

CREATING A PUBLIC PEDAGOGY FOR ANTI-RAPE ACTIVISM:

HOW WE LEARN TO ADVOCATE FOR OTHERS

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This thesis explores the way we learn to advocate for sexual assault survivors. This multi-methodological, qualitative study examines both popular cultural representations of sexual assault and official training materials provided by rape crisis centers and domestic violence organizations as sites of pedagogical messaging. I argue that it is imperative to incorporate intersectional feminist frameworks into understanding how advocacy is animated in these different sites of learning. This project offers an intersectional feminist analysis of two television shows: Netflix's *Unbelievable* and HBO's *I May Destroy You*, in addition to the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA) training manual and supplemental training materials from six different rape crisis centers within a 75-mile radius of the Dallas Ft. Worth metroplex. Together, both sets of texts work pedagogically to teach us who is a worthy victim, what counts as “real” rape (and to challenge this very framework), and who deserves organizational resources. This thesis concludes by offering an Intersectional Rape Advocacy Toolkit, aimed at offering a set of values, lessons, and practices necessary for activists to grow in mutual advocacy for survivors and mutual support for fellow activists working to put an end to rape culture.

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By

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CHAPTER 1

FEMINIST FOUNDATIONS IN ANTI-RAPE ACTIVISM

Introduction

During preliminary interviews of volunteer advocates at rape crisis centers, staff members often ask potential volunteers, “Why do you want to volunteer with the rape crisis center?” When I became an advocate with the Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center (DARCC) in 2019, I had recently witnessed Brett Kavanaugh’s Supreme Court confirmation hearings, including damning testimony from Palo Alto University psychology professor, Christine Blasey Ford, about being assaulted by Kavanaugh when they were both in high school. I was appalled that someone with such credible accusations of sexual assault could hold one of the highest seats in the United States judicial system and do so with the support of more than half of the Senate. Similarly, During the 2016 presidential election, I had listened to the would-be U.S. President, Donald Trump, excusing himself for acts of sexual assault because he was “rich,” and I, witnessed broad-based acceptance of his aggressions, dismissing his commentary as “locker room talk.” And just a year before the 2016 election, Brock Turner, a student-athlete at Stanford University, was charged with and found guilty of sexual assault after being caught in the act of assaulting Chanel Miller and was subsequently sentenced to just six months in jail. During my first day of training with DARCC, these high-profile stories of powerful cisgender white men facing few repercussions for their violent actions were repeatedly shared as reasons that we wanted to volunteer, why we were called to stand up for victims of violence.¹ These stories, and more, framed my

¹ I use “survivor” and “victim” interchangeably throughout this thesis. “Victim” is usually used to describe someone in the immediate aftermath of the assault, while “survivor” typically describes someone who is

expectations as a rape crisis volunteer and informed my reasons for why I wanted to volunteer as an advocate working on behalf of survivors of sexual violence. These stories (and countless others) underscore a wider public understanding of sexual violence in the U.S.

Before becoming a victim advocate, I had little personal experience with survivors of sexual assault and primarily understood the dynamics of sexual violence from portrayals in popular media. I went into victim advocacy with the idea that victims simply did not understand the criminal justice system and, therefore, were unlikely to report their assaults. In my vision of advocacy, I would step in to provide assault survivors the resources necessary to put perpetrators away in prison. For many other advocates I have met, this starting point is common – we have wanted to “save” women who are hurting and help them navigate the intricacies of the criminal justice system. My trainings to become a victim advocate, however, did not prepare me for the complexities of victims and their various needs, most of which extend far beyond the criminal justice system. As a woman of color, and a survivor, it was important to me to create space for other survivors to feel safe in sharing their experiences and know that I believed them, unequivocally.

Early in my work as an advocate, I met an elderly, unhoused, African American woman who would not speak to the police because she did not want to be the reason why another black man was incarcerated. I had to explain the medical benefits of Plan B to a Latinx mother whose religion led her to believe that her teenage daughter would be

continuously living with the aftermath of their trauma. Tami Spry argues that labeling people who have experienced sexual violence as “victims” or “survivors” is hegemonic and erases their agency to claim their own positionality. Spry argues for offering a liberatory epistemology where victims/survivors might be able to tell their own stories of sexual violence and claim their own positionality. See Tami Spry, “In the Absence of Word and Body,” *Women and Language* 13, no. 2 (September 30, 1995): 27.

ingesting an “abortion pill” if she took Plan B after she had been sexually assaulted that day. I had to leave the hospital after police told me that they would not sign off on a sexual assault evidentiary exam for an African American woman because she was a “frequent flyer”; the larger issue in their eyes was that this victim was having a mental health crisis and any violence she had experienced was not as pressing as her ongoing mental health issues. I mention the race, class, gender, and ability in these cases because the intersectional matrices of power working against their bodies and experiences further challenge the tropes of who is culturally presumed to be “good victims” in the U.S. cultural landscape – white, middle-class, women with able bodies and sound minds.² I soon learned that my goal as an advocate was not to discipline perpetrators, but to be the one person who would affirm that I believed each victim of violence I met. The only thing I could control as an advocate was that I would listen to victims, affirm their needs, offer choices for resources, and not judge their decisions.

This thesis explores the role of advocacy in intervening in systems of sexual violence. At its center, this project considers the nature of victim/survivor-centered advocacy and the pedagogical nature of messaging about sexual assault advocacy. As Rachel Hall observes, early rape prevention models of the 1980s, pursuant of a larger neoliberal environment, placed the responsibility of “safety” on the individual presumed to be at risk – typically believed to be white, middle-class, cisgender women.³ Hall argues that similar to other social, health, and environmental problems, sexual assault

² See, for example, Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Esther Madriz, *Nothing Bad Happens to Good Girls: Fear of Crime in Women's Lives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

³ Rachel Hall, “‘It Can Happen to You’: Rape Prevention in the Age of Risk Management,” *Hypatia*, (2004): 1.

advocacy framed rape victims (and by extension, all cisgender women) as a “space of risk,” a space that all women were warned to avoid. Developing the metaphor of the “tough target,” Hall notes that this “subject position offered to women by women’s safety pedagogy ... [is that of a] (re)action hero”, she is stealthy and quick with an expert awareness of her own vulnerabilities.⁴ Rather than developing intervention programming focused on preventing perpetrators from assaulting, rape prevention pedagogies are often rooted in long-held rape myths that suggest that some victims are “worthy” of our time, attention, and resources, while others have simply failed to protect themselves effectively. During training, advocates focus primarily on the immediate crisis or aftermath of an assault, leaving little time to discuss how they can assist in intervening in more substantial ways.

How advocates come to understand the nature of sexual violence and their capacity for responding to such abuse is foundational to meaningful interventions into systems of violence rooted around intersectional narratives that implicate gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, age, class, and ability. Relatedly, how narratives of advocacy circulate more broadly in U.S. culture influence how people interact with victims, provide education about sexual assault prevention and responses, and intervene in system of gendered violence. While there have been many studies about cultural perceptions of rape, rape myths, victims/survivors, and perpetrators, there has been little attention regarding the role of anti-violence advocates within the system of sexual violence prevention.⁵ The goal of this project is to explore the roles that advocates, and

⁴ Hall, “It Can Happen to You,” 6.

⁵ See for example, Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Rape Myths: In Review,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1994): 133–64; Patricia Yancey Martin, *Rape Work: Victims, Gender, and Emotions in Organization and Community Context*, Perspectives on Gender (New York: Routledge,

advocacy play in re-imagining sexual violence prevention and larger cultural understandings of ending such abuse. This thesis considers both how U.S. popular depictions of advocates/advocacy might inform broader expectations about criminal justice, victim/survivor support, and proactive prevention measures, and how trained advocates are taught to do the work of sexual assault response and prevention. Together, popular media representations of sexual assault advocacy and training materials aimed at sexual assault advocates provide a body of discourse that contaminantly informs how we might imagine and re-imagine more robust sexual assault prevention.

Brief History of Rape Crisis Advocacy in the U.S

Rape crisis advocacy emerged in the early 1970s by feminist consciousness-raising groups who realized that sexual assault victims living in patriarchal culture were not receiving appropriate services or support. Born out of frustrations with how police, medical practitioners, and legal personnel treated sexual assault victims, second wave feminists started forming rape crisis centers, many of which were born out of a growing number of domestic violence shelters. In 1970, Bay Area Women Against Rape established the first volunteer-staffed hotline, providing information and resources to survivors of rape.⁶ By 1973, 25 cities across the U.S. had opened some iteration of a rape crisis center.⁷ These small, unaffiliated groups provided crisis-oriented services

2005); Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993, Reprinted edition).

⁶ Shana L Maier, "Rape Crisis Centers," in *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*, eds. Claire M. Renzetti and Jeffrey L. Edleson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

⁷ Janet Gornick, Martha R. Burt, and Karen J. Pittman, "Structure and Activities of Rape Crisis Centers in the Early 1980s," *Crime & Delinquency* 31, no. 2 (1985): 247–68.

and action work. The main goal of action work was to oversee and monitor professional agencies with which survivors interacted. Feminist activists worked for fundamental changes in legislation, public opinion, and organizational policies and practices. Grounded largely in radical feminist understandings of gender, they viewed rape as a product of oppression toward all women living under patriarchy.⁸

Early feminist advocacy programs involved companionship for survivors to hospitals, police stations, and courts where activists became more aware of the widespread harms inflicted on survivors of sexual assault. Not only was their activism informed by their feminist principles, but their politics also influenced their group structures and decision-making practices. These early organizations were non-hierarchical, emphasized equality, and made democratic practices of consensus-building and voting a priority when making significant decisions.⁹ Without support from state agencies and relying completely on volunteers and community donations, early advocacy activists experienced the burnout typical of grassroots organizing and began to lose long-term commitments to on-the-ground advocacy. Securing external funding to support the work of victim advocacy became pivotal for rape crisis centers. Hospitals began to add rape crisis centers and services and police departments formed more specialized “rape units.”¹⁰ As services expanded and awareness of support spread, survivors began to overload hotlines and the centers’ limited staffs. With new funding opportunities from state-sponsored entities and the increase of interest in sexual violence as a clinical-medical issue, rape crisis centers started to hire clinical

⁸ Gornick, Burt, and Pittman, “Structure and Activities,” 247-68.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 250.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 253.

psychologists and social workers as counselors, volunteer trainers, and coordinators. The employee pool started to include more centrist feminists and apolitical women who may not have seen themselves aligned with the aims of (or welcomed by) the prior activism of feminist organizing.¹¹

Contemporary rape crisis centers may operate differently than the pioneering grassroots organizations, but their cause remains the same: to provide services to victims and advocate for social change through education and prevention efforts. Receiving public funding has functioned to distance many organizations from political, feminist consciousness-raising and activism, creating more professionalized and hierarchical environments. Once rape crisis centers were a mission for social change and political activism, now advocates worry that funding is contingent upon collaboration with police departments, district attorney's offices, and/or statewide advocacy guidelines.¹² This can affect advocates' abilities to speak freely with victims and may significantly impact the types of direct services offered. Direct services can include emergency assistance utilizing a 24-hour hotline that provides referrals and crisis-intervention support, face-to-face accompaniments to hospitals, police stations, and courts, and group or one-on-one counseling.¹³ Advocates often share their concerns that state funding that supports the institutions with which they collaborate also undergirds tensions, discouraging advocates from complaining about poorly trained or ineffectual medical staff or police.¹⁴ Importantly, over the past fifty years, as rape crisis

¹¹ Gornick, Burt, and Pittman, "Structure and Activities." 251.

¹² Shana L. Maier, "Rape Crisis Centers and Programs: 'Doing Amazing, Wonderful Things on Peanuts,'" *Women & Criminal Justice* 21, no. 2 (2011): 141–69.

¹³ Gornick, Burt, and Pittman, "Structure and Activities."

¹⁴ Maier, "Rape Crisis Centers and Programs."

centers began receiving more public funding, many organizations have found that their non-profit status has resulted in a stark reduction of political activism within a socio-political system that gravely needs change.¹⁵ It is challenging to create the fundamental changes needed to teach and learn about sexual violence when the necessity of state funding can stifle advocates' political voices and support for political figures who might more proactively advocate for systemic change.

In tandem with the decrease of feminist political activism that once guided rape crisis centers, advocates often lack a broader socio-political awareness of the many systems of power and oppression that sustain gendered violence. Shana Maier's research on advocates' perceptions of rape law reforms, for example, reiterates the damaging effects of rape myths that circulate across public domains.¹⁶ As Maier argues, the prevalence of such beliefs affects the legal process and even as laws regarding sexual violence have changed over the years, public perceptions of sexual violence have not been significantly impacted. Advocates who have a strong foundation in rape reform laws may also be able to influence societal perceptions such as perpetrator stereotypes and rape myths that often prevent victims from reporting their assaults. Maier posits that it is likely that advocates have limited knowledge of legal issues because they are not actively involved in legal proceedings due to increased specialization of volunteer and staff advocates.¹⁷ Most often, advocates who work on rape crisis hotlines are trained in crisis intervention and are taught to provide immediate assistance to victims, with the expectation that an employee of the organization will

¹⁵ Maier, "Rape Crisis Centers and Programs."

¹⁶ Shana L. Maier, "Rape Victim Advocates' Knowledge and Insight on Rape Laws," *Women & Criminal Justice* 18, no. 4 (2007): 37–62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

reach out with further assistance (e.g., counseling or legal assistance).¹⁸ Despite having limited knowledge of the legal system, Maier's work finds that advocates often criticize rape laws in ways that mirror caricatures found in media coverage of rape cases or popular television dramas.¹⁹ Similarly, in Murphy et al.'s research about legal advocacy in support of victims' interactions with the criminal justice system, victims found themselves entering a system with the belief that if they shared their stories, it would not make a difference because there was not enough teeth in the legal system to make reporting worthwhile.²⁰

Recent research of sexual assault advocates has focused on their emotional reactions due to repeated exposure of sexual assault, but offer little understanding of *how* advocates empathize with victims' experiences or how they come to understand their role in the larger system of rape prevention and response.²¹ As Rebecca Campbell highlights, one of the most important jobs of victims' advocate is to stop "second rape" or "secondary victimization," a result of insensitive, victim-blaming from police, medical staff, or other supposed "helpers."²² When survivors choose to go to the emergency room, hospitals that utilize local rape crisis centers or sexual assault response teams will quickly request the presence of a trained advocate, and the hospital room is made

¹⁸ Notably, not all rape crisis centers have fulltime pro bono attorneys or trained legal advocates who can communicate legal jargon into terms that would be comprehensible to victims.

¹⁹ Maier, "Rape Victim Advocates."

²⁰ Sharon B. Murphy, et al., "Advocates Speak Out on Adult Sexual Assault: A Unique Crime Demands a Unique Response," *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 20, no. 6 (2011): 690–710,

²¹ See, for example, Rebecca Campbell, "Rape Survivors' Experiences With the Legal and Medical Systems: Do Rape Victim Advocates Make a Difference?" *Violence Against Women*, 12, no. 1 (2006): 30–45; Shana L. Maier, "'I Have Heard Horrible Stories . . .': Rape Victim Advocates' Perceptions of the Revictimization of Rape Victims by the Police and Medical System," *Violence Against Women* 14, no. 7 (2008): 786–808.

