

THESIS

THE COMPLICITOUS SALUTE: SILENCING
FEMALE SURVIVORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN THE U.S. MILITARY

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ABSTRACT

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Driven by growing concerns about sexual assault in the U.S. military and public questioning of current reporting procedures, this thesis examines why female military assault survivors do not come forward and report the crimes committed against them. More specifically, I argue that sexual assault in the U.S. military goes underreported and ignored due in part to the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. To make sense of this military culture and the attendant discourse surrounding sexual assaults, I study two rhetoric texts through a critical rhetoric perspective. My first text consists of meaningful fragments of mediated public address centered on news coverage of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and her proposed legislation to reform military sexual assault: the Military Justice Improvement Act. My second text is a fictional narrative of similar military sexual assault legislation in the Netflix series *House of Cards*. Through my analysis, I consider my texts using a critique of domination and a critique of freedom to demonstrate how public discourse about sexual assault and its reporting challenges the hegemonic structure. In doing so, I employ an examination of critical rhetoric to expose a text's possibility for social change.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all survivors of sexual assault. I hope one day they may find their beautiful voice within.

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Chapter One: Introduction

“The thing that makes me the most angry is not even the rape itself; it’s the commanders that were complicit in covering up everything that happened.”¹ This quote from U.S. Marine Corps Officer and sexual assault survivor, Ariana Klay, is indicative of a hegemonic, masculine military institution that seeks to silence victims in the face of atrocities, particularly male initiated sexual assault overwhelmingly directed toward women.² Sexual assault against women in the U.S. military system is a cruel reality. As of 2012, the Justice Department indicated that one in five female service members reported unwanted sexual contact while serving in the military; likewise, the number of female sexual assault survivors has increased from 6.1% in 2012 to 8% in 2014.³ Even more, 19,000 sexual assault reports were made in 2014, which is roughly the same as in 2011; however, other estimated reports go as high as 22,500, which do not even account for the individuals who do not report.⁴ This point is further emphasized when we consider that in 2014, fewer than three out of ten survivors were willing to report the crime.⁵ Both Klay’s comments and the numbers above confirm that violent acts are only part of the problem. In reality, this violence is exacerbated when female survivors’ discourse relating to their sexual assault experience is silenced through the military’s complicity—complicity enacted in current reporting procedures for these crimes. Indeed, of the “survivors” noted above, 74% of female military members perceived one or more barriers to reporting sexual assault. It is no surprise then that the military is an institution in which sexual assault not only occurs but also is perpetuated.

As we know, the act of sexual assault is a traumatic violation of the body; however, when this aggressive form of power transpires and goes unaddressed within a military institution that has a long history of hostility towards victims in its ranks, sexual assault becomes emblematic of

a persistent problem that devalues survivors. Why does sexual assault remain a problem in the U.S. military? I argue that sexual assault in the armed forces is an endemic problem today largely because the military perpetuates a culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. Unless open, impartial, and supportive systems for reporting, trying, and punishing these acts are brought to fruition, the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity that reigns over our armed forces will continue to exist. To better understand this culture requires a deeper interrogation of each facet above.

To say the military cultivates a culture of masculinity is not another way to describe the high statistical percentage of military members who are men; rather, the term refers to the ongoing presence of hegemonic masculinity. In this instance, hegemonic masculinity refers to “how particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance.”⁶ To put it another way, hegemonic masculinity means that men in power assert their control and masculine identification over individuals, thus influencing and reinscribing a masculine institution. As a result, a number of discourses circulate within military culture that work to “mansplain”⁷ or excuse sexual assault directed toward women, inside and outside the service. For instance, the mere presence of women within the military ranks is said to spark aggressive male behavior in ways described as inevitable and natural. Sexual assault is often viewed as consensual and mutually agreed upon, and some even believe that women and men should not work within such close proximity of each other to eliminate temptation. Evidence of these kinds of discourse can be found in the public remarks of even highly decorated and relatively liberal military men. For instance, Vietnam veteran, Pentagon official, former U.S. Senator, and prospective 2016 presidential candidate, James Webb (D-VA), has vocalized his disregard for women in military combat positions. Webb

believes that small-unit cohesion is based on male-male bonding whereas male-female relationships were inevitably about sex. He insisted that if women were to join combat units, cohesion would fall victim to “the sexual jealousies, courtship rituals, and favoritism that are the hallmarks of romantic relationships.”⁸ In sum, the culture of masculinity embedded within the military operates by continually reasserting traditional gender identities while ensuring men, masculinity, and male-bonding activities retain dominant positions within the institution’s power structure.

Another factor contributing to persistent sexual assault against women in the military is the culture of complicity and silence. By silence, I am referring to the muting of voices exerted in the practice of domination as a key aspect of power.⁹ By complicity, I follow Mark McPhail in referring to “an agreement to disagree” at a moment of consequence which often leads to “the acceptance of essentialist assumptions” and the perpetuation of the status quo.¹⁰ These two concepts are related in human interactions; complicity evokes silence and conversely, silence indicates complicity. The reinforcing nature of silence and complicity is particularly conducive to unacknowledged sexual assault within military culture and institutions. For instance, female service members are subjected to a culture of silence and complicity when the military and military members turn a blind eye to sexual assault, mishandle reported cases, or otherwise ignore the sexual abuses that unfold under their purview. Often times, service members feel that if they report the abuse to their superiors, the crime will be intentionally neglected, trivialized, or completely delegitimized. Sadly, this is not unique to the military. In his book *Guyland*, Michael Kimmel states that “The bystanders observing violence in a community think they withdraw their support by turning the other way or standing by passively disengaged, but their silence is what creates a culture of complicity.”¹¹ This type of complicit behavior can be traced to everyday

life, but it is exemplified in an institution known to silence subversive identities, cover up internal violence, and enforce essentialist, traditional beliefs about gender roles. The current reporting procedures encourage other service members to act as silent bystanders, in the sense that Kimmel describes, by allowing the abuse to continue through complicit (in)action. In turn, the military officials who act in a complicit manner by ignoring the abuse, further silence female survivors' lived experiences as well as their voices since they cannot come forward and share their stories. The notion of complicity and acceptance of essentialism is fueled by the notion that men do and are encouraged to act in a hyper masculine way; the ability to enact violence is normalized and glorified by military expectations. By normalizing violence, military officials rely on complicit attitudes to handle abuse cases, which will inevitably silence a survivors' voice. The culture of complicity and silence in the military is evident through female service members' personal testimony. Officer Tara Johnson, of the U.S. Marine Corps states, "I was assigned a male provider who was new to the VA. During my first appointment through tears and fear I again disclosed my experience with MST [Military Sexual Trauma] [and] the provider looked at me, widened his eyes, sat back in his chair and said, 'Well, do you really think you were raped?'"¹² The blatant mistreatment of sexual assault (like this dismissal) exemplifies and exposes the presence of hegemonic masculinity, essentialist beliefs, and the complicitous nature of the military. Clearly, the need to disrupt the status quo is of utmost importance.

To interrogate the military's culture of hegemonic masculinity, silence, and complicity, this thesis investigates two different rhetorical texts that seek to upend the military's oppressive regime. The first is Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's (D, New York) public comments addressing sexual assault in the military by advocating for the Military Justice Improvement Act (MJIA). Senator Gillibrand first introduced MJIA (S. 1752) on November 20, 2013. The bill's main

purpose is to change the way reporting procedures are handled for crimes of sexual assault, which, I argue, challenges the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. Through traditional forms of public address, including speeches and public commentary regarding the legislation in the media, I will investigate how Gillibrand seeks to raise public interest of this troubling issue by challenging the status quo. The second text I will examine is a fictional, mediated storyline about a piece of legislation similar to MJIA on the Netflix original series *House of Cards*. This storyline takes place during the second season of the series and offers viewers a behind the scenes look at the opportunities and stakes in undermining the military's mistreatment of sexual assault victims in its ranks. However, in several ways, *House of Cards* reinforces hegemony through certain problematic representations of gender and race. Despite their inability to dramatically alter policy as it relates to military sexual assault, each text performs a critical role in addressing the military's onerous and unjust culture by raising public awareness about both the high incidents of sexual assault in the military and barriers to justice and voice faced by its victims.

As such, I argue in my thesis project that each text can be understood as a distinctive form of critical rhetoric. In his work on critical rhetoric, rhetorical scholar Raymie McKerrow, argues that "in practice, a critical rhetoric seeks to unmask or demystify the discourse of power."¹³ By doing so, we can understand the incorporation of power/knowledge in society. This critical approach seeks to locate the intervention strategies that could be used to effect social change within a discourse.¹⁴ The role of rhetoric in this instance can draw attention to politics and legislative proceedings as the discourse of power through different "intervention strategies." In this respect, taking politics "out of the government" and into the lives of consumers through a news report or television show could have the potential to shape public opinion in a unique way.

Essentially, the previous strategies, or texts, will be analyzed for the “effectivity of communication in the exercise of social power,”¹⁵ through traditional public address and entertainment media.

In undertaking a critical rhetoric approach to these two texts, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions: How do each of these texts function, or not, to elucidate women’s voices that have previously been silenced? What kind of effects, if any, can be traced between the texts and changes in public opinion or political action? In addition, what do these texts illuminate about how the rhetorical dimensions of sexual assault can be better dealt with moving forward? Lastly, how do these texts help us understand the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity present in the U.S. military? Before addressing these questions, I compile a brief review of literature on gender and sexuality, feminist criticism, and military culture and violence to build a framework for my thesis project.

Review of Literature

In order to answer my proposed questions and illuminate differing means of bringing to light sexual assault in the military, I will draw from relevant, existing scholarship in three categories: gender, sexuality, and power, feminist criticism, and military culture’s perpetuation of sexual assault. I begin with the category of gender, sexuality, and power to discuss the issue of masculinity and institutional power structures. Next, I draw upon feminist scholarship and include a discussion of feminist criticism to articulate my critical purpose. Lastly, the section regarding military culture and violence will encapsulate the nature of a military culture that perpetuates violence and complicity as it pertains to the issue of sexual assault.

Gender, Sexuality, and Power

When addressing sexual assault in military culture, it is essential to clearly define our

terms relating to gender, sex, and sexuality, and how they relate to discourse and power. While it was long believed that gender, sex, and sexuality were clear and self-evident concepts, the last century of academic scholarship, particularly feminist scholarship, has demonstrated this is not the case. Today, scholars define these terms differently by avoiding an essentialist conception and using language and discourse to guide our understanding. In the following section, I will define how gender, sex, and sexuality will be named and utilized in my thesis project.

Additionally, I will discuss how language plays a powerful role in shaping issues related to gender, sex, and sexuality and connect these notions to the study of power and how they are reinscribed in discourses on sexual assault.¹⁶ In order to discuss these intricate concepts, the sections that follow first assess in greater detail gender, sex, and sexuality using Judith Butler's articulation of these key terms as discursive, coupled with Michel Foucault's understanding of these powerfully symbolic terms. Finally, I will incorporate Foucault's discussion of power and discipline as it pertains to gender and sexuality.

During the 1970's continuing into the 1990's, much of the conversation about gender, sex, and sexuality was underdeveloped, understanding the terms largely as binaristic (rather than as fluid and multiple), static (rather than changing), and unrelated (rather than intersectional). However, soon after the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s, multiple scholars began to complicate these assumptions. For example, with the advent of Michel Foucault's work *The History of Sexuality* in 1976, conversations began to shift toward the role discourse plays in shaping our understanding of sex and sexuality.¹⁷ Elsewhere, Judith Butler transformed understandings of these terms when she published *Gender Trouble* in 1990. In ways not completely dissimilar to Foucault, Butler describes gender as performative. This means that the notions of masculinity and femininity are a type of performance, a theatrical "putting on" of societal norms.¹⁸ As a

result, notions of gender, sex, and sexuality increasingly became thought of as culturally and historically constructed.¹⁹ Although these two exemplary theorists have discussed gender, sex, and sexuality differently, their over-arching argument directs us toward how rhetoric comes into play within the discursive examination of gender, sexuality, and power.

As mentioned above, Judith Butler's work on gender and sexuality will be a guiding force within my argument by offering more complex insight, particularly with her notion of gender. For the purposes of my project, gender will be defined as a socially constructed concept pertaining to femininity and masculinity. Thus, characterizing the military under a culture of hegemonic masculinity will make sense with a deeper understanding of gender. Within this paper, the term gender will function under U.S. heterosexual assumptions and a Western perspective. Typically, heterosexual norms of masculinity connect male sexuality with power and violence in that sexual assault enacted by men is biologically necessary and inevitable. On the other hand, femininity affirms the social stereotype that women are manipulative, vindictive or even fabricate acts of violence.²⁰ In her work on gender, Butler eloquently explains these heterosexual standards in that the "body," which has been societally marked female produces a separation from freedom. Furthermore, the female body is marked with a masculinist discourse, whereas the male body is universal and remains unmarked.²¹ Butler claims that the female sex becomes restricted to its body and the male body is the incorporeal instrument of a radical freedom,²² which draws attention to gendered norms of femininity as restricted and controlled and masculinity as instrumental and fundamental to identity outside of body; thus, masculinity can be thought of as a form of institutional power. Here, Butler argues that gender is a performative act, a type of performance done through the strict limitations affixed by cultural processes.²³ It is within this performance that power is ascribed and sexuality understood.

With an explanation of gender, the discussion of sexual assault would be remiss without a mention of sex. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault takes note that at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the conversations about sex in Europe were generally open and publicly discussed. However, with the onset of the Victorian bourgeois, sex (and sex talk) was labeled shameful, and individuals were expected to silence sex talk and were encouraged to make little contact with the body.²⁴ Moreover, if one were to speak of sex, it was considered a transgression outside the reach of power, upsetting established law and necessitating repression.²⁵ However, at the same time, Foucault demonstrates that this attempt to repress sexuality which heretofore had been widely recognized in public discourse actually resulted in a discursive explosion about sex in the form of disciplinary messages. Therefore, Foucault demonstrates how speech, sex, and the regulation of sex and sex talk reveal strong cultural and historical connections to power and discipline. Foucault's historical mention of discursive understandings of sex can be culturally linked to contemporary times. According to Foucault, for decades now, our current society still finds it difficult to speak of sex in that our tone of voice demonstrates our knowledge of being subversive as we look toward a promising freedom of a different law.²⁶ As my project will examine the act of sexual violation, it is important to operationalize society's relationship with sex and the many sexual identities that can arise from it.

To understand the role of sexuality in the conversation of violence, it is significant to think of this term as again being culturally constructed. Here, sexuality can be linked to identity formation. Similar to gender, sexuality cannot be thought of as fixed or locked within heterosexual frameworks. According to Butler, if sexuality is defined as "culturally constructed within existing power relations, then the postulation of a normative sexuality that is 'before,' 'outside,' or 'beyond' power is a cultural impossibility and a politically impracticable dream, one

that postpones the concrete and contemporary task of rethinking subversive possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself.”²⁷ Simply, the concept of sexuality cannot be understood outside the realm of cultural constructions and political discourse,²⁸ which connects to Butler’s notion of the female as a body, a type of sexuality oppressively controlled and restricted. Women’s sexuality is to function as nameless objects to men’s desire through a heterosexual relationship in which heteronormativity is valued and this patriarchal view of sexuality privileged.²⁹ Since the military promotes a culture of hegemonic masculinity, it is clear that sexuality is central to this discussion when heterosexuality is marked normative as it influences internal sexual assault and male-female service member’s relations.

The gendered norms of masculinity and femininity as well as the nature of sexuality clearly play an important role in the discussion of sexual assault since they largely contribute to the discussion of power in the theoretical sense. According to Foucault, norms do not protect individuals from the encroachment of power, but instead they act as tools in shaping humans and disciplining individuals as a whole.³⁰ For the purposes of this thesis, power is understood as a disciplinary exertion of the dominant code. This disciplining is evident in the military’s culture of hegemonic masculinity in which those who adhere to military traditions and values are rewarded and those who do not, are punished. For example, women service members who come forward with their assaults are then subjected to the hierarchal reporting procedures that align with traditional military values of hegemony. They must either discipline themselves to fit into a hegemonic masculine code or remain silent. Foucault states, “power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth,”³¹ and the disciplinary power existing within the military structure produces a known truth surrounding reporting procedures. The standards set in place through military culture communicate that there is risk in reporting sexual

assault and this truth disciplines and silences survivors from speaking out. By understanding power in a disciplinary, Foucauldian way, I can better understand the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity that will inform my argument. Before further investigating the power discourse of sexual assault in the military and addressing the critical rhetoric surrounding this issue, I will articulate how feminist criticism informs my study.

