

**Listening to Survivors: Multiethnic American Women's Writing About Sexual Violence
1797-2019**

A dissertation submitted by

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Dissertation Abstract

Though the #MeToo Movement seemed to promise a new era of justice for survivors of sexual violence, it has drawn attention to a problem that literature has long revealed: survivors who tell their stories are often not listened to. Grounded in intersectional feminist theories of listening, my dissertation examines examples of women's writing about sexual violence in multiethnic American literature from the eighteenth century to the present, focusing specifically on narratives written from the survivor's perspective. I argue that close attention, or "listening," to the details of this tradition elucidates key insights into rape culture's deep roots in American culture.

To investigate this multi-century literary record of rape culture and resistance in the United States, I focus on five literary texts that represent women's experiences of sexual violence across a variety of historical, cultural, and identity contexts. My readings of these texts highlight rape culture's historical and contemporary manifestation through language, silence, and listening practices as well as a rich tradition of protest. I show that the authors use language in specific ways—often obliquely or figuratively—to express their experiences within rape culture and articulate its fundamental entwinement with other systems of oppression, including white supremacy, colonialism, heteronormativity, and capitalism.

The first half of my dissertation reads rape in texts published before the mid-twentieth century, when explicit writing about sexual violence was largely considered unpublishable. The second half concentrates on twenty-first-century texts that represent sexual violence explicitly. Chapter One, "Silencing and Rape Culture in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*," considers Foster's 1797 novel of "seduction" through the lens of rape culture to examine how acts that are not rape—such as silencing women and demanding their affective labor—are nevertheless

deeply entrenched in and crucial to sustaining a system that encourages sexual violence. Chapter Two, “Compelling Audiences to Listen: The Survival Literature of Harriet Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša,” analyzes the authors’ use of metonymy to obliquely express the collusion of rape culture with slavery and Native boarding schools, respectively, for white reading audiences inclined not to listen. Continuing this discussion of metonymy, Chapter Three, “Listening for Survival in Helena María Viramontes’ *Their Dogs Came with Them*,” focuses on how the novel’s visceral portrayal of noise pollution in East Los Angeles represents the fatal silencing of Chicana survivors over a long history of colonial violence. Chapter Four, “Verbal Hierarchy and Rape Regime in Margaret Atwood’s *The Testaments*,” shows how Atwood’s speculative portrayal of the demise of Gilead, an authoritarian regime based in sexual violence, ultimately falters because the methods of resistance retain the verbal hierarchies of rape culture.

Together, all these texts reveal that discrediting survivor stories is not a recent symptom of rape culture but a foundational feature of it, and one that women writers have developed strategies to resist.

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1797-2019

Introduction

I came to explore the wreck.
 The words are purposes.
 The words are maps.
 I came to see the damage that was done
 and the treasures that prevail.
 —Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck”

In September 2018, I listened along with the rest of the United States as Republican senators questioned, belittled, and ultimately brushed aside significant evidence that Supreme Court nominee Brett Kavanaugh had sexually assaulted Dr. Christine Blasey Ford. Like many, I had hoped that Dr. Ford’s testimony might herald a turning point in America’s tradition of devaluing of survivor perspectives¹—that it might signify the growing #MeToo Movement’s success in amassing so many stories about sexual violence that rape culture could no longer be ignored. And yet, despite Ford’s presumed credibility as a white university professor, despite her composure and politeness, despite her previous disclosure of the assault to a therapist, Kavanaugh sits on the Supreme Court today.² Rather than signaling a new era of justice, the so-called hearing reinforced rape culture’s insidious grip on American society, which has long minimized and discredited survivor voices.

After this national performance of rape culture, I wanted to know more about its roots. Guided by Lynn A. Higgins’ and Brenda R. Silver’s definition of rape culture as a *network of attitudes, beliefs, and actions* that make sexual violence “so ingrained and so rationalized” that it contributes to “the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence” (1-2), I was

¹ Throughout my dissertation, I use the term survivor to emphasize that many people who experience sexual violence do not identify as victims and, in fact, come to consider themselves survivors through the act of sharing their stories. At the same time, I want to acknowledge that not all who experience sexual violence and its aftereffects survive—including several characters considered in my dissertation—and not all who survive identify as survivors. I intend for my use of the term survivor to be inclusive of the spectrum of identities that people who have experienced sexual violence may occupy.

²See Klein for an overview of Blasey-Ford’s testimony and Kavanaugh’s rageful denial of the account.

interested, specifically, in how language and listening practices sustain and resist rape culture. So, I investigated what Rebecca Solnit calls “the long and brutal tradition of asserting that men are credible but women are incredible, men are objective, women are subjective” and the effects this belief has on survivors. I found legal scholarship pointing to legislative structures, spanning from the eighteenth century to the present, that have prevented women from speaking out about sexual violence, punished them for doing so, and prioritized men’s reputations over actually preventing rape.³ I found research by health professionals with resounding evidence that survivors experience re-traumatization when they are not believed, which contributes to post-traumatic stress disorder and, for some, can be “worse than the actual incident” (McQueen et al). I found historical sources unearthing records of survivors speaking out despite challenges and risks: eighteenth-and nineteenth-century precursors to Dr. Ford who also went unheeded.⁴ In short, I found that America’s longstanding and well-documented failure to listen to survivors has enabled rape culture to persist through a variety of mechanisms that have not been eradicated but merely changed over time.

Though many have celebrated the #MeToo Movement for “breaking silence” about sexual violence, the truth is that survivors have been speaking out for centuries; they simply have not been listened to. As a glance at American literature reveals, women have been writing about sexual violence and representing what we now call rape culture since the eighteenth century. Though some scholars, such as Tanya Serisier, call for rethinking narrative-based feminist resistance based on its failure to effect change (210), I am interested in how literary texts can

³See Salmon and Block for an examination of property and marriage laws that legally categorized women as commodities rather than agents and LeGrand for an analysis of twentieth-century legal attitudes toward rape testimony that favor the accused.

⁴ See Block for eighteenth-century examples and Miranda for nineteenth-century examples of victim-survivors speaking out despite the low probability of justice and high probability of further harm.

help audiences become better *listeners*—how shifting from a framework of reading to one of listening can cultivate a cultural practice of valuing survivor voices.

In my dissertation, I consider five works of literature by women representing sexual violence from the survivor perspective: Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette* (1797), Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Zitkala-Ša's *American Indian Stories* (1921), Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007), and Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019). Paying attention to verbal and auditory dynamics, I analyze how these texts portray silencing, discrediting, mishearing, ignoring, and speaking over survivors as continuous with sexual violence in motivation and effect, influencing how those who have experienced sexual violence process, communicate about, and respond to their assaults and, crucially, whether they survive. Read through an intersectional feminist approach of listening, these texts, I argue, reshape the soundscape of rape culture in several ways. First, they accentuate the mechanisms of rape culture that have silenced and distorted survivor voices in collusion with white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. Second, they refuse and rewrite the language of these oppressive logics, recasting survivor experiences in their own terms and compelling audiences to question their assumptions. Finally, they articulate the necessity of reciprocal listening to collective healing, societal transformation, and justice beyond the carceral system.

Depicted in narrative form, sexual violence appears amidst other events in the characters' lives, enmeshed in the sociopolitical dynamics of the time. With sexual violence at the center of my reading, I show how the surrounding events and dynamics—in essence, the majority of each text—form a literary record of rape culture. Since I am interested in how survivors have not been listened to, I focus less on graphic scenes of rape and more on affiliated language and listening practices. Following Saidiya Hartman, I intend to amplify “the terror of the mundane and

quotidian rather than exploit the shocking spectacle” (4), which can be its own kind of violence. By putting sexual violence in context, literary narratives provide an archive of the subtle mechanisms that undermine survivors’ credibility, distort their voices, and deny them empathetic listeners.

Rather than focusing on a particular literary era or genre, my dissertation listens to the soundscape of rape culture and resistance over the past three centuries. Though I contextualize each work historically and consider how generic conventions shape each author’s writing, I depart from recent studies that trace the development of genres such as the twentieth-century rape novel and rape memoir.⁵ Instead, I track the movement of rape culture itself as it emerges through a variety of genres over time, including the early American seduction novel, antebellum slave narrative, twentieth-century Native American autobiography, twenty-first century Chicana novel, and contemporary dystopia. By putting voices from different genres and eras together, I amplify patterns of rape culture that make not listening to survivors seem “‘natural’ and inevitable” (Higgins and Silver 2), as well as rhetorical strategies women writers have developed to challenge audiences to listen differently.

The first half of my dissertation explores late-eighteenth- to early-twentieth-century texts that could not depict sexual content directly due to middle-class, white social mores. Building on the work of scholars such as Cathy Davidson, Jean Fagan Yellin, and Ruth Spack, who “read the violence . . . back into texts where it has been deflected” (Higgins and Silver 4), I consider how portrayals of rape culture that do not graphically depict rape nevertheless represent sexual violation. Ultimately, I show how authors represent sexual violence using oblique language such as the rhetoric of seduction and metonymic depictions of other kinds of violence. The second

⁵See Field for an examination of rape novels in the 1970s and 1980s and Serisier for a discussion of rape memoirs in the 1990s.

half of my dissertation considers twenty-first century writers who can and do reference sexual matters explicitly. Despite being less constricted, however, these authors also use language in innovative ways as well—including metonymically connecting the literal to the abstract as well as speculatively echoing antiquated sexual politics—to articulate realities of rape culture that are difficult to voice within dominant logics. These articulations prompt, as Linda Martín Alcoff calls for, “a more complex understanding of the constitution of the experience of sexual violence” (1) by emphasizing rape culture’s entwinement with other systems of oppression.

Where my scope is broad in era and genre, it is specific in narrative perspective: victims and survivors. The texts I read, while not exclusively autobiographical, primarily feature the perspectives of characters who have experienced sexual violence and express their internal thoughts and feelings. Many studies of sexual violence in literature consider a wider range of narrative perspectives, analyzing how representations of rape can reproduce the violence of spectacle,⁶ stand in for other forms of violence,⁷ represent titillation or desire,⁸ or develop a character’s psychological interiority.⁹ However, my study is less invested in how representations of rape inform literary theory and more interested in how literature provides insights into rape culture and resistance.

Intentionally, I center the perspectives of girls, women, and gender non-conforming individuals. Though boys and men also experience sexual violence—and their stories are

⁶ See Hartman for a consideration of how spectacular scenes of Black suffering position audiences on “the uncertain line between witness and spectator,” risking audience voyeurism, desensitization to violence, and misplaced empathetic identification that obscures the actual suffering of the Black subject (4).

⁷ See Sielke for an extended look at how “American rape narratives are overdetermined by a distinct history of racial conflict,” leading to the metaphorization of rape as a stand-in for racial violence (2).

⁸ See Higgins and Silver 4 for examples of how sexual violence, when represented in literature, is often deflected and replaced with something else.

⁹ See Ferguson for an analysis of how rape in Richardson’s *Clarissa* enables the generic development of psychological novel by “becom[ing] the vehicle for the contrast between what could be said in public and proved and what is said in private and believed” (99).

important to understanding rape culture¹⁰—I limit my scope in part because girls, women (both cisgender and transgender), and gender non-conforming individuals experience sexual violence at extremely high rates.¹¹ Even more, given my dissertation’s emphasis on rape culture rather than the act of rape alone, I center these perspectives because rape culture is based in patriarchy and misogyny—systems that structurally disadvantage these groups whether a particular individual has experienced sexual violence or not.¹² Much of my dissertation addresses the ways in which legislation, language, and popular culture have created gendered notions of credibility, and each author in my dissertation, whether writing autobiographically or not, is informed by her lived experience of oppression under patriarchy and misogyny.

Despite this narrow narrative focus, the perspectives examined in my dissertation are not monolithic. In addition to depicting rape culture in multiple historical eras, the texts feature voices from a variety of cultural contexts and racial or ethnic identities, expressing the particular, embodied ways that a diverse group of survivors experiences and resists rape culture. So, for example, while all the texts depict the silencing of survivors in some way, the method of enforcement and degree of subjugation differs drastically from text to text, ranging from early American marriage laws and white, middle-class social codes to enslavement, ethnocide, and environmental destruction to theocratic totalitarianism. All too often, when survivor stories have a platform, the perspectives of cisgender, white, heterosexual women overshadow those of more

¹⁰ See Field’s chapter “Writing the Male Survivor: The Rape Novel in the Twenty-First Century” for an examination of texts that center the distinct experiences and challenges of male victims-survivors.

¹¹ Though rape and sexual assault statistics are complicated by the fact that they are profoundly underreported, it is indisputable that women and gender non-conforming individuals constitute the majority of victim-survivors. According to the Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), 90% of rape victims identify as women, and college students who identify as transgender, genderqueer, or nonconforming are 3% more likely than college students who identify as cisgender women to have been sexually assaulted; see “Victims of Sexual Violence: Statistics.”

¹² This is the basis of Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 book, *Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape*, which was foundational in establishing rape as a broad social and political problem.

marginalized groups, which not only misrepresents who survivors are but also flattens the realities of rape culture into a “single-axis framework” (Crenshaw 139), ignoring rape culture’s foundational intersections with white supremacy, colonialism, capitalism, and heterosexism. Informed by the scholarship of feminists of color, especially Black feminist literary scholars such as Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman, I work from the assumption that race and gender, among other identity markers, are co-constructed through interlocking systems of violence.

Because other forms of oppression are integral, not supplemental, to the shape that rape culture takes and vice versa, I use a metonymical framework to conceptualize how texts express simultaneous forms of oppression. Literary representations of sexual violence, Higgins and Silver explain, are frequently “turned into a metaphor or symbol” (4); Sabine Sielke goes so far as to say that these “highly mediated” representations “limit our understanding of sexual violence” (2-3). While this may be true in some texts—particularly those that do not emerge as a product of lived experience or center survivor perspectives—the texts in my dissertation “restor[e] rape to literal,” (4) as Higgins and Silver advocate for, while at the same time representing other, related forms of violence. To interpret this simultaneity, I borrow Eileen Julien’s concept of metonymy, in which the representation of rape is not “an isolated, gratuitous instance of violence that can be read metaphorically” but rather “a quintessential act of violence in a context of rampant abuse, both political and sexual” (161). Metonymical representations of rape, as the chapters that follow demonstrate, attend to both the embodied experience of sexual violence and the abstract systems of oppression that produce it.

My dissertation’s most distinctive contribution to the growing body of scholarship on sexual violence in literature is its emphasis on listening, both in thematic emphasis and methodology. On a textual level, I analyze how rape culture feeds on the refusal to listen to

survivors, speaking to what political scientist Andrew Dobson argues about listening in democracy: that despite its necessity in creating dialogue, listening is not institutionally guaranteed, which makes *not* listening “the most effective and insidious” political strategy the powerful use to maintain dominance (Dryzek qtd. in Dobson 25). I examine how, at the interpersonal level, the texts amplify “the micropolitics of listening” (Bassel 9), that perpetuate auditory inequity in everyday exchanges and, in turn, inform widespread societal beliefs about who deserves to be listened to. Specifically, I show how survivor narratives expose assumptions about gender and race that distort the audibility of marginalized voices: how, as Nancy Bickford explains, rhetorical styles associated with masculinity tend to be taken more seriously (96-97), and, as Jennifer Lynn Stoeber describes, “white supremacy . . . [attempts] to suppress, tune out, and willfully misunderstand some sounds and their makers” (6). Through textual analysis, my dissertation pinpoints exactly how rape culture maintains power by dismissing survivor voices as less rational, valid, and worthy of being heard than the dominant voices of white, wealthy, cisgender, straight men.

On a methodological level, my work responds to the explicit and repeated call of feminists of color for white scholars such as myself to “listen in” (Anzaldúa xxviii): to actively seek out voices that white supremacy, colonialism, and patriarchy have suppressed and to work to hear them on their own terms. Black feminist bell hooks explains that “for black women, our struggle has not been to emerge from silence into speech but . . . to make a speech that compels listeners, one that is heard” (6), citing the ways in which Black women’s voices have been “tuned out” as “background music” (6). Gloria Anzaldúa echoes a similar struggle for Chicanas, calling attention to “mestizas who have been silenced before uttering a word, or, having spoken, have not been heard” (xvii) whose “voices are heard as static” and “drowned out by white noise”

(xxii). Met with “ears that do not hear you” (hooks 6), that, in fact, “don’t want to hear” (Anzaldúa xxii), Black lesbian poet Audre Lorde insists that “where the words of women are crying to be heard, we must each of us recognize our responsibility to seek those words out” (41). Striving to meet this responsibility, I draw on these feminist frameworks as well as the wisdom of Native thinkers, such as Robin Wall Kimmerer, who articulate the value of learning to listen—how humility toward perspectives “other than our own . . . creates an openness to the world” (300) that can disrupt the reproduction of injustice. These scholars recognize the wealth of insight that already exists in sources brushed aside by dominant discourse, reminding those of us with privilege and power that, fundamentally, we need to listen.

As such, I employ Black, Chicana, and Indigenous feminist methodologies to seek out and try to fully hear the voices of women of color in the texts that I read. Where white, Western frameworks would likely hear nothing at all, these frameworks provide tools for calling out acts of silencing and hearing protest. The work of Black feminists, such as Saidiya Hartman, Marisa J. Fuentes, and Christina Sharpe, guides me to listen for meaning in archival silence and hear women writers’ oblique uses of language as intersectional articulations of oppression. Similarly, the work of Chicana and Indigenous feminists, such as Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, and Deborah A. Miranda, teaches me to hear articulations that might be dismissed as unintelligible or irrelevant as, in fact, central to collective, intergenerational conceptions of trauma and healing.

As my title suggests, I position myself toward the texts as a listener to hear what traditional critical approaches might miss or misconstrue. Informed by Krista Ratcliffe’s concept of “rhetorical listening,” this position is a “stance of openness” toward a text that differs from reading in its cultural assumptions and disciplinary goals (1, 24). Based on Gemma Fiumara’s critique of Hegel’s divided logos, which rejects what does not fit in to dominant logic, Ratcliffe

explores what can be gained by listening to the “exiled excess” (25): how it might harmonize or dissonate with the dominant discourse, enabling listeners hear meaning that would be imperceptible through logos alone (44). In avoiding the temptation to read only “for what we can agree with or challenge” (25), listeners shift from making meaning *within* the dominant discourse to making meaning *about* the dominant discourse—hearing what it excludes and why.

In rape culture, the “exiled excess”—that which does not fit into patriarchal logic—is almost always the perspective of the survivor. Dominant logics surrounding justice in the United States, shaped by the carceral system, widely consider survivor perspectives a threat to the reputations of innocent men, and since sexual violence is so difficult to prove using this system’s frameworks, survivor voices often simply get ignored. What would happen if, instead of rejecting accounts of sexual violence that differ from the perspective of the accused or that cannot be proven or adequately articulated using patriarchal language, we listened to them alongside the dominant discourse? What could we learn about the nature of sexual violence and how it operates in society by paying attention to the dissonances and echoes these conflicting discourses produce?

It is the imbalance in who is heard—the malfunctioning of the reciprocal interchange between speaker and listener—that my dissertation calls attention to. While detractors of the #MeToo Movement have misinterpreted the call to “believe women” as a mere judicial reversal in which accused men will be considered guilty until proven innocent, my conception of listening means cultivating an auditory culture in which all voices can be heard equitably, without suspicion or distortion. Listening, Nancy Bickford explains, is not the same as sympathy, identification, or consensus but is something that is necessary in the “presence of conflict and differences” to make decisions “under conditions in which all voices are heard” (2). So, to be

clear, I do not argue that survivor voices should be considered the unilateral “truth” for the purpose of making carceral decisions;¹³ rather, I ask *what can be learned about rape culture* by allowing conflicting perspectives to coexist and investigating the systemic factors that disproportionately suppress and dismiss survivor perspectives.

As an approach to reading literature about sexual violence, listening assumes an inherent value in perspectives voiced by survivors. While the predominantly skeptical mode of postmodernist critique has called into question the stability of categories such as survivor, considering how representations of women as victims might reinscribe the idea that they are powerless, Carine Mardorossian points out that this mode of thinking seems “unable to [tackle rape and antirape politics] . . . in any other way than the psychologizing and victim-blaming terms that have dominated hegemonic approaches to gendered violence in contemporary culture” (747).¹⁴ The postmodernist hermeneutics of suspicion¹⁵ so prevalent in literary studies risks reinforcing the already disproportionate mistrust of survivor narratives, which, as a literary genre, calls to be read differently perhaps more than any other. Approaching survivor narratives as a listener makes audible “the processes through which cultures count or discredit people as victims” (Mardorossian 766), in essence, anatomizing rape culture rather than destabilizing the voices that try to articulate it.

Most significantly, literature provides readers with the opportunity to practice the skill of listening—to maintain a “stance of openness” (Ratcliffe 1) toward perspectives that some readers

¹³ The problem with this dogmatic stance can be seen most clearly in the history of false, racially motivated accusations of Black boys and men sexually assaulting white women, such as the famous cases of Emmett Till and The Scottsboro Boys.

¹⁴ See Mardorossian 766 for an in-depth explanation of postmodernism’s circular logic that makes “any discussion of women’s victimization . . . automatically a suspect gesture.”

¹⁵ See Felski for an examination of the limits of this framework, a phrase coined by Ricoeur, which seeks to “expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see” (1).

may find difficult to relate to. Outside of literature, the most well-known survivor accounts emerge from high profile court cases, where survivors are immediately deemed suspect and forced to prove the veracity of their words. As any #MeToo comment thread will show, this attitude does not stop in the courtroom: it bleeds into everyday interactions where bystanders feel entitled to interrogate survivors. This atmosphere of distrust stems, in large part, from an all-consuming focus on individuals rather than systems, which manifests as anxiety over an accused man's reputation, as preoccupation with the survivor's character, or as the belief that rape can be solved by incarcerating a few monstrous individuals. Literature, on the other hand, provides an imaginative space for readers to listen to survivor stories at a level removed from specific, real-life individuals. It offers a chance to "listen metonymically" (Ratcliffe 78) to survivor stories—hearing them as representative pieces of larger systems of oppression—and in dialing down the emphasis on individual perpetrators and victims, the overarching dynamics of rape culture become audible. Read in this way, literature can help reshape collective listening practices in contemporary society, unlocking, as Elizabeth Ammons describes, "the power of words to change people and the power of people to change the world" (xiv).

My first chapter rereads Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797) as an early American articulation of rape culture. Considering the eighteenth-century concept of "seduction" through the contemporary lens of rape culture, I question readings of the novel that consider the protagonist untrustworthy and examine the novel's depiction of a society that uniformly dismisses women's words and feelings while giving men a monopoly on reason and the right to comfort. Still prevalent in the present-day United States, these attitudes, I show, are foundational mechanisms of rape culture rooted in early American legal doctrine, popular culture, and language. I analyze how *The Coquette's* protagonist exhibits

common responses to being raped after she is verbally berated and discredited, suggesting that these verbal behaviors are continuous with, not discrete from, sexual violence. A historical analogue to the confessional MeToo Movement, *The Coquette's* epistolary form shows how the new republic sustained rape culture, in part, by normalizing not listening to women.