²² Campbell, "Rape Survivors' Experiences."

anonymous for victim's protection. Revictimization refers to the distress, alienation, and blame that survivors often feel in the immediate aftermath of an assault. Survivors turn to medical professionals and law enforcement in the hopes of having the trauma of their victimization alleviated, but if a rape victim's story does not seem to be "real" or if it does not fit neatly into larger narratives of what constitutes sexual violence, survivors often face responses laced with blame and judgement.²³

Revictimization from the police may be relayed through invasive questioning, insensitivity, and demands that victims repeat their stories to multiple officers or detectives, in addition to medical personnel and often accompanying family members or friends who pry for more details. Rape victims' advocates are a vital component for the healing processes of survivors. Advocates are typically present for interviews with police and might suggest that the officer take a seated position rather than standing over a survivor, slow down to allow the survivor to understand their questions, and take breaks to ensure that victims do not feel overwhelmed by the pressure to answer "correctly" or "quickly."²⁴ The victim's advocate is present to reassure the survivor that an assault against them was not their fault, and there is nothing anyone can do to "deserve" such violence.

Advocates are trained to understand that survivors of sexual assault have been stripped of their power to make decisions about their own bodies; thus advocates work to help restore victims' senses of power by suggesting opportunities for victims to make even the smallest decisions regarding care and boundaries, whether it is choosing to drink water or juice or ask for another heated blanket. Campbell suggests that victims

²³ Maier, "I Have Heard Horrible Stories."

²⁴ Ibid.

who receive accompaniment to the hospital immediately after an assault are less likely to suffer from secondary victimization.²⁵ Campbell's research further found that survivors provided with an advocate are more likely to receive information on sexually transmitted infections (STI), be tested for pregnancy, and receive STI/pregnancy prophylaxis. During Campbell's interviews, survivors shared that they were more than twice as likely to experience their medical staff interactions as impersonal or detached compared to those survivors who were provided with advocates to help intervene with medical staff.²⁶ Providing data that speaks to the efficacy of rape victims' advocacy builds a stronger bridge between rape crisis centers and the legal and medical systems. While research that examines how victims' advocates provide valuable support and might be vulnerable to burnout from hearing about other people's trauma, most rape prevention research focuses on victims/survivors and perpetrators, ignoring the broader constellation of activists who seek to end sexual violence, meaningfully support victims/survivors, and demand accountability from both individual perpetrators and a larger culture complicit in perpetuating rape culture.

Understanding Rape Culture

Rape culture and rape myths can be defined as societal attitudes and belief systems which perpetuate and normalize violence against women.²⁷ As Annie Hill notes, "Rape culture refers to the social and structural norms that excuse perpetrators and demean victims, in effect shoring up and propagating a cultural climate whereby

²⁵ Campbell, "Rape Survivors' Experiences."

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁷ Debra Guckenhimer, "Rape Culture," in *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence*, eds. Claire M. Renzetti and Jeffrey L. Edleson (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2008).

sexual violence can flourish.”²⁸ Culturally, survivors of sexual assault are often made to believe that their actions, their dress, their intoxication, where they were, and when they were there may contribute to their victimization. Perpetuated by news accounts and entertainment media, rape myths are narratives which negatively influence the credibility of survivors of sexual assault and perpetuate expectations that victims are to blame for their experiences of sexual violence. Rape myths circulate differently amidst different cultural locations and in ways that implicate victims and perpetrators in ways that rely on dangerous tropes at the intersections of race, gender, class, ability, and religion (among other identity factors). Common rape myths include: (1) victims of sexual assault are lying because they regret consensual sex after the fact; (2) that a victim’s dress, behavior, or number of previous sexual partners can send “mixed signals” that lead to rape; (3) rape most often occurs between strangers and in locations that are unfamiliar; (4) rapists are “abnormal or marginalized men”; (5) African American men are more likely to rape than white men; and (6) if victims did not secretly want to engage in sex acts, they would more aggressively fight off their offenders.²⁹ The function of such rape myths and their frequent acceptance and reiteration is echoed in jury verdicts, public policies, media, and personal reactions to survivors of sexual assault.³⁰

Due in large part to the efforts of feminists since the 1970s, many of these rape myths have been actively challenged and more resistance to such explicitly stated

²⁸ Annie Hill, “SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response to Rape Logic: The Politics of Reclaiming a Name,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 26.

²⁹ See, for example, Lisa M. Cuklanz, *Rape on Prime Time: Television, Masculinity, and Sexual Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000); Kimberly A. Lonsway and Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Rape Myths: In Review,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (June 1994): 133–64.

³⁰ Lonsway and Fitzgerald, “Rape Myths.”

views is expected in this contemporary moment. Interdisciplinary research about the prevalence and circulation of rape myths suggests how we might improve understandings of consent and control, and foster sexual violence prevention. For example, feminist scholarship related to how we define “sexual violence” stresses the importance of survivors defining their own experiences and claiming their own truths. While this is informed by the legal system, such approaches are more concerned with cultural conceptions of how we understand what “counts” as sexual violence, and, importantly, *who* counts as victims and survivors. There is significant research on the importance of dismantling cultural stereotypes to prevent further victimization, victim-blaming, and wider insensitivities toward survivors.³¹

Using such existing research, I consider how advocates, as part of a larger system of cultural knowledge in the U.S., may come to assign blame and define who is a “good victim” (or “bad victim”), who can be understood as engaging in violent actions, and who is worthy of resources. I add to current research by using an intersectional feminist perspective that investigates how advocates are trained to determine where to assign blame, how advocacy trainings and perceptions of sexual violence can help prevent revictimization, how intersectional identities related to gender, race, ethnicity, class, ability, and sexuality influence responses to sexual assault. Victims across intersectional identities struggle with labeling their own experiences of sexual violence,

³¹ See, for example, Clare G. Holzman, “Counseling Adult Women Rape Survivors: Issues of Race, Ethnicity, and Class,” *Women & Therapy* 19, no. 2 (1996): 47–62; Holly M. Rusinko, April R. Bradley, and Joseph Miller, “Assertiveness and Attributions of Blame toward Victims of Sexual Assault,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 19, no. 4 (2010): 357–71; Linda A. Wood and Heather Rennie, “Formulating Rape: The Discursive Construction of Victims and Villains,” *Discourse & Society* 5, no. 1 (1994): 125–48,

often blaming themselves for their attacks, due largely to the messages that circulate regarding rape, victimization, and support for survivors.

Rachel Hall's work on rape pedagogy argues that messages emphasizing "women's safety" positions cisgender women's bodies in a constant state of vulnerability that establishes their identity as women, and underscores who is seen as a likely victim and worthy survivor. However, not all women live in the same status of presumed vulnerability. Hall writes, "a woman's social positioning shapes both her experience of rape and her treatment as a proper or improper victim."³² In other words, if one is not a middle-class, white, able-bodied, cisgender woman, then rape myths often suggest that the victim was more likely to have played a role in their assault (either by not being "vulnerable" enough, not being seen as "innocent," and/or not moving in vulnerable locations). Rather than developing intervention programming based on the future actions of sexual assault perpetrators, existing rape myths suggest that only some victims are worthy of our time, attention, and resources. This might make it difficult for survivors of all backgrounds, no matter how close they may be to the expectations of a "good victim," to understand and define their experiences when they have been sexually assaulted. According to Hall, expectations that women (and especially white women) ought to prevent themselves from being raped by remaining ever-vigilant and on-guard, current prevention pedagogies too often avoid focusing on would-be assailants.

How we come to understand what counts as sexual violence at the cultural level is influenced by a number of factors, including mediated depictions of sexual violence. In looking at the importance of media depictions of sexual violence and advocacy, I

³² Hall, "It Can Happen to You."

consider research that studies how popular media portrayals of sexual assault works to frame larger cultural understandings of sexual violence. For example, Nancy Worthington's analysis of online responses to news accounts regarding a campus rape that had previously been concealed demonstrates how audiences use their own identities and existing discourses about sexual violence to construct their own meanings of sexual assault.³³ Specifically, Worthington focuses on the encoding and decoding of rape news and works from the premise that while the news influences public perceptions of sexual violence, little attention is paid to how reporting on rape allows for important public discussion on the topic.³⁴ As Barbara Barnett argues, "media [offers] sites of production for ideologies and scholars suggest that news and entertainment have both challenged and reinforced rape myths."³⁵ Selective coverage of titillating sexual details and courtroom drama fails to acknowledge or incorporate feminist understandings that tackle underlying causes of rape.³⁶ This thesis has enabled me to further situate my understandings of rape culture and victims' advocacy by exploring how popular media influences cultural understandings of sexual assault interventions.

Representations of sexual violence in popular culture participate in wider understandings of what "counts" as sexual violence and how we might be prepared to respond supportively (or not) to victims of such abuse. In other words, popular culture depictions of sexual violence function at the ideological level. Sexual violence as depicted in television and film is not merely for popular consumption and entertainment,

³³ Nancy Worthington, "Encoding and Decoding Rape News: How Progressive Reporting Inverts Textual Orientations," *Women's Studies in Communication* 31, no. 3 (2008): 344–67.

³⁴ Hall, "It Can Happen to You."

³⁵ Barbara Barnett, "Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1, no. 2 (2008): 179–202.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

but can offer rhetorical equipment for audiences, teaching viewers both how to understand sexual violence and, quite often, how to perpetuate damaging rape myths and hierarchies of who is worthy of our sympathies. When analyzing formulations of sexual assault, feminist critics must remain skeptical of the popular stories that imbue our cultural imaginary, questioning how media depictions suggest when perpetrators should be held accountable, how to support survivors, and what (and who) to fear. As feminist film and media scholar, Sarah Projansky, argues popular cultural representations of rape can both help define feminist interventions and ideologically influence how we understand intersectional identities and the harms of sexual violence.³⁷

Similarly, Lisa Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti's analysis of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit's (SVU)* storylines considers the themes related to this long-time popular television show and considers how this show both contributes to and detracts from feminist understandings of sexual violence.³⁸ While television shows like *Law & Order: SVU* offer important pedagogical lessons about how to approach a forensic rape exam (e.g., the importance of not showering to gather evidence and the exam's invasive nature), such shows that focus on the criminal justice system often overstate the likelihood that reporting sexual assaults will lead to meaningful police and justice interventions. As such, popular media depictions of sexual assault and advocacy can help viewers in developing more empathy for survivors and create supportive language, but they can also narrow the focus in a way that might affect how advocates view their

³⁷ Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

³⁸ Lisa Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 4 (2006): 302-321.

likely work. Challenging narratives of a who counts as “worthy” victims can better prepare advocates when they encounter individuals who have been “othered” by society; for example, *SVU* has successfully showcased diverse survivors, including gay men, transgender individuals, and sex workers. Yet, we must be cautious of other “lessons” embedded in popular culture.

While this thesis does not focus on the criminal justice system and the systemic punishment (or lack thereof) of perpetrators, public perceptions of what happens after an assault (victims and advocates alike) are greatly affected by the circulation of media depictions of the criminal justice system. Thus, I argue that the ways that advocacy is positioned vis-à-vis the criminal justice system is connected with how volunteers might envision their work and how victims might understand what their advocacy would entail. Improving societal and academic understanding of advocacy and advocates provides a small window into victims’ experiences and the ways we might perpetuate and/or meaningfully intervene into powerful cycles of violence. Advocates’ work allows them to see survivors’ reactions and interactions through each stage of the process after an assault. Their position offers a personal view of the current barriers in the various agencies involved with rape crisis centers.³⁹ We know that rape and sexual assault are among the least reported violent crimes,⁴⁰ it is worth questioning how mediated depictions of such abuse and subsequent advocacy inform our collective understanding of the role of advocates.

³⁹ Sharon B. Murphy, Victoria L. Banyard, Sarah P. Maynard, and Rebecca Dufresne, “Advocates Speak Out on Adult Sexual Assault: A Unique Crime Demands a Unique Response,” *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment & Trauma* 20, no 6 (2011): 690–710.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Intersectional Feminist Foundations

This project entails feminist textual analyses of two different sets of texts – television media depictions of sexual violence advocacy in two different series, *Unbelievable* (2019) and *I May Destroy You* (2020), and training materials collected from rape crisis centers throughout the Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas, metropolitan area. Informed by intersectional feminist frameworks, I acknowledge that sexual violence advocacy is all too often limited with regard to diversity of advocates, of socio-cultural contexts for trainings, and for challenging the life experiences of new advocates. Using intersectional feminist frameworks is significant because marginalized communities suffer disproportionately due largely to the intersecting structural oppressions on multiply-minoritized identities. Identifying the barriers that people of color, mentally ill victims, trans victims, or unhomed survivors might face when seeking services through rape crisis centers is vital to providing support and preventing further victimization.

In the chapters that follow, I consider how feminist advocacy for sexual assault survivors might be advanced and/or hindered by portrayals of victims' advocacy in both television media and advocacy training manuals.⁴¹ In analyzing these texts, I ask the following questions: How do these texts relate to dominant social, cultural, and political storylines? How might these storylines be informed by intersectional standpoints of epistemologies of knowledge? Do these texts overtly work to encourage people to behave or believe differently as a result of the texts' characterizations of violence, victims, and assailants? How do these texts sustain biases and assumptions about sexual assault victims, perpetrators, and advocates/advocacy? Stereotypical depictions

⁴¹ Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne M. Daughton, *Modern Rhetorical Criticism* (Boston: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon, 2005).

of rape typically include a narrative structures highlighting able-bodied, cisgender white women of means who are attacked by a man who she does not know, typically a man of color (a stranger made *stranger* because his racial markings differ from those of the victim).

In Chapter 2, I analyze depictions of advocates/advocacy in two popular television series, Netflix's *Unbelievable* and HBO's *I May Destroy You*. By engaging critically with television representations of sexual assault and advocacy as sites of public pedagogy, I argue that these series work inform audiences, raise fundamental questions, and expand possibilities for social justice.⁴² Both shows are based loosely on "true stories" of sexual violence. Both *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You* are based explicitly on true stories of sexual assault; both shows depict rape(s) committed by strangers and, to some degree, acquaintances. The U.S. based show, *Unbelievable*, offers insight into vulnerability of victims as well as the repercussions of police revictimization, while *I May Destroy You*, set in London, follows the character Arabella as she attempts to heal from a sexual assault she cannot remember. In both shows, there are clear characters who operate as advocates working to support the needs of sexual assault victims. While the manner that these shows depict the needs of victims and the violence of perpetrators is relevant to this project, my focus remains most centrally on considering how these shows depict the role of the advocacy, the process of advocacy, and how this focus on the advocate works to sustain or disrupt larger cultural myths regarding sexual violence.

By analyzing popular media depictions, I elucidate at least part of what many

⁴² Henry A. Giroux, "Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 6 (2011): 686–95.

volunteer advocates may find to be their earlier training in becoming advocates.

Becoming an advocate means that one has to have been introduced to sexual assault somewhere in their life whether it is a personal experience, or a calling you have felt from reading the news, watching popular depictions of abuse, or having hard conversations friends/family around you. In order to serve survivors best, advocates must have a better understanding of the complexities that victims of sexual assault often come with. Not all cases are going to be high profile cases and advocates often find themselves facing barriers without the tools to overcome them.

