcasts are initially searching for the very things that women find within the genres I have previously

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[658] Sunny Wan, "Ranking the top manosphere podcasts of 2023," *The Varsity*, January 27, 2024, https://thevarsity.ca/2024/01/27/ranking-the-top-manosphere-podcasts-of-2023/.
[659] Southern Poverty Law Center, "Male Supremacy," accessed April 5, 2024, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/male-supremacy.
[660] Morgan Sung, "TikTok users turn 'alpha male' podcasters into a viral joke," *NBC News*, February 1, 2022, https://www.nbcnews.com/pop-culture/viral/tiktok-users-turn-alpha-male-podcasters-viral-joke-rcna13999; Meredith Clark, "Women are calling out 'sexist' male podcast hosts with viral TikTok trend," *The Independent*, February 8, 2022, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/sexist-male-podcast-tiktok-trend-b2010670.html. Although these parodies are mocking male podcast hosts, there is actually one prominent female podcasters in the manosphere, Hannah Pearl Davis.
[661] Avishay Artsy, "How Andrew Tate sells men on toxic masculinity," *Vox*, January 10, 2023, https://www.vox.com/culture/2023/1/10/23547393/andrew-tate-toxic-masculinity-qa.
[662] Debbie Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere," *Men and Masculinities* 22, no. 4 (2017): 1-20.

discussed: a feeling of being recognized, understood, and connected. These podcasts and "manfluencers," ostensibly offering self-help and dating advice, rely on affective appeals and homosocial sympathy to engage young male listeners.[663] By stoking men's anger, insecurity, and anxiety about their masculinity and their place in the world, these podcasts encourage allegiance to male supremacist ideas and blame women and feminism for their struggles[664]; as a result, listeners grow increasingly radical in their beliefs, growing demonstrably (more) misogynistic, homophobic, racist, and violent in ways they had not been before.[665] And despite ties to white supremacy, the manosphere is not just a problem among white men; Alexandria Onuoha has linked violent misogynoir and Black femicide to the radicalization of young Black men in the manosphere.[666] In fact, "Fresh and Fit," one of the most successful podcasts of this ilk, is hosted by Black men and has repeatedly come under fire for denigrating Black women in particular.[667]

Given the appeal and success of these podcasts across multiple demographics of men, researchers continue to monitor the manosphere's radicalizing influence on young men.[668] Polls

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[663] Craig Haslop, Jessica Ringrose, Idil Cambazoglu, and Betsy Milne, "Mainstreaming the Manosphere's Misogyny Through Affective Homosocial Currencies: Exploring How Teen Boys Navigate the Andrew Tate Effect," *Social Media and Society* 10, no. 1 (2024): 1-11.

[664] Justin Horowitz, "Manosphere influencers promote sexual assault and downplay rape," *Media Matters*, March 22, 2024, https://www.mediamatters.org/manosphere/manosphere-influencers-promote-sexual-assault-and-downplay-rape; Satu Venäläinen, "Nobody cares for men anymore: Affective-discursive practices around men's victimisation across online and offline contexts," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 25, no. 4 (2022): 1228-1245.

[665] Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, Megan Kelly, and Greta Jasser, "Of Victims, Mass Murder, and Real Men," in *Male Supremacism in the United States*, ed. by Emily K. Carian, Alex DiBranco, and Chelsea Ebin, 117-141 (London: Routledge, 2022).

[666] Alexandria Onuoha, "The Manosphere Isn't Just White: Black Femicide and the Radicalization of Black Youth," Global Network on Extremism and Technology, January 31, 2022, https://gnet-research.org/2022/01/31/the-manosphere-isnt-just-white-black-femicide-and-the-radicalisation-of-black-male-youth/.

[667] Alex Zidel, "'Fresh & Fit' Podcast Hosts Address History Of Disrespecting Black Women," *Hot New Hip Hop*, January 5, 2022, https://www.hotnewhiphop.com/378095-fresh-and-fit-podcast-hosts-address-history-of-disrespecting-black-women-news.