Like *The Coquette*, the texts in my second chapter, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) by Harriet Jacobs and *American Indian Stories* (1921) by Zitkala-Ša, discuss sexual violence through the rhetoric of the seduction novel. However, these authors go a step further by using metonymy to express the entwined construction of white supremacy and rape culture to white reading audiences inclined not to listen. Using Jennifer Stoeber's concept of the "white listening ear" and examining Victorian-era cultural assumptions, I describe how both Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša appealed to white audiences for political support despite these audiences' tendency to disbelieve women of color and consider writing about sexual violence taboo. I then analyze how the authors allude to rape in slavery and Native boarding schools, respectively, by describing other forms of racialized violence that share mechanisms with sexual violence: legal disenfranchisement, bodily violation, verbal abuse, and refusal to hear protest. Rather than considering these harms metaphors—that is, unrelated stand-ins—for sexual violence, I assert that they are metonyms: associated harms that collude with sexual violence. Articulating their experiences in this way, the authors simultaneously attest to the existence of sexual violence in white supremacist institutions and compel white audiences to understand the harm of these institutions as a whole.

Departing from the older texts of the first half of my dissertation, my third chapter considers Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came With Them* (2007), which, as a contemporary novel, portrays sexual violence explicitly. Yet, as I show, Viramontes also uses

metonymy to express intimate experiences of violence as manifestations of larger, intersecting systems oppression; specifically, she connects the silencing of Chicana survivors in the 1960s to a longer history of entwined sexual and colonial violence against the Aztec peoples and their descendants. Through an interdisciplinary approach that draws on sound studies, indigenous feminism, Chicana literary studies, and urban history, I show how the *literal* silencing of Chicana survivors of sexual violence, which Viramontes portrays through visceral descriptions of noise pollution, enacts the *structural* silencing of Chicana survivors. I first contextualize the novel historically in the construction of the freeway system and then trace the sonic lives of two characters who experience sexual violence, hearing the soundscape of urbanization—from the din of noise pollution to the silence of disappearance—that destroys their neighborhood and denies them listeners. While one storyline imagines the possibility of healing through rebuilding communication, the other demonstrates the fatal realities of losing listeners. Conceptualizing of listening as resistance, I consider how Viramontes' act of telling these stories contributes to an ongoing, collective, and intergenerational project of healing.

While chapters two and three examine the fundamental entwinement of sexual violence with racial and colonial violence, chapter four asserts the need for an equally intersectional approach to resisting rape culture. Interweaving sound studies with theories of intersectional feminism and leftist coalition, I read Margaret Atwood's dystopic novel *The Testaments* (2019) as a warning that anti-rape activism must foster collective listening across difference and not rely on one individual or homogenized voice to enact structural change. The novel's flawed, speculative portrayal of resistance, I assert, is not a straightforward model for eradicating rape culture but a critical engagement with the problem of inequitably distributed verbal and auditory power—that is, the power to write, speak, read, listen, or refuse. After outlining how language

and listening practices in Atwood's Republic of Gilead help sustain a rape regime, I examine how one character's plan to dismantle the Republic, which involves auditorily surveilling and verbally coercing survivors, stands in stark contrast to modes of resistance that center reciprocal listening and survivor healing. This portrayal, I argue, magnifies the shortcomings of present-day, mainstream anti-rape activism in the United States, suggesting that methods of resisting rape culture that retain verbal and auditory inequity will not bring about justice for survivors.

My dissertation concludes on a pedagogical note, since the texts, themes, and approaches explored in my dissertation can, I believe, make significant impact in the literature classroom. Read alongside histories of silencing, intersectional feminist theory, and alternative formations of justice, literature that centers survivor voices can help students understand what rape culture sounds like, open their ears to centuries of protest, and show that listening is itself resistance. Crucially, in today's atmosphere of televised court cases and trending headlines, this body of literature demonstrates that anti-rape activism is not a short-lived fight against individuals but an ongoing struggle of collective resistance, one that starts with listening to survivors.

Chapter One

Silencing and Rape Culture in Hannah Webster Foster's *The Coquette*

I. Conceptualizing "Seduction" through Rape Culture

About halfway through *The Coquette; or, The History of Eliza Wharton* (1797), Reverend Boyer, the man who supposes himself to be engaged to Eliza Wharton, discovers her in the garden with Major Sanford, a notorious libertine. Confirmed in his suspicions that Eliza is a coquette, Boyer refuses to listen to her side of the story, explaining, "your conduct . . . cannot be vindicated; your motives need no explanation; they are too apparent!" (Foster 64). Despite the fact that Eliza meets with Sanford only to put an end to his attentions, and despite the fact that Boyer finds the pair only because he ignored Eliza's explicit request that "no person might intrude on her retirement" (Foster 63), Eliza listens to Boyer without retort. She laments, "My excuses would be deemed utterly insufficient, and truth would not befriend and justify me" (Foster 74). Eliza knows that as a woman, she does not get to claim "truth." Boyer's words will be believed over hers, due to the long-held notion that women are less credible than men. This routine discrediting of women's words and emotions is a tenacious feature of rape culture that appears repeatedly in the novel and persists in the United States today. Reapproaching *The Coquette* as a listener, I draw out the verbal and auditory norms that silence the protagonist and demand her affective labor, calling into question readings of the seduction novel that fail to account for rape culture.

Critics frequently classify *The Coquette* as a novel of "seduction," which has a complicated literary history that feminist critics have endeavored to trace. Pamela Haag describes how "seduction," as a nineteenth-century paradigm, "absorbed or encompassed a

variety of arguably discrete sexual conditions, from violent rape to prostitution” (3); it “occupied a space between a fully legitimate consensual act and a fully violent act” (24). Because “seduction” can refer to both consensual and nonconsensual acts, the broad use of this term fails to realize that consent does not necessarily indicate sexual desire,¹⁶ especially “for those without access to full social, economic, and political self-determination” (Brown 379). In other words, due to structural inequality, women may consent to sex they do not want. However, instead of centering that structural inequality, “seduction” has often been used to “confir[m] female victimization” and “masculine narrative superiority” (Davidson 185-86). Put simply, “seduction” reinforces narratives of feminine weakness and masculine strength instead of highlighting the reality of sexist oppression.

An alternative way to conceptualize the various acts collapsed by the term “seduction” is through the concept of rape culture, which precedes and exceeds the discrete act of rape. As Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver explain, rape culture denotes “the danger, the frequency, and the acceptance of sexual violence [that] all contribute to shaping behavior and identity, in men and women alike” (1-2). Rape culture, unlike “seduction,” acknowledges that structural inequality can cause people to consent to unwanted sex as well as encourage male aggression and the subordination of women.

Reading “seduction” through the lens of rape culture is useful because it allows us to explore how acts that are not rape—such as sexual microaggressions or misogynistic verbal abuse—are nevertheless deeply entrenched in and crucial to sustaining a system that encourages sexual violence. For that reason, I move away from the question of whether Sanford’s

¹⁶ See Fischel for an explanation of how “in the current moment of sexual politics . . . we risk collapsing consent into desire into pleasure” (3).

“seduction” of Eliza is actually rape (using a presentist definition of consent)¹⁷ and focus on the more pressing question of how, specifically, the new republic sustained rape culture. I pay particular attention to Boyer’s silencing of Eliza, arguing that this verbal assault resembles a sexual assault not because it *symbolizes* rape but because it is *connected to* rape. As political scientists have pointed out, one of the easiest ways to render someone powerless is not to listen to them.¹⁸ So when Boyer refuses to listen to Eliza, he asserts power over her, and his denial of her voice mirrors the way rapists deny their victims’ agency. Because sexual violence is not motivated by perpetrators’ desire for sex but for power,¹⁹ both silencing and rape are attempts to control another. It is neither metaphorical nor hyperbolic to say that Eliza *experiences* Boyer’s verbal assault as a sexual assault even though it is Sanford who “seduces” her.

II. *The Coquette* as an Exposé of Rape Culture

In her groundbreaking 1986 study, *Revolution and the Word*, Cathy Davidson distinguishes *The Coquette* from more conservative accounts of Elizabeth Whitman’s story, arguing that the novel’s unsatisfying ending provokes readers to critically examine social structures. She explains that it “does not openly challenge the basic structure of patriarchal culture but, instead, exposes its fundamental injustices through the details and disasters of the plot” (Davidson 226). Taking up this interpretation of Foster’s protofeminism, Sharon M. Harris reads *The Coquette* as “a very densely textured political novel” that centers “Foster’s recognition of the numerous levels on which the new republic perpetuates a double standard for men and for

¹⁷ See Haag for a discussion of the problematics of “yes means yes” consent (xvi).

¹⁸ See Bickford 3 and Bassel 6 for their arguments about the centrality of listening to political equality.

¹⁹ The claim that sexual violence is about power rather than sexual desire appears frequently in resources for survivors of sexual violence and can be traced to Foucault’s *History of Sexuality*, which argues that sexuality is an “especially dense transfer point for relations of power” (103).

women” (4), and Donna R. Bontatibus reads it as an appropriation of “the seduction genre . . . by female writers for female audiences” that “explore[s] the lives of characters who have suffered from [rape, seduction, and sexual harassment] while providing readers with an imaginative space in which to suffer along with the heroine” (11). This twentieth-century criticism values Foster’s novel for its representation of calculated sexism in early America and its potential to build political consciousness.

More recently, however, critics have begun to view Foster’s novel as conservative. Thomas Joudrey argues that the *The Coquette*’s “wholesale repudiation of the value of fancy and passion,” in favor of reason, enforces “obedience to convention and authority with regard to marriage” (Joudrey 63), rightly pointing out that the option Eliza’s friends present to her as rational—marrying Boyer—would silence and confine her. Foster’s message is conservative, Joudrey maintains, because Eliza’s resistance to marital confinement is short lived. He claims that *The Coquette* cannot be an “exposé of the injustice of women’s position” (Joudrey 64) because it “portrays women as imperiled on all fronts, and in flattening out the complex options available to Eliza . . . represent[s] patriarchal institutions as the crucial and sole source of stability” (Joudrey 63). Put plainly, Joudrey finds Foster’s portrayal of Eliza as a victim unrealistic and unimaginative.

However, I would argue, along with Davidson, that Foster’s message is more ambivalent than a “wholesale repudiation” of emotion. Even if early Americans read *The Coquette* as a didactic tale about the supremacy of reason, the novel just as clearly portrays how women were denied the privilege of participating in “a competing discourse . . . that championed the imagination” (Joudrey 74). Given the belief that women were naturally irrational, the novel likely would have not reached the level of popularity that it did had Foster advocated for

imagination as plainly as the male proponents of imagination that Joudrey identifies.²⁰ Instead, she *illustrates* this dismissal through Eliza's experience. The evidence Joudrey provides for "the complex options available" to early American women are cases of exceptional women who "defied legal prohibitions, stared down projections of social stigma, and wrested new freedoms from the complex conventions defining marriage" (64). But if women "defied," "stared down," and "wrested," there must have been a force that "imperiled" them: an aggressive patriarchal culture that forced women to choose between submission or derision.

Even so, Laura Korobkin asserts that the message of *The Coquette* is far from radical, claiming that Eliza's behavior signifies not a legitimate political protest but an appetite for aristocratic vices. Korobkin counters readings of Eliza as a "protofeminist rebel" (79) by arguing that Eliza desires not "political freedom and self sufficiency but . . . sensuality, self-absorption, and social caresses" (90). It is true that Eliza is no political heroine: she represents white, middleclass women with a proclivity for parties, not political activism.

But Korobkin's interpretation of "what Eliza *wants*" (80) is problematic because it enacts the very issue of women's incredibility that I am arguing supports rape culture. Analyzing Eliza's "course of conduct," Korobkin concludes that Eliza "avoids commitment [to Boyer] hoping that Sanford will yet propose" (95), fulfilling her "dream of material gratification" (91). This interpretation of Eliza's desires dismisses her clear and repeated statements that she intends to delay marriage, which suggests that Eliza cannot be taken at her word—that she is inherently deceitful and untrustworthy. Like any other character, Eliza exhibits moral imperfections, and, of course, she is as capable of lying as any other narrator. But there is no particular reason to consider her behavior, which is ambiguous, more telling than her words, which are not.

²⁰ Addison, Hume, and Locke; see Joudrey 74-75.

Korobkin's analysis emulates the kind of suspicious reading that Frances Ferguson calls attention to in her famous 1987 article "Rape and the Rise of the Novel," which describes how "the process of proving the crime [rape]" tends "to displace the crime itself" (91). Survivors in criminal cases involving rape, Ferguson explains, face the following dilemma: while the survivor's statement of non-consent is necessary for proving that a sexual encounter was indeed rape, the statement is not considered sufficient evidence alone. Thus, the veracity of the survivor's statement becomes the subject of investigation, and the survivor herself—her body, her actions—become a text to be deciphered. In literature, this dynamic emerges as "a competition between the story and the narrator" (Ferguson 98) that assumes the narrator's words cannot and should not speak for themselves. I am arguing, however, that readers need not, and ethically should not, replicate the dynamics of the court room in readings of *The Coquette* and other texts that center the perspectives of women disadvantaged by rape culture. Because the tendency automatically to discredit women—especially regarding their desires and intentions—has become so normalized, it is imperative that critics take into account the inevitability of rape culture in novels of "seduction" and adopt an approach of listening.

III. Rape Culture's Silencing of Women

Readers may assume that the central conflict of *The Coquette* is Eliza's looming decision between two suitors, but if they listen to Eliza's words, they will hear her clearly announce her intention *not* to choose for the time being. In the first half of the novel, Eliza states this conviction to many people, repeatedly, but no one takes her seriously. She pointedly declares, "marriage is the tomb of friendship" (Foster 19-20) in response to Mrs. Richman's praise of Boyer. Similarly, Eliza corrects Boyer as soon as he confesses romance, insisting that he must

substitute the term “affection” for “some more indifferent epithet” (Foster 20); and when he proposes marriage, she thoroughly declines:

I recoil at the thought of immediately forming a connection, which must confine me to the duties of domestic life, and make me dependent for happiness, perhaps too, for subsistence, upon a class of people, who will claim the right of scrutinizing every part of my conduct; and by censuring those foibles, which I am conscious of not having prudence to avoid, may render me completely miserable. While, therefore, I receive your visits, and cultivate towards you sentiments of friendship and esteem, I would not have you consider me as confined to your society, or obligated to a future connection. Our short acquaintance renders it impossible for me to decide what the operations of my mind may hereafter be.

You must either quit the subject, or leave me to the exercise of my free will. (24)

Eliza’s reasons for avoiding marriage remain consistent no matter whom she tells. When Sanford asks her if she intends to marry Boyer, she explains, “I do not intend to give my hand to any man at present. I have but lately entered society; and wish, for a while, to enjoy my freedom, in the participation of pleasures, suited to my age and sex” (Foster 40). Eliza’s protestations against marriage could be read as feminine demureness²¹ in the face of Boyer and Sanford’s brazen expressions of love, but her protestations are the same when she speaks with platonic friends. Reiterating her resolution to Mrs. Richman, she states, “I am not sufficiently acquainted with either [Boyer or Sanford] yet, to determine which to take. At present, I shall not confine myself in any way” (Foster 41). Despite Eliza’s constant objection to marriage, fictional and scholarly readers of her letters alike tend to hear her words as deceitful or forget them altogether.

²¹ See Block for a discussion of how “early Americans theoretically expected respectable women to resist all illicit sex” (*Rape and Sexual Power* 12).

One reason that women's perspectives were so readily ignored in early America was that, legally, women had little voice. Marylynn Salmon writes, "Despite the promise of republicanism, American independence had little direct effect on the legal status of women" (xv). When a woman married, she gave up her legal rights to her husband through the doctrine of coverture. A "feme covert," as the law called a married woman, "had no individual legal identity": she could neither inherit nor bequeath property, and her signature on documents had no legal meaning (Davidson 194-5). Under coverture, a woman "was to be protected by her husband, and she was protected, so far as the law was concerned, because her rights were subsumed in his" (Davidson 194). Protection in name, ownership in practice, coverture revealed the reality of women's sexual obligation and financial dependence. Salmon explains, "Women could not enter into any agreements that might result in court actions against them, for if women could be imprisoned their husbands would be denied sexual and household services" (42). Remaining single, then, might seem a favorable alternative, but despite the legal independence it would afford, "spinsterhood hardly embodied a respectable option in the society of the time. On the contrary, the spinster was an object of pervasive cultural ridicule" (Davidson 198). And, as *The Coquette* shows, women's attempts to remain single while still enjoying society were interpreted as coquetry.

The words "spinster" and "coquette" both signify early America's discomfort with independent women. "Spinster" became an official legal designation for an unmarried woman in the seventeenth century, following its original meaning of "a woman (or, rarely, a man) who spins, *esp.* one who practices spinning as a regular occupation" ("spinster, n."). The negative connotation attached to a woman "beyond the usual age for marriage" ("spinster, n.") shows that early America disapproved of women who could provide for themselves. Similarly,

“coquette”—the feminized form of the word “coquet,” a diminutive of the French “coq” or male bird, meaning “to act the lover” (“coquet | coquette, v.”)—refers to “a woman (more or less young), who uses arts to gain the admiration and affection of men, merely for the gratification of vanity or from a desire of conquest, and without any intention of responding to the feelings aroused” (“coquette, n”). Contained in the word “coquette” is the idea that women who attempted “to act the lover” were playing a part meant for men and the implication that a man whose “feelings [have been] aroused” deserves a “respon[se]” from the object of his affections or else he is a victim of female “arts.” The word leaves no room for the possibility that a man may have feelings for a woman without her intentionally provoking them, and it emphasizes the social expectation that women owe men affective labor, a subject I will expand on momentarily. These labels for women from young to old age indicate that Eliza’s desire to remain single goes unheard largely because it is unimaginable.

It was against these “legal and social inequalities” (Davidson 195) that Abigail Adams leveled her request that the Constitution “not put such unlimited power into the hands of the Husbands” (110). John Adams’s reply—“I cannot but laugh” (112)—to his wife’s warning that women “will not hold ourselves bound by any Laws in which we have no voice, or Representation” (110) illustrates the exact injustice she cautions him against: the authorization of men to ignore the voices of women. Though the new republic touted ideals of multi-voiced democracy, the truth was that men—from fathers and husbands to those in formal positions of power—had no legal obligation to listen to women.

Correspondingly, the words of men held higher value than the words of women in early America. Since men were considered naturally more rational than women, they were not subject to the same level of skepticism that women were. Though certain men, like Sanford, might prove

themselves untrustworthy *around* women, the label of seducer did not necessarily affect their credibility *to other men*. In the courtroom, a man accused of rape would likely be believed over his accuser if accounts of the sexual encounter differed. Sharon Block explains, “men focused on their own perception of women’s sexual wishes, thereby creating consent for women who had not done so themselves . . . witnesses and judges dismissed the women’s claims” (*Rape and Sexual Power in Early America* 42).

The persistent stereotype of the untrustworthy, salacious woman has roots in early American popular culture. Block excerpts Revolutionary-era ditties, comics, almanacs, and poems that depict women as “ruled by the impulses of their own passions” (Block, *Rape and Sexual Power* 50) and simultaneously portray heterosexual relations as antagonistic: “men pursued, and women resisted” (Block, *Rape and Sexual Power* 39). Noting the implications of the desiring but resisting woman, Block concludes, “[t]his dual construction of women’s sexual role—always resisting, therefore never really resisting—had a powerful result: women could not be trusted to judge or represent their own consent” (*Rape and Sexual Power* 40). Because women allegedly “could not admit their true desires” (Block, *Rape and Sexual Power* 40), men’s judgment superseded women’s on matters of sexual desire and consent.

Although the consequences of favoring men’s voices were harshest in legal settings for survivors of sexual violence,²² this male bias extended well outside the courtroom; in daily life, men considered themselves rightful judges of women’s characters. *The Coquette* portrays this habitual partiality toward men in Boyer’s interactions with other men. He does not begin to take Eliza’s indecision about marriage as an indication of infidelity until a male friend “with kind intensions,” as Boyer puts it, “frankly . . . declare[s] the truth, that I might guard against duplicity

²² See Block for a description of how “courts might find women legally culpable when they brought charges of rape or incest to a court’s attention” (*Rape and Sexual Power* 38).

and deceit” (Foster 63). This man informs Boyer that “Eliza’s conduct had, for some time past, been a subject of speculation in town; that formerly, her character was highly esteemed; but that her intimacy with a man of Sanford’s known libertinism; more especially as she was supposed to be engaged to another, had rendered her very censurable” (Foster 62). Boyer, without hesitation, declares his intention to “terminat[e] the affair” (Foster 63). Eliza has already given Boyer reasons for her reluctance to commit to marriage and made it clear that she “was under no obligation to give him any account of [her] disposition towards another” (Foster 42). The first half of the novel is full of exchanges in which Boyer pushes Eliza to commit and Eliza pushes back. Yet it takes only one conversation with an unnamed male friend for Boyer to disregard Eliza’s words and accept a man’s interpretation of her actions as “the truth” (Foster 63).

Middleclass white women also dismissed each other, as demonstrated by Eliza’s friends, who are more inclined to correct her than to consider her words seriously. Eliza rejoices in the “unusual sensation” of “pleasure” she feels upon leaving her “paternal roof,” though she expects that her correspondent, Lucy Freeman, will find her feelings indecorous (Foster 4). Indeed, Lucy responds with a “moral lecture” that calls Eliza “coquettish” (Foster 6). Rather than engage in dialogue with Eliza, Lucy flattens Eliza’s complex emotional and intellectual life into the stereotype of a coquette, a label that haunts Eliza whenever she dares to speak her mind about how marriage restricts women. Appearing, in some form, sixteen times in the novel, the word “coquette” becomes a convenient shortcut for Eliza’s correspondents to dismiss her words, followed by various forms of “deluded,” which appear eleven times. When Eliza’s disposition shifts from lively to dejected, her friends still fail to listen. Lucy accuses her of being overly emotional after Boyer verbally assaults her. She mocks, “your truly romantic letter came safe to hand. Indeed, my dear, it would make a very pretty figure in a novel. A bleeding heart, slighted

love, and all the et ceteras of romance, enter into the composition!” (Foster 84). Writing Eliza off as irrational, Lucy asks, “[W]here is that fund of sense” (Foster 84).