In Chapter 3, I analyze training materials distributed by rape crisis center and domestic violence organizations in the 75 miles surrounding the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex. All advocates in Texas are certified by the Office of The Attorney General and have received 40 hours of training by their affiliated organizations. I chose Dallas because it is the current city that I live in, and where I am an advocate. Most rape crisis centers in Texas utilize a training manual provided by the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault, however implementation of this material can vary among counties.⁴³

In analyzing the training materials, I am guided by feminist standpoint theory, building out my analysis from my positionality as a feminist, a survivor, and as a sexual assault survivor advocate. Additionally, by approaching my research from the standpoint of a survivor of sexual assault, I hope to unpack relations of power hidden in the way care providers conceptualize their roles in interacting with sexual assault survivors.

⁴³ In 2018, sexual assault incidents increased by 9.4% in Texas compared to 2017. Importantly, in 86.9% of all incidents, there was no reports of the offender using drugs or alcohol. Of the offenders, 95.6% were male and around 3,000 of these men ranged between the ages of 15 and 19. What is also telling is that 89.6% of sexual assaults used physical force, holding someone down and 73.9% of all sexual assaults happened in a residence or home. Texas Department of Public Safety, "Crime in Texas 2018" (2019), 46-48 .

That is to say that, by analyzing the training manuals that are utilized by advocate training programs, I seek to examine how these materials produce and/or reinforce dependence on hegemonic power structures common rapes myths and social hierarchies that may prevent survivors from receiving adequate resources. This analysis explores how current training teaches advocates how to view survivors and determine which survivors are deserving of assistance.

While all training manuals explicitly state that all women are to be believed, personal biases and social views from advocates based on outside teachings may prevent them from providing adequate care. Standpoint theory argues that marginalized groups are uniquely seated in social relations to obtain a broad view of opposing group's interests and experiences in addition to their own. In contrast, dominant groups' understanding of social negotiations is truncated by their privileged standpoint. Still, marginalized communities have a broader perspective based on their own experiences and consideration for dominant ideologies.⁴⁴ Therefore, I contend that the current training manuals fail to train advocates to think intersectionally about survivors of sexual assault and their experiences, preventing those in marginalized communities from receiving the assistance they deserve.

By way of conclusion and through putting my research into meaningful conversation with current research, media portrayals of advocacy, and practices in training future advocates, I hope to offer direct contributions to advocacy, activism, and academia. As such, Chapter 4 follows the lead of feminist scholar, Sarah Ahmed's *Living a Feminist Life*, in outlining what I call an Intersectional Feminist Advocacy

⁴⁴ Barbara Gurr and Nancy A. Naples. "Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 20.

Toolkit.⁴⁵ I want to offer this research and a set of research-based advocacy suggestions/ “best practices,” with the hope of influencing victims’ advocacy in everyday life and in more systematic prevention education and justice-based advocacy. This research highlights how intersectional feminism can create a foundation within rape crisis advocacy that can work to more productively and profoundly dismantle racist, sexist, homophobic, xenophobic, and ableist stereotypes that so deeply fail survivors of sexual assault. I hope this research contributes to a more significant discourse where we can challenge the narrative of “real” and “legitimate” rape to help victims find their voice and reclaim agency. I want survivors of sexual violence to be believed, heard, and meaningfully supported. My goal is that feminist activists might take a page from their predecessors and early grassroots organizations and extend more intersectional feminist lenses to resist rape culture and build fortified coalitions.

⁴⁵ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

CHAPTER 2

POPULAR CULTURE AS PUBLIC PEDAGOGY

Introduction

When *Unbelievable* was released in September of 2019, I had been working as a survivor's advocate for around 9 months, had taken several hospital calls and answered the crisis hotline 5 days a week. When I started watching *Unbelievable*, I had expected the familiar detective saves the day plotline but found myself anxious as I watched a relatively accurate portrayal of a sexual assault exam. This was the first time on television I had ever seen the exam done in such in-depth nature. However, I had a heightened awareness that the character within the diegetic space, or the space that story is taking place, was not receiving adequate care. Viewers were able to see the invasive nature of an exam which I believed might shift how they view survivors of sexual assault.

Rhetorical and media scholars posit that popular culture and mass media are powerful sites of re-producing ideological investments, especially around intersectional hierarchies of gender, race, class, ability, religion, and sexuality.⁴⁶ As noted in Chapter 1, media representations of sexual violence frequently reproduce rape myths, which can influence advocates' perceptions and affect how they intervene in systems of violence; in thinking about advocacy, this chapter considers both depictions of trained victims' advocates and advocacy efforts of friends and family members who often are called upon to support survivors of assault. The study of rape narratives and themes in media is vital to feminist organizing because it helps us consider how audiences are impacted

⁴⁶ Barbara Barnett, "Framing Rape: An Examination of Public Relations Strategies in the Duke University Lacrosse Case," *Communication, Culture & Critique* 1, no. 2 (2008): 179–202.

by their exposure and consumption of media. In examining the importance of media depictions of sexual violence and advocacy, I consider research that studies how popular media portrayals of sexual assault works to frame broader cultural understandings of sexual violence. There is limited scholarship on how media invites viewers to identify with and/or align themselves with advocate positions to help assault survivors.

According to Lisa Cuklanz, the feminist anti-rape activists of the 1970s sought out to circulate their counter formulations and critique of the traditional view of rape to the general public.⁴⁷ As noted by Cuklanz, early scholarship and examinations of rape portrayals in mass media were analyzed in mainstream news coverage. Despite the mass amounts of feminist counter formulation publications from that time, Cuklanz and Moorti found that mainstream news outlets were unable to present a feminist-based understanding of rape but found that television talk shows and prime-time television had been more useful in conveying these understandings into the public's consciousness.⁴⁸ Through Cuklanz's research of prime-time police/crime dramas of 1976-1978, she found that early media representations of sexual assault followed a formulaic plot where rapes were highlighted as being: (1) especially violent and unexpected; (2) featuring rapists who were "sick" strangers; (3) centering sympathy for victims who were lonely young women with few resources to help them recover; and (4) depicting detectives who were vengeful toward rapists, but tender (even paternal) toward rape victims.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Lisa M. Cuklanz, "The Masculine Ideal: Rape on Prime-time Television, 1976–1978," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 15, no. 4 (December 1998): 423–48.

⁴⁸ Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti, "Television's 'New' Feminism: Prime-Time Representations of Women and Victimization," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 23, no. 4 (2006): 302–21.

⁴⁹ Cuklanz, "The Masculine Ideal."

When feminist critiques of rape culture started to permeate public consciousness, mass media of sexual violence often employed narratives that emphasized hegemonic masculinity wherein the voices of the survivors were silenced by the “stranger rapist” who rendered victims speechless during brutal assault. Such depictions often viewed detectives and lawyers as the victims’ primary advocates who worked to console and comfort victims in the pursuit of criminal justice.⁵⁰ From such portrayals, there was usually no question as to whether the victim was a believable survivor because her rape was depicted as what Susan Estrich has termed “real” rape –where unsuspecting white women are brutally attacked by men, presumably black men, who are strangers to them.⁵¹

Similarly, Sarah Projansky argues that while a slight shift has occurred in how rape is portrayed in mainstream news media, the minimal incorporation of feminist ideas corresponds with Projansky’s assessment of such depictions forwarding a post-feminist attitude, the belief that the ends of early feminist activism has already been successfully achieved and therefore no longer necessary.⁵² Dangerously, post-feminism absorbs and transforms feminism in ways that separate feminist ideologies from the ongoing exigencies of political and social activism. Early media representations did not operate to present feminist ideologies of social change, sustained rape prevention or trauma, but maintained hierarchies of hegemonic masculinity through graphic depictions of assault and plotlines surrounding cisgender male detectives as the heroes.

⁵⁰ Cuklanz, “The Masculine Ideal.”

⁵¹ See, Susan Estrich, *Real Rape* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University. Press, 1987).

⁵² Sarah Projansky, *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2001).

In this chapter, I analyze popular depictions of advocates and advocacy in two popular television series, Netflix's *Unbelievable* (2019) and HBO's *I May Destroy You* (2020). Both shows are based explicitly on true stories of sexual assault depicting rape(s) committed by a range of assailants, including strangers and acquaintances. The U.S.-based show, *Unbelievable*, offers insight into vulnerability of victims as well as the repercussions of police revictimization, while *I May Destroy You*, set in London, follows the character Arabella (Michaela Coel) as she attempts to heal from a sexual assault she cannot remember. Although the manners in which these shows depict the needs of victims and the violence of perpetrators is relevant to this larger project, the focus of this chapter considers how these shows imagine the process of advocacy as performed by a variety of characters who seek to intervene and offer support.

In this chapter, I argue that *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* invite audiences to identify with televisual advocates within larger intersectional discourses of sexual violence. Toward this end, I discuss how both shows disrupt the historically situated stigmas and myths surrounding sexual violence and who might be considered a “worthy” or “good” victim. My goal is to demonstrate how various characters in both shows model advocacy by believing survivors and ultimately aiding in their healing process by incorporating feminist perspectives related to community consciousness-raising and victim-centered advocacy. As such, this chapter suggests that *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You* function pedagogically to train viewers how to engage in advocacy and build feminist counter-formulations as a means of resistance. Guided by Henry Giroux's theorization of popular media as a “public pedagogy,” I demonstrate how these two shows might operate to prepare audience and advocates alike to function as

critical agents capable of transforming public discourses.⁵³ Situating my analysis of *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* against media scholarship centered on earlier popular media portrayals of sexual violence and advocacy allows me to expand on this important feminist research on the making of ideologies and challenging current public discourse involving sexual assault.

Popular Culture as Public Pedagogy

Popular culture such as television and film offer a site for informal learning, or what media scholars such as Henry Giroux terms “public pedagogy.” Giroux writes that “public pedagogy is a visual technology that functions as a powerful teaching machine that intentionally tries to influence the production of meaning, subject positions, identities and experiences.”⁵⁴ Researchers who study film and television as a form of public pedagogy believe it offers a medium which enables conversations that connect politics to personal experiences and public life to larger social issues.⁵⁵ Giroux argues that more extended narrative mediums such as films carry a significant pedagogical weight due to their capacity to develop a sustained and nuanced storyline and set of characters.⁵⁶ The two series I explore in this chapter were limited miniseries, with a plotline that evolved substantially over the course of carefully developed storytelling – eight episodes in *Unbelievable* and twelve episodes in *I May Destroy You*. Miniseries are different from sitcoms, for example, because this format enables a singular plotline

⁵³ Henry A Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film.” *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 6 (2011): 686–95.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 689.

⁵⁵ See, for example, Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies”; bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Class and Sex at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁶ Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies.”

with in-depth character development, whereas sitcoms are usually resolved by the end of a 22-minute episode.

Maudlin and Sandlin argue that “pop culture can be understood as the broad range of texts that constitute the cultural landscape of a particular time and/or place, as well as the ways in which consumers engage with those texts and thus become producers of new negotiated meanings.”⁵⁷ In other words, pop culture often reflects more generalized cultural understandings of social issues and social identities.

Furthermore, when thinking about popular culture as pedagogical, the performances of social relationships teach us particular ways of knowing, doing, and being.⁵⁸ For example, if representations of sexual violence and gender-based violence follow a formulaic plot line across various forms of media (e.g., television, movies, music), we are taught at the cultural level particular ways of understanding and responding to such abuse. Much of the mainstream public’s preconceived ideas about rape and sexual assault emerge in conversation with film, television, and popular music.⁵⁹

Representations of gendered violence that work against mainstream, simplified understandings of what sexual assault involves, who sexual assault involves, and how

⁵⁷ Julie Garlen Maudlin and Jennifer A. Sandlin, “Pop Culture Pedagogies: Process and Praxis,” *Educational Studies: A Journal of the American Educational Studies Association* 51, no. 5 (2015): 368–84.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See, for example, Mia Consalvo, “Hegemony, Domestic Violence, and COPS,” *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 26, no. 2 (1998): 62-71; Suzanne Marie Enck and Blake A. McDaniel, “Playing with Fire: Cycles of Domestic Violence in Eminem and Rihanna’s ‘Love the Way You Lie,’” *Communication, Culture & Critique* 5, no. 4 (2012): 618-644; Suzanne Marie Enck-Wanzer and Scott Murray, “‘How to Hook a Hottie’: Teenage Boys, Hegemonic Masculinity, and *CosmoGirl!* Magazine,” in *Mediated Boyhood: Boys, Teens, and Tweens in Popular Culture and Media*, ed. Annette Wannamaker (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), 57-77; Leslie A. Hahner and Scott J. Varda, “*It Follows* and Rape Culture: Critical Response as Disavowal,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 40, no. 3 (2017): 251-269. LeeAnn Kahlor and Dan Morrison, “Television Viewing and Rape Myth Acceptance Among College Women,” *Sex Roles* 56 (2007): 729-739; Kyra Pearson, “The Trouble with Aileen Wuornos, Feminism’s ‘First Serial Killer,’” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 4, no. 3 (2007): 256-275.

we ought to respond to this violence can raise fundamental questions about how we see the world and how we can better interact with the problems that plague it. Understood as public pedagogy, popular culture has the power to be both hegemonic and transformative. For example, depictions of sexual violence that focuses on the complicated range of survivors' experiences can legitimize diverse victims and their responses. By engaging with media texts that complicate the experiences of survivors, viewers might better engage in empowerment-oriented advocacy for the survivors in their lives in powerful ways.

Public consciousness raising of the 1970s is analogous to contemporary feminists' advancement of the prevalence of assault via the #MeToo movement. The #MeToo movement, originating by black feminist activist Tarana Burke, gained national momentum in 2017 following a tweet by white Hollywood actress, Alyssa Milano.⁶⁰ Similar to how media representations in the 1970s started implementing sexual assault into their plotlines built on more mainstream understanding of sexual violence, *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* emerged out from the zenith of globally prominent #MeToo activism, situating the storytelling of these series in more intersectional feminist appreciations for the dynamics of sexual violence. These series robustly explore rape myths, trauma reactions, the capacity for state-based counseling models, and the wide-reaching effects on victims' lives. *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* are both loosely based on the real-life stories of Michaela Coel, writer and producer of *I May Destroy You*, and the character of "Marie," of *Unbelievable*, a survivor from Lynnwood, Washington, characterized through a pseudonym.

⁶⁰ Gurvinder Gill and Imran Rhaman-Jones, "Me Too founder Tarana Burke: Movement is not over," *BBC News*, July 9, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-53269751>.

Netflix's *Unbelievable* premiered in the Fall of 2019, and is an adaptation based on the true story of “Marie’s” sexual assault titled *An Unbelievable Story of Rape*, co-published in 2015 by ProPublica and The Marshall Project. ProPublica and The Marshall project are nonprofit news organization that investigate abuses of power and the United States criminal justice system.⁶¹ Culling interviews and public records, *An Unbelievable Story of Rape* detailed Marie’s experience of a system which failed her after she reported her sexual assault in 2008. When Marie was eighteen, she reported being bound, gagged, and raped at knifepoint by a man who entered her apartment while she as sleeping. A ward of the foster care system, Marie’s credibility was undermined by original investigators and this suspicion was creatively woven into the mediated portrayal of her story. After police “discovered” inconsistencies in Marie’s story and her own foster care agents cast suspicion on her reactions to her assault, Marie recanted her statement and was charged with filing a false report, a misdemeanor crime punishable by up to a year in jail. Three years after Marie’s assault, on February 13, 2011, a similar sexual assault investigation took place in Golden, Colorado which was then connected to another assault in Westminster, Aurora, and Lakewood, Colorado. On January 5, 2011, Marc O’Leary was arrested and on December 9, 2011, plead guilty to 28 counts of rape. The detectives from Colorado connected their case to Marie’s as well as another case in Kirkland, Washington. After Marie’s record was expunged for false reporting, she sued the state of Washington settled for \$150,000, left the state and never looked back. Journalists, T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong, won the Pulitzer Prize for Explanatory Reporting, and published a book titled *A False Report: A True*

⁶¹ See ProPublica (<https://www.propublica.org/about/>) and The Marshall Project (<https://www.themarshallproject.org/about>) mission statements.