Feminist Criticism

The examination of my critical texts will be informed by feminist rhetorical criticism in the Communication discipline. Before I approach that particular scholarship, it is essential to begin with a definition of feminism and the ideological concepts that arise from it. A particular ideology investigated by feminist and ideological criticism alike is patriarchy — the male-ruling notion that men are inherently dominant, superior, and able to rule over the weak (typically those who are marginalized such as women). Patriarchy is ideological, in part, because, as bell hooks claims, it is learned through a masculine identity through the process of socialization during childhood and enforced later in adulthood by peers and institutions such as school and the workplace.³² With this definition, it becomes clear that patriarchy is a process of socialization, one of historical longevity that is rooted in political influences. Because patriarchy has been so pervasive in society for so long, it has been challenged well before critical rhetoric was defined by McKerrow. According to Wilma Mankiller, Gwendolyn Mink, Marysa Navarro, Barbara Smith, and Gloria Steinem, feminism is “the belief in the full, economic, political, and social equality of males and females – is usually seen as a modern movement to transform the male-dominant past and create an egalitarian future.”³³ Feminist Carol Hanisch of the 1970's women's liberation movement encapsulated this idea in the phrase, “the personal is political.”³⁴ This bold statement, which has helped define much of feminist criticism today, rings true for my politically

driven project. However, because there are many different types of feminism and the movements have gone through changes spanning several decades, it is important to define which focus of feminism I will use here. The feminist approach that I take in my proposed project focuses on political and social inequity, in particular the way our military institution values female survivors. In order to combat social and political gender inequities, I turn to feminist criticism more broadly.

Feminist criticism in this proposed project can be defined as what Bonnie Dow identifies as the political and heuristic value of criticism with a particular emphasis on the political implications of gendered practice and “its capacity to engage our thinking about the political implications of discursive practice.”³⁵ To simplify this notion, the basic assumption of feminist criticism is to uncover the ideological functioning of gendered practice. Bonnie Dow and Celeste Condit are two influential feminist rhetorical scholars in the Communication discipline who discuss how feminist scholarship has emerged in the field through their article, “The State of the Art in Feminist Scholarship in Communication.” The authors claim that criticism is influenced by second-wave feminism in that it examines the role of sexism, investigates power relations, and proposes the rethinking of universal claims through male experience.³⁶ More importantly, Dow and Condit assert that “feminist” is reserved for communication practice that is oriented toward the achievement of “gender justice.” This concept demonstrates how gender intersects with race, class, and sexuality going beyond the pursuit of equality between men and women in that gender itself is politically constructed.³⁷ The uncovering of political implications of gender through a feminist rhetorical criticism can shed light on the power relations at play that my texts seek to demystify.

In order to examine how my texts function, it is important to note how feminist rhetorical

criticism is applied to media, more specifically television. In their analysis of the depiction of sexual assault and rape in the crime drama series *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, authors Lisa M. Cuklanz and Sujata Moorti claim that a new kind of televisual feminism has emerged “with a critical view of feminine qualities, but a feminist understanding of sexual assault and rape.”³⁸ This characterization of a new televisual feminism not only points toward the feminist rhetorical criticism of media, but the potential influence that television can exhibit in the political and public sphere. Dow and Condit add to this notion by stating, “critical textual analyses of mediated discourse constitute the largest body of research analyzing the communication of gender ideology.”³⁹ Essentially, in analyzing my mediated texts, I will attempt to uncover gender ideology and feminist practice informed by my feminist purpose.

The feminist rhetorical criticism that will be applied to my argument is similar to a critical rhetoric approach in that, “‘passionate scholarship’, explicitly driven by politics and informed by a cultural, political and ideological reading of the context of interaction and everyday experience,”⁴⁰ will explore the effects of ideological discourse in relation to women’s experiences and communication praxis. Furthermore, “according to feminist theory, violence against women results from gender inequality on the societal level. The more unequal women are compared to men in a society, the more likely men are to be violent toward women. Gender inequality, or patriarchy, is both ideological (the beliefs, norms, and values about the status and roles of women in a society) and structural (women’s access to and positions within social institutions).”⁴¹ Although the focus of my project does not investigate gender inequality as the sole reason for the perpetuation of violence, it is important to note the ideological and structural explications above. Fashioning a feminist rhetorical purpose to my proposed project that focuses

on ideology and the dominant discourse segues well into a discussion of hegemonic masculinity and violence in military culture.

Military Culture's Perpetuation of Sexual Assault

Today, the contemporary U.S. military culture reflects traditional, long-held values about national security and authority that have made it arguably one of the most effective combat institutions in history. Although these traditions have, in some ways, contributed to the military's success as a fighting force, it is these same traditions that have caused internal strife in preventing and addressing sexual assault faced by male and female service members. Given the greater inclusion of women into the military over the last-half century, battles over controversial policies relating to sexuality, gender, and gender identity in recent decades have become prevalent. The fact that more and more service members today reflect the intersectional identities and cultural differences present in our society necessitates dissecting the "traditional" values that permeate military culture and how they contribute to instigating the assault. These values include: violence, hegemonic masculinity, and independence from civilian interference and criticism.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, violence persists in the U.S. military culture. The military is an institution designed to train soldiers in violence (in a careful and regimented manner) for the destruction of other human beings. This statement may seem boorish, however it is discernibly necessary that any military system should train soldiers to be prepared for violent combat considering national security needs. However, violence that is prevalent in the military's culture is often based upon masculinity and the fact that leadership within the system is predominately male. According to Carrie Yodanis, "in male-dominated institutions, violence is a tool that men can use to keep women out or subordinate and thereby maintain male power and control. Given

the male-constructed and male-defined policies and practices of these institutions, such violence is not likely to be punished or stopped. On the contrary, it may be subtly or overtly condoned and encouraged.”⁴² One of the most prominent places in which the military’s glorification of violence can be seen is in today’s militainment industry. In his book *Militainment, Inc.*, author Roger Stahl points out that the entertainment industry is a vehicle through which power reinforces dominant justifications of war and violence and these coded messages support a violent and masculine culture.⁴³ The claim that violence in a predominantly male institution could be condoned or even perpetuated alludes to the notion that not only is external violence commonplace, but internal violence (such as sexual assault), also exists.

In addition to a culture that purports violence, the contemporary U.S. military culture continues to reflect a discourse of hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity can be described as the traditional and historical culture of masculinity that demands enactment of the superior dominant code through institutional control. To break down this definition, it is important to start with a conceptualization of masculinity. Western views of masculinity include a large number of expected social performances, including strength, intelligence, publicness, the ability to provide, and dominance, among many others. Masculinity also cues particular views of sex. For instance, a cultural construction of masculinity defined by Irina Anderson and Kathy Doherty describes “the male sexual impulse as constructed as active, aggressive, and straightforward and as central to what it means to be masculine – ‘real men’ are always on the lookout for sex and would never refuse an opportunity for sex should it be presented.”⁴⁴ Even more, the culturally constructed definitions of masculinity can be interpreted as complicit or hegemonic. According to Andrea Braithwaite, “complicit masculinities, actively, if subtly, reap rewards from the reproduction of oppressive gender relations,”⁴⁵ thus demonstrating how much

hold hegemonic masculinity has as an oppressive discourse. Hegemonic masculinity is related to patriarchy in that it is a political-social system allowing men and male-dominated institutions to believe in their supposedly innate rights to dominate and rule over the weak, females, and the oppressed alike.⁴⁶ A culture of masculinity in the military derives from this belief in hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal thinking that has affected women in the service. This can be seen in personal testimony from female survivors, who like Sarah Plummer, detail a chain of command that is indicative of hegemonic masculinity and reinforces patriarchal traditions. Plummer, from the U.S. Marine Corps, states, “having someone within your direct chain of command handling the case, it just doesn’t make sense. It’s like your brother raping you and having your dad decide the case.”⁴⁷ This hegemonic masculinity and patriarchal control leaves little room for fair treatment of sexual assault crimes and establishes a male dominant institution that excludes any other ideology, particularly citizen inclusion.

In addition, military culture today continues to enforce norms in which citizen intervention and criticism is looked at unfavorably. This is surprising because the U.S. Constitution has placed the armed forces under the oversight of civilians since its inception more than two hundred years ago. Today’s military leaders do not directly challenge this chain of command and hold true to the belief that final decisions about military action should fall under civilian control. However, there is also an implicit animosity toward civilian interference within the military culture. This animosity can be seen in Stahl’s focus on military rhetoric which assures citizens that the military is to be trusted without question. Although Stahl focuses on the concept of war, his perspective of war as a spectacle, one in which control of public opinion is done by distancing, distracting and disengaging the citizen,⁴⁸ can be related to the issue of military stakeholders wishing to keep the issue of sexual assault within their jurisdiction by

disengaging the citizen. Furthermore, Stahl explains, “in its dominant use, however, ‘support the troops’ suggests that the citizen has no place in discussing the role of the military and that to do so is instead a direct threat to the besieged men and women on the front lines.”⁴⁹ Current military culture produces a private institution that disavows civic engagement and understands the issue of sexual assault as strictly a military issue. Similarly, opposition toward MJIA seeks to disavow civic engagement and keep the issue within military jurisdiction only. Much of military culture today can be defined as omnipotent, absolute and exclusionary of citizen opinion and collaboration. The hierarchal chain of command is typically viewed as being the “be all, to end all” on military matters. This is noticeable when former and current military authorities express their concerns for contemporary military culture. Andrew Bachevich describes Senator James Webb’s sentiments regarding women in the military in such a way. He explains, “Webb viewed the assault on traditional military culture as a proxy war, an offshoot of the larger ongoing effort to subvert American culture.”⁵⁰ Webb identifies the exclusion of citizens as something inherent to American and military culture that should be sustained. Additionally, in an article on *Politico*, Sen. Mark Kirk mentioned that Gillibrand’s bill was going to force broader changes to the World War II military system by disrupting the culture. Kirk is quoted as saying, “I wanted to make sure the captain of a ship is really the captain of the whole ship.”⁵¹ These statements about military issues needing to stay within the military’s jurisdiction point toward a larger conversation about violence and masculinity that my project aims to add to existing research.

Overall, this review of literature covers diverse topics in an attempt to produce an understanding of the complexity of military culture. In synthesizing the military culture as one in which violence is promoted and encouraged, masculinity and patriarchy (and its dual threats of sexual conquest and the support of brotherhood) is privileged, and interference from non-military

entities is discouraged, it is clear to see how a culture of complicity and silence can exist. For the purposes of my project, the notion of silence will develop from Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony. Gramsci purports that an individual's voice, a participant's ability to speak is contingent upon the hegemony of the prevailing dominant discourse.⁵² Thus, silence in this instance refers to a power effect that gives value to voices that reinforce and adhere to dominate ideology. When silence occurs, the act of complicity prevails. In this sense, for the purposes of my project, complicity relies on hegemonic power structures (the hierarchal military chain of command and male influence) and gendered notions of masculinity. These traditional values upheld by the U.S. military promote a space in which subversive ideologies are not welcome and internal sexual assault is perpetuated. With this review of existing scholarship, I will now detail my two specific texts of study and their corresponding methods and my overall critical approach.

Texts and Critical Tools

Discourse about sexual assault, and more specifically MJIA, is no simple matter to begin to dissect; to do so completely would require a full accounting of stated/unstated, verbalized/silenced, and visible/invisible commentaries on the issue over many years, perhaps even decades. However, in this thesis, it is possible to put into conversation sets of texts that elucidate the challenges of these issues for a popular audience. Therefore, to examine rhetorical strategies for exposing the cultures of masculinity, silence, and complicity that contribute to sexual assault in the U.S. military, my proposed thesis will examine two different but related texts. Each text, individually, contributes to broader cultural discourse about sexual assault that, when synthesized into a discourse and placed under critical inspection, can reveal important effects for challenging dominant anti-woman ideologies.

Text 1: News Coverage of the MJIA

As previously mentioned, my first rhetorical text I will study includes news coverage of MJIA. Since 2013, two U.S. Senators —Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D, New York) and Senator Claire McCaskill (D, Missouri)—have proposed competing legislation to reform the treatment of sexual assault victims in the military and worked diligently to draw public attention to their efforts through an emphatic public relations campaign that spanned several months.

Courageously confronting the world’s largest military structure, both legislators’ reform plans call for change to safeguard the personal security and inherent rights of military service members. Yet, while both bills are imperative to ongoing public discussions of sexual assault in the military, Gillibrand’s legislation was more forceful in calling for change and received more pushback from the military. As such, I have selected Gillibrand’s bill and talk around it as my preferred text for analysis.

Senator Gillibrand, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and strong advocate for military issues, first introduced MJIA (S. 1752) on November 20, 2013. The bill calls for reporting procedures of sexual assault cases to be altered, by including the use of private, nonmilitary prosecution during legal proceedings as well as curtailing military commanders’ prerogatives to overturn sexual assault verdicts granted by the laws of military justice. MJIA proposes, “mov[ing] the decision whether to prosecute any crime punishable by one year or more in confinement to independent, trained, professional military prosecutors, with the exception of crimes that are uniquely military in nature, such as disobeying orders or going Absent Without Leave (AWOL). The decision whether to prosecute 37 serious crimes uniquely military in nature, plus all crimes punishable by less than one year of confinement, would remain within the chain of command.”⁵³ Ultimately, Gillibrand’s bill, if implemented, would provide a

safer work environment for military members and, in its most basic sense, would promote justice by ensuring a fair trial and, in turn, providing a platform from which survivors could speak out more securely. Unfortunately, despite an ardent communication campaign enacted by Gillibrand, in March 2014 the bill was derailed in the Senate by a 55-45 vote; it fell short of five votes needed to overcome a filibuster. Even though the bill was derailed, the rhetorical, mediated strategies enacted by Gillibrand are significant for study as this sexual assault discourse surely will not disappear.

In order to cover a range of texts that encapsulate Gillibrand's rhetorical efforts to drive change, I searched the *LexisNexis* database for online news articles. I limited my scope to articles from November 2013 to March 2014. This particular timeframe is when the bill was first introduced to the House for vote in November 2013 in which MJIA's publicity took flight. Previous to November 2013, very little mention of the bill appeared in the press. My timeframe ends in March 2014, when MJIA went up for a vote in the Senate and was unfortunately derailed. After March 2014, there were few reports made about MJIA as the drive for votes was not needed any longer. Additionally, it is no coincidence that my timeframe mirrors the release of season two of *House of Cards* in February 2014 since this particular legislative time period was marked by an increased interest of sexual assault in the military.

Within my *LexisNexis* search, I located seventy-two articles which are, more or less, used within this analysis. Some material was left out due to its repetitiveness or because it did not speak to the rhetorical message I am deconstructing. I narrowed my search result to only two keywords: Gillibrand and MJIA. Any other search result using keywords other than these two yielded an unsubstantial amount of articles. Next, I narrowed the results from my keyword search even further by the five different news networks: *Fox News*, *Politico*, *The Huffington*

Post, *NPR* and *The New York Times*. Altogether, my scope, which included a specific timeframe, keyword search, and certain news publications, churned out the seventy-two articles I coded for themes of military culture. It is my goal to produce a sample that is representative of the diverse perspectives and political biases within the modern US media scape. By doing so, I hope to present a multitude of articles from several networks with very different journalistic aims in order to depict variety, invite diverse rhetorical messages and, more importantly, to avoid generalization. By building a framework of multiple texts from multiple sources, I intend to create a holistic narrative that aids in understanding military culture and sexual assault.

My theoretical approach of blending multiple news articles together into one larger narrative is in line with Michael Calvin McGee's theory of fragmentation. McGee argues that, "critical rhetoric does not begin with a finished text in need of interpretation; rather, texts are understood to be larger than the apparently finished discourse that presents itself as transparent. The apparently finished discourse is in fact a dense reconstruction of all the bits of other discourses from which it was made. It is fashioned from what we can call 'fragments.'"⁵⁴ In other words, just like a puzzle or mosaic is an incomplete picture without all the pieces fitting together, so too are the fragments of text on this exploration of sexual assault.⁵⁵ Furthermore, McGee addresses the audience of a text by claiming "the only way to 'say it all' in our fractural culture is to provide readers/audiences with dense, truncated fragments which cue them to produce a finished discourse in their minds. In short, text construction is now something done more by the consumers than by the producers of discourse."⁵⁶ Preferably, it is my goal to address an audience inundated by the media on a daily basis as they construct an understanding of issues through the media's lens, rather than direct legislative policy.