Though Lucy’s exasperation could indicate merely her forthright personality, her reaction mirrors that of other characters and represents the Revolutionary-era belief that “the control of the passions” was “increasingly necessary to a well-ordered society” (Block, *Rape and Sexual Power* 35). Elite white women were encouraged to develop their sense of reason through education for the benefit of men. Even though women supposedly lacked the ability to control their passions, they were also, contradictorily, responsible for morally regulating men’s behavior. Common was the idea, asserted by one post-Revolutionary magazine, that men’s “virtue and decorum” relied on the “good sense, firmness, and delicacy of the fair sex” (qtd. in Kelley 250). This duty of moral improvement, often associated with the “republican wife,” took on “a political role of no little significance” (Kelley 250) as privileged women cultivated their intellect in accordance with manuals written by men²³ with the expectation that they “place their learning at the service of [their] families” (Kelley 252). Ultimately, any claim these women had to the masculine domain of reason was predicated on their duty to men, and any deviance from reason they exhibited became an excuse to ignore their perspectives.

These gendered attitudes toward reason and emotion, some of which persist today, had serious implications for women in situations involving sex. Even preceding the judgment of a court, early America’s network of assumptions about women—their tendencies, capabilities, and responsibilities—frequently caused people not to believe women who called non-consensual sex rape. Block explains:

²³ Kelley names *The Gentleman’s and Lady’s Key to Polite Literature*, *The Beauties of Shakespeare*, *An Essay on the Genius and Writing of Pope*, and *The Preceptor* as four popular “instructional manuals that indexed, defined, condensed, and explained the literature women were expected to command at tea table and salon” (249).

Women might be increasingly expected to regulate men's passions, even as their own passions provided a rationale for disbelief of their claims of rape. Such beliefs created circular arguments from which women could not easily escape. If women should regulate men's passions, then women were responsible for men whose passions caused them to rape. And if women were believed ruled by the impulses of their own passions, then any sexual encounter might be consensual. A woman gave the name of rape to a sexual act because her (non)consent was crucial to its very definition. But popular stories, firsthand testimonies, and cultural standards limited the belief in a woman's ability to refuse to consent.

Hence much of rape was defined out of existence. (*Rape and Sexual Power* 50)

If it was up to women to say whether or not a sexual encounter was consensual, yet women could not be trusted to know or articulate what they wanted or to report truthfully, then their actual ability to define nonconsensual sex as rape was extremely limited. As is the case today,²⁴ the number of rape cases that ever came before a judge in early America was disproportionately smaller than the number of nonconsensual sexual encounters estimated to have occurred.²⁵ By constricting the definition of sexual violence and discrediting survivors, early American rape culture began to normalize silencing women in a variety of settings, to the point that today, even though they have greater legal voice, women still face doubt, suspicion, and minimization when they speak about their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings.

²⁴ According to the Rape, Abuse, & Incest National Network (RAINN), "only 230 out of every 1,000 sexual assaults are reported to the police," a statistic based on reports published by the Department of Justice and Federal Bureau of Investigation from 2017 and 2013.

²⁵ See Block, "How Should We Look at Rape in Early America" for reasons the number of rape prosecutions in early America "vastly under-represent the likely frequency of rapes, both due to the nature of the historical record and the treatment of sexual assaults themselves" (604).

IV. Rape Culture's Demand for Women's Affective Labor

Political philosopher Michael Hardt, building on feminist concepts such a “kin work” and “caring labor,” defines affective labor as a social “production of affects” (89) that is “intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion—even a sense of connectedness or community (96). This labor is uncompensated and expected of women even outside of marital or familial contexts. As Emanuelle Wessels puts it, “putting charm and empathy to work become essentialized . . . as part of a woman’s innate nature. Consequently, this surplus of feelings generated by feminized affective labor is implicitly coded as non-work” (513). Where women’s affective labor exists, women’s sexual labor follows close behind. As Silvia Federici explains, “giving pleasure to [*sic*] man is an essential part of what is expected of every woman,” arguing that for women in capitalist patriarchy, “sex is work” (25). Linking women’s “duty to please” (24), a blend of affective and sexual labor, to the underlying problem of women’s “economic dependence” (25), Federici shows how the expectation of women’s affective labor undergirds rape culture. Notably, the way affective laborers feel—“depleted” (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 6) and “alienat[ed] . . . a disconnection from the feeling self” (Wessels 513)—parallels some common emotional responses of survivors of sexual violence: depression and disassociation (“Effects of Sexual Violence”).

The Coquette illuminates this connection between affective labor and rape culture in Eliza’s interactions with Boyer and Sanford. Both men attempt to pressure Eliza into marital or sexual commitment by appealing to the belief that she owes them affective labor. For example, when Boyer finds Eliza’s response to his declaration of love unsatisfying, he pleads, “Take what time you think proper, only relieve my suspense, as soon as may be. Shall I visit you again tomorrow?” (Foster 21). At first, Boyer seems to respect Eliza’s need for time and space, but he

quickly puts the onus on her to “relieve [his] suspense” and almost comically requests that she do so the very next day, showing that he does not consider her reservations about marriage legitimate.

Soon after, when Boyer presumes himself to be engaged to Eliza, he requires her affective labor through “epistolary correspondence . . . as an alleviation of the care which that weighty charge [clerical duties] would bring on his mind” (Foster 26). Obliging Boyer, Eliza agrees to this “alleviation” but sets the boundary that “he must not expect anything more than general subjects from [her]” (Foster 26). Unsurprisingly, Boyer disregards this stipulation by including an excerpt of James Thomson’s “Connubial Life” (Foster 34), an advance which Eliza again repels (Foster 38). As time goes on and Eliza refuses to respond to his proposal of marriage, Boyer becomes increasingly impatient, feeling his “temper rise” when he finds “the same indecision . . . [and] previous excuses,” and warns her that he “was not thus to be trifled with” (Foster 61). Viewing their relationship from his perspective only, Boyer is convinced that Eliza is playing with his emotions, apparently considering her statement that she cannot “bear the idea of confinement to the cares of a married life at present” an “excuse” (Foster 61). He makes it clear that Eliza owes him a response lest she be a coquette, and when Boyer decides that she is, he casts himself as an “injured man” who was “enslaved” by her “artifice and dissimulation, of which [she] strove to render [him] the dupe” (Foster 81). His anger reveals a man who is used to women prioritizing his emotions, and the fact that he considers himself “injured” indicates that he believes the affective labor of women to be his right.

One might argue that the behavior of Boyer, who is based on the notoriously volatile Reverend Joseph Buckminster, does not represent the general affective expectations held by men in early America; however, Eliza’s other suitor, Sanford, employs similar tactics of emotional

manipulation. On an excursion with Eliza, Sanford threatens to call on her at home if she refuses to “rid[e] a little farther” with him alone so that he can discuss “a particular subject” (Foster 36). By way of explanation for his threat, he offers that “his mind was in a state of suspense and agitation, which was very painful to bear; and which [Eliza] only could relieve” (Foster 39). Here, Sanford uses the same language of “agitation” and “relie[f]” that Boyer does, assuming that Eliza should prioritize his emotional needs over hers. After Mrs. Wharton prevents Sanford from seeing Eliza, he writes Eliza a letter rife with emotional entitlement: “My mind is all anarchy and confusion! My soul is harrowed up with jealousy! I will be revenged on those who separate us, if that distracting event take place! But it is from your lips only that I can hear my sentence! You must witness its effects! To what lengths my despair may carry me, I know not! You are the arbitress of my fate!” (Foster 71). Ending every sentence with an exclamation point, Sanford blames his emotional turmoil on Eliza, claiming that she “must witness” his emotions if she chooses to end their relationship. With Sanford and Boyer each insisting that Eliza put his emotions before hers and Eliza’s friends dismissing her emotions, not to mention her thoughts, as mistaken, it is no wonder that she is suspended in a state of indecision about marriage. Yet, it is indecision itself that earns her the label of coquette.

This imperative for women’s affective labor, combined with the legal silencing of women through marriage, lays the foundation of what will remain a highly normalized rape culture in the United States for centuries. The twentieth century’s addition of women to the paid labor force did not change the demand for affective labor; it just brought with it the problem of workplace sexual harassment. The through-line between the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries of expecting women to cater to men emotionally speaks to how fundamental affective labor is as a tool of rape culture.

V. Verbal and Auditory Violence in *The Coquette*

When Boyer refuses to listen to Eliza and labels her a coquette, her reaction mirrors that of someone who has experienced sexual violence: she falls silent, begins to doubt herself, and feels worthless. Though usually loquacious, Eliza is unable to speak up after Boyer's inflamed reaction to seeing her with Sanford. She tells Lucy:

“He accused me of treating him ill, of rendering him the dupe of coquetting artifice, of having an intrigue with Major Sanford, and declared his determination to leave me forever, as unworthy of his regard, and incapable of love, gratitude, or honor!—There was too much reason in support of his accusations for me to gainsay them, had his impetuosity suffered me to attempt it. But in truth I had no inclination to self defence. My natural vivacity had forsaken me; and I listened without interrupting him to the fluency of reproachful language, which his resentment inspired.” (Foster 73)

The way that Boyer's “reproachful language” kills Eliza's “inclination to self defence” and “natural vivacity” shows his verbal domination. His position as not only male but also a minister allows him to pass judgment, and she plunges into a deeper silence. She soon finds it difficult to “compose [her]self” to write to her friend Julia Granby (Foster 83) and eventually concedes, “writing is not so agreeable to me as it used to be” (Foster 100). After Boyer so easily denies her voice, she loses faith in her words.

After Boyer's verbal assault and refusal to listen, Eliza's thoughts begin morphing to fit his narrative that she is untrustworthy. Distressed, she writes Lucy, “he has penetrated the cause of my proceedings” (Foster 74) and in a more composed letter to Boyer, “I frankly confess [my misconduct]. . . . Casting off the veil of dissimulation, I shall write with frankness” (Foster 80).

Yet until this point, Eliza has not given a “cause of [her] proceedings” to “penetrate” (Foster 74). Her letters never reveal a clear intention for her association with Sanford. At one point, she admits to Lucy, “he is pleasing to me” and “his person, his manners, his situation, all combine to charm my fancy” (Foster 18), but this admission is hardly evidence that she had been scheming to dupe Boyer. Until the assault, Eliza does not see her relationship with Sanford as sinister and defends the behaviors that others call “coquettish” as “the effusions of a youthful, and cheerful mind” (Foster 6). Whatever Eliza’s behaviors are, they are certainly not “dissimulation” (Foster 80). She is open about her mixed feelings about the kind of man she might eventually want to marry. She expresses her concern about being a minister’s wife to Boyer (Foster 23), and her letters to friends reveal an equal level of concern about Sanford.

The fact that people call Eliza a coquette rather than respect her indecision, even as Sanford openly antagonizes her, reflects a culture that blames women for men’s violence. In a letter to Lucy, Eliza relays the mortification she feels when Sanford interrupts her solitary walk in the garden to declare his love. She notes, “I was startled at his impetuosity, and displeased with his freedom. Withdrawing my hand, I told him, that my retirement was sacred” (Foster 29). Sanford, instead of leaving, “bowed submissively; begged pardon for his intrusion, and . . . went on rhapsodically to declare his passions” (Foster 29). Here Sanford both invades Eliza’s space and ignores her words. Eliza writes that she is “perplexed and embarrassed . . . by the assiduous attentions of this Major Sanford” (Foster 38) after he overtakes her party on horseback, forcing her to account for her change in company when they return to the Richmans’ house. She describes his aggressive behavior: “if I refused him this opportunity [to speak privately], [he said] that he must visit me, at my residence, let it offend whom it would” (Foster 39). Once again, Sanford violates Eliza’s boundaries and forces her into a position where she is vulnerable

to public disapproval. The letter in which she states her intention to stop associating with Sanford notes his “violent passions” and his loaded plea that she “deny [him] not an interview; but have pity on [her] faithful Sanford” (Foster 71). She plans to meet Sanford only to “keep [her] word, and meet him according to promise” (Foster 71). These exchanges, recorded by Eliza herself, portray her as vulnerable to Sanford’s emotional and physical manipulation, not as a manipulative coquette, yet Eliza eventually believes she is a coquette.

In her earlier letters, Eliza’s only “cause” (Foster 74) is her campaign not to marry any time soon, and there is no need to “penetrate” (Foster 74) it because she states it explicitly to several people. Thus, when Eliza “confess[es]” her “misconduct” (Foster 80), she is confessing to an offense she never committed. The authority of Boyer’s words overshadows her own conviction of her “innocent heart” (Foster 6) and right to “enjoy [her] freedom” (Foster 41). By the time Boyer silences Eliza, it is as if she never expressed her reluctance to marry. Rape culture has rendered her previous statements insignificant.

Boyer’s words, beyond silencing Eliza and warping her perception, send Eliza into a state of mental decline that shows how verbal assault is analogous to sexual assault. To tell Lucy about Boyer’s castigation of her, Eliza uses the phrase, “I am undone!” (Foster 82), which, as Davidson notes is “the precise word that in seduction novels typically signals a woman’s fall” (228). Eliza utters this phrase not after she “falls more conventionally into the affair with Sanford” (Davidson 228) but after Boyer has asserted his “power” by “triumphing in [her] distress” and condemning her behavior (Foster 83). While she had previously “escaped the censure of [her] own heart” (58), she now feels “self-condemnation” and “inward torture,” even stating that she is not “worthy” of Boyer (Foster 83). Eliza’s friends note a “surprising change” in her, finding that “her vivacity has entirely forsaken her” (Foster 86), and Eliza remarks that

she is “afraid of [her] own reflections” (Foster 90). Her reaction to Boyer’s harangue shows that she has not simply suffered hurt pride but also, and more important, the silencing of rape culture.

As Eliza’s mental decline reveals, the only thing as disheartening as not having a voice is having one that can so easily be disrespected, overpowered, and sabotaged. Long after Boyer’s initial reprimand, the fear of censure accelerates Eliza’s decline until her death. She writes, “Having incurred so much censure by the indulgence of a gay disposition, I am now trying what a recluse and solitary mode of life will produce” (Foster 106). When she speaks romantically of death, she imagines herself free of the judgment of others: “soon shall I be insensible to censure and reproach!” (Foster 112). Her final letter laments that she has “become a reproach and disgrace to [her] friends” and explains that the “disapprobation and resentment” she has “incurr[e]d . . . induc[e]s her to conceal from them the place of [her] retirement” (Foster 120). Eliza’s fear of censure motivates her to isolate herself first from society and then from her closest friends and family, a decline initiated by Boyer’s overpowering and silencing of her voice.

Exploiting the fear of censure that Eliza voiced to him (Foster 24) and denying her any means of defending herself, Boyer exercises his power as a male figure of authority. He relies on the convenient formulation of male credibility and female incredibility set in place by rape culture to rob Eliza of voice and agency. *The Coquette* shows how easy it is, in rape culture, for people to willfully forget and warp the words of women. As Eliza’s self-doubt reveals, the influence of rape culture is so pervasive that even women experiencing abuse can believe men’s accounts of their experience over their own. This assault on women’s voices is rooted in the societal imperative for male domination that exists in a continuum with sexual violence, and it is therefore crucial to recognize instances in which women are not listened to—in literature as well as in current events—as dangerous maneuvers of rape culture.

VI. The Epistolary Novel, Consciousness Raising, and #MeToo

Not only the content but also the form of *The Coquette* merits critical reexamination through the contemporary lens of rape culture. Through a sympathetic protagonist and familiar male characters, Foster reveals the harsh reality that “Eliza naively sought to exercise her freedom only to learn that she had none” (Davidson 227). In effect, she shows that such a tale of woe does not require extraordinary circumstances but is the logical outcome of rape culture. As Davidson points out:

[T]he nove[l] question[s] the efficacy of the prevailing legal, political, and social values, even if the questioning is done by innuendo rather than by actual assertion of a contrary view. What else can we make of fallen women who are more the victims of circumstance than the embodiments of sin and who scarcely deserve the punishments that are heaped upon them? Of seducers who are not villains? Of villains who ascribe to the standard morality. (220)

By revealing how rape culture circumscribes the future of such an unremarkable protagonist, *The Coquette* suggests that early America’s sexual expectations of women benefitted only men. In anticipation of future feminist movements, *The Coquette* is a story of an individual that calls attention the structural problem of rape culture.

Feminists have purposefully leveraged the power of informing the political with the personal and vice-versa through multiple practices. The 1960s gave rise to consciousness raising, a form of group discussion that aimed to “enable women to understand that their experiences were not specific to them as individuals but part of the structural conditions that produced the forms of oppression they suffered from” with the hope that “this recognition would result in

collective action” (Griffin). Most recently, the #MeToo movement has used digital platforms to spread awareness about the prevalence of sexual violence, giving survivors of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape a way to connect their personal experiences to the larger context of rape culture. As Jennifer L. Airey puts it, “The greatest success of the #MeToo movement has been . . . the defamiliarization of such stories [of sexual harassment], the act of forcing us to confront and name as Not Okay experiences that we previously shrugged off as an inevitable part of being a woman” (7). Pointing to the limitations of academic feminism, Airey claims, “our awareness of feminist theory clearly does not insulate or exempt us from a broader culture that normalizes harassment and assault. Nor does it insulate us from a culture that devalues and stifles women’s voices” (9). Forums in which survivors can speak from personal experience in order to build political solidarity are crucial for addressing the problem of rape culture.

In its epistolary form, *The Coquette* approximates the feminist practice of sharing personal stories with the potential for sparking political action. Though Foster, of course, is not writing autobiography, she gives voice to the deceased Elizabeth Whitman in a sensitive way that reads like a personal account. Joe Bray explains that the early epistolary genre was unique in its ability to foster empathy for characters because it “g[a]ve readers a sense of what it would be like to be someone else” (8). Bray argues that, while the epistolary novel does not give readers transparent access to coherent subjectivities of the letter writers, it does “explore with great subtlety complex tensions within the divided minds of their characters” (2). In the case of *The Coquette*, Eliza’s “divided mind” creates a sense of frustration, or at least confusion, that may be relatable to other women in rape culture.

Eliza’s mental and emotional collapse arises, in part, from the impossibility of aligning the patriarchal script preached by her friends with the reality of her lived experience. Though

Bray argues that the “turbulent and sometimes unresolvable psychological crises” of epistolary novel letter writers result from “tensions between feeling on one hand and reason on the other” (81), Foster complicates this dichotomization of emotion and reason. *The Coquette* illuminates how women in Eliza’s position might experience “psychological crises” because rape culture champions patriarchal interests masquerading as reason as the universal key to happiness while denying their subjective experiences. Foster takes pains to emphasize that marrying Boyer, the supposedly rational choice, scarcely offers Eliza more opportunity for happiness than any of her other options. Hesitant to commit to Boyer, Eliza muses, “His worth I acknowledge; nay, I esteem him very highly. But can there be happiness with such a disparity of dispositions?” (Foster 58). Despite the logic of Eliza’s query, her friends warn her to “beware the delusions of fancy!” and declare that “reason must be our guide, if we would expect durable happiness” (Foster 41). Eliza’s crisis is ultimately unresolvable, not because she is split between the “fevered passion of [her] experiencing self and the calm reason of [her] narrating self” (Bray 81) but because rape culture denies either of those selves’ subjectivity. The republican ideals of early America mislead Eliza into believing that she might possess the rights of an individual—that, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” (Declaration of Independence, US 1776) could be achievable through rational decision-making—when, in actuality, a “woman’s function was to be possessed or dispossessed” (Davidson 185). Eliza falls in the gap between her experience of subjectivity and rape culture’s denial of it.

This discrepancy becomes apparent through Eliza’s correspondence with friends who encourage her to be quiet, suppress her discontent, and conform. The epistolary form offers a glance into these conversations that anticipate, in inversion, future dialogues of consciousness raising groups and #MeToo discussion threads. Instead of portraying how peers’ validation of

shared experience can develop solidarity, *The Coquette* shows how Eliza's correspondents' dismissal gradually kills her will. Whether or not the unsatisfying resolution of *The Coquette* successfully politicized any of its early readership, the novel is worth reexamining now because the sexist double standards that it exposes are actively upholding rape culture today. Even though the current #MeToo Movement has increased the frequency of women speaking out about sexual violence, their words are just as often ignored, distorted, and silenced.

While *The Coquette* does not offer solutions, it does highlight the verbal dynamics of rape culture with remarkable clarity, and articulating the problem is prerequisite to solving it. By showing how gendered verbal norms devalue women's thoughts, feelings, and experiences—moves that also justify sexual violence—*The Coquette* portrays the dire effects of a rape culture that normalizes not listening to women. Fortunately, women's struggle to be heard does not end with *The Coquette*. As chapter two shows, Harriet Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša, whose obstacles to audibility are compounded by white supremacy and colonialism, write explicitly of political transformation in a way that Foster does not, imagining a future for survivors. However, women's fight for audibility is far from done, making “it is all the more important,” as literary critics, “that we promote women's voices and that we take women seriously as narrators of their own experiences” (Airey 10). By rereading *The Coquette* as a novel about rape culture, rather than simply a novel of seduction, and questioning the inclination to consider Eliza untrustworthy, we begin to counteract centuries of silencing and amplify an early American woman's perspective on rape culture in the United States.

Chapter Two

Compelling Audiences to Listen: The Survival Narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša

I. Introduction

As is well-known, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861) tells the story of Linda Brent, a pseudonym for author Harriet Jacobs, during her enslavement in the antebellum South and life as a fugitive in the North. Published sixty years later, *American Indian Stories* (1921) details the life of Yankton Dakota activist Zitkala-Ša from her childhood on the Yankton Reservation to her education and employment at missionary-operated boarding schools designed to forcibly assimilate Native children into white culture. Emerging from the traditions of slave narrative and Native autobiography, respectively, each text presents the narrator's oppression under and resistance to white supremacy and rape culture. Though neither author describes rape explicitly, something impossible or close to impossible to do at the time, the logics of rape culture and white supremacy fundamentally intertwine in their writing. As I will argue in this chapter, Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša fluidly interchange the language of sexual violence with descriptions of white supremacist institutions to express the intersectional nature of their oppression to audiences inclined not to listen.

II. The White Listening Ear and Limitations to Writing about Sexual Violence

Writing primarily to audiences of white women who, though progressive, were socialized to disbelieve or minimize the suffering of people of color and to regard sexual matters as taboo, Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša faced a shared dilemma. Almost certainly, their readers would unconsciously filter the authors' words through a set of racial and gender assumptions that

attacked the credibility and significance of their narratives—that is, through an “ideological filter,” to use Jennifer Lynn Stoever’s concept of the “listening ear” (13). As Stoever explains, “listening is an interpretive, socially constructed practice . . . riven with power relations,” and the listening ear ensures that “one’s ideas about race shape what one hears and vice versa” (14). That “listening ear,” I will explain, creates the limitations the authors faced in writing about sexual violence.

