Epistemic Uncertainties: Contemporary Narratives of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

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Abstract

"Epistemic Uncertainties" argues for the value of uncertainty to feminist theory as a way of acknowledging the complexities of sexual and gender-based violence. Uncertainty is a potentially dangerous mode for survivors. In response, US anti-rape activism has advocated for the reception of survivor testimony as credible and authoritative, in part laboring to develop what I call a rhetoric of certainty. While fiction, by virtue of being fiction, has different material stakes in comparison to a testimony that is given before the US Senate Judiciary Committee, or, for that matter, a public tweet, it too participates in discourses surrounding sexual and gender-based violence. The works of contemporary fiction discussed in this project frame key points of tension within these debates about survivor speech, reimagining them through the vicissitudes of first-person narration. These key points of tension, I argue, all crystallize around the problems of speaking about (and with) uncertainty: survivor precarity in Kate Walbert's *His Favorites* (Chapter One); female desire and sexual agency in Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" (Chapter Two); the apology of the accused man in David Foster Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (Chapter Three); and the specter of untruth in Jia Tolentino's "We Come from Old Virginia," an essay about sexual assault at my home institution, the University of Virginia (Coda). In a #MeToo era in which stories of sexual and gender-based violence have received unprecedented mainstream media exposure, I contend that we can treat the testimonies of survivors as credible and authoritative, *and* open up discursive space for their expressions of uncertainty.

The introduction looks specifically at the rhetoric of the global social media event, #MeToo. #MeToo tweets are written as declarative statements of fact—"This happened to me." The rhetoric is intentional and significant: activist rhetoric is often assertive in tone and declarative in nature in response to cultural and political pressures that discredit survivors' stories through a weaponization of survivor uncertainty. The act of speaking out, a principal practice of anti-rape activism, is a reclamation of the epistemic authority so often denied to survivors. I term this strategy a rhetoric of certainty. The result has been a broad shift within popular public discourse in the United States from frequent disbelief about the extent of sexual assault and violence toward a greater willingness to acknowledge its prevalence.

Chapter One reads the paradigmatic dangers of uncertainty in Walbert's 2018 novel, *His Favorites*, in order to ground the project with an analysis of the negative mechanisms of uncertainty particular to the speech of survivors, and to contextualize the novel within contemporary discourses crystallized in #MeToo. His Favorites is the story of Jo, who narrates how she was targeted and raped by her high school literature teacher. The novel uses formal elements to signal the material and epistemic damage done to Jo through these acts of violence. The subjunctive mood, in particular, demonstrates how biases work to undermine the speech of survivors. The result of these biases is Jo's enforced uncertainty: the precarious and conditional state of her bodily autonomy, the impossibility of her consent, and the epistemic violence done to her speech.

In contrast, in Chapter Two, the necessity of uncertainty to the protagonist of Machado's "The Husband Stitch" complicates the paradigm of dangerous uncertainty. Uncertainty intertwines both narrative agency and female sexual desire, undergirding its epistemic importance. A retelling of

the ghost story popularly known as "The Green Ribbon," "The Husband Stitch" is a story about the perils of female bodily autonomy: if the green ribbon is untied, the wife's head will fall off. Uncertainty forges the wife's difficult decision to capitulate to her spouse's desire, in opposition to her own, to untie her green ribbon; it illustrates the gendered derogation of women's speech throughout; and, I argue, it ultimately preserves the wife's agency in response to a question that does not require—or want—dialogic engagement: "Don't you trust me?" In the face of violation, the wife cleaves to "not-knowing," an indeterminate place forecasted by narrative breakdown and working in opposition to a question with only one answer: "yes."

Chapter Three argues that the ability to wield certainty or uncertainty has gendered implications, through an analysis of the genre of male confession in Wallace's short story collection *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*. Wallace's short stories anatomize the "abject man," a figure who acknowledges his complicity in misogyny, but nevertheless entreats his female interlocutors for absolution. Undoubtedly a product of his time, the abject man risks undoing the power usually granted to the auditor of a confession: he elides or erases the anger of his female interlocutors, and lays claim to absolution by assuming it will be granted. Do these confessions signal toxic masculinity in crisis, or, do they represent yet another adaptation of power exonerating itself? In these confessions, uncertainty too becomes the province of the powerful, but it might also be what undermines their authority.

The coda discusses the specter of untruthfulness and the importance of readerly empathy in the face of narrative uncertainty. It focuses on the controversial 2014 Rolling Stone account of a student's alleged gang rape at the University of Virginia—allegations that were proven post-publication to have been fabricated—and New Yorker writer Jia Tolentino's essay on the event in her 2019 collection, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*. How does fiction operate in dialogue with—but also differently than—the strictures imposed on a courtroom narrative, for example, or with the aims of a journalist looking for her next big story? Can encounters with these stories teach us to be "good" readers of non-fictional narratives of violence?

Introduction

Fifty Shades of Maybe:
The Case for Uncertainty within Contemporary Narratives of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence

This dissertation reads for uncertainty within contemporary literary works representing sexual or gender-based violence and argues for uncertainty's significance within discourses of sexual and gender-based violence. Uncertainty is a contested form of expression and experience, a controversial conceptual category, particularly for narratives of sexual and gender-based violence. My gambit to embrace uncertainty is then perhaps somewhat counter-intuitive, not least because epistemic certainty has such reparative power for survivors who speak out. Nevertheless, "Epistemic Uncertainties" suggests that there is now room for us to return to the value of uncertainty, in part because of significant changes to public discourse precipitated by anti-rape activism like #MeToo. The critical question becomes: can we claim uncertainty as a crucial part of a survivor's testimony without risking undermining her credibility? Central to this question is the fundamental two-sidedness of uncertainty as a concept: uncertainty has been used to call into question and thereby dismiss women, particularly, who speak out about sexual or gender-based violence, making it a dangerous mode of expression. And yet, making certainty a criterion for all forms of expression is its own kind of violence. Considering how difficult it has been for survivors of sexual violence to assert credibly "I know," suggesting that we embrace the capacity for "I don't know" might seem controversial or counterproductive. Yet, as this dissertation endeavors to show, this capacity is precisely the point. Uncertainty is a dynamic mode. It is both an episteme and a feeling, and each chapter looks closely at the formal

interrelation of certainty and uncertainty as epistemic, felt, literary modes within fictional first-person narratives of violence in order to argue for its hermeneutical value.

It is not my aim to imply that an embrace of uncertainty comes at the expense of articulations of certainty. Posing the two as in opposition detrimentally simplifies the complicated ways an individual might make sense of an act of violence, and a myopic focus on one instead of the other ignores the delicate nature of certainty as a form of expression for marginalized groups and the long histories of uncertainty's use in backlash against survivors who speak out. A respect for the hard-won shifts in broader cultural discourse for survivor speech informs this argument that feminist theory needs to make space for uncertainty in our reckonings with accounts of sexual or gender-based violence, now more than ever. Nor is to embrace uncertainty to downplay the violative capacity of an act of sexual or gender-based violence. As I see it, to acknowledge uncertainty is instead to embrace a more complete range of expression, experience, and epistemes for a survivor. Without it, we attenuate our hermeneutical tools and foreshorten our range of experiential phenomena. Specifically, reading for uncertainty resists powerful cultural narratives about rape and rape victims that would deny, punish, or dismiss feelings like ambiguity, ambivalence, and hesitation. It pursues accounts that might not correlate with existing templates for stories of sexual violence, including those that exist in marginalized or fringe areas. It emphasizes uncertainty's delicate relationship with certainty, and how the deployment of certainty has specifically gendered implications within narratives of sexual and gender-based violence.

Why Uncertainty?

"Certainty" as an epistemic category within philosophical tradition has been hotly debated and contentiously defined from Descartes to Wittgenstein, and the pursuit of certainty as a component of knowledge, experience, and subjectivity has led into the related domain of the uncertain. I extrapolate from these debates that *most* of the time we sit more comfortably within the domain of the *not*-certain. We are also subject to the vicissitudes of *not-knowing*. We second-guess; change our minds; hesitate; often labor in purgatories of indeterminacy or confusion before we make decisions; or actively transform ideas, perspectives, and outlooks while pursuing an answer, cause, or theory, which may in turn cause us to re-evaluate in retrospect. In other words, cumulatively speaking, we're a lot more uncertain than we are certain.[1] It is therefore perhaps wishful thinking to presume certainty as anyone's default setting, or an unrealistic projection of stasis onto the processes typically at work to generate certainty.[2] Uncertainty is, for better or worse, a precondition of how we experience the world and ourselves in it; it is capacious, encompassing affective states like ambivalence, hesitation, indecision, confusion, even skepticism and doubt; and it is cognitive, intricately bound up in space and time with the processes of how we come to know and how we make sense of our experiences. To exercise uncertainty can be, in certain situations, to exercise cognitive agency. As this dissertation shows, uncertainty is further implicated in cases of sexual encounter, particularly in those encounters that become violent or violative.

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[1] I refer to such processes of thinking prior to a more stable point of fixity of knowing as not-knowing. Not-knowing is taken up in Chapter Two.

[2] One can too, of course, be *passively* certain of something, that is, not having had to do the task of actively working through uncertainty in order to come to a place of certainty. This may be one of the greatest benefits of the patriarchy for its beneficiaries: it does the work itself of reinforcing one's social, sexual, and political privilege on behalf of the individual who benefits from it, such that beneficiaries need not do the cognitive work of uncertainty, nor bear the epistemic load of justifying one's own certainty to others.

Acknowledging, accounting for, and closely considering uncertainty and its various modes—ambiguity, ambivalence, hesitation, confusion, skepticism, and even doubt—is important for five main reasons:

1) Uncertainty happens. It happens to survivors, it happens to non-survivors, it happens over sexual violence, it happens about things that have nothing to do with sexual violence. I ground this basic assertion in arguments located in social work, psychology, and trauma studies;[3] women, gender, and sexuality studies and feminist epistemology;[4] and contemporary public discourse, including social media campaigns like the 2010 Twitter campaign, #talkaboutit, which aimed to spread awareness about the prevalence of "grey area" encounters.
2) Uncertainty is often forced upon survivors of sexual violence (see, Chapter One): in addition to physical vulnerability, victims of sexual violence often experience attitudes that are dismissive of or hostile to their stories. The truth of their experiences is called into question. Their stories are derogated from fact into fiction, fantasy, or hyperbole. This has felt and epistemic consequences. Feminism has discussed this transformation of

[3] I refer primarily to work by Catrina Brown, "Women's Narratives of Trauma: (Re)storying Uncertainty, Minimization and Self-Blame," *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations, & Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1-30; Marjorie L. DeVault, "Talking and listening from women's standpoint: Feminist strategies for interviewing and analysis," *Social Problems* 37, no. 1 (1990): 96–116; Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr and Michelle N. Lafrance ,"Telling stories without the words: 'Tightrope talk' in women's accounts of coming to live well after rape or depression," *Feminism & Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011): 49-73; and McKenzie-Mohr and LaFrance, eds., *Women voicing resistance: Discursive and Narrative Explorations* (Hove, East Sussex: Routledge, 2014).

[4] See, Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018); Joseph J. Fischel, *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Mary Gaitskill, "On not being a victim: sex, rape and the trouble with following rules," *Harper's Magazine* (March 1994), 35-44; and Lena Karlsson, "Towards a language of sexual gray zones: feminist collective knowledge building through autobiographical multimedia storytelling," *Feminist Media Studies* (2018).

survivor speech in relation to rape myths, or false narratives that tend to blame survivors and exculpate perpetrators, and work done in social work, psychology, and trauma studies within literary studies have all discussed the interrelation between violence, trauma, and uncertainty.[5]

3) Related to point two, forms of epistemic violence—injustices exacted upon someone in their capacities as a knower—seek to remove the productive epistemic role uncertainty plays in agential decision making, what I describe as not-knowing (see, Chapter Two). Simultaneously, these unjust attitudes regarding sexual violence and those who speak about it frequently seek to restrict and silence these very expressions of experiences of uncertainty.
4) The ability to speak and to be heard as speaking with certainty is gendered, and attention to certainty and who can speak with certainty illuminates the processes by which expectations about speaker credibility become gendered obligations (see, Chapter Three).
5) Finally, if we choose to ignore expressions and experiences of uncertainty, we ultimately reinforce the same outcomes as the ones intended by forms of epistemic violence, that is, silence and a dearth of hermeneutical tools for those who need to make sense of their own experiences of sexual violation (see, the coda).

In short, if we aim to open up the discursive field for making sense of experiences that are complicated, painful, confusing, or sometimes bafflingly simple, we need room for uncertainty within our stories and within our hermeneutical lexicon.

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[5] See, for example, *The Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies,* and Monica J. Casper and Eric Wertheimer, eds., *Critical Trauma Studies Understanding Violence, Conflict and Memory in Everyday Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

Indeed, certain works of literature, engaged with the discursive shifts of the contemporary period, have already begun presenting us with such expressions for re-examination: Margot of Kristen Roupenian's viral short story "Cat Person" wavers between saying no to sex she's no longer interested in and appearing "spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back."[6] The unnamed protagonist of Carmen Maria Machado's short story "The Husband Stitch" doesn't know that her head will fall off if the ribbon around her neck is untied, but she knows she doesn't want her husband to try it. Generally speaking, the works featured in this dissertation are not of the kind that currently dominate the market. In particular, many interesting works of fiction exploring the dystopia of the lived conditions of reproductive injustice and sexual violence have been published in the years surrounding and since #MeToo, perhaps revivified by the return of Margaret Atwood's watershed novel *The Handmaid's Tale*, this time on screen. Nor are the works discussed here groupable necessarily by genre. They do, however, pose questions within the same nexus of inquiry into the conditions of uncertainty. In doing so, they stretch the limits of language for discussing narratives of violence in important ways—some, such as David Foster Wallace's collection of short stories, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*, in ways that are perhaps problematically expedient.

In this dissertation, I consider texts as "social" entities—capable of influencing society, of forming feminist communities in resistance to gender-based violence, and of being shaped by these communities in turn—while also reading them as objects with literary attributes and discursive value. As social entities, the texts constituting this dissertation do not represent spaces

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[6] Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," in *You Know You Want This: Cat Person and Other Stories* (New York: Scout Press, 2019), 88.

in which I tested out pre-existing ideas or formulas, nor were they selected because they best represented any pre-existing theories I had about uncertainty. These literary texts are entities that contributed to the production and refinement of these very ideas. They posed problems for me in early versions of these ideas that required reassessment, and ultimately, I think, they offer alternate lines of inquiry to what I discuss as the paradigm of credibility for responding to a story of sexual violence because of the problems they posed for me initially.

In this project, I turn primarily to Kate Walbert's novel *His Favorites* (2018), Machado's "The Husband Stitch" (2017), and Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* (1999). Chapter One reads *His Favorites* as paradigmatic of the dominant mode within sympathetic public discourse for reading uncertainty within survivor testimony. In this paradigm, a rhetoric of certainty, as modelled by anti-rape activism like #MeToo, is marshalled to combat the ways uncertainty is used by unsympathetic or prejudiced auditors against survivors. In Chapter Two, "The Husband Stitch" takes on the felt experience of survivor ambivalence, uncertainty, and hesitation by looking at a situation of consensual violation between a husband and wife. I argue that registering the wife's ambivalence, as opposed to discursively discouraging it, enables us to come to terms with the prevalence of situations of violation that involve conflicted and competing feelings. I also argue that manipulation, epitomized in the story when the husband asks his wife a leading question with only one expected answer—"Don't you trust me?"—has epistemic consequences the story registers formally through the loss of the wife's head. Chapter Three considers the crisis of male credibility as a stymied expectation that they will be audited as they intend (that is, with certainty); the labor of female empathy; and the reparative potential for uncertainty for men who apologize for sexual misconduct in Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.

Literature can be a productive site for theorizing textual representations of sexual and gender-based violence. Feminist scholars like Linda Martín Alcoff and Joseph J. Fischel have already begun to argue for the need to theorize "beyond the domain of legal clarifications and reforms," and both suggest the amorphous sphere of culture as a potentially productive zone for this kind of work.[7] Literature is not necessarily a privileged site of discourse or narrative-based expression, but literary texts do have different material stakes in comparison to a testimony that is given before the United States Senate Judiciary Committee, or, for that matter, a public tweet, for example. Fiction in particular, by virtue of being fiction, in this sense can take risks—exploring possibilities and ambiguities through the imaginary and pushing discourse through experiment—in ways that the testimony of the real might not be able to without serious repercussion. Fiction can be contrarian. It can present us with speakers who do not need to be "likeable" in order to be believed. Or, alternatively, it can present us with unlikeable fictional characters who experience no form of backlash or retaliation in response to judgment of them as unlikeable; the worst that happens here is we are guilty of failing to apprehend complexity. Experimentation is necessary to open up further space for complexities, ambiguities, and incongruities within broader discourse about experiences of sexual or gender-based violence.[8]

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[7] See, Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 15; and Fischel, *Screw Consent*, 16.

[8] "If, as Gloria Anzaldúa claims, 'nothing happens in the "real world" unless it first happens in the images in our heads, then,'" Samantha Schalk argues in *Bodyminds Reimagined* that "changing the way marginalized people are represented and conceived in contemporary cultural productions, can also change the way such people are talked about, treated, and understood in the "real world."' Samantha Dawn Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender In Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 2; and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2007), 385, quoted in Schalk. *Bodyminds Reimagined* puts narratives of (dis)ability, race, and gender into conversation through the genre of speculative fiction.

Yet, despite calls across many disciplines for a re-evaluation of discourse surrounding narratives of sexual and gender-based violence, the study of fiction seems to be relatively stymied by uncertainty in relation to narratives of sexual or gender-based violence.[9] I find this surprising given literary studies' penchant—what was for many years a critical imperative—for seeking out textual modes of uncertainty within literature. Within literary studies, modes of uncertainty have been overdetermined to the extreme, partly due to the status of these aesthetic values as major critical imperatives since New Criticism (notably, William Empson, 1966) and, subsequently, deconstruction (Jacques Derrida, 1971, 1973, 1982) and some strains of psychoanalysis.[10] Feminist literary theory was not immune from the allure of indeterminacy, either. In fact, it was one of the major inheritors of French post-structuralism and Lacanian psychoanalytic theory. Writing of the primacy of French feminist theory in the late 1980s, Rita Felski summarizes the imperatives of feminist literary theory to shift away from theories based in an authenticity of female experience and "toward a kind of erotics of the text, in which multiple perspectives, plural meanings, and ironic ambiguity of experimental writing are linked to a notion of the feminine as subversion, a transgressive force."[11] Thus, the ideological imperative of

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[9] Recent scholarship within literary studies on the modern history and theory of representations of sexual violence in the United States include Horeck's recuperation of the idea of fantasy from the second-wave dustbin in *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2013); the construction of representations of rape as a major cultural force in the United States during the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries in Sabine Sielke's *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990* (2002); Marek Wojtaszek's inquiry into the narrow representations of masculinity within recent decades related to violence and psychosis in *Masculinities and Desire: A Deleuzian Encounter* (2019); Leigh Gilmore's *Tainted Witness* (2017), and Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall's *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (2019), which traces the history autobiographical life writing led by women of color to document, expose, and seek justice for sexual violation.

[10] For an excellent summary on the history of uncertainty and its "kin terms (ambiguity, difficulty, and indeterminacy)" within literary studies, see, C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9-18.

[11] Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge,

literary criticism within this school was almost always to settle ultimately upon the hermeneutical ambiguity of a text, something that marked it as disruptive to external, consumer-media forces, as separate or autonomous from male logocentrism, or/and as subversive and oppositional by virtue of being "feminine" (ie: multi-valent or ambiguous in meaning), as in Julia Kristeva's and Helen Cixous's system of writing, *l'écriture féminine*.[12]

I suspect the lack of scholarly discussion on the relation of literary fiction with representations of uncertainty within representations of sexual or gender-based violence exists precisely because of the seeming incompatibility with the imperative to indeterminacy, on the one hand, and the imperative of absolute narrative certainty, on the other. While ambiguity and indeterminacy have been bailiwicks of studies of literary fiction for a long time, they have been read primarily as registers that provoke crises of realism, truth, positivism, and representation. And for readers who seek the distortions of narrative representation, this reading imperative becomes difficult to calibrate with the political and ethical imperative to "believe survivors." We in literary studies are the inheritors, among other things, of the unreliable narrator, a figure who proves hard to reconcile with the speaker of a story of sexual violence and a feminist politics that has fought to promote the speaker of a story of sexual violence as 1) a speaker in her own right; 2) a person of credibility, undeserving of a priori distrust, suspicion, or blame; and 3) as statistically unlikely to misreport an act of violence as she is to report that violence in the first

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Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989) 22. Felski is critical of these moves. She also links the imperative within French feminist theory to assert that women's writing is somehow distinct from men's has led to prioritization "of the notion of difference, which is typically situated in relation to an avant-garde textual practice" (Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 43).

[12] "A revolutionary feminine writing, claims Cixous, must explode identity rather than reflect it, subvert coherence and the desire for truth, liberate an inexhaustible flood of writing." Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 74. See also Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 30-44.

place. As a result, our typical practices for interpreting uncertainty and its kin might become politically irresponsible and even somewhat irrelevant when it comes to *survivor speech* in literature depicting sexual or gender-based violence. As a result, in a surprising twist, we who study fiction with an eye towards the less than straightforward might be much more comfortable with Humbert Humbert than we are with Lolita.

And, if I'm being candid, Alcoff's claim in her introduction to *Rape and Resistance* does unsettle me: "Though many advocates today like to say that 'rape is rape,' in truth, some incidents are ambiguous. It is not only anti-feminists who entertain certain skeptical doubts about claims of sexual violence."[13] In critiquing the "neatness of our categories," Alcoff provokes my sense of the dangers of acknowledging ambiguity in the context of sexual encounters that are or that become violent.[14] Her assertion that we question the scalar equation "rape is rape" troubles my political sensibilities about justly interpreting stories of sexual violence because the questions most frequently put to survivors are sexist, uninformed, damaging, and, at worst, predatory. To make room for ambiguity potentially runs counter to the aims encapsulated by hashtag campaigns like #BelieveWomen, #TimesUp, and #MeToo, which, as discussed, function to call out the gendered practices working to undermine the credibility of survivors. And yet I agree with Alcoff: some experiences *are* ambiguous. "If experiences gain their meaning from contextually relative and arbitrary background conditions … is there a *necessary* ambiguity to the truth about our experiences, based on the ways in which their meaningfulness is discursively dependent?" Alcoff asks.[15]

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[13] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance,* 4.
[14] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 9.
[15] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 61. I have been working with this quote from Alcoff now for some time in various drafts of this project, and I have learned through trying to quote it in various ways to appreciate the carefulness of Alcoff's phrasing of a delicate proposition within

"Epistemic Uncertainties" suggests, not that we should return to reading practices that locate an endlessly deferred chain of meaning when reading a story of violence, or that an attention to only linguistic structures will suffice for addressing the violative capacities of sexual or gender-based violence.[16] Instead, I suggest that we might relocate uncertainty and its kin within literary representations as modes that have both real-world epistemic and affective value. I read moments of uncertainty like hotspots on a body or a map, employing the affinities of certain works of fiction for narrative gaps and fissures, interpretive ambiguities provoked by sets of parentheses and ellipses, and grammar as formal structuring frameworks conveying felt, epistemic, and discursive significance. Formal literary elements in these works demonstrate the gendered, politicized, and epistemic differences between an expression of fact—"This happened to me."—and the internal and external powers, persuasions, and desires that rewire such statements into subjunctive ones: "What if that had happened to me?"; "This could have happened to me"; "I wish that this hadn't happened to me"; "What if I wanted this to happen to me?" These works pose these linguistic shifts as gendered, as bearing epistemic consequences for a survivor of violence, and as operating within a history of anti-rape activism that deploys first-person narrative as one of its central features.

Such reading practices differentiate themselves from the interpretive imperatives of the legal or juridical spheres in important ways. While a testimony given in court, and fictional

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the context of discussions about how sexual violence is experienced. I've made sure to retain the fact that she poses this not as an assertion but as a question to her readers.

[16] As is suggested by Sharon Marcus in her attempt to find a linguistic form of resistance for survivors in "Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, ed. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992), 385-403. For a critique of Marcus and the post-structuralist responses to sexual violence broadly, see, Carine M. Mardorossian, "Toward a New Feminist Theory of Rape," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 27, no. 3 (2002): 743-775.

narrative, or a testimony spoken within the context of anti-rape activism, for example, all share the formal structure of speaker and auditor, a relationship inseparable from the function of testimony,[17] they differ in at least one crucial function. The function of a testimony given in a court of law serves to aid in a fact-finding mission, to determine the truth of conflicting claims given by a defendant and a plaintiff. Flawed though it is in practice, this function is mandated by the site itself—a court of law—which, as a space operating to carry out that specific function, determines the occasion for and the function of a testimony. In other words, a testimony given in a court will be subject to a fact-finding hermeneutics, which operates by determining speaker credibility. In contrast, a testimony given outside the confines of a court of law may serve many different purposes, including hermeneutical ones. In other words, a testimony might be given or heard for different reasons in different contexts. I am interested, among other things, in what the literary context might bring to bear on these conversations.

As readers of literature, we can bring our interpretive skills to bear in ways that highlight nuance, complexity, and even (and especially, for me) compassion. I read these literary testimonies as acting, not as truth-determining, fact-finding exercises, but as sites of individual and collective sense-making and pain-sharing. How do the people involved with the events narrated by a testimony make sense of what has occurred? How are we, as an auditor, drawn into this testimony, and what becomes our responsibility as a result? What other models of reading might this kind of engagement posit for interlocutors beyond the dominant paradigm of, Do I think this happened, or not? In each work considered, the relationship between speaker and

[17] For more of the relationship of speaker and auditor in relation to testimony, see, Derrida, "'A Self-Unsealing Poetic Text': Poetics and Politics of Witnessing," in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature In Theory Today*, ed. Michael Clark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 180-207.

interlocutor conveys crucial information about assumptions, attitudes, and power imbalances circulating within the conditions for testimony.

For example, by reading for certainty in these accounts we can see the continued dominance of the paradigm of credibility, by which an auditor determines the truth of event based on the perceived trustworthiness of the speaker. This paradigm for determining the truth of an event in which evidence and witnesses are often unavailable and testimonies are contradictory prevails both within a court of law and beyond. As I discuss in Chapter One, eroding a survivor's credibility includes corroding a subject's ability to experience and to express certainty—a fact that makes the prevalence of rhetorics of certainty within anti-rape discourse not only sensible, but invaluable. Yet, rhetoric is a strategy, just like any kind of politics, with particular aims in mind, and I want to suggest that a hermeneutical project might find its most imperative sense-making project within affects and feelings that are the most *non-strategic* to survivors because we have yet to make sense of them. Politics has a (important) normative function, but affective responses and hermeneutical sense-making are subject to vicissitudes beyond the normative. Moreover, as I argue in Chapter Two, uncertainty serves an important epistemic function beyond felt or affective experiences.

Making sense of these experiences, then, becomes crucial for theorizing sexuality, and a critical resource for survivors of sexual violation. Among scholars, advocates of, and allies for survivors of sexual violence, if one thing is currently agreed upon it is the primacy of the imperative to abet a survivor's own narrative agency over her own story. "The best thing allies can do for survivors is remove the pressure to speak or not to speak," argues Alcoff.[18] If we can agree that first, some experiences are ambiguous, and second, that making room for this

[18] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 43.

ambiguity respects the hermeneutical needs of survivors, then the point becomes not to cede the forms of experience and expression that are most vulnerable to prejudice, but to rally around them, to aid in the effort to make hermeneutical sense of experiences difficult, painful, troubling, and inalterably complex by making the discursive room for such sense making. The story of the survivor, whether she chooses to tell that story or not, and the meanings she may derive from it, whether these be straight-forward or fraught with ambivalence, belong to her. The narratives and meanings we derive from the careful interpretation of fiction, on the other hand, can belong collectively to all of us.

The conversation about uncertainty and sexual violence has already begun in the public sphere. For example, the 2010, Sweden-based Twitter campaign, #talkaboutit (in Swedish, #prataomdet), used autobiographical stories to spread awareness regarding the particular prevalence of "grey" experiences. The campaign, which framed "grey areas" as indeterminate, negative, predominantly (hetero)sexual situations residing in a continuum from consent to assault, garnered a good deal of mainstream media attention (this is not unrelated to its link to high-profile political whistleblower, Julian Assange). It sought to call attention to the incongruities of lived experiences that do not fit the standard discourse for describing and therefore understanding these experiences (hence, "grey"). In her recent article on the campaign, Lena Karlsson describes the experiences amplified by the hashtag as "situations amounting to something less than rape" and "something else than mere sex."[19] The imprecise, comparative language Karlsson uses is telling; there is more work to be done regarding our language for describing and discussing the encounters that fit somewhere between "rape" and "not-rape," a

[19] Karlsson, "Towards a language of sexual gray zones," 212. Karlsson cites Nicola Gavey, *Just Sex?: The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. Second ed. (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2019).

distinction Mary Gaitskill provocatively made in the 1990s to describe her own experience of sexual assault.[20] As Karlsson concludes, #talkabout it "points to ongoing everyday sense-making" that stands "in contrast to a culturally dominant frame of trauma and recovery," and that points out the gaps in our current language for making sense of sexual violation.[21] #talkaboutit points not to the anomaly but to the fact of the *preponderance* of this kind of "grey" experience.

In the field of feminist epistemology, Alcoff asserts the need for more "complexity" in our accounts and suggests that some experiences fit "somewhere on a continuum between existing categories."[22] For Alcoff, the division between "rape" and "not rape" doesn't always reflect the vicissitudes of survivors' experiences.[23] Suzanne McKenzie-Mohr's findings in a study co-written with Michelle N. Lafrance (Lafrance worked primarily with individuals with depression, while McKenzie-Mohr with rape survivors) in the fields of psychology and social work corroborates Alcoff's arguments. Drawing on Marjorie DeVault's "linguistic congruence," or the failure of existing language to meet the experiential needs of women, McKenzie-Mohr writes that "participants directly voiced their struggle with the misfit between their experiences and dominant rape scripts. For most, this meant an initial struggle to 'simply' name their experiences as rape."[24] Our categories, these scholars argue, are too sclerotic and too narrow to

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[20] Gaitskill, "On not being a victim," 35-44. Alcoff cites Gaitskill as well in *Rape and Resistance*: "Survivors themselves are among those who wonder about the neatness of our categories… [T]he writer Mary Gaitskill (1994) famously argued some years back that the binary categories of rape/not-rape were simply insufficient to classify the thick complexity of her own experience. As a result, the *meaning* of her experience felt ambiguous, resistant to closure, not black of white, but gray" (Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 60).

[21] Karlsson, "Towards a language of sexual gray zones," 221.

[22] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 60. Alcoff refers specifically to Mary Gaitskill, who uses "grey rape" as a term to better encapsulate her own experience of rape. Gaitskill, "On not being a victim," 35-44.

[23] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 60.

[24] McKenzie-Mohr and Lafrance, "Telling stories without the words," 56.

fully account for many experiences of sexual encounter that intersect with the domain of the violative. "*Sometimes* the full and adequate description of events belies simplistic classification. *Sometimes* our understanding of events changes over time."[25] For Alcoff, ambiguity describes a necessary interpretive outcome of subjectivity. Because any retelling occurs within the domain of subjective experience and discursive mediation, to paraphrase Alcoff, any event will most likely have multiple "meanings" because, while there is a particular truth of an event, what an experience of that event "means" to any given person is much more mercurial. "Meaning," moreover, has temporal dimensions—sometimes held for a moment and sometimes over a great length of time, it will likely change over time.[26] Crucial, again, is the distinction between the truth of the events as they have unfolded and the multiple, possibly conflicting ways even the same individual might make sense of the same events over time.

Yet, in situations of sexual violence, narratives told by survivors are often highly regulated "by hegemonic discourses that individualize and depoliticize women's experiences."[27] "The history of testimony, in particular," writes Leigh Gilmore, "demonstrates objectivity's alignment against the dispossessed … The network itself is structured to speed legitimate forms of harm."[28] Catriona Brown has argued within the field of social work that this regulation works specifically in relation to modes of uncertainty. Such modes "reflect the dominant discourse . . .

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[25] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 61. The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy cites Descartes, Louis Loeb, and Ernest Sosa on this problem. See, Descartes 1984, 2:2; Loeb, 1992: 200-35; and Sosa, 1997: 229-49.

[26] And—perhaps a point that goes without saying in the context of discussions of gendered violence—it can vary from person to person.

[27] McKenzie-Mohr, "Telling stories without the words," 52.

[28] Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 15. In *Tainted Witness,* Gilmore tracks the ways women's testimony have been discredited through legal, literary, and feminist frameworks for reading testimony, and puts the epistemological argument into literary, cultural, political, and historical frames.

that blam[es] women for the violence and minimiz[es] the seriousness of the abuse."[29] The very fact of uncertainty can be turned against survivors. Dominant cultural narratives about rape and rape victims uphold the idea that certain women either invite rape (and can therefore be blamed for it), or that these women cannot be trusted to reliably articulate their own experiences. A survivor is, effectively, cast into the domain of the *uncertain.* To avoid speaking of uncertainty, however, because it is used against these narratives emaciates the hermeneutical tools needed to make sense of violation. According to Brown, "rendering ambivalence in stories as invisible simply serves to reify women's existing uncertainty."[30] Furthermore, by eschewing modes of uncertainty, we inadvertently run the risk of strengthening the discursive grip of what Miranda Fricker calls "testimonial injustice," which aims to restrict survivor speech in order to, ultimately, silence.[31]

If the standard for speaking becomes perfect certainty, then only accounts of certainty will be met with certainty. In his landmark essay, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," Charles W. Mills argues that the best way to bring about the "ideal" of the end of oppression is by "recognizing the nonideal."[32] Not only this: "by assuming the ideal or the near-ideal, one is only guaranteeing the perpetuation of the nonideal."[33] Uncertainty can be a (and just one) "non-ideal" consequence of sexual and gender-based violence. If we neglect it, we risk, by Mills's logic, "guaranteeing the

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[29] Catrina Brown, "Women's Narratives of Trauma: (Re)storying Uncertainty, Minimization and Self-Blame," *Narrative Works: Issues, Investigations, & Interventions* 3, no. 1 (2013): 1-2.
[30] Brown, Women's Narratives of Trauma," 26.
[31] *Epistemic Injustice* attempts to put the fields of ethics and epistemology into contact with each other in order to explore "how our epistemic conduct might become at once more rational and more just." Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007, 4. I discuss Fricker and the approach to testimony in the field of feminist epistemology in Chapter One.
[32] Charles W. Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," *Hypatia* 20, no. 3 (2005): 182.
[33] Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 182.

perpetuation of the nonideal." In modeling our narratives on an ideal state, one without complicating factors, ambivalent feelings, unremembered details, uncommunicated desires, we "[abstract] away from realities crucial to our comprehension of the actual workings of injustice in human interactions and social institutions, and thereby guarante[e] that the ideal-as-idealized-model will never be achieved."[34] In other words, if we choose to ignore, not prioritize, or not acknowledge expressions and experiences of uncertainty, we ultimately reinforce the same outcome: a dearth of hermeneutical tools for survivors, a narrow framework for articulating and understanding these stories, and the inertia of survivor silence.

Finally, neglecting uncertainty might also deprive us of an apparatus we need for critiquing those same hegemonic, discursive structures that attack expressions and experiences of uncertainty. As Walter Mignolo has argued about the relationship between (and necessity of) decoloniality and coloniality: "thinking decolonially made it possible to see coloniality and seeing coloniality materialized decolonial thinking."[35] Thinking about uncertainty, I argue, helps us to see the difficulty and fragility of certainty within survivor speech in the face of epistemic and physical violence. Looking for uncertainty also speaks to the necessity of certainty. Uncertainty puts certainty into context. It turns survivor anger and the rhetoric of certainty deployed in anti-rape activism like #MeToo into not just actions, but *re*actions. Alternatively, as argued in Chapters Two and Three, situations in which the possibility for uncertainty has been precluded through expectation and obligation points, respectively, to domestic manipulation and gendered privilege.

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[34] Mills, "'Ideal Theory' as Ideology," 170.
[35] Walter Mignolo and Catherine E Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, and Praxis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 112-13.

In arguing for the significance of uncertainty within the context of our current moment—a moment of public upheaval around issues of sexual and gender-based violence—as well as for uncertainty's narrative and discursive capacities of hermeneutical sense-making and experiential complexity, "Epistemic Uncertainties" makes several crucial critical assumptions:

- Listening to survivors is a good idea.[36]
- Literary texts, like any other kind of text, are social actors that participate within larger systems of knowledge and how we come to know what we know, feel, desire, think, want, etc.[37]
- Language is simultaneously a resource for communicating experience, as well as an organizing system, and throughout, I use "discourse" in a Foucauldian sense: "Discourse," Alcoff argues, "is an important site of social struggle, given that discourses organize the realm of intelligible meanings and the range of meaningful questions and statements. [Foucault] … showed how there must be excluded speech, derogated, unspoken, in order to maintain existing discursive systems in place."[38]

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[36] This is a foundational principle of feminist anti-rape activism and survivor healing, and has been written about by scholars including Susan Brison, Gaitskill, and Alcoff. In *Rape and Resistance*, Alcoff foregrounds the need to "recenter" the survivor in contemporary discussions of sexual and gender-based violence, especially when considering the "difficult questions of complicity and consent" (Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 2).

[37] As Rita Felski wrote in 1989 of the social function of literature: "Literature… is also medium which can profoundly influence individual and cultural self-understanding in the sphere of everyday life, charting the changing preoccupations of social groups through symbolic fictions by means of which they make sense of experience" (Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* [Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989], 7).

[38] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 2.

We must, therefore, always consider what established narratives foreclose from utterance or what might need to be "translated" due to a dearth of existing language for expression, per DeVault, as well as what might be created by the imagining new of narrative scripts.[39]

#MeToo and a History of Certainty

The focus and form of "Epistemic Uncertainties" can be located historically roughly between the testimonies of Anita Hill in 1991 and Christine Blasey Ford in 2018. To write about the contemporary period is to abandon historical distance in the face of immediacy. In many ways, "virality" is the dominant form of immediacy in the present context, and the remaining section of this introduction discusses the particular ways #MeToo's virality has shaped public consciousness and discourses of sexual or gender-based violence: #MeToo acts as an unequivocal, viral shorthand of six characters or less, electrically charged by anger within public forums. Individuals and collectives use this shorthand to claim the epistemic authority so often denied to women and to survivors. Its virality has shifted popular reception of narratives of sexual or gender-based violence. It was also the event that catalyzed the focus of this project onto certainty.

Despite the propinquity of the contemporary period, I ground "Epistemic Uncertainties" within a history of United States anti-rape activism and with methods well-established by feminist theory: the identification of mechanisms of misogyny has always been a foundational aim of feminist work. Much recent feminist critique, philosophy, and social theory, such as Kate

[39] "'If words often do not quite fit, then women who want to talk of their experiences must translate, either saying things that are not quite right, or working at using the language in non-standard ways'" (DeVault quoted in McKenzie-Mohr, "Telling stories without words," 50-51).