For text one – the initial fragments that I will analyze and blend together form a text for interpreting sexual assault against women in the military – are an assortment of media reports and commentary by Gillibrand that narrow my research scope to significant moments during the journey of the bill. Additionally, this particular portion of textual analysis will be read as traditional public address, focusing on the language used to describe the bill and general sentiment toward it from Gillibrand, survivors’, military members, and other Congressional delegates. Essentially, my examination of Gillibrand’s rhetoric will illuminate both the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity at work in the military and how survivors’ of sexual assault might interrupt the aforementioned culture to remedy this inequity. The news coverage of Gillibrand’s bill will also exemplify how the media, in a journalistic sense, and public officials can galvanize and even propel certain viewpoints; thus positioning a mass audience to make sexual assault in the military an issue of national concern.

Text 2: House of Cards

To further gain insight into the issue of sexual assault against women in the military, my second text is an analysis of a fictional, mediated characterization similar to MJIA in particular episodes and segments from the second season of the Netflix series *House of Cards* (2014). *House of Cards* follows the exploits of U.S. House Majority Whip Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), a fictional political figure who will do just about anything and utilize just about anyone to get ahead in the high stakes game of national politics in Washington, DC. Helping Frank and his grand and complex network of allies is his wife, Claire Underwood (Robin Wright) who uses her own networks of influence in the private sector and non-profit world to propel the couple’s political status. Proving that little will get in the way of their agenda, season two of the series “picks up right where it left off, with wily House Majority Whip Frank Underwood about to

ascend to the vice-presidency and a pack of reporters on his trail.”⁵⁷ However, beyond its entertainment value, the revelation of Claire’s sexual assault at the hands of a decorated military official and her attempts to pass a mediated characterization of Gillibrand’s bill in a partisan and ugly political landscape provides a compelling opportunity for issues of sexual assault in the military and survivors’ agency to be tackled in a way that addresses different audiences. Therefore, *House of Cards* demonstrates the potential of entertainment media to serve rhetorical ends.

House of Cards is an ideal text for analysis because it centers on political junkies and lobbyist lifestyles often invisible to real world political coverage. Likewise, its televisual format makes it publicly accessible in ways political journalism is not. Even everyday Netflix members unfamiliar with the United States political system can gain insights on the real stakes and issues at work in the show’s entertaining, if not always accurate, representation of U.S. government. To put it another way, as Trevor Parry-Giles and Shawn Parry-Giles claim, depictions of the U.S. presidency in television series like *The West Wing* (and by implication *House of Cards*) gives society a glimpse of the “backstage” environment of government and these representations shape our understanding of the presidency.⁵⁸ Thus, *House of Cards* demonstrates how the “backstage” representation of legislative processes can shape society’s understanding of legislation and particular issues like sexual assault in the military.

The particular narrative of the sexual assault bill in *House of Cards* which I will detail in chapter three will function as a mediated representation of the current climate within the government regarding the military’s influence over such proceedings and the stakeholders that benefit from it. It will also offer insights into smaller, everyday struggles that relate to giving voice to sexual assault. The choice to include a mediated representation complementary to

current legislation provides potential opportunities to investigate how texts can speak to a broad audience not proficient in politics about public issues important to the public sphere.

The purpose of using an entertainment media text to broaden my discussion of sexual assault is to investigate how political messages embedded in accessible and engaging formats like television may be able to better illuminate hegemonic and dangerous forces. Several scholars have claimed television has this potential. As Don Waisanen points out, some entertainment commentaries have political force in that “critical approaches refocus mystifying rhetorics” and contribute to society and civilian attitudes in significant ways.⁵⁹ Another instance of the power of television is in Bonnie Dow’s study of television in which she describes, “television texts as rhetorical entities that can be interpreted as performing particular functions at particular times. These are persuasive functions that work to make some ideas, positions, and alternatives more attractive, accessible, and powerful to audiences than others. Particularly when television programming is studied with an eye toward its role in social change, it is useful to view it as rhetorical discourse that works to accomplish some end(s).”⁶⁰

Political influence in television is further analyzed by Todd Gitlin as he points out that when television shows are packaged more than written, they are automatically political more than artistic with network departments functioning as political brokerage on the search for trends.⁶¹ Therefore, television shows are not just political, but attuned to what is hotly debated at the current time or what opinions are chosen to be propagated. Sometimes, politics emerges in television from strong voices involved in the writing process. In an interview with *The Daily Beast*, actress Robin Wright explains her involvement in the military storyline by stating, “well to tell you the truth, that was kind of my idea, and Beau Willimon, the show runner’s, because I had been involved with this campaign for so many years.”⁶² The campaign that Wright is

referring to includes her advocacy work with *Synergie des Femmes contre les Violences Sexuelles*, an aid organization that helps survivors of sexual assault from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Therefore, it seems clear that Wright's personal, vested interest in the issue of sexual assault has, to some extent, saturated the storyline of *House of Cards*. Regardless, it is evident that entertainment media like *House of Cards* can take on a powerful political charge. This point is emphasized by Dow, who claims, "whether or not television 'reflects' reality outside the tube is beside the point: we watch television and it is therefore part of life. Rather than existing in autonomous realm outside of political life, media is part of it."⁶³ As will be discussed in more detail in my concluding chapter, television can serve an advocacy function in the public sphere, or at the very least inform a mass audience about particular social and political current affairs in a different rhetorical manner than traditional political speeches and journalistic reports. In this sense, the mediated characterization I have chosen for analysis is reflective of current political legislation and therefore, has the potentiality to motivate an audience in an approachable and dynamic manner through an understanding of critical rhetoric.

Critical Approach

As mentioned in my introduction, this analysis relies extensively on critical rhetoric as an approach to understanding sexual assault and silence in the military. To better understand how anti-woman ideologies situate power/knowledge production in society, it is the task of critical rhetoric to demystify certain discourses of power and locate different strategies that challenge and effect social change.⁶⁴ Examining the two different texts that I have chosen for study will expose the possibilities that each hold in effecting social change. Taking a critical rhetoric approach to my analysis of each text differ from other rhetorical approaches in that I will be locating the specific strategies each text may or may not employ for unmasking power discourse.

These strategies, I claim, “entertain possibilities for action.”⁶⁵ Locating the capacity for social change can demonstrate the influence of media and its relationship to legislative efforts in the political system. In my project I utilize a critical rhetoric approach to make sense of the current climate of masculinity, silence, and complicity rife in the military system.

In order to expose the often-invisible power dynamics at work in an institution such as the U.S. military, scholars in the field have turned to a form of rhetorical criticism labeled critical rhetoric. This particular form of rhetoric addresses how discourse is inscribed with social power; therefore, by studying said power discourses, rhetorical critics can begin to illuminate these often invisible and unconscious powers and point the way toward oppositional social change.⁶⁶ A study in critical rhetoric, then, examines ways in which power discourses can be revealed in institutions, symbolic actions, and texts thereby exposing oppression and challenging the dominance of these sites of power. In his work, McKerrow identifies two different forms of critique used to assess a text: the critique of dominance and the critique of freedom. At their most basic sense, the critique of dominance demystifies dominant ideology and the critique of freedom has a self-reflexive nature that dissects the new power structures which arise from a change in the status quo.⁶⁷ In my following analysis chapters, I will examine my rhetorical texts using the critique of dominance and the critique of freedom. While McKerrow first defines this approach of critical rhetoric in 1989, its antecedents lie in various works of scholarship in the field that undertake critical examinations of power discourse. While all of these antecedents that challenge dominant ideology cannot be addressed in this document, within this section, I will first discuss the basic tenets of ideological criticism and how they relate to critical rhetoric followed by a discussion of rhetorical media criticism.

Since at least 1969, when rhetorical scholars Robert L. Scott and Donald K. Smith detailed how the confrontation of oppression can be a rhetorical undertaking, other rhetoricians have detected the need to unpack and analyze ideologies that underlay rhetorical acts. In their study, Scott and Smith found that those who confront powerful, oppressive discourses, do not share, but rather demand and effect a change in the status quo.⁶⁸ This interest in evaluating and unpacking ideological rhetoric was crystalized more directly a decade later in the work of Philip Wander. Wander posits, “ideological criticism joined with rhetorical theory is prepared to critique rhetoric legitimizing actions, policies and silences relevant to the great issues of our time.”⁶⁹ Further elaborating on the dominant discourse of society, Wander posited that ideological criticism “entertains possibilities for action, and the actions it considers may go beyond actions sanctioned in the academy, namely the production of texts. This becomes apparent when we take up issues meaningful in our everyday lives – the impact, for example, of the established order, through various institutional arrangements, on how we think and talk about victims of official violence.”⁷⁰ A turn to ideological criticism, therefore, can not only unmask the power discourse within the military, but also provide a space for action outside criticism itself. Furthermore, ideological criticism breaks away from technical reason to join the political and social⁷¹ to remind us that the social aspect of sexual assault (the “survivors” experiences and conceptualization of their assault) are tied to the political. In the decades since Wander’s work first emerged, ideological criticism and connections between rhetoric and Western social thought have emerged in a wide variety of scholarship that will be assessed subsequently.

Another approach to rhetoric undergirding critical rhetoric is rhetorical media criticism. Often (though not always) sharing concerns about media are scholars in the Frankfurt School, rhetorical criticism of the media recognizes television, film, advertisements, and other media as

both the source of powerful discourses of oppression and as a potential site for promoting social change. In 1944, two scholars from the Marxist based Frankfurt School, Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer examined how media is a culture industry in which power discourse is produced and delivered to a mass audience. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, film and other forms of mass media no longer present themselves as art; instead, they indicate that the mediated industry is a monopoly in which economic positioning is the greatest influence.⁷² In this sense, the discourse of economic and class power reproduce oppressive ideology and the consumer is passed through this filter of the culture industry under the façade of choice.⁷³

Although media is considered the source of power discourse, other scholars believe that there is potential for both reproduction of oppressive ideologies and promotion of advocacy. As I pointed to earlier, Bonnie Dow uses a feminist standpoint to demonstrate how television programming can serve as social change when it works to accomplish some ends,⁷⁴ and this perspective on television can be the central assumption of media as a rhetorical text. Dow states, “My view is consonant with that of critics who claim that those who produce television programming function as ‘cultural interpreters’, and that television acts to ‘articulate the main lines of the cultural consensus about the nature of reality. The interpretation and articulation that occur in television entertainment involve choices at many levels.’”⁷⁵ Here, it is significant to note that my mediated text can be thought of as culturally interpreting the landscape of current reform legislation. What the effects of this interpretation are, as well as the purpose, will be further examined in my textual analysis.

As a whole, critical rhetoric encompasses many different features of power discourse that include ideological criticism and rhetorical media criticism. Therefore, as stated in the text section above, McKerrow’s conceptualization of critical rhetoric will serve as a short hand for all

of these interests in my critical approach. The possibilities of action which Wander mentions in his work on ideological criticism can be connected to McKerrow's discussion of demystifying the power discourse, (which for my project includes the dominate discourse surrounding the issue of sexual assault in the military) and examining how different intervention strategies (the two text of study) may effect social change and play a role in this large national issue.⁷⁶ As my underlying rhetorical purpose of feminist criticism examines power and inequity – providing society with a different avenue of thinking – similarly, McKerrow's notion of critical rhetoric may not be the only way to discuss power, but it is an orientation toward the postmodern conception of power and discourse.⁷⁷ By and large, the different approaches to critical rhetoric that I have included will, in their most basic sense, aid in unmasking the power discourse and challenge anti-women ideology. Before further investigating the power discourse of sexual assault in the military and addressing the critical rhetoric surrounding this issue, I will describe the chapter structure to accomplish these goals.

Outline of Chapters

To answer my proposed questions, I divide my thesis into four chapters. The current chapter functions as my introduction, review of literature and methodological framework. Here, I address the larger issue of sexual assault in the military supported by examples, background information, and statistical evidence. My two text of study are briefly introduced with a background of each detailing the decision for choosing specific timeframes, major news networks and television programming. In chapter one it is my goal to justify the significance of studying sexual assault in the U.S. military as well as the contributions Communication Studies scholars can make toward this pervasive issue. Moreover, I include a review of current and relevant scholarship by synthesizing the three categories I proposed above: gender, sexuality, and

power, feminist criticism, and military culture's perpetuation of sexual assault. Also, I highlight my methodological choice to study these texts using the critical rhetoric and feminist criticism lens.

Chapter two is my first textual analysis section. This section is entirely devoted to interpreting selected public address text in the form of media news coverage of Gillibrand and MJIA from November 2013 to March 2014. In this section, I exemplify my methodological decision to use discursive fragments in my analysis and how this approach serves to understand the rhetorical nature of these relatively traditional forms of public address. Using a critique of dominance, I locate Gillibrand's rhetorical strategies for their effectivity in challenging the hegemonic system.

Chapter three contains my second textual analysis section. This chapter focuses solely on the fictional mediated characterization of Gillibrand's bill in the television series *House of Cards*. Here, I assess segments, clips and particular dialogue from episodes in season two that deal with the legislation beginning with Claire Underwood's encounter with her assailant and ending with Claire's purposeful derailment of the bill. This televised rhetorical text is analyzed not only for its specific storyline, but also for the political choices to produce and propagandize this legislative affair. The rhetorical messages that I uncover in this text apply both a critique of dominance and a critique of freedom in that the text resists the hegemonic structure while simultaneously pointing toward other elements in need of critical attention.

Finally, chapter four acts as my conclusion, more specifically my overall comparison of both texts' rhetorical work. This chapter summarizes the analytical findings from both chapter two and three and synthesizes these findings to produce a comprehensive analysis. Simply, this chapter functions almost as a compare and contrast section of each text: the traditional public

address and the entertainment text. It is my goal to analyze each text keeping a critical rhetoric approach and a feminist criticism eye toward the effect that each text can provide in promoting advocacy and motivating social change and public opinion. The conclusion ends with a discussion of the implications of certain mediated text for my larger concern of sexual assault against women in the military.

Chapter Two: MJIA and Gillibrand's Public Address

When studying sexual assault in the military, it is nearly impossible to ignore the tenacious efforts of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand and her reform legislation. A simple internet search about military sexual assault will yield a number of online news articles related to MJIA and the up-and-coming junior Senator, whose name has become synonymous with fighting military sexual assault. Thanks, in part, to Gillibrand, this issue has been fiercely debated in Congress and in the media. Indeed, various news networks and outlets have covered MJIA's legislative lifespan from its initial proposal, to votes in both the House and Senate, to its ultimate demise, and hopes for a future reconsideration. As a result, news consumers have become increasingly aware of military sexual assault and Gillibrand's rhetorical efforts to pass MJIA. Therefore, as I will demonstrate in my analysis below, Gillibrand's discourse on MJIA has not only become an influential means of informing audiences about the complexity and prevalence of military sexual assault; it also represents a powerful rhetorical effort to unmask and ameliorate the harms of hegemonic masculinity, silence, and complicity in U.S. military culture.

To better understand the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity, this chapter examines Senator Gillibrand's rhetorical messages as part of a relatively traditional public address strategy for interrogating military sexual assault. What I mean by "traditional public address" deserves attention before delving into my analysis. Traditionally, audiences have been encouraged to talk about social and political issues in the realm of media news coverage. To make sense of the world around us, news plays a large part in educating the mass population in the public sphere. Elected representatives, like Gillibrand, engage in deliberative policy rhetoric which is different from other forms of public address like judicial or epideictic. Aristotle points out that with legislation, the deliberative orator must understand the forces that will

strengthen or weaken the constitution to produce a democracy that encourages public debate.⁷⁸ Gillibrand's public address as text does just that: it promotes deliberative consideration and democratic engagement of a heretofore unaddressed issue of national concern through Congressional and public debate. The media news networks, despite their supposed slant, present a story of sexual assault that allows for democratic participation from the audience. Clearly, this type of rhetorical text contrasts with the fictional popular culture text *House of Cards* that will occupy the next chapter. These differences will be fleshed out in both analysis chapters and elaborated upon in the conclusion. But, by focusing on public address strategies alone in this chapter, I can begin to uncover how uniquely deliberative forms of traditional public address approach solving military sexual assault and unearthing the power dynamics of this particular discourse.

As previously stated in my opening chapter, to investigate these public address strategies I have chosen to analyze news reports of the reform legislation using a *LexisNexis* search of online news articles from November 2013 to March 2014 from the following news networks: *Fox News*, *Politico*, *The Huffington Post*, *NPR* and *The New York Times*. In order to illuminate the rhetorical message that the public address of Gillibrand and MJIA perform, I distilled major themes present in my text. Some themes were more prominent than others; some were less, but more important to the overall conversation. Amongst these themes, three stood out in particular for their efforts to expose the military's culture of masculinity, silence, complicity: Gillibrand's Feminine Persona, Disrupting Hegemony, and Breaking the Silence. To begin my analysis, I will dissect the articles by addressing Gillibrand's Persona as marked by a traditional rhetorical feminine style. Next, I will detail how news reports have named the bill "radical" due to its major reform changes, unusual bipartisan coalition, Gillibrand's crusader efforts, and discussion

of a needed military cultural shift. Finally, I will end my analysis with a conversation of voice. Central to my argument is the notion of silence and Gillibrand not only functions as a loudspeaker, but she gives a platform to the voiceless survivors. Together, these three themes and their subsequent subthemes will address a larger rhetorical message that seeks to unmask power in discourse. Again, I argue that not one individual article will inform the audience about sexual assault in the military, but rather fragments will help elucidate the many layers of the hegemonic military culture. Gillibrand's use of the feminine style, the radical initiatives of MJIA and the platform for voiceless survivors all aid in addressing the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity by demystifying the hegemonic structure and providing space for democratic, deliberative social change.