Listening, in a particular sense, aptly characterizes how antebellum audiences received slave narratives. Deborah M. Garfield notes that, though Jacobs did not deliver her narrative on the oratory circuit, many formerly enslaved individuals did (“Earwitness” 101). In fact, white audiences often preferred to hear slave narratives rather than read them because, as Jacqueline Goldsby explains, it gave them the opportunity to “subjec[t] speakers to rigorous cross-examinations following the presentations” (16). The prevalence of these interrogations—“meant to fill in perceived gaps, to catch and expose supposed contradictions” (Goldsby 17)—attests to the ubiquity of the belief that slave narratives were unreliable. With skepticism shaping the reception of slave narratives, Jacobs was writing *Incidents* to an audience that felt entitled to question her credibility and “willfully misunderstand” (Stoever 6) her narrative.

In her brief preface, Jacobs anticipates that her audience will hear her account of suffering as false or inappropriate. She begins with the pledge, “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction. I am aware that some of my adventures may seem incredible; but they are, nevertheless, strictly true. I have not exaggerated the wrongs inflicted by Slavery; on the contrary, my descriptions fall far short of the facts” (Jacobs 5). The inclusion of this disclaimer speaks to the assumption that Black women’s words were up for debate. In addition, the preface forecasts that audiences will accuse Jacobs of publishing her story for personal gain. Explaining

that she is writing at the behest of abolitionists, she asserts, “I have not written my experiences in order to attract attention to myself; on the contrary, it would have been more pleasant to me to have been silent about my own history. Neither do I care to excite sympathy for my own sufferings” (Jacobs 5). The idea that Jacobs would write to “attract attention to [her]self” or “excite sympathy for [her] own sufferings” alludes to the belief that Black women lacked modesty—that their voices fell outside the bounds of middleclass respectability and were therefore invalid.

After Jacobs provides enough disclaimers to satisfy a skeptical audience, she addresses how white Northerners were prone to hearing stories of Black suffering as inconsequential to their lives. Writing amidst the terror caused by the Fugitive Slave Act, which criminalized Northerners who provided aid to fugitives and rewarded captors, Jacobs urges readers to oppose the law and abolish slavery: “I do earnestly desire to arouse the women of the North to a realizing sense of the condition of two millions of women at the South, still in bondage, suffering what I suffered, and most of them far worse. I want to add my testimony to that of abler pens to convince the people of the Free States what Slavery really is” (Jacobs 5). Notably, Jacobs does not intend to *alert* her audience to slavery’s existence but “to arouse” them “to a realizing sense” of slavery’s impact; she does not aim to reveal slavery’s untold horrors but “to add [her] testimony” to the litany of evidence proving slavery’s immorality. Here, Jacobs calls out how white audiences have failed to respond to previous narratives that detail the horrors of slavery. White inaction stems not from lack of awareness, she suggests, but from lack of concern. In essence, she notes how the white listening ear dials down the magnitude of Black pain.

Decades later, Zitkala-Ša wrote to a new generation of progressive white women whose ears were also “conditioned by historically contingent and culturally specific value systems”

(Stoever 14), in this case by prevailing stereotypes of tribal cultures as “savage.” With the passage of the Dawes General Allotment Act in 1887, the United States government shifted tactics from exterminating Native tribes to exterminating tribal culture—that is, from outright genocide to ethnocide²⁶—and fundamental to the project of ethnocide were government-funded boarding schools created, as the Carlisle Industrial Indian School put it, to “Kill the Indian and save the man!” (Davidson xvii). Such rhetoric enabled progressive whites to view Native boarding schools as charitable institutions designed to ensure students’ success rather than as what they were: instruments of ethnocide founded on abuse.

Although Zitkala-Ša wrote *American Indian Stories* to expose the reality of Native boarding schools to white audiences, her text was vulnerable to “deleterious interpretative violence” from those who would “ignore, misunderstand, dismiss, and/or (mis)interpret” her political message (Stoever 50). Clearly illustrating the stereotypes and assumptions that influenced how white audiences listened is the episode in *American Indian Stories* in which Zitkala-Ša competes in a statewide oratorical contest. Though she wins a prize for her speaking abilities, a group of “college rowdies” in the audience interfere with her message by unfurling “a large white flag, with a drawing of a most forlorn Indian girl on it . . . [and] words that ridiculed the college which was represented by a ‘squaw’” (Zitkala-Ša 102-3). An openly racist interjection, the flag distracts from her performance by proclaiming that Native women are inferior. These audience members “ignore” and “dismiss” (Stoever 50) Zitkala-Ša’s voice by visually speaking over it.

²⁶ See “Genocide and Ethnocide,” 48, for a detailed definition of ethnocide as “acts that contribute to the disappearance of a culture” including “denying a group its right to speak its language, practice its religion, teach its traditions and customs, create art, maintain social institutions, or preserves its memories and histories.”

Though not everyone in the opera house would have approved of the flag's derogatory content, the pervasive assumption that Native people needed "civilizing" would have influenced the reception of her speech. Even progressive audience members that supported Zitkala-Ša may have done so not because they were listening to her message but because they believed her oratory abilities proved the educational success of boarding schools. After winning the prize, Zitkala-Ša notes that the "little taste of victory did not satisfy a hunger in [her] heart" (103), suggesting that she did not feel genuinely heard by her audience. Immersed in assimilationist ideology, audiences of *American Indian Stories* were prone to "misunderstand" and "(mis)interpret" (Stoeber 50) Zitkala-Ša's "scathing polemic criticizing the Indian boarding school system" (Wilkinson 34) as an expertly written text that evidenced that system's efficacy.

Also limiting Jacobs' and Zitkala-Ša's writing was the white, middleclass prohibition against describing sexual violence, on top of stereotypes that Black and Native women were hypersexual. Jacobs' editor, Lydia Maria Child, addresses fellow white women when she claims, "our ears are too delicate to listen" to certain wrongs of slavery that "some call delicate . . . and others indelicate" (6). Child is referring, of course, to "slavery's sexual crimes" that allegedly "wounded the fragile ears of their middle-class female auditors" ("Earwitness" 101). Victorian society assumed that white women were vulnerable to seduction because they were sexually innocent by nature but denied Black women the same presumption of innocence. As Deborah Gray White explains, "one of the most prevalent images of black women in antebellum America was of a person governed almost entirely by her libido, a Jezebel character . . . the counterimage of the mid-nineteenth century ideal of the Victorian lady" (29). Obfuscating the reality that Black women could be, and frequently were, victims of sexual violence, the Jezebel myth portrayed Black women as seducers themselves. Thus, if Jacobs were to have described her

sexual abuse explicitly, many readers would have considered her writing a salacious corruption of her audience's purity. In essence, Jacobs faced the nearly impossible task of narrativizing her life while omitting the sexual abuse that was both integral to and integrated with the "incidents" that comprised her enslavement.

Zitkala-Ša contended with similar constraints when writing about sexual matters. As Ruth Spack observes, comparing the Dakota story "Squirrel Man and His Double" with Zitkala-Ša's English translation, "the most substantive and striking change from the oral to the written version" is that the oral version's "references to attempted rape" become "not explicitly sexual" (56). Spack posits that Zitkala-Ša stifles the sexual content because "telling such a story outside the Dakota community was unthinkable or prohibited" (57). Moreover, Zitkala-Ša was likely "sensitive to the narrow views held in much of Euroamerican society about Native female sexuality" (Spack 57). As Rayna Green explains, the derogatory term "squaw" is not only an ethnic slur but also a sexual slur referring to the alleged "alcoholic and sexual excesses" of Native women (711). The resulting elision of sexual violence—at least, explicit descriptions of it—occurs in *American Indian Stories* as well.

Given the misinterpretations of the white listening ear, it may seem counterproductive that Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša wrote to such heedless audiences. Indeed, the authors openly voice frustration at whites who witness injustice and do nothing in response. Jacobs asks, "In view of these things, why are ye silent, ye free men and women of the north? Why do your tongues falter in maintenance of the right? Would that I had more ability!" (29); Zitkala-Ša expresses her inclination to "suffer in silence rather than to appeal to the ears of one whose open eyes could not see [her] pain" (96). And yet, despite their indifference, whites held the political power to effect the enfranchisement of Black and Native people. Writing before the Civil War, when the

abolition of slavery was not a guarantee and fugitives in the North were not safe from recapture, Jacobs strove to garner support from the morally influential wives of enfranchised white men. Zitkala-Ša, publishing her book soon after the ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment, “directly called upon newly enfranchised white women . . . [to] use their votes to help Native communities” eschew wardship status (Cahill 41, 43); her vision for Native “citizenship . . . infused with tribal sovereignty” (Cahill 46) required both respect for tribal culture and political support. With stakes so high, each author sought to compel her audience, whose political response was critical, to listen.

III. Compelling White Audiences to Listen

Despite the limitations they faced, Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša reframe common misconceptions about sexual violence and race in their own terms, recalibrating their audiences’ listening ear to hear their suffering. To begin, both authors describe sexual violence obliquely through the rhetoric of the seduction novel. As I suggest in my previous chapter, white women were familiar with, and often sympathetic to, the plight of seduction novel heroines, as the seduction genre provided an early articulation of rape culture even as it reinforced it. Though seduction novels often blamed women for their supposed moral failings, the nineteenth-century paradigm of seduction included a wide range of sexual situations, including rape (Haag 3), enabling authors to write about sexual violence in the context of what is now known as rape culture. By alluding to the presence of sexual abuse in slavery and Native boarding schools, Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša challenge the assumption that sexual violence threatened only white women.

Even more, the two authors demonstrate the *intertwined* construction of white supremacy and rape culture through metonymy. Unlike metaphor, which entails the substitution of one thing for an *unlike* thing, metonymy entails the substitution of one thing for an *associated* thing. Thus, they do not entirely replace one form of violence with another but refer to multiple kinds of violence at once. To avoid sexually explicit writing, the authors describe forms of violence that, like sexual violence, emerged from the dehumanizing conditions of slavery and Native boarding schools. By showing how features of these systems shared fundamental mechanisms with sexual violence—particularly the legal disenfranchisement, bodily violation, verbal abuse, and refusal to hear the protest of the disempowered—they demonstrate the implicit presence of sexual violence *in conjunction with* other abuses.

Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl

When Jacobs describes the terror Linda faces at the hands of her enslaver, Dr. Flint, she uses terms associated with the seduction novel. Flint, the villain, is a “crafty man” and a “vile monster” who “trie[s] his utmost to corrupt the pure principles [Linda’s] grandmother had instilled” (Jacobs 27). Linda, the model heroine, “despise[s] him” (19) and “turn[s] from him with disgust and hatred” (Jacobs 27). Pitting a base villain against a morally superior heroine, Jacobs builds a cast and plot typical of a seduction novel. When Jacobs writes that Flint “began to whisper foul words in [Linda’s] ear” (27), she employs a popular motif in which listening signifies the heroine’s “fall” from sexual purity.²⁷ In the context of the seduction novel, Flint’s

²⁷ For example, *The Coquette* and another popular American seduction novel, *Charlotte Temple*, exhibit this motif. In *The Coquette*, Eliza’s friend warns, “if you listen to his flattery, you will, I fear, fall victim to his evil machinations!” (Foster 102); in *Charlotte Temple*, the narrator explains “she is in imminent danger; but if she listens to him with pleasure, ’tis all over with her” (Rowson 28).

“stinging, scorching words; words that scathed ear and brain like fire” (Jacobs 19) code as sexual intrusions.

Such language, however, alludes to sexual violence in ways that exceed the typical seduction novel. Jacobs’ description of Flint’s “foul words,” as P. Gabrielle Foreman and Novian Whitsitt argue, draws on Black rhetorical traditions to discuss sexual violence indirectly. Foreman, based on Jacobs’ frequent “signals” that her words “systemically come short of the ‘truth,’” suggests that Jacobs “undertell[s]” her enslaver’s sexual violence against her (77). Whitsitt interprets “Jacobs’s rhetorical ploy” slightly differently, asserting that “Jacobs is actually only hiding the truth” through “masking” (76), which Whitsitt explains, is a voice doubling technique that communicates truth in two registers: one that provides an “acceptable explanation . . . [for] white middle-class women in the North” and another that communicates the “complete and actual experience . . . [for] readers who can detect the cipher and appreciate Jacobs’s impressive cunning” (73). To Foreman and Whitsitt, the phrase, “stinging, scorching words” (Jacobs 19) signifies part of the truth—Flint’s repugnant language—but not the full extent of the assault, which the attentive reader recognizes as physical sexual abuse.²⁸

Even more, Jacobs employs replacement to obliquely narrate the realities of her enslavement. She substitutes a variety of things—including the experiences of others for Linda’s, an economic context for a sexual one, and other forms of bodily exploitation for sexual exploitation—to talk *around* sexual violence without ever actually describing it. Beyond allowing Jacobs to write about a taboo subject in coded ways, this technique reveals how all the

²⁸ See Whitsitt 74-76 for a review of arguments made by Elizabeth Fox-Genevise, P. Gabrielle Foreman, and Anne Dalton that Jacobs was sexually abused by her enslaver, James Norcom, despite the fact that the character Linda ostensibly avoids her enslaver’s sexual advances.

assaults she describes are *connected* under the system of slavery at the confluence of white supremacy and rape culture.

Even though Jacobs shows Linda triumphing, against the odds, over her enslaver's sexual advances, she frequently references the general presence of rape in slavery. As Garfield notes, Jacobs "swerves from private to public in order to deflect sexual blame," describing the circumstances of other enslaved women who became pregnant by their enslavers (108). In the opening pages of the narrative, Jacobs alludes to Linda's own family being marked by sexual violence. She writes, "in complexion my parents were a light shade of brownish yellow, and were termed mulattoes" (Jacobs 9), suggesting that her ancestors were sexually violated by their enslavers. Since the legal doctrine of *partus sequitur ventrem* stated that children of enslaved women would follow the condition of their mothers (even if their fathers were not enslaved),²⁹ it is certain that at least some of Linda's enslaved ancestors became pregnant by white men. However, although the prevalence of "mulatto" children made sexual relations between enslaver and enslaved an open secret, white readers did not necessarily understand such relations as rape. For that reason, Jacobs uses metonymy to explain how enslaved people, being excluded from the liberal notion of contracts, could not consent to sex. She illustrates their lack of legal rights and protections not through her own sexual abuse but through the financial interactions of her grandmother, Aunt Martha.

Jacobs reveals how Aunt Martha, with the intention of purchasing back her son, "had laid up three hundred dollars, which her mistress one day begged as a loan, promising to pay her soon" (10). The verb "beg" conveys that this exchange falls outside of the market economy, requiring Aunt Martha to supply an act of generosity or a gift rather than a contractual exchange

²⁹ See Morgan for detailed explanation of how "Atlantic slavery rested upon a notion of heritability" (1).

in which both parties act in their own interests. To explain Aunt Martha's compliance in providing the loan, Jacobs simply reiterates a truth about slavery familiar to her readers: "The reader probably knows that no promise or writing given to a slave is legally binding; for, according to Southern laws, a slave, *being* property, can *hold* no property" (Jacobs 10). Already disenfranchised and unprotected by law, enslaved people could not decline to provide what was asked of them without considerable risk to their lives. In this way, Jacobs introduces in economic terms what is true in sexual terms as well: enslaved people were denied the legal status necessary for the liberal notion of consent. Theft, in this instance, is not a metaphor for rape but a metonym for rape, both of which were reliant on the denial of legal rights to enslaved people.

Jacobs also employs metonymy by substituting one type of bodily violation for a related type. When she describes how Aunt Martha is forced to serve as wet nurse to her enslaver's children and wean her own daughter, Linda's mother, "at three months old, that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food" (Jacobs 10), the exploitation of her breast also represents the exploitation of her womb. Such nursing arrangements, which used the enslaved mother's body and deprived the enslaved infant, were commonplace in the antebellum South since, as Emily West and R. J. Knight explain, enslavers could avoid "paying for the services of a wet nurse . . . when one could be procured for free from one's own chattel" (39). Using the same calculation, enslavers could avoid purchasing more people to enslave when they could increase their "chattel" through forced reproduction, or, put plainly, rape. Thus, forced breastfeeding metonymically represents rape, two forms of bodily exploitation enabled by reproductive injustice.

Additionally, Jacobs employs synecdoche, using the whole to represent a part, to refer to sexual violence as an implicit part of comprehensive bodily exploitation. The story of Aunt

Nancy illustrates how enslavers treated the bodies of those they enslaved as wholly expendable, as Nancy is expected to serve Mrs. Flint and her children throughout the night despite its deleterious effects on her health and the health of her own infants:

She [Nancy] kept her station there [at Mrs. Flint's bedside] through summer and winter, until she had given premature birth to six children; and all the while she was employed as night-nurse to Mrs. Flint's children. Finally, toiling all day, and being deprived of rest at night, completely broke down her constitution, and Dr. Flint declared it was impossible she could ever become the mother of a living child. (Jacobs 121)

In this passage, Jacobs emphasizes the exhaustive destruction of Aunt Nancy's body through physical strain, sleep deprivation, and reproductive debilitation. Given that Aunt Nancy and her children were treated as entirely dispensable, in fact, were "slowly murdered" (Jacobs 122), it would be naïve to assume that sexual exploitation, though not explicitly mentioned, was absent from what "completely broke down her constitution." The overall bodily exploitation, especially since it is so clearly tied to reproductive issues, implies one aspect of it, sexual violence.

These shifting forms of violence (economic, bodily, reproductive, sexual) all permitted by slavery at a fundamental level, illustrate the multiplicity of abuses that enslaved women were forced to endure simultaneously. Conceptualizing these abuses as interconnected, rather than discrete, demonstrates how white supremacist belief and rape culture collude. In this network of violence, binary understandings of figurative versus literal descriptions become inadequate. Passages in *Incidents* that can be interpreted as a metaphor or metonym for sexual violence can often also be interpreted as literal.

Expanding on Stoever's interpretation of Flint's "stinging, scorching words" (Jacobs 19) as palpable violations, I consider Jacobs' description of these whispers a direct narration of one

aspect of sexual violence, harassment. Stoever reads Flint's intrusive way of speaking not as a metaphor but a physical assault in and of itself:

Vocal cord vibrations *are* material representations . . . [Flint] attacks [Linda] with sounds, physical vibrations emanating from his body and violating hers. The combined /s/ sounds of 'stinging,' 'scorching,' and 'scathed,' for example, mimic Flint's whispers, while the image of fire suggests the heat of her master's breath forcing itself into her ear canal.

(Stoever 66)

In addition to figuratively representing rape, these sonic impositions are actual channels through which Flint enacts sexual harassment. So, while the sexual violence that Jacobs experienced almost certainly exceeded the harassment she describes in *Incidents*, the sonic assaults she does recount reveal harassment as one element of sexual violence.

On top of the physical, sonic component of Flint's whispers, their semantic content enacts a further element of sexual harassment, emotional assault. Since perpetrators of sexual violence act out of a desire for power rather than a desire for sex exclusively, victims and survivors can experience their perpetrators' attempts to control them in ways that are sexual and non-sexual. The "foul words" (27) Flint whispers into Linda's ear are both a metaphor for sexual violence and a linguistic assault on her, expressing his claims of ownership: "he told me that I was made for his use, made to obey his command in *every* thing; that I was nothing but a slave, whose will must and should surrender to his" (Jacobs 19). These claims communicate verbally what rape conveys physically: that Flint regards Linda as human "property" (27). Linda's "shamefaced" reaction to these statements (28)—a frequent response to sexual violence—suggests that she experiences the Flint's attempts to own her, in part, as sexual assault.

While the nineteenth-century audience of *Incidents* may not have consciously registered the subtle rhetorical devices that Jacobs employed by referencing the seduction novel, drawing on the Black rhetorical techniques of “undertelling” and “masking,” and using figurative substitutions, including metonymy and synecdoche, that slide into literal description, *Incidents* clearly undermines simplistic notions that middleclass white audiences probably held about rape and slavery. Jacobs’ rhetorical techniques convey the reality that enslaved people’s sexual encounters with their enslavers could not possibly be consensual and that slavery permitted sexual violence because it was a system of comprehensive exploitation.

American Indian Stories

Employing a similar method, Zitkala-Ša uses the conventions of sentimental writing, particularly the seduction novel, to compare colonial abuses to sexual abuse in *American Indian Stories*. For example, when missionaries arrive on the reservation to persuade Dakota children to accompany them eastward, Zitkala-Ša’s mother laments that her daughter’s “ears” have been “filled . . . with the white man’s lies” (Zitkala-Ša 84). Echoing seduction novel mothers who instruct their daughters to close their ears against libertines, she warns, “Don’t believe a word they say! Their words are sweet, but, my child, their deeds are bitter” (Zitkala-Ša 84). From a Euro-American perspective, the mother’s warning translates, as Cathy Davidson notes, to a caution against “temptation and seduction” (xxx).³⁰ Indeed, Zitkala-Ša portrays her departure for White’s Indiana Manual Labor Institute as a “fall” from innocence (Davidson xxx):

“When I saw the lonely figure of my mother vanish in the distance, a sense of regret settled heavily upon me. I felt suddenly weak, as if I might fall limp to the ground. I was

³⁰ Alternatively, from a Dakota perspective, the mother’s warning is against the wiles of a trickster; see Bernardin 221.

in the hands of strangers whom my mother did not fully trust. . . . The tears trickled down my cheeks, and I buried my face in the folds of my blanket” (Zitkala-Ša 86).

Evoking the condition of a seduction novel heroine, words such as “regret,” “weak,” “fall limp,” and “tears” convey that Zitkala-Ša has been seduced or “fallen.” This focus on sentimental themes of “home, family, and mother-daughter relations” (218), which were also focal points of the seduction novel, Susan Bernardin notes, “promotes cross-cultural affiliation based on readerly sympathy” (223). Zitkala-Ša’s use of such language compels white readers to consider Native boarding schools as dangerous as the villains of seduction novels.

One vignette in particular, “The Cutting of My Long Hair,” compares the impact of cultural violation to that of rape through the rhetoric of the seduction novel. Zitkala-Ša writes, “I remember being dragged out, though I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly. In spite of myself, I was carried downstairs and tied fast in a chair. I cried aloud shaking my head all the while until I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck, and heard them gnaw off one of my thick braids” (91). Detailing physical struggle (“I resisted by kicking and scratching wildly”), emphatic non-consent (“I cried aloud shaking my head”), and bodily violation (“I felt the cold blades of the scissors against my neck”), the passage reads as a rape, with the substitution of scissor blades for a penis. Zitkala-Ša’s subsequent remarks resemble that of a “fallen” seduction novel protagonist: “Then I lost my spirit. . . . In my anguish I moaned for my mother, but no one came to comfort me. Not a soul reasoned quietly with me, as my own mother used to do” (Zitkala-Ša 91). Echoing the seduction novel heroine’s loss of self, words such as “anguish” and “moaned,” yearning for maternal “comfort” and “reaso[n],” and the stark statement, “then I lost my spirit” indicate that shorn hair in Dakota culture signifies not a superficial alteration but a profound bodily and spiritual loss. White readers who were unfamiliar with Dakota culture but

familiar with the seduction novel could thus better understand the gravity of this forcible haircut through the rhetoric of seduction.