Manne's *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* and Sara Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, reinvigorates a multi-dimensional view of sexual violence: these acts occur on a wider spectrum of gender-based violence, and are used as a systemic means of maintaining social dominance.[40] Understanding #MeToo's impact requires that we think within this idiom of structural feminist theory, and I retain the distinction Manne makes between sexism and misogyny: "I propose sexism to be the branch of patriarchal ideology that *justifies* and *rationalizes* a patriarchal social order, and misogyny as the system that *polices* and *enforces* [sexism's] governing norms and expectations."[41] Sexism and misogyny work hand in hand. Both individual and collective sense-making participates within these larger structures for organizing and hierarchizing, in which certain groups—and their ability to meet their hermeneutical needs—are prioritized at the expense of others.[42] #MeToo linked its structural critique with the pervasiveness of acts of sexual and gender-based violence by going viral.

In October, 2017, thirteen women publicly accused the Hollywood mogul, Harvey Weinstein, of sexual misconduct.[43] *New York Times*' reporters Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey broke the story of Weinstein's sexual misconduct on October 5, 2017, shortly followed by an investigative piece Ronan Farrow on October 23, 2017, published in the *New Yorker*, which took

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[40] Kate Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018); and Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017).
[41] Manne, *Down Girl*, 20.
[42] Fricker calls this hermeneutical injustice. See, Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.
[43] On May 25, 2018, Weinstein was charged with rape and several counts of sexual abuse. "Harvey Weinstein charged with rape following New York arrest," *BBC* News (May 25, 2018), https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-44257202. On March 11, 2020, Harvey Weinstein was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison. Jan Ransom, "Harvey Weinstein Is Sentenced to 23 Years in Prison," the *New York Times* (March 11, 2020), https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/11/nyregion/harvey-weinstein-sentencing.html.

the form of several, corroborating stories from the women Weinstein assaulted.[44] These stories initiated a cascade of reporting on Weinstein's misconduct. Subsequently, on October 15, 2017, American actor Alyssa Milano, who had herself accused Weinstein of misconduct, tweeted the following in response to and in solidarity with those who had made allegations against Weinstein:

> If you've been sexually harassed or assaulted write 'me too' as a reply to this tweet.
>
> Me too.
>
> Suggested by a friend: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too.' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem."[45]

Milano uses the phrase "me too" in her tweet. "Me too" originates from the work of American activist, Tarana Burke, whose organization, Just Be Inc., provides support and resources to survivors, particularly women of color.

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[44] Jodi Kantor and Megan Twohey, "Harvey Weinstein Paid Off Sexual Harassment Accusers for Decades," the *New York Times* (October 5, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/05/us/harvey-weinstein-harassment-allegations.html; and Ronan Farrow, "From Aggressive Overtures to Sexual Assault: Harvey Weinstein's Accusers Tell Their Stories," the *New Yorker* (October 10, 2017), https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/from-aggressive-overtures-to-sexual-assault-harvey-weinsteins-accusers-tell-their-stories. In September, 2019, Kantor and Twohey published their account of breaking the Weinstein story, *She Said: Breaking the Sexual Harassment Story That Helped Ignite a Movement* (New York: Penguin Press, 2019). In October, Farrow published his account of the Weinstein investigation, *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2019).

[45] @Alyssa_Milano, Twitter (October 15, 2017), https://twitter.com/Alyssa_Milano/status/919659438700670976.

More than 66,000 Twitter users replied to Milano's tweet overnight.[46] *Slate* Magazine reported that by the next day Milano's "tweet [had] over 18,000 retweets, more than 37,000 likes, and a whopping 51,000 replies."[47] Within forty-eight hours, almost one million users had tweeted #MeToo. Milano's tweet would spark the largest discussion of sexual violence on social media to date. Thus, while #MeToo is neither the first ebullition of activism against sexual and gender-based violence to reach a global audience,[48] nor the first hashtag social media campaign to address it,[49] its scale and scope are unprecedented. Before the end of 2017, over seven million people around the world would tweet the hashtag.[50] International uptake evolved new global counterparts such as Francophone #balancetonporc and Hispanophone #YoTambién, which took on their own signs and contours. In 2018, the largest demonstrations related to #MeToo were in

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[46] Alix Langone, "#MeToo and Time's Up Founders Explain the Difference Between the 2 Movements — And How They're Alike" *Time* magazine (March 22, 2018). http://time.com/5189945/whats-the-difference-between-the-metoo-and-times-up-movements/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[47] Eleanor Cummins, "For Women, #MeToo Is Frustratingly Familiar: How many times do we need to perform our pain?" Slate Magazine (October 16, 2018), http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2017/10/_metoo_is_frustratingly_familiar.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[48] Twitter and other social media protest exploded in response to the gang-rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in New Delhi in 2012 and activists like Wiam El-Tamami have spoken out against the sexual assault of women during the 2011 Tahrir Square uprising in Egypt. See, Sonora Jha, "Gathering Online, Loitering Offline: Hashtag Activism and the Claim for Public Space by Women in India and through the #whyloiter Campaign," in *New Feminisms In South Asian Social Media, Film, and Literature: Disrupting the Discourse*, Sonora Jha and Alka Kurian, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2017); and Wiam El-Tamami, "Things I Didn't Know," in *Granta* 138: Journeys (April 16, 2017), and Heba Afify, "Egypt's #MeToo moment targets street harassment," CNN (January 5, 2019), https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/04/health/egypt-sexual-harassment-intl/index.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[49] See, for example, #YesAllWomen, #WhatWereYouWearing, #YouOkSis, #SurvivorPrivilege, #FastTailedGirls, and #WhyWomenDontReport.

[50] For a comprehensive consideration of #MeToo as it was taken up across the globe, see the Berkeley Center on Comparative Equality and Anti-Discrimination Law, *The Global #MeToo Movement*, ed. Ann M. Noel and David B. Oppenheimer (Washington DC: Full Court Press, 2020).

India, where #MeToo's force paired with already-existing campaigns in India fighting sexual harassment and sexual violence.[51] Conversations stretched and contracted as people around the world joined in real-time. Participants were tweeting individually but connecting in multitudes.

#MeToo's critique of sexual and gender-based violence aligns with three main changes to discourse around sexual violence to come out of United States activism from the latter half of the twentieth century. That is, first, sexual violence is now not seen as rare, but as pervasive.[52] Statistics support this shift: CBS reports that an American is assaulted every ninety-eight seconds. RAINN estimates that only 310 out of every 1,000 rapes are reported to the police, for example. On college campuses, the number is even lower. Second, the paradigm for rape has shifted from stranger rape to acquaintance rape.[53] As second-wave feminism attacked laws protecting perpetrators of domestic abuse and sexual violence within marriage, studies like Robin Warshaw and Mary P. Koss's *I Never Called It Rape* (1988) broke new ground by identifying and articulating the epidemic of acquaintance and date rape. These studies shifted public understanding by reckoning with how often rape and sexual violence occurs in situations of intimacy, friendship, marriage, and dating. And, third, a "dimensional view"—the view of rape as occurring on a continuum with other forms of sexual victimization—has replaced a "typological view."[54] Gavey describes how this shift toward a dimensional view within anti-rape

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[51] See, Abhery Roy, "2018: The Year When #MeToo Shook India," *The Economic Times* (updated June 1, 2019), https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/2018-the-year-when-metoo-shook-india/2018-the-year-of-metoo-in-india/slideshow/66346583.cms (web, accessed: March 21, 2020).

[52] See, Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 59-60.

[53] RAINN reports that eight of out ten acts of sexual violence are committed by perpetrators who are known to the victim, and that 57% of sexual violence is committed by perpetrators who are white: https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[54] Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 61. Research precipitating this shift to dimensional thinking about rape is extensive. Nicola Gavey also cites Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage*. New York:

activism was derived out of and in opposition to the narrower, typological legal definition of rape in the 1980s, which did not protect against many situations in which non-consensual sexual intercourse occurs:

> In contrast to the expansive definitions [for rape] favored by some feminist activists, a reasonably narrow definition was generally used—one that was consistent with legal definitions of the acts involved. But [the feminist call to expand the definition of rape] was also underpinned with a commitment to looking at rape in the context of other coercive sexual experiences in women's lives. Research using the [Sexual Experience Survey], for instance, asked women about a range of other forced sexual acts and/or coerced or forced forms of sex, besides rape. Implicitly, while rape is an extreme act, it could be seen as existing on a continuum with more subtle forms of coercion, from an unwanted kiss to unwanted sexual intercourse submitted to as a result of continual verbal pressure.[55]

Gavey goes on to say that when viewed dimensionally, "over 50 per cent of women reported having had some experience on this continuum of sexual victimization."[56]

In keeping with dimensional views of sexual violence, the scope of violence accounted for by #MeToo included acts of harassment and assault, acts both discrete, acute, and localized,

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Macmillan, 1982; Gavey, "Sexual victimization among Aukland University students: How much and who does it?" *New Zealand Journal of Pyschology* 20, no. 2 (1991a): 63-70; and research by Liz Kelly (1987, 1988a, 1988b), Richard J. Gelles (1977), and David Finkelhor and Kersti Yllo (1983, 1985). Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 60.

[55] Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 60. The "Sexual Experience Survey" was designed as a part of Koss's research on the prevalence of rape. See, Koss and C. J. Oros, "Sexual experiences survey: a research instrument investigating sexual aggression and victimization," *Journal of Consulting & Clinical Psychology* 50, no. 3 (1982): 455-57.

[56] Gavey, *Just Sex?*, 60.

as well as systemic, normalized, and chronic.[57] #MeToo argued that sexual violence, a function of gender-based oppression (although not mutually exclusive to gender), is both pervasive and structural. It called up flashpoints of female testimony within recent history, particularly the 1991 testimony of Anita Hill and the spectacle by which she was discredited. The United States Senate's vote to confirm Clarence Thomas to the highest court in the United States federal judiciary system, in *spite* of Hill's testimony, sent a message around the world about the status of women's testimony. It spoke in no uncertain terms to testimony's failure within these spaces. *Ms.* magazine tweeted an image of Hill speaking during her testimony with the tweet: "America faces a crossroads: Will we repeat the mistakes of 1991? Or will we finally hold powerful men accountable? Revisiting Anita Hill's testimony in the midst of #MeToo."[58]

#MeToo quickly spread to other media besides social and conventional journalism outlets. Immediacy bore tweets, news articles, opinion pieces, video footage of public speeches, et cetera, followed by forms with longer gestation periods: political marches, blogs, interviews, Ted Talks, short fiction, and, finally, the novel and the memoir.[59] This expansion is currently live (indeed, each time I revise this introduction I have new works to add to this section): around #MeToo's one-year anniversary, *The Cut*, a blog put out by New York Magazine, published seventeen women's stories of sexual harassment and assault titled "The Unreckoned: Seventeen

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[57] Milano received criticism for pairing of sexual assault and sexual harassment, as this suggests to some an equivalence in degree between the two.

[58] @MsMagazine, Twitter (December 8, 2017), https://twitter.com/MsMagazine/status/939177765542211591. For more on the testimony of Anita Hill, see Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 27-58.

[59] In truth, it is academic scholarship that is the last of the genres to reach the public. Routledge published *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* in November, 2020. Giti Chandra and Irma Erlingsdóttir, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of the Politics of the #MeToo Movement* (London: Routledge, 2020).

women tell why #MeToo still hasn't come for them."[60] Laurie Halse Anderson, whose young-adult novel, *Speak* gained popularity in the early 2000s, published a poetry memoir, *Shout,* in 2019, which interweaves her own experiences of sexual violence with her activism since publishing *Speak.* Fiction that offers sustained mediations on #MeToo themes and that was published in its wake includes *You Know You Want This:* "Cat Person" *and Other Stories* (Kristen Roupenian), *The Power* (Naomi Alderman), *Any Man* (Amber Tamblyn), *Vox* (Christina Dalcher), *Putney* (Sofka Zinovieff), *Those Who Knew* (Idra Novey), *The Nowhere Girls* (Amy Reed), *The Water Cure* (Sophie Mackintosh), *Women Talking* (Miriam Toews), *What was Red: A Novel* (Rosie Price), *Trust Exercises* (Susan Choi), *My Dark Vanessa* (Kate Elizabeth Russell) and *His Favorites* (Walbert), by no means a comprehensive list. *The Testaments*, Margaret Atwood's sequel to her 1985 dystopian classic, *The Handmaid's Tale*, was published in September, 2019. Many of these works of fiction draw on contemporary public outrage over the pervasiveness of sexual and gender-based violence to unabashedly censor both those who perpetrate sexual or gender-based violence and the structures in place that aid and abet perpetrators.[61]

Because of #MeToo's viral impact on public discourse, it has set the tone for current discourse around sexual violence. To anatomize this phenomenon, I'll consider the phrase

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[60] Bernice Yeung, "The Unreckoned: Seventeen women tell why #MeToo still hasn't come for them," *The Cut* (September 5, 2018), https://www.thecut.com/2018/09/unreckoned-left-behind-by-metoo.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[61] In my research for this project, I've even come across several lists by public libraries curating books that might help teens, specifically, use fiction to help them discuss and confront issues of sexual violence. See, for example, lists created by the Oak Lawn Public Library, Illinois, https://www.olpl.org/content/me-too-books-for-teens, and the Jonhson County Library, Kansas, https://jocolibrary.bibliocommons.com/list/share/186066773/1069795477?page=1 (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

#MeToo's three primary components, which organize the remainder of this section: the hashtag, the adverb, "too," and the subject, "me."

Hashtag

The hashtag is the medium—the digital, social media component. Hashtags aggregate, by in large, those who would otherwise be strangers into groupings based on an affinity. On Twitter, these affinities are often shared opinions, experiences, political or ideological positions, or popular cultural dispositions. The hashtag acts as a kind of vernacular, a shared language that enabled connection. It constructed what Benedict Anderson, writing of "the nation" in the 1980s, calls an imagined community, a socially constructed community imagined by people who perceive themselves to be a part of that group.[62] Or, what Michael Warner in the early 2000s calls a counterpublic: a part of the social imaginary, a counterpublic is a public that is defined as "in tension with a larger public."[63] Or what Catherine Squires has called a networked counterpublic: spaces enabled by the internet for discourse across a variety of mediums, in which individuals are encouraged to investigate sources themselves and report their findings publicly.[64] We might think here too of Rita Felski's extension (subsequently taken up by the work of Nancy Fraser) of Jürgen Habermas's concept of the "public sphere," spaces of political participation, debate and opinion formation, to include feminist counter-public spheres, communities, and—as I argue—modes of address, that operate to oppose the accepted forms of political participation, debates, and public opinion occurring within the dominant public sphere.[65] (As is evident, there

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[62] Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (Verso, 2006), 6.
[63] Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 59.
[64] Catherine Squires, "Rethinking the Black Public Sphere: An Alternative Vocabulary for Multiple Public Spheres," *Communication Theory* 12, no. 4 (2006): 2006.
[65] Felski defines the feminist counter-sphere in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* as "an oppositional discursive arena within the society of late capitalism, structured around an ideal of a communal

is a long lineage of scholarly work on the construction of social communities based on affinities communicated through texts, broadly construed.)

The comments, tweets, and retweets around #MeToo constitute its conversation and serve as its means of circulation on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook. The political tweet has antecedents in forms of political demonstration: like protest signs and t-shirt slogans, items which were borne by many of the same women who would later march for #MeToo, #MeToo tweets share a maximum of effectiveness achieved through brevity and minimalism.[66] A hashtag is like a pink pussy hat: it became immediately legible as a symbol, an entire statement condensed into a small, single object or phrase, a metonym. Conversation-like, tweets are about the amount that can be delivered orally before taking a breath, like call and response chants.[67] A valence of likes, comments, and retweets chorused these compressed, individual statements, building the conversation network: "Because abuse is fed by silence and isolation. I will add my voice to the chorus #metoo."[68] These were statements to rally behind. To shout.

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gendered identity perceived to unite all its participants, the concept of the feminist public sphere provides a key to analyzing the distinctive yet often diversified political and cultural practices of the women's movement" (Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 9). See, specifically, Chapter Five of *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics.* Felski also cites Evelyn Keitel, "Verständigungstexte: Form, Funktion, Wirkung," *German Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (1983): 431-456. See also, Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 56-80.

[66] Brittny Mejia, "Sparked by #MeToo campaign, sexual assault survivors rally and march in Hollywood," The *Los Angeles Times* (November 12, 2017), http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-me-too-march-20171111-story.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[67] Such brevity has its foundation in the history of oral speech and the testimonies of enslaved Africans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For the relation of testimony to narratives of enslaved African-Americans and the testimony's ties to oral speech, see, Jeannine DeLombard, "Adding Her Testimony: Harriet Jacob's Incidents as Testimonial Literature," *Multiculturalism: Roots and Realities*. ed. C. James Trotman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 32.

[68] @Taylor_Roberts from Twitter (October 16, 2017), https://twitter.com/Taylor_Roberts/status/920075829635362817.

Collectively, these statements act as a network: leaderless and lacking a top-down, hierarchical design, the network is instead made of thousands of clusters and communities.[69] The affordances of social media in combination with the attention garnered by Milano's celebrity scaled up and amplified the message of the initial tweet. According to Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, older conventions for activism call for allegiance to a more clearly established set of ideological beliefs, which do not always support internal conflict or disagreement.[70] In contrast, the #MeToo conversation sustained a dialogue that was often contradictory and self-critical. Tweeters were quick to point out, for example, that Burke deserved credit for founding the Me Too movement in 2006, and that failure to credit Burke was another example of white feminism co-opting the work of black feminists.[71] Similarly, the discussion about who could occupy the speaker-subject position also expanded. Men, for example, although not initially given much coverage, made up about 30% of the hashtag's initial

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[69] Erin Gallagher's network visualization and *Medium* article demonstrate the shape and contours of #MeToo's many communities: 24,722 #MeToo tweets—October 16 to October 18, 2017. Erin Gallagher, "#metoo hashtag network visualization," *Medium* (October 20, 2017), https://medium.com/@erin_gallagher/metoo-hashtag-network-visualization-960dd5a97cdf. The #MeToo conversation was dense with already existing networks, "enabling," as Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg predicted in 2011 about successful digitally networked actions, "viral transmission of personally appealing action frames to occur," (Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action," *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:5 [2012]: 761). We can surmise, therefore, that #MeToo sped along, at least to some extent, these pre-existing networks. For scholarship on the density of feminist communication networks built using social media, see Carrie A. Rentschler and Samantha C. Thrift, "Doing feminism in the network: Networked laughter and the 'Binders Full of Women' meme," *Feminist Theory* 16, no. 3 (2016): 329-59; and Susana Loza, "Hashtag Feminism, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen, and the Other #FemFuture," *ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, and Technology* no. 5, https://adanewmedia.org/2014/07/issue5-loza/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=issue5-loza.

[70] Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, "The Logic of Connective Action," *Information, Communication & Society*, 15:5 (2012): 739-768.

[71] Milano, who was not aware of Burke's activism at the time, would amend her initial tweet to credit Burke.

tweeters.[72] #MeToo's viral success should not suggest that it has been uniformly greeted warmly, or that there is much general consensus among even those who tweeted #MeToo. Contradictions, internal criticisms, and disagreements are native to a network like #MeToo, not only because of the size of participation, but also because it foregrounded narrative accounts of personal experiences in all their variety and particularity (see, Chapter One).

Adverb

Despite the capacity for disagreements and differences, the adverb, "too," denotes #MeToo's sense of community. "Too" is responsive and affirmative. It indicates dialogue, a built-in audience, someone to whom you are responding in kind. Burke embedded this sense of dialogic community into the inception of the movement. Her origin story is an admission of missed opportunity, of Burke's retroactive attempt to tell a survivor in response this survivor's story, "me, too."[73] Expanded, #MeToo is "This happened to me, too." While the "this" of the phrase varied widely along the spectrum of sexual violence and harassment, the "me" of the phrase anchors through recognition. It connects through affinity and asserts its claim based on the pervasiveness of its claim. #MeToo narratives therefore participate in the history of the genre of feminist confession, which Felski argues aims to "delineat[e] the specific problems and experiences which bind women together."[74] "The obligation to honest self-description," within the feminist confession, "which constitutes part of the autobiographical contract is here mitigated by the feminist recognition that it is the representative aspects of the author's experience rather

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[72] Helena Horton, "300,000 men join in with #MeToo sexual assault hashtag," *The Telegraph* (October 18, 2017), https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/10/18/300000-men-join-metoo-sexual-assault-hashtag/.
[73] Burke's story is posted publicly on the organization's website. See, https://metoomvmt.org/the-inception/.
[74] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 94.

than her unique individuality which are important."[75] Distinguishing testimony from autobiography, Doris Sommer describes the complex relationship between the collective "I" used by the speakers of Latin American testimonios and the singularity attached to each victim's experience. The relationship is "lateral," "metonymic." Unlike the relationship of metaphor, which Sommer associates with the autobiography, in which one, singular, superlative story stands in for all stories, the metonymic "I" of the testimony "acknowledges possible differences among 'us' as components of the whole."[76] For anti-rape activism, the "representative aspects" of the experiences disclosed are, of course, the experience and—as evidenced by the existence of these narratives—the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence.

Subject

The final component of the phrase is the subject, "me." "Me" is a speaker, who actually puts herself as the object of the phrase: "This happened to me, too." "Me" is someone to whom something has been *done.* And yet, in articulating, "me, too," it is the speaker who acts as subject, who organizes the composition of herself into the object of the phrase. Speaking out not only mediates, but transforms her back into the position of subject.[77] To do this, #MeToo uses what I define as a rhetoric of certainty: a broad, straight-forward, affirmative assertion made in the declarative: "This happened to me, too." In Chapter One, I take up this rhetoric of certainty. I ground it within the rhetoric used by United States anti-rape activism since the 1970s. I argue

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[75] Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, 94. Felski distinguishes this feature as a shift from the bourgeois autobiography, whose raison d'être was to mark itself as individually exceptional.
[76] Latin American testimonios "stand *up* among others," Doris Sommer writes, as opposed to "standing in for others." Sommer, "'Not Just a Personal Story': Women's *Testimonios* and the Plural Self," in *Life Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Bella Brodzki and Celeste Marguerite Schenck (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 112.
[77] For a full account of the anti-rape act of speaking out, see Tanya Serisier's *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

that it represents the dominant anti-rape response to sexual or gender-based violence, as well as that is frames the dominant paradigm for responding to narratives of sexual or gender-based violence: the paradigm of credibility, by which an interlocutor audits and judges the veracity of a speaker's account.

As a result, #MeToo is actively affecting discourse around sexual and gender-based violence. As Gavey argued regarding the cultural scaffolding of rape culture, the stories in circulation about sexual violence both frame what can (and can't) be said about it. These stories structure how we understand sexual violence.[78] The literary lives of rape fantasies, representations in literature, television, social media and the news, etc, are all discursive participants shaping what sex, sexuality, and sexual violence are understood to be.[79] #MeToo is influencing how people think about sexual and gender-based violence, provoking a moment of cultural awakening, a kind of "coming to consciousness," as speakers condemn what they saw as a veritable ecosystem in which sexual assault and harassment, mutually reinforcing, co-exist symbiotically together.[80] #MeToo marks a crucial shift in the reception of women's accounts of

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[78] Nicola Gavey, *Just Sex?*.

[79] Tanya Horeck, *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (Hoboken: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 9.

[80] Not everyone finds these changes unilaterally positive. Legal scholar Jeannie Suk Gersen, for example, "shares #MeToo's goal of ending the impunity surrounding sexual assault. But she remains committed to the principles of due process, presumption of innocence, and the right to a fair hearing. This commitment places her in tension with some of the most impassioned actors in American public life, some of whom have come to regard due process as a fatal obstacle to deterring and punishing sexual misconduct." Gersen links #MeToo to the growth of sexual assault and harassment prevention programs on college campuses, which she feels do not give the accused a "fair opportunity to be heard." Gersen also thinks it is unlikely that #MeToo will "promote the practice of so-call 'trauma-informed' investigation, which proceeds on the assumption that inconsistent or confused victim recollections reflect the traumatic effects of assault and are themselves evidence of the truth of the accusation." I argree with Gersen on the latter emphatically. Wesley Yang, "The Revolt of the Feminist Law Profs," *The Chronicle Review* (August 7, 2019), https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190807-feminist-law-profs?utm_source=at&utm_medium=en&cid=at (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

sexual and gender-based violence within public discourse toward presumptive credibility. This is a shift that is happening *right now*. My inbox fills daily with new events—a #MeToo activist freed in China who covered the riots in Hong Kong, the landmark trial of Harvey Weinstein, an opinion piece by Nigerian writer and activist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie on the lack of solutions to come out of #MeToo—on the world stage that are put into dialogue with #MeToo. While the focus on this dissertation is primarily literature produced within the United States, the broader archive of literary fiction and non-fiction, such as social media and blogs, some referred to in "Epistemic Uncertainties," documents a live historical moment of growing cultural consciousness not just in the United States, but around the globe.

To reiterate my opening question: can we claim uncertainty as a crucial part of a survivor's testimony without risking undermining her credibility? I think there is reason to do so given the discursive shifts, particularly toward presumptive credibility, precipitated by #MeToo. "What is needed," Alcoff writes, "is an approach that will accept the complicating questions about the problems we face without in any way downplaying the deep effects that our sexist sexual cultures have on our sexual subjectivities."[81] "Epistemic Uncertainties" argues for the necessity and the value of recognizing and making room for expressions of uncertainty; for the value of considering alterative models for reading survivor testimony than the paradigm of credibility; and for the value of narratives that probe at the complicated, conflicting, the feelings that don't always make sense.

Feminist scholars are implicated in many capacities by a lack of nuanced language for discussing sexual and gender-based violation. I consider narratives of sexual and gender-based

[81] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance,* 10.

violence as significance textual sites in which speakers and auditors actively generate meaning.[82] These narratives have historically specific political stakes. Reading and interpreting these narratives requires that we learn how to be receptive, well-informed readers, something that fiction—with its ability to model narratively productive uses of not-knowing as critical to subjectivity, and its ability to take risks through the exploration of affective uncertainties, narrative gaps and ellipses, and emotional ambivalence—is well equipped to impart. Reading and interpreting narratives of sexual and gender-based violence also asks that we develop ethical reading practices for engaging with them based on the epistemological parameters they establish.

In a #MeToo era in which stories of sexual and gender-based violence have received unprecedented mainstream public exposure, we can work to eschew unjust practices for auditing a story of violence both by treating the testimonies of survivors as credible, and also by opening up discursive space for uncertainty as it might be expressed by a subject: how does *she* register, interpret, and either dwell in or foreclose uncertainty as an epistemological mode? We can ask: What kind of radical, epistemological realism would we pursue if we were to conclude that uncertainties make a survivor of violence not less creditable, but *more* creditable on the level of narrative? How might this shift, as Brown has argued, help us account "for the messiness of trauma stories"?[83] Finally—as is ever on the horizon of considerations of accounts of sexual violation—how might textual representations of uncertainty, hesitation, doubt, or ambivalence in relation to sexual encounter encourage the development of a more flexible, variable, and nuanced language for discussing healthy sexual subjectivity?

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[82] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 61.
[83] Brown, "Women's Narratives of Trauma," 26.

Chapter One

Fragile Certainties: *His Favorites* and the Rhetoric of Certainty in Survivor Testimony[1]

To write about uncertainty within narratives of sexual or gender-based violence, one must first contend with its ugly underside: how it has been used to silence and deauthorize, to mystify and manipulate speakers of sexual violence. Such derogation continues, and it is to such derogation that much of anti-rape activism responds. This chapter considers this ugly underside in order to acknowledge as much as to understand the bitter histories and continued struggles embedded here.

Published in the wake of #MeToo and the Weinstein scandal, Kate Walbert's *His Favorites* is a novel about sexual assault and a brutal end to girlhood.[2] Jo, the novel's narrator, recounts her years as a student at a prestigious preparatory school. During this time, she is targeted and then repeatedly raped by her literature teacher, known as the Master. In this chapter, I read *His Favorites* as a demonstration of the crucial need for both the capacity for and the expression of certainty for victims of sexual assault. I draw together work in feminist epistemology on testimony and epistemic violence with cues from the novel's use of grammar as a motif to scaffold a discussion of the epistemological ramifications of testimonial injustice. Survivor certainty itself is targeted not only by the violence of sexual violation itself, but also by biased attitudes about the motivations and capacities of survivors who attempt to speak out. Jo's

[1] A note: readers should be advised that the content of this chapter includes graphic, explicit descriptions of sexual violence, which may be triggering.
[2] Kate Walbert, *His Favorites* (New York: Scribner, 2018).

certainty is thus shown in the novel to be hard-fought, from which I extrapolate not the impervious nature of survivor certainty, but instead its perilous fragility.

The novel is therefore also a meditation on the dangers of uncertainty to survivors: diminishing Jo's capacity to be audited as a subject who can speak with certainty, the violence against Jo uses uncertainty to undermine her credibility, enforce her silence, and exonerate the Master. The novel shows how this derogation of Jo's speech in the diegesis works—even upon the fundamental level of grammar. In the novel, grammar maps onto consequences epistemic and phenomenological in nature: while the Master speaks of what "is," Jo's speech is heard by auditors as something that merely "might" or "could be" or even what "could never be." This epistemic transformation dramatized by shifts in language is then used by other authority figures, such as the school's headmaster, to justify the dismissal of Jo's allegations against the Master. In this way, the subjunctive becomes the register portraying the lived precarity of victims of sexual violence.

Thus, for Jo to tell her story becomes a *reclamation* of the very language needed in order to state something as a fact—to testify. This reclamation is a revolution of speech founded on the capacity to be heard as certain, authoritative, credible—to speak and to be heard when one says, "This happened to me." It is this capacity that is so often at stake for survivors who choose to speak out. I define this mode of speech as a rhetoric of certainty, which emerges out of a long history of United States anti-rape activism and the practice of speaking out. Indeed, certainty typifies the dominant rhetoric of current United States anti-rape activism, which defends against, combats, and corrects attitudes and actions that would deny a survivor the ability to position herself as a credible and authoritative speaker.

We are in a contemporary moment of incredible testimony. #MeToo erupted on social media in October, 2017. In January, 2018, 156 women, all of whom were underage minors at the time they were sexually assaulted, testified against former Olympic doctor, Larry Nassar.[3] *156*. On March 11, 2020, disgraced media mogul Harvey Weinstein was sentenced to twenty-three years in prison for rape and sexual assault because of the testimonies of six female survivors. *His Favorites*, published in 2018, draws directly on the fevered pitch of shifting contemporary public discourse around sexual and gender-based violence.

Testimony is infectious. #MeToo virally broadcasted a six-character shorthand for assertions made in the declarative: "This happened to me, too." American author and essayist Roxane Gay writes in her introduction to an edited collection of stories of sexual assault, *Not that Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture*:

> As I started receiving submissions [for *Not that Bad*], I was stunned by how much *testimony* writers offered. There were hundreds and hundreds of stories from people all along the gender spectrum, giving voice to how they have suffered, in one way or another, from sexual violence… I realized that my original intentions for this anthology had to give way to what the books clearly needed to be—a place for people to give voice to their experiences.[4]

I take my generic cue in this chapter from Gay. I write in an age of #MeToo testimonies.

Testimony has been a subject of interdisciplinary scholarship within literary studies, feminist theory, post-colonial and decolonial studies, and psychoanalysis. In the twentieth and

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[3] BBC News. "Larry Nassar case: USA Gymnastics doctor 'abused 265 girls,'" (January 31, 2018), http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-42894833 (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).
[4] Roxane Gay, ed., *Not That Bad: Dispatches from Rape Culture* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018), xi-xii, emphasis mine.

twenty-first centuries, in particular, it became a form of global witnessing, providing historical and generic contexts of global trauma and healing.[5] John Beverley's work on the Latin American testimony (Beverley uses the Spanish *testimonio*), notably the testimony of Guatemalan civil rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, whose testimonial autobiography *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1983) documented the atrocities of the Guatemalan Civil War, established testimony as a genre for study.[6] It is a genre that is tightly interwoven with the violent histories of colonialism, slavery, and global economic exploitation, and it is the genre most closely linked to experiences of mass atrocity: the Holocaust, Partition, Apartheid, enslavement, and genocides committed in Guatemala, Rwanda, and Bosnia. Testimony—a genre that crosses the boundaries between the legal and the extralegal, the fictional and the non—invokes not only the specter of the courtroom, which has been so ill-equipped to address cases of sexual violence, but these histories as well.[7] Scholarly work on the genre of testimony has argued that testimonies travel as parts of wider networks of speech, which are often biased against women and people of color in particular; act in opposition to forms of social and political control; and engage in the project of social and political change through their claim to speak the truth and to claim the right to justice.[8]

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[5] Ellie Weisel was the first to use the term testimony to refer to the witnessing of global atrocity in *Night* (1960), which documents his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, to describe the narratives of Jewish prisoners of Nazi German concentration camps.

[6] John Beverley, "The Margin at the Center: On *Testimonio* (Testimonial Narrative)" in *De/Colonizing the Subject: The Politics of Gender In Women's Autobiography*, ed. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (University of Minnesota Press, 1992); and Beverley, "'Through All Things Modern': Second Thoughts on Testimonio," *boundary 2* 18, no. 2 (Summer, 1991), 1-21.

[7] For the testimony as a specifically boundary-crossing genre, see Nicole M. Rizzuto, *Insurgent Testimonies: Witnessing Colonial Trauma In Modern and Anglophone Literature* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015).

[8] See, Leigh Gilmore, *Tainted Witness: Why We Doubt What Women Say About Their Lives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017).

Yet, as recently as 2008, Susan Brison has written of the failure to attribute "testimony" to narratives of sexual violence: "We do not, generally, use the words 'testimony' or 'witnessing' in discussing rape narratives (unless we are speaking of courtroom scenarios). Holocaust survivors give their testimonies. Political prisoners bear witness to the torture they endured. Rape survivors tell their stories."[9] What we are seeing now is precisely this shift: the survivor's story is becoming testimony.

Joseph Fischel has recently argued that #MeToo's "connective tissue" is "the denial of women's sexual autonomy": "They are stories of men arranging social and intimate life so the pleasure is all one-sided, their-sided."[10] Linking #MeToo tweets with narratives of sustained length, including those of fiction, anatomizes the connective tissue that Fischel describes. The certainty voiced by narratives like the fictional Jo's enfleshes the violence, attitudes, actions, and dismissals that work to keep survivors in a state of physical, epistemic, and phenomenological uncertainty. And we need this sort of enfleshing in order to contextualize how fragile the state of survivor testimony actually is. The prohibition against survivor speech remains a strong deterrent.[11]

His Favorites argues that certainty is one capacity that enables survivor speech, still a powerful act of transgression that can tell us a great deal about the state of survivor speech within contemporary public discourse. It speaks to the necessary but limited responses available

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[9] Susan J. Brison, "Everyday Atrocities and Ordinary Miracles, or Why I (still) Bear Witness to Sexual Violence (but Not Too Often)," *Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2008): 192.
[10] Joseph J. Fischel *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 180.
[11] See, Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 186-87.

within courts of law and public discourse, and to the significance of a chorus of testimony for affirming and buttressing the difficult and tenuous conditions of certainty in survivor testimony.

His Favorites and a History of Speaking Out

His Favorites is a novel of its moment. The *New York Times* titled its review, "The #MeToo Movement Gets Its Novel."[12] Walbert, an American novelist and short story writer, is known more popularly for her earlier novels, *A Short History of Women* (2009) and *Our Kind* (2006). *Our Kind* was a finalist for the National Book Award in fiction. *A Short History of Women* was a finalist for the *Los Angeles Book Award* and named one of the ten best books of 2009 by the *New York Times*. Walbert published her most recent work, a collection of short stories titled *She Was Like That: New and Selected Stories*, in 2019. Walbert's work focuses on the interior and exterior lives of women, and she frequently explores the difficulties faced by women because of their gender. A relatively new novel, *His Favorites* has yet to receive much scholarly attention, although it has been reviewed positively by several news outlets, including NPR and the *New York Times.* This chapter represents the first scholarly assessment of it.[13]

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[12] Sophie Gilbert, "The #MeToo Movement Gets Its Novel," The *New York Times* (September 27, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/09/27/books/review/kate-walbert-his-favorites.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[13] Scholarly work on Walbert's entire oeuvre too has been slim. Notable scholarship includes Ruth Maxey inclusion of *Our Kind* within her history of the historically rare first-person plural narrator "we" in American fiction, and Nadine Muller's location of *A Short History of Women* within a tradition of fiction that constructs feminist histories as told through family genealogies. Muller labels the novel a feminist family drama. See, Muller, "Feminism's Family Drama: Female Genealogies, Feminist Historiography, and Kate Walbert's a Short History of Women," *Feminist Theory* 18, no. 1 (2017): 17-34; and Maxey, "The Rise of the 'We' Narrator In Modern American Fiction,' *European Journal of American Studies* 10, no. 2 (2015): 1-15.

Because of its graphic and heartrending content, the novel can be difficult to read. The adult Jo is the homo-extradiegetic narrator, who speaks of the events of her past using nonchronological flashbacks leading up to and around her time at Hawthorne preparatory school. She opens with the accident that precipitates the young Jo's removal to Hawthorne: under the influence of alcohol, Jo crashes the vehicle she occupies with two of her friends. One friend, Stephanie, is thrown from the vehicle and killed on impact. As a result of the accident, Jo's mother transfers her from the high school in her hometown to Hawthorne, a school far from home with which she has no connections or support system. Tormented by her role in the death of her friend, Jo struggles with her feelings of guilt, shame, anger, despondence, and alienation. At one point, she rationalizes her mother's decision to send her away as motivated, not by a mother's desire to give her daughter a fresh start, but instead by her mother's desire to remove from her sight someone she can't look at anymore without grief. Isolated and alone, Jo's circumstances make her a prime target for the predatory rapist and literature teacher, Master Aikens.

The novel depicts the figure of the Master—cis-gendered, heterosexual—and his predation of female students in no uncertain terms. He targets new female students. These "favorites" are women who come to Hawthorne are like Jo: they occupy precarious positions. They lack safety networks, whether through legacy or social connections, or are on scholarship and therefore already at risk of alienation and beholden to the school for financial support.[14] The Master uses his position of authority over his female students as their teacher to his advantage:

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[14] Jo later tells the headmaster of Hawthorne, O'Connell, about her concerns that the Master will target another female student: "a freshman girl, Allison, how Master said she was raised by a single mother and comes from an infamous Boston neighborhood, how she is not your typical Hawthorne girl, no, and so he thought he would show her the ropes, he said." Walbert, *His Favorites*, 108.

he jocularly belittles female students in class, making gendered jokes at their expense to his male students; and he requests to meet with these female students privately to discuss their work, which is how he first manages to isolate Jo and engage her in illicit sexual activity. Inside and outside of the classroom, the Master wields sexism as charm. Jo describes him initially as youthful, handsome, and confident. He has a particular kind of aura among the students. He is socially adept and well dressed. It is easy to imagine that among a certain set he is very well liked. "I saw him for the first time in late October… leaning against one of the columns in the portico between the science building and the library, holding court for a group of the boys." Jo says, by way of an introduction: "Master Aikens was one of those teachers" (Walbert 15). Jo is fifteen when they meet, the Master, thirty-four.