Story of Rape in America. Miller and Armstrong's accumulation of reporting offered the groundwork to re-tell Marie's story, through the comparative lens of how police and advocacy intervention can go "well," when investigators start with the premise of believing a victim.

Starring Golden Globe nominee, Kaitlyn Dever, and Emmy award winners, Merrit Wever and Toni Collette, *Unbelievable* was nominated for four Emmy awards including "Outstanding Limited Series." Originally conceived as a film, writer Susannah Grant knew that Marie's story warranted an eight-hour mini-series.⁶² Grant critiques the current way entertainment culture displays sexual assault in a "sort of voyeuristic, almost slightly porny way."⁶³ Recognizing that this representation is not what she wanted for the real-life Marie (and possible other Maries in the world), she chose to write Marie's experience in the form of flashbacks and removed from more exploitative and gratuitous portrayals of her abuse. While the criminal justice system is central to *Unbelievable*, the points of view of detectives and other state-centered actors are not emphasized; this is not really a show that features the criminal justice system as much as one might expect, given the amount of screen time and narrative development of state actors. If anything, the through-line of the journalists' investigation which propelled others to literally track and locate a singular serial rapist helped viewers question their own allegiances to the fidelity (or lack thereof) of different narrators in the show.

⁶² Katie Kilkeny, "How a Pulitzer Prize-winning investigation became Netflix's 'Unbelievable,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, September 13, 2019, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/how-a-pulitzer-prize-winning-investigation-became-netflixs-unbelievable-1239342/>.

⁶³ Libby Hill "'Unbelievable' scribe Susannah Grant used collaboration to build a community," *IndieWire*, July 7, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2020/07/susannah-grant-unbelievable-consider-this-netflix-1234571671/>.

Likewise, despite documenting police investigations into two different rape cases, *I May Destroy You* is also not a typical criminal justice process show. Touted as the “most sublimely unsettling show of the year” by *Vulture* magazine, *I May Destroy You* (IMDY) stars Michaela Coel, whose on-screen character, Arabella, parallels the real-life experiences of Coel as she navigated the healing process of a sexual assault that she could not remember.⁶⁴ In 2016, during the writing of her comedy, *Chewing Gum*, Michaela Coel shared that she was sexually assaulted by strangers the night she was trying to finish one of her episodes that was due the following morning.⁶⁵ Coel referred to herself as “lucky” because she only remembered what happened to her in a flashback.⁶⁶ Similarly, Coel’s fictional character, Arabella, is a writer working on a new book that is due to her editors; when taking a break from her all-night writing binge, Arabella went out with friends for a drink, where she was subsequently drugged and left unaware about being raped in a bathroom at the club. She regains moments of inchoate recognition of her assault through flashbacks and discovering clues from people who might have known more. While this show does include scenes of Arabella dealing with police and police personnel, Coel uses the medium of *IMDY* to share her fragmentary experiences of trying to maintain friendships/relationships, sustain her own mental health, her employment, and ultimately her own healing through writing.

HBO released weekly episodes in June of 2020, allowing audiences to absorb and unpack, rather than binge quickly and let the entire 12-hour story blur together. In

⁶⁴ E. Alex Jung, “Michaela the destroyer,” *Vulture*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/article/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you.html>.

⁶⁵ Hunter Harris, “Michaela Coel says she was sexually assaulted when she worked on *Chewing Gum*,” *Vulture*, August 22, 2018, <https://www.vulture.com/2018/08/michaela-coel-says-she-was-sexually-assaulted.html>.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

an interview with *The Washington Post*, Coel explained that her show was not about justice, it was about consent. Coel shared, “I think it’s because I am aware that cases very rarely end in justice ... the victim, or survivor is left open. How do they find their own closure?”⁶⁷ Michaela Coel made *TIME*’s Most Influential People List of 2020 where she has been described as fearless and powerful because she knows when to speak truth and is not afraid to put fear aside “and step out in front of those who are still waiting to be free.”⁶⁸

Building a Culture of Advocacy

Rape culture and myths have convinced much of the mainstream public that certain experiences or certain bodies are not or cannot be raped or assaulted. Or, as Annie Hill observes, “Rape culture’s continuum of sexual violence is not created by rapists alone; it is produced through social practices, scripted interactions, physical and symbolic violence, institutional discourses, and cultural logics to which many people contribute, and which must be challenged by creative, collective, and unyielding opposition.”⁶⁹ In the following analysis I’m thinking about how these two shows disrupt dominant rape cultural expectations, considering how they help build a culture of advocacy to simplified dismantle binaries and white cis-heteropatriarchal privilege. Thinking about how media works to create dominate ideologies, these two television shows, powerfully introduce feminist ideologies and counter formulations regarding rape

⁶⁷ Sonia Rao, “Michaela Coel is in control,” *Washington Post*, July 21, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2020/07/21/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you-interview/>.

⁶⁸ Lena Waithe, “Michaela Coel: The 100 most influential people of 2020,” *Time*, September 20, 2020, <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2020/5888492/michaela-coel/>.

⁶⁹ Hill, “SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response,” 35.

myths and culture. Demonstrating a pedagogical way of advocacy, *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* inform audiences to what helpful advocacy looks like as well as the detrimental cost of not having an advocate in the aftermath of a sexual assault. This chapter aims to dismantle the binary of worthy/unworthy victim by acknowledging that the treatment of the characters influences the way observers decide who is a worthy survivor and deserved of resources. Toward this end, I consider the advocacy world-making potential offered in *Unbelievable* and *IMDY* as they operate through three different disruptions to mainstream rape logics. First, I discuss how these series positions the act of believing survivors as a challenge to preconceived ideas of how survivors should act before and after assaults. Second, acknowledging the different experiences of sexual assault regardless of race, class, gender, or sexuality can unveil why we have been programmed to not believe certain individuals who say they have been assaulted. Finally, I discuss the importance of strong, though imperfect, support systems and community effort to help sustain survivors of sexual assault.

Dismantling “Worthy”/“Unworthy” Victim Binary

Activists engaged with rape prevention have worked ardently to eradicate the binary tropes of “good” victims or “bad” victims, of those who are “worthy” of empathy and support and those who are “unworthy.” These harmful views can prevent survivors of assault from receiving adequate support, but when trained sexual advocates are provided, they can shift this narrative. Psychology scholar Rebecca Campbell highlights that one of the most important jobs of the victim advocate is to stop “second rape” or “secondary victimization,” a result of insensitive, victim-blaming from police, medical

staff, or other supposed “helpers.”⁷⁰ Revictimization refers to the distress, alienation, and blame that survivors often feel in the immediate aftermath of an assault. Survivors turn to medical professionals and law enforcement in the hopes of having the trauma of their victimization alleviated. However, if a rape victim's story does not seem to be “real” or if it does not fit neatly into broader narratives of what constitutes sexual violence, survivors often face responses laced with blame and judgment.

In episode two of *IMDY*, “Someone is Lying”, Arabella (Michael Coel) is accompanied to the police station the morning after her assault by her good friend Kwame (Paapa Essiedu), where they meet with two detectives; Kwame and the two detectives serve as the show’s first three advocates who help to illuminate the importance of dismantling the “good”/ “bad” victim binary.⁷¹ Arabella, is calm during questioning and believes that she was not the one who was assaulted but that she is there under the assumption that it happened to someone else; in a way being an advocate for a different victim of assault. At one point Arabella leans over to Kwame and says, “I made my deadline, did I tell you?” It is very normal for survivors of assault to talk about anything other than the traumatic experience they are going through. Arabella is very careful of referring to what she has seen as a sexual assault; she is not sure it happened, whom it happened to, and expresses the importance to not jump to conclusions. The detective working her case affirms all of her emotions and gently walks her through what Arabella believes to be a story in her head, which turns out to be bits and pieces of the assault against her.

⁷⁰ Rebecca Campbell, “Rape Survivors’ Experiences With the Legal and Medical Systems: Do Rape Victim Advocates Make a Difference?” *Violence Against Women* 12, no. 1 (2006): 30–45.

⁷¹ *I May Destroy You*, episode 2, “Someone is Lying,” directed by Sam Miller, June 9, 2020, HBO.

Not once during Arabella's interview did the detectives ask her how much she had to drink or if she had taken drugs on the night of her assault; what was most important to them was helping Arabella understand what had happened to her and what she could expect from this process. Arabella's "positive" interaction and experience with police might allow for other black audience members, maybe even survivors understand what that interaction is *supposed* to look like. While crime-and-punishment television shows occasionally deploy characters from marginalized communities, it is rare to see a complicated representation of characters who are BIPOC, poor, or disabled. In such TV dramas, the victim would soon be left to deal with their own personalized aftermath, while the detectives do everything they can to put the perpetrator in prison. Instead, *IMDY* succeeds in featuring the complex story of a singular victim, without featuring the criminal justice system as the central space for salvation and support, showing the messy process of healing. Arabella is the exact opposite of what the public has been led to believe of a traditional" victim.

Audiences are also motivated to think of Arabella's character as a bit of a party animal and irresponsible. When Arabella sits in her office prior to going out the night of her assault, her phone is repeatedly going off with texts and phone calls from Simon (Ami Ameen). When she finally picks up and he urges her to go out for the night, Kwame rolls his eyes and insists on Arabella hanging up the phone so she can get her work done, insinuating that Simon is not a man to be trusted.⁷² Arabella sets her alarm for one hour, allowing herself a short break to meet Simon out for a drink where she dances in clubs, ingests cocaine, and shoots tequila with friends. Here is where

⁷² | *May Destroy You*, episode 1, "Eyes, Eyes, Eyes, Eyes," directed by Sam Miller, June 8, 2020, HBO.

audience members might begin to grapple with the ingrained rape myths that teach them, she is to blame for her assault because she was not sober. However, through the interaction with the police and her friend Kwame, the collective spectatorial feelings are sympathy, and belief. Audiences see Arabella as a “good” survivor of assault because she immediately reports to the police, she has a visible injury, and she cries as she is receiving her exam.

Marie’s experience with police and detectives in *Unbelievable* is unfortunately a stark contrast from Arabella’s. Marie’s story features a character who is living on her own in a transitional housing program for teens who are aging out of the foster system. After falling asleep, Marie is raped in her home in the middle of the night by an intruder with a weapon.⁷³ The use of a weapon reifies the common misconception that most sexual assailants most often overpower their victims with the use of weapons.⁷⁴ The story at the heart of *Unbelievable* is real-life re-telling of Marie’s assault, so it is imperative that the series accurately portray basic facts of her experience. What we learn is that even though the perpetrator uses a weapon, the audience is still led to believe that Marie is not a believable victim. After calling the police, an officer quickly arrives at Marie’s home to take an initial statement she is found on the ground, visibly upset, and covered in a blanket; she is then greeted by two cisgender white male detectives, Detective Parker (Eric Lange) and Detective Pruitt (Bill Fagerbakke) ask her to repeat her experience in detail. By the time she gets to the hospital, she must repeat her experience for the third time to the nurse and suffers from repeated traumatization

⁷³ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, “Episode One” directed by Lisa Cholodenko, September 13, 2019, Netflix.

⁷⁴ According to RAINN, only 11% of rapes involve a weapon. “Perpetrators of Sexual Violence: Statistics | RAINN,” accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence>

and revictimization.⁷⁵ Similar to Arabella's story, because the audience is aware that a rape has happened, there is a collective feeling of sympathy. As an advocate, my sympathy grew knowing that not having an advocate present can be damaging.

While Marie's case is the center of the show, *Unbelievable* is an important story because it involves multiple victims and suggests how a feminist-informed advocacy framework can improve survivors' experiences and ultimately pursue criminal justice ends. Amber (Danielle Macdonald), another victim of sexual assault, receives what is considered to be victim-centered, trauma-informed treatment.⁷⁶ While interacting with Detective Duvall (Merrit Wever), a cisgender white woman, Duvall explicitly seeks consent each time she interacts with Amber, consistently checking in with her state of being. Detective Duvall informs her of everything she is doing and why. The very simple difference between the tone of voice of Detective Duvall and Marie's detective indicates that empathy is lacking when talking to Marie. According to Kahlor and Eastin, men are significantly more accepting of rape myths, which can involve believing that a large majority of women lie about being raped after having consensual sex that later regret, or that women who claim to be raped also have bad reputations.⁷⁷ During questioning, Amber is praised for being able to remember her assault in such detail while Marie is frequently interrupted with more questions, constantly seeking clarification for her

⁷⁵ According to Rebecca Campbells interviews with survivors of sexual assault about their experiences with law enforcement and medical personal, 86% of survivors without an advocate felt guilt or self-blame, and 89% of survivors without an advocate were reluctant to seek further help. Rebecca Campbell, "Rape Survivors' Experiences With the Legal and Medical Systems: Do Rape Victim Advocates Make a Difference?," *Violence Against Women* 12, no. 1 (January 1, 2006): 30–45.

⁷⁶ *Unbelievable*, episode 2, "Episode Two."

⁷⁷ Kahlor and Eastin also recognize that while men might be more accepting of rape myths, rape perceptions are also held by women. LeeAnn Kahlor and Matthew S. Eastin, "Television's Role in the Culture of Violence Toward Women: A Study of Television Viewing and the Cultivation of Rape Myth Acceptance in the United States," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 55, no. 2 (2011): 215–31.

answers when she responds with “I don’t know.” During Marie’s exam, detectives are at her apartment finishing up with the evidence collecting, Detective Parker asks about fingerprints and fluids as the forensic police are packing up, but during Amber’s case when the officers inform Detective Duvall that the police are starting to get tired and asks for a break, she very flatly says “no, keep working” making it very clear how serious she is about this case. Whether or not Marie or Arabella appear to be worthy/unworthy victims suggest to the audience, who should be believed.

“I Believe You”

Aptly named, *Unbelievable* is the story of a young woman’s sexual assault that no one believes occurred. Despite the circumstances of Marie’s sexual assault which mirrored larger U.S. cultural expectations of what sexual assault most often entails (i.e., a stranger, a weapon, time of day), Marie’s her foster mom, Judith, makes it very clear that she is dubious about Marie’s claims and believe that Marie could be faking her assault for attention. During “Episode One,” Judith (Elizabeth Marvel) asks to speak to Detective Parker privately concerning Marie’s assault.⁷⁸ Judith begins to explain that Marie’s live has been unstable, a child in the foster care system with a history of abuse, Judith explains that her experience makes for a “very complicated young woman” and on top of her moving out on her own for the first time Marie has been “needier...a little more acting out.” The scene then flashes back to a child’s birthday party where Marie can be seen dancing proactively on a table while a group of teenagers watch below her. Judith takes notice and immediately states “that’s inappropriate...there are children present”, when the scene flashes back to her talking to the detective she explains that

⁷⁸ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, “Episode One.”

she would call this “Look at me” behavior. Judith proceeds to tell the detective that when she got the call from Marie and showed up to comfort her the whole thing just “felt off.”⁷⁹ While the audience originally felt sympathy for Marie moments before as they saw her sitting on the ground traumatized, the show introduces skepticism making it harder to believe that Marie was really the victim of an assault.