[668] Matteo Botto and Luca Gottzén, "Swallowing and spitting out the red pill: young men, vulnerability, and radicalization pathways in the manosphere," *Journal of Gender Studies* (2023): 1-13, https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2023.2260318; Hussam Habib, Padmini Srinivasan, and Rishab Nithyanand, "Making a Radical Misogynist: How Online Social Engagement with the Manosphere Influences Traits of Radicalization," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction* 6, CSCW2 (2022): 1-28;

conducted by Gallup,[669] Glocalities,[670] and Change Research[671] have all found that there is a notable ideological divide among young men and young women globally: Gen Z and younger millennial women have become more progressive than previous generations, while the same generations of men are growing more conservative or remaining stagnant.[672] Because of this gap, media reports suggest, heterosexual men are finding it more difficult to attract and keep female partners, which furthers their aggrievement and sexual entitlement, sending them even deeper into the manosphere, which in turn makes relationships with women even harder to form.[673] The result is a supposed "loneliness epidemic" amongst men, one that no one is quite sure how to solve, though some wish to hold women responsible.[674]

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[669] Lydia Said, "U.S. Women Have Become More Liberal; Men Mostly Stable," *Gallup News*, February 7, 2024, https://news.gallup.com/poll/609914/women-become-liberal-men-mostly-stable.aspx.

[670] Martijn Lampert and Panos Papapdongonas, "Polarization Extends into Gender via Young Adults Who Lose Hope: Culminating Trends in Decisive International Election Year," *Glocalities* (Amsterdam: Glocalities, 2024), https://glocalities.com/reports/trend-report-polarization.

[671] Change Research, "Young Women Are More Liberal Than Young Men," September 2023, https://changeresearch.com/young-women-are-more-liberal-than-young-men/.

[672] Some studies locate the beginnings of this gender gap in the 1990s and early 2000s. See: Megan Condon and Amber Wichowsky, "Same blueprint, different bricks: reexamining the sources of the gender gap in political ideology," *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 3, no. 1 (2015): 4-20; Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox, "The Gender Gap in Ideology," *Polit Behav* 30 (2008): 503-523. For media coverage of the gender gap, see: John Burn-Murdoch, "A new global gender divide is emerging," *Financial Times*, January 27, 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/29fd9b5c-2f35-41bf-9d4c-994db4e12998; Fortesi Latifi, "Young Women Voters Are More Liberal Than Young Men, Change Research Poll Finds," *Teen Vogue*, September 12, 2023, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/young-women-voters-more-liberal-young-men-change-research-poll; Devika Rao, "The ideological gap between younger men and women is becoming a chasm," *The Week*, February 8, 2024, https://theweek.com/politics/conservative-men-liberal-women.

[673] Tom Ough, "The ideological divide between men and women is growing. What's happening?" *The Independent*, February 12, 2024, https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/conservative-right-wing-men-progressive-women-b2488939.html; Alejandra O'Connell-Domenech, "Politics are increasingly a dating dealbreaker – especially for young women," *The Hill*, March 25, 2023, https://thehill.com/changing-america/enrichment/arts-culture/3917348-politics-are-increasingly-a-dating-dealbreaker-especially-for-women/.

[674] Patrick Ryan, "Boys and men are lonelier than ever. What can we do about it?" *USA Today*, February 7, 2023, https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/health-wellness/2023/02/03/male-friendship-lonely-close-friends-men/11162423002/; Jean Guerrero, "Why are men so lonely?" *LA Times*, January 15, 2024, https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-01-15/men-friendship-gen-z-loneliness; Sarah Youngblood Gregory, "Men are in a Loneliness Epidemic. Should Women Care?" *YES! Magazine*, September 11, 2023, https://www.yesmagazine.org/health-happiness/2023/09/11/men-loneliness-epidemic-women. There is very limited academic research into men's loneliness in the present; see: John Ratcliffe, "Men, Masculinities, and Loneliness: a mixed-methods study of men's perspectives in a wider context," PhD thesis, University of York, 2023; Vincent Gil, "Missing Out: What's Going On With Male Friendships? Review and Discussion of Male Friendships in the 21st Century—Change and Stasis," *On Knowing Humanity Journal* 8, no. 1 (2024): 26-46.