More than comparing cultural violation to sexual violation metaphorically, though, such scenes refer to sexual violence metonymically, as in *Incidents*, using one type of assault to refer to a related assault. The language that compares Native boarding school practices to rape communicates the structural conditions that made the schools hotbeds of actual sexual violence. In other words, the mechanisms of forced assimilation were not only comparable to rape but also included rape.³¹ Administrators reinforced the message that Native children's bodies were not their own—creating a culture of both forcible assimilation and rape—by handling them without consent, fashioning them in Euro-American styles, restricting their bodily functions (such as eating and sleeping) to a rigid schedule, denying them appropriate care, and ignoring their protests.

Metonymically representing sexual violence, Zitkala-Ša's arrival at the boarding school entails the first assault in a series of many that denies her bodily autonomy. She writes, "A rosy-cheeked paleface woman caught me in her arms. I was both frightened and insulted by such trifling. I stared into her eyes, wishing her to let me stand on my own feet, but she jumped me up and down with increasing enthusiasm. My mother had never made a plaything of her wee daughter. Remembering this I began to cry aloud" (Zitkala-Ša 88). Contrasting earlier interactions with her mother and Dakota elders, which were founded on mutual respect,³² this moment highlights the sudden physical vulnerability Native children faced as white adults set a precedent for further invasion.

³¹ Efforts to document boarding school atrocities have shown that the "epidemic of sexual abuse in boarding schools" was "rampant" (Smith 38).

³² In "The Coffee-Making," Zitkala-Ša recalls attempting to make coffee over cold ashes and how her mother and a grandfather "treated [her] best judgement, poor as it was, with the utmost respect" (79).

A second theft of Native children's bodily autonomy, the forcible exchange of their tribal attire for Euro-American clothes, also metonymically represents sexual violence. After Zitkala-Ša's "blanket had been stripped from [her] shoulders" and she spies a line of pinafores Native girls, "immodestly dressed . . . in their tightly fitting clothes," she describes how she "felt like sinking into the floor" (90). The shame conveyed by this wish as well as the intrusive connotation of "strip" suggest an impact analogous to sexual assault. Since the same factors that motivate sexual violence—the desire to control another and a disregard for that individual's personhood—motivated assimilationist policy as well, the body became a vulnerable site of incursion and humiliation. Here, the literal stripping of clothing represents attempts to strip Native children of their tribal identities, enacted through both the imposition of Euro-American attire *and* through sexual abuse.

A later vignette called "Iron Routine" employs synecdoche, similar to that in *Incidents*, in which comprehensive dehumanization suggests sexual violence as one specific form of dehumanization. Zitkala-Ša describes the administrators' "cruel neglect of [students'] physical ills" in the name of punctuality and attendance:

No matter if a dull headache or the painful cough of slow consumption had delayed the absentee, there was only time enough to mark the tardiness. It was next to impossible to leave the iron routine after the civilizing machine had once begun its day's buzzing. . . . I despised the pencils that moved automatically, and the one teaspoon which dealt out, from a large bottle, healing to a row of variously ailing Indian children. (Zitkala-Ša 96-97)

The dehumanization of the "iron routine" indicates an environment that encouraged administrators to treat Native children as cogs in the "civilizing machine" rather than as human

children with specific spiritual and physical needs. Both impersonal and culturally inappropriate, the “one teaspoon” of cure-all tonic given to “variously ailing Indian children” was inadequate medicine, especially considering the richness of tribal medicinal traditions. Eventually, one of Zitkala-Ša’s classmates dies, which is not surprising. Given the boarding schools’ goal of assimilation at all costs, fatalities were not exceptions but the norm,³³ with administrators regarding Native children as “dumb sick brute[s]” (Zitkala-Ša 96) to justify atrocious acts of violence, including sexual violence. As research shows, “sexual aggression” often is a “consequence of engaging in dehumanization” (Bevens and Loughnan 715). At the boarding schools, the dehumanization that permitted inadequate care also represents the dehumanization that allowed for sexual violence.

Throughout the autobiographical sections of *American Indian Stories*, Zitkala-Ša draws attention to the oppressive soundscape of the boarding school, describing sonic manifestations of colonial mechanisms: the “painful cough of slow consumption,” the scratching of “pencils that moved automatically” and the “buzzing” of the “civilizing machine” that drowns out any resistance a student might attempt to voice (96). Among the first details Zitkala-Ša notes upon

³³ Andrea Smith (Cherokee) reports that, in order to keep costs down, “Children were given inadequate food and medical care, and were overcrowded in these schools. As a result, they routinely died from starvation and disease” (38). Until recently, the United States government has made little effort to document the number of boarding school deaths on a national scale. However, in 2022, Interior Secretary Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo) led an investigation into “historical records of boarding school locations, burial sites, and enrollments logs of children’s names and tribal affiliations” (Benallie). Haaland created this initiative after the discovery of 215 unmarked graves at the former site of Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada (The Associated Press), and “many believe it is likely more graves will be found at the U.S. Indian boarding schools” (Benallie). Before this, in 2001, the Truth Commission on Genocide in Canada implicated the boarding school system in over 50,000 Native children’s murders (Smith 40). Preceding the United States investigation, the remains of 102 Native children have been found buried near the Haskell Institute, with at least 500 additional Haskell students buried elsewhere (Smith 39), and the remains of nearly 200 Native children have been found buried at the site of the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (Estes).

arrival are the “loud metallic voice” of the breakfast bell, the “annoying clatter of shoes on the bare floor,” and the “undercurrent of many voices murmuring in an unknown tongue;” she writes “the constant clash of harsh noises . . . made a bedlam within which I was securely tied” (89). Provoking physical and mental distress, the sounds of the boarding school invade her “sensitive ears” (Zitkala-Ša 89) without respite. After her moccasins are exchanged for “squeaking shoes,” Zitkala-Ša struggles to escape harmful situations, such as the cutting of her hair (89). These sonic details are important because they portray an atmosphere where Native children were inaudible, except for the purposes of surveillance, making it extremely difficult for them to dissent or flee.

When Native children did successfully voice their protests, the assimilationist ideology of Native boarding schools encouraged administrators to disregard them. For example, after Zitkala-Ša is hoisted into the air without her consent, she pleads to go back to her family but “the ears of the palefaces could not hear [her]” (89). Treated as incomprehensible, she is sent to bed. Resulting on a basic level from school administrators’ lack of familiarity with Native languages, this unresponsiveness stemmed more significantly from their complete disinterest in learning. Since the purpose of the boarding school system was to sever Native children from their cultural roots, the consequences of miscommunication were foisted upon students so that they would be motivated to learn English,³⁴ and as Andrea Smith explains, students were punished and tortured for speaking their Native languages (40). But even beyond this linguistic disavowal, the schools remained hardened against Native students’ extralinguistic expressions of resistance, as seen in the hair-cutting scene described by Zitkala-Ša in which she “resisted by kicking and scratching

³⁴ In “The Snow Episode,” for instance, Zitkala-Ša describes how a friend who did not speak English was beaten for answering a question incorrectly. She writes, “misunderstandings as ridiculous as this one . . . frequently took place, bringing unjustifiable frights and punishments into our little lives” (93).

wildly” and “cried aloud shaking [her] head” (91). Students’ consent was irrelevant to those enacting the schools’ mission since the assumption that Euro-American culture would save Native children from supposedly barbarism justified use of force.

The sonic atmosphere that rendered Native children’s protests irrelevant made students especially vulnerable to sexual predation. How could Native children escape sexual danger in an environment where adults refused to hear their protest or pain? Writing about the contemporary crisis of sexual violence against Native people, Smith explains that “sexual predators know they can abuse Indian children with impunity” (39), which derives from how boarding schools commandeered Native children’s bodies, ignored their voices, and reframed violence as benevolence. Zitkala-Ša’s portrayal highlights the simultaneity of rape culture and ethnocide—where, as Smith puts it, sexual violence was “not simply a tool of patriarchy but also a tool of colonialism and racism” (8)—by showing how the boarding schools enacted their colonial mission through sexual violence, one aspect of a larger culture of colonial abuse.

In *American Indian Stories* Zitkala-Ša communicates both the impact of colonial violence and its intertwinement with rape culture by drawing on the rhetoric of the seduction novel, describing boarding schools’ physical assaults on Native children, and depicting a sonic atmosphere that stifled their voices and ignored their dissent, making sexual violence a pervasive threat. Altogether, Zitkala-Ša’s portrayal of Whites Indiana Manual Labor Institute reveals an environment disposed to sexual violence by nature of being an ethnocidal institution. This depiction challenged white assumptions that Native boarding schools held the best interests of students at heart by compelling readers to hear a different story of assimilation—not as a trajectory of untroubled academic and professional success but as a story of spiritual loss, dehumanization, and sexual violence.

IV. Conclusion

Incidents and *American Indian Stories*, though written long before the #MeToo Movement and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theorization of intersectionality, speak to current feminist concerns including survivor advocacy, the politics of listening, and a multi-axis framework for understanding oppression. Read in the contemporary moment, the texts resist narrow definitions of sexual violence that limit it to discrete acts of physical aggression motivated by sexual desire and show how discrediting survivors, particularly survivors of color, is a socially constructed attitude that has historically benefitted people in power. Put another way, it is not necessary for texts to describe sexual violence explicitly for them to provide important insights into rape culture. In fact, it is often oblique rhetorical moves that articulate the basis of sexual violence in larger systems of power, including patriarchy, capitalism, white supremacy, and colonialism. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and *American Indian Stories* reveal that varieties of harm reinforce each other, that ostensibly unsexual acts can be fundamentally intertwined with and contributing to sexual violence. Ultimately, Jacobs' and Zitkala-Ša's narratives show the link between sexual violence and white supremacy—disputing the myth that rape threatened white women exclusively—and redefine rape as one method, among others, that the powerful use to maintain dominance over the disempowered.

Chapter Three

Listening for Survival in Helena María Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them*

I. Introduction

The earsplitting sounds of bulldozers, sledgehammers, sirens, and gunshots reverberate through East Los Angeles in Helena Maria Viramontes' *Their Dogs Came with Them* (2007). Based on the historical construction of the Los Angeles freeway system in the 1960s, the novel portrays the highway's disastrous impact on the predominantly Chicana³⁵ Eastside. The incursions of urbanization, represented heavily through sonic details, prevent Eastside residents from communicating with one another, which, I argue, inhibits the healing of characters who have experienced sexual violence. Tracing the sonic lives of two such characters, Ermila and Turtle, I examine the mechanisms that collectively silence their community and deny them listeners. With limited access to people who can empathize with, validate, and respond to their experiences, both characters struggle to survive.

This chapter continues my analysis of how metonymy connects systems of oppression—in this case colonialism, racism, and rape culture—to the personal, sensory experience of struggling to survive in their grasp. However, while my previous chapter focuses on the metonymic substitution of sexual violence with related forms of violence, here I zoom in a level further, considering sonic details as metonyms for the large-scale systems mentioned above.³⁶

³⁵ Though Viramontes does not specify whether characters in *Their Dogs* identify with the reclaimed term Chicano/Chicana (as opposed to the less politically charged Mexican American), I use the term Chicana in this chapter to reflect Viramontes' affiliation with Chicano/a literature and the gender fluidity of one the characters. See Contreras for a discussion of the terms Chicano, Chicana, Chican@, and Chicana.

³⁶ While I do not *focus* on sexual violence as metonymy in this chapter, I still consider references to sexual violence in *Their Dogs* as metonymical rather than metaphorical. See Wald 77-78 for a related discussion of sexual violence in *Their Dogs* as “more than metaphorical,” countering Kevane 11 and Herrera-Sobek 245, who interpret it as a “symbol” of conquest and a “metaphor” for colonization, respectively.

Pervasive by definition, structural violence manifests through multiple avenues, including the sonic; thus, a sonic detail, such as noise from a helicopter that shakes the walls of a home can represent the larger force of urbanization. Such a detail operates at a specific level, conveying how invasive sounds damage residents' homes and health, but also at a broader level, demonstrating how colonialism, racism, and rape culture structurally silence targeted populations. Operating on these two planes, metonymy invites readers to contemplate how the literal informs the figurative (as opposed to metaphors, where the figurative divorces itself from the literal) as well as how the figurative connects the literal to the systemic. In this way, sonic metonyms in *Their Dogs* express the expansive temporality of trauma and healing for Chicana survivors of sexual violence.

II. Metonymy and Temporality

Thinking alongside Hsuan L. Hsu, who conceptualizes the sensory details of urbanization in *Their Dogs* as metonymy, I am interested in how the novel's emphasis on physical realities concretizes the impact of abstract systems of oppression and vice versa. While Hsu focuses on visual instantiations of metonymy—dust in nostrils, grime under fingernails, soot on feet—arguing that these Lacanian “stains . . . make visible the human effects of ambient (often imperceptible) environmental harm” (157), I turn my attention to sonic metonyms. Contrary to Hsu's claim that environmental racism “quietly affects all the characters' lives” (156), I submit that it is anything but “quie[t].”³⁷ As Turtle puts it, “If it's one thing that the Eastside never lacked, it was the constant howling of a siren” (Viramontes 270).

³⁷ I do agree with Hsu, however, that environmental racism is often ambient and can be quiet in the sense that it goes unremarked upon by those who benefit.

Far from a mere backdrop, the sounds of construction and emergency vehicles measurably impact the Eastside, an environment Marina Peterson describes as “composed by noise, where sound . . . shapes neighborhoods and lives” (1). At an atmospheric level, “the diffuse and dispersed quality of noise,” Peterson argues, “makes people accustomed to experiencing and conceiving of that which is indeterminate, to dwell, that is, in uncertainty” (Peterson 4). Known to environmental scientists as noise pollution, this atmospheric stress encompasses any “human-created noise harmful to health or welfare” (Legasse). The environmental hazards of noise, of which transportation vehicles and construction equipment are the “worst offenders,” can cause “hearing loss . . . lack of sleep, irritability, heartburn, indigestion, ulcers, high blood pressure, and possibly heart disease . . . alter endocrine, neurological, and cardiovascular functions . . . creat[e] severe tension in daily living and contribut[e] to mental illness” (Legasse). Inflicting chronic physical and mental illnesses on Eastside residents, noise pollution damages the wellbeing of the entire neighborhood.

While the physical effects of noise pollution have been well studied, this chapter examines its discursive effects—that is, how noise pollution obstructs self-expression and communication. I show how “traumas related to languages, such as stuttering, muteness, and extreme social anxiety,” which Desirée A. Martín points out many characters in the novel suffer from (51), are a direct result of noise pollution, arguing that the sonic invasion of the Eastside has communicative repercussions: the sound of urbanization overwhelms the neighborhood to the point that it forecloses opportunities for residents to grow, heal, and connect with one another.

At the same time, the language-related traumas of individuals also metonymically represent how colonialism, racism, and rape culture silence entire populations on a structural

level—as in the political silencing of low-income residents in city decisions, the archival silencing of people of color in historical memory, or the legal silencing of survivors of sexual violence in the carceral system. Despite the novel’s focus on the gritty effects of urbanization in a particular time and place, its significance extends far beyond the material present of East Los Angeles in the 1960s. As Alicia Muñoz explains, the title’s quotation of an Aztec account of the conquest of Mexico names the freeway construction “a second conquest” (25), part of an ongoing colonial history enmeshed with racial and sexual violence.

Bridging individual and collective experience, metonymy in *Their Dogs* expresses the intergenerational temporality of trauma and healing for the Aztec peoples and their descendants. Though the novel focuses on the experiences of four discrete protagonists, Viramontes does not pretend to resolve centuries of suffering through “an identity-based narrative arc of hopeful triumph over adversity” (Martín 53). Instead, as T. Jackie Cuevas argues, Viramontes writes “a version of Chican@ history that refuses to adhere to a dominative linear progression of assimilation. . . . providing a complex portrait of what Chicanidad looks like when loss is not redeemed” (28-29). Redemption in *Their Dogs* is yet to be had; as much as the past informs the novel’s present, so too does the future. Recording the stories of an unresolved past for a contemporary audience, the novel “demand[s] an accounting of the dead” (Cuevas 42), gesturing toward a future audience who will witness their deaths, listen to their stories, and ensure that they are not forgotten.

The medicinal relationship between story and listener originates in indigenous oral tradition. Writing about “storytelling as indigenous survival strategy,” Deborah A. Miranda, a member of the Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation, tells of generations of Native women who have survived sexual violence by exercising their voices, even when unheeded by those in power

(“Saying the Padre Had Grabbed Her” 94-95). She relays the story of Vincenta Gutierrez, who reported being sexually assaulted by a priest in the 1830s, when “California Indians . . . were legally being sold as slaves, [so] the rape of a native woman was almost an oxymoron” (“Saying the Padre” 106). With equal significance, Miranda recounts how Ohlone ethnologist Isabel Meadows recorded Vincenta’s story in 1935 and “made sure that this story (among many others) found its way into the archive,” despite it not being the kind of “‘traditional’ knowledge” that white “salvage” ethnologists of the time were seeking (“Saying the Padre” 93). Isabel’s retelling of Vincenta’s telling, Miranda writes, suggests three things:

First, that Isabel herself knew the power of story; secondly, that she believed in our survival—she believed that future Indian women would exist and would need this story; and thirdly, she trusted our potential to become healers, to heal ourselves and each other, and to reintegrate body, soul, community even hundreds of years after the initial violence. (“Saying the Padre” 106)

In this intergenerational temporality of healing, Vincenta’s story has the power to influence more than just her immediate audience. Miranda asserts, “we are meant to engage in a conversation with her. . . . Tell her what happened to you. Take part in her cure. Take part in your own cure” (“Saying the Padre” 107). This partnership is inviting those who encounter Vincenta’s story to participate in a collective healing by remarking on an assault that the colonizers considered unremarkable, by conversing with a woman believed to be voiceless. For Chicana survivors of sexual violence, Viramontes plays a role similar to Isabel, delivering the stories of the past to an audience who still needs them in the ongoing project of healing amidst continued oppression.

III. Los Angeles in the 1960s

Before delving into the sonic details of the text, it is first necessary to consider aspects of colonial and urban history that shape the novel's setting. While the same overarching tactics of intertwined colonial, white supremacist, and patriarchal oppression reappear across time—destruction of land, displacement, resource hoarding, inequitable economic opportunity, discriminatory legislation, surveillance, militarization, violence against gender and sexual minorities, and sexual violence—the exact ways these tactics manifest depend on legal, geopolitical, and social structures specific to time and place. To understand this, I focus on the structures of Los Angeles during the latter half of the twentieth century, specifically transportation, policing, and legislation, that ultimately enabled racial- and gender-based violence in the Eastside.

Funded by the Collier-Burns Act and the Federal-Aid Highway Act, the construction of the Santa Monica freeway between 1961-1966 and the San Diego freeway in 1969 deepened disparities between low-income East Los Angeles and the affluent suburbs. While the freeway system provided suburban-dwelling whites with convenient access to the city, it destroyed the Chicana neighborhoods through which it was built. Regarding the ideological impact of the freeways, Angela M. Blake argues that “the late twentieth-century, mostly white, mobility of freeway driving [was] defined by the Los Angeles freeways and defined by an inattentive and unfocused seeing” (161). The fast pace and sense of independence afforded by the freeways encouraged white drivers to pass over the inequities happening outside of their automobiles in East Los Angeles.³⁸ Such “transportation induced inequities,” as detailed by Robert Bullard, include “infrastructure that that physically isolates communities; inequitable distribution of

³⁸See Muñoz 33-35 for a discussion of how the freeway's design creates a “drive-through perspective” that enables drivers to speed through the Eastside “without contact or engagement.”

environmental nuisances . . . [and] lack of sufficient mitigation measures to correct inequitable distribution of negative impacts (for example, noise or displacement of homes)” (26). Indeed, as *Their Dogs* illustrates, the freeways severed the Eastside from resources and displaced residents, both directly through eminent domain and indirectly through noise and other pollutants. With cyclic effect, the resulting impact on community health and economic opportunity, on top of racial discrimination in political and legal settings, made mitigating these inequities a challenge. The state’s investment in the freeways was, in the words of Eric Mann, a “classic case of transportation racism” that “reflects how government rewards primarily white and affluent constituencies and punishes primarily low-income constituencies of color” (35-36).

Beyond the disruption of the freeway, increased police presence and surveillance restricted Eastside residents’ mobility even further. Represented in the novel by the fictional Quarantine Authority (QA), this militarized state is based on a number of moments in Chicano history—including the Zoot Suit Riots of 1943, the Chicano Blowouts of 1968, and the Chicano Moratorium of 1970—when the state employed tactics such as curfews and checkpoints to try to dampen political protest (Muñoz 37). Justified in the novel by an alleged rabies pandemic, also based on a real 1955 outbreak,³⁹ the QA invades East Los Angeles with roaming helicopters and armed guards. Though Viramontes condenses several periods of heavy policing into one, her depiction derives, above all, from her own experiences growing up in East Los Angeles, as she describes in an interview with Elisabeth Mermann-Jozwiak and Nancy Sullivan: “I remember when we had curfews. We felt like criminals. We literally had to stop at points where we were asked where we were going, and what we were doing. We were trying to go into our own homes! Into our own neighborhoods!” (84). Subject to a “spatial racism” (Muñoz 36) compounding the

³⁹ See Kevane 25 for more on the historic and symbolic significance of dogs in the novel.

transportation racism of the freeways, Eastsiders faced confinement and police threat throughout the twentieth century.

In addition to exacerbating racial disparities, the postwar design of Los Angeles and accompanying laws perpetuated gendered violence as well. Daphne Spain describes Los Angeles as the prime example of patriarchal urban design, characterized by the gendered separation of work from home and public from private (584-85). The rise of the suburbs, made possible by the freeways, reflected this ideology of separate spheres which assumed that “men’s labor in the public realm is paid and visible” while “women’s household labor is unpaid and invisible” (585). Even more than the economic expectation that women stay at home, Spain explains, “the greatest inhibition to women’s mobility” was “their fear of sexual assault” coupled with a “reluctance to report it to the authorities, who for many years blamed the victim for dressing provocatively or being in the wrong place at the wrong time” (588). Indeed, in her 1973 legal review, Camille E. LeGrand exposes how misconceptions about sexual violence—that rapists are sex-crazed strangers or that women make false rape complaints—“produced and sustained laws and attitudes that seek to protect the innocent from an unjust rape conviction, rather than to protect women from rape” (931). Rape laws in the mid-twentieth century treated women who reported rape as potential criminals whose allegations challenged the limited definitions of rape and rapist.⁴⁰ But while fear of sexual violence and a broken reporting system dissuaded women from public life, the truth was (and is) that “women are far more likely to experience physical and sexual violence at home than in public” and “to be raped by someone they know than by a

⁴⁰ See Kilpatrick for the 1962 US Model Penal code definition of rape, which required the use of “force or threat of force or threat of imminent death, serious bodily injury, extreme pain, or Kidnapping” and excluded the possibility of marital rape.

stranger” (Spain 589).⁴¹ As I will expand on later, this internal threat in the context of East Los Angeles indicates the insidious reach of colonization and rape culture from the outside in. At a structural level, women had no space that could be considered safe, and it would not be until the 1970s that the first women’s centers were established, creating public places for women to organize, educate, and build community.