Marie has a turbulent history; she has been in and out of foster homes for most of her life and has a history of sexual assault, leading Judith to believe that Marie has done something that she regrets and is making up the story. Rachel Hall writes that “performance of diligent fearfulness grant[s] *some* women access to good citizenship and all of the rewards.”⁸⁰ Marie does not act fearful. Colleen (Bridget Everett), another foster mom from Marie’s past, comes to her aid; she enters her home without knocking, forces Marie into physical contact via a hug without her consent, and expects Marie to want to unload her emotions about what happened.⁸¹ Because Marie does not concede to or fit these emotions, she does not fall into her foster mom’s arms for protection, she gets angry at a department store clerk when looking for new sheets, and “really just want to get things put away” as she unpacks into her new apartment; Marie does not fit into the fear mold of a believable survivor.

Standpoint theory does not suggest that you need to be a part of a marginalized or different social group to believe the accounts of others or to develop knowledge to advocate on behalf of the lives of others.⁸² Instead, this framework suggests that you

⁷⁹ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, “Episode One.”

⁸⁰ Hall, “It Can Happen to You,” 10 (emphasis added).

⁸¹ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, “Episode One.”

⁸² Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What is ‘Strong Objectivity,’” *Michigan State University Press* 36, no. 3 (Fall 1992): 437–70.

use individual's experiences and stories as a starting point of analysis for developing critical insights; Marie's family, friends, and the detectives fail to do this. Instead, Judith takes it upon herself to reach out to the lead detective of Marie's case and share the former foster mothers' skepticism about Marie's accounts. At first, it seems that the detective is taking Judith's testimony with a grain of salt, responding, "I think there is a range of reactions to this kind of thing," implying that he has a certain degree of trauma informed training.

In T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong's original reporting with ProPublica, Marie's real-life foster mom is quoted saying "I'm a big *Law & Order* fan, and I just got this really weird feeling...I felt like she was telling me the script of a *Law & Order* story."⁸³ Because Marie's attack was so rare, so severe, and so dramatic, it amplified the disbelief of those close to her, making those who should have believed and supported her cast doubts. Marie is asked to come back to the station to go over her written statement and driven by the doubts of Colleen and Judith, the detectives on her case start to question the minor inconsistencies of Marie's assault. The detectives also request her records of child services because they wanted a clear picture of the kind of person that she was. Marie is becoming less and less believable through the stereotypes of being "white trash" due to history in the foster care system and her abusive family situations. The inconsistencies in Marie's story shed light to what happens when you go into a situation with a preconceived notion that what you are hearing is not the truth. It is normal, and to be expected that survivors of sexual assault

⁸³ T. Christian Miller and Ken Armstrong, "An Unbelievable story of rape." ProPublica, December 16, 2017, <https://www.propublica.org/article/false-rape-accusations-an-unbelievable-story>.

might not remember or confuse details. Their bodies are doing whatever they need to, to survive which includes blocking out what is traumatic.⁸⁴

What transpires next can only be described as coercive and bullying. As a result of the *minor* inconsistencies and influence from the foster moms, the two detectives accuse Marie of lying. Marie says she “flips a switch” to do anything that she can to get out of that room and tells the detectives she was not raped, and she made the story up. *Unbelievable* also takes liberties with how they choose to represent the other survivors in the story. Although ProPublica/Marshall Project never discussed the race of the other survivors in Colorado. The television show however decided to portray them with different races, body types and various ages; reinforcing the idea that anyone, no matter what you look like can be a victim of sexual assault. Although at this moment, observers might be battling with whether to believe Marie, this show is working unlike other feminist shows in the past because it is challenging audiences framework on what makes a believable survivor.

Arabella’s experience of support allows her to heal safely where she experiences no judgment from her core group of friends. Her employers provide her with a therapist trained in sexual assault trauma who provides awareness of rape trauma syndrome which includes frequent flashbacks, high irritability, emotional numbing, and difficulty focusing. Victim-centered advocacy informs the audience of the multi-dimensional reactions that survivors may experience and reiterates that not all survivors have the same experience. *What I May Destroy You* also does well is provide the audience with various types of sexual assault. In episode 4, “That was Fun” Kwame is assaulted; after

⁸⁴ Kate Richmond, Elizabeth Geiger, and Carly Reed, “The Personal Is Political: A Feminist and Trauma-Informed Therapeutic Approach to Working with a Survivor of Sexual Assault,” *Clinical Case Studies* 12, no. 6 (2013): 443–56,

a consensual hook-up from the app Grindr he attempts to leave the room but is forced onto a bed and sexually assaulted by his date.⁸⁵ When Kwame attempts to report what happened to him, he is met with apprehension and judgement by the police because they do not understand the “hook up” culture that Kwame describes and are visibly uncomfortable with the fact that Kwame is gay. In Arabella’s attempt at finding companionship, she meets Zain who while during consensual sex removes the condom without her knowledge, which later Arabella learns is another form of rape.⁸⁶ Choosing to tell multiple stories during this twelve-part series teaches viewing audiences that there is no singular “type” of rape, and all survivors deserve to be believed.

The “Tribe”

After Marie is coerced into recanting her statement, because she lives in group housing, she is required to tell everyone that she lied about what happened (presumably to calm fears of others who might worry about a rapist breaking into their living quarters).⁸⁷ One by one, this show demonstrates Marie’s loss of support from people who might otherwise stand by her. She loses the support of her foster moms, the counselors, and friends she made in her housing complex. She goes so far as to begin deleting all the photos of friends and family from her digital camera, a hobby she once loved. As a result of the widespread belief that she had fabricated the assault, no one offered her help, and she was not eligible for any resources through the criminal justice system. She was left feeling very alone, a point that is reiterated when her name was

⁸⁵ *I May Destroy You*, episode 4, “That Was Fun,” directed by Same Miller and Michaela Coel, June 29, 2020. HBO

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, “Episode One.”

leaked to the press as the “girl who cried wolf,” she lost all anonymity as news channels waited outside of her apartment, which eventually lead to so much publicity that she lost her job. Marie starts slipping into behavior that also results in the loss of her housing and must move back in with Judith temporarily. Through all of this, she is then charged with and pleads guilty to a false report of a crime, must pay a fee of \$500 and is required to be on probation and attend counseling.⁸⁸

Watching Marie become a victim to systematic failures encourages audiences to recognize that having resources and believing survivors can have a disparate outcome. Marie was not fearful of the system any longer, she trusted no one because everyone continued to let her down. The best thing that came out of this for her was surprisingly her false report charge. The charge provided her with an attorney who was willing to listen to her and fight for her best possible outcome. Her mandatory counselor was the first person who looked at her and said, “I am so sorry this happened to you, and I believe you.”⁸⁹ Victim-centered advocacy is knowing the systemic failures and gaps in knowledge that could prevent what happened to Marie. *Unbelievable*'s representation of systematic failures a collective consciousness raising that encourages audiences to think about what differences can be made in the criminal justice system that would prevent this from happening again.

During Arabella's story of healing, her friends Terry and Kwame lift her up the best ways they know how. Terry organizes self-care days weekly; she accompanies Arabella to meetings with the police when they find out that the case is being closed due

⁸⁸ See *Unbelievable* episode 5, “Episode Five,” and episode 6, “Episode Six.”

⁸⁹ *Unbelievable*, episode 7, “Episode Seven.”

to a lack of evidence and no one to charge for the crime.⁹⁰ Terry supports Arabella as she outs Zain publicly for sexually assaulting her, and other women. She is there for the yoga lessons, doctor visits, paint classes ... almost overwhelmingly so to Arabella. Wanting so badly to take away what happened to Arabella, Terry finds herself speaking about Arabella rather than for Arabella. Linda Alcoff writes that “one woman’s experience of sexual assault, its effect on her and her interpretation of it, should not be taken as a universal generalization.”⁹¹ In other words, what Terry knows about healing from sexual assault can only be taken from what she has learned from others, or in her own experiences, but acknowledging that all experiences of assault are different. Terry cannot change her position as the one who was *not* assaulted, but she struggles with finding the balance of being an advocate for Arabella and allowing Arabella to find and use her own voice. Arabella finds a group a support group for sexual assault survivors where she can be around women who have similar stories and who share similar experiences. bell hooks writes that consciousness-raising groups were created so that women were able to express the ways they experience victimization, exploitation, and oppression in their everyday lives.⁹² *IMDY* used this support group to show a diverse group of women who came together to talk about the abuse they experienced in the workplace, walking down the street, or Arabella’s case in a bar. This nod to feminist consciousness-raising groups offers a site of encouragement to the loss of feminist thinking and strategies for social change. As Alcoff extends here analysis of activists’ efforts to speak *with* others and to engage with others’ stories in ways that do not

⁹⁰ *I May Destroy You*, episode 8, “Line Spectrum Border.”

⁹¹ Linda Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 5–32.

⁹² bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

reproduce "a desire for mastery, to privilege oneself as the one who more correctly understands the truth about another's situation or as one who can champion a just cause and thus achieve glory and praise."⁹³

Similar to Marie in *Unbelievable*, after Arabella's case takes an all-too-common turn and it is closed due to lack of criminal evidence, Arabella finds herself spiraling into what the audience might understand as unhealthy, self-destructive behaviors. The lack of evidence from her assault or the fact that she cannot remember her assault does not make her an unbelievable survivor, and audiences should not end the show questioning whether her experience happened because there was no arrest. Early representations of sexual assault often ended by either the death or capture of the assailants from the male savior detective, again affirming that the character was in fact assaulted.

Arabella turns to the social media community and becomes a sort of survivor of sexual assault spokesperson. She documents her private life almost as if to say, "this happened to me, this happens to everyone, let's do something about it!" What she does not realize is that by doing this, she is soaking up all the stressors of the world. Very often, we make the mistake of pressuring survivors to report their crime by saying "he could do this to someone else or already has", this creates a level of guilt and responsibility that survivors do not deserve. Phrases such as this place the responsibility of further sexual assaults on the survivor of the previous assault when the only person responsible for these violent actions is the perpetrator. Arabella is reluctant to give up her social media accounts because she feels that "it is her job to speak the truth, [she] must speak the truth" but at what cost to her own mental health? With victim-

⁹³ Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," 29.

centered advocacy, survivors no longer need to feel they must be the ones to be only ones with a voice, advocates can take on that burden for them and be that voice if they choose.

What Does Television Teach Us?

Unlike the closure found in *Unbelievable*, Arabella's story does not end wrapped tightly in a bow with someone punished for a crime. Arabella's romantic relationships have ended, she lost one of her book deals, and the rape case has been closed. Arabella's finale is pure artistry. She invites her audience to experience the grit and pain of finishing her memoir, as well as closing the chapter on her rape. She battles with wanting to face her assailant to hurt him but struggles at the same time with wanting to get to know him and his pain.⁹⁴ An audience member might find her ending frustrating, but it also offers us the ability to want to know her and support her. Viewers might also come to understand that the ending Michaela Coel wrote is more typical for survivors. According to Rape, Abuse, Incest, National Network (RAINN), the United States only 5 out of 1,000 of sexually assault will lead to a felony conviction, and only 4.6 out of 1,000 will lead to incarceration.⁹⁵ Statistics such as these show that the end of a survivor's story, does not need to end in the prosecution of her perpetrator but that we should focus on the experience of the survivor and their very specific needs.

Throughout this chapter, I have worked to dismantle stereotypical tropes and myths related to sexual violence. I have analyzed two television shows post the #MeToo movement that have provided a feminist points of exploration and conversation

⁹⁴ *I May Destroy You*, episode 12, "Ego Death."

⁹⁵ "The Criminal Justice System: Statistics | RAINN." n.d. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>.

for their audience. Both *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You* portray the aftermath sexual assault in a manner that differs from most other popular culture on this topic. They prevent the audience from obsessing over the titillating details of sexual assault from the survivors thus not allowing for the objectification of women through television. Rather than focusing primarily on the harms of the sexual assaults as acts of immediate violence, both shows invite audiences bear witness to the larger cycles of trauma that often radiate out after experiences of assault; audiences watch helplessly as Marie and Arabella lose the support of friends and family, sink deeper in their depression, engage in other high-risk behaviors, and experience suicidal ideations. Rachel Hall suggests that the goal now needs to turn the tragedy into ordinary.⁹⁶ This is not to say that sexual assault is not a tragedy, but when it is an experience of one out of six women in the U.S., then it is also frighteningly ordinary. By acknowledging the “ordinary” circumstances of sexual assault, advocates can rid pop culture of the previous assumptions that rape is rare, or that it is a crime only committed by strangers.

Receiving the lived experiences through television texts might empower some to stand up for themselves or for other. Laws can change with good advocacy. Advocates have a responsibility to survivors, and that means that more must be done outside of interfacing with survivors. Becoming a victim advocate means signing up to be on the front lines of this movement. It is immersing oneself in its failures and its ignorance; challenging the norms that are barriers to a survivor’s healing. It should be said that sexual assault is not a crime only committed against women. It should be recognized that this crime exists in the LGBTQIA+ community, it happens to men by women, and

⁹⁶ Hall, “It Can Happen to You.”

men by men. This crime happens to children, and it can happen to the elderly. Further research should be conducted on these marginalized communities. My research comes from the standpoint of a current sexual assault advocate, but I cannot speak for all advocates and their experiences.

If media is a site of production for ideologies that reinforce hierarchies, then having the ability and responsibility to critique media for feminist discourse is imperative. If we are able to be advocates in fictional settings as we watch them play out on television, then we must pay attention to the way rape is represented in the popular culture we consume. As feminist critics we can look at the policies that exist in our criminal justice system, medical and judicial systems. Feminist critics who are also advocates have a duty to recognize where there are gaps in teachings and trainings that do not allow for fundamental cultural or systemic shifts. We must pay attention to how pop culture and media are influencing the way that we treat victims of violence and how we might participate in ending it.

Television shows, particularly those based on true stories are in the business of speaking for others. If pop culture and mass media are sites for ideologies, then it is the responsibility of those who produce these sites to practice awareness of sensitive topics such as sexual assault and abuse, be aware of dialogues or narratives that are sexist, and racist. Jennifer Sandlin writes that practicing cultural resistance actively engages in creating pop culture.⁹⁷ Michaela Coel is creator, writer, director, and executive producer of *I May Destroy You* and she fought to have complete creative control of her show, and

⁹⁷ Sandlin, "Pop Culture and Cultural Resistance."

in reality, her story.⁹⁸ Using her platform, Coel enacted not only her own agency as a survivor, but to also offered space for other survivors, particularly black women and men to speak out about assaults, and to seek the support they rightfully deserve. As mentioned before the true story of what happened to Marie was published by two non-partisan and award-winning journalists, and her story is an important one to tell. Netflix however, allowed for global consumption. I would argue that the parallel narratives of *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* provide a space for more deeply understanding how coming from a perspective of believing victims is instrumental to their healing process and for providing them with a voice.