His Favorites belongs to a growing amount of contemporary literature that tackles the prevalence of teacher-student sexual relationships, including Zoë Heller's *What Was She Thinking?* (2004), R. A. Nelson's *Teach Me* (2007), Susan Choi's *Trust Exercise* (2019), and Kate Elizabeth Russell's *My Dark Vanessa* (2020). These novels emerge during a period that has seen several high-profile sexual assault cases in the United States between teachers and their students, including, for example, the Choate Rosemary Hall boarding school in Connecticut, in which twenty-four students alleged sexual misconduct between the years of 1963 to 2010;[15] the Penn State child abuse scandal, in which former football coach, Jerry Sandusky, was convicted in 2012 on forty-five counts of child sexual abuse;[16] and the charges recounted in journalist Lisa

[15] Jonathan Saltzman, "Report names 12 at Choate Rosemary Hall who allegedly abused students," the *Boston Globe* (April 13, 2017), https://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2017/04/13/choate/nwt6knYgaVa3UR55ULu2SP/story.html (web, accessed: March 22, 2020).
[16] Bill Chappell, "Penn State Abuse Scandal: A Guide And Timeline," NPR (June 21, 2012), https://www.npr.org/2011/11/08/142111804/penn-state-abuse-scandal-a-guide-and-timeline, (web, accessed: March 22, 2020).

Taddeo's *Three Women* (2019) against high school teacher, Aaron Knodel, who was tried and found not guilty of sex with a minor. Taddeo corresponded over the course of over eight years with the pseudonymous "Maggie," Knodel's accuser.[17] These works take a hard line on the inappropriateness of the sexual relationships between the adult teacher and the underaged student.[18] This position corresponds with the trend in contemporary discourses around sexuality to take more a stringent stance on the problematics of power differentials in relationships with significant age differences or in situations in which one partner holds a position of authority over another.[19]

Elements of the novel's formal composition draw directly on contemporary discourse around sexual violence: the novel directly invokes the speaker-auditor dyad embedded within the feminist practice of speaking out. Jo tells her story in the first-person, frequently breaking the fourth wall by addressing her unnamed interlocutor, "you." More so, she expects—because they have yet to do so—that her audience will not believe her. The novel opens:

> This is not a story I've told before. No one would believe me. I mean, *really* believe me. They would ask certain questions that suggested I was somehow culpable or that I was making most of it up out of nothing—just girlish fantasies

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[17] Hadley Freeman, "Lisa Taddeo on her bestseller Three Women: 'I thought I was writing a quiet little book,'" the *Guardian* (December 6, 2019), https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/dec/06/lisa-taddeo-interview-three-women, (web, accessed: March 22, 2020).

[18] The dark horse is *My Dark Vanessa*, which presents a female student who refuses to consider herself as entirely manipulated by her older partner. See, Heather McAlpin, "'My Dark Vanessa' Looks Back At The Devastation Of A Predatory Affair," NPR (March 11, 2020), https://www.npr.org/2020/03/11/810406133/my-dark-vanessa-looks-back-at-the-devastation-of-a-predatory-affair, (web, accessed: March 22, 2020).

[19] Feminists are by no means unilaterally agreed on this issue. For dissenting opinions see, Jane Gallop, *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); and Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017).

> and daydreams. Hysteria. They would wonder how my actions might have precipitated everything or encouraged everything, especially given why I was at Hawthorne at all.
>
> (Walbert 1)

Jo's rhetoric is structured around her past feelings of helplessness and rage, rage that is "woven" into her life "with steel thread" (Walbert 112-13). Finally, as I discuss at length in this chapter, the novel's examination of language and the ways language itself can be used against survivors is linked directly to the rhetoric of certainty deployed in anti-rape activism, mostly virally in the recent social media campaign, #MeToo.

Scholars tend to locate the emergence of the contemporary "rape narrative" in the United States within the latter half of the twentieth century. Kenneth Plummer argues the rape narrative began to flourish in the 1970s to the 1990s.[20] Robin E. Field argues that up to the 1960s, rape in narrative functioned as a "rhetorical device to signify cultural anxieties" or as "a trope for other social concerns."[21] The experiences of victims of rape were largely ignored within these narratives. Rape narratives produced in the United States after the 1960s, however, refocused their attention away from the perspective of the rapists, hitherto hardly named as such, and back onto the experiences of survivors. *Rape and Representation* (1991) established the connection between rape and representations of rape, and scholars have since gone on to argue for the pedagogical function of rape narratives in fiction: "a critical mandate of rape fiction is to educate

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[20] Kenneth Plummer, *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change, and Social Worlds.* New York: Routledge, 1995, 49.
[21] Robin E. Field, *Writing the Survivor: The Rape Novel In Late Twentieth-century American Fiction*. Clemson University Press, 2020, 10, 9-10.

readers about 'what rape *is.*'"[22] These texts (Field writes specifically of what she terms rape fiction) "insist upon understanding rape *as* rape."[23]

Yet scholars have also been critical of many of the dominant frameworks for the telling of stories of rape. Alcoff writes of the growing interest in "salacious" stories of rape and incest catered to by United States day-time television industry beginning in the 1980s, which constructed the speaker of sexual violence as a figure of audience curiosity and, eventually, of problematic media consumption. "Initially, the shows used the power of the stories to draw out the audience's emotional response as a way to generate interest and a felt connection to both the show and the host."[24] Eventually, however, "survivors' stories were sensationalized and exploited by the media, in both fictional and dramatic reenactments and 'journalistic' forums. The presence of real survivors, as opposed to actors, provided a shock value by breaking social taboos, but it could also satisfy the sadistic voyeurism of some viewers."[25] Once the shock value of hearing survivors' stories on television had worn off, Alcoff states, to keep ratings up day-time television resorted to bringing in experts who contested survivor stories, explaining these stories away as the products of pathological liars. These "experts" frequently portrayed survivors as "damaged, weak, and dependent on expert help."[26] The use of survivor stories as a commodity for television audiences' consumption contributed to a "collective disempowerment" around practices of speaking out.[27]

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[22] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 15. See also, Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver, *Rape and Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.
[23] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 20.
[24] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 178.
[25] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 180-81.
[26] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 181.
[27] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 181.

Serisier and Gilmore write about what they call the "rape memoir" and the "neoliberal life narrative," respectively. Following the growing interest in rape narratives in the 1980s, Serisier describes the boom of "rape memoirs" in the mid 1990s into the 2000s; she includes within this genre Charlotte Pierce-Barker's *Surviving the Silence* (1998), a collection of survivor's stories including Pierce-Barker's, and infamous cases like Trisha Meili's *I Am the Central Park Jogger* (2004). Rape memoirs are "autobiographical accounts of the experience of rape and its aftermath as the defining event of the story, as opposed to autobiographical works that include discussions of rape as one element in a life narrative."[28] A disproportionate amount of these accounts document the assault of white, straight, middle-class women by strangers who were typically blue-collar men of color.[29] These accounts persisted in overabundance despite the fact that sexual assaults are much more statistically likely to be committed by acquaintances than by strangers, and the fact that intra-racial sexual violence and domestic abuse is much more common than inter-racial sexual violence and domestic abuse. While not necessarily the intent of the speaker, it can be argued that the fact of the preponderance of this type of narrative is related to racist stereotypes about the sexuality of black men in the United States, and that these memoirs aided in skewing public opinion about the frequency of stranger and intra-racial rape to the detriment of groups vulnerable to racism and/or poverty. These stereotypes affected victim as well as perpetrator: the only "suitable" rape victim, it might be implied, is the white, straight, middleclass heterosexual woman.[30]

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[28] Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 47.
[29] See, Serisier, *Speaking Out,* 47.
[30] See, Terrion L. Williamson, "What Does That Make You? Public Narration and the Serial Murders of Black Women," in *Where Freedom Starts: Sex Power Violence #MeToo* (Verso Press, 2018), 73-86.

Finally, Gilmore argues that the "neoliberal life narrative" is "better understood as neoconfessional rather than testimonial insofar as [it] promote[s] individual life experiences as examples of a generic humanity and eschew[s] historical and political analysis or contextualization."[31] Neoliberal life narratives—Gilmore uses Jeannette Walls's *The Glass Castle* (2005) as her primary example—tell the story of a heroine who overcomes her violation by working hard by specifically "working on herself." These narratives thereby abstract, to paraphrase Gilmore, away from an analysis of larger socio-cultural attitudes or political structures in place that blame women who speak out against sexual assault. It is up to her to make lemonade out of lemons—that is, to cope with the hand she has been dealt. The shift toward the individual self and away from specific socio-political context occurs, according to Gilmore, precisely because it is the latter that gives the memoir its "radical potential": "Because the radical potential of memoir consists in the public platform it offers newly visible writers and the social and literary transformations they seek, its potential had to be absorbed by neoliberalism by emptying the form of its challenging and politicized content and replacing its aesthetic challenges with the closure of the redemptive narrative."[32] Furthermore, just as Serisier argues, for Gilmore, these memoirs present "suitable survivors," whose overabundance decreases room and "tolerance for other life narratives" within public discourse.[33]

The question these scholars all ask is, when does speaking out empower the individual survivor and when it is negatively co-opted by broader social, cultural, economic, or political

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[31] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 93.
[32] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 93.
[33] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 94. Gilmore also critiques the rise of the self-help genre within this frame. See, Gilbert, *Tainted Witness*, 111-15.

forces—the media, neoliberalism, racism—to distort and thereby disempower?[34] As Alcoff notes, "given that power operates not simply or primarily through exclusion or repression but through the very production and proliferation of discourses, what has been the effect of this proliferation [of survivor narratives]?"[35] What is the efficacy of survivor testimony?

The act of testifying to a personal experience of sexual or gender-based violence is the practice well known within anti-rape activism as "speaking out." Proponents of speaking out are committed to "the transformative political potential of experiential storytelling."[36] Within this tradition, speaking out is intended to empower its subjects, bring survivors together, and produce social change. As Serisier has argued in *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, "feminist anti-rape politics is founded on the belief that producing and disseminating a genre of personal experiential narratives can end sexual violence."[37] "The very act of speaking out—on the printed page and at public meetings—was a courageous first step for many women in naming the unnameable [sic] and identifying rape as an act of violence and hatred against all women," wrote Robin Warshaw in 1988 of 1970s anti-rape activism in the United States.[38] These events "demonstrated the epistemological primacy and political power of women's experiential knowledge around sexual violence."[39] To speak out as a survivor is not only to be subject to the gendered differences in attitude regarding who speaks of universal truth and who speaks only of particulars, most infamously symbolized by the phrase "he said, she said," but also who speaks

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[34] See, Linda Alcoff and Laura Grey, "Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1993): 260-90.
[35] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 190.
[36] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4.
[37] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 4.
[38] Robin Warshaw, and Mary P. Koss, *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report On Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988), 1.
[39] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 6.

universally and who speaks "partially." Indeed, to be "partial" or biased, as opposed to impartial and objective, has historically in the United States set the precedent for the dismissal of certain groups' claims to subjectivity, participation within the public sphere, and citizenship.[40]

The practice of speaking out in the United States has its roots in African American political activism. Indeed, the start of anti-rape activism itself in the United States begins with American anti-slavery narratives. As accounts like Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of Slave Girl* attest, enslaved women of color used narrative as a strategy to confront rape as a by-product of the institution of slavery and of racism since at least the nineteenth century, and specific narrative scripts were mobilized by abolitionists as well as by proponents of slavery to advocate for their respective causes. Jennifer Rae Greeson, for example, has argued that the mobilization of the tropes of urban gothic fiction in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* with the antebellum slave narrative was a political strategy aimed specifically at northern, white abolitionist women in order to rouse their support for "Linda" on the basis of readerly sympathy upon the axis of gender despite racial differences.[41] Literature was a key component for generating this affinity. And although frequently less recognized than its white-feminist counterparts, African-American

[40] Alcoff makes a version of this argument in her talk, "The Phenomenology of White Identity," which she gave at the 2019 Cornell summer School of Criticism and Theory. In this talk, she argues that American exceptionalism is the central feature of the natural attitude of whiteness in the United States. She grounds this claim in eighteenth-century rhetoric that linked the unique historical condition of the founding of the United States by immigrants who chose to immigrate, and therefore had no grievances against their new country; we note of course how this excludes categorically people of color who were brought to the United States against their will. Thus, only (white) immigrants who came to the United States without grievance could participate in grievance-free forms of rational debate, which becomes a public good. Everyone else—everyone who is not white—becomes a special interest group with special agenda of specific injustices: they become "partial."

[41] Jennifer Rae Greeson, "The 'Mysteries and Miseries' of North Carolina: New York City, Urban Gothic Fiction, and *Incidents In the Life of a Slave Girl*," *American Literature: A Journal of Literary History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 2, no. 2 (2001): 277-78.

literary production continues to address the union of racism and rape has continued well into the twentieth century: "As [Roxane] Gay and other authors make clear," writes Serisier, "in many women's life stories the harms of rape sit alongside and interact with structural harms such as racism and colonialism as well as interpersonal and familial histories and dynamics."[42]

In the twentieth century, second-wave feminists campaigned for the recognition of sexual violence, harassment, and domestic violence as issues of utmost political concern, and the first speak-out against sexual violence was organized in 1971 by the New York Radical Feminists. Consequently, between the 1970s and the 1990s, feminist activism and academic work—among them, Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Power* (1975) and Warshaw and Mary P. Koss's *I Never Called It Rape* (1988)—consolidated a new discourse around stories of sexual violence.[43] Second-wave feminists challenged commonly held views that sexual aggression is biologically determined in men, that women are sexually passive, and that sexual domination of women by men is natural, coining the term "rape culture" to describe a culture in which "rape and other sexual violence against women and children are both prevalent and considered the norm."[44] They identified and argued against workplace harassment; organized

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[42] Serisier, *Speaking Out*, 49. For recovery work on the long history of the testimonies of African American women, 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, 2011).

[43] While Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* has been thoroughly critiqued—for separating sex and violence in the analysis of rape; for naturalizing violence as a component of male sexuality and inadvertently concluding that, as a result, women are structurally inferior to men; and for failing to address to how race impacts the myths of the criminal justice system around rape, for example— it has been widely credited with changing public opinion about rape: it was the first sustained study of rape and one of the first to argue that rape is a form of social control. Explicitly against the view that rape was committed only by deviant and pathological criminals and thus only the problem of the judicial system, Brownmiller wrote *Against Our Will* to evidence rape as a systemic problem, enforced by misogyny and widely pervasive.

[44] Merril D. Smith, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Rape* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 174.

against the use of a female plaintiff's sexual history in a rape trial, catalyzing Rape Shield Laws; and began holding consciousness-raising groups, as well as public speak-outs, to demonstrate the urgency and preponderance of sexual and gender-based violence. Second-wave feminism brought issues of domestic violence, sexual harassment, and sexual and gender-based violence out of the private sphere and into the public sphere successfully for the very first time.[45]

Second wave anti-rape activism also responded to commonly held "myths" about how rape operates, and the likely attendant mindsets of those who subscribe to these myths. Such questions undergird commonly held assumptions about who "deserves" rape or is responsible for her and who can be "raped" at all; it was, until legal reforms within the latter half of the twentieth century, not legally possible for one spouse to rape another spouse within the contract of marriage. Merril D. Smith lists the following commonly held attitudes about rape: "victims deserve, cause, invite, ask for, or want to be raped; victims who get raped could have avoided it and therefore are at fault; and victims are sexually promiscuous, or they are sexually active with the offender, and thus she/he was a willing partner in the sex act."[46] Rape myths render survivors who speak out about sexual or gender-based violence uncreditable and make auditors less likely to believe in the factuality of their claims.

In *Tainted Witness*, Gilmore locates survivor testimony within a socio-cultural history of the larger systems in place that refuse to believe what women say and that support the lack of institutional recourse for women who are not believed when they do speak out. "The history of testimony, in particular, demonstrates objectivity's alignment against the dispossessed… The

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[45] For more on the novel successes of second-wave feminism, see Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989), 71-75.

[46] Merril D. Smith, *The Encyclopedia of Rape* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2004), 191.

network itself is structured to speed legitimate forms of harm."[47] These networks are explicitly gendered:

> When a witness is a woman, and especially when the harm includes sexual violence, she will be subjected to practices of shaming and discrediting that preexist any specific case… [A]ttacks on her credibility will draw from a deep reservoir of bias that connects gender and race to status across popular culture and informal spaces as well as institutions. Judgment as a cultural practice is participatory, rule-governed, and binding.[48]

To speak out, then, as Alcoff puts it has "significant transgressive potential" because it disrupts the rules dictating "in what circumstances [speakers] can meaningfully form and utter specific statements about sexual violence," and goes against the grain of structural inequities embedded into the circuitry of testimony.[49] When I use the word "testimony" to designate survivor speech, I intend this transgressive potential of speaking out.

I approach testimony as a mode of address that is motivated by the specific material context for its utterance, and that has epistemic motivations. José Medina defines testimony broadly as "any kind of telling in and through which the expression and transmission of knowledge becomes possible."[50] Testimony is, to use Sara Ahmed's formulation, not only an

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[47] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 15. See, Carol Smart, *Feminism and the Power of Law* (New York: Routledge, 1989) for a critique of how women's testimony has been undermined through alliances with pornographic narratives perversely meant to give pleasure to auditors at the expense of the woman testifying.
[48] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness,* 5.
[49] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 187.
[50] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28. See also, Elizabeth Fricker, "Telling and Trusting: Reduction and Anti-Reductionism in the Epistemology of Testimony," *Mind* 103 (2005): 373-83; and Paul Faulkner, "The Social Character of Testimonial Knowledge," *The Journal of Philosophy* 97, no. 11 (2000): 581-601.

action, but a *re*action.[51] A great deal of recent scholarship in feminist epistemology has been driven by the desire to understand the epistemic consequences of identity-based prejudices against oppressed groups or individuals. I extend this line of argument to ground the concepts of subjectivity, agency, and epistemic violence, and I connect it explicitly to sexual violation. I look closely at how expression and the transmission of knowledge are undermined when these expressions come from survivors of sexual or gender-based violence.

Within feminist epistemology, Jennifer Hornsby, Kristie Dotson, Miranda Fricker, Alcoff, and Medina, among others, have sought to clarify the links between speaker and auditor, and to explain the vulnerabilities of communication that can occur when speakers are not heard justly. These thinkers point to the (often unfortunate) necessary reliance of speakers on their audiences, and reveal the ways speakers can be epistemically damaged by an unjust or hostile auditor. Dotson, who builds on Hornsby's contention that a speaker's ability to successfully communicate depends upon her audience, argues that "every speaker needs certain kinds of reciprocity for successful linguistic exchanges. Speakers are vulnerable in linguistic exchanges because an audience may or may not meet the linguistic needs of a given speaker in a given exchange."[52] An auditor who is emphatically resistant to a survivor's testimony might demonstrate "pernicious ignorance," which occurs through "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguistic exchange."[53]

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[51] See, Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 187-90. Ahmed argues that to "insist on renaming actions as reactions," which is demonstrate how an action is not a starting point, but a reaction situated within a context of other precipitating factors, is precisely the work of feminist politics. Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 189.

[52] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2011): 238.

[53] Dotson "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 238. For more on white ignorance, in particular, see, Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon

Pernicious ignorance executes epistemic violence against proffered testimony. Subject-based identity prejudices, these thinkers argue, deny speakers reciprocity and exploit vulnerabilities in linguistic exchange.[54]

Moreover, epistemic violence does not attach itself to all subjects equally. Certain testimonies are more likely than others to be subject to "biases" and "epistemic distortions created and sustained by oppression," which "affect the production and transmission of knowledge and ignorance."[55] To channel Gilmore, doubt "sticks" to the testimony of women. Miranda Fricker argues that a "distinctively epistemic kind of injustice" imperils "two of our most basic everyday epistemic practices: conveying knowledge to others by telling them, and making sense of our own social experiences."[56] The latter she calls hermeneutical injustice, the former, testimonial injustice. Testimonial injustice is an identity-based prejudice, which "occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."[57] Epistemic injustices have epistemic consequences: epistemic injustice denies what Fricker calls "epistemic trust": by denying survivors the authority to communicate their knowledge reliably to

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Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of Albany Press, 2007), 11-38; and Alcoff, "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, 39-58.

[54] Dotson works with racism specifically in her essay. The risks of epistemic violence are higher for women of color, particularly African American women: statistics show that an African American woman who reports a sexual assault is less likely to be considered credible than a white woman reporting the same crime; she is also more likely to be assaulted, as well as less likely to report an assault. See the Maryland Coalition Against Sexual Assault, https://mcasa.org/assets/files/African-American-Women-and-Sexual-Assault1.pdf; and Tillman et al. 2010.

[55] José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 28.

[56] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1. *Epistemic Injustice* does not specifically address issues of sexual or gender-based violence, but I think the application is a natural one. Fricker uses the concept more broadly, and testimonial injustice can be extended to other situations in which truth is indexed to power unevenly in terms of race, class, religious affiliation, etc.

[57] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.

others, testimonial injustice excludes survivors "from participation in the practice that defines the core of the very concept of knowledge."[58] For Dotson, working to better understand the epistemic consequences of silencing, "the extent to which entire populations of people can be denied this kind of linguistic reciprocation as a matter of course institutes epistemic violence."[59]

Testimonial injustice operates in ways that are specific to hegemonic, socially constructed ideas about sexual violence. Victims of sexual violence in particular are not credited as experts on their own experiences. Alcoff calls this phenomenon "reverse empiricism": unlike "[i]n most cases, [in which] first-hand experience is a privileged kind of knowledge…. sexual violence is seen to engender instability."[60] An uncorroborated testimony is, more likely than not, enough to produce "reasonable doubt." Indeed, the very collectivity summoned by the community-oriented subjectivity of testimony has historically proven to be one of the *only* ways that women will be heard as reliable or legitimate. Consider how many women have had to come forward with allegations against Weinstein. Against Cosby. Against Nassar.[61] Against the current President of the United States.[62] Moreover, in her capacity as a subject, a woman's testimony is *up for interpretation*, whereas one man's "he said" is enough to exonerate him and, as in the case

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[58] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice,* 145.
[59] Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence," 238; and Jennifer Hornsby, "Illocution and its significance," in *Foundations of Speech Act Theory*, ed. Savas L. Tsohatzidis (New York: Routledge, 1994), 134.
[60] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 48.
[61] More than eighty women have spoken against Weinstein. More than forty-five women have spoken against Cosby, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-bill-cosby-timeline-htmlstory.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020). More than 250 women have spoken against Nassar. 156 women testified in court. Of these men, as of May 2018, only Cobsy faces any criminal penalties.
[62] In May of 2018, CNN verified more than ten women's accounts of sexual misconduct by Donald Trump.

of Clarence Thomas, allow him to proceed to a position on the highest court in the United States, the Supreme Court.[63]

Testimonial injustice, thus, ensures that "testimonial truth" "is indexed not to facts but to power"[64] and that the speaker is effectively denied her capacity as a subject, someone capable of producing knowledge. Such damages implicate the epistemic within the nexus of bodily, material harm done to a survivor, and collude with the material injuries inflicted by the original act of physical violence. Indeed, survivors who testify are hyperaware of the limits placed on their credibility, and how uncertainty may be used against them. Consider Professor Christine Blasey Ford's use of the neuroscience of traumatic memory during her 2018 United States Senate Judiciary Committee hearing to explain her inability to remember how she got home after she claims she was assaulted by Brett Kavanaugh.[65]

Dramatizing how the dyad between speaker and auditor can become epistemically unjust, *His Favorites* implicates the very act of narration within a nexus of concerns for the survivor. As Jo tells her interlocutor, "you": "Corroboration, I understand, is needed. Corroboration is what you have asked for, though I imagine that each of us favorites must have her own version of Master… Or maybe I could tell it from his perspective" (Walbert 144-45). Corroboration requires the accuser in the novel to be a "we" and not just an "I"; the title is, after all, plural. These lines also suggest that Jo might tell it from the Master's perspective, a dig at the frequency at which an auditor is likely to entertain exculpatory motives for "his" actions, while clinging to

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[63] The bias of "*your version*" hardly ever fails to neglect assignation to those in power. Objective reality is granted in this way via tacit privilege.
[64] Gilmore, *Tainted Witness*, 9.
[65] See, Jamie Ducharme, "'Indelible in the Hippocampus Is the Laughter.' The Science Behind Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony," *Time* Magazine (September 27, 2018), http://time.com/5408567/christine-blasey-ford-science-of-memory/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

any reason at all to condemn "her" for hers. Jo ventriloquizes these reasons for her audience: the Master was a "young boy at heart lacking the maturity and self-control to be surrounded by so many very young, very pretty, girls, especially the impressionable ones, and let's be honest, they were *all* impressionable" (Walbert 145-46). Such rationale suggests Jo is to be held responsible for the Master's actions. It turns a survivor's story into a mere version of the truth in favor of the definitive account provided the male assailant. Thus, the certainty of Jo's narration and the conviction of her accounts comes into conflict with the disbelief and incredulity she faces when she spoke out as a minor initially at the time of the Master's offenses.

One scene in *His Favorites* in particular drives home the damages inflicted by testimonial injustice onto a survivor. Encouraged by her roommate, Lucy, Jo decides to make an official accusation against the Master to the headmaster of Hawthorne, a man named O'Connell. As Jo recounts the Master's pattern of violence to the Headmaster, her mind races:

> My throat clenches and the whole thing is suddenly terrifying—the reason I am here in O'Connell's office, this man, this complete stranger and my only confessor because Lucy said he should be and because I do not know how to make it stop because I want it to stop and I do not know how to make it stop… He would know what to do, Lucy said.
>
> He would understand.
>
> "I understand," he said.
>
> (Walbert 107)

The vanishing punctuation mirrors Jo's anxiety, the sentences becoming unstructured, the syntax untethered, by the lack of grounding provided by punctuation. Here's the sum of what the headmaster understands: he asks her if she's considered "the many implications" of her claim;

how such a claim will "ruin a man's career"; how "complicated" and "serious" such a claim is; to consider how the teacher has suggested her for a prestigious academic award (Walbert 109, 110, 111). He refers to the clothing she wears; to her "problems at home"; and to how she came to their school "from a very difficult situation," suggesting likely that she will both not be believed and that she should be grateful to have received entrance to the school, even if it came at the expense of repeated sexual violation (Walbert 110, 111).

The headmaster easily, carefully, dismisses Jo's allegations. His questions, operating based on a misogynistic logic that treats women as either responsible for the violence done to them or as unreliable sources of their own experiences, act to undermine and then to discount the credibility of her account. More than that, the headmaster has a *vested interest* in dismissing her claims in order to protect the reputation of Hawthorne. It is in his best interest to remain perniciously ignorant of the actions of a teacher for whom he, as headmaster, is responsible. Jo's only recourse is to insist on the veracity of her account. "'It's the truth,' I say. O'Connell links his fingers together and then waggles them, as if for exercise… 'I know this is your version,' he says. 'But there are always two sides to every story. You understand, for the record, we'll have to hear his. And then we'll have to make our own decision'" (Walbert 111-12). Effectively denied the ability to make her case to the headmaster as a matter of fact, Jo is cast into the epistemic domain of the uncertain.

In the face of this disbelief, Jo's narration marshals a rhetoric of certainty. Her narration lambastes the hypocrisy of one man's "he said" and takes aim at those who are complicit in covering up his actions and shielding the violence the Master enacts on his female students. Hers is an assertion of absolute conviction despite—and perhaps because of—the disbelief she received from those in positions of authority when she spoke out at the time of the violations.

Jo's rhetoric, consistent then as it is now, stands in contrast to the forces that discredit her speech, which undermine its ability to convey what she has experienced as fact. Jo uses a rhetoric of certainty, a rhetoric that exploded on social media in the months before *His Favorites* was published. This is the language of the viral #MeToo.

#MeToo and the Rhetoric of Certainty

#MeToo's declarative, affirmative language asserted—in the most basic sense—that an action had occurred to the speaker: "this happened to me." "This happened to me" is a declarative statement of *fact*. #MeToo belongs to the long durée of women's struggle against sexual and gender-based violence and the anti-rape practice of speaking out. It established shared terms for speaking out and breaking silence through the use of personal experience. Silence was rejected as coercive.[66] "I'm not surprised to see the number of #MeToo tweets. For so long, women have been silenced after being harassed or assaulted. Not anymore."[67] #MeToo speakers asserted that the pressure to remain silent, whether that silence is enforced by normalization or through the threat of retaliation, was not the exception, but the rule. #MeToo's language of protest was amplified by social media platforms like Twitter, which function based on their ability to connect people within digital public spaces. These expressions came to form powerful, imagined collectives. #MeToo testimonies perform the act of admission into communities, both

[66] Both silence breaking and speaking as acts of rebellion became rhetorical bulwarks of #MeToo protest, linking it again, back to second-wave feminist idioms of protest and consciousness raising.

[67] @SupJaniceHahn from Twitter (October 16, 2017), https://twitter.com/SupJaniceHahn/status/920071000804356097.

past and present, of shared struggle through the utterance, "#MeToo."[68] They seek to reclaim the testimony as a mode of truth telling available to women. Because such utterances are *in response* to injustices, they constitute a language of protest.

#MeToo testimonies bring personal, private, and individual pain into public spaces through the use of the first-person narrator, "I." Speakers recall events from their past into the present. They combine narration of events with rumination and contemplation. As in the case of *His Favorites*, they might fragment the chronological sequences of events or dart continuously between the act(s) of violence and its subsequent fallout, like spider threads spiraling out from the site of impact when a rock hits a glass window, a narrative strategy of omission and association often deployed in narratives of trauma. These accounts are highly self-aware, personal distillations of jagged encounters with violence, with their subjects' bodies, with boundaries and with violation.

#MeToo testimonies often feature a style of narrative omission structured by minimalism or condensation. In this excerpt from a testimony in Gay's *Not That Bad*, the author uses deictics and pronouns to intentionally obscure and shroud the central act of violence:

> This is not about that. This about everything after. This is about how, all of the sudden, there was only one *after.* How the infinity of tiny afters… were all swept away into the only after that stretches out endlessly over the unfolding nows. This is about that.[69]

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[68] In the introduction, I linked the construction of these communities to scholarship on community formation through discourse by, for example, Benedict Anderson, Felski, Nancy Fraser, Jürgen Habermas, Catherine Squires, Michael Warner, and Lance W. Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg.

[69] Claire Schwartz, "& the Truth Is, I have No Story," in *Not That Bad*, ed. Gay, 33-34.

The omission in this author's account of more precise words than a deictic demonstrates perhaps an avoidance of the full experience of the violence, but also a condensation of this violence into generalizable words, like "this" and "that." These words organize the speaker's life more completely, as evidenced by her focus on how the violence, "that," continues to impact her after the event, foreclosing other futures into this "only one *after*." The speaker of this #MeToo tweet also condenses a larger history into a single suggestive word: "I didn't just transfer schools because I didn't like the preppy environment #MeToo."[70] The tweet freights the adverb "just" with an untold story *right* beneath the surface, a more complete history omitted. Condensation implies an event through absence while simultaneously suggesting a much longer timeline of healing for the speaker, all within the confines of an articulation limited on Twitter to a maximum of 140 characters.[71]

The effect of this pared-down style on Twitter is that the rhetoric of #MeToo conveys speech given unequivocally, authoritatively, and without qualification. #MeToo tweets staggered and shocked in both their brevity and in their declarative address.[72] "Me too, when I was 6 and then 15 #MeToo."[73] #MeToo broadcasts what I define as a rhetoric of certainty, a broad, affirmative assertion made in the declarative: "This happened to me, too." The Oxford English

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[70] The account belonging to @kathrynseely has been deleted on Twitter since I began this chapter. As a result, this tweet no longer exists in public record for reference.
[71] Twitter has since increased its character limit to 280. Tweets are, on average, thirty-three characters. Sarah Perez, "Twitter's doubling of character count from 140 to 280 had little impact on length of tweets," *TechCrunch* (October 30, 2018), https://techcrunch.com/2018/10/30/twitters-doubling-of-character-count-from-140-to-280-had-little-impact-on-length-of-tweets/, (web, accessed: March 20, 2020).
[72] This brevity is in part the result of Twitter as the originary medium for #MeToo. Twitter limits the total number of characters per tweet to 140, a limit imposed to match the limit of 160 characters for short message services.
[73] @skwontotwitch, Twitter (October 30, 2017), https://twitter.com/skwontotwitch/status/925117071708643330.

Dictionary defines the word "certain" as "determined, fixed, settled; not variable or fluctuating; unfailing," and "certainty" as "the quality or state of being subjectively certain; assurance, confidence; absence of doubt or hesitation."[74] It provides a rhetoric with which survivors could assert their experiences authoritatively, straightforwardly. That is, *without qualification*.

Such declarative language has rhetorical (and by extension, political) force because of the strategies so often used to undercut the speech of survivors. #MeToo did *not*, for example, follow up its call to action with common requests for clarification or for justification: What were you wearing? Had you been drinking? Did you attempt to struggle? (This, of course, did not preclude other users on social media from responding to a #MeToo post with these questions.) This speaker responds to the hostility and stigma against female testimony when she tweets, "Why did I have to explain myself over and over? Why should any person have to explain what they did to make a person rape them? #MeToo."[75]

#MeToo's idiom embraces narratives that *willfully* engaged the survivor's perspective. Speakers articulated their experiences as subjects to whom something had been done: "I was sexually assaulted by a man 5 times my age and I live to tell my story. I *testify* for those who can't do the same. ❤️ #MeToo."[76] Gay's own description of an act of violence against her in *Not That Bad* channels this style. Her narration is precise, jagged, and blunt: "When I was twelve

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[74] "Certain" in the Oxford English Dictionary, definition 1a, http://www.oed.com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/view/Entry/29975?rskey=ZhFbSc&result=1&isAdvanced=false#eid9733558; and "certainty" in the Oxford English Dictionary, definition 5a, http://www.oed.com.proxy01.its.virginia.edu/view/Entry/29979?redirectedFrom=certainty#eid.

[75] @ambergreenking Twitter, 2017.

[76] @disvxvery, Twitter (October 15, 2017), https://twitter.com/disvxvery/status/919742638697406464 (emphasis mine). Many who tweeted #MeToo used "testimony" and "testify" within the legal context, but many did not specify a legal context, as with the example provided here. Due to the scale and scope of #MeToo, the elision of the legal context for "testimony" into a broader usage meaning "to speak out" was rapid. The details of this elision would make for an interesting digital humanities project.

years old, I was gang-raped in the woods behind my neighborhood."[77] This is how Gay begins her introduction to the edited collection. #MeToo argues that the validity of a single victim's perspective can be expressed in and acknowledged based on no more than six characters. No other explanation is (should be) required. It designated space for victims of harassment and assault to affirm without qualification, even if they meant to accuse, that they too had been victimized, and that their fear of victimization is not abnormal or acute, but chronic and normative. "#MeToo I've lost count - the numbers of times. And memories still bring anger, hurt and more anger."[78] And while Laura Kipnis has recently written that the "cult of feeling has an authoritarian underbelly: feelings can't be questioned or probed," when we view speaking out as a *response* to long histories of "questioning" and "probing" that are dependent on gendered attitudes about sexuality and women's testimony, we are reminded of the fact that the feelings of *certain* subjects are probed and questioned all the time.[79] #MeToo was spontaneous, furious, crowd-based. It didn't ask for proof. It didn't require details. Its rhetoric is intentionally "biased" by being one-sided; it only spoke what "she said." Asserting the validity of a single victim's perspective was the precisely the point of #MeToo's rhetorical protest.

#MeToo's rhetoric of certainty was a polarizing force. On one (extreme) side of the ideological fence, conservative critics seized on #MeToo's "bias" in order to decry it as a "witch hunt"; a "vicious hate mob," that will "not end well for women"; and "mass hysteria."[80] In

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[77] Gay, "Introduction," *Not That Bad*, ix.
[78] (@ShresthaSubina Twitter, 2017.
[79] Laura Kipnis, *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2017), 2.
[80] Andrew R. Chow, "Woody Allen Warns of 'Witch Hunt' Over Weinstein, Then Tries to Clarify," *New York Times* (October 15, 2017) https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/15/movies/woody-allen-harvey-weinstein-witch-hunt.html?_r=0 (web, accessed: April 7, 2020); Celia Walden, "#Metoo has become a vicious hate mob - this will not end well for women," *The Telegraph* (November 10, 2017),

contrast, others hailed #MeToo as an eruption of righteous female anger. For many, it was a call to arms.[81] "Feminism," writes Lindy West, "is the collective manifestation of female anger. They suppress our anger for a reason. Let's prove them right."[82] #MeToo turned into a global ebullition of anger in just one night: "This is different. This is '70s-style, organic, mass, radical rage, exploding in unpredictable directions," wrote Rebecca Traister. "The anger window is open."[83]

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https://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/life/metoo-has-become-vicious-hate-mob-will-not-end-women/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020); see, Peter Papesch, in letters to the editor, "High-Profile Firings for Sexual Misdeeds," The *New York Times* (November 30, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/30/opinion/matt-lauer-sexual-harassment.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020). See also Bari Weiss, "Aziz Ansari Is Guilty. Of Not Being a Mind Reader," *The New York Times: Opinion* (January 18, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/15/opinion/aziz-ansari-babe-sexual-harassment.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020); and Ashleigh Banfield, "Open Letter," read on HLN, CNN (2018): https://deadline.com/2018/01/ashleigh-banfield-slams-aziz-ansari-accuser-on-hln-1202243875/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[81] For just as many feminists, #MeToo was a call to caution: in fact, a letter signed by 100 prominent French thinkers, performers, or artists, including Catherine Millet, also denounced #MeToo as a "witch hunt." See, Agence France-Presse in Paris, "Catherine Deneuve says men should be 'free to hit on' women," the *Guardian* (January 9, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jan/09/catherine-deneuve-men-should-be-free-hit-on-women-harvey-weinstein-scandal, (web, accessed: March 22, 2020). Concerns about #MeToo's perceived sexual puritanism and its carceral turn persist: an article in Chronicle of Higher Education, for example, details some of the concerns about the shift in consciousness that calls for more punitive measures *and* more regulation and prohibition of sexuality, within the contexts of universities in particular. See, Emma Pettit, "The Next Wave of #MeToo," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (February 16, 2020), https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Next-Wave-of-MeToo/248033, (web, accessed: March 22, 2020). I've also had several good conversations—although none of made it into print yet—about concerns that #MeToo's carceral turn will serve to penalize not the privileged and powerful perpetrators, but those who are already more likely to find their way into the United States prison industrial complex.