At even greater risk were transgender and gender non-conforming individuals who not only experienced high rates of sexual violence⁴² but also disproportionately suffered police brutality.⁴³ Spain makes clear that, alongside women of color, “the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community of any race or ethnicity experience more intensely than whites the inequalities associated with urban spatial practices” (582). As with women’s centers, LGBTQ community spaces would not exist until nearly the 1970s, and widespread recognition of transgender existence, not to mention legal protection or rights, would be (and still is) decades in the making.

At the intersection of state-designed racism, misogyny, and transphobia, Chicanas and gender non-conforming Chicanxs were denied safety and resources to the greatest extent.⁴⁴ Economically and legally barred from the suburbs,⁴⁵ they lacked even the illusion of domestic

⁴¹ See “Scope of the Problem: Statistics” for a broad view of sexual violence statistics that shows domestic confinement to be a serious concern, as 55% of sexual assaults occur at or near the victim’s home and 12% at or near a relative’s home.

⁴² According to the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey, 47% of transgender people experience sexual assault in their lifetimes; see “Sexual Assault and the LGBTQ Community.”

⁴³ Police violence against the LGBTQ community is well documented, most notably the instigation of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 in New York City. Less well known, but even earlier and local to Los Angeles, was the Cooper Donuts Riot of 1959 in which LGBTQ people protested police “entrapment, intimidation, and violence” at an LGBTQ-friendly donut shop (see Lilly 4). Statistically speaking, “trans people are 3.7 times more likely to experience police violence and 7 times more likely to experience physical violence when interacting with police than cisgender victims and survivors,” the most publicized recent case being the police murder of trans man Tony McDade in 2020 (see Burns).

⁴⁴ Though sexual violence is prevalent among Latinas, it is underreported for many reasons, including lack of linguistically and culturally relevant services and support; see “Existe Ayuda Fact Sheet.”

⁴⁵ See Baxandall and Ewen for more on racial discrimination and zoning laws in the post-war suburbs.

sanctuary and, more importantly, the privileges that came with living in a neighborhood deemed respectable and worthy of investment. In the absence of pronounced separate spheres, street gangs emerged as distinctly masculine spaces (Spain 590), which made the possibility of assault outside the home a real threat. Meanwhile, the police were a source of violence rather than an antidote. Even after the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center and the Crenshaw Women's Center were established in Central Los Angeles in 1969 and 1970, respectively, they were largely inaccessible to residents of the Eastside, who, if travelling by foot, would have had to walk for over three hours and cross five major freeways. Due to resource inaccessibility, housing instability, police violence, and environmental vulnerability, Chicana/x *relationships* suffered, which, I will argue, severely affected the survival of those who experienced sexual violence.

IV. Noise and Silence in *Their Dogs Came with Them*

The impact of damaged relationships appears vividly in the stories of two Chicana/x characters, Ermila and Turtle, after they experience sexual violence in the Eastside. Despite both being assigned female at birth and both growing up on the same street, they suffer the after-effects of sexual violence with minimal but varying opportunities to heal, the variation attributable to differences in their gender marginalization. Ermila, a cisgender teenager who lives with her grandparents, is sexually assaulted by her cousin in her home and is likely raped by her boyfriend in his car; though she receives little support at home, she ultimately finds listeners in her tightknit group of female friends, known as the girlfriends. Turtle, a gender non-conforming ex-gang member experiencing homelessness, is sexually assaulted by a stranger in public as a child; abandoned by her family and subject to misogyny in the gang, Turtle never confides in anyone about the assault. Analyzing sonic metonyms that make tangible the structural silencing

of the Eastside in these two characters' stories reveals how sonority is both a colonial tactic and a tool of resistance.

Ermila: "waiting for a listener"

When Ermila is a child, noise pollution from the freeway construction actively impairs her family's health, collectively damaging their functioning as a household. Grandfather shows signs of hearing loss and depression, spending his days watching television with the volume turned all the way up. Grandmother struggles with anxiety as she worries about the safety of her daughter and granddaughter and has trouble focusing on household tasks. Under the stress of these health issues, the grandparents develop tension in their relationship which erupts into shouting matches that seep into Ermila's ears like secondhand smoke. Suggesting causality between the noise of the freeway and strife in the Zumaya home, Viramontes depicts the escalating soundscape of arguments building on bulldozers:

[Grandmother] asked . . . could he [Grandfather] please lower the volume because she couldn't hear herself think, she couldn't hear herself think, his hellish box that miserably loud. The child poked her finger into the whipped frosting and tasted the sweetness of hard work over the arguing voices of her grandparents. Mixed in the cement, a tumble of the fears and accusations. Sledge-hammers competing with Grandmother's heartbeats. Mixed in with the buzzing and farting of the earthmovers and the long cranes resembling dented kitchen utensils, Grandmother's inquiry—Is the child safe?—meaning either her granddaughter Ermila or her daughter Inez. Her question buried in the new pavement, her hands so soft and malleable, they were incapable of shaping her daily chores. (151)

In this soundscape, Grandfather hardly hears his "miserably loud" television over the noise of "sledge-hammers," "earthmovers," and "cranes," much less his wife's "heartbeats" and

“question;” Ermila absorbs the rising decibels “mixed in” with the “arguing voices” of her caregivers; Grandmother finds herself unable to “hear herself think” and “incapable of shaping her daily chores.” Collectively, noise pollution leaves no space for the home’s inhabitants to think, speak, and attend to one another’s needs.

Growing up in a noise polluted environment, Ermila develops selective hearing which, on one hand, protects her from the hazardous sounds of her surroundings but, on the other, disables her from connecting to others verbally. Viramontes describes Ermila’s sense of hearing as “an option she commanded early on—to have the ocean’s sob and then to decide the noise, the external reverberation of language and landscape, until she demanded the silence again” (11). Though Ermila’s capacity to “decide the noise” and “deman[d] the silence” endows her with a sense of aural agency, she also finds herself unable to speak, which leads to feelings of self-doubt and isolation. In one instance, after witnessing two adults kissing on the playground, she wants to make sense of the affection by talking to a peer but finds herself unable to do so:

Pigeons in her belly, the child wanted to release them by opening her mouth wide. The feeling fluttered from her root-tangled intestines and traveled up through the tree trunk of her throat to the branch of her tongue, and there it perched, waiting for a listener. She turned to the lunch tables to seek out one of her classmates, but the playground was long ago empty, and she returned to Mr. and Miss Eastman, who had also vanished, and the child began to doubt what she had witnessed. (Viramontes 153)

Stunned by this glimpse of intimacy, Ermila struggles to connect to others, and the absence of a listener distorts her cognition (she “began to doubt what she had witnessed”). This social disconnect becomes increasingly dangerous as Ermila grows older and navigates more complicated forms of sexual intimacy herself.

A decade later, the Zumaya household threatens to crumble under constant sonic bombardment, both in its physical structure and family relationships. As Ermila enters adolescence, bulldozers morph into helicopters that scan the streets for rabid dogs and builders become sharpshooters that enforce the QA's curfew. Feeling restrained by Grandmother's increasingly anxious attempts to stifle her teenage sexuality, Ermila experiences her home as a space of confinement made even tighter by the sounds of the QA. After a particularly fraught moment involving her grandmother, helicopters arrive over Ermila's street, destabilizing the very walls of her home:

The chopper blades raised the roof shingles of the neighborhood houses and toppled TV antennas in swirls of suction on the living side of First Street. . . . The wheeling copter blades over the power lines rose louder and closer and closer and louder The walls trembled, disturbing the framed old magazine picture of John F. Kennedy, shattering a glass in the kitchen. (Viramontes 77)

Again, Viramontes pairs this moment of sonic intensity with a moment of interpersonal tension in the Zumaya household, suggesting a correlation between the two. At the same moment that Ermila feels her trust in Grandmother shaken, the helicopter's force palpably shakes the foundations of their home, and the shattered glass becomes both a literal manifestation and symbolic representation of the destabilizing effects of urbanization on the home and the relationships within.

Moments later, the thunder of helicopter blades and gunfire provides a sonic cover under which Ermila's cousin sexually assaults her. Trapped in the house, Ermila is, in Hsu's words, "doubly quarantined—alternately shut up in [her] hom[e] and blockaded out of [her] neighborhood" (155). Though Grandmother intends to protect Ermila, especially sexually, by

cloistering her inside, she subjects her to the insidious danger of incest in a household already made precarious by noise. As her home becomes the unwilling “epicenter” of the earsplitting sweep, Ermila’s assault goes unheard:

Her slip lifted to her bare belly, and finally swelled over her two firm breasts. Her nipples felt the pinch of chill. This was happening because the world was going crazy. She could feel his moist palms inside the cool nylon of her underwear as a faint succession of bullets continued. . . . The gunfire continued until dawn. (Viramontes 77-78)

Ambiguous as to whether Ermila’s cousin or the force of the helicopter initially “lifted” her slip, the assault is double. While the noise literally creates an environment conducive to assault, its simultaneity with the assault also represents the invasive effects of the QA that ripple into Eastside households. To be clear, I am not arguing that noise pollution absolves Ermila’s cousin of responsibility but rather that the novel invites readers to conceptualize the assault at multiple levels: the intimate and the structural.

Years of noise pollution particularly impacts the family’s ability to communicate. By Ermila’s teenage years, the grandparents’ verbal exchanges have deteriorated beyond the arguments of her childhood: Grandfather suffers a stroke,⁴⁶ which “produced an insatiable hunger [in Grandfather] to speak, though his wife often turned to him at times with bitter repercussion, resentful stares jolting him into silence” (Viramontes 179). Now, household communication consists of tense, uneven bouts of speaking and silence that inhibit genuine connection. Grandmother and Ermila, too, suffer a communication breakdown that stunts their relationship, and Ermila conceptualizes their distance in sonic terms:

⁴⁶ According to the National Institute for Neurological Disorders and Stroke, the leading risk factor for stroke is high blood pressure (see “Brain Basics: Preventing Stroke), which is a common symptom of noise pollution (see Legasse).

Are you even listening to me? The ground had shifted under them and the earth had breached, creating a rift between the two women that began, one could safely say, at puberty, but truly began ten years before when Ermila first arrived on their doorstep. Although Grandmother's big ears sprang out from her thinning gauzy hair, she could barely make out what Ermila said from the other side of the bluff. (Viramontes 179)

Like a landmass split under pressure, the women are pushed apart by an external force, and the resulting "rift" makes communication almost impossible. Evoking voices dampened by space, the sound of words dissipating between bluffs expresses the silencing of a community cleft by urbanization.

This communication void is especially detrimental during Ermila's teenage years because she has begun experiencing "intolerable guilt, a filthy feeling that bathing couldn't cleanse" after having "harsh and bloodied" sex with her boyfriend, Alfonso (Viramontes 74). Grandmother compensates for her inability to provide a safe environment for her granddaughter by denying Ermila's sexuality rather than listening to her fears or answering her questions, her "rational thoughts . . . absorbed in preventing Ermila's sex from entering their decent household" (Viramontes 73). Completely lacking trust in one another, the two women cannot express their feelings or exchange the stories that could lead to healthier relationships with sexuality. Having "told no one" about her experiences with sex (Viramontes 74), Ermila is left to navigate desire, consent, and self-worth without guidance from an adult in her family.

While the survival of an individual in Ermila's situation is not guaranteed, Viramontes uses the imaginative space of the novel to explore a way forward. In imagining how and where Ermila might find listeners, Viramontes positions her outside the home and amongst peers in stolen moments of mobility. Ermila forms a friendship with her classmates, Rini, Mousie, and

Lollie, with whom she shares gender and sexual identity in addition to age, and they talk constantly in transit between school, work, and home. Centering on verbal exchange, the friendship sustains the young women through hardship and trauma:

The only things they cherished, their only private property, were the stories they continued to create and re-create in a world which only gave them one to tell. And so they never tired of one another's company; they listened to Rini rewrite accounts of her phantom father by proclaiming a gift package or a funny postcard arrived in yesterday's mail addressed to her with a return address, and the girlfriends nodded but never asked to see his handwriting. Or Ermila's single sentence stories of foster homes, half memories of the Child Services or half truths about Alfonso, wording his name like the punch line of a joke . . . (Viramontes 61-62)

Mutually, the girlfriends care for one another by listening unconditionally, prioritizing validation over debate. As Martín writes, "The fact that the girls' stories recur in fragments . . . is not a flaw or a nuisance. Rather, the girls' bits and pieces of stories and memories create a comforting space of repetition and recycling. They need only hear a fragment of each girl's story . . . to assess each other's mental and physical states" (59). Objective truth and evidence hold minimal value in these storytelling sessions, as they are intended to help the storyteller process her pain and take charge of her narrative by rewriting it, all done in community. Lacking a fixed space to call their own, the girlfriends build a sort of mobile resilience unit as their neighborhood, homes, and family bonds are riven beneath their feet.

After one of them experiences sexual violence, the girlfriends resist being silenced by unifying their four voices into an undeniable force. Their collective linguistic power emerges most notably when Rini calls upon her friends to seek revenge on her abuser by scratching

“PUTO” and the name of the gang “LOTE” into his car with acetone and steel wool, requiring trust and coordination:

The girlfriends fought against their individual doubts and concentrated on one communal goal. . . . From the east, west, north, and south the girlfriends converged toward the magnet of their wrath’s attention. There was no practice save from repetition of the task at hand and they knew the actual execution would have to take less than a few seconds.

That’s all they had . . . each of them was assigned letters . . . (Viramontes 198-199)

Significantly, the message can only be written as a team. Just as the girlfriends depend on one another as listeners to process trauma, they need each other to hold Rini’s abuser accountable in a public forum. Martín observes that “although the vandalized car might appear to bystanders like any other example of gang tagging . . . it reflects their role as master translators of the space, politics, and relationships of the Eastside” (66). An alternative to seeking justice in a legal setting, vandalizing the car physically marks Rini’s injustice, collectively asserting that what Rini claims happened happened, that it was wrong, and that her abuser is culpable.

And unlike the result of so many court cases, which invalidate the perspectives of survivors, the girlfriends leave feeling empowered:

They strolled away in separate directions . . . barely containing their collective sense of invincibility. . . . Ermila reveled in becoming one of the winds of the four directions and just for a moment, a fleeting moment at that, she experienced a larger-than-life ability to soar over just about anything. (Viramontes 199)

The source of this empowerment is a sisterhood cyclically generated by and generative of expression: while reciprocal speaking and listening sustains the girlfriends’ bonds, the bonds themselves enable them to reclaim their voices. Their homes and families damaged by noise

pollution, the young women create pockets of space and moments of connection to survive their neighborhood's collective silencing and, in doing so, survive sexual violence.

Turtle: "needed to listen to someone speak"

While in Ermila's story, Viramontes raises the possibility of healing through rebuilding community and communication, in Turtle's story, she underscores the reality that lack of access these resources can be fatal. Though Turtle, who grew up on the same street as Ermila, experiences noise pollution as well, she feels the impact of urbanization most acutely through the isolation it causes, which appears in the text as sonic absence. Thus, Turtle's narrative focuses not on the din of noise pollution but on the silence of abandonment. Viramontes introduces teenaged Turtle in the "skitter[ing]" soundscape of an empty alley when "the hollow clang of her name" is "hurl[ed] . . . into the street like the metal lid of a trash can" (16). As dawn breaks, the word "*Turrrtle* . . . spook[s] her awake" and can only mean one thing: that she is being pursued. Though her name once signified her membership in the McBride Boys, its "hollow" sound reveals that she no longer belongs to the gang.

Infuriated by the government's theft of her brother, Luis Lil Lizard, for the Vietnam War and crushed by the pain of abandonment, Turtle experiences her rage and grief as a hunger for sound: "it pitched a rise in her so bad Turtle needed to listen to someone speak (Viramontes 23). The phrase "[she] needed to listen to someone speak" (Viramontes 23, 166) and the equally lonesome "come on, no one said" (Viramontes 29, 171), along with the motif of her name clattering like the "metal lid of a trashcan" (Viramontes 16, 171), appear multiple times in the novel, conveying a pervasive sonic lack. The missing correlate to young Ermila, who is "waiting for a listener" (Viramontes 153), Turtle craves the company of someone she can listen to.

A decade of “the groan, thump and burr noise of the constant motors” (Viramontes 168) has destroyed Turtle’s family, pushing her deep into silence. As the neighborhood “disappear[s] inch by inch” (Viramontes 169), her mother’s wellbeing deteriorates with their house, “carelessly repaired with cardboard and duct tape like her cracked windows” after repeated physical assault (Viramontes 161). This comparison of Turtle’s mother to “surroundings in disrepair,” Muñoz argues, “reveal[s] the potential danger of a community eating away at itself . . . where external conditions foster downward spirals, and society harms itself because of the physical conditions around it” (28). Connecting the health of Turtle’s mother to the health of the house, Viramontes makes clear that the neighborhood’s environmental conditions—not the moral failings of individuals—have, as in Ermila’s home, impaired family bonds.

Also like Ermila, conflict marks Turtle’s passage into adolescence, but in Turtle’s case, it goes as far as homophobic abuse: her aunt and mother, disapproving her masculine style, call her a “malflora” (Viramontes 167), a derogatory term for lesbian that translates to “bad flower.” This insult, Keri-Ann Blanco writes, “others Turtle from her family as well as herself . . . [and] isolates her within the home” (243). Homophobia being a prime example of “internal colonization by other Chican@s” (Cuevas 35), Turtle has lost “access to the solidarity of other females” (Cuevas 38) on top of having “no queer or lesbian community or context in which she can even begin to make sense of herself as queer” (Cuevas 39-40). At risk of total isolation, Turtle wants to stay in the kitchen with her mother and aunt despite their verbal abuse, feeling that “the word ‘malflora’ sounded so sad . . . it was a word you shouldn’t be left alone with” (Viramontes 168). Her resistance to being “left alone” with the “sad” word suggests that, even in a verbally hostile and noise polluted environment, Turtle knows the silence of abandonment is even worse.

Tragically, silence is what Turtle receives when she is sexually assaulted on the side of the freeway—no one reacts to the assault in the moment or after the fact. Due to the freeway’s spectatorial design, “not one driver from all those cars zooming on the new freeway bridge, not one driver driving the overpass of the 710 freeway construction, not one stopped to protest” (Viramontes 24). Turtle is simultaneously hyper-visible and invisible, learning that the violation of her body, even in public, is not worth comment. Though Luis witnesses the act and makes the perpetrator leave, he refuses to acknowledge what happened, telling Turtle to “shut up” when she begins to cry “because he had a girl for a brother and he profoundly resented it” (Viramontes 25). Ashamed of her female body—“a site that reminds her of her vulnerability and separation from her brother” (Blanco 235)—Turtle views it as the culprit of her assault, and Luis’s silence deems it a problem she needs to deal with on her own: they continue walking “sullenly, neither one saying a word” (Viramontes 25), and she never mentions the assault to another person again. Cut off from any community that might help her “politically [to] reimagine female roles” (Blanco 238) and from “access to a queer history with which to insert herself as an imaginable and legible subject” (Cuevas 39), Turtle has no opportunity to foster the connections she needs to survive as a queer, Chicana victim of sexual violence.

Craving some form of community, Turtle joins her brother in the McBride Boys gang, which buries her deeper in silence. Belonging to the gang is “all about learning the unspoken” and “learning how not to talk” (Viramontes 158), so Turtle commits to suffering pain stoically. For her initiation, she endures being beaten with the important stipulation, “you don’t tell nobody who did this to you” (Viramontes 233). A test of her loyalty, this prescribed silence isolates her from anyone outside of the gang and trains her to speak only through action. She channels her rage at being sexually assaulted into physical violence, flashing back to “the metal-cold fingers,

the bagman's hands" and vowing that "she wasn't about to let it happen again" (Viramontes 232). Yet, as she hardens her *machismo* front, she dreams of motherly care, imagining her neighbor Chavela's "warm towel carr[y]ing the fragrance of Dove soap . . . ma[king] her feel refreshed, lovely" (Viramontes 235). The distance of this fantasy from reality intensifies her sense of unbelonging as she thinks, "But let's face it, if Turtle knocked on Chavela's door right now, a Grade-A cold-blooded malfora with studded ears, smelling like vomit from the trash she had been forced to eat, would Chavela welcome her? Would the old lady offer Turtle a shower, sudsy Dove foam for her chest, hips, her thighs? Offer a meal? A bed?" (Viramontes 236). Marginalized by her sex and gender expression, her social bonds obliterated by urbanization, Turtle yearns for the impossibility of a friendly voice.

While Ermila finds listeners in the girlfriends, Turtle never finds anyone to listen to. By the end of the novel, the closest sound to a familiar voice is the "tinking soda bottles" at Ray's Friendly Shop, which Turtle finds "dependable" and "reassuring" because it is the only vestige left of her childhood (Viramontes 253). After Luis goes to war, Turtle deserts the gang, knowing that she cannot belong without her brother. Though "the gang is framed as a family more loyal than any biological or domestic family," Martín points out, "it is a patriarchal, heteronormative, and gender-binary-defined family that actively excludes her" (63). Now estranged from both her birth family and the gang, she has no place to go but the streets. Her final chance at survival—the possibility of a job at Ray's—disappears when one of the McBride Boys finds her and drugs her so that she will take the fall for a murder.

In the final moments of her life, Turtle becomes so estranged from her body that she physically loses her verbal abilities. Overcome by the dissociative effects PCP, she murders a boy the gang has targeted on the street:

Turtle clenched her jaw because she no longer had a mouth to speak. . . . she had to remind her lungs to exhale so that the suffocation she was now experiencing with the screwdriver in her hand could not render her motionless . . . and Turtle lunged at the boy with all the dynamite rage of all the fuck-up boys stored in her rented body. (Viramontes 322)

It is not just the literal effects of the drug, but the feeling of her body being “rented,” that alienates Turtle from herself. Blanco attributes Turtle’s bodily absence to her sexual assault but also the verbal norms of rape culture, specifically the “misogynistic language” of the McBride Boys, who, in their “lack of agency . . . over space,” attempt to “belittl[e] Turtle into an object that they can manipulate into carrying out their violent acts” (250). Exploited by the McBride Boys and gunned down by the QA, Turtle dies a wordless death at the intersection of misogyny, homophobia, racism, and colonialism. The silence that engulfs her functions metonymically, both a substantive symptom of her lack of community and a sonic representation of the colonial theft of queer Chicana voices throughout history.⁴⁷

V. Conclusion

In the novel’s final soundscape, a third character, the spiritual Tranquilina, conveys Viramontes’ ultimate message when she proclaims the Eastside’s worth through the pandemonium of street sounds and QA activity. Arriving upon the scene of Turtle’s death, she cradles the wordless body in her arms and projects her voice into the night:

⁴⁷ See Miranda “The Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California” 256 for an account of Spanish colonizers’ “active, conscious, violent extermination” of third-gender people indigenous to present-day California.