The location, or in other words, where someone who might see themselves as an advocate speaks from is epistemically salient. Where we get the knowledge to develop an opinion on something like sexual assault, and then speak on it can prove to be dangerous. We must pay attention to how these television shows teach viewers how to be advocates. An advocate's voice has to the power to make effective or ineffective changes in policy. Those with the power to speak for policy changes who do not speak from a location of knowledge do not speak for victims of sexual assault, but about victims of sexually assault. Speaking about a survivor, or about their needs is participating in representing their needs, goals, situations, and who they are.⁹⁹ By focusing efforts on creating pop culture that is victim experience driven and advocacy centered, feminists can make central the issues of sexual violence and shift the

⁹⁸ Michaela Coel originally pitched her show to Netflix, but they refused to allow her to have 5% of the copyright. She turned them down for all creative rights working with BBC and HBO. Jung, E. Alex. "Michaela the Destroyer," *Vulture*, July 6, 2020, <https://www.vulture.com/article/michaela-coel-i-may-destroy-you.html>.

⁹⁹ Alcoff, "The Problem of Speaking for Others."

narratives of blame from survivors to perpetrators and develop sustainable prevention measures.

CHAPTER 3

PEDAGOGIES OF ADVOCACY TRAINING IN TEXAS

Introduction

My experience as a victims' advocate in Dallas, Texas has been deeply rewarding as well as challenging in myriad ways. I transitioned from serving as a volunteer to staff member within three months, mentoring new trainees, and serving on advocacy training panels for new volunteers. Prior to training, all new volunteers undergo an interview process, and before being accepted into the volunteer program, staff need to believe that new volunteers are empathetically prepared to support survivors. During trainings, our instructors discussed the importance of self-care and recognizing the signs of burnout, which frequently prompts activists to phase themselves out of the day-to-day work of being involved with the anti-rape movement. Separating yourself from someone else's trauma, while also remaining empathetic and engaged in the victim's experiences, is no easy feat; but this separation is particularly important when assisting those who are struggling through compounding layers of trauma, such as systemic poverty and racism.

This 40-hour training consisted of lectures and workshops, three days a week in the hospital that we would soon provide accompaniment when we were finished training. We participated in training with members of the Texas Association Against Sexual Assault (TAASA), the District Attorney, a detective from the Dallas Police Department, staff from Genesis (a Dallas-based domestic violence shelter) and Traffick911 (a faith-based organization for sex trafficking survivors), and the Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center DARCC's Chief Executive Officer. During our training, we primarily

focused on how to efficiently answer crisis hotline calls, involving understanding topics such as what sexual violence entails, various cycles of trauma reactions, how to provide immediate crisis intervention, and the tenants of trauma-informed care. One overarching theme of this training was to break down rape myths and reiterate that anyone can be a survivor of sexual violence and that all victims deserve a strong advocate.

Informed by intersectional feminism, I acknowledge that sexual violence advocacy is all too often limited regarding the diversity of advocates and the comprehension of socio-cultural contexts of survivors. Critical race theorist and feminist activist, Kimberlé Crenshaw, coined the term intersectionality in 1989 to examine the consequences of treating race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience.¹⁰⁰ Her groundbreaking research on the intersections of multiple identities offers a critical framework for researchers seeking to recognize patterns of oppressions that perpetuates the harms of violence against minoritized communities, particularly women of color and individuals belonging to multiply-marginalized populations. Adopting a perspective informed by intersectional feminism is significant because marginalized communities suffer disproportionately due largely to the intersecting structural oppressions on multiply-minoritized identities. Identifying the barriers that women of color, victims living with mental illnesses, and/or unhomed survivors might face when seeking services through rape crisis centers is vital to providing support and preventing further victimization.

As I discussed in Chapter 2, media representations of sexual assault inform audiences, and potentially advocates of what survivors of sexual assault are “supposed”

¹⁰⁰ Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique on Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989):139-167.

to look like. Surely, the media depictions of sexual violence I and other advocates have consumed have shaped how we understand survivors. Frequently, upon leaving a hospital accompaniment, I have wondered why I assumed that a survivor would act differently and have been curious about how my official training has intersected with my training in a larger culture steeped in sexual violence.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, all victims' advocates in Texas are certified by the Office of The Attorney General and receive 40 hours of training by their affiliated organizations. Much of the training material is provided by TAASA and augmented by local advocacy organizations to help advocates understand localized challenges common to victims in their area. During classroom training, advocates are generally provided with an agency training manual and participate in lecture-style lessons. In September 2020, I contacted fifteen rape crisis and domestic violence organizations in the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex and asked them to provide me with any and all training materials that they use doing their lectures. I received copies of PowerPoints, links to webinars, and three out of the fifteen organizations I contacted provided me with physical training manuals. In addition, TAASA provides a 263 page *Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual* to all sexual assault programs with the SATP certification. This manual was most recently revised in 2016 and is in its seventh edition. Rape crisis centers and dual domestic violence organizations use this manual as a reference during their advocacy trainings.

In this chapter, I engage in a discourse analysis of the training manuals utilized by advocate training programs to determine how the materials employed by instructors participate in reinforcing and/or challenging hegemonic power structures, common

rapes myths, and social hierarchies that may prevent survivors from receiving adequate resources. Discourse analysis is a method used to analyze language, spoken or written, images, symbols, and other media representations.¹⁰¹ A feminist discourse analysis, a vestige of postmodern feminists, prevails as an inherently feminist tool in examining hidden oppressions lurking in the discourse of social and political interactions of society.¹⁰² In this chapter, I analyze the training materials from local non-profit rape crisis centers and domestic violence shelters in the Dallas / Ft. Worth, Texas metroplex, in addition to the TAASA training manual, to appraise their content for potential latent biases. Carefully analyzing the language in these training materials has enabled me to pay special attention to the selection of words, phrases, descriptions of experiences, or events that aims to educate and inform volunteers and paid advocates how to serve survivors. While all training manuals explicitly state that all survivors are to be believed, personal biases and social views from advocates based on outside teachings may prevent them from providing adequate care. Examining how organizations train their advocates provides insights into the importance of more fully adopting a framework guided by intersectional feminist values.

Advocacy Training in Texas

In Texas, individuals interested in becoming advocates for sexual assault survivors are required to complete 40 hours of crisis intervention training, certified through the Office of the Attorney General. The Office of the Attorney General (OAG)

¹⁰¹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," 47.

¹⁰² Frauke Elichaooff and Nollaig Frost, "Feminist Postmodernism, Poststructuralism, and Cultural Theory," in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, ed. Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2014), 47.

Sexual Assault Prevention and Crisis Services (SAPCS) administers the Sexual Assault Training Program Certification (SATP) to local programs¹⁰³ that operate sexual assault training programs that meets the following certification requirements: (1) a 24-hour crisis hotline (2) crisis intervention (3) public education (4) advocacy, and accompaniment to hospitals, law enforcement offices, prosecutors' offices, and courts.¹⁰⁴ Eligibility for the certification requires each organization to provide their paid advocates and volunteers with 30 hours of classroom-style instruction, and 10 hours of on-the-job training, web-based training, or other non-traditional classroom training and a minimum of 6 hours annual continuing education.¹⁰⁵ The purpose of the OAG SATP certification is to prepare employees and volunteer advocates of Sexual Assault Programs to satisfy the requirement in Texas Code Criminal Procedure, Article 56.045 which states that before conducting a forensic medical exam on a person presenting for the collection of evidence for a sexual assault the medical service personal shall offer the person the opportunity to have an advocate present. In other words, it is Texas State law that when someone presents at a hospital for a sexual assault exam, medical personal is *required* to offer an advocate to that individual. Furthermore, their training must meet curriculum requirements and cover topics such as (1) dynamics of sexual assault, (2) system response, (3) primary prevention (4) working with survivors (5) local program information (6) Medical forensic examinations for the collection of evidence and (7) Role

¹⁰³ Also referred to as Sexual Assault Programs as defined by Texas Government Code, Section 420.003(7).

¹⁰⁴ See, Texas Office of Attorney General. *OAG Sexual Assault Advocate Training Program (SATP) Certification Guide*, 3.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

of an Advocate during the Sexual Assault Medical Forensic Examination.¹⁰⁶

A sexual assault survivor advocate's primary job is to provide direct services to survivors, typically in the immediate aftermath of an assault. Advocates use trauma-informed training techniques to provide ethical and empathetic support to survivors. Advocates are also equipped to answer a wide range of questions about forensic exams, rape laws, and follow-up counseling services. Therefore, it is imperative that rape crisis centers spend ample time preparing advocates to understand the dynamics of sexual violence in the most expansive way possible. Despite the "anyone can be a victim" mantra, training materials frequently rely on frameworks of "special populations" to account for victims who are not cisgender white women. This chapter seeks to understand how statewide trainings frame the unique experiences and needs of survivors who do not fit into the mold of stereotypically "believable" survivor. In what follows, I first discuss the framework of "special populations" as it permeates much of the training. Next, I consider how the TAASA manual and other training materials work to dismantle rape myths and, in doing so, convey ideological convictions. Finally, I unpack Texas trainings' uses of mock calls and vignette style scenarios to help to prepare advocates for answering hotline calls and understanding the dynamics of sexual assault to explicate how these stock scenarios work both in alignment with and in tension with hegemonic myths about rape victims, assailants, and prevention.

Who are Survivors of Sexual Assault?

The TAASA *Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual* references "special population" survivors on pages 148-184 and this language is common to many of the

¹⁰⁶ OAG *Sexual Assault Advocate Training Program (SATP) Certification Guide*, 3-4.

localized training materials. The TAASA manual details that “special populations” include individuals who have disabilities, belong in the LGBT¹⁰⁷ community, identify with racial and ethnic groups such as African American, Latinos, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, and American Indians, and survivors who fall into certain age categories such as adolescents, college students, and the elderly.¹⁰⁸ The term “special populations” is particularly problematic because while the training materials are explicitly working to acknowledge the realities of sexual violence experienced by multiply-marginalized communities such as women of color and unhomed individuals, calling them “special” insinuates a difference, a peculiarity, and that they do not fall neatly into the feminist anti-rape movement.

As Crenshaw argues, “contemporary feminist and antiracist discourses have failed to consider intersectional identities such as women of color.”¹⁰⁹ Grayson County Crisis Center located in Sherman, Texas defines “special populations” in their PowerPoint training, noting that special populations are “groups of people where certain considerations must be taken with advocacy”¹¹⁰ This definition informs Grayson County advocates that there are survivors whose identities make them more vulnerable to harms, with unique needs and considerations. While this is certainly an important starting point, the language of “special” suggests unwittingly that there is a “normal” population of victims against which the special groups are differentiated.

Returning to the topic of attending to the vulnerabilities of intersectionally located

¹⁰⁷ This is the language used by TAASA.

¹⁰⁸ TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*”, (2016), 148-184.

¹⁰⁹ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

¹¹⁰ Grayson Crisis Center “Special Populations,” PowerPoint Presentation.

individuals, I do want to emphasize the importance of training advocates about the complicated ways that multiple-marginalized victims face particular challenges such as, violating norms of racial solidarity in the Black community by implicating Black men, inability to access organizational resources like housing assistance due to funds largely being allocated to accompaniment and courts, and the myth of the Black prostitute or jezebel as justification for rape.¹¹¹ The unfortunate lack of research of sexual violence within the LGBTQ+ community has also made it difficult to “understand victimization rates which translates to poor access to services for LGTBTQ survivors, disproportionate reduction in safety, and generally a poor response to assault disclosure in health, social service, and criminal justice sectors.”¹¹²

A rape crisis center located in Fannin County, TX, provided me with their physical training manual, and their section covering special populations spans pages 103-137. Between the pages of 119-127 are titled “male survivors” and “people of color”, these pages have been completely omitted from the training manual and are not found within their manuals. According to The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, for every black woman who reports rape, at least 15 women do not report and as Crenshaw notes African American survivors of rape are the least likely to be believed due to intersecting matrices of racialized/gendered stereotypes about Black women’s strength, stigmatized sexuality, and long-standing dismissive attitudes

¹¹¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd ed., Routledge Classics (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹¹² Jeffrey L. Todahl, et al., “Sexual Assault Support Services and Community Systems: Understanding Critical Issues and Needs in the LGBTQ Community,” *Violence Against Women* 15, no. 8 (2009): 952–76.

regarding abuses of Black women.¹¹³ Black women are less likely to report their assaults and experience higher rates of rape and sexual assault than White, Asian, and Latinx women.¹¹⁴ These experiences of disenfranchisement are exacerbated in Texas because advocacy training manuals do not address the vulnerabilities of Black women in the U.S. Rather, the training materials overwhelmingly erase Black people's experiences with the criminal justice system, connections to faith communities, and stigmatization of sexual violence victims. In each free-standing rape crisis center I analyzed, not even one includes discussion of the unique experiences of women of color or the violence they often experience.

The erasure of Black women's experiences from the training material suggests that Black women are simply presumed to be represented in and benefitted by prevailing feminist interests.¹¹⁵ Michele S. Jacobs of University of Florida succinctly states "if [Black women] are not valued as women, and if their wounds are not recognized as wounds ... women's organization will never be able to move from ignoring their issues to creating space for them under the women's umbrella."¹¹⁶ Furthermore, when we discuss a community such as Black women, we lift all communities who do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual or class privilege to rely on, "if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free

¹¹³ "Black Women and Sexual Assault" The National Center on Violence Against Women in the Black Community, last modified, October 2018. <https://ujimacommunity.org/resources/>; Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1289.

¹¹⁴ U.S. DOJ Bureau of Justice Statistics, "*Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994-2010*," 2013.

¹¹⁵ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins," 1271.

¹¹⁶ Michelle S. Jacobs, "The Violent State: Black Women's Invisible Struggle Against Police Violence", *William & Mary Journal of Race, Gender, and Social Justice* 24, no 1 (2017): 63.

since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.”¹¹⁷

In the PowerPoints provided by the Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center (DARCC), TAASA representatives conduct the lecture on trauma-informed care which covers special populations; however, DARCC’s materials have changed their language to “vulnerable populations.” In this shift though, DARCC’s training removed “cultural groups” from their presentation as being vulnerable to abuse and exclusion by the criminal justice system. In removing “cultural groups,” DARCC has also removed the opportunity in their training to actively invite discussion about the precarity faced by women of color more generally. This shift is intended to emphasize that anyone can be victimized by sexual violence, regardless of race. However, as Crenshaw argues, when feminist politics claim to reflect all women’s experiences, especially in relation to gendered violence, this does not typically include the uniquely intersectional experiences of Black women.¹¹⁸

The TAASA manual makes sweeping generalizations about “similar feelings shared by people of color,” stating that people of color have a “lack of trust in authorities,” “less inclination to openly discuss feelings,” and “loyalty to [their] own cultural group.”¹¹⁹ The manual also discusses the many ways that people of color are portrayed as “promiscuous, passionate, exotic or subservient.”¹²⁰ These racist and sexist myths are important foundations for acknowledging barriers that people of color

¹¹⁷ Combahee River Collective, *The Combahee River Collective Statement: Black Feminist Organizing in the Seventies and Eighties* (Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1986).

¹¹⁸ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins,” 140.