Many young women, however, have been busy forming connections with each other. While thinkers on the left and the right ponder a contemporary "crisis of masculinity," some women are embracing overwhelmingly female spaces and genres that embrace feminism, or at least the aesthetics of it.[675] Notably, the summer of 2023 was even dubbed the "summer of girlhood" due to the smashing financial success, inescapable press coverage, glowing reviews, and (pop) feminist messaging of three major projects: Greta Gerwig's highly-anticipated *Barbie* movie, in which the titular character tackled the patriarchy in a pink jumpsuit; the Renaissance Tour, which celebrated Black women and served to further cement Beyoncé's status as a global icon and artist; and (the topic I wish to discuss) the Eras Tour, which grossed more than a billion dollars and saw tens of thousands of girls and women in stadiums hugging, crying, and exchanging friendship bracelets as Taylor Swift performed songs she'd written about love, heartbreak, and healing.[676] In other words: the ideological divide between men and women might also be understood as a generic divide. And just as the manosphere podcast has been essential to shaping and expressing young men's attitudes about women, sex, and rape, I assert that the pop song may represent one of the most significant popular women's genres discussing sexual harm today.

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[675] Idrees Kahloon, "What's the Matter with Men?" January 23, 2023, *The New Yorker*, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2023/01/30/whats-the-matter-with-men; Mary Elizabeth Williams, "Yes, men and boys are in crisis – but traditional masculinity won't help them," *Salon*, January 6, 2024, https://www.salon.com/2024/01/06/yes-men-and-boys-are-in--but-traditional-masculinity-wont-help-them/.

[676] Rachel Mueller, "The Summer of Girlhood: A Reflection," *Sartorial Magazine*, November 27, 2023, https://sartorialmagazine.com/opinion/2023/11/27/the-summer-of-girlhood-a-reflection; Anjali Kishore, "The Summer For Girls, By Girls," *34th Street*, September 14, 2023, https://www.34st.com/article/2023/09/barbie-taylorswift-girlhood-commodification; Vanessa Yurkevich, "Taylor Swift, 'Barbie' and Beyoncé are unleashing the spending power of women," *CNN*, August 9, 2023, https://www.cnn.com/2023/08/09/economy/barbie-taylor-swift-beyonce-economic-impact/index.html. There is perhaps a note to be made here about the presumed whiteness of Taylor Swift's fanbase; at the same time, her tour has been an international success, with sold-out dates in South America, Asia, and Europe, so without data I hesitate to speculate on the racial breakdown of her audiences. It is likely that her U.S., European, and Australian tour dates were largely (but not exclusively) attended by white fans. The gender breakdown, however, has been easily-observed; there are people of all genders at every Eras Tour show, but everyone who attends comments on the overwhelmingly female environment.

Picture, if you will, a stadium packed with some 70,000 people, most of them girls and women, singing—screaming—along with their favorite pop star. The pop star is performing a song about a relationship gone wrong, as popstars tend to do. But in this case, the narrative she unravels is not merely the story of a love lost or a fragile heart broken. The story is this: a predatory age gap, a boyfriend in his thirties when she was still a teenager, a fall from innocence, a loss of faith, and an anger, now that she is the very age he was then, that he ever dared to touch her. Her tone speaks of pain and fury and righteousness, and her fans echo that feeling as they sing-scream along: *If I was some paint, did it splatter / on a promising grown man? / And if I was a child, did it matter / if you got to wash your hands?* Rain delays have pushed the show well past midnight. People are tired, and damp, and hungry. Nevertheless, the crowd is alive with feeling, the voices of tens of thousands demanding an accounting for a sexual and gendered harm that was not rape and yet was nevertheless devastating, even disabling. *Memories feel like weapons*, the popstar sings. *The wound won't close*. Soon, the atmosphere shifts, grows expectant, as the popstar reaches the song's bridge and the crowd roars out its final line: *Give me back my girlhood, it was mine first.*[677]

The song is "Would've, Could've, Should've" by Taylor Swift, which she performed as a surprise during a show in Nashville, but it is just one of several major pop songs released since 2020 that address the dynamics of a predatory age gap, including Billie Eilish's "Your Power," Demi Lovato's "29," and Olivia Rodrigo's "Vampire."[678] Although songs about age gaps are a time-honored tradition in popular music, songs that focus on the predatory behavior of older men, rather than on "jailbait" teens trying to seduce the lead singers of rock bands, are a

[677] Taylor Swift, "Would've, Could've, Should've," track 19 on *Midnights (3AM Edition)*, Republic Records, 2022.
[678] For a playlist of the songs I mention and other relevant ones, go to https://spoti.fi/4cFzo0O.

somewhat newer phenomenon.[679] An article for *Mother Jones* even observed that, since #MeToo, "artists [have been] empowered to call out their exes in a new way—critiquing these older men for taking their innocence and 'girlhoods.'"[680] The circulation of discourses of sexual violence, and the normalization of different kinds of rape (and sexual abuse) narratives—that is, the expanding of the genre—has allowed for these kind of stories to be told and to be recognized as being worth telling.