[82] Lindy West, "Brave Enough to be Angry." *The New York Times* (November 8, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/08/opinion/anger-women-weinstein-assault.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[83] Rebecca Traister, "Your Reckoning. And Mine. As stories about abuse, assault, and complicity come flooding out, how do we think about the culprits in our lives? Including, sometimes, ourselves," The Cut (November 12, 2017), https://www.thecut.com/2017/11/rebecca-traister-on-the-post-weinstein-reckoning.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

Charged by anger within a public forum, #MeToo used declarative language to make a broad claim for the epistemic authority so often denied to women and survivors. This rhetoric continues to be deployed in highly publicized survivor testimony. In the 2018 the sentencing of Olympic doctor, Larry Nassar, for example, Aly Raisman, who was the captain of the gold medal-winning 2016 United States women's Olympics gymnastics team, adopts this rhetoric. In her statement, she repeats the declarative statement "I am here" several times. In doing so, she not only underscores the difficulty and pain it caused her and her fellow female athletes who also testified to come forward and speak, to be "here." "I am here" also asserts Raisman's position as a subject in the face of a man whose criminal actions consistently denied her subjecthood when she was his patient: "*I am here* to face you, Larry, so you can see I've regained my strength, that *I am* no longer a victim, *I am* a survivor. *I am* no longer that little girl you met in Australia." Raisman indicates the change in power between the abused female gymnasts and their abuser: "We, this group of women you so heartlessly abused over such a long period of time, *are now* a force and *you are nothing.*"[84] Such statements when spoken by survivors have the import of revolt: "The tables have turned, Larry. We are here," said Raisman. "We have our voices, and we are not going anywhere."[85]

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[84] Mahita Gajanan, "'It's Your Turn to Listen to Me.' Read Aly Raisman's Testimony at Larry Nassar's Sentencing," *Time* Magazine (January 19, 2018), https://time.com/5110455/aly-raisman-larry-nassar-testimony-trial/, emphasis mine (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[85] Glamour, "'My Voice Matters': The Survivors of Larry Nassar, In Their Own Words," Glamour Magazine (February 6, 2018), https://www.glamour.com/story/the-survivors-of-larry-nassar-in-their-own-words (web, accessed: April 7, 2020). Gilmore and Elizabeth Marshall include the female gymnasts who spoke out against Larry Nassar in their recent work on the history of female life writing to transform suffering, particularly through the figure of the girl, in *Witnessing Girlhood: Toward an Intersectional Tradition of Life Writing* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

Speaking out, writes Serisier, "promises to produce cultural change by shifting public understandings of rape to more closely reflect the experience of survivors; it assists the collective liberation of survivors by chipping away at the stigma and shame of rape; and it produces individual empowerment for the speaker by having her story heard and herself recognized as an expert on the basis of her experience."[86] Raisman's testimony is a searing example of speaking out, and yet there is no sense in which her testimony, and the justice brought to her and the other female child gymnasts assaulted by Nassar, was inevitable, assured, or certain. There is pain behind Raisman's conviction, the grief of a certainty spoken aloud that may not have ever been assured prior to that moment that it would be heard or assured of justice. Thus, we can see the disconnect between (and the necessity of) Serisier's words and the act of speaking out.[87] Speaking out "promises." It "assists." To promise is to assure. Survivors of sexual violence have very little assurance that their testimonies will be heard and understood by sympathetic, understanding, or just ears. To promise is to wish for something better, to acknowledge a deficit. It is to recognize that things are not as they should be, that to speak with certainty to is act in defiance. To speak out is in many ways to face the reality that what you say will most likely not be accepted. It is to acknowledge the limitations of language for creating social change.

The Grammar of Sexual Violence in *His Favorites*

Using grammar itself to indict systems of collusion and power, *His Favorites* evinces how violence pervades even—or especially—the level of language. Language is, after all, the

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[86] Serisier, *Speaking Out,* 6.
[87] I personally would have qualified very heavily the claim that speaking out "produces individual empowerment."

instructive domain of the literature teacher. The novel uses grammar as a formal method for demonstrating how language is inflected with power, and conversely how language can articulate the injustices inflicted by sexual violence. The precarity of Jo's testimony gets delineated in the novel by the contrast of two grammatical moods, the indicative and the subjunctive. The indicative is the grammatical mood in English used for statements of fact. The subjective, on the other hand, is the grammatical mood used for expressing irreality, counterfactuality, possibility, desires or wishes, conditionality, and uncertainty. Grammar maps onto consequences in the novel that are epistemic in nature: the indicative becomes the privileged language of the rapist, while the subjunctive becomes the register forced upon the victim of sexual assault. Grammar, in this way, demonstrates the attrition of survivor certainty within the nexus of physical, psychological, and epistemic violence.

His Favorites introduces the leitmotif of the subjunctive through the Master's comments on Jo's expository writing. Critical of Jo's overuse of the subjunctive, a common error among writing composition students, along with passive constructions and indirect markers of speech, "I think," "I believe," "it seems to me," the Master responds to Jo's essays with refrains such as, "Always the conditionals, Master said. Would haves, should haves, could haves: nothing claimed, nothing asserted" (Walbert 145); "Do not live your life in the subjunctive *mood,* Master said, rereading my first paper on 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird'" (Walbert 77); and "Understand the beauty of a declarative sentence… to *state* what you think as fact: without emotion, without qualifiers, with clean punctuation: a period'" (Walbert 73). Instead of the subjunctive, the literature teacher instructs Jo to use his preferred grammatical mood, the indicative, specifically, the authoritative declarative. But there is inconsistency and violence written into the grammar of the Master's critique, inconsistent because his injunctions regarding

the declarative are actually *not* declarative statements, but imperative ones; and violent because the imperative is a mode for a conspicuous use of linguistic power, which plays out in the novel beyond the register of linguistics in the way the Master singles out and undermines his female students in class with misogynistic comments, with humor that denies their capacities as moral agents, and with violence that seizes hold of their bodily autonomy.

The Master wields his language of certainty as both a privilege and as power over his victims: "Understand the beauty of a declarative sentence… to *state* what you think as fact: without emotion, without qualifiers, with clean punctuation: a period.'" The "beauty" of the declarative for a predator like the Master is that the ability to state what you think as fact, and to be received as not only credible, but also reliable and definitive, only functions for *certain* people. There is, thus, irony and cruelty at work between the functional power of the declarative and the Master's imperative that his students see its "beauty," female students whose ability "to state what you think as fact" when it comes to the violence done against them by him he renders ineffective.[88] It is also these comments—marginalia returned with an essay grade—that set into motion the Master's strategy for isolating Jo outside the public space of the classroom. The novel mercilessly interweaves the pedagogical function of the teacher into the actions of a predator who abuses his power in order to rape and then to silence his victims: "Do not live your life in the subjunctive mood, Master said, rereading my first paper… See me Re This, he wrote across the top near my name and his C+, and knowing from the syllabus that his office hours were Tuesday… his apartment, here I was" (Walbert 73). The Master not only rapes his female

[88] The novel sets up this irony between the Master's writing advice and his predatory sexual abuse of his female students, but it is not clear if the Master himself recognizes the irony.

students; he is in control of their acquisition of the linguistic and expressive tools they will need in order to reckon with and, ultimately, to respond to this violence.

Language is thus presented as the grounds not only for emancipatory discourse, but also for subjection and epistemic violence. In one of the final episodes of *His Favorites*, Jo marshals the one tool she has against her teacher: she uses declarative language against him. The passage begins with Jo again addressing her auditor, "you." In this passage, however, Jo introduces "they," the pronoun non-specific but referring to a general class of her previous, unjust auditors. "They" acts like a chorus throughout *His Favorites.* In this passage, Jo ventriloquizes "them":

> Those were different times! … [The faculty] were encouraged to sympathize, empathize, soothe. Those girls had *problems.* And who can say why or when a buoying hug or gesture of some kind might lead to more?
>
> Aren't we all after the same thing? The human connection? The warmth?
>
> But here is where I draw the line. Here is where I stop him. Declarative.
>
> No, I say. In no moral universe would this not be a crime, I say."
>
> (Walbert 146)

There are several notable positions taken by the pronoun "they": first is the work "they" do to sympathize, excuse, and justify the actions of the Master, thereby undermining Jo's accusations. The question, "who can say why or when a buoying hug or gesture of some kind might lead to more?" takes Jo's declarative statement—"He raped me."—and turns it into a hypothetical, question, a question that acts rhetorically to dismiss Jo's declarative statement. Then there are the moral gymnastics that excuse the Master's actions because of the norms established by the time in which they occurred, or because of "those girls" and their "problems." Last, is the suggestion that the desire for "human connection" exempts the Master from any sort of culpability. This

suggestion romanticizes the Master's intentions by presenting him as someone who "just wants to be loved," instead of someone who repeatedly preys on vulnerable, underaged women (which should be reprehensible regardless of his motivations for doing it, including if that motivation includes the search for human connection). It also implies that Jo's failure to grant or to concede within the abstract that human connection is a universal human want is a deliberate withholding of empathy, for which she is also held responsible; I take up this implication and its gendered logic in Chapter Three.

What these lines imply is that it is the suggestion that empathy is due, more so, even *owed,* to a man who rapes his students alongside that stops Jo short. "Declarative," she says, the pronoun shifting to "him." "Him" hones in on the one, singular man who perpetrated the primary physical and emotional violence against her. But it also accomplishes a confluence of pronouns that belies who exactly the actions of the "they" have been protecting all along. "Declarative" is a full stop, assertive, certain, and it is a grammatical register of the indicative. It holds open no room for opposition to this very fundamental of moral claims, "In no moral universe would this not be a crime"—were it not for that final marker of indirect speech, "I say." "I say," on the lips of a survivor of sexual violence becomes a qualifying statement, a minimization, an excuse to ignore, blame, discredit, or shame. Jo's narration displays her own understanding of how unlikely it is that she will be heard by a sympathetic or understanding audience. She fears retaliation and she expects disbelief. She expects that her story will be undermined in the form of questions that assert the relativity of her truth claim, or the impossibility of her story based on identity-based prejudices. She expects this because she has experienced it.

More than this: the novel demonstrates how Jo, bereft of institutional recourse and treated as a subject incapable of conveying knowledge, is effectively cast from the register of the

indicative into the domain of the subjective—the uncertain. As a work of fiction, *His Favorites* imagines the ramifications of "being taken as a 'non-knower'" for a survivor of rape through narrative. Specifically, it links the epistemic ramifications of testimonial injustice with the material and physical ramifications of sexual violation through enforced uncertainty. Reading for uncertainty in *His Favorites* points to the precarious and conditional material state of a victim's bodily autonomy, the impossibility of her consent, the violation of her subjectivity, and the silencing of her testimony. "Truth is relative, they might have said. Yes and no, they might have said. You know girls and their imaginations, they might have said," choruses *His Favorites*'s testimonially unjust "they" (Walbert 144).

The fact of Jo's derogation into the subjunctive is played out in her interactions with the headmaster. After she has made her accusations against the Master, she faces an onslaught of the headmaster's misogynist attitudes about rape, his testimonially unjust questions and insinuations, and his pernicious ignorance about the Master's culpability. Jo finds she is stunned into silence. Unmoored by headmaster O'Connell's response, she thinks:

> What did I want to do? What should I have done? What did I do? I should have reached across that polished desk with its antique inkwell and granite paperweight… to tear those spectacles from his face… I should have smashed those spectacles to glass so fine he would never not remember how I ruined his vision—decisive, quick, imperative—and wrecked that world of his own making…
>
> "I have a busy day," O'Connell says, looking down.
>
> And that was it: rage woven into my life with steel thread.
>
> (Walbert 112-13)

The subjunctive dominates this passage—"I should have, I wanted to," a series of questions that harken back to the Master's earlier critique of Jo's writing: "Always the conditionals… Would haves, should haves, could haves: nothing claimed, nothing asserted." But Jo *has* made a claim—and her claim has been discarded, her speech has been cast into the uncertain.

In this wake of this mistreatment, Jo even imagines an act of violence: she imagines smashing the headmaster's glasses. She describes this act as "imperative," the very same grammatical mood the Master uses when he says, "Do not live your life in the subjunctive mood," a sign of his grammatical dominance over his students. But Jo's action is cast as real (an action carried out) in the fantasy of indirect discourse only. The headmaster has already cast aside Jo's attempts to use the declarative, rendering her epistemically ineffective. Whereas the Master possesses the linguistic and material resources to carry out acts of violence against his female students, Jo is powerless to stop them. The subjunctive language of her fantasy underscores how entirely bereft of recourse she is. A double negative ("never not") marking her imperative as unreal, the subjunctive is prescribed for Jo even as she narrates her account. The result, Jo tells us, is rage.

The subjunctive has epistemic and material consequences for Jo. The fact is, regardless of the language used, Jo's language is not equivalent or as effective as the Master's. The Master's imperatives carry the power to physically violate, and his questions and laughter expresses a humor that derides and dehumanizes, just as Jo's language alone cannot guarantee her physical safety *or* epistemic trust. Her recourse to the language the Master has taught her—the declarative—cannot stop the abuse she suffers at his hands:

> [H]ere is where I draw the line. Here is where I stop him. Declarative.
>
> No, I say. In no moral universe would this not be a crime, I say.

> I was a child, I tell him.
>
> There is right and there is wrong.
>
> Shame on you, I say. Shame on you, I say. Shame on you.
>
> And he laughs and reaches out for me.
>
> "You are cute as pie when you're angry," he says.
>
> "Come here," he says.
>
> "How old are you again?" he says.
>
> "Close your eyes," he says.
>
> (Walbert 146)

Whereas the Master's dialogue is clearly marked by quotations marks, Jo's, mediated as it is by her act of giving testimony, is not. Whereas the Master's dialogue is clearly demarcated as direct speech, Jo's, mediated by time and indirect speech, is not:

> I was a child, I tell him.
>
> There is right and there is wrong.
>
> Shame on you, I say. Shame on you, I say. Shame on you.

The aspect of "tell" is ambiguous: is "tell" an evocation in the past reconstructed or an evocation spoken in the present? The "is" of right and wrong, we'll note, has no temporal aspect—it *is* right and it *is* wrong. For me, the aspect of "tell" is both. It denotes a past accusation between victim and assailant, as well as iterative speech, a thing she will say again and again. The ability for "tell" to conjure a past accusation and to characterize the event of Jo's current narration speaks to the novel's continuous interweaving of the past violence with the continued injustice Jo faces in the present. This language enfolds a much broader net of complicity than can be satisfied by castigating the actions of just one man. So too the referent of "you" is ambiguous. It is clearly

and accusingly aimed at the Master, but it also reprehends the chorusing "they," whom she has conflated with "him," those who were complicit in the ways they turned away, silenced, or belittled her.

And "you" enfolds us, the reader, too, as the "you" also designates the unnamed interlocutor. At key moments throughout the novel, Jo evokes her auditor, "you," breaking the fourth wall to address this person directly. The interpellating "you" makes us complicit in this telling: "I am on the mattress in his room, the mattress on the floor. This is the first time. You asked about the first time" (Walbert 97). We are very far from "representations of rape" as "pornographic, voyeuristic, and androgenic," which Field argues characterizes much of twentieth-century American fiction before the 1970s.[89] "You" is positioned as someone outside of the narrative, who through the act of listening comes to new knowledge about *Jo*'s experience. We learn at length that it is the "you" who has occasioned Jo's exhumation of these events of her childhood. Thus, the subject position of the *interlocutor* becomes a crucial element of the calculus of these encounters. "You" is someone who must be re-oriented, snapped awake. In this dyad, the subject knows something the interlocuter doesn't, something that once known, will change the interlocutor forever.

What kind of reader, the novel seems to be asking of its reader with its ambiguous "you," will *you* be? The novel leaves this question hanging. It is not clear whether Jo's story will fall on sympathetic ears. Yet, this is a story Jo will tell again and again—because up to now no one has listened or believed her, and also because the words are still as true now as they were then: "Shame on you, I say." She repeats this declarative: "Shame on you, I say." And then, the "I say"

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[89] Field, *Writing the Survivor*, 9. "Rape is the 'loveliest of dreams,'" Field continues, "when relayed through the perspective of the rapist," with whom she argues the reader is often aligned or made to be complicit with through the act of reading (Field 9).

dropping off, Jo, the novel, and the collective host of women animating *His Favorites* declare without interlocution or indirection or mediating "he says" or "she says," "Shame on you."

Certainty, a Fragile Language

While Jo remains firm in her conviction of the wrongs done to her, *His Favorites* shows the efficacy of Jo's certainty as incredibly fragile. And, despite the hard-won successes for survivors won by anti-rape activism like #MeToo, this chapter has sought to convey the fragility of survivor speech. Jo's ability to communicate her own certainty about the truth of her claims is subject to the vagaries of the biases and motivations of people in positions of authority, her lack of social support during a time of trauma and grieving, and in the face of physical violence that, among other things, operates to destabilize and undermine her subjectivity through violation. Reading for the fragility of certainty in this context doesn't infantilize or victimize survivors of sexual violence. I'm weary of the claim, which comes at times from feminist camps too, that this sort of "victimization" is turning survivors into agentless non-actants. Instead of suggesting that the fragility of a survivor's speech indicates a moral failing or a deferring of subjectivity on her part, why don't we pay more attention to the structures in place that work to attenuate survivor speech and withhold the hermeneutical tools survivors might use to make sense of their own experiences?

Instead, the fragility of certainty in survivor testimony demonstrates the pressures of epistemic injustice as it colludes with broader networks of testimonial harm and physical violence. It is related and reliant, as Hornsby and Dotson argue, on its receiving audience, who have the power to acknowledge that certainty as truthful, or to cast it aside unjustly based on

identity-based prejudices. It speaks to the limitations of language to enact social change and to end violence. Using grammar as a literary trope, *His Favorites* asks us to *read* the languages of certainty and uncertainty as foundational components of a narrative of sexual violence. Rendered ineffective, Jo is unable to precipitate the necessary actions for putting a stop to the violence done to her and other female students at Hawthorne. Epistemic biases like testimonial injustice prey on connected modes of living—epistemic, rhetorical, material, discursive. In making the processes of testimonial injustice visible, *His Favorites* implicates, archives, and excoriates these processes for what they are: predatory, misogynistic, unacceptable.

Finally, the fragility of certainty testifies to our continued entrenchment in anti-rape activism and feminist discourses within the paradigm of credibility, by which certainty (along with victim "suitability") becomes the hallmark of credible testimony. Within this paradigm, the burden of proof is difficult to meet, as rape allegations are most often lacking in corroborating witnesses. The speaker returns to a past event to evidence the violence against her. Auditors are tasked (rightly or wrongly) with determining her credibility. The dominance of this paradigm has to do with the continued sway of legal procedures for defending an individual accused of rape: because the most common defense in rape cases is to claim that the rape was not rape but consensual sex, it behooves the defending attorney to provide the jury with enough evidence to demonstrate that the plaintiff is lying. In such situations, juror biases, prejudices and myths about rape come into play. Therefore, to speak out against violence with anything but certainty, particularly to interlocutors whose perception of a speaker's credibility hinges on subjective determinations influenced by identity-based prejudices, is to play further into a hand stacked against the speaker of sexual violence who perform in certain ways in order to be taken

seriously. The buttressing and supporting of a survivor's ability to experience and speak with certainty makes complete sense given the dominance of the paradigm of credibility.

While this chapter is centered around the dangers of uncertainty to the narratives of survivors, I want to conclude by returning to this question: what other models for reading might literature—as something distinct from a testimony given in a court of law, for example—put forward for making sense of a story of sexual or gender-based violence? This chapter demonstrates the necessity and the fragility of survivor certainty—and yet I close with the suggestion that it is uncertainty that becomes necessary for us to consider within the space of literature. Uncertainty is a capacious term. To be "uncertain" can mean to be undetermined or unestablished; to be doubtful or skeptical; ambiguous or enigmatic; to have an unfixed duration; to be variable, unsteady, or fitful; to be not confident or unassured of something.[90] What role can fiction, which operates in relation to the paradigm of credibility differently than a real-life testimony to a New York jury, for example, play in expanding this crucial and complicated epistemic necessity and felt reality within narratives of sexual or gender-based violence?

I think there is reason to theorize "uncertainty" given the discursive shifts precipitated by #MeToo. In the next chapter I look beyond #MeToo's rhetoric of certainty in the face of testimonial injustice to not-knowing, an epistemic process at work prior to states of clarity, certainty, or knowing, through a reading of narrative breakdown and domestic coercion in Carmen Maria Machado's short story, "The Husband Stitch."[91] In doing so, I develop a method for reading this uncertainty in dialogue with concepts of epistemic injustice. Reading uncertainty

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[90] All definitions come from the Oxford English dictionary's entries for "uncertain" (adj).
[91] "The Husband Stitch" is the first story of Carmen Maria Machado's 2017 short-story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (London: Graywolf Press, 2017).

as a productive site for understanding sexual subjectivity and simultaneously as a site for the potential for violence pursues one answer to the feminist assertion that we need to theorize in more depth the full "complexity" of narratives of sexual encounter, including those that end in violence. It pays attention to accounts that might not fit the dominant paradigm of credibility, and makes room for feelings that are complicated and conflicting.

His Favorites doesn't conclude with a memory of trauma, but with a memory of Jo's from "before everything, before I grew up." Jo remembers how she and Stephanie, her friend who is killed in the accident that sends Jo to Hawthorne, would sit in a magnolia tree planted on the edge of Jo's family's yard and think of their futures.[92] The passage is redolent with "we": "Look at that, we would say. We would look, talking about God knows what, nothing and everything" (Walbert 148). Translated by the narrator of the present, who can't remember exactly what she'd talked about in the past, the perspective of the scene then shifts dramatically: "Or, from a different perspective. The young girls sit high in the thick of the magnolia talking. They are difficult to see so high among its shiny green and black leaves, but know they are there" (Walbert 148-49). The need to shift perspective summons Jo's claim of having to tell her story from the Master's perspective. The girls now foreclosed, this perspective shifts the girls from "we" to "they," as the narrator balances the close of the novel between the perspective of the girls looking up, for "looking down spelled doom," and the predatory vision coming up from below:

> O, the weight of them.
>
> The weight of us.

[92] The presence of a tree here is perhaps significant, as it is a white pine tree that Stephanie collides with, having been thrown from the vehicle, which kills her upon impact.

(Walbert 149)

The novel closes with a chorus from below, the doom beneath the magnolia tree, having transformed the testimony of the first-person speaker from Jo, into "them," and "I" into "us," the final line heavy with the encroaching perspective of those who wait beneath for the girls to fall.

Afterword

In July, 2018, Professor Christine Blasey Ford wrote a confidential letter to California Senator, Diane Feinstein, accusing President Trump's Supreme Court nominee, Brett Kavanaugh, of sexual assault (Brown 2018).[93] Ford, testified in September of 2018 in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee. She spoke with certainty, both about what she could remember and what she could not. When asked by Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy about her clearest memory of that night, Ford responded, "Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the uproarious laughter between the two [men], and their having fun at my expense."[94] In October, 2018, Kavanaugh was confirmed to the United States Supreme Court.

In January, 2019, Cyntoia Brown, who served fifteen years for the murder of a man who purchased her for sex at the age of sixteen, received gubernatorial pardon.[95]

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[93] The *Washington Post* published Professor Christine Blasey Ford's story on September 16, 2018.

[94] Jamie Ducharme, "'Indelible in the Hippocampus Is the Laughter.' The Science Behind Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony," *Time Magazine* (September 27, 2018), http://time.com/5408567/christine-blasey-ford-science-of-memory/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[95] Mallory Gafas and Tina Burnside, "Cyntoia Brown is granted clemency after serving 15 years in prison for killing man who bought her for sex," CNN (January 8, 2019), https://www.cnn.com/2019/01/07/us/tennessee-cyntoia-brown-granted-clemency/index.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

In July, 2017, after pleading guilty to child pornography charges, Larry Nassar was sentenced to serve sixty years in federal prison. In January 2018, the state of Michigan sentenced Nassar to forty to 175 years in a state prison after he plead guilty to seven counts of sexual assault of minors. In February, 2018, he was sentenced to an additional forty to 125 years in prison after pleading guilty to three counts of sexual assault. The time of healing for the women Nassar violated will be just as long.

Chapter Two

In Defense of Uncertainty: "The Husband Stitch" and the Choice to Not-Know

In the folktale popularly known as "The Green Ribbon," a man and a woman marry—and they would have lived happily ever after, were it not for one unalterable feature, the wife's green ribbon.[1] The enigmatic ribbon never leaves her neck, and it is not until she is on her deathbed that the wife discloses its secret to her husband. She asks him to untie the ribbon. Once the ribbon is undone, the wife's head falls off without hesitation to the floor. The story concludes with a horrified husband, who is shocked by the truth of his beloved wife's corporeal disfigurement. A normal, happy life, is now marred by a truth grotesque, supernatural. Ghost and folk stories often have implicit warnings. Don't eat candy from strangers; don't trust any magical creature who promises supernatural powers, longevity of life, or transformation of any kind; don't go wandering into the woods alone, especially when those woods promise parlance with charismatic, talking wolves. Misplaced trust, these stories imply, leads to irreparable consequences for the unsuspecting protagonist. "The Green Ribbon," whose shocking reveal asks a reader to inhabit the mind of the horrified husband, warns about the inscrutability of intimacy, the dangers of (indeed perhaps the impossibility) of knowing even the person with

[1] The most popular print version of the folk story, "The Green Ribbon," also sometimes known as "The Velvet Ribbon," is in Alvin Schwartz's collected ghost stories children's book. See, Schwartz, "The Green Ribbon," in *In a Dark Dark Room, and Other Scary Stories* (New York: Harper Collins, 1984), 24-33. In an informal poll of my friends, which I've conducted over the course of writing this chapter, about 50% report familiarity with this story. The exact origins of "The Green Ribbon" are unknown.

whom you are most intimate. You never know what secrets she may have. The solution? Better make sure, if you can, that she has *no secrets*.

Carmen Maria Machado's "The Husband Stitch" is a short story about the perils of female bodily autonomy, female sexual desire, and intimate partner betrayal.[2] It is the story of two people, a man and a woman, who meet, have some sex, fall in love, get married, have incongruous fantasies and desires, and who raise a child together. It is also a retelling of "The Green Ribbon." Machado retells the story from the wife's point of view. Whereas the original aligns a reader with its male protagonist who, like the reader, isn't privy to the wife's secret until the end, Machado flips the original and its enigmatic portrayal of female consciousness through the unnamed wife's first-person narration.[3]

Like the construction of a patchwork quilt, the wife weaves a narrative made up of sundry stories. Machado's story is equal parts the narrator's reconstruction of her life with her unnamed male partner, which traces their courtship through the birth and maturation of their son, and the ghost and folk stories about generic women that the unnamed narrator interweaves throughout the story of her life. Fantastical and ghostly elements circulate in the both the generic stories and the wife's autobiography. The threat of ghosts, children who see toes where there should be potatoes in the aisle of a grocery store, a woman who unintentionally cooks her own liver to satisfy her husband's hunger, a narrator whose head is strung to her neck only through the

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[2] Carmen Maria Machado, *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories* (London: Graywolf Press, 2017).

[3] The characters of "The Husband Stitch" are all unnamed, and the narrator and the protagonist are one and the same. For the sake of clarity, when I refer to actions that occur within the diegesis, I refer to "the wife" or to "the husband." When I refer to "the boyfriend" or "the girlfriend" I am referring to characters specifically within the horror story, which the narrator tells us. I use "the narrator" to indicate extradiegetic actions that the narrator has taken, or inferences she draws outside the limits of the diegesis.

cording of a slight green ribbon—all inhabit "The Husband Stitch," curated by our narrator's uncanny, troubled stream of consciousness.

As I will argue, the sequence in which the narrator intersperses the generic stories with stories of her own life implies a transposition of genre: the genre of horror onto the narrative of husband and wife. This curiosity escalates in "The Husband Stitch" into a crisis of female autonomy. Placing a romance story within the genre of horror, Machado gives a sinister, malevolent patina to a lover's desire to know everything about his beloved. An inversion of the original's warning about the horror of secrets, "The Husband Stitch" warns of the impossibility of secrets—of the wife's autonomy—within intimate partner relationships. While the wife in Machado's version does not know what will happen if the ribbon around her neck is untied, what the wife *does* know is that she doesn't want her male partner, at any stage of their relationship as boyfriend, fiancé, and husband, to untie it. The ribbon is a thing that she claims as hers, whose function and meaning is a secret unknown even to herself. Trouble is, he *does*. Implicating the epistemic within the nexus of physical and emotional violation that occurs as a result of the husband and wife's conflicting desires for knowledge, intimacy, and ultimately, autonomy, I argue that what the "The Husband Stitch" also exposes is the horror of losing the ability to *not-know*.[4]

[4] Linda Martín Alcoff uses "violation" as a more expansive term than "violence": We are "concerned with violation of sexual agency," more holistically, with "subjectivity." Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2018), 12. I retain "sexual violence" when I refer to acts that involve by definition physical contact, and sexual violation to refer to emotional, verbal, and psychological dimensions. At times, both or one or the other can be at play.

This chapter engages with the concept of what it means to not-know. To not-know, as I define it, is not the opposite of knowing.[5] It is part of the process of coming *to know*—to experience, understand, and work through thoughts and/or feelings when one is not clear, certain, or knowing. Whereas to be uncertain, for example, might be a felt or affective state, to not-know is cognitive. Furthermore, the act of exercising one's cognitive ability to consider, rethink, second-guess, hesitate is a kind of agency. And, as this chapter discusses, though one might retain the cognitive ability to not-know, one's ability to exercise it as a form of agency can be taken away.

Scholars working in the field of gender and sexuality studies continue to be engaged with identifying and defining this agency as a crucial capacity for sexual beings. Joseph J. Fischel defines "co-determination" as the capability for all parties involved to "plan the existence, directions, and trajectories of their sexual relations."[6] For Fischel, co-determination stands alongside "access" as the defining factor of sexual agency.[7] Co-determination suggests that a subject has the potential to actualize a decision made from multiple options. In the socio-legal

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[5] Philosophers of moral philosophy and epistemology tend to position ignorance as the opposite of knowing. See, for example, Andrew I. Cohen "Moral Repair, Uncertainty, and Remote Effects and Causes," *Georgetown Journal of Law and Public Policy* 15 (2017): 891-907.

[6] Fischel, *Screw Consent,* 148. See also, Ann J. Cahill, "Unjust Sex vs. Rape," *Hypatia* 31 (2016): 746–61; Jennifer Nedelsky, *Law's Relations: A Relational Theory of Self, Autonomy, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press), 2011; and Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press) 2007.

[7] See, Joseph J. Fischel, *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 20. Sexual agency is not, Fischel contends in *Screw Consent*, synonymous with consent. *Screw Consent* takes aim at consent's failures of scope, sufficiency, and appositeness. Instead, Fischel instead proposes values of autonomy and access, extending theories of "access" from disability studies. Fischel intends access to "democratize and deconcentrate opportunities and experiences of intimacy and pleasure." Fischel, *Screw Consent*, 22. "Should we prioritize 'best practices for *consent*,'" he asks, "or should we prioritize instead 'best practices for *sex*' whereby we facilitate sexual literacy, access to sexual information, and access to sexual health resources, and whereby we critically interrogate sexual pressure, gender norms, drinking culture, media representations of sex, and the like?

sphere, Tanya Palmer has argued for what she calls a "freedom to negotiate" to define sexual agency.[8] Palmer's notion of freedom to negotiate "emphasizes the context in which sexual activity takes place, requiring that, at a minimum, all parties to sexual activity should have the space to *negotiate* both the fact and nature of their participation throughout the duration of that activity."[9] Palmer concludes, when a subject does not feel "free to express [her] desires," including the ability to change her mind, there is no "room to say no."[10] Add to this the sense any individual might have of "the equivalent right in others" to "sexual self-determination" and we have what Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan call "sexual citizenship": "a socially produced sense of enfranchisement and right to sexual agency."[11]

Fischel, Palmer, and Hirsch and Khan all emphasize the capability of a subject to influence an outcome, decision, or proposition based on her own desires—to act as an agent. This can include opting out of an outcome, decision, proposition, as well as opting out of the role of decision maker. One need not "call the shots," Fischel argues, in order to exercise co-determination. "Choosing to let one's partner make the choices is itself an exercise in co-determination, *as long as that choice can be revoked or revised*."[12] The ability to choose, regardless of whatever that choice may be, is critical to these formulations of sexual agency. To

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[8] Like Fischel, Tanya Palmer also argues against consent as the sole criterion for defining sexual autonomy.

[9] Palmer, "Distinguishing Sex from Sexual Violation: Consent, Negotiation and Freedom to Negotiate," in *Consent: domestic and comparative perspectives. Substantive issues in criminal law,* ed. Alan Reed, Michael Bohlander, Nicola Wake, and Emma Smith (New York: Routledge, 2017), 24 (emphasis mine). Palmer discusses women as a particular group in her study.

[10] Tanya Palmer, "Distinguishing Sex from Sexual Violation," 22.

[11] Jennifer S. Hirsch and Shamus Khan, *Sexual Citizens: A Landmark Study of Sex, Power, and Assault on Campus*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020, xvi. Hirsh and Khan's other two concepts for understanding students' experiences with sex and sexual assault are sexual projects and sexual geographies.

[12] Fischel, *Screw Consent,* 148.

not-know, the process by which one comes to the decision enacted through a choice, subtends these formulations.[13] In other words, to not-know is constitutive of knowing: to not-know is to weigh options, assess possible outcomes, recognize conflicting desires, and to evaluate the consequences of a decision, for example. To lose the ability to not-know (one's agency) would mean to be subject to form of epistemic violence.

"The Husband Stitch" conveys all this—the vicissitudes of not-knowing, its exercise as a form of agency, and the threat of its removal as an injury to one's sexual subjectivity—with one, simple question: "Don't you trust me?" A boyfriend and a girlfriend are alone in a parked car near the edge of a lake. The girlfriend, alert while her lover rests after sex, hears something on the radio. A killer has escaped from the local asylum. She is afraid. She wants to leave. The boyfriend feels differently. "Don't you trust me?" he says. They stay. This chapter is a consideration of the complex interplay of intimacy, obligation, uncertainty, and manipulation at play in this seemingly simple interaction between a boyfriend and girlfriend. While the boyfriend and the girlfriend are themselves only minor characters in "The Husband Stitch," tucked away in the genre of a horror story, the narrator cannily places the generic horror story twice within the fabric of the narrative. The story's repetition provides a reader with interpretive cues. It acts as a double for the story the wife tells about her own life: the uncanny horror story reflects the subtle processes by which intimacy and trust are leveraged into obligations against the unnamed narrator herself, the woman with the green ribbon.

Yet, as I will conclude, "The Husband Stitch" offers what is ultimately a recuperation of the narrator's ability to not-know. In reading narrative disintegration as reparative, I run against

[13] Sometimes, I'd add, the decision reached can be uncertainty or ambivalence. Knowing need not always indicate certainty.

the grain of the story's desire to warn against the impossibility of autonomy within heterosexual relationships. In doing so, it is not my intention to romanticize or ignore the compromised situation in which the wife acts. Instead, I argue that narrative breakdown in this context, the wife's reclamation of not-knowing, is a defensive move, one made in the face of situation in which her subjecthood is threatened by the husband's desire to untie the green ribbon. It foregrounds the difficulty of the wife's choice. The epistemology I trace in "The Husband Stitch," therefore, emphasizes how crucial uncertainty is for female subjectivity even—indeed especially—in conditions described by "The Husband Stitch" as nothing short of domestic horror.

Non-ideal Conditions:
Pain, Pleasure, and Female Bodily Autonomy in "The Husband Stitch"

"The Husband Stitch" was first published in *Granta* literary magazine in 2014 and is the first in Machado's 2017 short story collection, *Her Body and Other Parties*. While Machado has yet to receive much, if any, scholarly attention, her work has been unilaterally well-received in literary circles: *Her Body and Other Parties* was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award and the Nebula Award for Best Novelette. "The Husband Stitch" itself was nominated for the Shirley Jackson and Nebula Awards, awarded a Pushcart Prize Special Mention, and long-listed for the James Tiptree, Jr. Literary Award. As one reviewer notes, "that's one story nominated for the highest awards in mystery/horror, science fiction/fantasy, literary, and stories exploring

gender in significant ways," and then links Machado with other genre-bending authors like Margaret Atwood, Kelly Link, and Karen Joy Fowler.[14]

Her Body and Other Parties draws from, among others, a rich literary history of non-realist and speculative fiction, which question the real and critique its inequities through a use of the unreal.[15] In an interview with the *Paris Review*, Machado says that "[the space between reality and the fantastic is] very close to how I actually perceive the world, but turned up to a higher degree… I don't believe in anything really supernatural, but I'm attuned to what they could look like in the real world."[16] Machado's work often portrays the long-term effects and psychological ramifications of emotional abuse or manipulation as supernatural in consequence. Similarly, Machado's writing mobilizes genres like the horror and the psychological thriller to critique the ways women, in particular, are punished or devalued because of their gender. A demise of the supernatural sort might be the (unfortunate) consequence of an action that has willfully disobeyed gendered social norms. For example, a woman in a story told by the narrator of "The Husband Stitch" is killed by an undead corpse for "knowing too much."

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[14] Jerome Stueart, *Her Body and Other Parties: Stories*, by Carmen Maria Machado. *Graywolf Press*, 245 Pp., $16.00 Paper. *The Antioch Review*, vol. 76, no. 1, 2018, p. 189a.

[15] Scholars including Madhu Dubey, adrienne maree brown, and Samantha Dawn Schalk (2018), have argued that the genres of non-realist and speculative fiction have been taken up by feminists of color, in particular, to deconstruct hegemonic social structures through themes of fantasy, dystopia, and the supernatural, in order to reimagine ways of relating. Machado's connection to these traditions remains a rich opportunity for future scholarship. See, Dubey, *Black Women Novelists and the Nationalist Aesthetic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); brown, "Outro," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and brown (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 279-81; and Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)ability, Race, and Gender In Black Women's Speculative Fiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018).

[16] Lauren Kane, "Pleasure Principles: An Interview with Carmen Maria Machado," the *Paris Review* (October 3, 2017), https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2017/10/03/pleasure-principles-interview-carmen-maria-machado/. (Accessed March 27, 2020).

Machado's work is also, in general, queer and very sex-positive. Though "The Husband Stitch" concludes in an act of consensual violation—when the husband unties the wife's ribbon—the story begins with the wife's (at the time not yet a wife, but an unmarried young woman) sexual awakening.[17] It opens, "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does" (Machado 3), and it celebrates her exploration of her sexuality from this genesis. In these early stages of her sexual relationship with her partner, the narrator both expresses feelings of uncertainty familiar to new experiences ("I am not truly sure what he is going to do before he does it… I don't know what to do now," et cetera [Machado 5]), while also at times initiating and dominating their sexual encounters. Machado's irreverent and frank—and frequently poetic—representation of women's sexual agency pairs women's uncertainty as compatible with action, and flouts outdated stereotypes of female sexuality as passive or submissive: "I pull him through the trees, and when we find a patch of clear ground I shimmy off my pantyhose, and on my hands and knees offer myself up to him. I have heard all of the stories about girls like me, and I am unafraid to make more of them" (Machado 7). The wife's sexuality is informed and in dialogue with her husband, but not predicated on him alone.