¹¹⁹ TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*, 149.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

often experience in accessing resources. Notably, the TAASA manual also notes that “people of color have special concerns about sexual assault that come from their cultural upbringing and the problems of *coping with racism in society*.” Importantly, people of color should not be expected to “cope” with racism in society; advocates should be trained to help dismantle the racist structures and practices that impede people of color from finding equitable support. Sexual violence advocacy organizations whose mission is to create “social change through awareness and accountability”,¹²¹ “treat each person with dignity and respect”,¹²² “foster a culture that respects fundamental rights”,¹²³ and “honor survivor’s culture, experience, and lifestyle”,¹²⁴ should work more proactively at being the change. Additionally, it is not enough to simply state that “African-American women have historically experienced increased objectification” or that they have been “pressured” to trust whites.¹²⁵ Advocacy training is incomplete without acknowledging the history and commodification of African American women’s bodies. Furthermore, African American women represent 22.3% of women in poverty in the U.S. and this precarity only increases the likelihood of a wide range of violence and marginalization, including sexual violence.¹²⁶ Living in poverty creates additional barriers for seeking

¹²¹ See, Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center’s mission statement. “Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center – We Believe Survivors,” accessed May 19, 2021, <https://dallasrapecrisis.org/>.

¹²² See, Mission Granbury Mission Statement. “Who We Are,” Mission Granbury, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://www.missiongranbury.org/services1>.

¹²³ See, TAASA Mission statement, “Texas Association Against Sexual Assault,” accessed May 19, 2021, <https://taasa.org/>.

¹²⁴ See, Fannin County Mission statement, “Mission & Values,” Fannin County Crisis Center, accessed May 19, 2021, <https://fccrisiscenter.org/mission-%26-values>.

¹²⁵ TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Training Manual*, 150.

¹²⁶ Robin Bleiweis et al., “The Basic Facts About Women in Poverty,” Center for American Progress, accessed May 8, 2021, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/reports/2020/08/03/488536/basic-facts-women-poverty/>.

help from both formal and informal services due to victim blaming based on racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of societal trauma.¹²⁷

A few points to consider about the language used for “special” populations in the TAASA training manual. Starting on page 149, the manual introduces various cultural groups: African American, Latinos, American Indian, and Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI). One thing to notice is their use of the term Latinos, an all-encompassing descriptor for large groups of people whose national and cultural origins, or those of their ancestors, are from Mexico, Central America, or Latin America, regardless of their gender and/or cultural particularities.¹²⁸ According to the *Journal of Latinx Psychology*, “Latinx” is increasingly used as a “gender-inclusive identifier that aims to acknowledge the spectrum of gender identities and address the invisibility and oppression that the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people face within Latin American countries.”¹²⁹ Furthermore, the “x” in Latinx reflects the “visible wound” that confronts the violence that has been accepted in their communities.¹³⁰ Implementing terminology that acknowledges not only their identities, but the violence suffered can provide a framework to advocates that will help affirm the survivors with who they interact. While important to add this language to manuals and activism efforts, advocates must always allow the space for survivors to choose how they want to identify. We want to work on understanding the cultural nuances of

¹²⁷ Thema Bryant-Davis, et al., “Struggling to Survive: Sexual Assault, Poverty, and Mental Health Outcomes of African American Women,” *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 80, no. 1 (2010): 61-70.

¹²⁸ TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*,” 153.

¹²⁹ María R. Scharrón-del Río and Alan A. Aja, “Latinx: Inclusive Language as Liberation Praxis,” *Journal of Latinx Psychology* 8, no. 1 (2020): 7–20.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

individuals and promote inclusivity, rather than placing survivors in restrictive identity boxes.

Research out of the University of Oregon offer several recommendations for local organizations to reduce oppression of sexual minorities such as including LGBTQ awareness training in curricula, utilizing inclusive language in agency paperwork and developing and implementing LGBTQ sensitive training protocols¹³¹. Cultivating the tools to interact with individuals of other cultural groups as well as people who identify as LGBTQ is imperative to the mission to end sexual violence. While the *Sexual Assault Advocate Manual* uses the acronym “LGBT” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender), the local manuals more consistently use “LGBTQ+” (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, with the plus indicating others who might fall under the broader umbrella of people who fall outside of gender/sexual binaries). Promoting inclusivity by acknowledging the many identities of both sexuality and gender informs advocates that personal opinions and discrimination on the matter will not be tolerated as an advocate for survivors of sexual violence. Defining these terms is also imperative to advocate understanding. The TAASA manual uses an extremely outdated description of transgender individuals on page 182 stating that “transgenderism refer to the range of individuals who are living as the opposite sex, (with or without surgical reassignment) cross dressing for a period of time, or earning a living working in the dress of the opposite sex.”¹³² According to the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD) the term transgender (not transgenderism) is an “umbrella term for people whose

¹³¹ Jeffrey L. Todahl et al., “Sexual Assault Support Services.”

¹³² TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*, 182.

gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth.”¹³³ Importantly, more contemporary advocacy for trans people do not rely on binaries that are suggested with phrases like “opposite sex,” and are far less likely to emphasize surgical status or dress as the key markers for identifying as trans. The TAASA definition provides outdated and limiting context to advocates who may be first learning about LGBTQ+ identities and experiences in these trainings, which could lead to further revictimization of transgender survivors of sexual violence.

How advocates learn to think about sexual assault is crucial, and many rape crisis centers utilize mock hotline calls to prepare advocates for the types of encounters they might experience. Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center provides nine scenarios for their advocates, and also requires that prior to their final exam they meet with a staff advocate who will “act” out scenarios and do scripts in real time. Out of these nine scenarios, seven involve a cisgender woman as the victim and a cisgender man as the offender. The only representation of a man accessing services is found in a scenario of a man calling the hotline to harass the volunteer. While this sort of call sadly happens to crisis hotline workers often, this limited perspective reinforces the expectation that only women will be victims and that men would only need to access the hotline to reinforce violence against women.

Each scenario is central to the learning process for advocates and these scenarios inform the imagination of what advocates assume they will encounter in their work. These mock scenarios are designed so that advocates can prepare to answer questions about medical exams, police interactions, and unique concerns related to

¹³³ “GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender,” GLAAD, September 9, 2011, <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

adolescents and victims navigating shame and guilt. For example, in Scenario 1, the caller describes her assault as “sending him the wrong message” and that it was a “guy that I’ve been talking too.”¹³⁴ This scenario helpfully reinforces the fact that most survivors are not harmed by unknown strangers. Similarly, DARCC provides a second example of acquaintance rape in Scenario 8, a caller stating that she was assaulted by her boyfriend who she lives with and she does not know what to do. Furthermore, in Scenario 9, DARCC maintains that regardless of whether or not a survivor remembers their assault, advocates are to believe them, and provide them with the same services. The caller in this scenario asks, “will the nurse be able to tell me if I was raped, for sure?” “What if I don’t remember, I think I was raped ... I don’t know.”¹³⁵ These scenarios are incredibly helpful in assisting advocates with tough calls and helping them build confidence in how they might respond to survivors. While there is no question that gender-based violence more frequently involves women victims and men/masculine assailants, these scenarios undermine the reality that 13% of lesbian women, 46% of bisexual women, 40% of gay men and 47% of bisexual men, and 47% of transgender people have experienced sexual violence or rape in their lifetime.¹³⁶

I have been answering hotline calls like these since 2019, and I have recently seen an increase in African American callers sharing their apprehensions about involving police or seeking counseling. I have had callers state “Clearly, I can’t call the police – you’ve seen what they do to Black men” and “Do you have cultural competent

¹³⁴ Dallas Area Rape Crisis Center, “Hotline Scenarios”

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ See James Herman, et al. *The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality. (2016). S.G Smith, et al. *The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS): 2010-2012 State Report*. Atlanta, GA: National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2017).

therapists, ones who know how to deal with Black issues”; while African American women are seeking help in the DFW area, organizations are not providing sufficient frameworks for their advocates to comprehensively understand unique barriers. The apprehension of contacting authorities due to historical racism in policing on top of the fear of not being believed, are two independent challenges facing Black women. Not only do Black women suffer from sexist misconceptions that women lie about being assaulted, but they are also experience racism within the criminal justice system compounding the intangible burdens that plague Black women as they report sexual assault.¹³⁷ Creating more diverse training scenarios for advocates to practice with during their trainings could prove invaluable to training more well-rounded, intersectionally informed advocates.

The TAASA manual also uses vignette style scenarios to tell fictitious stories to prepare advocates. Despite studying the misconceptions of “real” rape, these vignettes are riddled with stereotypes and misconceptions about “typical” sexual violence experiences. Out of the seven examples of sexual assault, two involve strangers, three involve an acquaintance, one involves a victim in prison, one involves family violence, and one involves marital rape. In each vignetter also includes the use of a weapon and/or significant physical abuse. For example, the survivor profile of “Maria” states that after returning to her apartment, she was shoved into an elevator and a knife was pressed against her throat when the elevator opened, the attacker forced her into a storage room where he proceeded to rape her and threatened to kill her.¹³⁸ In one of the few examples of same-sex violence, the story of “Shell” tells the story of a male

¹³⁷ Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

¹³⁸ TAASA, “*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*, 65.

survivor, who after a party was forced into a car by another man, raped, and stabbed below the ribs. Each character in these vignettes is presented as suffering from severe violence, and/or graphic sexual assault. Although other places in the training teach advocates that weapons are rarely used in cases of gendered violence, each descriptive story tells the story involving exceptional levels of physical violence and threats; this framing suggests to advocates in training that survivors are only believable if they have the significant abuse to “prove it.”

Advocates with a baseline understanding of the dynamics of sexual assault are prepared to assist survivors as they work through their traumatic experiences. Educating intersectionally about the dynamics of sexual assault can strengthen an advocate’s ability to acknowledge their own biases and provide non-judgmental support. If the training manual is going to provide fictional stories of sexual assault, they should be including a wider range of experiences that more closely mirror the nuanced experiences of local victims. Organizations could provide more realistic accounts of sexual assault by asking advocates about their experiences to help produce mock hotline calls or hospital accompaniment. From participating in advocate panels in the past, common questions I have been asked related to issues involving communicating with police, encouraging survivors to report, and how to respond to survivors who blame themselves for the assault. These questions tell me that during training, we are failing to teach advocates about the realities of sexual assault and the complicated array of barriers and challenges that survivors face.

Moving Forward

As this chapter illustrates, while rape crisis centers and domestic violence

organizations are providing immeasurable service to survivors of violence, the development of advocates' trainings and Texas response to prevention strategies fails to incorporate the marginalized experience. For too long, the "women's experience" has been the framework for policy implementation and interventions on violence against women.¹³⁹ Unfortunately, universalized models of "women's experiences" have historically left women of color out of the conversation and systemically ignores the harms experienced by men and non-binary survivors. These problems cannot be solved simply by the "add Black women and stir" method, and we must reconceptualize how we train advocates and the public how to think about survivors. Crenshaw explains that "placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action."¹⁴⁰

Finally, in order to reshape the narrative of sexual violence, sexual assault and domestic violence organizations must create conditions where Black survivors and other women of color's voices are heard and supported. It is not enough to say that people of color share similar feelings of mistrust towards police, law enforcement, counselors or authorities. Organizations must educate on the oversexualization of women of color and the repercussions of using Black bodies as sites of oppression since slavery. The development of an advocacy group made up primarily of women of color could potentially assist in the outreach into communities looking to recruit volunteers or educate on prevention. Rape crisis centers must implement messages of inclusivity and acknowledge the difference of how sexual assault effects women of color through their

¹³⁹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection."

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 167.

advocacy training if there is any hope on ending sexual violence. The TAASA manual encourages advocates to read literature, participate in events go out into the community and accept theories from diverse populations but offer no starting point or concrete suggestions for pursuing these goals.¹⁴¹ They do not offer literature written by Black feminist activists such as Patricia Hill Collins, Angela Davis, or bell hooks. They do not typically bring in non-white survivors to share their experiences or imagine that advocates will represent non-white perspectives. An advocacy perspective derived from the lived experiences of the diverse community it aims to nurture is the only way to respectfully and thoroughly reach the survivors of sexual assault where they are. A training manual teaches more than protocols and procedures; it creates the ethos by which survivors are approached and given empathy and solace. We have a duty to get this right.

¹⁴¹ TAASA, "*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*, 151.

CHAPTER 4
INTERSECTIONAL ADVOCACY TRAINING KIT

Introduction

As I have delved deeply into this research and continued my time as a rape victims' advocate, the need for intersectional advocacy has become even more evident. The COVID-19 virus has prevented advocates, such as me, from providing hospital accompaniment and has necessitated shifts to virtual/ distanced accompaniments. While hospitals can provide technology to victims who have presented for an exam, not all survivors are able to access telehealth options outside of the hospital or privately in their homes. In addition, without an advocate simply showing up in the room with a survivor, it is likely that many individuals do not know the values of requesting the presence of an advocate in the moment of an already alienating experience. An intersectional advocacy framework and project such as this can inform advocacy organizations and allies who wish to provide support to friends and family about how to strengthen the networks of advocacy resources, pedagogies, and outreach.

The purpose of this thesis was to explore how we learn how to advocate for sexual assault survivors, by examining the pedagogies found in both popular culture and advocacy training materials. Chapter 1 embedded this larger contemporary project in a longer feminist history of rape crisis centers and the development of more robust and multi-faceted advocacy programs. As feminist interventions and consciousness-raising were successful in shifting public awareness of sexual violence, so too were their efforts to secure public funding for this work. While helpful in magnifying the reach of advocates, this shift worked alongside broader cultural ideologies supporting myths

about who could experience assault and who was worthy of intervention, this proliferation of rape myths circulates in ways that are especially damaging at the intersections of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class.

Chapter 2 investigates popular culture as a public pedagogy as a means of extending how we think about advocacy for victims of sexual violence. As I detailed, *Unbelievable* and *I May Destroy You* centers sexual assault in their plotlines, importantly exploring diverse experiences of different survivors, nuancing what a “normal” response to abuse might look like. These shows require spectators to sit uncomfortably as their characters, plotlines, and storytelling encourage viewers to question their preconceived notions of what “real” rape entails, how “real” survivors respond to violence, and “real” advocates can meaningfully (if imperfectly) respond. *Unbelievable* asks audiences to judge who is a “believable” survivor of sexual assault by following one survivor’s interactions with police, family, and friends. On the other hand, Arabella’s traumatic experience with sexual assault in *I May Destroy You* is never questioned, but audiences are required to negotiate where to place blame for Arabella’s trauma — On the survivor for being intoxicated and associating with unknown, dangerous men? On her friends who did not effectively protect her? On the unknown assailant? As with most accounts of sexual violence, this story is complicated by murky memories, responses to trauma, and well-meaning, but ill-informed allies. As Henry Giroux reminds us, entertainment media is a powerful teaching machine which influences us unconsciously, and so while early media representations of sexual assault may have influenced a culture of rape myth acceptance, this thesis provides an analysis of popular media which can shift how we think about survivors of sexual assault and

ultimately work on our own skills for providing advocacy to others.¹⁴²

For activists who are invested in engaging in more ongoing and in-depth advocacy efforts, understanding how they are trained to do this work has also helped fill in some gaps about how we understand advocacy pedagogies. Chapter 3 involves a discourse analysis of the Texas statewide *Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual* as well as trainings offered by programs in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex. By analyzing the language used in these materials, I discovered a need for more intersectional language and a wider array of perspectives. The focus of training, which has been designed by the state, has failed to develop a guide for advocacy that incorporates meaningfully intersectional perspectives. This discourse analysis demonstrates a great need for agencies to reconceptualize how we think about survivors at the multiply-minoritized intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, and religion. Introducing an intersectional framework to the training of advocates would help acknowledge the historical, cultural, and structural dimensions that shape vulnerable populations and affect how their willingness to reach out for support from mainstream advocacy centers.¹⁴³ As an advocate who has gone through these trainings, I am in a unique position to do this research because I know that the survivors I work with are not represented well in the advocacy trainings. The nuances that guide their experiences of abuse, the system, healing, and recovery are glossed over when advocacy trainings presume a “one size fits all” approach to interventions. The training is designed so that advocates respond swiftly to a presenting issue, the crisis of having recently been

¹⁴² Henry A. Giroux, “Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film,” *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 6 (2011): 686–95.