We'rrre not doggggs! Tranquilina roared in the direction of the shooters. Stop shooting, we're not dogs! The words crashed into one another, rocketing into one big howl of pleading, demanding, a speeding blur of raging language blending in with the chaos of commands and shouts and orders and circuslike commotion coming from the shooters who stood in the darkness. (Viramontes 324)

Unintelligible in the cacophony of the police, Tranquilina's "blur of raging language" marks her will to speak and be heard even in the absence of a capable listener. This "barrage of meaning," Martín claims, "resists the binaries and limits" that the state imposes on Eastside residents (52), shattering the neo-colonial illogic that would silence them as "negated subjects" (68). Reaching beyond her immediate audience of "sharpshooters," "cabdrivers," "travelers," and "spectators," she appeals to "the embrace of ancestral spirits" to hear her protest (Viramontes 325). In seeking spiritual listeners, she "honors the dead and protects them against anonymity" (Martín 68), just as Vincenta Gutierrez honored the lives of her sister survivors when she told about her sexual assault during a time when being "a native woman [meant] you were a raped native woman" ("Saying the Padre" 106). Likewise, Viramontes, in her telling of the telling, acts as Isabel Meadows, ensuring that this moment of vocal protest will be recorded for future generations.

Making audible the voices that have been literally stifled by noise pollution and structurally suppressed by colonialism, racism, and rape culture, Viramontes "take[s] part in [the] cure" of telling ("Saying the Padre" 107). Nothing can recover the loss of individuals like Turtle. But telling their stories—amplifying their voices—can be part of an ongoing, collective, and sonic resistance to silencing which, in turn, can interrupt the reproduction of unjust systems. Viramontes attests to the power of telling in an interview with Muñoz, saying "I want you to know what it is like to have a voice and see that voice silenced. I want you to know what it is

like to resist it in the smallest, tiniest ways but nonetheless resist it” (36). With a similar emphasis on vocal presence, the motto of the current-day East Los Angeles Women’s Center reads, “where your silence is heard” (“East Los Angeles Women’s Center”), recognizing that a lack of conversation about sexual violence indicates not absence but rather the *act of silencing*, a deliberate attempt to prohibit survivors’ healing. *Their Dogs* articulates the way colonialism and racism collude with rape culture to embed that silencing in the tangible structures of the city, targeting a neighborhood with a historically marginalized population. As clearly as Viramontes maps out the interactions between longstanding systems of oppression, her attention remains on the palpable details of the novel’s present; that is, she draws this map from the perspective of those “stuck under and between the freeways” (Cuevas 28). Fulfilling the novel’s opening directive “not to forget” (14), Viramontes amplifies the sonic details of East Los Angeles—the shatter of a drinking glass, the steel-wool screech of teenage revenge, the trashcan-lid echo of an abandoned street, and a plea rocketing toward the ancestors—to record precisely what oppression and resistance sound like.

Chapter Four

Resisting Rape Culture: Verbal and Auditory Power in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments*

“For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.”

—Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

I. Introduction

The biblical story of Judges 19 appears continually in Margaret Atwood's *The Testaments* (2019) to underscore the novel's themes of sexual violence, rape culture, and speaking out against injustice. As the story goes, a Levite man travelling through a Benjamite city avoids being raped by offering his concubine in his place; when he finds the concubine dead in the morning, he cuts her body into pieces to send as a message to the Israelites about the Benjamite's sins (*New Revised Standard Version*, Judges 19.30). The irony, through a feminist lens, is that the traveler's treatment of the concubine is as violent as the crimes he reports. Aside from appearing explicitly in Atwood's text as a tool the dystopic Republic of Gilead uses to teach rape culture, Judges 19 reappears allusively when the female protagonists convey a cache of evidence to Canada, exposing the Republic's sexual corruption. While this allusive retelling at first seems like a feminist revision, I argue that the power dynamics behind the cache's conveyance ultimately reinscribe the traveler's violent treatment of the concubine and reliance on rape culture. Engaging with issues of inequitably distributed verbal and auditory power—the power to write and speak as well as to read, listen, or refuse—I interpret the novel's ending as a warning that rape culture cannot be eradicated through methods that use hierarchy and coercion or deny survivors' agency. Moving from my previous chapters' emphases on intersectional

experiences of *oppression*, this final chapter asserts the need for intersectional modes of *resistance*.

II. Language and Listening in Rape Culture and Resistance

Atwood's Republic of Gilead has long prompted reflection on the past, present, and future of gender and sexual politics in the United States. Her first foray into Gilead, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), portrayed Reagan-Era sexual politics pushed to an extreme, sounding alarms about the effects of fundamentalist Christian conservatism on women's rights.⁴⁸ With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, and subsequent setbacks in reproductive justice, *The Handmaid's Tale* saw a resurgence in popularity, including a 2017 television adaptation that drew parallels between Atwood's Gilead and the present-day United States. When Atwood published her second Gileadean novel, *The Testaments* (2019), during the #MeToo Movement, she portrayed a heightened version of rape culture and resistance. As critical feminist dystopias, the two novels not only examine the politics of their time "as if they were placed under a magnifying glass" ("The Writing of Dystopia" 53), Ildney Cavalcanti explains, but they specifically "thematize the *linguistic* construction of gender domination by telling stories about *language* as instrument [*sic*] of both (men's) domination and (women's) liberation" ("Utopias of/f Language" 152; emphasis added). These linguistic themes make Gilead fertile ground for thinking through the politics of speaking and listening in rape culture and resistance.

Critics have commented on the ways that language and stories create and sustain rape culture, both in the United States and Atwood's Gilead. Zoë Brigley Thompson and Sorcha

⁴⁸ See Neumann 860 for a discussion of *The Handmaid's Tale*'s exaggerated portrayal of Reagan-Era gender and sexual politics, including increased violence against women, decreased access to reproductive rights, and ideological backlash against feminism.

Gunne explain that the West's "use of language in the courtroom, the media, and the literary text has masked the pervasiveness of sexual violence" (4) and that "the rape myths that dominate a particular audience, community or nation dictate the way in which narratives are received" (8). Put briefly, the words and stories a society uses to discuss sexual violence profoundly affect whether and how rape culture will manifest. Writing about the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*, Zarah Moeggenberg and Samantha L. Solomon argue that Gilead "provides a dystopian articulation of rape culture in the United States . . . challeng[ing] the normalization of sexual assault and sexism in American politics, law, education, and family life" (6). Though Moeggenberg and Solomon do not explicitly discuss language, their focus on political and societal institutions encompasses the linguistic norms that "ritualize" rape culture into rape regime (6). *The Testaments*, as I will show, portrays the linguistic construction of rape culture with even greater specificity than Atwood's earlier novel, detailing how the Republic's official terminology, mythology, and legislation make it difficult for women to articulate the existence of sexual violence, much less report it, and even less so be heard.

In addition to examining "language as instrument of . . . (men's) domination," critics have also explored its role in "(women's) liberation" (Cavalcanti "Utopias of/f Language" 152). At the center of the #MeToo Movement is the act of speaking out: survivors use their voices to highlight the ubiquity of sexual violence, combatting rape culture through personal narrative. An exaggerated version of this voice-powered resistance appears prominently in the television adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale* where, as Amanda Howell points out, by "breaking silence about women's experience of sexual violence," the "Gileadverse" presents a "fantasy world where silenced and oppressed women bear witness, speak up, and talk back" (217). As the "fantasy" of the adaptation suggests, this new era of "speak[ing] up" about sexual violence

proposes to rectify centuries of silencing survivors—a fantasy, I will later discuss, that *The Testaments* escalates even further by depicting stories of sexual violence catalyzing the Republic’s downfall.

Despite the value of “breaking silence,” some critics hesitate to consider speaking out *alone* an unequivocal victory, asking *whose* voices are heard within the movement and the Gileadverse. Amongst cultural critics, #MeToo has garnered criticism for privileging the voices of white women while sidelining women of color, the people by and for whom the original movement was built.⁴⁹ Along similar lines, literary scholars have critiqued *The Handmaid’s Tale* for ventriloquizing the actual experiences of women of color in the United States through the voice of a white protagonist.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the adaptation’s strong emphasis on the protagonist’s heroism, Karen Crawley argues, “reinscribes neoliberal subjectivity,” rather than offering a model for structural transformation (340). Indeed, this tone of “go girl defiance” (Nussbaum qtd. in Crawley 340) reflects a more superficial approach to change-making than collective forms of resistance, such as those based in intersectional feminism⁵¹ or leftist coalition.⁵²

While neoliberal politics favor an individual’s empowerment through speaking, leftist coalition strengthens collectivity through listening. Activists and theorists agree that listening is not only necessary, but also at its most powerful where identity differences exist. Commenting on the power of listening to build solidarity in the presence of difference, restorative justice

⁴⁹ See Burke, Hill, Hobbs, Lee, and Vagianos for a sampling of such critiques in popular media.

⁵⁰ See Dodson 69 and Lauret 180-82 for a discussion of *The Handmaid’s Tale*’s appropriation of slave narratives such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*

⁵¹ See Crenshaw 157 for Crenshaw’s theorization of intersectional politics, in which “the needs and problems of those who are most disadvantaged” determine “the restructuring and remaking [of] the world” wherein “others who are singularly disadvantaged would also benefit.”

⁵² See Cohen 437-38 for Cohen’s theorization of leftist coalition, in which “one’s relation to power, and not some homogenized identity, is privileged in determining one’s political comrades” and which seeks to “transform the basic fabric and hierarchies that allow systems of oppression to persist.”

practitioner Victor Jose Santana explains that “sharing our different oppressions deepens our mutual understanding. However, it is not our common oppression per se that binds us, but rather how, in spite of our oppression, we nurture our relationships with one another” (23). Similarly, theorist Elliott Powell describes the aurality of coalitional politics as a “collective resonance,” noting that “to resonate is to resemble, but not exactly to be the same. . . . [to] produce a collective with those who share and experience such resonance, but are differently affected by it. . . . [to refuse] to elide varied histories and lived realities of marginalized people” (188-189). Truly, one *must* listen to gain insight into another’s experience of oppression, since, as Krista Ratcliffe points out, “sight only gets us so far” (8). Examining the soundscape of anti-rape resistance, then, requires attention not only to the politics of speaking but also to the politics of listening, which necessitates a serious consideration of difference.

The triadic narrative structure of *The Testaments*, which features three women with varying relationships to power, allows for this kind of reflection. Though, as Julia Kuznetski argues, the Republic’s “corporeal subjection of women” through controlled reproduction means that even its most elite class of women, the Wives, “are voiceless and powerless” (292) due to their sexed-female bodies, *The Testaments* shows that women are not all “voiceless and powerless” to an equal degree. Michaela Keck notes that, by “juxtapos[ing] multiple voices and perspectives located in different positions within . . . Gilead’s social hierarchy” (2), *The Testaments* exhibits “varying degrees and kinds of [women’s] complicity in and resistance against patriarchal oppression” (1). In addition to the various voices represented in *The Testaments*, the complete silence of women of color marks their specific and even more profound subjugation, as the white supremacist regime has deported all people of color to labor in an uninhabitable toxic wasteland called the Colonies (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 83). This

portrayal of people of color's silencing to such an extreme that their voices do not even appear—a controversial authorial choice which scholars have debated⁵³—represents a crucial dynamic of speaking and listening that, though represented through absence, should not be overlooked.

Engaging past, present, and future through both dystopic and speculative modes,⁵⁴ *The Testaments* prompts reflection on the future of rape culture and anti-rape activism by amplifying the shortcomings of the contemporary moment and its echoes with mistakes of the past. While Atwood's Gilead does not predict America's future, it extrapolates on existing social and political institutions, as Frederic Jameson describes of dystopias (198), so that readers are “invited to imagine ways to rectify or avoid the parallels” between the speculative world and their own (Holladay and Classen 5). In particular, the novel reiterates aspects of current rape culture by presenting a society eerily similar to the pronounced rape culture of early America, as discussed in my first chapter on *The Coquette*, where women are dismissed through legal disenfranchisement, an arsenal of gendered labels, and widely circulated myths about their untrustworthiness. In both societies, women are overtly conditioned to take responsibility for men's wellbeing and rewarded for enforcing rape culture themselves. In a full-circle moment, Atwood emphasizes patterns of rape culture stitched into America's fabric that have yet to be

⁵³While Maria Lauret argues that *The Handmaid's Tale* “prioritises gender over racial oppression” (182), Danita J. Dodson suggests that the protagonist's awakening to her own privilege “ultimately becomes a testimony about the need for women to cross borders, to discover each other's voices, and to intersect but not conflate their stories” (82).

⁵⁴Famously, when writing *The Handmaid's Tale*, Atwood made it a rule not to “put any events into the book that had not already happened” (*The Handmaid's Tale* xvi), so Gilead as a dystopia is what Michael D. Gordin, Helen Tilley, and Gyan Prakash describe as a “histor[y] of the present”—a failed utopia that “resemble[s] the actual societies historians encounter in their research” (1). At the same time that the dystopic mode draws on the past to represent the present, the speculative mode extrapolates the present to imagine the future. Frederic Jameson explains that critical dystopias “defamiliarize and restructure our experience of our own *present*” (286) in order to expose, Jeremiad style, the dangers of certain socio-political orders so that people might change them.

broken. Thus, I would like to suggest that the novel's ostensibly triumphant depiction of resistance offers not a straightforward model for success but a critical engagement with rape culture's current and historical connection to inequitably distributed verbal and auditory power.

Specifically, I assert that *The Testaments* warns against modes of resisting rape culture that depend on an individual or homogenized voice rather than on listening practices that build solidarity across difference. While the novel portrays other modes of listening—such as critical listening, auditory surveillance, and forced listening—these modes do not facilitate coalition building or prioritize the needs of survivors; instead, they present a foil to collective forms of listening that foster structural change. Ultimately, *The Testaments* demonstrates how the extreme concentration of power in one woman's voice, and her use of coercive rhetorical tactics enmeshed in rape culture, inhibits the transformative potential of listening to anti-rape resistance.

But before examining the novel's portrayal of resistance, it is first necessary to understand how language and listening practices construct rape culture in Gilead as well as how they variously oppress and empower the three characters I focus on. As the next section demonstrates, the three women occupy difference places in a hierarchy of verbal and auditory power: the two younger women, Agnes and Becka, are vulnerable to the linguistic inculcation of rape culture while Lydia possesses more rhetorical power to resist it.

III. Verbal and Auditory Power in *The Testaments*

Agnes

A Daughter who grows up in one of Gilead's most elite families, Agnes holds a middle-ground of verbal and auditory power between Becka and Lydia. Though privileged in certain ways by wealth, Agnes is limited by her youth because the Republic has prohibited girls of her

generation from learning to read. Her student perspective illuminates how Gilead, in tandem with preventing female literacy, indoctrinates girls with stylized language embedded with rape culture. However, despite the regime's active attempt to teach girls to remain silent and accept blame for sexual assault, Agnes teaches herself to think outside the logic of rape culture by listening critically for contradictions and silences—for cracks in Gilead's calculated linguistic order.

As Agnes's narrative details, the Aunts use calculated terminology to groom girls to accept responsibility for sexual assault. By repeatedly calling them "precious flowers," they convey that girls are "the innocent and blameless causes that through [their] very nature could make men drunk with lust" (*The Testaments* 10). The connotation of "precious flowers" teaches them that they are inherently pure, while the paradoxical language of "blameless causes" assigns them responsibility for men's sexual advances. They learn, in so many words, to consider their victimization inevitable. Later, when Agnes's dentist sexually assaults her, she has no way to conceptualize it except through the logic she has learned. She laments, "so it was all true then, about men and their rampaging, fiery urges, and merely by sitting in the dentist chair I was the cause" (96). The term "cause" at the forefront of her mind, Agnes views her assault as a confirmation of what she has been taught.

Besides inculcating girls with the logic of victim blaming, the Aunts train them to remain silent about sexual violence. Retrospectively, Agnes explains how she learned through unspoken rules that reporting her sexual assault would dampen her credibility and get her in trouble:

The Aunts at school taught us that you should tell someone in authority—meaning them—if any man touched you inappropriately, but we knew not to be so dumb as to make a fuss, especially if it was a well-respected man like Dr. Grove. . . . Some girls had

reported such things . . . The first girl had had the backs of her legs whipped for lying, the second had been told that nice girls did not notice the minor antics of men, they simply looked the other way. (97)

Even though the Aunts officially tell girls to report sexual violence, they more emphatically teach girls to hear—to listen for—their real message, which is to prioritize men’s reputations and diminish women’s credibility. In essence, they limit the definition of sexual violence and who is capable of it to the point that reporting is virtually impossible. These lessons condition girls to accept the official verbal hierarchy of Gilead’s legal system, in which “the testimonies of young girls . . . would count for little or nothing” and “even with grown women, four female witnesses are the equivalent of one male” (252). In dystopian fashion, the Republic has made women’s supposed incredibility a legal reality, bolstered by a new generation of girls accustomed to devaluing their own voices.

With limited opportunity to speak, Agnes instead listens. Quietly empowering herself with what Ratcliffe describes as the most overlooked of the “four rhetorical arts” (18), Agnes begins to perceive inconsistencies in Gileadean discourse, which is rife with vagueness, contradiction (such as “blameless causes”), and silence. Ratcliffe, drawing a connection between listening and agency, explains that when “cultural discourses become embodied in people . . . the gaps and/or conflicts between the embodied discourses construct spaces from which a person’s agency may emerge” (53). Listening for such incongruities in discourse, then, increases Agnes’s awareness of her environment, leading her to distrust the culture in which she is immersed.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ I conceptualize Agnes’s interpretive position as listening here for several reasons: first, to juxtapose it against speaking (listening is a receptive rather than assertive stance) and second, to differentiate it from reading, a skill that Agnes has been barred from learning and that, as Ratcliffe puts it, quite literally “proceeds via different body organs” than listening (24). Indeed, the term listening, as opposed to a more general term like critically engaging, emphasizes Agnes’s perception of the sonic, which requires an atmospheric kind of sensing possible only through her complete immersion in Gilead’s environment.

In one instance, unsaid words make Agnes skeptical of her teachers' claim that women are intellectually inferior to men. She recalls Aunt Vidala concluding a lesson with "and that explained everything . . . and we will have no more questions about it," noticing how Vidala's "mouth clicked shut, locking in the other words that might have been said" (*The Testaments* 15). Hearing Aunt Vidala's emphatic silence, Agnes thinks, "I knew there must be other words" (15). Puzzled by these omissions, she tries to reconcile the ideological gaps that surround her, finally realizing that her teachers' lessons may not be true.

In another instance, Agnes and her friend Shunammite struggle to parse out the difference between Gilead's definition of the term Handmaid and its definition of the term slut, exposing the clumsy construction of the Republic's sexual code.⁵⁶ While Shunammite asserts that "Handmaids must be double sluts . . . because they didn't even have husbands," Agnes reminds her that they "weren't supposed to be rude to the Handmaids or call them sluts because they were performing a service to the community by way of atonement," to which Shunammite responds, "I don't see why being a slut is performing a service" (81). Though the girls do not recognize Handmaids as victims of sexual violence, they do notice that Handmaids embody a contradiction between the regime's sexual ideology and its sexual practice: why would Handmaids repent for past sexual transgressions by committing the ostensible Gileadean transgression of extramarital sex?

As Agnes grows older, she learns to interpret the significations of what is not said, explaining, "most of what I heard came in fragments and even silences, but I was becoming good at fitting these fragments together and filling in the unsaid parts of sentences" (99). Listening critically, she perceives the absent voices of women brutalized by the regime, noticing the "silent

⁵⁶ Handmaids are a class of women who, having committed sexual transgressions (by Gilead's standards) in their previous lives, are forced to serve elite families sexually and reproductively.

eyes” of her family’s Handmaid—whose name she later learns is Crystal—who died during childbirth. Indignantly, she reflects on how Crystal’s supposed voluntary sacrifice was actually murder: “The truth was that they’d cut Crystal open to get the baby out, and they’d killed her by doing that. It wasn’t something she chose. She hadn’t volunteered to die with noble womanly honour or be a shining example, but nobody mentioned that” (105). As she recalls Crystal’s dead face, she thinks, “there was a certain power in it, silence and stillness” (223). By listening for what is absent, Agnes gains spiritual solidarity with the Republic’s silenced women, though her access to a physical community of resistance remains nonexistent.

Eventually, Agnes’s perception of cracks in Gilead’s ideological foundation alerts her to the active suppression of her literacy and the way it disempowers her. Leading up to her planned marriage, she realizes that her lack of geographical literacy prevents her from escape: “I considered running away from home, but how would I do that and where could I go? I had no notion of geography: we did not study it in school since our own neighborhood should be enough for us, and what Wife needed more? I did not even know how big Gilead was. How far did it go, where did it end?” (224). So instead of running away, which she is ill-equipped to do, she runs toward her one chance of literacy as a source of empowerment and becomes an Aunt.

Becka

Agnes’s narrative includes her friendship with Becka, a classmate who grows up amongst the Republic’s elite but who belongs to a comparatively lower class. Portrayed in the novel only through the perspectives of others, Becka holds the lowest level of verbal and auditory power. Like Agnes, she is disempowered by illiteracy, but she is even further silenced by her family’s precarious class status. A survivor of childhood incest, Becka learns that she should not tell anyone of her father’s abuse, fearing that he will lose his job and she will be blamed for ruining

her family. Having kept her abuse secret for years and having internalized the message that familial duty calls for her to suffer in silence, her traumatization is ongoing and multilayered. Though like Agnes, she gradually hears the faults in Gilead's language and *logically* circumvents rape culture, her trauma has become so embodied that she never psychologically or physically escapes. Becka's fate emphasizes how survivors who are multiply marginalized have even less opportunity to articulate their experiences and less chance of being listened to, leaving them vulnerable to further violence.

Becka internalizes rape culture through several avenues but none so prominent as Judges 19. Becka first encounters the story in school, when Aunt Vidala uses it to teach her pupils that "we should be content with our lot and not rebel against it" (*The Testaments* 79). The way Vidala tells it, a "kind and forgiving" man sets out to collect his "disobedient" concubine who has run away; on the journey back, they lodge with a "generous citizen" in a town where the men were "filled with sinful urges . . . that would have been especially wicked between men, so the generous man and the traveller put the concubine outside the door instead," where the men rape and murder her (78). Vidala surmises, "Well, she deserved it don't you think? . . . She shouldn't have run away. Think of all the suffering she caused to other people" (78). Conveying the key tenets of rape culture, this lesson emphasizes that women are responsible for men's emotional and physical needs and must minimize the importance of their own. Becka hears this message clearly, becoming distressed at the thought of ruining her father's career if his sexual abuse of her is discovered.