Before #MeToo, some critics dismissed these stories and their singers as "self-indulgent."[681] In "Dear John" (a 2010 song about the same relationship described in "Would've, Could've, Should've"), Swift tells the addressee that she was *too young to be messed with*.[682] At the time, reviewers accused Swift, then twenty-one, of engaging in a "thinly veiled airing" of a petty grudge;[683] of "sound[ing] more like a bitter brat swimming in self pity than a mature woman";[684] and of being "shallow and shortsighted."[685] In an otherwise positive profile, one critic says that although she likes the melody of "Dear John," "Swift's self-righteousness, her immature insistence on her own immaturity … curdled the drink."[686] For many, Swift was guilty of playing the victim, refusing to admit her own responsibility, her own complicity, in her exploitation.

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[679] Bryan Wawzenek, "Top 10 Jailbait Songs," *Ultimate Classic Rock*, September 2, 2013, https://ultimateclassicrock.com/jailbait-songs/.
[680] Angelica Cabral, "How MeToo Changed Music's Relationship With Age Gaps," *Mother Jones*, June 15, 2023, https://www.motherjones.com/media/2023/06/after-metoo-age-gaps-music/.
[681] Preston Jones, "More self-indulgence from Taylor Swift," *Leader Post*, October 26, 2010, https://proxy.lib.umich.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/more-self-indulgence-taylor-swift/docview/761017500/se-2.
[682] Taylor Swift, "Dear John," track 5 on *Speak Now*, Big Machine Records, 2010.
[683] Jones, "More self-indulgence from Taylor Swift."
[684] John J. Moser, "Disc Review: Maybe it wasn't time for Taylor Swift to 'Speak Now,'" *Lehigh Valley Music*, October 30, 2010, https://blogs.mcall.com/lehighvalleymusic/2010/10/disc-review-maybe-it-wasnt-time-for-taylor-swift-to-speak-now.html.
[685] Jonathan Keefe, "Review: Taylor Swift, *Speak Now*," *Slant Magazine*, October 25, 2010, https://www.slantmagazine.com/music/taylor-swift-speak-now/.
[686] Judy Rosen, "Platinum Underdog: Why Taylor Swift is the Biggest Pop Star in the World," *Vulture*, November 18, 2013, https://www.vulture.com/2013/11/taylor-swift-reigning-queen-of-pop.html.

The refusal among critics to take seriously the clear picture of emotional manipulation, even abuse, that Swift paints, was nothing new; eight years earlier, the critical reception of Alanis Morisette's "Hands Clean" was much the same. The song, about her relationship when she was underage with an older man, opens with the chilling (and unmistakably predatory) lines, understood to be the man's words to her: *If it weren't for your maturity, none of this would've happened / and if you weren't so wise beyond your years, I would've been able to control myself.*[687] Yet some reviewers failed to realize that the song was about statutory rape, describing it as a "hypothetical dialogue between her and a former lover" and comparing it (unfavorably) to previous breakup songs she had written.[688] Another reviewer, complaining that "the brash femininity of the '90s got damped down, married off and traded in for mealy-mouthed chick-lit concerns," described "Hands Clean" as a "tolerable enough tune … for those who think their chocolate craving says something poignant about their inner selves."[689] Morissette herself reflected in 2019 that the she and the song were "just straight-up ignored at best. Vilified and shamed and victimized and victim-attacked at worst."[690] Still, despite this critical reaction, Morissette knows that the song had been "a grenade" for those who'd been able to listen and relate.[691]

Yet Morisette's experience of being misunderstood gestures to part of what makes the pop song distinct from the genres I have described in previous chapters: it is neither a criminal indictment, a straightforward narrative, nor necessarily even an autobiographical claim. In the