Gillibrand's Feminine Persona

While researching public address about MJIA, Senator Gillibrand's persona emerged as an important rhetorical element within media reports. Persona is a classical dimension of rhetorical performance defined by Edwin Black as not only the role of the author, audience or relationship between the two, but more so, the ideology of a speaker in that one's convictions will shape their identity and overall message.⁷⁹ When I speak to Gillibrand's feminine persona, I am referring to her presence as author/speaker with an ideological identity visible through her political messages in media reports. Gillibrand accomplishes this persona through the rhetorical tools she deploys to strategically construct a critical message. In this section, I will discuss a particular rhetorical tool Gillibrand enacts to communicate her persona: her feminine speaking style. Gillibrand's feminine style, which Karlyn Kohrs Campbell has described as the style of speech used by many early feminist advocates that assured the audience of the speaker's femininity,⁸⁰ is deliberately employed to engage (and contrast with) a masculine military

opposition. The feminine style is a persona Gillibrand has conceived that functions to bolster the legislation by appealing to a male-dominated sphere while simultaneously taking into account the power and productiveness of using feminine style to talk about women's issues. In order to dismantle the hegemonic system, tactics such as the feminine style are necessary to break the silence and thwart a complicitous culture that has been historically engrained with masculinist ideology.

In public address study, scholars first took note of the feminine style as a device utilized by leaders of the early feminist movement around the late 1800's. Since public oratory at the time was reserved for men, women advocates needed to find alternative methods for inserting their voices into the public sphere and legitimating their cause. The feminine style emerged to fit this need. The feminine style was comprised of various strategies used together and separately, including the use of drama and poetry, domesticity, inductive reasoning, metaphors, relying on male authority as credible support, and most noticeably the use of emotionally expressive language.⁸¹ The style and content used by these early feminist advocates has been regarded as rhetorically strategic since it was a means to an end. If the leaders of the early movement were to promote women's rights, than appealing to an audience through male credibility and the emphasis on feminine traits was a mode of persuasion. The feminine style was an approachable tactic that motivated male audiences to listen to a feminist message. However, this style was employed during the early feminist movement, when just speaking to a crowd was shocking and unheard of for women.⁸² In our current age, employing the feminine style may seem problematic as it can be argued that it reinforces the dominate code by reaffirming gendered expectations. There lies a valid concern that the feminine style may reinstate the hegemonic system that Gillibrand is attempting to eradicate. Nonetheless, I argue that although the feminine style is a

more traditional rhetorical tactic, Gillibrand is skillfully adopting this strategy to improve her chances in debate and appeal to a masculinist, often times anti-woman institution. On the other hand, the feminine style is not only Gillibrand's recognition of a hegemonic audience, but the feminine style is also another way to productively talk about sexual assault that overwhelmingly affects women in the military. What follows is an examination of the different aspects of the feminine style such as emotional language, metaphor, empathy, and the reliance on male credibility, which demonstrate how Gillibrand's feminine persona is a rhetorical tool for combatting military sexual assault.

The most glaring example of the feminine style is Gillibrand's use of expressive language and news reports characterizations of her as passionate and emotional. Before the House vote of MJIA, *Fox News* stated that, "On Wednesday, Gillibrand was joined at an emotional news conference,"⁸³ alluding to the emotional intensity of the bill and Gillibrand's appeals to Congress. Addressing delegates, Gillibrand is quoted, "Anyone who does that ought to lose some sleep over it, frankly, because I'll tell you, if we get very close but can't have an up-or-down vote, but we get in the high 50s, this change is coming. But why not make the change now?"⁸⁴ Clearly, Gillibrand has occupied the space of an emotional speaker by appealing to the Senate in what seems like a last-ditch, desperate effort to get votes. Yet, this tactic is actually a means to draw upon pathos and the feminine style in an attempt to persuade voters through what was characterized as a personal plea by *Politico*. Additionally, Gillibrand uses pathos instead of logos to appeal to the hearts of delegates by stating, "I don't see this as a political vote, I really see this as a vote of conscience, a vote of justice, about whether you're willing to take on the status quo and take on the Department of Defense."⁸⁵ Here, Gillibrand makes a very clear, deliberate distinction that this issue is not political, but one of the conscience. Appealing to pathos through

conscience instead of politics (which would be equated to logos), Gillibrand's rhetorical strategies are marked feminine. Lastly, news reports from *The Huffington Post* and *The New York Times* both identified Gillibrand as "passionate," "frustrated," "infuriated," and "emotionally charged." Typically, adjectives such as these are reserved for women, especially female political figures. Would a male-counterpart, potentially Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas) who has been publicly supportive of Gillibrand and MJIA be described as "passionate," or "emotionally charged" when speaking toward the issue of sexual assault? As such, it is evident that Gillibrand's use of expressive language and emotional appeals qualify her feminine style and differentiate her from her male colleagues. Instead of relying on facts and figures to communicate an emotionally-charged issue, Gillibrand uses those same emotions to sympathize with survivors. She is not simply bowing down to a masculine perspective to initiate change, but focusing on understanding the lived experience in order to propose the necessary tools to accomplish her goal.

Although Gillibrand is a highly regarded legislator capable of asserting authority, a rhetorical device of the feminine style that she employs to navigate masculine terrain is relying on male credibility. To mitigate the violation of women speaking in public, early leaders of the women's rights movement would reason inductively to give audiences the illusion that the conclusions were their own by relying on male authority.⁸⁶ Even well before the early feminist movement, rhetoricians can trace this strategy back to Athens with Aspasia, the first known female rhetorician. Since women had few opportunities to participate in public life, Aspasia could only gain notoriety through her relation with Pericles. Not only did Pericles consult Aspasia, but Plato remarked that she had written his famous "Funeral Oration."⁸⁷ Historically, even as far back as Ancient Greece, women have been known to rely on male authority and

speak from their perspective in order to gain respect and legitimacy. It is not surprising then — given the fact that this bill deals with a culture of masculinity, in a landscape that is disproportionately male-dominated — that Gillibrand would employ this rhetorical strategy. To convince male leaders to support MJIA, why not appeal to the ego and co-opt patriarchy in order to subvert authority needed to be open to a gendered message? Gillibrand’s tactic is apparent when support for MJIA comes from military officials, like Senator Richard Blumenthal (D-Connecticut), member of the Armed Services Committee who believes these reform changes are bringing about an unprecedented amount of awareness.⁸⁸ Gillibrand is receiving support from military officials who possess male credibility that can bolster her message. Additionally, in an article for *Fox News*, Gillibrand states, “Not every single commander necessarily wants women in the force. Not every single commander believes what a sexual assault is. Not every single commander can distinguish between a slap on the ass and a rape because they merge all of these crimes together.”⁸⁹ Within this statement, it is apparent that Gillibrand is relying on male authority or speaking to male credibility when she addresses military commanders. Gillibrand repeats “not every single commander...” as an emphasis on male authority by navigating treacherous terrain, carefully avoiding a gross generalization, and building upon her own credibility by pointing out that not every single commander has contributed to the military’s culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity.⁹⁰ By relying on male authority, Gillibrand is adeptly addressing a predominately masculine audience by utilizing the feminine style to her advantage. Those in opposition to the bill can hear her statement and feel comfortable with the fact that Gillibrand is not blaming all military members, or all men. Here, Gillibrand is giving military opposition the power they want in this situation (which they felt has been “stripped”), through her characterization that not all in the military perpetuate sexual assault, while never

relinquishing her own rhetorical agency. Even more, the audience is not solely comprised of military opposition. Gillibrand's colleagues and the American public are influenced daily by the hegemonic, patriarchal system I mention and Gillibrand's rhetorical tools avoid alienating her audience by inviting male credibility in the form of outspoken military supporters and her own brand of reasoning.

Another element to Gillibrand's feminine style is her use of personal experience and empathy to provide supporting evidence for MJIA. One such example is Gillibrand's push for using personal experiences, testimonies and horrific stories from the ranks as evidence for sexual assault in the military during Senate hearings.⁹¹ To supplement the facts, figures, and statistics that Gillibrand and her team have composed, the choice to use personal experience and narrative is one that is marked feminine considering the emotional appeals that arise from such evidence. Additionally, Gillibrand also made a "personal plea" of her own when an *NPR* article cited her as stating, "Because as women, not only can we understand and be very empathetic when we talk to a man or a woman who's been brutally raped, but we are often able to internalize it and actually imagine what that would be like if that happened to my son or to my daughter, or to myself."⁹² Gillibrand is inserting empathy by asking the audience and opponents of the bill to imagine a hypothetical narrative in which they or someone they care about has been affected by a traumatic event. In this instance, Gillibrand is remarking that she herself, through personal experience, has invented a scenario in which she does not receive the proper treatment, support and justice after living through a significant event. This element to the feminine style may be successful in the sense that drawing upon narrative and empathy can potentially generate an affective response; however, it may backfire in that it limits logical, masculine forms of reasoning which opponents may be familiar with employing. As Campbell has pointed out, the use of personal experience is

tested against male authorities with limited amounts of statistical evidence demonstrating that it is not atypical.⁹³ More often than not, the feminine style is viewed by a male audience as a weaker form of argumentation, but as I have explained, in this particular context, it is indispensable. Gillibrand understands how emphasizing personal experience can bring collective sharing into the conversation that holds valuable meaning for survivors' dealing with abuse. This collectivist mobility can ensure support by way of feminist strategies.

Similar to the use of personal experience and empathy in establishing pathos, Gillibrand incorporates the use of metaphor into her public address. In her analysis of Elizabeth Cady Stanton's famous speech, "The Solitude of Self," Campbell notes how Stanton used the lyrical style full of metaphors, an intimate tone and the use of aesthetic materials as an experience that breathes new life into her ideas.⁹⁴ On the same token, Gillibrand includes the choice of metaphor to enhance her message by breathing life into a human issue. In a *Fox News* article, Gillibrand asserts, "They are maintaining a closed system when what we really need is sunshine. What we really need is light and transparency so we can get to the root of the problem and then find the right solutions."⁹⁵ In her metaphor, Gillibrand is using illustrative language to prove that there has been darkness, silence, and the covering up of sexual assault crimes. In order to prevent the issue, "get to the root of the problem," shine light, and grow from prior mistakes, Gillibrand uses "sunshine" to compel the audience to support MJIA's reforms. It is no coincidence that Gillibrand has chosen to use a "cheery," or "optimistic" metaphor since the feminine style is equated with women as nurturing, caring, and positive. Gillibrand astutely assembles political metaphor as poetic as her rhetorical femininity. Using metaphor is an expressive, emotional appeal to the senses that functions much differently than common modes of reasoning. By taking

the silence, darkness, and evil out of the picture, this issue can be viewed metaphorically in a productive and proactive manner.

Gillibrand's feminine persona is rhetorically strategic and beneficial in driving support for MJIA. Using male authority and personal experience can appeal to the audience in a unique way by potentially convincing opponents to think differently about the issue or motivating supporters to get more involved. I argue that Gillibrand is well aware of the fact that those in opposition of the bill—including military members, some of Gillibrand's congressional colleagues, and parts of the U.S. public—will be more disposed to listen to an argument constructed by means of a feminine style versus one that defies traditional gender norms. Here, the feminine style is more than an oratorical style; it is one of the most effective means to fight a system so deeply embedded with masculinist ideology. The intentional choice to employ the feminine style, by engaging a masculine community with feminine tactics ensures that the conversation of military sexual assault will be had and not intentionally neglected as masculine tactics have proven. As I demonstrated, the feminine style is not only accommodative to a masculine audience, but it also addresses an issue that has vastly affected women in ways that speak uniquely to their lived experiences. Gillibrand does not just focus on appealing to the masculine community, but addresses sexual assault with a feminist approach that can instill sympathetic urgency for solving the problem. However, the feminine style may pose detriment to the cause when it saturates Gillibrand's argument and can be read as emotional and irrational by those in opposition. Regardless, the problematic assumptions are not as substantial and do not necessarily limit rhetorical efficacy of this use of the feminine style. Gillibrand's persona exposes the masculine culture of the military which paves a pathway for a radical naming of the bill that ultimately calls for a disruption of institutional complicity.

Disrupting Hegemony

When Gillibrand and her political network first stepped on scene to present MJIA to the House and the Armed Services Committee in November 2013, the plan to provide fair and swift prosecution for survivors was characterized by opponents as “controversial.”⁹⁶ Across the board, out of all the news networks I selected for analysis, the representation of MJIA as radical was a consistent pattern. Without this characterization, it is difficult to imagine how to tackle an institution that has, for so long, established a routine of complicity through hegemony. Often times, radical measures call for far-reaching, deep-seated changes. Gillibrand’s rhetorical efforts are more than garnering publicity; I argue that they are necessary for challenging a system unwilling to relinquish control in an environment so wrought by toxic complicity. The military’s culture of complicity that has more often than not excused the abuses that occur within the system are being challenged by the crusading Gillibrand who is anything but complicit. When I describe MJIA and Gillibrand’s political efforts to combat military sexual assault as radical I have located several areas of analysis that, put together, encompass my notion of a radical public address text. This characterization of MJIA and Gillibrand aid in disrupting the hegemonic structure through “radical” efforts. In the section that follows, I will first discuss the representation of Gillibrand as a crusader who aggressively fights for change which will extend my conversation of her rhetorical feminine persona. Then, I will discuss how news reports characterize the bill as controversial due to its unusual bipartisan coalition and “historic nature”⁹⁷ of legislative reform changes. Finally, I end my analysis on a conversation about the need for a military cultural shift which many news reports, and Gillibrand herself, touch upon.

Sexual Assault Crusader

In many of the news reports of MJIA, Gillibrand is characterized as a “fighter” and “crusader” against sexual assault. According to *Politico*, “For Gillibrand, a New Yorker with national ambitions, her quest isn’t finished by a long shot. She’ll keep playing the part of liberal crusader by zeroing in on a commander’s power to determine which sexual assault cases proceed to a court-martial.”⁹⁸ This “liberal crusader,” has “aggressively pushed legislation,”⁹⁹ taking to the Senate floor to lambaste the opposition for not simply moving ahead on sexual assault,¹⁰⁰ while “leading an uphill fight.”¹⁰¹ Clearly, Gillibrand is the image of a “Rosie the Riveter” type of feminist who is assured that MJIA will pass and who is averse to abandoning hope. As Gillibrand has pushed to attack her measure,¹⁰² one detail is for certain: Gillibrand is confident that the bill will pass the Senate.¹⁰³ The depiction of Gillibrand as a “crusader” and “advocate” for the rights of sexual assault survivors’ represents Gillibrand as a legislator who will utilize any political tool in her arsenal to fight for the voiceless.

A mobilizing feature of Gillibrand’s “crusader” persona is the approach she takes toward politics, particularly her legislation. In a *New York Times* article, Gillibrand was described by colleagues and political journalists as “ubiquitous,” “savvy,” “relentless,” “admired for her ample fund-raising,” “skillfully aligned,” and “canny.”¹⁰⁴ Some have even likened her zeal to the Tea Party, remarking how, “Her other tactics include cornering colleagues on the Senate floor and refusing to stop talking, and popping out a news release picking apart a senator's competing legislation as it is being announced.”¹⁰⁵ Similar to the wily character Frank Underwood in *House of Cards*, Gillibrand also partakes in an active form of politics that resembles a “take no prisoners” approach. Although I am not arguing that Gillibrand is corrupt like Underwood, I do wish to draw connections to their political leadership style. Gillibrand is a “formidable figure,”

who has been quoted as saying if her approach “makes a colleague uncomfortable, that’s a price worth paying.”¹⁰⁶ Unlike the feminine style previously mentioned, here it seems like Gillibrand is using “the master’s tools” to enact change on a grand scale, doing whatever it takes to advance her cause. This assertive and aggressive aspect to Gillibrand’s persona does not delegitimize her feminine style; coupled together, the feminine style and crusader are rhetorically savvy tools. The feminine style ensures her legitimacy and opens up the floor for conversation. The crusader persona and feminine style are intermixed; one is not privileged over the other since both are necessary for Gillibrand’s ability to connect with all audience members.