Another teacher, Aunt Estée, intervenes with an alternative interpretation that seems to offer Becka a route to agency but actually causes her to internalize rape culture at an even deeper level. Concerned that such a violent portrayal of men's lust will frighten girls away from

marriage, Aunt Estée consoles, “There’s another way of looking at the story. The concubine was sorry for what she had done, and she wanted to make amends, so she sacrificed herself to keep the kind traveller from being killed by those wicked men. . . . That was brave and noble of the concubine, don’t you think?” (80). This version of the story assuages Becka’s anxiety to an extent because it lends the woman a greater sense of choice, but this ostensible agency is false: the girls are learning that “brave and noble” women will make sacrifices of their own volition to support and reproduce systemic misogyny, conditioning them to yield to a regime that will certainly use force if they do not submit first. Aunt Estée concludes, “We must all make sacrifices in order to help other people. . . . Men must make sacrifices in war, and women must make sacrifices in other ways. That is how things are divided” (80). A vague catchall, the “other ways” that women are supposed to make sacrifices teaches girls to serve to men in *every* way outside of war, such as managing the household, performing affective labor, deferring to men intellectually, and being sexually subservient. It teaches girls that women in fact owe men the act of total self-sacrifice *because* of men’s sacrifice in war.

As Becka grows older, this message imbeds itself into her psyche to the point that she conflates agency with self-sacrifice. Trapped by her father’s sexual abuse and the constant reminder that she could ruin her family’s precariously elite status by asserting herself, Becka feels that she is an inconvenience to others and fantasizes about her own disappearance. Her only mode of rebellion—self-negation—is actually a form of acquiescence in a misogynistic society, illustrated most clearly by her suicide attempt. When it comes time for her to marry against her will, she slashes her wrists with a “ferocity . . . never seen in her before” (166). While Becka’s “ferocity” expresses her refusal of the role Wife, her death, at the same time, would actualize a Wife’s fate—“that marriage would obliterate her. She would be crushed, she would be nullified,

she would be melted like snow until nothing remained of her” (163). Agential only in the sense that it is on her own terms, Becka’s attempt to “obliterate” herself minimizes the value of her life and erases her liability to her father’s reputation, which fundamentally serves rape culture. Before long, Aunt Lydia saves Becka from this marriage-or-death bind by allowing her, like Agnes, to train as an Aunt, but she saves her, I will argue in the penultimate section, for an even more sacrificial purpose.

Lydia

Though Wives are widely considered the most powerful group of women in Gilead, due to their marriages to wealthy Commanders, Aunts actually hold significant influence due to their high engagement with language. The only women who possess the right to literacy, Aunts’ ability to read, write, interpret, and influence language affords them immense power that, though intended to uphold the Republic, could also potentially dismantle it. Aunt Lydia, who appeared in *The Handmaid’s Tale* as the draconian matron in charge of Handmaids’ re-education, narrates her own story in *The Testaments*—one of violent induction, political ascent, and wavering allegiances to the regime. Her use of verbal and auditory power remains largely ambiguous as she alternatively, even simultaneously, reinforces the regime and undermines it through skillful language and listening practices.⁵⁷

In early negotiations about Gilead’s governance, Lydia prioritizes her verbal agency, fighting to retain her right to literacy even as she forfeits numerous other rights. Reserving a “separate sphere” for women and designating herself its “architect” (*The Testaments* 174-178),

⁵⁷ As with Agnes, I conceptualize Lydia’s power in terms of language and listening because it captures the atmospheric impact of Lydia’s influence. While language and listening are vehicles through which Lydia enacts emotional manipulation and political strategy, they are also more than that: they shape the very soundscape of Gilead, carving out the pathways of meaning-making available to Lydia’s political pawns and adversaries.

Lydia justifies her need for literacy by making language one of the sphere's primary building blocks; in this role, she invents "laws, uniforms, slogans, hymns, names," such as the term "precious flowers," that the Daughters of Gilead learn in school (177). Though the language Lydia creates for this sphere outwardly conforms to Gilead's ideology, it contains intentional ambiguities that allow for alternate interpretations. Regarding the Aunts' motto, "*Per Ardua Cum Estrus*," for example, Lydia writes, "It pleases me to have concocted such a slippery motto. Is Ardua "difficulty" or "female progenerative labor"? Does Estrus have to do with hormones or with pagan rites of spring?" (33). Her ambiguous language gestures toward a time before Gilead and a future after it, when women could be valued for more than their reproductive capabilities. It is no mistake, then, that Agnes hears cracks in Gilead's logic: Lydia has left a degree of instability in the language—linguistic trap doors that provide routes for thinking outside of it.

Beyond her retention of literacy and official linguistic influence on the regime, much of Lydia's advantage comes from her decades of experience with language and listening before Gilead ever existed. A judge in her previous life, Lydia is a master of rhetorical arts, using persuasion, strategic listening, and audience awareness to negotiate political power. In one instance, she adopts a concise, persuasive speaking style to suggest that one of her enemies is scheming against the other, and, in five short sentences, convinces the latter to smother the former in her sleep: "Such a shame about Vidala's allergies,' I said. 'I hope she won't suffer an asthmatic attack while sleeping. Now I must rush off, as I have a meeting. I will leave Vidala in your nurturing hands. I notice that her pillow needs rearranging'" (392). Acutely aware of the power behind what she says and leaves unsaid and how both of those things will be heard—that is, listened to, Lydia chooses her words with utmost calculation to achieve her political goals.

Lydia also uses listening as a political strategy, following the maxim, “Don’t share too much about yourself, it will be used against you. Listen carefully. Save all clues. Don’t show fear” (177). Over the course of her career, she listens for corruption and quietly collects evidence of crimes that she will one day deploy to discredit the regime. Planting hidden microphones throughout the Aunts’ headquarters, she eavesdrops as “an ear inside the wall” of dormitories and offices to collect girls’ testimony of sexual violence as well as Commanders’ admissions of guilt (251). Alternating between surveillance and sousveillance,⁵⁸ this non-consensual, one-directional listening builds Lydia’s individual power, allowing her to hoard information to disclose at her own discretion.

Keenly attuned to audience, Lydia waits to release the cache of crimes until it can be conveyed outside the borders of Gilead. Aware that, in the words of political scientist Andrew Dobson, “it is in the interests of those in power not to listen” (18), she knows that high-ranking Commanders would not be motivated to act on what they learn unless it were to benefit them directly. Furthermore, she knows that the Republic’s citizens would be unlikely to hear accounts of sexual violence as legitimate due to the rape culture logic that permeates the nation. Aware of her audience, Lydia’s decision to deliver the cache to Canada is a shrewd political strategy that, in the end, prevails: the cache makes it to Canada, and as the epilogue details, “The release of this information touched off the so-called Ba’al Purge that thinned out the ranks of the elite class, weakened the regime, and instigated a military putsch as well as a popular revolt” (*The Testaments* 411).

⁵⁸ Steve Mann defines surveillance as “observation or recording by an entity in a position of power or authority over the subject of the veillance” and sousveillance as “observation or recording by an entity not in a position of power or authority over the subject of the veillance” (3). Due to Lydia’s simultaneous status as a powerful official in the regime and a second-class citizen as a woman, the form of veillance shifts depending on who she is listening to.

And yet, despite her success in catalyzing the downfall of the Republic, Lydia's rhetorical methods represent a questionable form of anti-rape activism, as she is motivated by "the idea of retributive vengeance" against the regime's leader (317) more so than justice for survivors. Her own writing describes the dangerous amount of power she holds and her continual conflict between power and ethical behavior:

My reader, I am now poised on the razor's edge. I have two choices: I can proceed with my risky and even reckless plan Or I could choose the safer course In that case, I would destroy these pages I have written so laboriously; and I would destroy you along with them, my future reader. One flare of a match and you'll be gone—wiped away as if you had never been, as if you will never be. I would deny you existence. What a godlike feeling! Though it is a god of annihilation. I waver, I waver. (317-318)

Though she does go through with her "risky and reckless plan" to destroy Gilead, she acts in the interests of her individual legacy rather than for the benefit of survivors. As the next section explores more specifically, Lydia's plan, despite its political success, sacrifices survivors' agency and does not provide a model for transforming listening and language practices that sustain rape culture.

IV. Coercive Listening and Language Practices

On the surface, the execution of Lydia's plan looks like it could be a revision of Judges 19. After awakening to the reality of the Republic's corruption, Agnes and Becka help transport the cache to Canada by way of Agnes's Canadian sister, Nicole. Echoing the traveler's use of the concubine's body to convey the Benjamite's crimes to the Tribes of Israel, Lydia embeds the cache as a microdot in Nicole's arm, but, in this case, the still-living Nicole consciously

participates in the plan. As the four women work together to project stories of Gilead's sexual crimes into a space where they will be heard, it is tempting to view the plan as a triumph and consider the younger women's participation in it a feminist reclamation of a harmful story. However, a closer examination of the chain of events leading up to this conclusion reveals Lydia's reliance on coercive listening and language practices—namely, auditory surveillance, forced listening, and persuasive suggestion—which rob the young women of genuine choice.

When Agnes and Becka begin training as Aunts, their access to verbal power does increase significantly, since learning to read provides them with more information and opportunities to think critically. They read “the whole story” of Judges 19 and notice that “it doesn't say what they [Aunt Vidala and Aunt Estée] say it says” (*The Testaments* 303). Becka realizes that “everyone at the top of Gilead has lied to us” and Agnes arrives at her own conclusions about the story: “I looked for the brave and noble part, I looked for the choice, but none of that was there. The girl was simply shoved out the door and raped to death, then cut up like a cow by a man who'd treated her like a purchased animal when she'd been alive. No wonder she'd run away in the first place” (303). Becka's disillusionment with the Republic and Agnes' decisive re-interpretation of Judges 19 set the stage for a revision, but this hopeful possibility underestimates how deeply they have internalized the lesson that “women must make sacrifices” (80) and how brutally Aunt Lydia will manipulate them to her will, no matter the risk to their lives.

The first coercive listening strategy Lydia uses to manipulate the young women is auditory surveillance. The “instructive . . . confidences” she gathers when Agnes and Becka “believe no third party is listening” (251) inform her plan, allowing her to use them as pawns. Over time, she learns a few key pieces of information: 1) that they have both been sexually

abused by Dr. Grove, 2) that the young women are dedicated friends, 3) that Becca fears being a burden and conflates self-sacrifice with agency. This collection of knowledge gives Lydia the terms for a cold calculation which depends on Becca taking her own life to vacate an identity for Nicole to assume when she transports the cache to Canada. Far from empathetic listening, Lydia's auditory surveillance allows her to use the young women's stories of sexual violence against them to put them in harm's way.

Lydia enacts the next phase of manipulation through forced listening. While forced listening can mean "obliging the powerful to listen"—for example, when "perpetrators of political violence are forced to listen to their victims' testimony"—this dynamic is "much less common" than the reversal, in which "the oppressed are forced to listen" (Dobson 58; Garrison qtd. in Dobson 58). Gemma Corradi Fiumara calls this linguistic imposition "not listening so much as endurance or forced feeding, hypnotic induction or epistemic violence" (93). As the young women strengthen their literacy, Lydia forces them to read the testimony she has been collecting—which includes the knowledge that Agnes has a Canadian sister who is now in Gilead—by slipping them files without comment. Though the files confirm the young women's suspicions that "beneath its outer show of virtue and purity, Gilead was rotting" (*The Testaments* 307), knowing this information forces their silent complicity in a plan they know little about, tethering them to Lydia as their leader. After exposing them to the files, Lydia invites them to join her efforts, with the caveat that if they do not cooperate, the regime will surely execute them, along with Nicole, due to the knowledge they now possess (337). While Lydia claims, "you are, of course, free to make your own decisions," the young women comply not only for fear of causing Nicole's death but also because their political awakening has isolated them and created a sense of insider loyalty to Lydia. Agnes feels, "there was no one I could confide in

[because] . . . the truth can cause a lot of trouble for those who are not supposed to know it” (307), and Becka insists, “Remember how she [Lydia] rescued us—both of us? We have to say yes” (338). Though the young women’s own sexual trauma, of course, motivates their decision to resist as well, their involvement in Lydia’s specific plan is nonconsensual from the start.

In the final stages of her manipulation, Lydia employs the power of suggestion to herd Becka into her intended role of sacrificial lamb. As Agnes and Nicole prepare to flee Gilead with the cache, Lydia instructs Nicole to assume Becka’s identity to cross the border as an evangelizing Pearl Girl, and she instructs Becka to hide. Though she never tells Becka to take her own life, she uses persuasive implication to guide Becka to that conclusion, saying “Our entire mission, not to mention the personal safety of Aunt Victoria [Agnes] and Nicole, depends on you. It is a great deal of responsibility—a renewed Gilead can be possible only through you; and you would not want the others to be caught and hanged” (354). Lydia’s appeal to Becka’s sense of “responsibility” to her loved ones—specifically coding responsibility as self-sacrifice—takes advantage of the knowledge she gained through auditory surveillance, and her final suggestion—that Becka’s existence creates a liability—triggers Becka’s fear of being a burden.

And indeed, after Becka drowns herself in the cistern, Lydia’s commentary suggests that sacrificing her was part of her plan all along. She details that Becka “retained her undergarments for purposes of modesty” and notes, “it’s how I would have expected her to behave” (389). Though at first this comment about Becka’s behavior seems like a sentimental acknowledgment of her virtue, the ambiguous “it” could signify that the behavior Lydia “expected” was her drowning, not her modesty. Lydia’s next, equally vague statement that “it was a willing sacrifice” (389) presumably means that Becka willingly sacrificed herself for her nation and her friends. But Becka did not make this decision in isolation. She was influenced by an entire verbal

and auditory atmosphere that encourages the disappearance of survivors—from her education in rape culture to Lydia’s deliberate manipulation of her low self-worth. The “willing sacrifice” in fact, is engineered by Lydia. Though “saddened by her loss” (389), she writes Becka off as collateral damage in her political victory against a rape regime, even as she actively deploys rape culture against her.

Ultimately, Lydia treats the young women who carry out her plan as the traveller treats his concubine in Judges 19. Becka becomes the “brave and noble” woman who sacrifices herself (80), while Agnes is “shoved out the door” and Nicole is “cut up like a cow” to send a message (303). As Nicole flees back to Canada with the microdot cache embedded in her arm, she considers the tension between her sense of bodily autonomy and the reality that her body has been commandeered as a vessel: “If my body and the message were one, what would happen if my body didn’t make it to Canada? I could hardly cut off my arm and mail it” (360). Nicole’s eventual understanding that she, like Agnes and Becka, has been used as a pawn in a more powerful individual’s plan, even when she believed herself to be making agential choices, gives the ostensible success of the plan an unsettling air. Is a resistance led by one influential person who employs coercive tactics that harm survivors really a victory against rape culture?

IX. Conclusion

In the hyperbolic style of speculative fiction, Atwood heightens the impact the cache has in Canada, portraying the power of stories to instigate political change as a utopic outcome: “It’s explosive. So many crimes, among the top brass in Gilead—it’s much more than we’ve ever hoped for. The Canadian media are releasing one disruptive secret after another, and pretty soon heads will roll” (*The Testaments* 398). While this hopeful ending foretells the fall of the

Republic, the novel's discomfiting epilogue casts doubt on the eradication of rape culture, as it satirizes sexist verbal and auditory dynamics as they exist in year 2197. The epilogue sees the return of Dr. Pieixoto from the *The Handmaid's Tale*, who presented biased commentary on the eponymous Handmaid's account at the Twelfth Symposium on Gileadean Studies. A year later, in the epilogue of *The Testaments*, Pieixoto presents on the recently discovered testimony of Lydia, Agnes, and Nicole, giving an equally short-sighted lecture that diminishes the value of their stories.

From the start of his lecture, it is clear that Pieixoto's involvement with the records has made no impact on his language and attitudes regarding women and power. After flippantly referring to his previous sexual harassment of the symposium's chair as "little jokes," he goes on to comment on the "terrifying extent" to which women are "usurping leadership positions" (408). Later, he casually reveals that not he but a female graduate student discovered the manuscripts he is lecturing about, and he seems unconcerned by the gendered power implications of his theft. Ironically unaware of, or unsympathetic to, the parallels between his own language practices and those of Gilead, he makes no reference to the records' nuanced portrayal of rape culture's operation through language.

In his lecture, Pieixoto's treatment of the manuscripts emulates the kind of gender bias sometimes found in male-centric academic discourse: he diminishes, disbelieves, and detracts from the female narrators of his primary sources while assigning male voices more value. Attempting to erase the role of sexual violence testimony from the narrative of the Republic's downfall, he claims that the most "noteworthy" files in the cache contain "plots devised by Commanders to eliminate other Commanders" (408). Furthermore, he distracts from the women's first-hand testimony with self-important concerns about authentication; resistant to

taking the young women “at their word,” he seems almost hopeful that “the girls’ story of ‘Aunt Lydia’ is itself a misdirection, intended to protect the identity of the real Mayday double Agent” (411) who is presumably a man. At times, his tone betrays a fascinated admiration of the regime’s male leadership, as it did the previous year, when he expressed unabashed disappointment at acquiring the “crumbs” of a Handmaid’s narrative instead of “even twenty pages from Waterford’s private computer!” (*The Handmaid’s Tale* 310). While Pieixoto’s obsessive concerns about “dating,” “forgery,” and “misdirection” (309-311) are certainly pedantic, they more importantly enact rape culture by denying women’s voices value and credibility.

Though the sexist verbal and auditory dynamics of 2197 are quieter than they are in Gilead’s rape regime, they do echo current-day rape culture in the United States, which I interpret as a warning that the methods of resistance modeled in *The Testaments* will not bring about structural change or justice for survivors. Given the basis of rape culture in hierarchy and coercion, Lydia’s reliance on language and listening practices that deny survivors agency and devalue their voices fails to eradicate rape culture, even as it eradicates Gilead. Hoarding her own power, Lydia surveils, manipulates, and coerces those with the least power, which stands in stark contrast to models of speaking and listening that center reciprocity and survivor healing. Using superior power, as *The Testaments* demonstrates, leads to top-down political schemes that result in those most marginalized by rape culture being ignored and lost. Centering reciprocity and survivor healing, which Atwood leaves to be imagined, has the potential to sustain powerful, intersectional resistance that transforms rape culture from the bottom up, creating “tools,” to invoke the words of Audre Lorde, from beyond the “master’s house” (99).

Afterword

Since I started writing this dissertation in 2018, countless survivors of sexual violence have come forward to share their stories, but little has changed in how they are heard. Too often, still, public discussions of sexual violence focus on individuals, leading onlookers to pick sides, evaluate character, and reaffirm patriarchal notions of truth and fairness that retraumatize survivors.⁵⁹ Amidst renewed conversation about sexual violence, how can we ensure that people listen in a way that does not automatically discount survivors? How can we foster listening as a practice that names rape culture as a systemic problem? How can listening provide new routes to justice and healing for survivors? My dissertation, I hope, has begun to explore some answers.

In the preceding chapters, I have adopted listening as an interpretive approach to survivor narratives, as well as a thematic emphasis, modeling a way of reading that amplifies the verbal and auditory dynamics of rape culture and how they have been resisted. My first chapter attended to Foster's portrayal of the gendered politics of listening through epistolary exchange, demonstrating how not listening to women has been normalized in cultural attitudes, social interactions, and legislation since the early days of American democracy. In my second chapter, I used intersectional feminist frameworks to listen for oblique articulations of entwined violence—that is, what white supremacy, colonialism, and rape culture have attempted to render inarticulable or unremarkable—hearing how Jacobs and Zitkala-Ša protested everyday harms against Black and Native women. Chapter three continued to listen for intersectional articulations of oppression, specifically how Viramontes' act of recording the systemic denial of

⁵⁹See Dockterman for a recent example of this kind of public participation in a case involving sexual violence: the reaction to Johnny Depp's televised defamation lawsuit against Amber Heard in 2022, after she made the general claim that she is a survivor. Depp, who essentially won the case, received overwhelming public support while Heard was demonized through the logic of imperfect victimhood.

listeners to Chicana survivors participates in an expansive, intergenerational project of healing amidst ongoing colonial violence. Finally, my fourth chapter considered how Atwood's speculative portrayal of resistance warns against replicating hierarchical, one-sided modes of listening that privilege individuals over a collective.

Spanning several eras and multiple genres, the texts in my dissertation can be read in a variety of ways. However, as I hope to have shown, readings that do not attend to the role of rape culture in these texts—or, worse, approach articulations of survivor experience with suspicion—do a disservice to survivors, who are still fighting to be heard against centuries of silencing and misrepresentation. As an educator, I believe that teaching students to hear survivors' perspectives on rape culture—in these and myriad other works of literature—can help shift cultural attitudes toward survivor voices. So, I end this dissertation on a pedagogical note to make clear how educators can engage students with these texts to become better listeners.

First, teaching students about the forces, current and historical, that make survivor voices suspect equips them to recognize depictions of inequitable verbal and auditory dynamics as central to rape culture. In turn, literature provides detailed examples of how survivors are silenced at the micropolitical and systemic level, enabling students to draw connections between the personal and the political. Paired with intersectional feminist theory, texts by multiply marginalized women can help students understand, in concrete ways, how multiple forms of violence collude with one another. With an array of works to consider, students can more clearly hear how patterns of rape culture emerge from historically and culturally specific contexts, framing sexual violence as a societal, not individual, problem.

Similarly, exposing students to forms of justice, resistance, and healing that are possible outside of the carceral system equips them to discern women writer's resistance against rape

culture. Survivor narratives make clear how carceral notions of objectivity and evidence consistently fail survivors, prompting students to reflect on textually imagined alternatives. Paired with theories of listening, these texts can help students think deeply about the role of listening in collective healing and movement building and give them the space to practice. This literary archive, read with the intention of unlearning bias against survivors, provide students with opportunities to listen to imperfect victims, hold space for conflicting accounts, hear what can be felt but not articulated, or what has been articulated obliquely, and sit with uncomfortable truths. For students who are survivors themselves, or who have been impacted by rape culture in other ways, listening can offer pathways to self-recognition, validation, and participation in collective resistance.

I opened this dissertation with an excerpt of Adrienne Rich's "Diving into the Wreck" because the texts within lay bare the "wreck" of rape culture: "the thing itself and not the myth" (line 63). Survivor narratives make audible the "evidence of damage" (line 66) through nuanced depictions of survivor's being discredited and dismissed. But audible too, are "the treasures that prevail" (line 56), in not only their representations of protest but also the opportunities they provide to listen to—to resist the silencing of—survivor voices. After centuries of dismissing survivors through the same, predictable moves, it is time we visit the soundscape of rape culture to listen intentionally for survivor perspectives and use the insights they hold to reshape possibilities for resistance, healing, and justice.

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