¹⁴³ Nancy A. Naples, “Teaching Intersectionality Intersectionally,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 11, no. 4 (2009): 566–77.

assaulted or developing a self-care plan on the hotline. As I have mentioned already, one important job of an advocate is to prevent revictimization of survivors by providing informed, empathic, non-judgmental support and act on their behalf; but without learning how certain identities are more likely to receive inadequate care or suffer from revictimization from police or medical professionals, then we cannot provide culturally competent advocacy.

The more we talk about how media creates ideologies involving sexual assault, the more we can challenge the production of those ideologies thus opening the door to conversations about how we can create sustainable change. Advocacy should not be a singular effort and needs to include broader community responses to ending sexual violence. Pairing popular media with formalized training efforts can help compel spectators to question what they would do or how they might act as an advocate in the lives of friends and family. For example, in *Unbelievable*, during Marie's exam, viewers are invited to experience Marie's point of view, surrounded by camera flashes, the clicking sound of a speculum, and the frustrating silence as no one talks to her.¹⁴⁴ Viewers are also invited to feel Marie's uncertainty, frustration, and malaise when she is asked to repeat her story to a detective for the fourth time after having shared it to a cop, detective, and nurse.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, in *I May Destroy You*, viewers are introduced to the trained advocates while Arabella sits in a group session for survivors of sexual assault, learning how to respond in ways that are empathic and supportive, without

¹⁴⁴ *Unbelievable*, episode 1, "Episode One," directed by Lisa Cholodenko, September 13, 2019, Netflix.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

judgment.¹⁴⁶ This sort of spectatorial collective has the potential to teaches audience members how to support survivors of sexual violence, including the need to take breaks from the barrage of questions, listen to what is being said and how those words are being said, and to recognize that not everyone experiences violence through the same range of responses. By offering an analysis of formal training in tandem with informal, popular training, I have connected how different pedagogical methods inform potential advocates to think about their position amidst larger cultural expectations about sexual assault.

By way of conclusion, I offer an intersectional rape advocacy toolkit, inspired by Sara Ahmed's book, *Living A Feminist Life*. After considering the many ways the feminist activism is encouraged, thwarted, and derailed, Ahmed offers a pragmatic set of ten items in what she calls a "Killjoy Survival toolkit." According to Ahmed, a feminist killjoy will stop a "pleasant" family dinner in its tracks when someone says something racist, sexist, or transphobic¹⁴⁷. And, rather than being seen as the source of necessary corrective, feminist killjoys are more often are found at fault for exposing problems, as if only when you speak about a problem does that problem exist. To be sure, activists who advocate to end sexual violence, quash rape culture, and stand up for survivors are likely to be seen as killjoys against a landscape of mainstream misogyny and normalized sexual violence. Ahmed's feminist killjoy toolkit offers more than just a model of "self-care"; the toolkit helps build resilience because "feminism needs feminists

¹⁴⁶ *I May Destroy You*, episode 6, "The Alliance," directed by Same Miller and Michaela Coel, July 13, 2020.

¹⁴⁷ Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 237.

to survive.”¹⁴⁸ Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde, Ahmed insists that this survival toolkit is revolutionary because “Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”¹⁴⁹

This intersectional rape advocacy toolkit offers a set of values, lessons, and practices necessary to grow in our mutual advocacy for survivors and our mutual support of each other as intersectionally grounded feminist activists. At its core, my toolkit suggests that we ground ourselves in the rejoinder that “the personal is political,” that we dedicate ourselves to deeply intersectional and complicated ways of experiencing identity, that we remember the importance of prevention, that we consume and support intersectional feminist media, and that we recenter sexual assault prevention work with early grassroots organizational principles. Feminists must survive and while killjoys are assigned to the negative, they recognize that if it is not them who will do the work, then who will it be?

The Personal is Political

“The personal is political” is a second-wave feminist activist slogan that has worked to unite activists and highlight underlying struggles across myriad issues relevant to social oppressions. This mantra suggests that individuals’ personal experiences and how we experience the world as individuals are deeply connected to greater social, ideological, and political issues. For survivor advocates, this mantra means acknowledging that we must embrace our voice for survivors beyond the spaces of hospitals and crisis centers. In other words, our dedication to advocacy must be far-

¹⁴⁸ Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, 236.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 237. See also, Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: Essays* (New York: Firebrand, 1988), 131.

reaching and world changing. First and foremost, rape and sexual assault is a crime in which only 4.6 out of 1000 sexual assault perpetrators will be incarcerated.¹⁵⁰ While reporting the crime is important, our energies are likely not best suited to simply pushing for more incarceration (especially when the prison industrial complex disproportionately warehouses men of color, poor people, and sexual minorities in another hierarchy of oppression and violence). Rather, shifting the focus to how rapists are produced and where they receive the sense of inflated power to inflict harm with impunity is a direction where we might productively embrace the “personal is political” mantra. Choosing to embody the tenets of the “personal is political” means recognizing that rape laws do not (and cannot) provide equal protection for all victims, because the foundations of rape laws were race specific; historically, only white women could be raped and there were no legal sanctions against White men raping black women.¹⁵¹ Furthermore, early rape laws have been embedded in property laws, imagining the harms of rape as being harms against (white) husbands and fathers of (white) women. Advocates must play an active role in the politics that can more effectively engage in protection of vulnerable communities. The “personal is political” is a call to action. It is essential that activism play a larger role in our advocacy.

Invest Deeply in Intersectional Feminism

We cannot aptly respond to all survivors of sexual assault without deep foundations in intersectionality. Being intersectional in our advocacy means

¹⁵⁰ “The Criminal Justice System: Statistics | RAINN.” n.d. <https://www.rainn.org/statistics/criminal-justice-system>.

¹⁵¹ Carolyn M West and Kalimah Johnson, “Sexual Violence in the Lives of African American Women,” *National Resource Center on Domestic Violence* (2013).

acknowledging how early feminist work failed to incorporate the experiences of Black communities, LGBTQ+ victims, and survivors experiencing poverty and homelessness. bell hooks emphasizes the reality that sisterhood can only be achieved through confronting the ways that women have also dominated and exploited other women through sex, class, and racial differences.¹⁵² Advocates would greatly benefit from learning the historical significance of African American women's increased risk for sexual assault and further denigration by the criminal justice and medical systems. Education that decentralizes white women's experiences of sexual assault would certainly be an important starting point. For example, there are several free webinars available through The National Center on Violence against Women in Black Community that discuss the experiences of Black survivors, exploring intersections, and offering pragmatic lessons for non-Black activists advocating for the needs of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) communities. The state of Texas requires that advocates receive an additional six hours of continuing education annually.¹⁵³ Yet, in my experiences with DARCC, I have not been encouraged to seek out any type of culturally sensitive, intersectional training such as this. Because strong advocacy has the power to create or change existing policies, the framework of our training must take intersectionality into account at its core, lest marginalized experiences continue to be excluded from prevention efforts and robust support for survivors.

¹⁵² bell hooks, *Feminism Is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹⁵³ Texas Office of Attorney General. *OAG Sexual Assault Advocate Training Program (SATP) Certification Guide*.

Advocacy and Prevention

The primary goal in prevention is to stop sexual violence before it happens; this goal requires addressing violence at the root causes rather than centering violence after-the-fact. During prevention trainings, facilitators must ensure that when discussing prevention, they do not inadvertently shift responsibility back on survivors, leading them to believe they could have done something different to prevent the attack. Thankfully, many educational outreach efforts have moved away from this model of victim-blaming; yet the onus of preventing rape is still too often focused on how (primarily) women can avoid being assaulted by (primarily) men. For example, telling people to watch their drink, take self-defense classes, or walk with keys in their hand may promote a sense of self-protection, but these “safety” precautions are perpetuating the idea that sexual violence is most often perpetrated by strangers, that it is the victim’s responsibility to “fight back,” and that preventing sexual violence is the responsibility of individuals to avoid rape contexts.

Stronger intersectional prevention efforts would recognize the broader sociocultural issues that play a role in a sexual violence. Each local program and statewide initiative for prevention employs the Center for Disease Control and Prevention’s public health model and socio-ecological model in their efforts to combat violence. The public health model uses four steps to addressing a public health problem, such as diseases or epidemics. By implementing a public health model on prevention of violence, the CDC acknowledges that such violence has reached “epidemic” levels warranting an approach that addresses the underlying problem of violence. The public health model is not explicitly focused on sexual violence, but all

forms of violence and according to TAASA can feel a little clumsy.¹⁵⁴ Importantly, though, public health models examine societal, community, relationship, and individual factors that might influence sexual violence.¹⁵⁵ This shifts the focus from primary prevention at the individual level onto risk factors associated with perpetrators. In regard to prevention, women's bodies are no longer being seen as the space of risk¹⁵⁶ as Rachel Hall critiques; rather societal norms such as hegemonic masculinity, hierarchies of family violence, environmental racism, poverty, and other societal norms that support masculine superiority are centered.¹⁵⁷

Feminist Media

I use the term feminist media to describe various mediums of media that are rooted in feminist efforts such as dismantling rape myths, inclusivity for BIPOC, and for all genders and sexualities, and ending sexist oppressions. Several researchers have explored the importance of implementing films into their teaching methods, as a way of addressing public issues and bolstering agency for minoritized groups.¹⁵⁸ Thinking about how media can be used as a public pedagogy for critical conversations that relate media back to viewers' lives. Currently there are several hashtags circulating on the social media app, TikTok, that encourage intersectional awareness related to sexual assault. This form of virtual consciousness-raising invites a reimagination of social

¹⁵⁴ TAASA, "*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*," (2016), 111.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Rachel Hall, "'It Can Happen to You': Rape Prevention in the Age of Risk Management," *Hypatia* 19, no. 3 (2004): 1–19.

¹⁵⁷ TAASA, "*Sexual Assault Advocate Training Manual*", 112-113.

¹⁵⁸ See, Henry A. Giroux, "Breaking into the Movies: Public Pedagogy and the Politics of Film," *Policy Futures in Education* 9, no. 6 (2011): 686–95; Julie Garlen Maudlin and Jennifer A. Sandlin, "Pop Culture Pedagogies: Process and Praxis," *Educational Studies* 51, no. 5 (2015): 368–84.

media spaces which can often feel oppressive to minoritized groups. At the time of this writing if you type in #sexualassault into TikTok, you will find over 168.6 million views on videos including that hashtag and 351.7 million views on #97percent, a reference to the percentage of women between the ages of 18-24 who have experienced sexual harassment.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, TikTok creators such as @PollyPistol, an advocate for sexual assault and domestic violence prevention, or @NurseCjen, a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner (SANE), share 60 seconds videos depicting a day in the life of a sexual violence survivors' advocate,¹⁶⁰ or educational videos about what a survivor might experience when interacting with SANE nurses.¹⁶¹ This virtual consciousness-raising not only provides a platform for education, but it also providing space for BIPOC and LGBTQ+ individuals to share their own experiences with assault and healing.

Returning to the Roots

When I say return to the roots, I imply returning to grassroots feminism, but selectively. It is important to remember that while countless Black and Indigenous women were actively seeking justice for women in the earliest days of U.S. feminism, they were rarely recognized as pioneers of the early feminist movement. We must add their voices to our advocacy toolkits, working to draw on a wider range of foundations, perspectives, and generational storytelling. bell hooks discusses consciousness-raising

¹⁵⁹ Note that this percentage is in reference to the UK population and not the United States. "Safe Spaces Now," UN Women UK, accessed May 13, 2021, <https://www.unwomenuk.org/safe-spaces-now>.

¹⁶⁰ "Polly Pistol (@pollypistol)," TikTok, accessed May 13, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@pollypistol?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v3.

¹⁶¹ "Courtney (@nurseCjen) TikTok | Watch Courtney's Newest TikTok Videos," TikTok, accessed May 13, 2021, https://www.tiktok.com/@pollypistol?lang=en&is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v3.

at great length in her book, *feminism is for everybody*.¹⁶² According to hooks, “feminists are made, not born”; similarly, becoming an advocate requires a dedication to feminist politics overall and requires an attentiveness to ongoing becoming. Feminist consciousness-raising (CR) refers to second-wave feminist activism in the 1970s where (primarily) women would join to name their experiences of oppression, to unleash pent-up hostility and rage about being victimized. This was also the site where women discovered the abysmal treatment of sexual assault survivors and subsequently launched rape crisis advocacy efforts.¹⁶³ These early groups were formed by victims of violence. They knew survivors first-hand and they learned from their strength, from their stories, and from their experiences. Listening to survivors much be central to the advocacy role and the ongoing commitment to becoming an advocate.

Consciousness-raising efforts are particularly important to the sustainability of feminism and feminist ideologies because as hooks notes, when Women’s Studies classrooms replaced the CR groups as the main site of transmission for feminist thinking and strategies, there was no longer a diverse group of activists, but mainly privileged white women who had the ability to go to college.¹⁶⁴ While feminism is for everybody, college, or Women’s Studies programs might not be. Central to creating inclusionary space for CR groups, hooks further suggests that men (and by extension, nonbinary folx) must also be included. Ending sexual violence relies on the voices of everyone, not just those who expect to be victimized. Actively working toward better training for masculine-dominated fields such as law enforcement and medicine require

¹⁶² hooks, *Feminism is for Everybody*.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

the feminist infiltration of a culture rife with hierarchies and narrowly conceived notions of what victimhood looks like. As advocates, it is our duty to continuously work to shift the current rape culture and be the voice for the silenced. We cannot allow survivors to be put into position where they are not believed or cannot find the resources that they so deserve.

Conclusion

Beyond my altruistic notions, I became an advocate because I know the cost of not being believed. The silenced stories of my friends enraged me. My own silenced story enraged me. I hoped that by becoming an advocate I could provide a grounded expertise to survivors so they might avoid struggles with medical and legal systems which often compounds the trauma that follows an assault. Generally speaking, the perceived credibility of sexual assault survivors influences their treatment by family, friends, law enforcement, and medical personnel. The significance of analyzing two very distinct texts such as popular media and formal training manuals is in considering how they both produce knowledge. Pedagogically both sets of texts teach us how to decide who is a worthy victim, what counts as “real” rape (and to challenge this very framework), and who deserves organizational resources.

This analysis provides links from texts to cultural context. Sexual assault is not rare, it is dangerously commonplace. In order to shake free from the cultural misunderstandings of sexual assault survivors and rape myth acceptance, shows like *I May Destroy You* and *Unbelievable* demonstrate how popular media can have the pedagogical potential to inform culture in ways that more formalized trainings might be unable to reach. For those fortunate enough to have never experienced sexual assault

personally, media representations form a primary frame of reference and cognitive training, therefore popular media is a critical site of learning, unlearning, and quite possibly, cultural transformation. And for those who choose to be active in the anti-rape movement, dismantling the stereotypes about survivors can help inform the important paradigm shifts and wider culture that perpetuates sexual violence and norms of rape culture.

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