After the final Senate vote on MJIA was derailed, unsurprisingly, the persistent Gillibrand had more to offer. News coverage concluded that Gillibrand was “defeated, but unbowed,” and “Although the vote sent the bill back to the Senate calendar, it was unlikely to be the final word.”¹⁰⁷ Other politicians have noted how Gillibrand will not go away,¹⁰⁸ and Gillibrand herself has spoken to her presence in Congress by stating, “We’ll just keep fighting every year, I feel responsible for every single one of these victims, and I feel I have to do something to protect them and give them hope for justice.”¹⁰⁹ Gillibrand’s persistence and steadfast nature prove her passion for the project and the unremitting determination she possesses. A comment from Gillibrand about her involvement with MJIA exhibits her political spirit when she states, “The big difference between me and Sen. Levin and others is that I want to do something -- something meaningful -- about the lack of reporting.”¹¹⁰ Undoubtedly, Gillibrand wants to accomplish major reform changes that are not only legislative, but have lasting imprints on the military structure. These statements released by Gillibrand and chosen for news coverage appears to be less about the political gains garnered by the Senator and more about her role as an advocate.

The confident sexual assault “crusader” and “advocate” that Gillibrand encompasses through her persistent, aggressive, and canny political leadership approach has contributed to her overall persona. Even though I argue that Gillibrand’s “fighter” characterization helps to bolster the bill and her status as an effective legislator, I would be remiss to not mention how the tensions between Gillibrand as feminine and “fighter” can cause conflicting results. Opponents of the bill, as well as those consuming the media reports might be threatened by a female figure who aggressively battles for votes unlike many other politicians. On one side, the audience views a feminized political figure who empathizes and incorporates personal experience into her argument, whereas on the other side there exists a Gillibrand who wages a tireless battle similar to a military commander. Again, these tensions play together to formulate a persona that is rhetorically crafty. If it were not for Gillibrand’s use of the feminine style and her crusader efforts, then this issue may have faded into the legislative background.

Bill as Radical

Another message from news coverage of MJIA and Gillibrand that distinguishes them from the hegemony and complicity of the status quo is the bill’s controversial nature. According to *The Huffington Post*, MJIA is controversial because it proposes removing military control over legal proceedings of sexual assault cases.¹¹¹ The controversial focus is not necessarily on the significant assistance survivors would receive, although that in and of itself is a radical idea. The focus is mostly on the change in military reform. Many have commented that MJIA will provide “scores of tough new provisions,”¹¹² “aimed at cracking down,”¹¹³ which “calls for major reform.”¹¹⁴ Even more, what each news network I analyzed claimed in their coverage of the bill was that MJIA would strip military commanders of their ability to overturn jury verdicts and eliminate their authority.¹¹⁵ Universally, it appears that news coverage was utilizing the word

“stripping” to describe the military reform changes MJIA would guarantee. The verb “stripping” implies an aggressive measure and this strategic way to describe the bill seems to, at times, bolster opposition toward it, as no citizen would want the nation’s military commanders, the ones who protect the country, to be “stripped” of all authority. Ignoring the fact that this “stripping” would provide justice for survivors, the radical reform to military control takes center stage. The characterization of MJIA as controversial can also be linked to the fierce opposition and clear-cut support the bill has received. Framing the bill as radical does not solely boost opposition, but it also works as a call to action that encourages supporters to speak out, even the most unlikely of politicians.

The vote for MJIA seems to be an age-old tale of legislative tension in which support and opposition is dividedly split. However, the divide is not between political parties as the nation has seen with other major reform changes. Uniquely, the effort to pass MJIA has seen a bipartisan coalition that distinctly defies the norms of politics today. In a *Fox News* report they indicate that MJIA has seen “strong bipartisan support” in which “Republicans and Democrats in the House and Senate united behind efforts to stop sexual assault.”¹¹⁶ High-profile politicians such as Senator Ted Cruz (R-Texas), a member of the Armed Services Committee, prominent figure in the Tea Party movement who is running in the 2016 presidential election has been one of Gillibrand’s loudest Republican supporters.¹¹⁷ This unlikely coalition building is quite remarkable given that other types of reform legislation have even caused a government shutdown. On the other hand, MJIA and Gillibrand have received strong opposition, strictly for the radical nature of the military reform. A *New York Times* article claimed that, “an uncomfortable division between the Senate’s women,”¹¹⁸ has deemed this bill as hotly contested. As stated previously, some of the biggest opponents of the bill come from Sen. Claire McCaskill

and a slew of military members and Pentagon officials. Senator Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), an Air Force lawyer addressed Republican supporters by stating, “People wanting to run for president on our side, I will remind you of this vote. If you want to be commander in chief, you told me a lot about who you are as a commander-in-chief candidate. You were willing to fire every commander in the military for reasons I don’t quite understand, so we’ll have a good discussion as to whether or not you understand how the military actually works.”¹¹⁹ The slight made by Graham indicates a strong opposition not only towards Gillibrand and MJIA, but those wishing to build bipartisan coalition on the Republican side who are viewed as traitors to their party and national security altogether. The unlikely bipartisan coalition marks MJIA as radical because some of the support and opposition it has received is unexpected. Today, Congress is known for being divided, particularly along party lines, so when reform legislation builds coalition between parties it is characterized as radical. Furthermore, it seems that support from an individual like Senator Ted Cruz, who has been known to voice extremist opinions opposite of Gillibrand, helps to make MJIA appear more moderate to those questioning its radical nature. Coalition building of this kind is a rhetorical strategy Gillibrand utilizes to communicate to supporters the exigency of military sexual assault and to convey to opponents that middle ground can be made.

A noticeable theme relating to MJIA as radical is the definition of the bill as “historic.”¹²⁰ Not only would this bill provide historic change for survivors and voices that have been historically silenced, but MJIA would provide significant historical military reform unlike any other seen before. MJIA’s “far-reaching changes,”¹²¹ prove that “major changes are coming for a decades-old military system.”¹²² It appears that those in opposition, particularly military members, are apprehensive of the change to the military system that has historical roots. Media

reports including *NPR* have indicated that MJIA would “erode the good order and discipline that allows the military to function,”¹²³ making changes to the World War II-era military justice system that would inevitably disrupt the unique military culture.¹²⁴ One of the many reasons this cultural shift is viewed as radical (and MJIA reforms are viewed as radical, as a result), is credited, in part, to a disruption of history. According to *The Huffington Post*, “The legislation would spark the cultural shift needed to create a climate in which victims have the confidence to step forward and report sex crimes without the fear of retaliation.”¹²⁵ Furthermore, “This idea that the commander has to control the administration of justice, even for serious offenses, goes all the way back to George III, our last monarch,”¹²⁶ and another report asserts that Gillibrand’s bill would only pile Band-Aids on a badly broken 18th century museum piece.¹²⁷ In order to give voice and justice to survivors, the news reports of MJIA tell readers that what the military needs is a change in the status quo by disrupting history. Additionally, the military has historically existed as a system of entitlement in which those on the top of the hierarchy (typically men) are protected. Those that commit sexual abuse do so, in part, because they can. The complicit structure has allowed abuse to continue and the historical foundations of the military are used as tools to reason. Clearly, MJIA is a threat to the history of the military culture that some argue should not be altered. Opponents give the impression that the history made (giving survivors justice) cannot overshadow the history lost.

Altogether, the characterization of MJIA as a controversial amendment to military reform, an unusual bipartisan coalition, and the historical naming of the bill paints a larger image of MJIA as wholly radical. These fragments of a radical bill can contribute to opposition toward sexual assault reform that intends to downplay the historical change made in the name of survivors. However, I argue that by framing the bill as radical, Gillibrand can appeal to

opponents through unlikely coalition building and incite fervor in supporters. The radical nature of the bill attempts to get at the root of this problem by shifting military ideology and bringing proactive measures to the forefront.

Military Cultural Shift

Another significant finding from my analysis of Gillibrand's public address, which I previously alluded to, is a broken and toxic military culture in need of a shift. In addition to the reform changes that MJIA calls for, media coverage, supporters of the bill and Gillibrand herself cite military culture as a system in need of a cultural shift. The notion that the military justice system is broken is widespread as Gillibrand's sexual assault message is propelled by supporters and journalists alike. Numerous articles have cited that "the system is broken"¹²⁸ and "there is a perception out there right now that the military is out of control."¹²⁹ An "out of control" military incites public scrutiny and many reports remark that the broken system indicates that there is a lack of good order and discipline within the ranks.¹³⁰ Overall, the broken system contributes to what many have claimed is "a justice system that is rife with bias and unfairness."¹³¹ Even more, some reports claim that the broken justice system is particularly unfair for women in the military.¹³² As such, these reports take issue with the broken justice system and the unfair legal proceedings for survivors by beginning to locate why exactly the military system has ensued in this fashion for so long. Dissecting the institutional issues at the heart of sexual assault in the military leads to toxic leadership as probable cause.

In an effort to comprehend the issue of sexual assault in the military, several supporters of MJIA, as well as Gillibrand herself, have shed light on the toxicity inherent in the disciplinary strategies and culture of the military. An *NPR* article explored the toxic environment as a contribution to sexual assault by stating, "Top commanders in the U.S. Army have announced

publicly that they have a problem: They have too many ‘toxic leaders’ — the kind of bosses who make their employees miserable.”¹³³ Additionally, the article claims that toxic officers have contributed to soldier’s mental health problems due to the fact that these trusted leaders are abusive, self-aggrandizing, arrogant and unconcerned about troop morale.¹³⁴ The toxic leader incites images of the archetypal figure seen on television screens in which a soldier is abrasively yelled at by an officer, establishing discipline and dominance. But, as Gillibrand mentions, “destructive leaders are one reason why the number of sexual assaults in the military is so high. You’ve just heard from these victims, there are too many command climates that are toxic.”¹³⁵ The extreme nature of toxic leadership is one of the many factors why the military fosters a culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity and why so many in opposition of MJIA still do not want civilian interference. Moreover, “Walter Ulmer, a retired general who led forces in Vietnam, calls toxic leadership an ‘institutional cancer’”¹³⁶ alluding to the cultural climate of the military that not only fosters perpetrators, but perpetuates systemic hegemony. The unveiling of institutional failings and subordinating ideologies speaks to the need for a cultural shift that news reports have likened to MJIA’s reform changes. Thus, a radical cultural shift that calls for major institutional changes would only educe such radical legislative reform.

The culture of entitlement intrinsic to the military allows for members to commit these heinous acts without repercussion because of the role of institutional tolerance and underlying misogyny which is read as healthy fraternity.¹³⁷ The culture of entitlement presented here is similar to my argument that the military is a culture of complicity by way of institutional tolerance for allowing members to commit sexual assault crimes and go unpunished. To combat this culture of complicity, Gillibrand’s crusader persona and the bills radical nature aid in challenging a longstanding hegemonic structure.

Breaking the Silence

In addition to Gillibrand's attack on the military's masculinist structure and complicit environment, the Senator also tackles the military's culture of silence, attempting both to break it down and give voice to survivors. The culture of complicity that the public address speaks to with reference to a military cultural shift reveals that survivors of assault do not wish to come forward to gain justice due to fear of retaliation, disbelief, and overall covering up of said crimes. Within this section, I outline how the military system lacks a platform for survivors to speak out and how Gillibrand and MJIA can be considered this platform that survivors need to have their voices heard. Because of Gillibrand's vocal crusade against military sexual assault, breaking the silence has shed light on this issue in ways that help to not only bring awareness, but incite exigency.

As is evident in my section on Gillibrand as a crusader, her fight is not only about passing legislation, but about speaking out for those in the military system who feel that they cannot vocalize their concerns. In a *Fox News* article Gillibrand states, "We want to make sure that the men and women who serve our military have a justice system deserving of their sacrifices. They are literally giving their lives for our values, for our country. They shouldn't have a justice system that is rife with bias and unfairness."¹³⁸ This issue lies in distrust of the military system. Survivors do not feel that the military will honor their voices and protect their future service. Gillibrand asserts, in an article for *The Huffington Post* "The people who do not trust the chain of command are the victims. That breach of trust, that fundamental breach of trust has been broken for victims of sexual assault."¹³⁹ Clearly, this distrust of the military – the complicit covering up of crimes – has caused a silencing of survivor voices. Representative Nita Lowey (D-NY) remarks that "Sexual assault in the armed services and at our military academies is systemic and

corrosive. We must end the violence, shame, and silence. We must also change the culture that has allowed these crimes to take place."¹⁴⁰ Gillibrand is, in a most basic sense, informing the nation that sexual assault is nothing new, but a product of past generations who have been complicit in hiding truths about abuse which silences the survivors. In order to end the silence and allow female survivors to come forward and speak out about their experiences requires a legislative push and a leader (Gillibrand) with influence and political power to recognize the oppressive system and give voice to survivors.

One of the most significant features of Gillibrand's public address is that it presents a platform for the voiceless survivors. According to a *New York Times* article, Gillibrand states, "I have always seen myself as a voice for the voiceless."¹⁴¹ Gillibrand astutely understands the harmful implications survivors face if they were to come forward about a crime without reform legislation that protects their military career. She is enacting her crusader persona and using the power of her privileged identity to give voice to the silenced survivors. In a report by *The Huffington Post*, Gillibrand stated, "Our job as members of Congress is to provide that oversight and accountability over the military, over the Department of Defense and there is a growing chorus of military leaders who have even more experience than Sen. McCain who are saying, 'This should be taken out of the chain of command.'"¹⁴² Her voice echoes the responsibility she believes she owes her constituents and military members. She is a senator that makes human issues the core of her legislative initiatives, causing some journalists to even dub her a feminist. "[Gillibrand] is a feminist who has made improving women's lives the focus of her political legislation."¹⁴³ Her feminist approach of giving voice to the voiceless has garnered testimony from survivors, letters of support from retired brass, and a vote in support of MJIA from a member of the Pentagon's advisory panel.¹⁴⁴ More importantly, Gillibrand's feminine stylistic

approach has visibly drawn testimony from survivors and in a very apparent way given them the platform needed to speak out. In an op ed piece for *The Huffington Post*, Paula Coughlin, a member of the U.S. Navy recalled her experience with military sexual assault and publicly supported Gillibrand and her valiant efforts. Coughlin states:

Senator Kirsten Gillibrand's bipartisan MJIA amendment proposed for this Senate session does exactly that: it makes rape, assault, and failure to forward any complaint to the third party investigating unit a crime. It does hold commanders accountable, and it gives commanders the exact tools to convict criminals in the military. It empowers commanders to rid the armed services of serial rapists and criminals by using the JAG corps professional assault crimes unit, a third party legal professional would handle all assaults and rapes... Sen. Gillibrand's amendment does this, and no other proposals actually address this point of command influence and bias, and the lack of professional legal training.¹⁴⁵

This testimony is indicative of a platform for the voiceless that Gillibrand has established based upon her legislative efforts and her rhetorical ungirding of hegemonic structures. It is in speaking out for the voiceless that Gillibrand equips survivors with the tools they need to enact social change. I would be remiss to not mention how speaking for others, especially through a feminist lens, can produce consequence. Gillibrand does not entirely understand the lives of these survivors and she cannot presume to judge whether her reform legislation is exactly what some survivors' need. Even more, she possesses an identity that constitutes privilege, specifically her racial positionality. However, I argue that without a political leader with status and the ability to sway those in control, the voiceless may never realize a platform. It is in calling out privilege and recognizing the consequences of speaking for others that this legislation can be perfected. Gillibrand as the spearhead for the voiceless may not be the final answer for social justice, but it is a start to breaking the silence.

Despite the fact that MJIA was derailed, the conversation of military sexual assault has gone from a hushed backstage occurrence that survivors dealt with internally to a loud,

undeniable reality with a major call to action. Fortunately, for survivors, Gillibrand and MJIA are the ambassadors for justice. *Politico* addressed this breaking of silence, stating, “The yearlong campaign transformed the evolution of military sexual assault from episodic scandals to a full-blown mega-cause with staying power — complete with appearances in popular culture and powerful champions who’ve learned the issue can be politically potent.”¹⁴⁶ Obviously, advocates had fought for MJIA to pass; however, other valuable outcomes beyond the legislation has come from Gillibrand’s efforts, ranging from greater public awareness to establishing a platform for survivors. *Politico* further remarks, “Military sexual assault is now seeped in the public consciousness. As Ted Cruz pointed out, the concept behind Gillibrand’s proposal served as an important story line in the second season of the popular Netflix show “House of Cards.”¹⁴⁷ Likely, Gillibrand’s legislative efforts inspired Hollywood writers and in turn, viewers are educated upon the matter as the long standing silence created by the military culture is slowly starting to shatter. It would be too simplistic to remark that the public address text shatters silence completely; in fact the legislation alone will not solve the problem of sexual assault. However, it is the awareness brought about by Gillibrand’s efforts, the platform she has created for survivors and the resounding voice she has cultivated that will aid in the demystifying of the military’s hegemonic system.