While celebrated by the story, however, female sexual agency is never presented by the narrator as entirely separate from the possibilities of manipulation, coercion, or violation. The narration closely relates female pain and pleasure, at times even placing the two syntactically right next to each other: "When he tells me that he wants my mouth, the length of my throat, I teach myself not to gag and take all of him into me, moaning around the saltiness. When he asks

[17] The couple are cis-gendered. The wife's sexuality is somewhat ambiguous and perhaps best characterized as bi-curious. While her relationship with her husband is primarily heterosexual and monogamous, at times she fantasizes about a female friend. Having been told about her wife's fantasy, the husband translates her desires into a three-way with this woman, which quickly diminishes the wife's desires. More about this scene later.

me my worst secret, I tell him about the teacher who hid me in the closet until the others were gone and made me hold him there, and how afterward I went home and scrubbed my hands with a steel wool pad until they bled" (Machado 9.[18] The relationship between consensual encounter and sexual violation within these lines is not cause and effect, but narrative proximity. The two are linked by parataxis and anaphora: the first sentence relates an intimate moment between husband and wife, the second, the wife's divulging of a traumatic memory of childhood sexual abuse. Joined sequentially through parataxis, the anaphoric "when" further links these two memories. "When" marks the similarity between the two, that is, that both of the wife's actions result from desires expressed by her husband. Strictly syntactically speaking, agency and coercion become, as the wife's consent in the first sentence stands in relation to the clearly marked violation of the second sentence, harder to unwind.

The ribbon itself links sexual agency and sexual violation explicitly: the first time they kiss the narrator's partner asks her about it, and she rebuffs him. The ribbon informs one of the wife's two rules while they are dating: "We are learning, he and I. There are two rules: he cannot finish inside of me, and he cannot touch my green ribbon" (Machado 4, 7). The ribbon is component of the wife's sexuality, but the wife's ribbon is not unique to her. The women of the story all have ribbons. Men, on the other hand, do not. The women's ribbons, which appear in different places on their bodies, affect how they go about their day-to-day tasks, their comfort levels, the contours of their every-day experiences and expressions. They can cause them pain or annoyance in quotidian ways—a snag on a sewing machine, a preoccupation with prevention. This is a world that has not been built for women with ribbons. And yet these women, by virtue of all having ribbons, become co-conspirators, just as they are co-authors or co-circulators of

[18] The "he" of these sentences is the male partner.

popular folk stories throughout “The Husband Stitch.” Men, who do not have ribbons, are presented as risks.

In “The Husband Stitch,” women’s desires—whether those desires manifest themselves as sexual, gustatory, or even intellectual curiosity—often come at the cost of women’s bodies. The narrator uses folk, horror, and ghost stories, interwoven associatively, to expand upon the precarities of female sexual desire, bodily autonomy, and even, sometimes, their sanity: “I once heard a story about a girl who requested something so vile from her paramour that he told her family and they had her hauled off to a sanitorium” (Machado 4); “When I fold [my dress] into my hope chest, I think about the bride who played hide-and-go-seek on her wedding day and hid in the attic, in an old trunk that snapped shut around her and did not open. She was trapped there until she died” (Machado 11). In another example, the narrator says, “Of all the stories I know about mothers, this one is the most real” (Machado 18). What follows is a tale in which a daughter loses her mother: she returns to their hotel room after a day of vacationing to find it vacated of any trace of her mother. The townspeople claim they’ve never seen her mother and that the daughter arrived alone. A reader is left to interpret between two versions of the story the narrator presents: either the daughter is insane and never had a mother, or that she is the victim of a town cover-up, in which the town elders have quietly disposed of the mother’s diseased body to prevent hysteria among the townspeople. Which version of this story is true? (It is worth noting that in both versions of the story, having either died previously to the story or during the events of the story, the mother ceases to exist. The narrator tells this tale right about the time she herself is to become a mother.)

No episode in “The Husband Stitch” exemplifies female bodily precarity within the story more than the titular procedure, “the husband stitch,” which occurs after the wife has given birth

to the couple's first and only child.[19] The procedure is framed as a dialogue between men: "They give me something that makes me sleepy, delivered through a mask pressed gently to my mouth and nose. My husband jokes around with the doctor as he holds my hand. 'How much to get that extra stitch?' he asks. 'You offer that, right?' … The doctor chuckles. 'You aren't the first—'" (Machado 16-17). Weak from childbirth, the wife lies inert on the periphery of the men's dialogue.

Her consciousness, however, isn't required for this sort of "business," a shadowy deal made between the wife's husband and her doctor. The husband casually "jokes" about the surgical alteration of his wife's body without her knowledge or consent while simultaneously performing a gesture of spousal support as he holds her hand (Machado 9). It's an example of the close proximity of trust and betrayal, sickening for its casual discussion of bodily mutilation. The deal made between the two men exemplifies how in the story autonomy can be taken away from women in situations of vulnerability, specifically by those closest to them.[20] It is never made explicit whether or not the wife receives the husband stitch after the birth of her child. The narration departs from this event with the transition of an m dash—"'the rumor is something

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[19] "The Husband Stitch" is a euphemism for a controversial, little-discussed surgical procedure: an extra stitch to the vaginal area performed during the repair of a woman's perineum after childbirth. This extra stitch makes the vaginal opening smaller in order to increase male sexual pleasure. Information on the history of this procedure, which puts a woman at additional risk during subsequent labors, is slim to none. Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger note that research regarding men's increased sexual pleasure due to vaginal tightening is "conspicuously absent," while certain research other research suggests it may increase female pleasure. Braun and Kitzinger remain skeptical of the latter, stating: "We are not denying that a tighter vagina might increase women's sexual pleasure, but remain unconvinced that concern about tightness is primarily a concern for women." Braun and Kitzinger, "The Perfectible Vagina: Size Matters," *Culture, Health & Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (2001): 265.

[20] Perhaps this is why, in the narrator's opinion, "of all the stories I know about mothers," the one about motherhood whose two outcomes are conspiracy or insanity is "the most real" (Machado 18).

like—' '—like a vir—' And then I am awake" (Machado 17)—and never returns to the event again.[21]

In the context of this embodied vulnerability, female precarity becomes a kind of epistemology. "The Husband Stitch" crafts a gendered way of knowing that is impacted by and inseparable from an ambivalence generated by the close proximity of intimacy and trust with coercion and betrayal. The ribbon, symbolizing this precarity, separates the men of the story from the women of the story. It turns each into a site of difference and othering for the other. For example, after an argument over her ribbon, the wife thinks, "I am up for a long time listening to his breathing, wondering if perhaps men have ribbons that do not look like ribbons. Maybe we are all marked in some way, even if it is impossible to see" (Machado 21). In the next paragraph, the narrator describes how the ribbon begins to separate her as well from her young son: "The next day, our son touches my throat and asks about my ribbon. He tries to pull at it. And though it pains me, I have to make it forbidden to him. When he reaches for it, I shake a can of pennies. It crashes discordantly, and he withdraws and weeps. Something is lost between us, and I never find it again" (Machado 21). The daily concern—and sometimes a more acute threat—of unraveling becomes a way of knowing for the wife.

"Knowing" for the women of "The Husband Stitch" is itself a fraught endeavor. Women, "The Husband Stitch" insists, know things, but the things they know are often overlooked, unacknowledged, claimed by someone else, or dismissed as untrue: "Everyone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells these stories, even if they don't know them—but no one ever believes them" (Machado 5-6). "Story" can be used as an account of something that has

[21] The procedure itself reportedly produces very little physical evidence of its existence, except for strange, otherwise unexplainable discomfort felt at the alteration of one's physical form.

occurred, but "story" can also be used pejoratively, to signify that the events related skew a little bit south of the truth—that they are *just* a story. "The Husband Stitch" labors this distinction along the fault line of gender: the stories women tell are dismissed as mere hearsay, folklore, the stuff of ghost stories. The story opens with a set of parenthetical stage directions, which direct us to imagine the women's voices as "forgettable" and "interchangeable," but to imagine the men as variously "robust with his own good fortune," "like your father," "like my husband," and "gentle, rounded with the faintest of lisps" (Machado 3). There is intentional irony in this set of stage directions in which one woman is rendered and performed the same as any other women, while all the male characters are made distinct. While it is true the foregrounding of the male characters contrasts with the way the stage directions turn the female characters into indistinguishable background characters, "The Husband Stitch" also demonstrates how these diminished female characters use this collectivity to their advantage. The act of storytelling becomes a counter-discursive, community-building project for the women of its many stories, as the narrator summons up generic women through ghost and folk stories throughout. The narrator includes herself as a member of this cast of derogated speakers: "I have always been a teller of stories," she tells us.

Moments of connection between the wife and the other women in the wife's life, however, are more often than not non-verbal, or never explicitly communicated. Instead, moments of recognition flicker in the ambiguity of a pronoun or in the space of what is not said in conversation. When the wife meets with the female model from her figure-drawing class over coffee, she tells us,

> We do not discuss the specific fears of raising a girl-child. Truthfully, I am afraid even to ask. I also do not ask her if she is married, and she does not volunteer the

> information… I desperately want to know what state of need has sent her to disrobe before us, but I do not ask, because the answer would be, like adolescence, too frightening to forget. (Machado 22-23)

The narrator's reference to "adolescence" conjures another of the memories she has told, when, as a child, the narrator tells her mother about seeing toes where there should be potatoes in grocery store aisle. "Something behind the liquid of her [mother's] eyes shifted quick as a startled cat. 'You stay right there,' she said" (Machado 8). What knowledge or understanding is contained by that look, we're never privy to—perhaps it's nothing. But it is also true that instead of a dialogue between two women, the daughter's fears are extinguished by the paternal "sunbeam" of her father's "logic."

> "Most importantly," my father said, arriving triumphantly at his final piece of evidence, "why did no one notice the toes except for you?" As a grown woman, I would have said to my father that there are true things in this world observed by only a single set of eyes. As a girl, I consented to his account of the story, and laughed when he scooped me up from his chair to kiss me and set me on my way. (Machado 8-9)

It is possible to read the male figures as representing a logic of phallogocentrism, a post-structuralist term coined by Jacques Derrida to indicate the co-option of logocentrism by a masculinist or patriarchal agenda. The narrator's choice of "evidence" to describe her father's argument conjures a mode of rationality and empiricism used to counter a horror more sinister (and certainly less likely). If there is only one determinate way to know and "a final, definitive

truth" (logocentrism),[22] then phallogocentrism prioritizes the "masculine" way of knowing, and it is clearly the father's way of knowing that occupies the position of determinism. Yet, in a story concerned generically with the intrusion of the horrific and the supernatural into the every-day, I think that it is less the fact that these male narratives equal the instantiation of one, decisive, (and male-generated) way of knowing, than it is the fact that the intrusion of the father's logic disrupts the potential for the sharing of connection between two women, the daughter and her mother.[23] What stirs and startles the mother at her daughter's revelations remains unspoken.

Similarly, the husband intrudes upon an incipient connection between the wife and the woman with the red ribbon. Misrecognizing the woman with the red ribbon for what she actually is, a sexual rival, the husband instead inserts her instead into his own "exhaustive fantasy," which the wife imagines contains a sexual scenario in which "she and I are together, or perhaps both of us are with him" (Machado 23). The husband's insertion of himself into a narrative that doesn't actually include him causes the wife a great deal of shame. It causes her to terminate her relationship with the woman: "I feel as if I have betrayed her somehow, and I never return to the class" (Machado 23). Even unintentionally, these male characters stymy the possibility for connection between women, whether that connection be grounded in knowledge, physical intimacy, or shared experiences. The intrusion of their narratives, whether that be the narrative of rationality and realism in the face of child's fears or a male heterosexual fantasy, stoppers the

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[22] Felski, *Literature After Feminism* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), 73. For "phallogocentrism," see, Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, corrected ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), chapter two.

[23] I also think clumping all of the different forms of male "intrusion" under one heading in this case does a disservice to variety within these epistemes. I've chosen throughout to use the phrase "male-generated" instead of masculine to denote that these narratives aren't inherently "masculine," but that the come from male-identifying characters and that they interrupt female-generated narratives (not feminine narratives).

potential for narrative development between these women. In some cases, such as the conversation between the male doctor and the husband about the husband stitch, it threatens to dangerously alter the wife's physical form, while simultaneously drowning out her speech: "'Please,' I say to him. But it comes out slurred and twisted and possibly no more than a small moan. Neither man turns his head toward me" (Machado 17).

Into the absences produced by the intrusion of these male-generated narratives, the ghost, horror, and folk stories of "The Husband Stitch" proffered by our narrator communicate very explicitly. Not many of these stories have happy endings. They are stories of death, dismemberment, self-mutilation, insanity. They communicate warnings: the dangers of female bodily precarity and the impossibility of female autonomy within heterosexual, patriarchal structures, epitomized by the titular "husband stitch." These stories circulate as the narrator's method for sharing knowledge specific to women (the central figures of these stories are all women and it always these women who suffer the consequences that provide the story's moral). Historically excluded from the public sphere, marginalized groups have found alternate ways of engaging in public discourse by creating feminist counter-public spheres, what Nancy Fraser defines as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."[24] Yet while the stories' morals are fairly straightforward and hard to misconstrue, the counter-discourse the narrator produces by collecting generic stories is a careful one. The genericization of the women within these stories protects any individual

[24] Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text* no. 25/26 (1990): 67. Fraser extends the concept of the "counter public sphere" from Felski's *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics: Feminist Literature and Social Change* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989). See, chapter five, "Politics, Aesthetics, and the Feminist Public Sphere," especially.

woman from identification, and as the origins of folk stories are notably difficult to trace, their provenance and their original speakers and subjects remain anonymous. The girlfriend of the horror story with which this chapter is, we'll recall, anonymous, a generic "girlfriend." In this way, the circulating stories can speak pointedly without pointing back to their speaker.

"The Husband Stitch" portrays a host of reasons for why the creation of counter-discourses for its female characters becomes necessary. Sometimes, the lack of a counter-discourse can have dire consequences, such as in the case of the surgical procedure known as the husband stitch. There is little to no determinate information about the procedure, and the story dramatizes it by staging the event as a matter of overheard conversation, to which the wife is a central "participant" but a less than peripheral figure of consultation or authority. But not least of these reasons is the devaluation of women's speech and the backgrounding of women's individuality into the generic "women," established by the opening stage directions. Male speech and male narrative arcs are over-valued, as evidenced by the opening stage directions, the finality and singularity of the father's interpretation of the daughter's story, and the husband's unrestrained re-storying of the wife's narrative of the woman with the red ribbon.

Feminist epistemologists have argued that the damage done by long-term, repeated derogation has consequences that can be registered epistemically, and epistemic injustices operate in relation to narratives of sexual or gender-based violence often by enforcing certainty's opposite: uncertainty, precarity, and vulnerability.[25] Indeed, Chapter One focused on the ways anti-rape activism, whose discourse has been channeled by novels like *His Favorites*, has combatted this derogation of women who speak out about sexual or gender-based violence

[25] Kristie Dotson, "Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing," *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 26, no. 2 (2011): 243.

through a rhetoric of certainty. Chapter One addressed the epistemic consequences of "testimonial injustice," an identity-based prejudice that "causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker's word."[26] The result of processes like Fricker's testimonial injustice is a form of epistemic violence, and Fricker concludes that, unable to communicate the reality of their experiences to others, these individuals effectively become categorized as non-knowers. What damage might this do to subjectivity? "One can imagine," Kristie Dotson writes, "circumstances in which one's intellectual courage is undermined through routinely being taken as a 'non-knower' as a result of social perceptions of one's identity." In this situation, one might risk, we can imagine, being forced into a position of uncertainty.

The effects of epistemic violence also have hermeneutical consequences. Fricker calls the process by which the resources an individual might need in order to make sense of her experiences are deliberately withheld "hermeneutical injustice." "Hermeneutical injustice," writes Fricker, "occurs at a prior stage [to testimonial injustice], when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences." It "is caused by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources."[27] When certain social groups are prevented from participating in the collective practice of making social meaning, they become "hermeneutically marginalized."[28] Thus, "situated hermeneutical inequality" occurs when this group's "social situation is such that a collective hermeneutical gap prevents them in particular from making sense of an experience which it is strongly in their interests to render intelligible."[29] In "The Husband Stitch," narrative

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[26] Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.
[27] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 1.
[28] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 6.
[29] Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, 7.

becomes another resource withheld from the women of the story. Narrative possibilities between women are stoppered up, blocked, frustrated, ignored, or interpreted over within the story of the wife's life. As a result, the story also represents the risk of a dearth of stories told by women to women.

The narrator counters by interweaving generic stories into her own to maintain a circuitry of story for women. She places scenes from her own life that present the close intermingling of pain and pleasure alongside stories with very candid warnings about the demise of women. These stories dwell in uneasy proximity to each other. For example, the narrator tells the story about the daughter who loses her mother (explained either by the loss of her sanity or a town conspiracy) right after the description of the birth of her own son—and the conversation between her husband and her doctor about the husband stitch. How we consider how she experiences motherhood looks differently based on the proximity of this subsequent story—the story she claims is the one about motherhood that is the "most real." Placed next to each other, the subsequently told folk story backgrounds the wife's feelings of joy about the birth of her son, which she expresses explicitly when describing the birth. Instead, it foregrounds the horror of uncertainty regarding whether she received the extra stitch or not, and it calls into question the wife's understanding of category of motherhood. The effect of this juxtaposition might provoke in a reader a form of what C. Namwali Serpell calls "literary uncertainty," a combination of "ethically disturbing content" and "radically structured," formal uncertainty.[30]

What are we to do with this seemingly incongruous juxtaposition? As with the sentences relating the memories of both consensual intimacy and childhood sexual abuse, the relationship

[30] C. Namwali Serpell, *Seven Modes of Uncertainty* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9. Serpell specifically describes uncertainty that is provoked in the reader (as opposed to in a character or in the implied author).

between the two stories becomes in this case not cause and effect, but narrative proximity. The proximity of these two stories of motherhood tie the two together. This narrative technique allows the narrator to transpose the genre of horror or psychological thriller (depending on which version of the story about motherhood you choose) onto her own story of intimate partnership. The transposition isn't explicit, just as the identities of the generic women aren't specific, but it's implied. It's present. The effect is a formal demonstration of how the wife must work against the dominant narratives at her disposal in order to understand her own experiences. She must deploy the genre of horror as a hermeneutic instead. "I don't need to tell you the moral of this story," says the narrator coyly as she concludes the folk story about motherhood. "I think you already know what it is" (Machado 19).

As it turns out, the wife will need this hermeneutic to make sense of the final act of the story, when she consents to her own unravelling:

> We fall asleep exhausted, sprawled naked in our bed. When I wake up, my husband is kissing the back of my neck, probing the ribbon with his tongue. My body rebels wildly, still throbbing with the memories of pleasure but now bucking against betrayal […]
>
> "Do you want to untie the ribbon?" I ask him. "After these many years, is that what you want of me?"
>
> His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. "Yes," he says. "Yes."
>
> Resolve runs out of me. I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and the end of all his desires all etched there. He is not a bad man, and

> that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all… and yet
>
> […]
>
> "Then," I say, "do what you want."
>
> (Machado 30)

This consensual violation dramatizes the deeply ambivalent conditions of "The Husband Stitch."[31] Intimacy is implicated. The wife weighs the cost of her husband's desire to untie the ribbon and she is filled with ambivalence. The ellipsis hovers between the phrase, "He is not a bad man at all… and yet," a typographical marker of her deeply conflicted feelings and a condemnation of the husband's persistent pushing of his wife's one remaining rule. The wife's ambivalence complicates the attribution of agency. She has portrayed her relationship with her husband as constituted by both pleasure and desire as well as violation and manipulation.

The result is narrative breakdown: she isn't able to conclude the story. "The ribbon falls away. It floats down and curls on the bed, or so I imagine, because I cannot look down to follow its descent" (Machado 30-31). "Or so I imagine" indicates the transition away from determinate knowledge, her speculation a consequence of a literal losing/loosing of her head. And then:

> If you are reading this story out loud, you may be wondering if that place my ribbon protected was wet with blood and openings, or smooth and neutered like the nexus between the legs of a doll. I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry.

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[31] Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to discuss, Fischel's critique of consent as the sole category for judging the difference between violative and non-violative sex applies to this scene. Because the category of consent is insufficient according to Fischel to encourage an active, healthy, thriving sexual culture, and to militate against sexual violation, Fischel proposes asking these questions instead: "why are we consenting to bad sex?", "what went wrong?", and "how as a society can we make sex better?" See, Fischel, *Screw Consent*, 20.

(Machado 31)

The narrator's professed lack of knowledge about her own body is strange and unsettling, as she presents her body as either wounded and permeable or mechanical and sterile. The conditional "if" unsettles the relationship between subject and auditor, marking the narrator agnostic about the eventuality of any auditor to her story; such an event is a conditional (and not an assumed or inevitable) encounter. The mechanics of storytelling follow the undone ribbon, unraveling into an epistemic ellipsis, an ellipsis perhaps uncanny to the material ellipsis residing between the wife's phrase, "He is not a bad man at all… and yet." "The Husband Stitch" thus frames the wife's demise as a dual matter of female bodily autonomy and lack of narrative resolution. Literally unmade in this moment of forgetting, "The Husband Stitch" ends as the narrator thinks, "As my lopped head tips backward off my neck and rolls off the bed, I feel as lonely as I have ever been" (Machado 31).

Were this not a horror story, a lover's desire to know his beloved would signal the apotheosis of romance. In this ascendance, intimacy becomes the marriage of sexuality and knowledge. But things are not as they should be in this world, and to be known has two different connotations: to be known in this story is, on the one hand, the narrative of a life shared between a loving husband and wife. '"I feel like I know so many parts of you,"' the husband says the day they become engaged, '"And now, I will know all of them"' (Machado 9). On the other hand, to be known in this story is to be invaded, evacuated—to have nothing that belongs only to yourself, to have no secrets. In this way, the pursuit of knowledge and a lover's desire for intimacy becomes complicit in the horror waiting at the end of the story. As a result of her partner's desire for intimate knowledge about her, the wife feels "lonely." Knowledge in "The

Husband Stitch" isn't abstract or immaterial. It is gendered. It has currency. It can be extracted just like anything else.[32]

For the husband to know his wife in this way, the story suggests, means that she will lose some part of herself. The conflict between their two desires escalates into questions of ownership and narrative rights:

> "Come back here," he says.
>
> "No," I say. "You'll touch my ribbon."
>
> He stands up and tucks himself into his pants, zipping them up.
>
> "A wife," he says, "should have no secrets from her husband."
>
> "I don't have any secrets," I tell him.
>
> "The *ribbon.*"
>
> "The ribbon is not a secret; it's just mine."
>
> "Were you born with it? Why your throat? Why is it green?"
>
> I do not answer.
>
> He is silent for a long minute. Then,
>
> "A wife should have no secrets."
>
> My nose grows hot. I do not want to cry.
>
> "I've given you everything you have ever asked for," I say. "Am I not allowed this one thing?"
>
> "I want to know."
>
> "You think you want to know, but you don't."

[32] For another reading of spousal curiosity related to the epistemic, see Felski's reading of Colette's "The Hidden Woman," in *Literature After Feminism*, 71-75.

> "Why do you want to hide it from me?"
>
> "I'm not hiding it. It just isn't yours."
>
> (Machado 20-21)

Where the wife has seen the ribbon as something that is hers, the husband sees something that is kept from him. The husband's claim is one of ownership, a desire to *know*, the wife's an obligation to meet that desire. As I will argue in the next section, this obligation doesn't require her to co-determine their relationship. In fact, it actively works to remove her ability to do so. The method of extraction in this situation is trust, intimacy, love—all the hallmarks of a good relationship. These hallmarks have been leveraged through a logic that looks, on second glance, a lot like manipulation. The original story, "The Green Ribbon," warned of the possibility of ever really knowing even those closest to you. In contrast, "The Husband Stitch" uses this logic to warn of the impossibility of secrets, of having anything, even one's own narrative, just for oneself. Perhaps that is why the wife is "lonely" as she loses her head: she has lost some part of herself.

"Don't You Trust Me?"

The narrator's hermeneutic of horror connects the final story of "The Husband Stitch"—the wife's unraveling—with its penultimate tale, a generic horror story about a boyfriend and a girlfriend who go "parking." The generic story concludes when the boyfriend and girlfriend meet their implied demise at the hands of a hook-handed murderer, who has escaped from a nearby insane asylum. The terms and outcomes established by the penultimate horror story frame the stakes for the final episode through parallels. The narrator makes these parallels herself,

introducing the horror story as "a classic, a real classic, that I haven't told you yet" (Machado 28). Except for she *has* told us this story before. In fact, she told us within first few pages of "The Husband Stitch." When the narrator first introduces this story she and her boyfriend, in a car, have just had sex for the first time "at a lake with a marshy edge," much like the lake in the generic story (Machado 5). The girlfriend is, as the narrator alludes in the opening stage directions, which prompt us to distinguish between male and female characters, "interchangeable with" the narrator herself (Machado 3). "A boyfriend and a girlfriend went parking. Some people say this means kissing in a car, but *I know the story. I was there*" (Machado 28, emphasis mine). The narrator has thus positioned herself from the beginning of "The Husband Stitch" as the subject of both a horror story and a domestic drama, reinforcing the uncanny doubling of women's voices and women's stories throughout. "*Anything could be out there in the darkness,* I think. A hook-handed man. A ghostly hitchhiker. An old woman summoned from the repose of her mirror by the chants of children. Everyone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them—but no one ever believes them" (Machado 5-6).

The parallels between the wife and the generic girlfriend continue. The radio on, post-intercourse, the generic couple hears the news about the escaped killer:

> "We should go," she said.
>
> "Nah," the boyfriend said. "Let's do that again. I've got all night."
>
> "What if the killer comes here?" the girl asked. "The asylum is very close."
>
> "We'll be fine, baby," the boyfriend said. "Don't you trust me?"
>
> The girlfriend nodded reluctantly.

This story is familiar to us, has been told to us before, yet it is still strange, reaching us like a distorted echo. And, like a bad dream, we are yanked out of the story just before the climax:

> "Well then—" he said, his voice trailing off in that way she would come to know so well. He took her hand off her chest and placed it onto himself. She finally looked away from the lakeside. Outside, the moonlight glinted off the shiny steel hook. The killer waved at her, grinning.
>
> I'm sorry I've forgotten the rest of the story.
>
> (Machado 28-29)

If we can transpose the genre of horror forward onto the final story of domestic drama in which the wife loses her head, then we can transpose domestic drama backward onto the horror story. The boyfriend's lines are classic horror-story gimmicks: "What could go wrong?" a character says in this genre with an insouciance that ironically foreshadows his prompt disposal by whichever ghoul, serial killer, or home invader populates the generic horror story.

And yet the confluence of these lines with a scene of domestic drama casts into the sharp relief the implications of these lines within the horror story. Manipulation works subtly within the generic couple's dialogue: "Don't you trust me?". The boyfriend, dismissive of what he thinks is just a story, or, at the very least, a story that is very unlikely to affect them, poses the question using a negative construction,[33] and flippantly (some might say flirtatiously) uses the suggestion that the girlfriend might *not* trust him to achieve his desired aims. As he has framed the conversation, his role means that he is *owed* trust, just as it is her duty as his partner to trust him. The parameters of the question falsify that question's ostensible intent by adhering to a logic designed to elicit only one answer: *yes*.

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[33] As opposed to the unqualified construction, "Do you trust me?".

Is a question a question when it doesn't operate with the potential for more than one answer or logical outcome? Is a question a question when it does not operate under the condition that it can be refused? The function of this question in this context is almost nonsensical; the question itself is simply rhetorical. For the girlfriend to negate the question, within this framework, would be to call into question the foundation of their relationship, trust. More so, if the girlfriend's answer is predetermined by the strictures of the "question," then she has not chosen to answer affirmatively. If her consent is an outcome that has already been determined by her interlocutor (and it's an outcome that works in her partner's favor) she hasn't really chosen anything at all. The answer could be "Yes," or "No," or "Bears," or "Only on Wednesdays." The answer itself is irrelevant so long as it corresponds with the questioner's predetermined answer. By posing a question that denies all outcomes other than the desired outcome—"yes"— the boyfriend's question simultaneously seeks to foreclose the girlfriend's ability to make up her own mind—to co-determine the relationship.[34] Her "yes" becomes a mere formality. Such a question leaves no room—indeed, actively militates against any room—for her to express affective uncertainty or to engage in agential not-knowing. This kind of a question isn't interrogative. It is imperative.[35]

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[34] It's not necessarily the case that the boyfriend is actively motivated by shutting down the girlfriend's ability to think for herself. However, the question participates in this larger discursive structure in which trust is leveraged against the female participant because it is *owed.*

[35] The scene I describe here is a significant one for the story, but the exchange I focus on in particular—"Don't you trust me?"—is not necessarily foregrounded by the text within this scene. The dialogue is more like latent content. However, these are issues that I think are important to Machado's development as a writer; Machado explores the question of the question within the context of domestic abuse explicitly in her 2019 memoir about emotional domestic abuse within same-sex partnerships, *In the Dream House*: "She gets close to you, you can smell something sour on her breath. 'Who are you thinking about,' she says. It is phrased like a question but isn't" (Machado, *In the Dream House: A Memoir.* Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2019, 80-81).

Just as a question that seemingly invites but ultimately enforces participation is a command and not a question, so too an epistemology that decrees the inevitability of a loss of autonomy ("a wife should have no secrets") is one that forecloses the potentially productive epistemic capacities of the wife: either to arrive at certainty *through* uncertainty, or to refuse to engage at all with the question as it has been posed. Desire becomes transmuted into obligation. The boyfriend is "owed" his girlfriend's trust; the husband is "owed" the knowledge of his wife's green ribbon. This logic forecloses her ability to consider multiple outcomes, to make up her own mind. It closes off room to demur, defer, or negate the question. This construction is particularly pernicious because it capitalizes upon the ambivalence generated by the proximity of the wife's pain and pleasure, and the ambiguity created by her inability to disentangle intimacy and trust from her feelings of obligation and ultimate betrayal, in order to turn desire into obligation. Such obligations flourish in and reinforce the conditions in which only damaging forms of uncertainty can be expressed, in which women's stories are not viewed as authoritative accounts, nor their speakers as creditable witnesses; "Everyone knows these stories—that is, everyone tells them, even if they don't know them—but no one ever believes them" (Machado 6). They are symbiotic and mutually reinforcing of the story's portrayal of non-ideal conditions within intimate partnerships.

Under these conditions, the final horror story and the final episode of the narrator's life conclude in the same way, with the demise of the female character. As in the horror story, her demise is precipitated by the generic boyfriend's question, "Don't you trust me?".[36] Both of

[36] Curiously enough, the wife frames her question to the husband without the negative construction: "'Do you want to untie the ribbon?' I ask him. 'After these many years, is that what you want of me?' His face flashes gaily, and then greedily, and he runs his hand up my bare breast and to my bow. 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes'" (Machado 30). The difference between their two "yeses" speaks to their differing capacities to co-determine the relationship.

these stories also conclude with narrative disintegration. The horror story concludes, “Outside, the moonlight glinted off the shiny steel hook. The killer waved at her, grinning. I’m sorry I’ve forgotten the rest of the story” (Machado 29). The wife’s narrative concludes, “For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry” (Machado 31). Having provided the sought-after response, the girlfriend’s acquiescence to her boyfriend’s desires seals the couple’s fate. The hook-handed murderer, this character in “just a story,” arrives despite the boyfriend’s nonchalance and doubt, malevolent and extant all the same.

The warning of “The Husband Stitch” is the premise of inevitable unravelling—and with it the loss of the possibility of not-knowing. It becomes impossible within these conditions for the wife to be able to say “no.” Was the story always doomed to end this way? Is the loss of the wife’s head a crisis, or is it an inevitability? This is, after all, a horror story. I have argued that the warning of the original tale, “a wife should have no secrets,” is a logic that “The Husband Stitch” repudiates through revision. “The Husband Stitch” shows this logic to be extractive, and doubly implicated in its use of intimacy and trust by which it leverages its influence over a partner. Yet the warning risks auguring *inevitable* demise: the husband’s desires were always extractive; the husband was always going to get what he wanted; and the wife was always going to have to give what he wanted.

I think we have reason to mistrust this form of interpretation, by which theories of inevitability and absolutes determine outcomes. This discourse risks conflating structural embeddedness and systematic execution of social ills like misogyny with the inevitability of these ills. It is all the more important to revisit this question because the conclusion of inevitable demise accords, I think, with a current proclivity within contemporary cultural discourse to read the state of heterosexual intimate partner relations as more than deeply structurally flawed. These

conclusions posit inevitable failure. They risk nullifying the possibility of Fischel's co-determination, Palmer's freedom to negotiate, and Hirsch and Khan's sexual citizenship.

Eve Cherniavsky identifies similar concerns in relation to the kinds of contemporary discourse around sexuality and violence amplified after the event of #MeToo. She writes that "[t]he peculiar achievement of #MeToo as an exercise in feminist world building is to expose the deeply dystopian character of lived heterosexual relations."[37] According to Cherniavsky, one of the outcomes of #MeToo has been an airing of a (perceived) "fundamental awareness" that coercion "governs [women's] orientation to sexual contact and preempts their capacity to say (and perhaps even to know) what they want."[38] #MeToo, in this sense, has not only exposed the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence. It "symptomatiz[es] a situation… in which women routinely conceive that they cannot say no and therefore, I would add, can never really mean 'yes.'"[39] As further, anecdotal evidence, I will add that whenever I teach this story, a strong vocal contingent of my students—understandably I think, although I disagree—read "The Husband Stitch" story as an indictment against even the possibility of heterosexual intimate partner relationships without coercion.[40]

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[37] Eva Cherniavsky, "Keyword 1: #MeToo," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 30, no. 1 (2019): 22. For Cherniavsky (and for myself), this orientation is a felt condition, as opposed to an actual condition. I make my position clearer in the argument that follows.

[38] Eva Cherniavsky, "Keyword 1: #MeToo," 21.

[39] Cherniavsky, "Keyword 1: #MeToo," 21-22. This entire of issue of *differences*, titled "Sexual Politics, Sexual Panics" is devoted to a concern regarding a paucity of what the editor of the issue describes as "feminist political optimism" (Robyn Weigeman, "Introduction: Now, Not Now," *differences* 30 no. 1 [2019]: 1-14). In popular culture, Masha Gessen has been a strong critic of this perspective. See: Masha Gessen, "Al Franken's Resignation and the Selective Force of #MeToo," The *New Yorker* (December 7, 2017). Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/al-franken-resignation-and -the-selective-force-of-metoo.

[40] Machado herself gives her view of heterosexuality in a tweet about the 2019 television series, *Shrill*, "Heterosexuality is both a trap and a prison."@carmenmmachado, Twitter (March 24,

No story open to this interpretation took the public by storm at this time quite like "Cat Person" did. Authored by the then relatively unknown author, Kristen Roupenian, the story was published in a December issue of the *New Yorker* roughly two months after #MeToo exploded onto the world stage.[41] "Cat Person" landed within a #MeToo public already awash with testimonies about sexual or gender-based violence. Roupenian's characters, the college-aged Margot, and the older, working Robert, are fairly ordinary. Robert is standoffish and Margot is jejune. They meet randomly when Margot sells Robert concessions before he sees a movie, flirt via text, and ultimately go on a date that ends in consensual (although bad and certainly not enthusiastically consented to) sex. Margot knows during her sexual encounter that she doesn't want to see Robert again, and she feels relief once he's dropped her off at her dorm after the date. After Margot ghosts him, the story concludes with an onslaught of Robert's misogynist, drunken, text-message invectives. The last word is his text, "'whore.'"

The extremity of Robert's outburst is incongruous with his previous behavior toward Margot. He has at times acted paternal/paternalistic toward her, rewarding her with affection when she has demonstrated vulnerability or need for him—for example, when she cannot get into the bar he takes her to because she is underage, she cries and he comforts her—but he has not been outwardly aggressive prior to the text messages ending the story. Yet the effect Robert's final word has is to be both shocking and familiar. Of course this is how he responds. How could it have been any other way, many readers wondered.

2019), https://twitter.com/carmenmmachado/status/1109802184101765122. One has the sense this tweet is simultaneously tongue-in-cheek and serious.

[41] Kristen Roupenian, "Cat Person," the *New Yorker* (December 11, 2017). Available at: https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/12/11/cat-person. "Cat Person"'s success made Roupenian a literary phenomenon. A full collection of short stories, titled *You Know You Want This: "Cat Person" and Other Stories*, was published in January of 2019, to little praise.

The degree to which one believes Robert has "revealed" himself during his final outburst as misogynist prompts a reader to return to the beginning of the story to search for red flags auguring this behavior. The final word influences a reader's judgment when distinguishing in retrospect whether Robert's behavior toward Margot is paternal or paternalistic. Could we have seen this coming, some of my students have wondered aloud in class. Was Robert's latent misogyny always lurking right beneath his tepid (to my mind, deeply self-conscious) surface? Margot's experience spoke to something many female readers felt they *already knew*:

> So @griccardi_ & I were texting crazily about why that Cat Person short story went viral, and our theory is as follows […]
>
> 4. The man in the story isn't an easily recognizable "villain" in the parlance of the usual relationship archetypes. He's not an outright dick/fuccboi/man in a position of power l. His most obvi flaw is his cluelessness
>
> 5. AND YET! As nonthreatening as he is on paper, his are [sic] and his size and his gender still give him a kind of power that terrifies almost all women. We can't explain why, but we have felt it before[.][42]

"AND YET!" turns like a volta, telescoping one word—"whore"—into a broader pattern of disrespect. It shifts us from the reality of Robert the individual to "Robert" the symbol, the cog within the larger structure of misogyny or the secret, lurking misogynist within, a kind of Hyde to Robert's Jekyll.

There are many (unfortunate) reasons for why "Cat Person" resonated with so many female readers, not least because of its portrayal of the sad state of female pleasure; Margot

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[42] @delai_cai, Twitter (December 10, 2017), https://twitter.com/delia_cai/status/939999784626278400.

appears to lack the language and the ability to express what she wants sexually, including a desire to stop their sexual encounter before it comes to intercourse.

> Looking at him like that, so awkwardly bent, his belly thick and soft and covered with hair, Margot thought: oh, no. But the thought of what I would take to stop what she had set in motion was overwhelming; it would require an amount of tact and gentleness that she felt was impossible to summon. It wasn't that she was scared he would try to force her to do something against her will but that insisting they stop now, after everything she'd done to push this forward, would make her seem spoiled and capricious, as if she'd ordered something at a restaurant and then, once the food arrived, had changed her mind and sent it back.[43]

In short, Margot feels shame. On top of this, the story percolates with her underlying fears and then subsequent anxieties about the legitimacy of those fears.[44] As Robert's text, "whore," lands heavily and incisively, there is little room for redemption (for Margot or for Robert) at the end of "Cat Person." Robert's slur is incisive not because it's particularly creative or cunning, and, if we choose to ignore the fact that it's a slur, not even at all accurate in the occupational sense. It's incisive because it's so common. "Cat Person" is the story of an average, quotidian encounter. It's a bad date and it ends badly. It's not the exception, but the rule. That's the horror, and that's the point. It works based on frequency, which turns into familiarity. Thus, readers who retrospectively (and, arguably, rightly so) return to look for red flags that might predict the

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[43] Roupenian, "Cat Person," in *You Know You Want This: "Cat Person" and Other Stories* (New York: Scout Press, 2019), 88.