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[687] Alanis Morissette, "Hands Clean," track 3 on *Under Rug Swept*, Maverick Records, 2002.
[688] Kimberley Reyes, "REVIEW: 'Under Rug Swept' by Alanis Morissette," *Time*, March 26, 2002, https://content.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,220205,00.html.
[689] NME, "Morissette, Alanis: Hands Clean," September 12, 2005, https://www.nme.com/reviews/reviews-nme-6082-334439.
[690] Nicole Cliffe, "Alanis Morissette on Pregnancy at 45, Childbirth, Postpartum Depression, and #MeToo," *Self Magazine*, June 26, 2019, https://www.self.com/story/alanis-morissette.
[691] Cliffe, "Alanis Morissette."

pop song, the narrative is subsumed within the structure of a song: the chorus, the hook, the melody. In the world of the song, the exact whos and hows of sexual harm often get blurred; it tells a story, but its primary function is to convey a feeling, and if you do not respond to that feeling, it might begin to feel "self-indulgent" indeed. If you do respond, however, it can be "a grenade." The power of these songs is not unlike the power of Chanel Miller's statement or *SVU*'s fandom—or, for that matter, the success of the manosphere—in that they create a sense of community, connection, and identification amongst those who listen. An acquaintance of mine, who was in the audience when Swift played "Would've, Could've, Should've" in Nashville, told me, "As the 'girlhood' moment got close, you could feel the energy spike, everyone know IT was about to happen … Everyone knew this was a capital-letter Moment, in the rain no less, and of course it was the line we all shouted the loudest."[692] Another attendee recalled, "It was raining, and you're just screaming this incredibly vulnerable song and it felt INCREDIBLY cathartic. Especially the 'girlhood' line, the stadium was so loud. It's a core memory of mine."[693]

A similar instance occurred when Demi Lovato's song "29" inspired a TikTok trend. The song reflects on a relationship that began when Lovato was seventeen and her then-boyfriend was twenty-nine; people, mostly women, began posting videos set to the song in which they show photographs of themselves at the age they were groomed by a former abuser and/or partner, as well as photographs of the men themselves. As Fortesa Latifi notes, the effect is "jarring, with pictures of baby-faced teenage girls contrasted with photos of grown men."[694] The song's lyrics underscore the power differentials in these "relationships": *Finally twenty-nine /*

[692] Brittany Diamond (Taylor Swift fan), in discussion with the author (March 2024).
[693] Savannah (Taylor Swift fan), in discussion with the author (March 2024).
[694] Fortesa Latifi, "Demi Lovato's '29' Is Prompting TikTok Users to Open Up About Age-Inappropriate Relationships," *Teen Vogue*, August 19, 2022, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/demi-lovatos-29-tiktok.

Funny, just like you were at the time / Thought it was a teenage dream, a fantasy / But was it yours or was it mine? / Seventeen, twenty-nine.[695]

Sharing these stories, like sharing the moment of mass catharsis Swift's song created, has powerful repercussions, as I have discussed throughout this dissertation. It not only creates a sense of connection amongst girls, women, and other survivors, but it helps to redefine the bounds of what rape means and how it is understood. However, given the generic and ideological gender divide, is it enough to affirm girls' and women's feelings, and to offer them ways to interpret and reinterpret their experiences and their reality? What does it mean that the generic explorations of rape that take rape seriously and offer new, victim-oriented avenues for understanding it, are largely within these women's genres? Can women's genres ever speak to men and boys in a significant way? Can they counter the work that is being done within men's genres, and particularly the work of the manosphere? And, in the end, do these gendered generic divisions ultimately reinforce the ideological power of the gender binary, a conventionalizing force that makes the lives of people of all genders, cis and trans alike, smaller?

I believe that for individuals who have engaged with the kinds of narratives I have described in this dissertation, the genre of rape can be capacious and offer feminist insight into the experience(s) of sexual violence. However, without the investment of people of all genders in these narratives, the genre of rape will all too often continue to be used against victims, a tool to contain and control the experience of rape, rather than to help victims recognize, interpret, and survive what they have faced.

[695] Demi Lovato, "29," track 6 on *Holy Fvck*, Island Records, 2022.

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