Conclusion

The conversation of a military cultural shift made by all of the media networks draws attention to the unmasking of power discourse at the bedrock of a critical rhetorical text.¹⁴⁸ The issue of sexual assault in the military today can no longer be discussed without directing just attention to the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity that played such a vital part in these abuses. Gillibrand’s public address strategies in support of MJIA were crucial in

accomplishing this task. By replacing masculine speaking style with the feminine style, disrupting complicity with radical initiatives, and swapping silence for speech, the rhetorical strategies in her public address illuminate hegemony and begin to slowly replace it with a feminist lens. To have journalists and supporters of MJIA describe the military as “rife with institutional cancer” in need of a historical shift away from 18th century monarchy is an extraordinary illumination of dominant ideologies intended to provide readers with heightened awareness of what is truly at the core of sexual assault in the military. Combined, the three themes I have outlined connect to create a puzzle-like narrative of sexual assault that demonstrates the effectivity of Gillibrand’s rhetorical tactics, proposes space for future reform legislation, and offers a critical examination of the dominant ideology.

Gillibrand’s use of the feminine style, her radical persona, and the voice she gives to the survivors’ who have been silenced are effective in driving social change. For instance, Gillibrand’s feminine persona contains elements of social progress that help to bolster MJIA and, in addition, shed light on my overall argument, through the characterization of Gillibrand as a crusader. Furthermore, Gillibrand’s use of the feminine style is consequential in appealing to MJIA opposition as she rhetorically crafts an image of herself that carefully navigates masculine terrain. Yet, at the same time, she effectively communicates to supporters and military assault survivors’ that their voices are being recognized and she is dedicated to the cause. Representing the bill as radical due to its unusual bipartisan coalition and reform to historic military culture attempt to disrupt the complicit structure set in place. Finally, Gillibrand’s unwavering voice has fought to give survivors a platform and break the silence by bringing awareness into public consciousness. Gillibrand’s rhetorical strategies have proven her ability to perform the high stakes political game Congressional members must maneuver carefully. The rhetorical tactics she

has employed will have lasting implications and influence future reform. Media reports of MJIA and Gillibrand's public address propose space for future military sexual assault reform. Media reports claim that Gillibrand and MJIA will not go away and, fortunately, the public address sets up space for future legislative work. Of course, MJIA did not pass, but it does not mean that it ceases to exist. It will live on in the future legislative work to combat military sexual assault. It may not be Gillibrand's physical voice that audiences hear, but it will be the lasting remnants of her words, the platform she created, and her influence that will ultimately help drive future social change. Once an issue like sexual assault has been called to the forefront of political-social concerns, it will be hard to silence it any more.

Lastly, the public address of MJIA and the rhetorical tools employed by Gillibrand are a function of McKerrow's critical rhetoric known as the critique of domination. As I previously mentioned, McKerrow asserts that "the focus of the critique of domination is on the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated. It is, more particularly, a critique of ideologies, perceived as rhetorical creations."¹⁴⁹ The public address text functions as a critique of the domination since Gillibrand's rhetorical tactics focus on the ways in which the dominant code has exerted power over the silenced survivors'. In this sense, Gillibrand unearths the discourse of power by critique of military ideology. The multiple media reports not only inform the audience of political happenings, but they challenge the status quo, shed light on the oppressive nature of military sexual assault, and offer space for social change.

These fragments I have selected and subsequent themes I have discovered paint a rhetorical picture that functions as a critique of domination which serves as a means for combatting military sexual assault. Gillibrand's rhetorical tactics illuminate the power in this particular discourse and pave way for future legislative reform. However, it is important to

understand how texts different from traditional public address, such as entertainment media can highlight the problematic nature of this sexual assault discourse. A complex discourse such as this requires a complicated reading; thus, there must be multiple ways of discussing military sexual assault. In the chapter that follows, I will outline how the fictional, mediated text provides other ways for disrupting the power of military sexual assault while simultaneously pointing toward other dimensions of the issue in need of critical attention by scholars going forward.

Chapter Three: Televised Narrative of Military Sexual Assault

While Senator Gillibrand made frequent appearances in television news interviews and in online articles to promote MJIA, another narrative about sexual assault in the military was playing out during a similar time frame in a very different space of public attention. In February 2014, Netflix released the second season of its original series *House of Cards*. Season two continues with the exploits of U.S. House Majority Whip Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), and his wife, Claire (Robin Wright) as they fight their way to the top of Washington, D.C.'s political ladder. While *House of Cards* has given scholars ample material to consider for critical analysis, an additional plotline emerged in season two of particular interest to this project: Claire Underwood reveals that she was sexually assaulted by a prominent military general and decides to support a reform bill similar to Gillibrand's MJIA. While Claire's fictional bill is not directly correlated to Gillibrand's bill and *House of Cards* is certainly not a completely accurate depiction of the legislative process, the show's storyline offers—in a distinctly entertainment-driven interpretation of the political landscape—a compelling alternative rhetoric for introducing and interrogating sexual assault in the military. Indeed, even though *House of Cards* is largely an entertainment text, Bonnie Dow reminds us that “television programming [can] function as ‘cultural interpreters’, and that television acts to ‘articulate the main lines of the cultural consensus about the nature of reality.’”¹⁵⁰ As a result, whether or not the sexual assault narrative in *House of Cards* is an exact representation of MJIA is beside the point. What matters is that *House of Cards* provides the viewing audience a narrativized and mediated representation of MJIA that can serve as a rhetorically rich means for combatting the systemic issue of military sexual assault. Therefore, one of my goals in this chapter is to analyze and dissect particular rhetorical features of this storyline to better understand how this issue can be illuminated in

popular culture in ways distinctly different than those offered by Gillibrand in the previous chapter.

A second goal of this chapter is to consider how efforts to bring attention to sexual assault in the military can themselves resituate the terms of this issue in ways that perpetuate other oppressions and power dynamics. In many ways, *House of Cards* is similar to Gillibrand's rhetorical tactics from the previous chapter. Specifically, *House of Cards* functions as a critique of domination by revealing and confronting the ways powerful discourses affirms the dominant ideologies that, in this case, sustain sexual assault in the military. However, the narrative version of examining sexual assault in the military in *House of Cards* also offers critics an opportunity to consider the other half of McKerrow's critical rhetoric: the critique of freedom. As I have already described, the critique of freedom relies on Foucauldian notions of power to make a "self-reflexive critique that turns back on itself even as it promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations."¹⁵¹ Simply, this category of critical rhetoric claims that the new status quo that emerges in discourse during and after social change also generates new areas of domination that need to be examined and called into question. For the purposes of my project, it is not enough to simply call for a new status quo, but also examine how that, in and of itself, can contribute to other oppressions.

In order to fully understand efforts to unmask the military culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity as well as how this discourse produces new troublesome discourses, I will divide this chapter in half to analyze *House of Cards* through both a critique of domination and a critique of freedom. My first section will demonstrate a critique of domination through the following analytical themes: *The Sisterhood of Sexual Assault* and *Corruption on Capitol Hill*. These two themes will exemplify the tactics of addressing sexual assault through a feminist lens

as well as discuss the role legislation plays with regards to sexual assault and the potential the television's narrative has in bringing awareness closer to home. My second section will place *House of Cards* under a critique of freedom in which the following themes emerge: *Evil Male Figure vs. Victimization of Women, The Catfight, Warrior Woman, and Invisibility of Color*. The first three sections will involve the discussion of gender, sexuality, and power by defining the notion of hegemonic masculinity more thoroughly and illustrating the culture of silence and complicity intrinsic to the military. After foregrounding a conversation of gender, the final theme will be an examination of the invisibility of color and saturation of whiteness within the mediated narrative. Together, these themes work to build a rhetorical story that is visually and symbolically evocative, but more importantly aids in social change and simultaneous self-reflection. Therefore, deconstructing the textual and visual representation of sexual assault afforded by the television show will provide further insight into the textual possibilities of which critical rhetoric may appear.

Before delving into analyses of the *House of Cards*' narrative and its implications, I want to begin this chapter by providing a concise, yet complete recounting of the story to highlight and explain the significant fragments I have selected for analysis. Even though the sexual assault narrative in *House of Cards* is one of several subplots of the television show and only appears in about half of the episodes, its complexity is not equated with length or airtime attention, but rather its ability to bring awareness to the issue plaguing the U.S. military and its resonance with MJIA. Within this textual analysis, I will deconstruct the following delineated narrative and construct a rhetorical story that serves to answer my proposed questions relating to critical rhetoric.

A House of Cards Vignette

During season two of *House of Cards*, the audience is first introduced to sexual assault when Claire Underwood reveals to Frank during an award ceremony that General McGinnis – the man that he is honoring that evening – is Claire’s assailant from college. The reappearance of McGinnis in Claire’s life causes some self-reflection as she remembers her past experience with sexual assault. Shortly after the ceremony, Claire proclaims on a national televised interview that the prominent military general assaulted her years earlier. Moments after Claire’s televised admission, the news network is flooded with calls from other military sexual assault survivors, including one in particular: Private Megan Hennessey (Marine Corps) who claims that General McGinnis (Claire’s assailant) also assaulted her. Inspired by the interview, Claire decides to support a legislative bill similar to MJIA in that it will change the military reporting procedures of sexual assault crimes by including private prosecution and civilian oversight. Claire attempts to get the current Majority Whip Jackie Sharpe (a military veteran) and the First Lady to back the bill, all while encouraging Megan to speak before the Armed Services Committee in hopes that her story will get the bill to a vote. Once the committee meeting arrives, it is evident that Megan is not ready to speak before officials about her assault. Instead, Megan waits off stage believing she is having a panic attack and tells Claire she can no longer speak.

After Megan begins to show signs of “falling apart,” Claire’s bill takes another hit when Jackie meets with Claire to inform her she will not support the bill. Jackie believes that the bill will harm her military image and publicly withdraws her support. Around the same time, Megan meets with the *New York Times Magazine* journalist in her notably “nervous,” “manic,” and “skittish” state. She discusses living with the trauma of sexual assault and mentions how Gen. McGinnis betrayed his country and that Jackie’s opposition is also a betrayal. Once Megan’s

article is revealed and Jackie catches wind of Claire's deceiving and manipulative tactics, Jackie plans to take down the bill on her own accord. During a televised interview for the bill's media campaign, Jackie calls into the show to speak with Megan and cunningly ambushes the interview by spotlighting Claire as a coward who is hiding and allowing Megan to do her dirty work. Finally, as Claire realizes she can no longer win this battle and that she must keep Jackie in her tight network with Frank, Claire purposefully derails the bill, removing it from the docket, supposedly with hopes to work with Jackie to draft a different version.

The sexual assault narrative ends with a private meeting between Frank, Claire and Jackie. At that meeting, the Underwoods essentially blackmail Jackie into whipping votes to impeach the sitting President so that Frank and Claire's political rise will be complete. Using the derailment of the sexual assault bill as a bargaining chip, Jackie is left with little choice in the matter as she is engulfed by political corruption. The season ends with Frank and Claire taking up residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

Although the above synopsis is a brief recounting of the sexual assault narrative in *House of Cards*, the following analysis will include a more in-depth deconstruction of this rhetorical story with detailed descriptions of scenes and transcriptions. This recounting, then, provides a comprehensive overview of the narrative to bear in mind while I analyze the following fragments with careful attention.

A Critique of Domination

In ways similar to Gillibrand's rhetorical strategies, *House of Cards* addresses dominant ideologies and the tools used to oppress certain individuals. This reading of the televised narrative serves as a critique of domination. McKerrow's critique of domination can be understood as a rhetorical analysis that dissects the ways in which a text may legitimate the

interests of the hegemonic group and reinforce the ways of being that promote the dominate viewpoint.¹⁵² It is significant to study this text with an eye toward the critique of domination to showcase the series' possibility for social change. In the following sections, I locate rhetorical strategies from the show that demonstrate the existing hegemonic structure by providing a context in which it can be challenged. First, I will describe the portrayal of a feminist sisterhood and then move into a conversation about the political nature of the show and its depiction of Congressional corruption. Considering feminist criticism is central to my thesis' argument, I will begin my rhetorical analysis with an examination of the rhetorical strategies of employing a critique of domination by way of a feminist sisterhood.

The Sisterhood against Sexual Assault

As my previous analysis of Gillibrand's public address demonstrated, gender plays a major role in uncovering oppressive ideologies of sexual assault discourse. It is significant to my project to note how a more nuanced approach to gender and the incorporation of a feminist approach can help promote social change in the face of male-dominated oppression. While in Gillibrand's case, the feminine style was a key tactic for exposing masculinist hegemonies conducive to sexual assault in the military, for *House of Cards*, masculinist hegemony is exposed through a different gendered rhetoric: the sisterhood. By sisterhood, I mean the ways in which particular female and feminist characters in the *House of Cards* narrative rely upon their relationships with one another as women to collaborate on legislative work that may serve to potentially alter systemic oppression in ways that only women with lived experience can accomplish. In other words, *House of Cards* depicts representationally, in ways often invisible in non-fictional public address, that women working in solidarity with other women is an essential resource for challenging patriarchy. The rhetorical tactic of the sisterhood, then, challenges the

dominant code at the heart of military culture “as it empowers the ruled to present their interests in a forceful and compelling manner.”¹⁵³ Reading the mediated sexual assault narrative as a space of feminist sisterhood therefore offers a compelling critique of domination.

One apparent fact stemming from the sexual assault narrative is that the characters who have worked on the legislation are all female. Jackie Sharpe, the First Lady, Megan Hennessey and the ringleader, Claire Underwood, all share a common gendered thread. Even more, both Claire and Megan each have a shared experience in that both are survivors of sexual assault. By and large, it is not unreasonable to believe that the issue of military sexual assault, which predominantly affects women would be dealt with by women who can relate and share in the experience. In her work *Sisterhood is Powerful*, feminist author Robin Morgan stated, “Women’s liberation is the first radical movement to base its politics – in fact, create its politics – out of concrete personal experiences.”¹⁵⁴ Social advocacy, women’s liberation and justice for survivors’ is arguably best fought for by those who share in the personal experiences, similar to consciousness-raising efforts. In a sense, the group of women in the narrative serves a consciousness-raising role in that they are shedding light on the injustices of assault survivors – the women who are voiceless – and attempting to solve the problem by gaining political agency for women. Although Claire and Jackie do not agree with each other’s political standpoint, both women are still very much committed to finding support for survivors of sexual assault. The political results that can arise from a strong collective of women with shared experience should not be overlooked. This sisterhood, I argue, can help eliminate sexual assault and unmask power discourse in ways that male counterparts may not be able to without the shared, lived experience.

The sisterhood I speak of requires not only shared, personal experience, but a collective

identity as well. In order for consciousness-raising and social change to take place, a collective is necessary to help shape identity, build structure, and garner support. In feminist scholarship, a famous sisterhood of women of color named “Combahee River Collective” generated *A Black Feminist Statement* and cited, “We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters, and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.”¹⁵⁵ In order to accomplish a political goal, the Combahee River Collective reminds all that those who will most reliably work toward liberation are those who need liberation themselves. In this specific instance, *House of Cards* conveys to viewers that communities of women are necessary for winning liberation and justice for survivors of sexual assault because they are typically the ones most victimized by it. Together, the collaborative efforts of Claire, Megan, the First Lady, and even Jackie contribute to giving voice to survivors because they can identify with survivors through their subject position.

The sisterhood of the sexual assault narrative represented in *House of Cards* is a way to combat violence and enact social change on a larger scale through collective efforts. However, at the same time, the sisterhood also functions on a less grand scale on the series by uplifting survivors and building community. In the narrative, we see the sisterhood becomes a safe space in which individuals in the collective can relate to one another and support one another by telling their stories. This function of the sisterhood is seen most clearly in *House of Cards* between Claire and Megan, particularly in the conversations they have prior to the court proceedings and press interviews. Another notable instance of feminist sisterhood and female collectively related to my text is Susan Zaeske’s piece “Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women’s Antislavery Petitions.” Not only did early feminist anti-slavery petition signers enact individual

agency through their physical signatures, but their activism generated a collective political subjectivity with one another.¹⁵⁶ Like the Combahee River Collective and the petitions signers, the sisterhood against sexual assault in *House of Cards* is motivated to make political gains and put an end to this form of gender oppression; but the series also conveys that the sisterhood is likewise about the identity building and connection to community necessary to undertake these larger struggles. Overall, the sisterhood then is another means to expose masculinity, silence, and complicity by enacting social change through a collective identity.