[44] "Before five minutes had gone by, [Margot] became wildly uncomfortable, and, as they got on the highway, it occurred to her that [Robert] could take her someplace and rape and murder her; she hardly knew anything about him, after all." Roupenian, "Cat Person," 80.

outcome of Robert and Margot's relationship participate in what begins to look like an interpretive loop: the inevitability of misogyny.[45]

In a contemporary context embroiled in growing concerns about "the deeply dystopian character of lived heterosexual relations," "Cat Person" and "The Husband Stitch" summon up fears about the inevitability of Robert's last word, "whore," and the inevitability of the wife's final loneliness in "The Husband Stitch" that follows the loss of her head. Margot's silence in the face of Robert's text-message screed at the end of "Cat Person" recalls the silences in "The Husband Stitch," the overwriting of narratives told by first-person female narrators or from third-person narrators who inhabit the point of view of a female character with male-generated scripts. Within this framework, it is reasonable to read the wife's narrative breakdowns as yet another interruption of the potential for connection between women—this time, perhaps, between a female narrator and her female audience—by the male-generated script of female obligation and male satisfaction. The wife yields, as she has in many of the scenarios she relates, to her husband's desires, which stand in direct contrast to her own desires to protect her well-being and physical autonomy.

Yet, while the wife's end is a demise and while the situation is fitting of all the conventions of horror, it is not inevitable. The fact of "The Husband Stitch" itself belies this premise if inevitability. If the narrator's demise were absolute, *we couldn't have a story at all*—and we needn't take the narrator's final claim of forgetting as an epistemological dead end. The wife's demise is the result of a *discursive bind*, a bind that is exemplified by the boyfriend's question, "Don't you trust me?", and whose outcome is dramatized by the loss of the wife's head. Discourse is socially constructed—which means it can't be inevitable, just as, given the

[45] And for my part, I believe it's a reading supported by the story.

fact that we have "The Husband Stitch" in the first place, the wife's demise can't be wholly and completely totalizing. This also means, at least within the domain of narrative, it can be changed. Presenting only the façade of choice, the discursive bind within "Don't you trust me?" controls for the one response it requires. In this sense, it operates successfully through *the removal* of productive forms of not-knowing. It assures the response it requires—"yes"—by freighting any other response with the weight of negating the validity of the relationship between partners.

In the face of consensual violation, the wife cleaves to not-knowing. When a question isn't a question because it doesn't operate with the potential for more than one answer or logical outcome; when a question isn't a question because it does not operate under the condition that it can be refused—the way out of this bind is to refuse to answer the question, to opt, in refusing to continue to narrate, for uncertainty, for an epistemological ellipsis. And this is just how the narrator concludes both the story of the girlfriend and the boyfriend, *and* the story of her own life: "I'm afraid I can't tell you, because I don't know. For these questions and others, and their lack of resolution, I am sorry" (Machado 31). This form of not-knowing, as a function of knowledge-making, of sexual agency, and of the wife's own subjectivity, all hinges around her ability to express her uncertainty, expressions that accrete around the act of narration. The story's arrival at a place of unresolvable uncertainty may in some ways be exactly the point.

"The Husband Stitch" is rife with not-knowing and states of uncertainty. I have defined not-knowing as an epistemic process that works in order to achieve states of clarity, certainty, or knowing (which can include knowing that you don't know, or that you know that you are uncertain about whether or not you know). This process is constitutive of knowing and constitutive of the production of sexual agency. The narrative itself is a discursive act of not-knowing, bringing this process to life through the narrator's act of narration. It appears formally:

the narrator qualifies her own knowledge with "maybes." The narration itself is structured by meta-fictional stage directions that are qualified throughout by "if" and bracketed by parentheticals, and of course it "fails" in critical moments of narrative diegesis by breaking down entirely. Unreliable declarations are belied by uncanny doubling and repetition. The story juxtaposes pain and pleasure to explain the wife's ambivalence, establishes comparisons that contradict each other, and refuses to resolve its hermeneutical puzzles. And it characterizes the narrator's relationship with the most important symbol of "The Husband Stitch": the wife does not know what will happen if the green ribbon around her neck is untied.

I have argued that these uncertainties at the levels of form, interpretation, and epistemology posit the importance of representing the "necessary ambiguity to the truth about our experiences" and the uneasy dwellings within experiences of sexual violation.[46] But I also offer such that narrative uncertainties foreground not-knowing, which becomes the point not because it is a priori better to not-know, but *because* it is the wife's ability to co-determine an intimate sexual relationship that is distinctly threatened in the discursive bind presented by "Don't you trust me?". Such a reading is inseparable from the conditions under which her autonomy is threatened. In this way, "The Husband Stitch" both warns and resists: It warns us against the loss of the ability to not-know by giving us horror. Yet it resists utter demise through the act of storytelling—an utterly uncertain telling of story. When threatened with a question in which sexual subjectivity and dialogic engagement are prohibited by the terms of the negotiation, the narrator revokes the question. She chooses not-knowing.

Conclusions, and a Coda for Consent

[46] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 61.

This chapter has argued that without not-knowing, without the ability to change one's mind, to feel ambivalence, to reject a position of trust or a relation of intimacy, without the critical difference between what is given freely and what is obliged, owed, there is no capacity for choice or for certainty. "The Husband Stitch" is concerned fundamentally with the perils of knowing—of the crisis of the warning "a wife should have no secrets"—and the importance of female storytelling as a counter-discursive practice. To foreground this practice, it presents a complex picture of uncertainty, representing it formally, affectively, epistemically. Moments of uncertainty, like metaphorical fault lines on a map or hot spots in a body, symptomatize and point to larger structures of misogyny. Epistemic violence in the form of testimonial injustice destabilizes women's speech by undervaluing it or turning it into mere "story." Hermeneutical injustice withholds the resources certain groups need to make sense of their stories. Uncertainty can portend the result of these forms of epistemic violence. It can also portend feelings of ambivalence driven by the close proximity of pain and pleasure within the scope of one relationship, in the case of "The Husband Stitch," that of the wife and her husband.

Thus, the wife's retreat into narrative breakdown and epistemological uncertainty represents not a triumph of individual will nor a fated conclusion based on the condition of misogyny, but an act based on the reality of non-ideal conditions related to the how the story theorizes the precariousness of female bodily autonomy. While I am by no means disputing that victims of sexual or gender-based violence face violence and repercussions that place them in physically precarious positions (see, Chapter One), I want to read out of this story not the *essential* condition of women's vulnerability (nor the essential condition of men's misogyny), but the danger of logics that oblige based on the leveraging of relationships of trust, and that seek

to undermine an individual's ability to exercise co-determination through the use of the former. These logics operate precisely because they make their intended outcomes *look* inevitable, natural, or "just as things are." Considering these pressures, to choose not to tell, to deliquesce into narrative silence and epistemic ellipsis, remains an expression of narrative autonomy and important form of individual choice.

I fear that interpretations that portend the wife's demise as inevitable—as opposed to related to the structural embeddedness of misogyny that manifests itself in "The Husband Stitch" in the use of a discursive bind, or the overwriting of narratives generated by female characters by narratives generated by male characters, for example—similarly risk foreclosing possibilities for change, variance, ambivalence, and even mistakes. We risk reverting to older models of viewing men and women as categorically composed, essentially different, and aggressively binary. I make this point not in order to seek to take to task stories like "Cat Person," or the readers who have read it in this way, for their response to Margot's fear and anxiety. If over seven million people can tweet #MeToo in the course of one night, it is to profoundly miss the point, I think, to respond with disbelief or didacticism to such responses instead of with compassion. This is how many heterosexual women experience their own sexuality at present—and that is a depressing conclusion, to say the least. Anxiety is, in my opinion, a reasonable way to respond to over seven million individual stories of sexual or gender-based violence.

But the current state of things *isn't the way things have to be.* "The decibels of outrage mean that rape is no longer thought of as inevitable," Alcoff writes of the current situation subsequent to #MeToo.[47] The same can (and should) be argued for misogyny broadly conceived. As I will argue in Chapter Three, cultural reckonings are significant because, among many other

[47] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 26.

reasons, they move the needle regarding what is generally considered reasonable or acceptable behavior, which affects our estimations of how we then re-evaluate those who have done wrong. Such needling moving affects, as well, what one can reasonably claim to be in ignorance of. Our cultural literacy about sexual violence continues to, painfully, become more nuanced.

It is for this reason that diagnosing the contemporary state of discourse around sexualities and violence doesn't mean that we must cede to a position of inevitable "demise." To suggest that acts that fall upon a spectrum of misogyny are the norm is not the same as further concluding that these actions are inevitable. Such critique is not new to feminism, and I don't labor this distinction to suggest I'm breaking new ground. But, along with Cherniavsky, I do think that we currently risk conflating prevalence with permanence, and by extension, choice with the essentializing explanatory powers of "nature." In her essay, Cherniavsky concludes, "The task for (what we used to call) sex-positive feminisms is not to refute this vision of heterosexuality (as though engaging in the normative work of theory, the question of how we *ought* to conceive heterosexuality), but to reckon with its apparent hold on the psychic life of gender."[48] What Cherniavsky suggests is that we fail to deal with the problems facing the present conditions of sexual violation if we focus only on how things *ought* to be. The task becomes how to build what *could be* to be by remaining grounded in the indicative, present tense sense of what *is*. This is a delicate, ethical balance of indicative and subjunctive states of mind.

Equally as important as focusing our attention, our outrage, on the spiral that concludes "Cat Person" with the word, "whore," I think is focusing our attention on Margot's articulations

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[48] Cherniavsky, "Keyword 1: #MeToo," 22. Machado experiments with this "psychic hold" in *In the Dream House* in a sequence titled "*Dream House as* Choose Your Own Adventure®." In the sixteen-page sequence, the reader is given several options in how she might respond to situations of domestic abuse, all of which end, despite the difference in the choices, with the same conclusion (Machado, *In the Dream House*, 162-177).

of her own uncertainty, which she—as focalized by the story's third-person narration—presents not to Robert, but in depth to her *readers*. Why does Margot feel that she does not have the capacity to voice to her sexual partner her own changing mind? To act on the vicissitudes of thought that have had her turbulently desiring and then not desiring Robert throughout the course of their date? What is happening behind the wife's ellipsis in the phrase, "He is not a bad man at all… and yet" (Machado 30)? In *Screw Consent*, Fischel argues that in order to create change for the better we should pose inquiry-based questions, such as, "why are we consenting to bad sex?", "what went wrong?", and "how as a society can we make sex better?"[49] How can we embrace these moments of uncertainty in order to think more creatively about addressing the problems of sexual violation? Of the insidiousness of domestic abuse? Of the pervasiveness of "bad sex" and the psychic malaise regarding sexual agency characterizing this #MeToo moment?

Establishing these modes as important, potentially productive components of sexual subjectivity appears all the more crucial to me in a contemporary moment in which critics like Masha Gessen and Cherniavsky continue to identify pessimistic outlooks on the state of female sexual agency; in a moment in which movements like #MeToo rightly bring the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence to the foreground of public debate; in a moment in which we witness the global rise of alt-right men's rights groups, whose raison d'être is to address the "women problem," often through strategies of sexual subordination;[50] in a moment in which the

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[49] Fischel, *Screw Consent*, 20.

[50] See, Sarah Banet-Weiser and Kate M. Miltner "#MasculinitySoFragile: Culture, Structure, and Networked Misogyny," *Feminist Media Studies* 16, no. 1 (2016): 171–74; and in a recent issue of *Signs,* Pierce Alexander Dignam, Deana A. Rohlinger, "Misogynistic Men Online: How the Red Pill Helped Elect Trump," *Signs* 44, no. 3 (2019): 590. For recent work on men's rights movements' resistance to viewing issues like domestic violence and sexual assault as structural, see Nancy Berns "Degendering the Problem and Gendering the Blame: Political Discourse on Women and Violence," *Gender and Society* 15 no. 2 (2001): 262–81.

recently unseated, previous President of the United States, advocated for "grabbing women by the pussy." There is shockingly little distance between a perspective that outwardly aggresses against women's sexual agency and a perspective that even unwittingly denies a partner of any sex or gender the ability to determine through the productive capacities of not-knowing her preferences, opinions, desires, and decisions—a perspective, in other words, that leaves her no room to express uncertainty, and that at worst seeks to remove her capacity to determine her own mind.

As many have argued, to tell one's own story can be one method for taking back one's own subjectivity from the instrumentalization and violation of sexual or gender-based violence. It can become an oppositional method by which derogated speakers can produce their own forms of knowledge. The production of oppositional knowledge belongs to Machado's representation of gender oppression not merely as an abstract, almost totalizing system, but as a part of everyday conversations and intimacies between men and women, which the narrator weaves into and among her own. The production of such oppositional knowledge is perhaps, the story suggests, the difficult (and lonely) work of a woman's coming of age. It is bound up with the epistemology of bodily vulnerability, symbolized by the ribbon. It is produced in conditions that cast aside the knowledge of women, that minimize the impact and the function, even the reality, of their stories. It is also true that the juxtaposition of stories—some of horror, some of domestic drama—tell a different story when set side-by-side with each other. In some sense, "The Husband Stitch" makes the case that these juxtapositions of stories are necessary in order to make sense of an individual—the wife's—experience. The hermeneutic of horror is one that the narrator uses to understand the conditions of her life as a wife and mother. The act of the wife's narration does not solve the problem of domestic abuse and physical violation—but it brings a

voice to it. It adds a piece of ephemera to the archive.[51] It adds a hermeneutical tool for others to use, should they need it.

Finally, interpreting the wife's demise as inevitable elides from consideration the fact that the husband *chooses* to find out what the secret of the green ribbon is. It evacuates from our calculus the fact of his want, his desire:

> Resolve runs out of me. I touch the ribbon. I look at the face of my husband, the beginning and end of his desires all etched there. His not a bad man, and that, I realize suddenly, is the root of my hurt. He is not a bad man at all. To describe him as evil or wicked or corrupted would do a disservice to him. And yet—
>
> 'Do you want to untie the ribbon?' I ask him. 'After these many years, is that what you of me?'
>
> His face flashes gaily, then greedily… 'Yes,' he says. 'Yes.'
>
> (Machado 30)

To my mind, we can read the narrator's ruminations about the "root" of her "hurt" in one of two ways. Both are important. The first is that the root of the hurt is that her husband isn't "evil" or "wicked" or "corrupted," but instead an average human, and yet he still chooses to untie the ribbon. This has implications that can be read about the general state of "masculinity." We might

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[51] This is José Esteban Muñoz's theory of queer history: to put together an archive of queer history is to gather ephemera, which Muñoz defines as material and phenomenological, a way of being. José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 8 no. 2 (1996): 5-16. Similarly, of the Dutch feminist film, *A Question of Silence*, in which a group of women murder a shop owner, Sara Ahmed writes, the film "shows snap not as a single moment of one woman experiencing something as too much but as a series of accumulated gestures that connect women over time and space. The film gives snap a history." Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 200-1.

argue using this reading that responsibility for this action lies at the feet of "men," broadly construed.

The other way to read this passage is to see the wife's pain as rooted within the particular, specific, and to everyone else outside her relationship with her husband unknowable intimacy. In this moment, she *knows* what he will choose, not because he was always fated to choose that option, but because she has spent her whole adult life with this person. She knows him in a way only an intimate partner could. She knows, because she knows "the beginning and end of his desires all etched" on his face, that he will choose to untie the ribbon. For her, it is not "men" or misogyny that chooses her demise. It is worse: it is this particular man whom she has chosen to spend her life with. "I close my eyes. I remember the boy of the party, the one who kissed me and broke me open by the lakeside, who did with me *what I wanted*. Who gave me a son and helped him into a man himself" (Machado 30, emphasis mine). He could have answered her differently, but he doesn't. "'Then,' I say, 'do what you want,'" she says. And that is incredibly lonely.

While "The Husband Stitch" suggests that we need new paradigms for looking at these age-old stories of violence, violation, and vulnerability, the narrator's recourse to narrative breakdown isn't a signal of positive, unambiguous revolution.[52] Under the conditions dominated by the logic "a wife should have no secrets," how could interpreting the wife's recourse to uncertainty possibly be triumphant, liberated, or revolutionary?[53] The end of "The Husband

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[52] Such counter-actions are often patinaed with the positive spin so frequently accompanying readings in literary studies of moments of narrative deconstruction.

[53] This thread of ambivalence runs through *Her Body and Other Parties*: in the story, "Real Women have Bodies," the protagonist seeks to liberate the women who have faded into shades from the prom dresses they have been sewn into, but the women, who to some degree have chosen to let themselves be sewn themselves into the vestiges of traditional femininity and heterosexuality, which women who continue to have fleshy body will wear, refuse to depart,

Stitch" is, instead, as the narrator says herself, "lonely." But there are other kinds of uncertainty in "The Husband Stitch," irreverent, playful, sexy: "I do not know if I am the first woman to walk up the aisle of St. George's with semen leaking down her leg, but I like to imagine that I am" (Machado 11). Claiming uncertainty can help us understand bodily vulnerability and encourage sexual agency, to consider how the capacity for productive not-knowing might be unevenly dispersed based on vulnerability and precarity. It can help us return the process of making meaning to survivors, as Alcoff claims, by not "rejecting the possibility of ambiguity or complexity," and in turn, enable us to "to live with our sometimes indeterminate conclusions."[54] It can also keep pushing us toward broader, better representations of female sexualities within texts, and by extension, within broader cultural discourse: "In the beginning, I know I want him before he does. This isn't how things are done, but this I how I am going to do them" (Machado 3). "The Husband Stitch" urges us to consider these discursive sites of uncertainty closely. It is worth the risk.

Each time I read "The Husband Stitch," I am more and more compelled by the story of the wife and the woman with the red ribbon knotted around her ankle. I am compelled by what it holds out. The woman with the red ribbon offers the possibility of a different story, which takes root in their incipient intimacy as they share coffee. "I am captivated by her, there is no other way to put it… She's like dough, how the give of it beneath the kneading hands disguises its sturdiness, its potential… 'Perhaps we can talk again sometime,' I say to her. 'This has been a very pleasant afternoon.' She nods to me. I pay for her coffee" (Macahdo 23). I too am compelled by the way the husband misrecognizes the wife's desires—the way he co-opts what is

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refuse to be liberated. Instead they flutter tremulously from the shredded dresses in the emotional climax of the story.

[54] Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, 61.

hers and makes it into his, an extraction of the content of the wife's experience with the woman with the red ribbon for a narrative that fits his sexual fantasies and not hers. "I do not want to tell my husband about her, but he can sense some untapped desire. One night, he asks what roils inside of me and I confess it to him. I even describe the details of her ribbon, releasing an extra flood of shame" (Machado 23). Counterfactual possibilities accrete within the repository of the narrative. What would have happened if the wife would have chosen to keep her desire for the red-ribbon woman as not a secret to be kept from her husband, but something that is just hers, as she desires? What if the husband had recognized that he was not a part of this narrative, and respected that?

"The Husband Stitch," I think, does hold out hints of the possibility for the existence of other outcomes. It gives us scenarios in which we can see these incipient, other worlds being built. To find them you have to look within the subtleties of syntax. For example, if we look closely at the girlfriend's point of view within the lodestar story of the hook-handed murderer, we can see that the story's grammar allows for co-existence of two worlds, two different versions in which the story plays out: right before they are met by the hook-handed murder, the girlfriend listens to her boyfriend's words and then thinks, "his voice trailing off in that way she *would come to know so well*" (Machado 28-29, emphasis mine). Perhaps the subjunctive "would" suggests an assumption on the girlfriend's part—that she will get to know this person so well—an assumption untouched by the unknown murderer heading their way. But perhaps it also suggests the co-existence of two possible outcomes of the story: the first, horror story in which we can surely conclude that the escaped asylum inmate murders the young lovers; and second, the one in which the girlfriend can come to know her boyfriend's "voice trailing off in that way she would come to know so well," as an iterative, habitual, intimate sense of knowing that

projects out into the future. This is a subtle temporal paradox lodged into the language of the story, an uneasy ambiguity—but it is just the sort of thing that fiction is so well-suited for holding out to us.

Chapter Three

Brief Encounters of the Hideous Kind:

The Apology, Empathy, and a Crisis of Male Credibility in *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*

In November, 2017, about a month after the allegations against Harvey Weinstein burst into the public, the *New York Times* published allegations of sexual harassment and victim intimidation against American comedian Louis C. K.[1] Hugely popular beginning in the early 2000s, C. K. has made his career as a writer, actor, and stand-up comedian. His comedy capitalizes on C. K.'s disclosure of taboo and perverse desires, which he narrates through his experiences as a white heterosexual man. Raunchy, irreverent, and a little self-deprecating, C. K.'s comedy turns on self-exposure. It punches with confessional-like reveals (sometimes literally, as when C. K. discusses growing up Catholic).[2] C. K. delivers these confessions with straightforward self-awareness. He "tells it like it is," and the authenticity of his performance is born out of the intentional disclosure of personal thoughts or reactions that are, as is often the case in comedy, slightly outside generally acceptable speech.[3]

Five women, one anonymous and all colleagues of C. K., accused him of masturbating in their presence. C. K. confirmed the allegations of indecent exposure and masturbation the next

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[1] Melena Ryzik, Cara Buckley, and Jodi Kantor, "Louis C.K. Is Accused by 5 Women of Sexual Misconduct," the *New York Times* (November 9, 2017), https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/09/arts/television/louis-ck-sexual-misconduct.html?smid=tw-nytimesarts&smtyp=cur (web, accessed: February 13, 2020).

[2] See, for example, Louis C. K.'s special on HBO's "One Night Stand," in which one extended bit revolves around "blowing a demon in hell" for the sins he's committed on earth.

[3] For more on the abject and the confessional in stand-up comedy, see, Rebecca Krefting, *All Jokes Aside* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

day in a public statement. In his official statement, he apologizes for sexual harassment (although not for victim intimidation) and announces a hiatus from comedy and the public.[4] "These stories are true. At the time, I said to myself that what I did was okay because I never showed a woman my dick without asking first, which is also true. But what I learned later in life, too late, is that when you have power over another person, asking them to look at your dick isn't a question. It's a predicament for them. The power I had over these women is that they admired me. And I wielded that power irresponsibly."[5] Amidst the judiciously placed rhetorical markers about consent, C. K. avers a "coming to consciousness." In line with a discourse that reads #MeToo as a kind of cultural reckoning, a coming to consciousness in terms of the pervasiveness of sexual and gender-based violence, C. K. too claims a particular form of previous ignorance: "I didn't know *then*, but I know *now*." He apologizes.

C. K.'s reprehensible behavior combined with his professional confessional style of abjection makes him reminiscent of what the late American author David Foster Wallace called a "hideous man." The hideous man is a person, typically of privileged means, who speaks as if to repent for his socially unacceptable actions that typically reinforce structures of heteropatriarchy and that are usually related to the expression of his sexuality. This chapter anatomizes the apology of "the hideous man": what it claims, who it seeks out, and what it can actually do. I examine it generically along the lines of gender as it coalesces around topics of empathy, sincerity, credibility, and uncertainty through the fiction of the man who invented the phrase, Wallace's 1999 short story collection, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men*.[6]

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[4] C. K. would return to comedy and 2018 and announce a tour in 2019.
[5] See Louis C. K.'s full statement on CNN (November 10, 2017), https://www.cnn.com/2017/11/10/entertainment/louis-ck-full-statement/index.html (web, accessed: February 10, 2020).
[6] David Foster. *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co, 1999).

Brief Interviews criticizes the ways certain apologies focus not on *feeling* contrition, but on *achieving* it—and, at worst, requiring it. The one thing these agonized renderings in the form of interviews turn out not to be at all are apologies. Instead of being genuine acts of contrition, the interviews themselves are revealed to be mere pretenses that allow the male repentant to achieve ulterior motives. Deploying abjection as hyperbole, *Brief Interviews* satirizes the frequency at which the apologies of abject men perform contrition. Thus, many of the interviews in *Brief Interviews* portray what are not apologies at all, but perverted forms the confession, as the "contrite" man speaks not to the wronged-party, but to a third-party interlocutor named Q. Through a reading of the collection's most controversial story, "Brief Interview #20," I argue that it becomes clear the hideous man might not be asking for but instead expecting absolution. Given this expectation, itself a form of male entitlement, can we read these confessions as a sign of masculinity in crisis, or do they represent yet another adaptation of power exonerating itself?

Renewed interest in the apology comes at a time in which we're awash with men, and some women, accused and some convicted of various forms of sexual assault and/or harassment.[7] #MeToo's continued virality has kept this social form of redress at the forefront of public attention.[8] Moreover, perhaps because many of these (primarily) men are public figures, these apologies are often given publicly—a fact that means, to a certain extent, it is the public

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[7] The *New York Times* put out list in 2018 of the men who had lost their jobs subsequent to #MeToo. See, Audrey Carlsen, Maya Salam, Claire Cain Miller, Denise, Lu, Ash Ngu, Jugal K. Patel, and Zach Wichter, "#MeToo Brought Down 201 Powerful Men. Nearly Half of Their Replacements Are Women," the *New York Times* (October 28, 2018), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2018/10/23/us/metoo-replacements.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=REGIWALL&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=1DA340F3BD405FE1812F29661CFA88D9&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL (web, accessed: April 2, 2020).

[8] Even feminist icons like Eve Ensler have begun tackling the capabilities of the apology. See, Eve Ensler, *The Apology* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). Ensler was herself the victim of childhood sexual abuse from her father.

who is being asked as a third party to adjudicate male apologies. What precedents will be set for the reading and the responding to of these apologies? How will these apologies mediate the delicate balance between the desire for structural change with the necessity of human kindness/forgiveness? In being asked as a public to observe these apologies, we enter into—whether we like it or not—a kind of social contract, we, the broader public of interlocutors of this new phenomenon of hideous men. #MeToo has moved the needle on sexual assault and harassment within the public sphere. This chapter argues that similar structures of speech and obligation, expectation and certainty, govern the rules of the apology as well. It therefore becomes crucial to examine this facet of discourse around sexual assault and harassment as well, especially now before the status-quo dust will have settled again.

What an apology is and how it should function and for whom remains the subject of debate. Moral philosopher Andrew I. Cohen argues that the key features of the apology include "some reference to a transgression, some acceptance of blame, some pledge of reform, and many other features."[9] Olivia Milroy Evans links the apology to speech act theory, as well as notes its limitations within this theory: as an "expressive illocutionary act" it only "emphasizes the mental state of the apologizer, but gives no account of the addressee."[10] Evans marks an important tension constructed into the function and form of the apology that harkens back to apologies etymological roots in *apologia*, at once an admission of wrongdoing and a constructed defense of one's actions. When we speak of who is "entitled" and who is "owed" we are the in

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[9] Andrew I. Cohen, *Apologies and Moral Repair: Rights, Duties, and Corrective Justice*. New York: Routledge, 2020, 8.

[10] Olivia Milroy Evans, "Contemporary Documentary Poetry: Rhetoric, Poetics, Form" (dissertation, Cornell University, forthcoming). In the dissertation's fourth chapter, "Poetic Proofs: Description and Repetition," Evans discusses the apology in relation to "Whereas," a documentary poem by Layli Long Soldier. "Whereas" responds to the United States's official apology to indigenous people during the presidency of Barack Obama.

the province of "justice," according to Cohen, whose project is to theorize the apology such that it can respond to historical injustice as a form of moral repair.[11] Yet without a theory that involves the auditor, any theory of the apology is lopsided: an apology may thus succeed insofar as the speaker has intended to apologize and then does so.

More so, moral philosopher Kate Manne identifies in *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* an unequal distribution of giving and taking between men and women. Manne calls this the "give/take model." "If patriarchy is anything here and now, that is, in cultures such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Australia," she writes, "I believe it consists largely (though by no means exclusively) in this uneven, gendered, economy of *giving and taking* morals-cum-social goods and services."[12] Men feel obliged to take and women feel they are under obligation to give. "Hers to give" includes "attention, affection, admiration, sympathy, sex, and children (ie, social, domestic, reproductive, and emotional labor); also mixed goods, such as safe haven, nurture, security, soothing, and comfort."[13] I would also include "forgiveness" among Manne's list, as it relates to the security, soothing, comforting of male iniquity. Thus, while the apology intends to reconcile by absolving past wrongs, by reinforcing the gendered give/take model, it fails to unsettle the status quo, in which sexual and gender-based violence operate within larger structures of misogyny.

Brief Interviews shows how the apology, within the context and sexual and gender-based violence, is subject to the same axis tilt by which men expect to receive absolution and women are expected to give it. Operating to exonerate their subjects and not to engender sincerely felt

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[11] Cohen, *Apologies and Moral Repair*, 4.
[12] Manne, *Dowl Girl*, 107. I cover this model in detail in this chapter as it is enacted in my critique of *Brief Interviews* and the apology of the hideous man, writ large.
[13] Manne, *Down Girl,* 130.

forms of contrition, the apologies of *Brief Interviews* demonstrate how feigned sincerity can become the generic grounds for guaranteeing male *credibility*, even (perhaps especially) when these apologies articulate acts of misogyny. What happens when this "right" to absolution is challenged is the subject of "B.I. #20," the most controversial of *Brief Interviews'*s stories. In contrast to other Wallace scholars, in my reading "B.I. #20" represents a significant crisis of male credibility. Indeed, scholars of Wallace's work generally converge around the goal, the ideal even, of empathy as an ameliorative measure for individuals seeking connection with others. I draw attention in this chapter to the ways empathy in Wallace's writing is predicated on a gendered division of labor, which has been absent thus far from Wallace scholarship about empathy as a redemptive feature of his fiction.

More broadly, I am not suggesting the cultural jettisoning of empathy or the apology as feelings and actions with significant reconciliatory powers. This is the particular problem of the apology, that it is perhaps the only possible but never fully satisfying route some transgressors might take in order to atone for past sins. But I am invested in this chapter in working through what C. Namwali Serpell has called the "unequal distribution problem" of empathy (who society deems worthy of receiving empathy).[14] Although the apology at least alleges a reparative function by calling out sexual or gender-based violence as reprehensible and by expressing the remorse of the perpetrator, the sought-after contrition is not equally available to all, nor is the expectation of emotional labor equally apportioned. In this chapter I focus specifically on how this unequal distribution plays out in the apology in terms of gender in two key ways. The first is that who is deemed to be suitable for sympathy within the context of an apology depends on

[14] C. Namwali Serpell, "The Banality of Empathy," The *New York Review of Books* (March 2, 2019), https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/03/02/the-banality-of-empathy/ (web, accessed: April 3, 2020).

certain identifying features. Thus, the hideous man, in life as in Wallace's work, often comes with several (unsurprising) identifying markers: "he" is likely of the privileged, heterosexual, white male variety. Second, I argue that the male apology works under a particular, gendered logic that I describe in this chapter as the "empathy game." The empathy game reinforces the unequal distribution of emotional labor between men and women. I conclude this chapter by way of the Emmy-winning television series, *Fleabag* by suggesting that the solution to the problem of the hideous man's apology might not be the requirement of female empathy, but instead the event of male uncertainty.

The "Hideous Man" and Abject Masculinity

Wallace is having a posthumous—and unfavorable—cultural comeback. Within the decade since his death both Wallace and his work have become shorthand for "bro lit" for many contemporary audiences. "Bro lit" ties Wallace to a subculture of heterosexual, white, upper/middleclass male fans who acquire *Infinite Jest* as a marker of intellectual ability, "regular guyness," and (ironically) a particular blend of early twenty-first century cool. Popular news and cultural sites like BuzzFeed have gone so far as to define "the bro" as "always a dude… who never reads women [writers] and yells about David Foster Wallace too much."[15] And while a platform like BuzzFeed may lend itself to light-hearted riposte, these accusations have taken a

[15] Kevin Tang, "27 Broiest Books That Bros Like To Read" BuzzFeed (July 1, 2013), https://www.buzzfeed.com/kevintang/27-broiest-books-that-bros-like-to-read?utm_term=.kiaWR1l4q#.lh3EjGY9v (web, accessed: April 7, 2020). While a fan of Wallace's work myself, I have met more than one individual who fits this description to a T.

more serious turn within current cultural discourse.[16] Increasingly, Wallace's work (and liking Wallace's work) is coded at best as vaguely sexist: the artist a contemporary cultural icon for the privileged, out-of-touch, white heterosexual bro. At worst, those markers contribute to oft-uncommented-upon executions of intentional acts of misogyny.[17] It is at least partially for this reason that Wallace's "hideous men" become relevant to a public sphere tasked with adjudicating the cases of these "fallen" men.

The last fifty to seventy-five years in the United States has seen a dramatic shift in what constitutes acceptable behavior towards women. As second-wave feminists in the United States beginning in 1960s and 1970s campaigned to shift cultural attitudes around the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence, and to legislate around work-place harassment and discrimination against women, among many other issues, so attitudes began to shift regarding what constitutes sexism and misogyny. The word "sexism" itself (meaning, "prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex") didn't appear in print until the 1960s.[18] Widespread cultural awareness around issues like date rape following the

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[16] American memoirist and poet Mary Karr, who dated Wallace in the 1990s, has accused Wallace of domestic abuse and stalking. In 2018, accusations resurfaced this time on Twitter in response to the David Foster Wallace biography, *Every Love Story is a Ghost Story*. Karr tweeted: "tried to buy a gun. kicked me. climbed up the side of my house at night. followed my son age 5 home from school. had to change my number twice, and he still got it. months and months it went on." Karr, Twitter (May 5, 2018), https://twitter.com/marykarrlit/status/992735594060148737.

[17] Though Deirdre Coyle writes an essay that troublingly conflates author and author's work, fans of an author's work and the author, et cetera, I take seriously her claim that "[i]t feels bad to read a book by a straight cis man about misogyny. It feels bad when this book contains some relatively graphic depictions of sexual assault." Coyle, "Men Recommend David Foster Wallace to Me," *Electric Literature* (April 17, 2017), https://electricliterature.com/men-recommend-david-foster-wallace-to-me/ (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[18] The *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition for sexism, n. 2. American feminist Caroline Bird used "sexism" in her 1968 speech "On Being Born Female," which was shortly thereafter published in the monthly magazine, *Vital Speeches of the Day*: "There is recognition abroad that we are in many ways a sexist country. Sexism is judging people by their sex when sex doesn't

1988 publication of Robin Warshaw's *I Never Called It Rape*, for example, put pressure on behaviors that previously had no penalty.[19] This cultural shift that would precipitate legal victories like the introduction of sexual harassment laws in the United States in the 1970s through the 1990s and the 1994 Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), which mandates the provision of government resources for the prevention of violence and for the support of victims. VAWA signaled recognition at a state-level that violence against women was not acute or abnormal, but chronic and normal, and that violence of this kind would not be sanctioned by the state. This cultural shift also impacted more mundane, although reprehensible in their own way, forms of sexism: acceptable ways of talking about and/or representing women in the United States began to change during the latter half of the twentieth century as well. Such changings norms called into question and marked as reprehensible acts and collusion with these acts, which may not have previously aroused much scrutiny.[20]

As feminist movements shifted social norms regarding what constitutes sexism and misogyny and advocated for the rights of women in the latter half of the twentieth century, new scholarship began to label and scrutinize certain forms of masculinity for the first time within the nexus of gender and sexuality studies (as well as founding "masculinities" as a field for study).[21]

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matter. Sexism is intended to rhyme with racism. Women are sexists as often as men." Bird, *Vital Speeches of the Day* (November 15, 1968), 6.

[19] Robin Warshaw and Mary P. Koss. *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report On Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

[20] We can see a similar form of backlash to #MeToo. For example, the solution to sexual harassment, popularized by Vice President Mike Pence, is that if men do not interact with women in the workplace, since you might not know when you're sexually harassing her, there won't be any more sexual harassment. This seems to me to be about as effective as abstinence is as a form of birth control (another favorite of Pence's). It's also sexist, since it assumes allegations of sexual harassment are entirely unpredictable, illegible, and illogical to men, who continue to stand in for what is reasonable.

[21] For a short summary of the history of the various traditions, as well as their differences and similarities, within what is variously known as Masculinity Studies or Critical Studies on Men

R. W. Connell, Tim Carrigan, and John Lee argued that masculinities are not just embedded into the psychology of the individual, but apparent within larger social institutions.[22] Both sexism and misogyny perform social roles, often the reinforcement of the social order in which the dominant group—the white, educated, heterosexual, and affluent males—preside.[23] Connell's early work in the 1970s and 1980s on masculinities, which drew from the fields of psychoanalysis, feminist theory, gay theory, and structural sociology, was the first to use the term "hegemonic masculinity."[24] Connell theorized hegemonic masculinity as part of a social and political order, as "one particular variety of masculinity to which others—among them young and effeminate as well as homosexual men—are subordinated."[25] Hegemonic masculinity is generally accepted in masculinity studies as the dominant, although certainly not unilaterally practiced or condoned, form of masculinity, which "emphasizes masculine practices toward control, independence, emotional restriction, self-reliance, active homophobia, aggressiveness, and the capacity for male perpetrated violence."[26] Hegemonic masculinity supports the notion that men are (or should be

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and Masculinities, see the introduction to Lucas Gottzén, Ulf Mellström, Tamara Shefer, eds., *Routledge International Handbook of Masculinity Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

[22] See, Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Toward a new sociology of masculinity" *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 591. For more on masculinity as formed by social opportunity and not fixed, see James Messerschmidt, *Masculinities and Crime: Critique and Reconceptualization of Theory* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

[23] In "Toward a new sociology of masculinity," Connell describes the rise of Men's Rights groups in the 1970s as a responsive, adaptive move to "modernize" masculinity "without breaking down the social-structural arrangements that actually give them their power. Connell, "Toward a new sociology of masculinity," 577.

[24] "Hegemonic masculinity" first appears in Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell, and John Lee, "Toward a new sociology of masculinity" *Theory and Society* 14, no. 5 (1985): 551-604. R.W. Connell's groundbreaking *Masculinities* was first published in 1995. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1995).

[25] Connell, "Toward a new sociology of masculinity," 587. Connell links the initial challenge to heterosexual hegemonic masculinity to the gay liberal movement. See, Connell, ""Toward a new sociology of masculinity," 586.

[26] Callie Marie Rennison, "Feminist Theory in the Context of Sexual Violence," in *Encyclopedia*

by nature) aggressive and dominating.[27]

Dominant, pernicious forms of masculinity, like hegemonic masculinity and toxic masculinity, operate based on the subordination of other types of gender identities, including other masculinities. Common operations for demonstrating "masculinity" include bullying, othering, shaming, or the enacting of violence against others. "Hegemonic masculinity socializes males into believing that they can accomplish masculinity by ridiculing, dominating, and subordinating all that is female. This includes sexual violence."[28] Hegemonic masculinity constructs a binary by which men are created "men" by virtue of not being women (female, effeminate, etc). Men who are "less dominant," then, can also be slurred by more dominant men as effeminate or womanly, perpetuating misogynist stereotypes about gender and policing men's behavior through strategic and pernicious uses of shame.[29] Shame and forms of domination go hand in hand, and have a powerful hold on social constructions of masculinity, which play out in rigid hierarchies of control that legitimize certain men as "men" at the expense of others. In other words, hegemonic masculinity operates by *othering* other forms of gender identity.

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of Criminology and Criminal Justice, ed. Gerben Bruinsma and David Weisburd (New York: Springer, 2014), 1623.

[27] The term toxic masculinity, developed independently of the term hegemonic masculinity, has also been used to describe a form of masculinity similar to hegemonic masculinity. Sociologist Michael Flood describes toxic masculinity as the expectation (and enforcement) that "boys and men must be active, aggressive, tough, daring, and dominant." Flood, "Toxic masculinity: A primer and commentary," (July 7, 2018) https://xyonline.net/content/toxic-masculinity-primer-and-commentary, (web, accessed: February 14, 2020).

[28] Rennison, "Feminist Theory in the Context of Sexual Violence," 1623.

[29] In *Shame and the Citadel*, Susan Faludi looks at how male cadets at the Citadel, an all-male military college in South Carolina, protested the admission of female cadets in the 1990s. What she found was that cadets protested not only on the grounds of exclusion: "Of particular significance to the male cadets was the prospect of (a) being dressed down by the higher-ranking cadets in her presence, (b) having to do feminine-coded domestic work when she was around to do it instead, and (c) their not only breaking down and crying in front of her, but also comforting each other, as was apparently common—and done tenderly, between bouts of brutal bullying." Faludi, quoted in Manne, *Down Girl*, 116.

Abject masculinity is one form of masculinity currently being forged out of this process of hegemonic othering within the social ordering of gender and sexuality. It is constructed around the fact that it is *not* the same as hegemonic masculinity. Abject masculinity is, instead, better distinguished by all the hallmarks of the hegemonic othering process: though he has exhibited monstrous behaviors, specifically related to heterosexual desire, across the spectrum from the pathetic to the vile and ignominious, the abject man feels shamed and contrite. He is aware that his actions are considered reprehensible. The hideous man acknowledges his complicity in structural sexism or misogyny and his own actions as sexist or misogynist.[30] Such acknowledgement makes him distinct from the unrepentant predator (see, Harvey Weinstein, Donald Trump) or the confident lothario (what it seems, to me at least, like Aziz Ansari deluded himself into thinking he was in the unsavory encounter publicized by babe.net[31]).

The claim of awareness and contrition serves dual purposes: abjection distinguishes the hideous man from varieties of hegemonic masculinity, and it implies that the hideous man too, through the othering process of abjection, has been victimized by hegemonic masculinity. The othering that occurs works on both sides, then: abjection is activated by hegemonic masculinities that seek to establish identity through the dominance displayed through the shaming of others, and it is adopted by the hideous man who seeks to distinguish himself from the bloc of

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[30] I adopt Kate Manne's definitions of sexism and misogyny: "We should think of misogyny as serving to uphold the patriarchal order, understood as one strand among various similar systems of domination… Misogyny does this by visiting hostile or adverse social consequences on a certain (more or less circumscribed) class of girls or women to enforce and police social norms that are gendered either in theory (i.e., content) or in practice (i.e., norm enforcement mechanisms)." Sexism, on the other hand, is "the branch of patriarchal ideology that *justifies* and *rationalizes* a patriarchal social order." Manne, *Down Girl: The Logic of Misogyny* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), 13, 20.

[31] For the account of the date published on babe.net, see Katie Way, "I went on a date with Aziz Ansari. It turned into the worst night of my life," babe.net (https://babe.net/2018/01/13/aziz-ansari-28355 (web, accessed February 10, 2020).

hegemonic masculinities—read: those who remain unrepentant, predatory, and still at-large.

Performances of abject masculinity become dangerous when they capitalize on the tendency within progressive movements to fail to focus on the distinctions between different degrees of predation or different acts of violence (a move that Chapter One has discussed as the political strategy mobilized by movements like #MeToo to argue for the prevalence of sexual and gender-based violence): if critiques of these formations don't acknowledge these distinctions, we can bet that the hideous man will do it for us, and he will come out looking like the victim.[32] A case in point: C. K.'s misconduct is not the same as Weinstein's misconduct. (It's not not true, which is why it is so resonant.) In this way, abjection—which I don't doubt in many cases accurately reflects the felt experiences of men in this situation—becomes a powerful tool with which a relatively dominant group might present themselves as victims.

In their introduction to *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure & Violence*, Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond correlate the concept of abjection with the idea of the unjustly victimized, and point out the current preponderance of dominant groups who now fashion themselves as abject.[33] Hennefeld and Sammond link this performance specifically

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[32] This is a complex response to dimensional views of sexual and gender-based violence, which look at violence as operating on a continuum and at individual actions as connected to larger structures of sexism and misogyny. Responses like #notallmen respond by taking this logic and superimposing it back onto the fact that one individual actor is not responsible for all misogyny or sexism, nor is each and every individual actor likely to be a rapist (true). Yet, in focusing on the "tree" within the "forest," so to speak, such responses willfully miss the point of dimensional arguments, which seek to identify a problem broadly and to argue for broader, societal responsibility for ameliorating the problems of sexual and gender-based violence.

[33] Maggie Hennefeld and Nicholas Sammond cite backlash movements like "Blue Lives Matter," "Affirmative Action for White Applicants," and "Men's Rights Are Human Rights," for example, as participating in this project: "Many people normally associated with the dominant culture are increasingly claiming an abject status in order to adopt, ironize, and undermine the markers of marginalization by which damaging social and power hierarchies have traditionally been administered and enforced." Hennefeld and Sammond, *Abjection Incorporated: Mediating the Politics of Pleasure & Violence* (Duke University Press, 2020), 3, 2.

to the rise of Donald Trump to the United States' presidency and to Trump's politics: "Trump's ascent to sovereignty (or at least to the office of the American presidency) has unleashed a firestorm of competing performances of abjection. For many, Trump and his followers embody the abject underbelly of a democratic body politic, the 'deplorables.' In contrast, for Trump's supporters, 'draining the swamp' means cleansing government of soft-hearted progressives and moderate Democrats and Republicans… rather than addressing endemic corruption."[34] What's more, the performance of abjection, Hennefeld and Sammond argue, "although strongly undesirable in daily life, can generate wide-spread sympathy and even institutional redress."[35]

The excess of sympathy shown to a man at the expense of a female victim is what Manne calls "himpathy." According to Manne, excessive amounts of sympathy are often shown to privileged men at the expense of others, such that if a woman accuses a privileged man of sexual assault, for example, it is assumed that she must be lying even if she has always been credible up that point because said privileged man is considered to be a "good guy."[36] This occurs frequently in cases of sexual violence; to make this point in *Down Girl*, Manne discusses the case of convicted rapist, Brock Turner, at length. The "exonerating narrative," Manne claims, is "a prevalent cultural narrative" that "perpetuates a strenuous collective effort" to "uphold certain men's innocence, to defend their honor, and to grant them pardon prematurely, or without the

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[34] Hennefeld and Sammond, *Abjection Incorporated*, 3.
[35] Hennefeld and Sammond, *Abjection Incorporated*, 4.
[36] The privileged man according to Manne is "American men who are white, nondisabled, and other privileged 'golden boys.'" Manne, *Down Girl*, 197. For how "himpathy" relates to empathy and inequality, see, Manne, *Down Girl*, 199-200, especially. "Himpathy" is an intriguing but less central concept to Manne's *Down Girl* than the concept of male taking and female giving, for example. Manne's subsequent book, *Entitled: How Male Privilege Hurts Women*, explores himpathy in more detail. Manne's consideration of how privilege and entitlement provides a new framework for understanding sexism and misogyny.

proper authority to do so."[37] Because of the exonerating narrative, certain men receive the benefit of the doubt despite the cost this benefit of the doubt has for the woman (or women) with accounts of his conduct that speak to the contrary. The logic of "himpathy" benefits men while policing the conduct of women, making it, Manne remarks, the "reverse mirror of misogyny."[38] "The idea of rapists as monsters exonerates by caricature," writes Manne.[39] Contrapuntally, abjection takes the monster and makes him human too.

No one does abjection in literature better than David Foster Wallace. Wallace hyperbolizes "hideous" masculinity into the figure of the abject man. The abject man in Wallace's fiction wears his social awkwardnesses, faux pas, and blundering social missteps on his sleeve. He has sexual desires, but does not know how to appropriately act on them. He is characterized by excesses: he thinks too much, sweats too much, feels too much. Wallace's work, particularly in its representations of extreme bodily excess, summons up Kristevan readings of the abject, wherein the child learns to consider his own body as a shameful object: "the child, as it learns to identify as a sovereign subject, regards the products of its own body (and the bodies of others)—blood, snot, piss, shit, mucus, sperm, rotting flesh—as vile, disgusting, and in need of suppression, rejection, and regulation."[40] An overabundance of bodily fluids causes the male characters in Wallace's fiction to feel ugly, self-critical, even grotesque; a character in Wallace's posthumously published novel, *The Pale King*, fears sweating in public so

[37] Manne, *Down Girl*, 179, 178.
[38] Manne, *Down Girl,* 197.
[39] Manne, *Down Girl*, 199.
[40] Hennefeld and Sammond, *Abjection Incorporated*, 2.

much that his anxieties about sweating in public causes a vicious loop in which he sweats more in public because he is thinking so much about sweating in public.[41]

In Wallace's work, the body dramatizes externally a character's interiority, and many of Wallace's characters suffer from an over-abundance of anxieties and entrapping cognitive loops. Precocious, adolescent Hal (arguably protagonist of *Infinite Jest*), sums up the nature of Wallace's abject as he lies catatonically in front of a film projector near the end of *Infinite Jest*:

> Hal, who's empty but not dumb, theorizes privately that what passes for hip cynical transcendence of sentiment is really some kind of fear of being really human, since to be really human (at least as he conceptualizes it) is probably to be unavoidably sentimental and naive and goo-prone and generally pathetic, is to be in some basic interior way forever infantile, some sort of not-quite-right-looking infant dragging itself anaclitically around the map, with big wet eyes and froggy-soft skin, huge skull, gooey drool. One of the really American things about Hal, probably, is the way he despises what it is he's really lonely for: this hideous internal self, incontinent of sentiment and need, that pules and writhes just under the hip empty mask, anhedonia.[42]

Hal struggles with the form of masculinity embraced most empathetically (and most empathically) in Wallace's work, portrayed as self-deprecating, self-aware, and exaggerated to the point of hyperbole and narrative exhaustion.[43]

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[41] According to Wallace's biographer, D. T. Max, Wallace had the same fear, and, as a result, carried a tennis racket to explain a sweaty appearance. D. T. Max, *Every Love Story Is a Ghost Story: A Life of David Foster Wallace* (New York: Viking, 2012), 12.
[42] Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), 694-95.
[43] In mode, style, theme, and materiality, Wallace's fiction is marked by different registers of excess: his style is often described as maximalist and the genre of his novels, encyclopedic. *Infinite Jest* is too long and weighs too much. David Letzler has described a particular kind of

Yet, Wallace's hyperbole, particularly in *Brief Interviews*, emphasizes the fact that abjection can be performed and manipulated for self-serving purposes.[44] How can Wallace's characters both authentically feel *and* perform abjection? (Spoiler: these are not mutually exclusive when one feels obliged to receive something.) For Wallace, the difference between the characters that feel genuinely abject and that just simply perform it is a matter of communicated sincerity. In the next section, I discuss Wallace's relationship to New Sincerity and his program of empathy through fiction in relation to his most controversial work of fiction, *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men.*

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men and the Empathy Game

During his life, Wallace became famous for his challenging prose style, his combination of erudition and representations of intense human suffering, and his call to the writers of his day to reject the irony and cynicism of post-modernism and to risk what he called "single-entendre values"—naivete, sincerity, and feeling—in fiction.[45] The thematic excesses in Wallace's

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plentiful detail in *Infinite Jest* cruft, or pointless information, the superfluous. See, Letzler, *The Cruft of Fiction: Mega-Novels and the Science of Paying Attention* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017).

[44] Wallace's most famous work, *Infinite Jest,* demonstrates how excess can be manipulated by the addict in order to justify one last hit prior to quitting. "Even if [the marijuana] started to make him dizzy and ill. He would use discipline and persistence and will and make the whole experience so unpleasant, so debased and debauched and unpleasant, that his behavior would be henceforward modified, he'd never even want to do it again because the memory of the insane four days to come would be so firmly, terribly emblazoned in his memory. He'd cure himself by *excess*." Wallace, *Infinite Jest*, 22 (emphasis mine). Minor character Ken Erdedy's attempt to "cure himself by excess" is one of the novel's most memorable opening sections, and a great failure on Erdedy's part to become sober.

[45] Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (1993): 192. That Wallace did not acknowledge that his move towards "sentiment" refers to a mode of affect that has been long couched, in literary-historical terms at least, within

writing, epitomized by the way Hal relates "sentiment" in *Infinite Jest*, links to the way Wallace conceived of sincerity. Wallace's embrace of sentiment would make him one of the early popularizers of the movement later known as New Sincerity, most prominent within the United States in the mid 1990s.[46] New Sincerity promoted authenticity of address as the best way of disclosing an authenticity of self, even (and especially) if that self was messy, or disliked by or uncool to the establishment, and by many standards, downright embarrassing in its emotional excesses in comparison to the sleekness of postmodern American "cool."[47]

> The next real literary "rebels" in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction. Who eschew self-consciousness and hip fatigue. These anti-rebels would be outdated, of course, before they even

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the context of writing done by and ascribed to women, is a further turn of the screw. Sentiment has long coded as popular and trashy. These works are written typically by women. New Sincerity, on the other hand, a cultural dominant linked to white, middleclass men, became a twentieth-century zeitgeist. Wallace's new twentieth-century "literary rebels" may not be rebels after all, or only rebels insofar as the unacknowledged gender and race of these literary rebels is male and white (certainly no one thought until the recovery projects of twentieth-century feminist scholars of female writers of sentimental fiction as "literary rebels").

[46] More work on New Sincerity and literature, see, for example, Adam Kelly, "David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction," *Consider David Foster Wallace: Critical Essays*, ed. David Hering (Los Angeles: Sideshow Media Group Press, 2010), 131-46; R. Jay Magill, *Sincerity: How a Moral Ideal Born Five Hundred Years Ago Inspired Religious Wars, Modern Art, Hipster Chic, and the Curious Notion That We All Have Something to Say (No Matter How Dull)* (New York: Norton, 2012); Marshall Boswell, "Cynicism and Naïveté," *Understanding David Foster Wallace* (University of South Carolina Press, 2009); and Allard Den Dulk, *Existentialist Engagement In Wallace, Eggers and Foer: A Philosophical Analysis of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016).

[47] See, Lee Konstantinou's *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (Boston: Harvard Univ. Press, 2016).

> started. Dead on the page. Too sincere. Clearly repressed. Backward, quaint, naive, anachronistic. Maybe that'll be the point. Maybe that's why they'll be the next real rebels. Real rebels, as far as I can see, risk disapproval. The old postmodern insurgents risked the gasp and squeal: shock, disgust, outrage, censorship, accusations of socialism, anarchism, nihilism. Today's risks are different. The new rebels might be artists willing to risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs, the parody of gifted ironists, the "Oh how banal." To risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness. Of willingness to be suckered by a world of lurkers and starers who fear gaze and ridicule above imprisonment without law. Who knows.[48]

To a 1990s United States' audience that valued detachment, restraint, and apathy, Wallace felt that his call for attachment would appear distasteful, artless. Thus, artists of the New Sincerity viewed their aesthetic intervention as the valorization of openness, honesty, vulnerability, and emotionality, a sensibility they saw as risky within a climate dominated by post-modern irony, consumerism, and cynicism. The former, he felt, was more authentic than the latter. Fiction, Wallace says in perhaps his most oft-quoted phrase, should be about "what it is to be a fucking human being."[49]

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[48] This most-quoted articulation of Wallace's writerly manifesto comes from Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram," 192.

[49] David Foster Wallace Interview with Larry McCaffery, "A Conversation with David Foster Wallace By Larry McCaffery," *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 13, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 131. In the interview Wallace goes on to say: "If you operate, which most of us do, from the premise that there are things about the contemporary U.S. that make it distinctively hard to be a real human being, then maybe half of fiction's job is to dramatize what it is that makes it tough. The other half is to dramatize the fact that we still "are" human beings, now. Or can be… What's engaging and artistically real is, taking it as axiomatic that the present is grotesquely materialistic, how is it that we as human beings still have the capacity for joy, charity, genuine connections, for stuff that doesn't have a price? And can these capacities be made to thrive? And

Fiction's role, according to Wallace, was to assist in the possibility for genuine connection by promoting empathy between people:

> I had a teacher I liked who used to say good fiction's job was to comfort the disturbed and disturb the comfortable. I guess a big part of serious fiction's purpose is to give the reader, who like all of us is sort of marooned in her own skull, to give her imaginative access to other selves. Since an ineluctable part of being a human self is suffering, part of what we humans come to art for is an experience of suffering, necessarily a vicarious experience, more like a sort of "generalization" of suffering. Does this make sense? We all suffer alone in the real world; true empathy's impossible. But if a piece of fiction can allow us imaginatively to identify with a character's pain, we might then also more easily conceive of others identifying with our own. This is nourishing, redemptive; we become less alone inside. It might just be that simple.[50]

Often considered Wallace's artistic manifesto, in this interview Wallace posits that empathy as generated by dialogue between people might point the way forward. Conceiving of others' subjectivity in fiction can be ameliorative. Conversation with others is nothing short of therapeutic.

Because of the therapeutic potential of a conversation, conversation as a theme and in various generic forms recur in Wallace's fiction: interviews, which appear in *The Broom of the System, Infinite Jest,* and *Brief Interviews*; talk therapy; the radio show; an English phrase-learning cockatiel; Alcoholics Anonymous testimonials; letter correspondence and phone

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if so, how, and if not why not?" McCaffery, "A Conversation," 131-32. These lines are quintessential to understanding Wallace's project as a writer.

[50] McCaffery, "A Conversation," 127.

conversations; the High-Definition Masking sequence in *Infinite Jest*; language games in the style of Wittgenstein; the list could go on. Conversation—in so far as it enables connection—is perhaps one of the only ways, Wallace's fiction claims, that an individual might prevent solipsism. While genuine connection is never assumed to be a given, the best shot one has at attaining it, Wallace's fiction argues, is through sincerity. Boswell writes, "the interviews employ a self-conscious literary device that provides the illusion of 'true empathy,' which Wallace, following Wittgenstein, realizes is impossible—that is, we cannot, literally, feel someone else's pain—while at the same time serves as a literal means of escaping the inevitable loneliness of our interior state, since our interiors, in the act of reading, becomes a site of voices in dialogue."[51]

Conversely, when characters are at their lowest they are often unable to engage in dialogue of any kind.[52] The most extreme example of the opposite of the dangerous consequences of refusing to engage with others in Wallace's work is the infamous Entertainment in *Infinite Jest*. The Entertainment is some of cinematic media. Watching the Entertainment causes a viewer so much pleasure that it acts as a kind of viewer-selected lobotomy. Viewers eventually starve to death, their brains evacuated of any desire to satiate other needs besides viewing the Entertainment ad nauseum. The Entertainment hypostatizes the philosophical paralysis of solipsism, the belief that it is only one's own existence that can be known for certain, and it acts as a cypher for the dangerous ills of addiction and media Wallace feared in contemporary American culture. It produces a perfect, closed circuit of pleasure between media

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[51] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 189.

[52] For example, in the quote from *Infinite Jest* in which Hal contemplates what it means to be human, he is trapped within the confines of his own thoughts. As a result, he is unable to engage in conversation with his best friend, Michael Pemulis, choosing instead to watch *Infinite Jest*'s equivalent of television, on loop.

and viewer. The male subjects of *Brief Interviews* also participate in a form of solipsism, but they enact it by perverting the potential positive outcomes of connection with another person through sincere dialogue.

Brief Interviews with Hideous Men, published in 1999, is the dark horse of Wallace's oeuvre.[53] It was adapted into a film directed by John Krasinski, and several of the stories have been adapted for the stage. The collection is composed of twenty-three stories very loosely related in their critique of male heterosexual sexism and misogyny. Four of the twenty-three stories are titled "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men," and each of these four includes one or more distinct interviews; there are sixteen interview transcripts total. To distinguish between them, each individual interview is labeled "B. I." plus a unique identifying number and a location, presumably the date and the location in which the interview was given and transcribed.[54] The interviews are linked formally by the letter Q, which stands in in all cases for a female interlocutor, and in some cases for a specific female interviewer who appears to recur in several of the sixteen distinct interviews.

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[53] Readers typically come to Wallace's work either through his 2005 Kenyon College commencement speech, "This is Water," and then onward to his popular collections of nonfiction, *A Supposedly Fun Thing I'll Never Do Again* (1997) and *Consider the Lobster* (2005); or through his monumental novel, *Infinite Jest*, which cast Wallace into literary stardom when it was published in 1996. While fans of *Infinite Jest* typically tread next into his other novels—*The Pale King*, unfinished and published posthumously in 2011, and *The Broom of the System*, published in 1987 and originally his major thesis at Amherst College—readership, and indeed scholarship, is much sparser for Wallace's second short story collection.

[54] So, for example:
Brief Interviews with Hideous Men

B.I. #20 12-96
New Haven CT
(Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 287).

Despite *Brief Interviews*'s peripheral status within Wallace's work, Marshall Boswell, who put Wallace scholarship on the map in 2003 and who remains the pre-eminent scholar within Wallace studies, has claimed that *Brief Interviews* is Wallace's most "characteristic" work: *Brief Interviews* foregrounds Wallace's hallmark themes of "depression, solipsism, community, self-consciousness—both textual and psychological—and the impact on our collective consciousness of therapeutic discourse writ large."[55] Conversation looms large in *Brief Interviews.* "The book positively brims with talk and more talk, much of it sophisticated and articulate and all of it geared toward an 'honest' description of hideousness in the area of interpersonal relations."[56] *Brief Interviews* is also the work of Wallace's that most explicitly reflects on sexism, misogyny, and gendered power imbalances.

Many of the subjects of *Brief Interviews'*s stories are lonely, frustrated, delusional men—but what makes *Brief Interviews* particularly hideous are the male subjects of its four stories marked "Brief Interviews with Hideous Men."[57] These men are masters at using sincerity for dialogic deception and manipulation. "Over and over again Wallace demonstrates how self-professed "openness" can become an even more sinister form of deception. All the characters are in a sense metafictionalists of their own feelings, with the result that their openness leaves them even more lonely and despairing."[58] The interviews demonstrate how conversation itself can be perverted for self-interest as its interviewed subjects dexterously exploit the potential

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[55] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 182.
[56] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 184.
[57] If you are a reader of *Infinite Jest*, think about it this way: *Brief Interviews* is like *Infinite Jest* if *Infinite Jest* were stripped down to only the characters of Orin Incandenza and Randy Lenz, which is a grim thought.
[58] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 184.

ameliorative capacities of conversation for their own aims.[59] In each of the sixteen interviews, themselves almost a dramatic monologue, the male subjects communicate to Q a desire for one thing. Yet, by the end of the interview, they have revealed their true desire or motivation for an entirely different thing, usually much less savory and much more self-interested. In doing so, they reveal their true motivations, which have been dictating course of the conversation with Q all along.

"B. I. #2 10-94" is an illustrative case in point. The story begins with a male subject asking his female partner if they can talk:

> "Sweetie, we need to talk. We've needed to talk for a while. I have I mean, I feel like. Can you sit?"
>
> Q.
>
> "Well, I'd rather almost anything, but I care about you, and I'd rather anything than you getting hurt. That concerns me a lot, believe me."
>
> Q.
>
> "Because I care. Because I love you. Enough to really be honest."
>
> Q.
>
> "That sometimes I worry you're going to get hurt. And that you don't deserve it. To get hurt I mean."
>
> Q, Q.
>
> "Because, to be honest, my record is not good. Almost every intimate relationship

[59] A side note: He who controls the conversation, always a marker of power in Wallace's work, isn't always gendered male. It is fearsome matriarch Avril Incandenza in *Infinite Jest* who alienates her eldest and smothers her youngest, whose hobby horse is language and who literally polices the constitutional building blocks of conversation: grammar.

> I get into with women seems to end up with them getting hurt, somehow. To be honest sometimes I worry I might be one of those guys who uses people, women. I worry about it somet—no, damn it, I'm going to be honest with you because I care about you and you deserve it. Sweetie, my relationship record indicates a guy who's bad news."
>
> (Wallace 91)

The interview goes on in this manner: the male subject expresses a desire to leave the relationship because he fears he *will* do something to hurt his partner. The dissolution of their relationship is an action taken in her best interest, he claims. He expresses his concerns as hypotheticals, things that he thinks, nay, worries anxiously about. These worries are based on his past track record, a record he feels he is likely to continue adding to in the future. The worst he can be accused of, thus, is being overly cautious in his care for his partner.

A reader's willingness to go along with this incredibly self-aware and candid subject (or a reader's morbid curiosity to see just how this will end up going all wrong) becomes the story's final volta. In reading, we too are strung along. Breakup determined, the interview transcript of "B. I. #2 10-94" ends:

> "There's just one more thing I feel like I have to tell you about first, though. So the slate's clean for once, and everything's out in the open. I'm terrified to tell you, but I'm going to. Then it'll be your turn. But listen: this thing is not good. I'm afraid it might hurt you. It's not going to sound good at all, I'm afraid. Can you do me a favor and sort of brace yourself and promise to try not to react for a couple of seconds when I tell you? Can we talk about it before you react? Can you promise?"

(Wallace 100)

The story concludes, leaving us suspended at the end of these cliff-hanging interrogatives. Yet this disclosure, whatever it is, reveals that the entire conversation has been, all along, one big preamble toward a real, past-tense, already-happened iniquity. What the subject had positioned in the strictly future-tense as fears about not-real, hypothetical actions are, in actuality, fears used rhetorically to disclose an act that is in fact real and *has already happened*. Thus, the subject's expressed fears of doing something again (implied: in the future) have only rhetorical value.

The subject's final confession of the forever undisclosed-to-us iniquity reveals how sincerity and openness have become perverted, mere tools for the subject's intended aims. Honesty is part of the sophistry of the hideous man, and a primary tool for *Brief Interviews* to lay bare the soul-rot of the interviewees. Simply count the number of times the male subject uses "honest" in the short passage quoted above to get a feel for it. By merely feigning honesty, sincerity, and contrition, these men openly breach the social contract of the apology. The male subject of "B. I. #2" has effectively reverse-engineered himself into an apology. Instead of opening up a dialogue in which an apology is given and a hope is held out for forgiveness, the apology only serves as a ruse through which he can disclose a past misdeed. Indeed, the act of speaking, which he frames as an action taken to prevent harm from coming to his partner, becomes an act that ultimately discloses information that (we can presume) emotionally harms his partner. Conversation, Wallace's method for promoting human connection, becomes in the mouths of the hideous men a dangerous form of harm.

The drama of gender, which dictates who can say what (and how she can say it) in *Brief Interviews*, plays out along the formal lines of the interview. As is rendered above in the quotation from "B. I. #2," the interview structure captures the silences of the collection's primary

female characters through their designation, Q. A fixture in all of the interviews, Q's dialogue with the interviewed men is rendered visible only through ellipses or blank lines.[60] This technique allows *Brief Interviews* to lay out the imbalances between its male and female characters, quite literally, onto the page, as all the "page time" is given over to the male interviewees.[61] Wallace's modified interview structure, therefore, requires that a reader infer what Q's comments, questions, and even her affect and non-verbal cues might be through context clues provided by the men's dialogue. This technique is consistent throughout the collection, marking elisions and the absence of dialogue within *Brief Interviews* as distinctly female.[62]

Clare Hayes-Brady argues that silent female characters signal that the masculinity of the men of *Brief Interviews* is "in crisis."[63] "Since women offer an unknowable other to masculine subjectivity [in Wallace's writing]," she writes, "*Brief Interviews*' investigation of self-other dynamics is played out upon this stage in a grotesquely, literal way."[64] I'm less unambiguously convinced of a global crisis of masculinity in *Brief Interviews*; I'm pretty sure the male subject of "B. I. #2" gets away with it, for example. But I think Hayes-Brady is right to point in *Brief*

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[60] "Q" stands in, not the interlocutor's name, but for "question." This technique shows up in some of Wallace's earliest writing including *The Broom of the System*, as well as in *Infinite Jest.* For the sake of simplicity, I use "Q" as a name for the interviewer or for the various female characters it stands in for.

[61] The notable exception to female silence in *Brief Interview* is the eponymous "Depressed Person," whose claustrophobic voice corrodes almost perfectly.

[62] The interviewee of "B. I. #48," who asks women on their third date whether or not they would like to be tied up only then to force them into listening to the subject's childhood issues with his mother, says to Q of silences: "You are, of course, aware that social silences have varied textures, and these textures communicate a great deal… Any sort of courtship ritual, game of sizing one another up, gauging. There is afterward, always an eight-beat silence. They must allow the question to {finger flexion} *sink in.*" Wallace 102.

[63] Clare Hayes-Brady, *The Unspeakable Failures of David Foster Wallace: Language, Identity, and Resistance* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 177.

[64] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 177.

Interviews to what she calls a "mode of resistance to the system that mutes female narrative energy, a mode that involves appropriating the features of the oppressive system to draw attention to it and subvert it."[65] It is, of course, possible for a narrative to represent a pernicious system of power without colluding with it.

I'd be on board with Hayes-Brady's assessment if *Brief Interviews*'s gender commentary stayed within the confines of textual representation of power imbalances as they relate to the ability to speak and to be heard. But it doesn't. It offers a solution to its readers in the form of radical empathy: "Wallace wants to test the boundaries of our willingness to 'empathize,' since the men we, as readers, interview are, as they are advertised to be, hideous," claims Boswell.[66] The text itself articulates this project through the narrator of "Octet"—a favorite among scholars of *Brief Interviews* for its meta-fictional ruminations on the relationship between text and reader. The narrator of "Octet" speaks to its author: "And then you'll have to ask the reader straight out, whether *she* feels it, too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman *sameness*," in other words, the need for human connection.[67]

Wallace's desire for radical engagement with his readers through empathy is the key to understanding the intentionally difficult positions Wallace puts readers in, especially in *Brief Interviews.* Boswell again: by "breaking out of the story" in "Octet" to "speak directly to the reader," "Wallace achieves what he sees as the primary aim of fiction, which is to 'allow us imaginatively to identify with characters' pain' so that 'we might then also more easily conceive

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[65] Hayes-Brady, *Unspeakable Failures*, 177.
[66] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 189.
[67] Wallace 157 (emphasis mine). The narrator of "Octet" then deflects the definition of "interhuman sameness" onto a question about cohesion of the text, which the author must pose like a gadfly to his reader. Yet, the vulnerability of human connection communicated by "interhuman sameness," which cannot be subsumed entirely under questions of craft, remains.

of others identifying with our own.'"[68] Even Zadie Smith—who loves *Brief Interviews*—picks up on this authorial imperative. Smith writes "[t]he point is to run a procedure—the procedure of another person's thoughts!—through your own mind. This way you don't merely "have" the verbal expression. You feel it and know it."[69] Smith hones in on Wallace's conviction that, although true empathy might be impossible, the best way to step outside yourself is to imagine yourself in someone else's head, which is perhaps fiction's primary objective.[70] Wallace, Smith asserts, asks the *reader* to run through these "procedures" herself. What is it like to be another person? Not only another person. What is it to be a person self-conscious and awfully *aware* hideous person?

As its interviewees reveal deeper and deeper layers of their monstrosity as their interviews proceed, the challenge *Brief Interviews* sets up for its readers, who are textually interpellated with the pronoun "she,"[71] becomes continuing to empathize with precisely the

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[68] Boswell quoting Wallace in *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 189.
[69] Zadie Smith, "Brief Interviews With Hideous Men: The Difficult Gifts of David Foster Wallace," in *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2009), 277.
[70] Smith's is a version of the argument that reading literature makes people more empathetic. "Deep engagement with the interior lives of characters, attention to how language and narrative function, and practice reflecting on the ambiguities and uncertainties of other minds and lives" broadens our understanding and appreciation of those who might be different than us. Ann Jurecic, "Empathy and the Critic," *College English* 74, no. 1 (2011): 11. As Ann Jurecic notes, this position has been taken up by prominent philosophers such as Richard Rorty and Martha C. Nussbaum, as well as by contemporary political and cultural celebrities like Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey. In opposition, the valorization of literature as a teaching tool for empathy has come under scrutiny from scholars who charge it with colluding with larger structures of power. Affect theorists like Sara Ahmed and Lauren Berlant have traced the ways that certain positive affects, including joy, happiness, and empathy, allow an individual to indulge without rendering "social transformation," marking these affects with neoliberal imperatives. Berlant, "Poor Eliza," *American Literature* 70, no. 3 (1998): 641. See also, Ahmed *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010); and even the "feminist killjoy" in *Living a Feminist Life* (Duke University Press, 2017), 56-57.
[71] Wallace says cheekily in an interview, "My ideal reader would be twenty-seven, look eerily like Melanie Griffith, think every line of the book was the best thing since sliced bread, and hope

lowest of the low—the hideous men. The question provoked thus becomes, if we can empathize with *even* them, what is left to limit our humanity? The more abject the man, the more challenging (and, therefore, rewarding, in this framework) the task is to empathize. This is the empathy game. The empathy game constructs the giving of empathy from the female interlocutor to even the most hideous of men as its particular *challenge*. The men of *Brief Interviews* are, therefore, by *necessity* those who exhibit monstrous behaviors, specifically related to heterosexual desire, across the spectrum from the pathetic to the vile and ignominious. Abject masculinity becomes the new test of humanism, specifically as it relates to perverse or socially unacceptable heterosexual, male desire.

The empathy game shifts the burden of empathizing onto the interlocutor. Grammatically bound through the gender of the author's chosen pronoun, it is always "she" who must act as the story's empathy-granting interlocutor,[72] and the space for the (female) reader to step in and empathize with the male characters is taken from the minimized "space" of the silenced female characters; in certain interviews, the male characters wholly appropriate narratives belonging to female characters. Boswell argues that *Brief Interviews* redeems itself by being fundamentally as lost and confused as the reader and, crucially, by putting the *reader* "inside the story as a character, making her a participant in the narrative's construction."[73] Yet, while the amount of dialogue provided to the male subjects leaves Boswell open to infer that "[the male characters']

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for nothing so fondly as to support me in all physical and emotional ways so I could write more books just like it. Nobody wants his fiction to 'daunt.' We want it to seduce." Gerald Howard, "David Foster Wallace and his 1,079 mystical, brilliant pages," Elle Magazine (1996), https://sancrucensis.files.wordpress.com/2018/01/1996-david-foster-wallace-interview-with-gerald-howard-in-elle.pdf.

[72] Boswell is attuned to Wallace's techniques when he writes that *Brief Interviews* puts the reader "inside the story as a character, making her a participant in the narrative's construction." Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 188. He too genders the reader female.

[73] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 186, 188.

openness leaves them even more lonely and despairing," the female interlocutors are condensed throughout into the silent letter "Q," leaving little to no room to infer anything specific about their responses. There is certainly no "turn," as the male subject in "B. I. #2" puts it (and promises it), for the female interlocutor to speak, let alone the provision of space for the female partner to counter her partner's pending revelation with her own desires.

On the one hand, *Brief Interviews* clearly demonstrates the silencing of women under the weight of the men's words. On the other hand, these interviews perform the act of female silencing over and over again. These are sham interviews. The interviewees talk over their textually erased interlocutors to the point of exhaustion, and they feign honesty as just another ploy for deception and personal gain. Yet these interviews have been read as providing a redemptive form of empathy via fiction for reaching his reader. When I look at the rules of the empathy game, I don't see masculinity in crisis. I see another representation of power exonerating itself via an expression of "feeling badly." Yet, as I will argue, *Brief Interviews*, unintentionally I think, presents us with a different sort of crisis for its hideous men: a crisis of credibility. To see this, we must consider "B. I. #20."

"B. I. #20"

Wallace pushes the transformative capacities of human empathy to its furthest—and most troubling—extent in the collection's most disturbing story, "B. I. #20." "B. I. #20" is the penultimate story of the collection and the last of the sixteen homonymous stories. It was originally published in the *Paris Review*, winning its Aga Khan Prize for Fiction in 1997. At its core is a story about surviving and coping with sexual assault that is nested within an act of male

narrative appropriation. “B. I. #20”’s subject is Eric, an intelligent, relatively well-off (due to his own merit and hard work) professional heterosexual man likely in his late 20s. In the story, Eric is interviewed about a sexual encounter he had with a woman he calls the Granola Cruncher, and whom I’ll call Sarah.[74]

As Rachel Haley Himmelheber writes, “B. I. #20” is “the story of a story of a story of a story.”[75] It is also a confession, as Eric admits to Q that he initially picked up Sarah at a music festival only in order to have sex with her. Specifically, he claims to have manipulated Sarah through artificial declarations of openness, awkwardness, embarrassment, and sentimentality that he determined would appeal to her “type.” Later, after they have had sex, Sarah tells Eric the story of how she survived sexual assault by a man who had picked her up hitchhiking. The driver of the car also threatens to murder her after he has raped her. However, Sarah claims that she was able to escape death by “empathizing” with her rapist. Eric claims that Sarah’s sincerity about her escape from her assailant (her way of telling a story is artless and without motive)—and the utter profundity of her ability to empathize with her assailant—causes Eric to fall in love with her. The story opens, “‘And yet I did not fall in love with her until she had related the story of the unbelievingly horrifying incident in which she was brutally accosted and held captive and very nearly killed’” (Wallace 287). “B. I. #20” is, ostensibly at least, Eric’s attempt to convince Q of his love for Sarah.

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[74] It’s not clear the male subject’s name is Eric, but the names Eric and Sarah come up in a line of dialogue in “B. I. #20”, when the male subject ventriloquizes what he thinks Q is thinking about what he’s saying. For the sake of clarity, I’ll call the subject Eric and the Granola Cruncher, Sarah. See, Wallace 313.

[75] Rachel Haley Himmelheber, “‘I Believed She Could Save Me: Rape Culture in David Foster Wallace’s ‘Brief Interviews with Hideous Men #20,’” *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 55, no. 5 (2014): 523.

Eric's account to Q is replete with self-disclosure and self-awareness. He buttresses troubling comments he makes to her with, "'Let me explain. I'm aware of how it might sound, believe me'" (Wallace 287). He also demonstrates an awareness of, if not a respect for, some of the contemporaneous (1990s) cultural narratives around rape and rape culture: "'I'm concerned in today's climate to steer clear of any suggestion of anyone quote asking for it, let's not even go there'" (Wallace 287). But he also demonstrates some of common misinformed and harmful attitudes about rape, for example: "'you might be wondering as I did when one hears about cases like this as to why the victim doesn't simply bail out of the car the minute the fellow begins grinning maniacally'" (Wallace 294). And, the patently racist idea that black men are more likely than not to sexually assault white women: "'In today's climate one wouldn't want to critique too harshly the idea of someone with a body like that getting into a strange automobile with a mulatto'" (Wallace 300). Eric seems aware that there are changing cultural scripts for what he can and can't imply, and that implying Sarah "should have known better" is no longer culturally acceptable, but he remains entirely unaware of his racism.[76]

The story recognizes and lambasts elements of Eric's hideousness. Like in "B. I. #2," Eric's dialogue takes up all of the material space on the page, reinforcing the fact that, also like in "B. I. #2," Eric's thinking about what Q might be thinking herself violently evacuates any real sense of or articulation of what Q might be thinking or feeling. While confessing to targeting Sarah upon first meeting her in order to have sex with her—an act that Eric expresses might be viewed as reprehensible—the story more flagrantly eviscerates Eric's sexism when he discusses Sarah as a particular "type" of woman, the "Granola Cruncher":

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[76] Himmelheber reads the racialized distancing Eric does between himself and Sarah's rapist as intentionally executed in order to exonerate himself from charges of misogyny in "'I Believed She Could Save Me,'" 534, specifically.