However, I would be remiss to not mention how the sisterhood I have identified is broken in certain respects. Certainly, Claire and Jackie are at odds with one another; in fact, even Claire and Megan do not share the same standpoint at the end of the narrative when Megan expresses her frustration and disappointment with the Second Lady's efforts. Albeit, the broken fragments of the collective only point toward a larger critical message that these women of the sisterhood are working in a system that is stacked against them. Similarly, scholar Belinda Stillion Southard writes about the sisterhood present in the television series *Sex and the City*. Although the show has been regarded as a postfeminist text, the friendship between the four female characters builds upon collective shared experience, but the essay also recognizes the constraint of individuality each woman faces that is not entirely feminist in nature.¹⁵⁷ Likewise, the feminist sisterhood of *House of Cards* contains elements that do not entirely comprise a feminist message. It is an unfortunate outcome that some of these women would dispute one another, but this only demonstrates how hegemony functions elusively, in ways that attempt to pit the oppressed against the oppressed in order to keep those on top in power. The women of *House of Cards* face a system stacked against them and they are using sisterhood, although not flawless, as a form of collective agency.

Regardless of the lasting efforts of the sisterhood, I argue that its very presence on screen is helpful in understanding how sexual assault and other similar issues that primarily affect women are often times best confronted by a collective of women with shared experience and a cohesive feminist goal. The rhetorical story benefits from a constructed image of the sisterhood in unmasking anti-women ideologies and prompting social justice.

Corruption on Capitol Hill

Another avenue for a critique of domination is the series' propensity to depict political corruption and deal making as an impediment to remedying sexual assault in the military. Unlike *House of Cards*' predecessors such as *The West Wing* (1999) and *Commander in Chief* (2005), the Netflix original series aims to create a fictional storyline that portrays Washington, DC as it seemingly is: corrupt. The twisted political plotlines in the series inform audiences of the backstage happenings on Capitol Hill as lobbyists succeed in nefariously advancing their interests while the concerns of constituents and the national good languish in the background. In *House of Cards* in particular, the sexual assault narrative is symbolic of how reforms can be sacrificed at the hands of corrupt power delegates and political figures. The interests of Claire, Frank, and Jackie in the narrative all evidence how the greater good is often pushed aside in order to propel political careers or fulfill a favor. Yet, there is certainly an exaggeration of corruption's role in the series.¹⁵⁸ Nonetheless, when asked about the show's Machiavellian nature in an interview, Kevin Spacey responded by quoting a prominent politician: "99% of *House of Cards* is realistic, and the 1% that isn't is that you could never get an education bill passed that fast."¹⁵⁹ To emphasize this point, in the following analysis, I demonstrate how Claire, Frank, and Jackie's political corruption purposefully derails legislation addressing sexual assault in the military to advance their own subsequent gain in the U.S. political system. By

orchestrating this narrative, the producers of *House of Cards* therefore further expose discourses of silence and complicity in military (and government) culture. In short, *House of Cards* highlights how politicians ruthlessly abandon sexual assault legislation, becoming complicit in watching the issue dissolve, and thereby, allow perpetrators to be protected.

The theme of corruption in the sexual assault narrative is evident when the plot twist at the end of the season reveals a political scheme Claire and Frank have manipulatively devised. When Claire initially derailed the sexual assault bill she cunningly tells Jackie to revise a new draft of the bill with verbiage she is comfortable with and Claire will undoubtedly support it. Unbeknownst to Jackie, the wily Underwood pair have tricks up their sleeves. Claire's purposeful derailment of the bill turns out to be an irrefutable bartering tool to use against Jackie. In a private meeting, Frank reveals to Jackie that he would like her to "whip votes" to have the president impeached so the Underwood's can gain even greater political status and control as well as offer her the same power. Frank alludes to the corrupt nature of politics by remarking on how all three of them possess "ruthless pragmatism." The following dialogue makes even more apparent how the show regards American politics:

Jackie: Mr. Vice President, what you are asking is just shy of treason.
Frank: Just shy, which is politics.¹⁶⁰

This "ruthless pragmatism" that both Frank and Claire have manifested has grown stronger throughout the series and arguably becomes more perverse, especially with the request in the sexual assault narrative. The accuracy of these depictions cannot be determined, but for a viewership living in a political climate in which a government shutdown actually occurred, the fictional peek inside the closed doors of elected representatives is curiosity enough to believe the likelihood of political corruption. Furthermore, Frank, Claire, and Jackie's complicity in derailing the bill is evidence that sexual assault and women's issues have a largely second-class

status for legislators. It is easy for those in power like Frank, Claire, and Jackie to throw away a sexual assault bill because it simply is of little direct concern to them. In the end, self-preservation and political status remain the most consequential. Here, “the conditions of domination”¹⁶¹ emerge in the form of political gain over the greater good of constituent needs.

The failure of legislation depicted in the *House of Cards*’ sexual assault narrative functions as a cultural interpretation of dominant ideology since mistrust of the government is considerably high and inventive corporations such as Netflix attempt to set themselves apart. The writer of the television series Beau Willimon is a political veteran; he served on two Senate and two presidential campaigns before dabbling in the art industry. A recent interview with Willimon draws attention to the issue of political corruption and an audience disenchanted with government. However, Willimon adds that he thinks the current political system is less corrupt, and like the show, engages a more active form of politics that encourages bartering and exchanging of favors.¹⁶² Additionally, Willimon astutely notes, “We want our leaders to be good leaders, which often means throwing out all the rules, and at the same time we want them to be saints, which means being squeaky clean and never having a single contradiction or hypocritical thought. That’s why people are so often disappointed by the politicians. Because they’re one or the other, or a little bit of both. But you can’t be both entirely.”¹⁶³ If Willimon is correct, then politicians do not always fall into the dichotomous characterization of saint and sinner, but rather, they often times engage in bartering which can result in corruption. The television narrative of the corrupt and ruthless politician serves as a reminder that not all is what it may appear. The possibility of trading second-class issues for favors is a cultural interpretation that Congress and the military do not truly care enough about sexual assault in the ranks. Thus,

House of Cards depicts how the hegemonic fashioning of sexual assault further trivializes this serious concern as the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity persists.

The interpretation of the U.S. political landscape made by the writers and directors of *House of Cards*, particularly the choice to include a storyline similar to MJIA, is not entirely coincidental, but rather a critique of domination. Perhaps, as Beau Willimon alludes in his interview, the delegates of today's government are more active and willing to engage in ruthless pragmatism, lobbying for their own interests in a take-no-prisoners style. Given the fact that support for MJIA was dividedly split down party lines, with less support from Republican officials and military supporters, the representation of MJIA on *House of Cards* provides an insider glimpse. Yet, a fascinating detail that emerges from this text is that season two aired on February 14, 2014; Senator Gillibrand's MJIA was derailed in the Senate in March 2014. Call it writer foreshadowing, but this mediated representation is nothing less than a pragmatic reading of actual legislative efforts surrounding the current climate of sexual assault in the military. If an audience was left with an idealistic image of sexual assault in which legislation passed and survivors attained justice then many might assume that all is won and violence has ended. In fact, the derailment of the bill in the entertainment form is essential for educating audiences about the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. In order to understand the culturally systemic problem that still exists, political corruption on the show is necessary for understanding the inner workings of dominant ideology.

A Critique of Freedom

The section that follows adopts a critique of freedom that is self-reflexive in nature. In calling for a change in the status quo, the system that replaces the dominant code in many cases can raise equally worrisome ideological concerns as its predecessor. In particular and not

surprising, issues of gender and race are prominent features of the critique of freedom in the *House of Cards* text that continue to be areas of oppression. As McKerrow asserts through an understanding of Foucault, there is no certainty or universal truth toward an ultimate destiny¹⁶⁴ and challenging the dominant code by replacing it with another ideology is not necessarily the best option for all. Certain voices are left out of the conversation and problematic gender constructions still persist which mark the critique of freedom as an important tool for analysis as the rhetor discovers different ways of interrogating a text. In the following section, I begin with a conversation about gender representations on *House of Cards* by first discussing the dichotomy of the evil male figure and the victimization of women. Next, I move into the catfight and warrior woman concepts as additional gender themes. I will conclude this half of my analysis with a look at the absence of women of color as a function of the critique of freedom. Together, these themes illuminate the ways in which *House of Cards* can resituate hegemony through the practice of challenging anti-woman ideology.

Evil Male Figure and Victimization of Women

One of the first challenges *House of Cards* inscribes into the evolving discourse of sexual assault in the military is the oversimplification of the issue as one of an evil man and helpless women. More precisely, *House of Cards* uses a kind of fairytale to characterize sexual assault in the military that is familiar to many: the big bad wolf attacks an innocent, young girl in a battle of monster versus victim. While this story is fictitious, the monster/victim narrative is meaningful and problematic, requiring an assessment through the critique of freedom. Indeed, as Kenneth Burke argues, effective storytelling often requires following symbolically familiar patterns¹⁶⁵ and we see this appeal at work represented on screen in *House of Cards*. As we will see, these familiar patterns have consequences that need to be addressed by critics.

The “gender fairytale” I see in *House of Cards* features a set of prominent and familiar characters: the “evil bad guy” and the victim “damsel in distress.” General McGinnis plays the character of the big bad wolf in this story while Megan Hennessey and Claire Underwood function as his helpless prey. Unfortunately, many narratives of sexual assault cast those involved into these or similar ways: the evil male and the woman as the victim. Yet, when audiences consume the message this story implies that women who are assaulted are only victims and the men who assault them are transparently evil, mentally sick monsters—then the complex factors contributing to and sustaining sexual assault as a whole are trivialized. In the following section, I will first discuss the portrayal of Gen. McGinnis as the evil male figure, depiction of Megan and Claire as victims, and the implications this characterization can have on understanding and addressing sexual assault more generally.

The characterization of McGinnis as an evil male figure deflects attention away from the broader, complex, and more structural issues at hand: the military’s culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. Moreover, the issue of sexual assault itself can be conceptualized as one that derives from hyper masculine thought. In his work on gendered violence, Jackson Katz claims that we must think of gendered violence, including sexual assault, not as women’s issues, but as men’s issues since violent behaviors are tied to definitions of manhood. Furthermore, Katz asserts that perpetrators are not scary monsters who arise out of the swamp and go into town to commit their crime and then retreat back into their cave. They are much more normal. This is an example of a rape myth retold by the hegemonic structure. Male violence is a systemic failure and social issue that stems from the social constructions of masculinity.¹⁶⁶ When McGinnis is made to appear as an evil being who not only committed multiple crimes, but also betrayed his country, the audience is left to consume the image of an evil male figure instead of the

systematic wrongdoing of military culture. Near the end of the narrative, the focus is on the failure of the bill to pass, the extreme nature of its reform, and how it can be reworked to fit a less radical narrative and the only criminal left to chastise is the evil male figure. In an attempt to represent the disturbing reality of sexual assault, the narrative pushes the limits of revealing power in discourse by reasserting it through the characterization of a monstrous, evil villain.

One of the few occasions that audiences witness Gen. McGinnis is when he first steps “into the scene” as the heroic general, celebrating his military career at a ceremony in which Vice President Underwood honors him and his service. At the event, McGinnis approaches Claire causing her to experience a trigger event. Their brief conversation sends Claire quickly to the bathroom for escape and isolation. Frank soon follows Claire to address the situation and Claire admits, for the first time, that McGinnis was the man who assaulted her while she was in college. Outraged, Frank shouts that he will not award McGinnis any honor and throws a lamp across the floor as he expresses his rage as an overprotective, devoted husband. With this first encounter of McGinnis, the rhetorical narrative strategically sets up the notion that McGinnis is an evil man as he confronts Claire at the event, years after he knowingly assaulted her. Getting too close for comfort, McGinnis even gives Claire a friendly, yet insidious kiss goodbye after their brief interaction in which he makes a snide retort about their past relations. Here, McGinnis is set up as an evil, cool and unremorseful individual that audiences are called to believe is a big bad wolf, and Claire is his prey who continues to be re-victimized, not only in this particular scene, but throughout the narrative. For example, Claire remains silent in the face of her aggressor at the ceremony until she opens up to Frank and must withstand McGinnis being honored while she knows the truth about his character. Additionally – as I will go into more detail later in the section – Claire is revictimized as she gives up on the sexual assault bill for

“ruthless pragmatism.” To be clear, I am not arguing that McGinnis is not an evil figure; certainly, any individual who commits such a violent act should certainly be thought of as harmful. However, because the narrative simply dichotomizes McGinnis from his victims in a storybook fashion, a real understanding of military culture and sexual assault is not provided.

Although viewers hardly ever see Gen. McGinnis, his name is constantly tossed into dialogue as both Claire and Megan shed light on his transgressions. Even though audiences do not know what transpired, the tone, emotive language, and description of McGinnis from Megan and Claire allude to images of a cruel and malicious man. Like the award ceremony scene, audiences are asked to recall the big, bad McGinnis and witness the trauma he has caused for Megan as well. During an interview with the *New York Times Magazine*, Megan opens up about McGinnis:

Interviewer: Your nerves...I know that's been an issue since the assault. The defense brought up what they called emotional and mental instability.

Megan: That's what always happens. The person who gets attacked gets attacked all over again.

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Megan: It made me angry. The lawyer kept coming after me about my panic attacks, my anti-depressants, but I just kept staring at McGinnis. Wanted him to see I could take it. That I was strong. I wanted to make him look away at first.

Interviewer: And did he?

Megan: Yes. When I said he did more than violate my body, he betrayed his country. He robbed it of a good marine.¹⁶⁷

This interview with the political journalist is evidence of not only Megan's “emotional instability” and her “nervousness,” but it also illustrates the anger and hatred Megan reserves for the monstrous McGinnis. Here, Megan is visibly angry at McGinnis, especially for “robbing his country of a good marine,” as she has every right to be; however, while Megan remains angry at the evil monstrous McGinnis she fails to mention how the institution itself, with its flawed justice system, has also “robbed the country of a good marine.” As author Valerie Estelle Frankel

writes in her book *Women in Game of Thrones: Power, Conformity and Resistance*, all men are sexist in the highly patriarchal world of fiction and usually misogyny is correlated with evil. When it comes to rape scenes, women are depicted as having affected the male.¹⁶⁸ In this sense, men are made out to appear wholly evil, devilish, sick-minded, and easily seduced by the manipulative female. In reality, the issue of violence is not simply deduced to mental illness or evil forces. Sexual assault persists not necessarily because evil monsters like McGinnis exist, but more because institutions like the military, and societal paradigms like hegemonic masculinity, tend to foster and protect these monsters. The critique of freedom therefore reveals *House of Cards*' reliance upon a narrative featuring an evil "bad guy" rather than a negligent and hostile military institution.

Conversely, the other gendered role of the sexual assault narrative in *House of Cards* is the feminized victim. If McGinnis is the big, bad wolf in this gender fairytale, the distressed female victim is played most clearly by the volatile and unbalanced Megan Hennessey. Megan is characterized as a victim through a number of symbolic depictions within the text. For instance, in the transcript above, the political journalist makes mention of Megan's nerves. While watching this interview unfold, audiences can tell that Megan's mental health has declined due in part to courtroom proceedings and attention from the press. Even before that conversation, viewers are witness to Megan's first breakdown in front of Claire before her testimony. Megan discloses to Claire that her assault has given her panic attacks and she is vulnerable to an unhealthy sexual lifestyle. It is clear throughout the entire narrative that Megan is emotionally unhinged, incapable of moving on from her assault and in need of pharmaceuticals to solve her problems. By and large, Megan is the victim. She is the helpless woman, the naïve child who fell prey to the hands of a monster. As such, this problematic characterization of women in the

military takes the language “survivor” out of sexual assault narratives. Megan does not perform the role of survivor since she still seems trapped by the confines of the hegemonic system. Assault survivors deal and cope with their experiences in many different ways, none more right or wrong. However, for the rhetorical strategies of my thesis, Megan’s performance of victim, due in part to her weak, emotional, and irrational behavior communicates to audiences that speaking out and confronting hegemony actually causes more harm than good. Megan is trapped in hegemony’s snare as she performs victim instead of strong and fearless survivor.

While Megan is clearly the most helpless victim within the narrative, Claire is also represented as a victim in *House of Cards*, though to a different degree and with added complications. Although Claire is not military personnel and her assault does not occur within the confines of the military institution, there is resemblance between her attack and military sexual assault. Therefore, it is important to dissect how these images of victim are closely related through the complex power dynamics of gender and sexuality.