> "And I'm going to admit at the risk of appearing mercenary that her prototypical Cruncher morphology was evident right at first sight, from clear on the other side of the bandstand, and dictated the terms of the approach and the tactics of the pickup itself and made the whole thing almost criminally easy. Half the women—it is a less uncommon typology among educated girls out here than one might think."
>
> (Wallace 288)

Eric types Q too when he labels her a "bra-burner" and he frequently makes generalizations that begin with "attractive women often do," followed by something sexist. What the story marks as reprehensible is less his cribbing from the book *The Game: Penetrating the Secret Society of Pickup Artists* in order to have sex with Sarah, than his insistent fetishizing of Sarah as the Granola Cruncher, which he insufferably credits to his superior intelligence and not to his sexism. While Eric is willing to extract complex emotional catharsis from Sarah's story, he's not able to use her real name, nor is he aware of the irony involved in this.

"B. I. #20" is thus *Brief Interviews*'s most explicit example of male appropriation of painful experiences belonging to women. Eric not only tells the story of the female survivor. He claims her story in order to precipitate his own emotional catharsis. Eric believes this is a redemptive narrative arc, one in which he remains the protagonist in a story that is brutally not about him (which means a reader can always take what Eric says and what he promotes within the story as something that the implied author might hold at a critical distance).

The fact that this is not a story about Eric, the redeemed protagonist, comes into clearest focus as a reader watches Eric become increasingly discontented and agitated as the interview develops. Grappling with his newfound reprehensibility in the face of Sarah's sincerity, Eric is a

man in crisis, a subject unmoored. His destabilization becomes most apparent through his increasingly hostile reactions to Q. Given Q's lack of dialogue, a reader must infer what she has asked and how she has reacted to Eric's increasingly audacious claims. It is clear that she interrupts Eric several times when his overly long responses blatantly sexualize and objectify Sarah, and she re-directs him back to the story she's asked to hear (what happened to Sarah) but there is not much else that can be explicitly gleaned from her silences.[77] Eric's dialogue, on the other hand, becomes explicitly aggressive: "'I know I'm not telling you anything you haven't already decided you know. With your slim chilly smile. You're not the only one who can read people'" (Wallace 304). He thinks he can ward off Q's judgment of him by calling her out on it: "'He's a fool because he thinks he's made a fool of her, you're thinking. Like he got away with something. The satyrosaurian sybaritic heterosapien male, the type you short-haired catamenial bra-burners can see coming a mile away'" (Wallace 304). "B. I. #20" concludes as Eric spews a deluge of misogynist slurs, invective, and a final desperate claim to love and to be loved at Q. The interview ends with, "'I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story'" (Wallace 318). His is the only and insisted upon interpretation, although blatantly wrong, version of this story.

What has caused Eric to fall apart over the course of the interview? When scholars write about "B. I. #20," they tend to attribute Eric's dissolution as a signal of both the text's disavowal of his actions and as a sign of Sarah's narrative ascendency. Here's Boswell again: "by secreting the woman's story and her selfless, guileless, and straightforward telling of it at the center of a narrative that is brimming with its teller's layered self-consciousness, Wallace once again hopes

[77] It also becomes clear that Eric and Q are at a bar or restaurant, as he asks her several times if she'd like another or if he can get her a refill.

to use self-reflexivity as a means of overcoming mere self-reflexivity… She tries to empathize with [her rapist] human-to-human, to enter his interior, however cosmically, and force *him* to see her not as a thing but as another human being."[78] Empathy (in combination with Sarah's sincere delivery of it), "B. I. #20" suggests, radically disrupts. The "soul-exposing connection" that allows Sarah to "make it difficult for the fellow to murder her" is empathy (Wallace 295). (Sarah's empathy is also what makes it impossible for Eric to give Sarah a fake number, as he had been planning to do whenever she would depart his apartment.) Empathy, as Eric describes it, involves Sarah seeing the rapist as "an ensouled and beautiful albeit tormented person in his own right instead of merely a threat to her or a force of evil or the incarnation of her personal death" (Wallace 300). Her focus sees through "the veil of psychosis," "penetrat[es] various strata of rage and terror and delusion to touch the beauty and nobility of the generic human soul beneath all the psychosis, forcing a nascent, compassion-based connection between their souls" (Wallace 302). In response, Sarah's empathy puts her rapist, in Eric's words, into "agony" (Wallace 310). Both of the men she has come into contact with—her rapist and her would-be lover—fall apart in the face of her radical empathy.

We can understand why, within this paradigm, Sarah is considered to triumph over both her assailant and her (incredibly unworthy of her) suitor, Eric: she has succeeded in the empathy game. Yet, while some are comfortable declaring victory to the "Granola Cruncher" of "B. I. #20," who "triumphs" over her rapist and unsuccessful murderer by empathizing with him, and then over her proceeding lover, who loses his own voice in the power of her story and must fall

[78] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 196. Even Himmelheber, who is much more critical of the story's project than Boswell, ultimately argues that Sarah's actions manifest a "problematic" extension of feminist care ethics that story suggests "in its imagery" through the "complicated relationship between self-awareness and brutality." Himmelheber, "'I Believed She Could Save Me," 534.

back on expletives and hideous rage directed at Q to vent his frustration, I am not. Empathy is presented as a tool for transcendence, but it's a transcendence that reinforces an unequal distribution of the work of emotional labor, and Wallace's use of sexual violence potentially as a metaphor for the radical empathy that can be participated in via the act of reading resounds to me as particularly tone deaf.[79] At one moment, Eric wonders aloud to Q whether or not empathy could allow one even to disrupt and transcend a form of extreme physical domination, such as rape.[80] Overcoming a traumatic event, like a rape, by "transcending" it through empathy for Eric in this account is a viable, even heroic, alternative. Eric has not only appropriated Sarah's story. He has taken over the hermeneutical sense-making needed to reintegrate a violent encounter back into the narrative of a survivor's life, a process that no one has the right to dictate except Sarah.[81]

By critiquing Eric's sexism and casting his narrative plight to center himself within a love story as a misguided one, "B. I. #20" distances itself from its subject. Yet, at the same time, it

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[79] Even if we are not meant to take this story literally—in other words if this story is meant to allegorize the radical empathy that can be initiated through reading—it's more than a little troubling to use rape to allegorize radical empathy through reading (or anything, really). Pointing to the amount of words dedicated to the actual event of the rape itself, Rachel Haley Himmelheber points out, "To read this story as being primarily about narrative rather than about this specific narrative is to grossly misread the story and to willfully ignore or reject more than half of its content." Himmelheber, "'I Believed She Could Save Me," 525.

[80] "it struck me that this behavior of hers during the rape was an unintentional but tactically ingenious way in a way to prevent it, or *transfigure* it, the rape, to *transcend* its being a vicious attack or violation, since if a woman as a rapist comes at her and savagely mounts her can somehow choose to *give* herself, sincerely and compassionately, she cannot be truly violated or raped, no?" Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 310 (emphasis in the original).

[81] While subjectivity can certainly aid in the hermeneutical process of *healing* from a traumatic and violent event, to suggest that it can literally "prevent" a rape from occurring elides the act of violence through an act of subjective will on the part of the survivor. And while Sarah the character, or a real person, for that matter, may feel—and has a right to feel if she does—that she has intellectually or spiritually transcended the rape itself, there are numerous physical damages to her body possible from such an act of violence that cannot be "transcended" by empathy. The body registers the consequences of an act of violence entirely differently.

draws itself back to him through the project of radical empathy (a project both Eric, however misguided, and the story desire). Midway through a ratiocination of the rapist's motivations, Eric interrupts himself, interjecting, "God how lonely, do you feel it?" (Wallace 303). His question telescopes out into the metafictional project of the collection as a whole, recalling the narrator of "Octet" when it says, "And then you'll have to ask the reader straight out, whether *she* feels it, too, this queer nameless ambient urgent interhuman *sameness*" (Wallace 157, emphasis mine). Thus, Boswell concludes his discussion of "B. I. #20" with the assertation that the critical perspective of *Brief Interviews* is one of human rights: "We acquire our sacred rights as humans only by *granting* those rights to others, however hideous. This process must also be selfless."[82] Boswell, channeling Wallace, thinks the question we need to ask ourselves is, can we stretch ourselves to empathize with even the most hideous of men—thereby granting them their human dignity? In so doing, we, the auditors, reflexively endow ourselves with these rights.

But it is this "granting" and the logic buttressing it that I find particularly difficult to fathom.[83] The subject of Boswell's sentence, and the person completing the act of empathizing, is not the hideous man but the interlocutor. By extension, if we, the interlocutors, fail in the "granting," it is not the hideous men who have failed, but we, the withholding readers. If she does not empathize in return and thereby accept the apology, it becomes she who is out of line, not the contrite man. On whom we place the onus to act (the interlocutor) and on which act we focus on (the granting of empathy) are significant because they are not the same. The empathy game flips the responsibility of empathy from the hideous man onto his interlocutor, tasking her

[82] Boswell, *Understanding David Foster Wallace*, 196.
[83] It doesn't help that Boswell's use of "granting" syncs with Eric's use of "gifting" when he describes how Sarah might "transcend" a rape by changing her mind about the nature of the encounter.

with the challenge of empathic absolution. By failing to grant absolution, the interlocutor has failed to treat the penitent humanely. Yet, to my mind, the female interlocutor doesn't "acquire [her] sacred rights as humans only by *granting*"—or shall we say "gifting"—these rights to others. We—used here to mean a general we, literally "anyone"—might gain human rights by actually empathizing with other humans, but this is something the hideous men are almost always not willing or not able to do, nor is it something that defines his humanity.[84] In other words, it is not the *Granola Cruncher* or the *reader* who must be put through the paces of radical empathy, but the hideous *men* of who would gain their subjecthood through their own ability to empathize with their victims, lovers, family members, even strangers.[85]

For me, *Brief Interviews* accomplishes something quite different than successfully making the case for radical empathy. These are stories that distinguish experiences along the lines of gender in significant ways. The inequality of power pervading these stories is built into the structure of the interview. Not only that: *Brief Interviews* asks of its reader, gendered explicitly with pronoun "she," to put on the mantel of its female characters. What it is like to be the muted Q? The manipulated female partner of "B. I. #2"? Can we even begin to understand the experiences of the "Granola Cruncher"? The kinds of avenues these characters have for asserting themselves within this male-dominated dialogue—an m dash here, a line break there—archive a material history of women being talked over, disregarded, or silenced because of their

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[84] This is precisely why Boswell argues this process of empathizing must be "selfless," as the reader cannot expect the hideous man to return her empathy. At least in the case of "the Granola Cruncher," it certainly isn't necessarily "selfless" to use empathy as a tool to prevent a murder, and there's nothing wrong with that.

[85] I feel compelled to restate that it is not the project of empathy that I object to, per se, but *who* exactly is asked, even compelled, to empathize. We may all feel the same need for empathy, but the bar for the rapist described here is literally not torturing and murdering another person, while the bar set for Sarah is precisely to empathize while she is being physically violated and threatened with rape and torture.

gender. Reading *Brief Interviews,* we might even be able to sympathize with the frequency at which, as Manne avers, "women are rather expected to provide an *audience* for dominant men's victim narratives, providing moral care, listening, sympathy, and soothing."[86] These are important distinctions to make: to acknowledge, on the one hand, the "sameness" Wallace puts forward as our challenge and, on the other hand, the undeniable hideousness of the situation—which is that despite our "interhuman sameness," we are *not* all asked to do the same work or provided the same presumption of credibility. Just reading *Brief Interviews* makes this inequity along the lines of gender pretty clear.

A Crisis of Credibility

Instead of interpreting Eric's breakdown at the end of "B. I. #20" as a signal of Sarah's transcendence or as a crisis of masculinity, I read this breakdown as a signal of a very different kind of crisis for the male character. Eric is used to, as Manne would put it, taking: Eric is what we might consider "the shamefaced who feel[s] entitled to more or better—that is, the admiration and approval of the subjects they want to destroy for looking at them the wrong way, or failing to look at all."[87] When faced with Q's "chilly smile," the entitled shame Eric feels provokes him into self-righteous and hideous name calling. "When this [proprietary] sense [the right to her attention] is challenged, thwarted, violated, or threatened, this is often the trigger for misogyny

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[86] Manne, *Down Girl*, 231.

[87] Manne, *Down Girl*, 183-84. In this section of *Down Girl*, Manne discusses the fictional character Lester from *Fargo*, who murders his wife by bludgeoning her to death after she laughs at him for his inability to fix their washing machine. Amidst the clutter of his diatribe and stream of consciousness, Eric let's slip the comment, "'I felt certain that the psychotic had driven off somewhere to kill himself. It seemed clear from the anecdote that someone had to die.'" Wallace, *Brief Interviews*, 316.

toward her."[88] Eric's misogynist invective is, frankly, too offensive and gratuitous to print here, but "B. I. #20" doesn't conclude with name calling. Eric forcefully terminates the interview with a final, gasping epistemic claim: "'Happy now? All borne out? Be happy. I don't care. I knew she could. I knew I loved. End of story'" (Wallace 318). The repetition, "I knew," is not a bold declaration; we've witnessed throughout the course of the interview how Eric is increasingly destabilized by Q's responses to his assertions. Instead, these protestations are shaky, defensive, and self-conscious. Perhaps these epistemic claims have been scrutinized, even challenged by Q's "thin chilly smile"?

Eric's crisis is a crisis of credibility. He doesn't fall apart at the end of the interview because he is sundered into pieces by the power of Sarah's transcendent empathy. This isn't a love story, nor is it a story of redemption. In the face of Q's mounting disbelief, Eric falls apart because he can't handle not being taken *at his word*. Eric has assumed that we'll take what he says—about Sarah's interpretation of the act of violation at the center of this story, about his interpretations of the rapist's motivations, about his validity as the center of this story—as credible. He's not interpreted how he wants, which is what he has expected and what he essentially demands at the end, and he can't cope. What Eric's breakdown signals is a crisis of interpretation: Eric is used to the privilege of presumptive credibility from any auditor because of his race and gender-based privilege. From Q, he doesn't get it. (Of course, there's no way to know for sure, since interpreting Q's silence always involves inference and speculation). Unmoored by his questioned credibility, he lashes out and then he unravels.

Eric's dissolution brings to mind Brett Kavanaugh's testimony in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee in 2018. The then Supreme Court nominee had been accused in July 2018

[88] Manne, *Down Girl*, 108.

by Christine Blasey Ford of sexually assaulting her in the summer of 1982 when they were in high school. Kavanaugh's testimony was, to be blunt, messy. He wept, spluttered with indignation, and openly accused committee Democrats of "lying in wait" and sabotaging his bid for the Supreme Court seat. The event was mocked in a subsequent *Saturday Night Live* sketch. In *SNL* the sketch, American actor Matt Damon parodies Kavanaugh's performance, but Damon does not need to hyperbolize much to bring Kavanaugh back to life. The scowling, shouting, and calendar clutching were all already there in Kavanaugh's original appearance. The Senate confirmed Kavanaugh's nomination by a vote of 50–48 on October 6, 2018, but Kavanaugh's testimony left a bitter aftertaste in the mouths of more than just those who objected to Kavanaugh's suitability based on credible allegations of sexual assault. Many condemned Kavanaugh's lack of "judicial temperament," a somewhat ineffable quality judicial experts say has to do with "open-mindedness" and neutrality.[89] Guns blazing, Kavanaugh's performance didn't harmonize with this picture of non-partisanship.

For me, Kavanaugh's performance—the overriding hostility, indignation, and abjectness—speaks to what I think is a profound assumption Kavanaugh had made about his own credibility: that is, Kavanaugh expected that he would be treated as credible, just as he expected Ford's allegations would be dismissed without much fanfare (were it not for those pesky Democrats' love of bipartisan smearing). Kavanaugh wore his indignation openly. We, the offending audience, were the ones unfairly denying him something that was his for the taking, something he had earned (he leaned on this point heavily in his testimony through a repetition of

[89] See, Robert Barnes, "As Kavanaugh is all but confirmed, questions linger about his judicial temperament," The *Washington Post* (October 5, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/courts_law/as-kavanaugh-is-all-but-confirmed-questions-linger-about-his-judicial-temperament/2018/10/05/998da822-c8c4-11e8-9b1c-a90f1daae309_story.html (web, accessed February 15, 2020).

the hard work motif). How dare we get in the way of what was rightfully his? In his closing remarks before the Senate Judiciary Committee, Kavanaugh claims, "I have done *everything right*." In Matt Damon's version, Kavanaugh shouts, "To quote my hero, Clint Eastwood's character in *Gran Torino*, get the hell off my lawn!"[90]

Neither Kavanaugh's testimony nor Eric's interview conclude with an apology. For all its excessive water drinking, calendar thumping, and question evading, I believe Kavanaugh's performance was sincere. I believe it in its sincerity not because I don't think he sexually assaulted Blasey Ford—I think he did. I think he truly believed he is obliged our presumptive belief. He felt he was *owed* credibility.[91] Denied something he felt was rightfully his through a challenge to his credibility, he lashed out. While both Eric's and Kavanaugh's statements lack contrition (an element I have been suggesting might be up for debate in any case throughout this chapter), both demonstrate a peculiar assumption: that even when facing a potentially unsympathetic auditor, they assume that the sincerity of their address should be enough to guarantee them their credibility. Demonstrated sincerity is expected to achieve their respective desired interpretive aims. So too does sincerely demonstrated contrition via the public apologies given by hideous men may carry with it the same expectations of absolution. To expect something is to be sure, or relatively sure, it will happen. To feel obliged is to expect to receive something with relative certainty. Expectation, obligation, privilege, taking—these are all paradigms that operate using models of certainty. Such models are, it might go now without

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[90] Matt Damon, *Saturday Night Live* (September 29, 2018) 3:41-3:48, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VRJecfRxbr8 (web, accessed February 15, 2020).

[91] In contrast, by coming forward with a story of sexual assault, Ford becomes, by this logic, not only a politically motivated slanderer of Kavanaugh's reputation. Her untruths also disrupt the natural order of things, by which a man who has worked hard receives the due results of his hard work. We can see this implication underlying Kavanaugh's statements that Ford's allegations have put him and his family "through hell" (again, not not true, I'm sure).

saying, entirely opposite to the kind of assumptions typically made about survivors who testify about sexual or gender-based violence.

The very fact of public breakdown in the form of figures like Kavanaugh suggests a challenge to the paradigm in which sincerity and contrition guarantee interpretive certainty. Consequently, we might wonder, are these men in crisis? Maybe not—after all, Kavanaugh was still confirmed and now sits on the United States Supreme Court. But perhaps such a crisis indicates that structural changes to the paradigm of men giving and women taking in this capacity are slowly, grindingly, pushing on. Such structural changes come undoubtedly from acts in which survivors *give*: Blasey Ford gives her testimony; activist Ana Maria Archila confronts Senator Jeff Flake in an elevator and demands accountability from him in the form of an FBI inquiry. It's clear that resolution won't come in the form of survivors simply refusing to give, or from refusing a hearing or even from refusing sympathy to those who seek absolution for their wrongdoings.

Cohen writes that "theorists reaching back to Aristotle commonly note that assignments of responsibility involve two conditions, a *voluntariness* condition and some *epistemic* condition."[92] The epistemic condition Cohen describes revolves, to a certain degree, around group consensus: "Assignments of responsibility typically suppose that an agent is praiseworthy or blameworthy only if that person knew what she was doing or was otherwise in a position to know what she was doing and its consequences."[93] In other words, responsibility becomes a question of what we can reasonably expect another person to know. Hashtags such as #notallmen, which although true, miss the point by diffusing responsibility. What is needed is to

[92] Cohen, "Moral Repair," 894.
[93] Cohen, "Moral Repair," 894.

move the needle on what we can reasonably expect an individual to know about sexual and gender-based violence, and therefore what we can reasonably be expected to forgive. We need a reckoning with the imbalance between those who take and those who give. We need to sit just a moment with the utter privilege of someone who not only insists, but who is also baffled and upset by a challenge to, only his interpretation of a series events—even and especially when it is wrong.

Instead of beginning with radical forms of empathy, what if what was said to the "Granola Cruncher," was: "I can't begin imagine how my actions have made you feel. I'm sorry." If she wants you to enter into sympathy with her, she'll let you know. This kind of dialogue takes work. Such a shift doesn't jettison the apology as a form, but it redistributes the responsibility of absolution away from the empathetic capacities of the interlocutor and back onto the transgressor. In the meantime, perhaps the most efficacious way to unsettle the status quo, in which men take and women give, as it relates to the apology of the hideous men is to destabilize the expectations—the certainty—that come with such a paradigm. Perhaps what these hideous men need is to experience what it means to be utterly uncertain.

Fleabag and the Question of Uncertainty

Empathy, I have argued through a reading of Wallace's *Brief Interviews with Hideous Men* works within the apology of the hideous man not to transform, but to reinforce patriarchal structures already in place by which men expect to receive, and women are expected to give. Leila Kinney has argued that "genres are most active when unnoticed. They function silently, their muteness a sign of a plausibility that shepherds visceral response and reception through

language and association. They become audible when repudiated, and then generate new means of representation."[94] The apology of the hideous man functions best when the gendered division of its labor remains unnoticed and its terms uncommented upon, obfuscated from view under a thick patina of "interhuman sameness." The imperative then has been to dissect in order to anatomize and understand how this genre of the apology functions. Wallace's most troubling work of fiction demonstrates clearly how sincerity can be used to shore up male credibility, empathy to buttress the continued responsibility of women for men's misdeeds, and silence to reinforce a gendered division regarding who can speak about cases of sexual or gender-based violence.

Like the preceding chapters, this chapter considers how uncertainty operates in relation to the dominant paradigm for considering a narrative of sexual or gender-based violence: the credibility paradigm. However, by focusing on male transgressors, this chapter has also dramatically shifted from the preceding chapters, which have considered the experience of uncertainty in narrative representations of female survivors, and the epistemic and discursive ramifications of avoiding it. There are political repercussions in shifting the center of attention from the subjectivity of survivors and onto the subjectivity of the (even the penitent) perpetrators. My own shift harmonizes with the goals of the previous chapters: to consider the incredible entrenchment and gendered differences in credibility in narratives of sexual or gender-based violence; to open up room for survivors and for discursive flexibility as it pertains to expressions of uncertainty, which I have argued in this dissertation are both risky and at risk; and to contribute to a broader discourse of agitation against violence against women. I don't believe

[94] Leila W. Kinney, "Genre: A Social Contract?" *Art Journal* 46, no. 4 (1987): 273.

we can accomplish these goals without considering how logics of sexism and misogyny continue to permeate and to circulate even generically.

By way of a conclusion, I turn to an incident of male apology in the contemporary television show, *Fleabag.* The series, written and starred in by Phoebe Waller-Bridge, follows the dysfunctional life of its thirty-something eponymous protagonist, Fleabag. Fleabag spends most of the first season coping with her best friend Boo's accidental death by trying to find meaning in meaningless (to her) sex, riling up various members of her dysfunctional family, running a failing guinea pig-themed café, and breaking the fourth wall as she confesses her unsaid feelings, quips, and snide side-eyes to her favorite interlocutor: us. In the fourth episode of the first season, Fleabag and her high-powered, unhappy-in-love sister, Claire, attend a silent retreat weekend, in which female participants are meant to re-connect with themselves by observing a strict code of silence. Ever so snidely, the show scrutinizes the retreat venue's form of cultivating personal growth. For one thing, neither Claire nor Fleabag want to participate in the retreat at all, and the show doesn't treat their participation with a redemptive arc; no one realizes by the end of the episode that silently scrubbing floors is what she needed all along to solve her problems. Instead, the silence of the retreat and the organized manual labor serves as a backdrop that declutters the noise of their lives. The retreat's silence brings into relief how much what Fleabag and Claire need is not silence, but open conversation with each other.

Instead of an honest conversation with her sister, however, Fleabag engages with a character known as the Bank Manager, who in the first episode of the season has denied Fleabag a loan that would have resuscitated her failing café after she accidentally offends him; he

retaliates tersely by calling her a "slut."[95] But in the fourth episode, sitting alone outside the retreat, the Bank Manager's tone has changed. He says, "I touched a colleague's breast… more than once… at a party…"[96] "I'm just a very… disappointing man," he continues.[97]

> 'They keep asking me. What do you want from this workshop? What do you want? [pause] I'm not telling them what I want… I want to move back home, I want to hug my wife, I want to protect my children, protect my daughter, I want to move on, [pause] I want to apologize … to everyone. I want to go to the theater, [pause] I want to take clean cups out of the dishwasher… and put them in the cupboard… At home. And the next morning I want to watch my wife drink from them. And I want to make her feel good. I want to make her orgasm again. [pause] And again. [pause] Truly.'[98]

Without missing a beat, Fleabag smiles sadly at him, looks down with resignation, and then speaks for the first and only time in their conversation: "'I just want to cry… all the time,'" she says.[99] They both agree, with a gesture of zipping their lips, to just let that admission be, without comment.

Like Q of *Brief Interviews*, Fleabag has been silent, almost entirely. Her responses are indicated through gestures and facial expressions. She is listening. And like the Q of "B. I. #20," Fleabag is not the character to whom the Bank Manager owes his apology. She's not the woman

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[95] The Bank Manager is participating in a sexual harassment workshop for men who have anger issues directed specifically at women.
[96] Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 1.4, 20:38-20:50.
[97] Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 1.4, 20:54-21:02.
[98] Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 1.4, 21:20-22:38.
[99] Waller-Bridge, *Fleabag*, 1.4, 22:38-22:49.

he's sexually harassed in his office.[100] But she's included in the "everyone" whom he wants to address, the group he has harmed, which includes, although unrelated to the incident of sexual harassment with the colleague, Fleabag. The Bank Manager's confession crystallizes around this idea of what it means to "want" in the fallout of a charge of sexual harassment. What he expresses is a desire for things to go back to the way they were—for a return to normalcy, even to the mundane. His inflection when he says, "I want to take clean cups out of the dishwasher," suggests he anticipates Fleabag's potential disbelief regarding an item so banal as taking dishes out of dishwasher. And yet, he suggests, this too is part of what he wants—something so ordinary as a cup in the dishwasher might have meaning when one's world has been so changed.

To "want" in this passage is not an expectation. Fleabag can't guarantee the Bank Manager will pass his anger management and sexual harassment workshop and be reinstated at the bank. Nor can she guarantee that this expression of want will guarantee that his wife will want to feel "good again" around him. Instead, the Bank Manager expresses wants for things he doesn't know he can ever have again. The banality of wanting to remove dishes from the dishwasher becomes a sign of how even the most rote of actions, the mindless clutter of daily life, hardly worth remarking on, have been jeopardized by his actions. His uncertainty about his future because of actions he owns reaches even to the mundane, to the daily clutter of a life. *Fleabag* demonstrates a dissolution of the binds of obligation in the apology of the Bank Manager, whose expressions of want open up the deepest of uncertainties about what will be. There is no social contract here, in which the Bank Manager expects that his condemning of his past actions will assure him of absolution. There is just silence.

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[100] This too is something the scene shares with Q and Eric of "B. I. #20." The dynamics of the scene would be much different if Eric were giving his confession to Sarah herself.

And yet the Bank Manager recognizes he owes Fleabag too an apology.[101] His focus on the future also radically differs from the emphasis of the apologies of real-life hideous men, who focus almost entirely on the paradigm of what they didn't know then, versus what they know now, all the while shunting the brunt of the emotional work back onto the interlocutors and decentering the narrative of the survivor from the center of the story. Hideous men in Wallace's work make their claims for absolution based on appeals of empathy, professing newfound contrition for acts they now understand to be reprehensible, and which they often relate to larger structures of toxic heterosexual masculinity. Yet it is always a f*emale* third-party interlocutor from whom these characters seek absolution, and while *Brief Interviews* critiques its men for their insincerity, manipulation, and sexism, it nevertheless posits that, should these men engage candidly with empathy, all will be well. The relative consequences versus benefits for the female interlocutors are much left out of the calculus of empathy as a reparative force in Wallace's writing.

We might infer that these character's focus on the past implies their perceived lack of the need to think about the future. Such a temporal and rhetorical blind spot is a sign of the certainty with which they presume to receive absolution and reintegration. To break apart the bindings of obligation returns the recipient of that obligation into a state of the unknown: To apologize without the assurance of its acceptance. To confess without the assurance of absolution. To speak

[101] Fleabag's admission too is, in fact, we later learn in the series, related to her own confession: the emptiness and guilt she feels after the death of her friend Boo, whose boyfriend Fleabag has slept with prior to her death. Yet, Fleabag can't apologize to the person who most deserved it, her friend. Instead, she confesses to a stranger her own kind of personal want, and they let such confessions be—unable to guarantee each other anything except a hearing—a marking of the regret they both feel and the desire for things to be different.

without the assurance, for once, of credibility. To desperately want, but to be uncertain whether or not you will receive.

Coda

Subject, Writer, Reader

When I searched for the article "A Rape on Campus: A Brutal Assault and Struggle for Justice at UVA" in the spring of 2020, it was gone.

"A Rape on Campus" was published by the *Rolling Stone* in November, 2014. Sabrina Rubin Erdely's feature piece was a graphic account of an alleged gang-rape, which occurred at the University of Virginia's fraternity, Phi Kappa Psi, in September, 2012. The story was told by its victim, a University of Virginia undergraduate named Jackie. Not long after "A Rape on Campus" was published, the story began to fall apart: Jackie's story lacked corroboration, the facts didn't add up, entire persons had been fabricated, sources hadn't been consulted, stories were changed. The *Washington Post*, *ABC News*, the *Washington Times*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported on the errors and inconsistencies in the *Rolling Stone* feature. *Rolling Stone* issued a retraction and a (now retracted) comment about regretting misplacing its trust in Jackie. A few months later, commissioned by *Rolling Stone*, the Columbia School of Journalism examined in depth what had gone wrong with Erdely and her editors' reporting.[1] Both University of Virginia Dean Nicole Eramo and Phi Kappa Psi fraternity have successfully sued *Rolling Stone* for damages.[2]

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[1] Sheila Coronel, Steve Coll, and Derek Kravitz, "*Rolling Stone's* investigation: 'A failure that was avoidable,'" *Columbia Journalism Review* (April 5, 2015), https://www.cjr.org/investigation/rolling_stone_investigation.php (web, accessed April 7, 2020).

[2] See, T. Rees Shapiro and Emma Brown, "Rolling Stone settles with former U-Va. dean in defamation case," the *Washington Post* (April 11, 2017), https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/education/rolling-stone-settles-with-u-va-dean-in-defamation-case/2017/04/11/5a564532-1f02-11e7-be2a-3a1fb24d4671_story.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020); and Sydney Ember, "*Rolling Stone* to Pay $1.65 Million to Fraternity Over Discredited Rape Story," (June 13, 2017),

I remember exactly where I was when I first read "A Rape on Campus." The fall of 2014 was my first semester as a brand-new PhD student at the University of Virginia. I had arrived in Charlottesville, Virginia during the deepest part of summer. I'd been charmed by the low-hanging evenings twinkling with fireflies (and still am), intimidated by verbosity of my peers (and still am), and awestruck by the privilege that was my new mandate to spend so much time *reading* (and I still am). I remember exactly what I felt as I read "A Rape on Campus" alone at my kitchen table late on the night of November 19th. I remember marching with new colleagues. I remember someone flicking a lit cigarette at us from the balcony of a popular undergraduate bar. On the lawn out front of it, I remember wanting to tear down the storied fraternity brick by bloody brick.

Six years later, Google returned results that all spoke to the catastrophe of Erdely's reporting, to the wound the article had re-opened, and to the millions of dollars in litigation. But none of these results rendered the story itself. "Retracted," all of the official news articles said. What a strange thing, to have been the most read non-celebrity story in the history of the *Rolling Stone* at the time, and to be so bright and so nauseating a memory in my own mind, and to now be gone.

I confess, it was difficult for me to determine how to conclude a dissertation about representations of sexual and gender-based violence. In each of the chapters, I found an inverted grace note through which I could send off the chapter: In Chapter One, speaking some of the names of the survivors who told their stories. In Chapter Two, the unfollowed and yet vivid anecdote of the woman with the red ribbon, a symbol of possibility in a story vexed with the

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https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/business/media/rape-uva-rolling-stone-frat.html (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

inevitability of loss. In Chapter Three, a shared moment of intimacy and regret between two strangers with equal but distinct reasons for seeking forgiveness. But how to sing one final note for a dissertation constituted by so much pain? The subject itself defies the form: neatness, closure, finality.

Over the course of this project, I considered several, ultimately unfollowed options: the female revenge plot; trauma and childhood in Susan Choi's *Trust Exercises*; the space for love stories in a contemporary culture dominated by #MeToo discourse (work by Phoebe Waller-Bridge and Sally Rooney comes to mind); the dystopian worlds of Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*, Leni Zumas's *Red Clocks*, and Naomi Alderman's *The Power.* However, choosing one topic over another always felt to me as if I were tacitly privileging this topic over the others by placing it at the very end, or that I was suggesting a suitable way forward for a problem that staggers me still. Even now, concluding in this way stymies me.

Still, something about the event of reading "A Rape on Campus" and the way it all went up like so much dry kindling so soon after it lit up has remained lodged, like unworked-through material caught at the back of the throat, or like a gaping hole one circles but is too afraid to step too close to. In a 2019 introductory literature course I taught called "All the Single Ladies," we read Jia Tolentino's 2019 essay about "A Rape on Campus." Even then, I couldn't bring myself to go so far as to search for the piece at the center of Tolentino's essay. I taught Tolentino without re-reading the *Rolling Stone* article. I didn't assign it to my students. I wondered if I could write this coda on the story by memory alone. It was gone from the internet, after all. Isn't there some part of us that wants it gone?

Though *Rolling Stone* has scrubbed the piece, it's not untraceable.[3] Very few things actually are in our internet age. Working on this coda, I stepped a little bit closer.

In her essay "We Come from Old Virginia," Tolentino, a University of Virginia alum herself, reflects on her experience reading "A Rape on Campus." She writes that she realizes at the time of writing "We Come from Old Virginia" that she didn't have the necessary skills then for seeing the piece for what it was: "At twenty-five, I was closer to my time at UVA than I was to the age I am now—closer to the idea of being the subject than the idea of being the writer. I didn't know how to read the story. But a lot of other people did."[4] To pick the *Rolling Stone* piece apart—to notice its errors and inconsistencies, the things Erdely writes about with certainty, but which beg the question, *how could she know*—is an ability Tolentino claims she would develop over time as she became a seasoned journalist. Over time, she's become a canny reader. Experience creates fluency.

For me, Tolentino's reflection on her development as a journalist asks, what does it mean to be a "good" reader of stories of sexual and gender-based violence? What *is* a "good" reader? "We Come from Old Virginia" models several key moves. Tolentino gets all the facts straight. She is clear about the prejudices that directly affect and prevent survivors from speaking. She weaves in the longer history of sexual and gender-based violence at the University of Virginia, including more recent cases as well as the imbrication of racism and enslavement with the history of sexual violence at the university. She brings in other sources. She acknowledges her

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[3] Sabrina Rubin Erdely, "A Rape on Campus: " *Rolling Stone* (November 19, 2014), archived by the *Internet Archive*, http://web.archive.org/web/20141119200349/http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/features/a-rape-on-campus-20141119 (web, accessed: April 7, 2020).

[4] Tia Tolentino, "We Come from Old Virginia," in *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion* (New York: Random House, 2019), 202-3.

blind spots. In writing with such insight, it is clear to me that she has asked herself: How would I have felt? What would I have seen? What would I have *wanted* to see? "I have sympathy," Tolentino writes, "for the experience of being fooled by what you want to believe in. Good intentions often produce blind spots. It's hard to blame Erdely for believing that Jackie's memory had initially been obscured by trauma. It's easy to understand how a college administrator might believe in her institution's moral progress despite evidence to the contrary, or how a reporter would believe that stories tend to shift in the direction of truth."[5] Her reflections speak to the importance of learning to be good readers of stories of sexual and gender-based violence.

In the conclusion of her essay, Tolentino relates a personal experience: during her year in the Peace Corps her host father kisses her without her consent. When she reports this misconduct, the Peace Corps administration does not believe her. The dismissal of her experience impacts Tolentino profoundly. "Even the suggestion that I was making something out of nothing made me wonder what if I was, in fact, making something out of nothing. I started *wanting* things to happen to me, as if to prove to myself that I wasn't crazy, wasn't hallucinating."[6] Tolentino suggests, in a project about explicating the collateral damage associated with the fallout of the *Rolling Stone* article, that what she felt about being told she was making something out of nothing was something that might have driven a survivor like Jackie too. "Jackie's false accusation, in this context," she writes, "appears as a sort of chimera—a grotesque, mismatched creation; a false way of making a real problem visible."[7]

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[5] Tolentino, "We Come," 208.
[6] Tolentino, "We Come," 234.
[7] Tolentino, "We Come," 217.

"A Rape on Campus" failed to do its due diligence as a piece of journalism. It failed to seek out the facts, to corroborate its story, to find a credible speaker. It speaks to the troubling fact of just how sensational a story needs to be in order to get noticed in order to begin to step toward justice; and to the inadequacies of existing outlets for survivor speech. No doubt the article's aftermath has caused incalculable personal and professional damage to people involved directly and indirectly. And it brings into sharp relief that bright line between what is fact and what is fiction—since, in a strange, unsettling way, that is what "A Rape on Campus" becomes when it fails to meet the standards of verifiability. It slips uneasily into the strange category of fiction, in the most painful way.

Near the essay's conclusion, Tolentino writes, "I wish I had known—then, in Peace Corps, or in college—that the story didn't need to be clean, and it didn't need to be satisfying; that, in fact, it would never be clean or satisfying, and once I realized that, I would be able to see what was true."[8] "Epistemic Uncertainties" is about the uneasy yoking of the truth to the reality of messiness—that the truth can be messy, and that messiness can be truth. "A Rape on Campus" and its fallout testifies to the open wound at the center of many of these stories—and how much yet there is still to do, if we can manage even one step closer to what lies at the center. To see the truth in/of the messiness, we need more spaces for these narrative messes, for impressions; bright details; faulty memories; composites and monsters created out of both fact and fiction, real and imagined; wish fulfillment; uncertainties and ambivalences; even for lies mixed in with truths. We can't always be clean and tidy. These spaces aren't—nor perhaps should they be—the spaces of the legal or the journalistic. They might not even be at the podiums or on the banners or in the

[8] Tolentino, "We Come," 234.

hashtags of anti-rape activism. But we need them, and it is up to us to make room for them, here, now.

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