Like Megan, Claire is cast as a victim, rather than a survivor, in several instances in the narrative. For instance, in the scene described earlier, Claire’s trauma upon meeting McGinnis again causes her to flee for safety in the bathroom where she cries and emotionally breaks down. This is a highly unusual representation of Claire on the show. Before this scene, viewers never witness Claire barring coded, feminized emotions like crying or breaking down. In fact, the Underwood Empire (of which Claire is a central part) is built, so to speak, through “ruthless pragmatism” and the Underwoods’ ability to pick themselves up when they are knocked down. This unusual portrayal of Claire then highlights the exceptional nature of her assault on her life.

In another instance in the narrative, Claire is highlighted again as a victim when she discusses the evening’s events with Frank and decides to speak about the assault. Claire makes

one striking comment during this conversation fitting of her victim identity. She states, “Every time I think of her [myself], pinned down like that, I strangle her Francis, so she doesn’t strangle me.”¹⁶⁹ Using the third person to describe her trauma, Claire is essentially admitting that the prior events at the award celebration had re-victimized her. As I mentioned before, Claire must silently watch McGinnis be honored while she re-experiences her trauma in ways that almost “pin her down.” However, Claire only allows these harrowing events to resurface momentarily as she recognizes her desire to repress them in order to move on. What is unique about Claire’s role as a victim is that she is cognizant of the ramifications of victimization and how being placed in a victim box will only limit her ability to succeed in Washington, D.C. If she is to remain in a position of power, then to her, dwelling on the past and not allowing it to “strangle” her means she must not act a victim like Megan. In response to this victimizing moment, Claire becomes an advocate for sexual assault in the military in that she does not assume the traditional role of victim.

Finally, as viewers watch Claire boldly combat sexual assault and fight on Capitol Hill for the voiceless, audiences are disappointed when they see Claire victimized yet again, this time as she derails the bill to keep Jackie Sharpe wrapped around her and Frank’s political finger. In this instance, Claire is victimized again by a system she cannot fight; but she is also victimized by the game of politics she and Frank play so seriously. By giving up on sexual assault survivors – an issue Claire seemed so passionately devoted to – Claire succumbs to the hegemonic system by falling prey to it in yet another victim role. In short, although Claire may not outwardly appear a traditional type of victim (like Megan) or always act as a victim on screen, her role on the show complicates the narrative. Claire is, essentially, a strong survivor who champions those who have faced sexual assault yet who can also easily fall into victimhood when her political

status becomes more important than her advocacy. As such, *House of Cards* often imagines survivors of sexual assault as either helpless or fallen victors who eventually give in to systemic limitations. This representation rhetorically sets up problematic notions of what a survivor of military sexual assault should look like and how those who challenge the system are subject to victimhood.

One very significant complication of the victim portrayal that is present in the sexual assault narrative of *House of Cards* is the binaristic image of evil male figure and female victim that gives credence to rape myths. According to LeeAnn Kahlor and Matthew S. Eastin, rape myths are the false, but persistent societal beliefs that victims cause a nonconsensual, unwanted sexual act. Common rape myths include women who dress provocatively inciting lewd acts or remarks, the thought that women should not be out alone at night in precarious situations, or even that the victim was drunk and got what they were asking for.¹⁷⁰ Unfortunately, many individuals accept rape myths and Kahlor and Eastin indicate in their study that men were more likely to accept rape myths than women.¹⁷¹ Given this fact, it is evident how these gendered dichotomies at play in *House of Cards* can promote masculinist beliefs that in turn reinforce the military's oppressive ideology. The military's culture of masculinity, I argue, harbors these types of rape myths when they do not give support to survivors through the legal system and even question certain survivors in a suspicious manner. When this type of image is represented on screen, as is with the evil McGinnis and his victims Megan and Claire, the power discourse is perpetuated and a visually symbolic rape myth is established. The narrative teaches the audience to focus more on the evilness of the criminal and the credibility of the victims by diminishing the responsibility of the military.

The harmful implications of this simplistic narrative of evil man-helpless women are significant. The victimization of women in this particular narrative elicits a conceptualization of female military members as victims rather than survivors; weak women with dangerous coping mechanisms rather than strong women who struggle against the harsh realities of sexual assault. At the beginning of the narrative it seems that Megan is strong which is correct in that she bravely comes forth with her disclosure. However, soon enough, Megan begins to crumble under pressure and the short-lived courage that was sparked within her soon flickers out as she shows signs of emotional and mental instability. This characterization is not the image of a strong and powerful survivor. The victimization discourse surrounding Megan is detrimental to the prevention of sexual assault as a whole. As Kate Lockwood Harris argues in her article on using the word rape to describe nonconsensual sex, the naming practices involved in the discourse of sexual assault should consider lived experience and the power that language holds in defining violation.¹⁷² Herein, the use of the name “sexual assault survivor” instead of “sexual assault victim” as well as the representation of a powerful female character instead of the foolish and emotional Megan can be the difference between prevention and perpetuation. When one’s own power and agency are stripped of their very being, as is the case with sexual assault survivors, it is important to return agency and strength in the naming practices of their violation. Likewise, the survivor that *House of Cards* presents limits possibility that a survivor can appear and behave in a number of ways as Lockwood suggests. It is not that a survivor is weak, helpless, or easily a victim of the system, but that they can process their assault differently, and therefore cope and make sense of their experience much differently than a storybook representation would have many think. The discourse of sexual assault constructed by *House of Cards* can potentially have lasting implications on the viewership’s conceptualizations of sexual assault in the military.

Narrowly confining McGinnis and Megan to gendered roles of evil male figure and female victim lends itself to rape myths (which are elements of the dominant code) and gives reason to accept the military's oppressive culture.

The "Catfight"

The critique of freedom also reveals how the sexual assault narrative in season two of *House of Cards* functions, in part, by the pitting of women against women, in what is known as the "catfight." As we have seen, the U.S. military is a space in which those who uphold and withstand tradition by being loyal, complicit bystanders are rewarded and those who do not are punished. Therefore, it is not unlikely that women fighting other women in a game of masculinity would occur. The pitting of women against women is more than a spectacle; it is an affirmation of hegemony and power. For instance, in regards to racism, authors Ella Shohat and Robert Stam elaborate upon this point by claiming "oppressed people can perpetuate the hegemonic system...in a manner ultimately benefitting those at the top of the hierarchy."¹⁷³ It is no surprise then that in a narrative that has ascribed strict gendered roles, women would verbally fight one another and function as the oppressed to perform oppression. The catfight provides example of a critique of freedom when the replacement of the female sisterhood resituates a new status quo that fashions a catfight instead of collective thinking. In the following analysis, I use the conflict between Jackie Sharpe and Claire Underwood to illuminate how *House of Cards* can reinforce hegemonic masculinity in an attempt to shed light on political corruption.

One such example of the military's hegemonic, masculinist grasp within the *House of Cards*' sexual assault narrative is the "catfight" nature of Jackie Sharpe and Claire Underwood's relationship. What I label the "catfight" is best exemplified in the narrative during an aggressive

quarrel between Jackie and Claire when Jackie refuses to support the sexual assault bill due to its harmful effects on military leadership and governance, quoted below:

Jackie: Mrs. Underwood you know how much I respect your intentions, but I've thought deeply about this and I can't cosponsor the bill in its current form. Civilian oversight is too extreme a step, but I'd be happy to revisit some of the other less extreme proposals.

Claire: You think we're being extremists?

Jackie: I want to help with this issue but this bill goes against...

Claire: This bill is through Armed Services, this bill has a date on the floor. Almost every woman in the House supports this bill.

Jackie: And I can't be one of them.¹⁷⁴

This dialogue exemplifies today's military culture and the actual response to Sen. Gillibrand's bill. Here, Jackie is supposedly adhering to the principles and traditions of the military by refusing to support the bill due to its extreme nature; yet, at the same time, Jackie is acting as a bystander who has fallen into the trap of hegemonic masculinity. She cannot be "one of those women who support the bill" since she has multiple allegiances. As a woman, Jackie is likely torn because she would like to support survivors, but as a former military member she has allegiance and loyalty to the institution and in turn, to hegemonic masculinity. Similar to Senator Mark Kirk's earlier allusions to civilian oversight,¹⁷⁵ Jackie is a mediated representation of the synthesis between military culture and hegemonic masculinity. Although Jackie is not a cruel individual and probably supports women's issues as a congresswoman, she has clearly chosen her allegiance to hegemonic masculinity with her choice to support the military and draft a less radical version of the bill. This characterization presented to a mass audience functions as a reproduction of the societal issue plaguing the military.

Although this mediated representation is a symbolic reproduction of the current military culture of hegemonic masculinity, it also functions as a propagation of hegemonic masculinity in the relations between the two female characters, Jackie and Claire. Throughout season two, it is clear that Jackie and Claire are at odds with one another. Both maintain the relationship for

political career gains to propel their status and most often they are depicted in conflict with one another. In essence, the two female characters are engaged in what Susan J. Douglas identifies as the “catfight.” As evidence from the scene I previously described, the two women struggle between feminism and antifeminism. As Douglas claims, the catfight is a “symbolic catharsis of woman’s internal conflict between the desire for liberation and the longing for security. It was also a spectacle: two women, often opposites, locked in a death grip that brought them both crashing down into the muck. Both women were sullied; no one won.”¹⁷⁶ Case in point: the conflict between Jackie and Claire regarding the sexual assault bill. Both are opposite, both have different allegiances and in the end, no one truly wins. Claire loses the bill and Jackie remains under the control of the Underwood’s. The only winner here is patriarchy. In the end, if one was to say that Claire and Jackie were both winners in that they win by sacrificing other women, (survivors of military assault), then they have still created a whole different catfight between female leaders and survivors. This characterization of the catfight benefits patriarchy in that women stand in the way of other women. Audiences love a good catfight and the reason being is that the sisterhood of feminism can be called a crock of shit and the threat that feminism posed could be contained and turned back on itself.¹⁷⁷ This “catfight” portrayal between Jackie and Claire could be the television show’s interpretation of a failed feminist effort enacted by prominent female politicians. Hegemonic masculinity would assert that only male leaders can participate in political leadership and any misguided woman who thinks she can solve social-political issues is naïve and catty. Although the narrative represents the hegemonic nature of the military, it also reproduces hegemonic masculinity through the pitting of women against women. The interpretation of the catfight and female corruptness revealed by Claire’s purposeful derailment of the bill can be viewed as feminism failing. The audience is left to think that Claire

is feminist and Jackie is antifeminist and that no middle ground exists; only radical viewpoints. This is exactly what the catfight calls for: the media putting feminism in one corner and antifeminism in the other all the while there is no middle ground, no room for just simply, feminism.¹⁷⁸ Because of this sectioning off, the two female characters, once viewed as powerful and politically tough, are delegitimized.

The dumbing down of such strong female characters through the catfight essentially communicates to the audience that catty performances for entertainment purposes prevail and more importantly, it trivializes efforts to prevent sexual assault in the military. Douglas points to the 1992 campaign in which Barbara Bush and Marilyn Quayle were in one corner and Hillary Clinton was in the other. The media news coverage conveyed that the multilayered complexities each of those women have faced in work, marriage, family, and politics was of no significance. The media opted for the simplistic, coercive metaphor of woman-on-woman violence.¹⁷⁹ Similarly, the fictional characters of Claire and Jackie both enjoy riches of success and prestige in their work and the political realm. Yet, instead of depicting compromise or the locating of a feminist middle ground, they are reduced to a dull-witted match in which no one backs down. It is a simplistic representation of not only the conflict and negotiation skills that women possess, but the probability of the kind of change that they could enact. Persuasion, logic, and reason are entirely thrown out the window when emotional women are pitted against one another. This adherence to hegemonic masculinity and gendered identification reflects poorly on the sexual assault legislation when irrational women cannot make decisions. This narrative framed by *House of Cards* reifies gender stereotypes and, similar to the evil male and female victim dichotomy, promotes the military culture of masculinity through acceptance and promotion of harmful gender binaries.

The Warrior Woman

A final gender observation of the *House of Cards*' sexual assault narrative is that Claire Underwood is a strong, tough female character. In my analysis, I dissect this complex character more closely and define Claire as the "warrior woman." Claire is not necessarily malicious, but ruthless and bold. None of these traits are negative or entirely off-putting. However, the warrior woman is a female leader who encompasses masculine traits while retaining a feminine identity to accomplish a goal and be taken seriously by others. The narrative communicates that in order to fight masculine fire, or rather, a culture of masculinity, then it is best accomplished by masculine fire, better known in this case as the warrior woman. As actress Robin Wright remarks, Claire is "so evil, but I don't see her as evil. She's doing her due diligence and that's the way things work. That's how you get jobs done and if there's a hindrance or a roadblock you've got to remove the roadblock. It's really simple."¹⁸⁰ Even though it is easy for viewers to conclude that Claire is an evil, conniving character suited perfectly for her husband Frank, there is more depth to this "warrior woman" than meets the eye. Although this particular characterization seemingly parallels Gillibrand's rhetorical tactic of the sexual assault crusader, I argue that this turn represents a critique of freedom since it largely is ascribed as gender-less with an emphasis on the use of masculine rhetorical tools. This theme presents a complex move that exhibits Claire's strength and commitment to the bill, but also allows audiences to construct an adverse reading of a woman defying traditional gender norms to fight her battle. In a self-reflexive way, the warrior woman complicates societies' notions of gender, but emphasizes the use of masculine rhetorical tools as the most effective means of persuasion.

Throughout the sexual assault narrative, Claire's demeanor and leadership style toward the sexual assault bill is nothing less than a warrior woman disposition. According to Frankel,

the warrior woman is one who engages in the socially acceptable behavior of playing down the feminine qualities while playing up the qualities traditionally associated with masculinity. The strong female character, the “warrior woman” is one who has no gender at all.¹⁸¹ Essentially, we can think of Claire as playing down her more feminine qualities such as submissiveness or meekness and playing up her masculine traits like aggressiveness and her ability to be headstrong. With femininity and masculinity compete (because her femininity still exists) she becomes less of a gendered individual and more of a warrior ready to battle. No other time is this warrior woman more visible than when Claire and Megan work together. When Claire first meets Megan over the phone during the televised interview, Claire is nothing but understanding, sincere, and empathetic to Megan’s disclosure in a feminine approach. However, Claire quickly plays down her femininity when Megan has an emotional break down before her testimony in court. Claire realizes how crucial Megan’s testimony against McGinnis is for the direction of the bill and forcefully demands that Megan continue with the proceedings. At one point in the dialogue, Claire becomes frustrated with Megan and physically pushes her against the wall to drive her point across. Acting in a masculine way, Claire embodies aggression and mercilessness in order to get the job done. In a real way, this forceful push against the wall, this masculine, assertive gesture could likely trigger traumatic memories for Megan. Claire is fighting the masculine culture of the military with masculinist tactics. Meanwhile, Claire recognizes the fear she has instilled in Megan and rapidly changes her expression to one of femininity. She begins to lower her voice to a softer level and coaxes Megan in a motherly fashion. Claire is neither defined as feminine or masculine; she is a warrior woman utilizing any gendered tactic to be successful. In a profession overcome with hegemonic masculinity, the politicized choice to be a warrior woman is victorious, if nothing less, strategically advantageous. Claire understands that

in order to win on Capitol Hill, as in many other powerful positions, the female figure must be willing to play up masculinity in order to be considered a competent and valuable leader. The warrior woman is a strategic measure like Gillibrand's use of the feminine style, but it differs in that a turn toward a more gender-less style which at times plays up masculinity, does not always negate power discourse, but contributes to it. Through an audience perspective, Claire in many ways performs the hegemonic code. In real time politics, no other politician has been thought of as the warrior woman more than Hillary Clinton.

The warrior woman persona that Claire Underwood embodies is similar to the leadership style and public's opinion of former U.S. Secretary of State, Senator and First Lady Hillary Clinton. Although the bill that Claire Underwood supports is a mediated representation of MJIA, I argue that Claire is less a representation of Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, than she is a characterization of Hillary Clinton. Similar to media reports of Claire as "evil" with an "icy resolve" and an "unabashed quest for power,"¹⁸² Hillary Clinton has also been a target in the public sphere for her warrior woman personality. As Karrin Anderson points out in her work on U.S. presidential female candidates, Hillary Clinton was situated in the news as the conniving bitch,¹⁸³ and likewise, Claire is made to seem like an icy, evil woman, despite the fact that her husband Frank engages in the same manipulative, corrupt behavior. In just the same way that Claire plays down her femininity and plays up the masculinity, Hillary Clinton has been publicly perceived as heartless and hard-hitting. Not only do satirical television programs sling names at the former First Lady, but even serious political news coverage have labeled Clinton with some of the worst female offenses known.¹⁸⁴ The media has been quick to label Clinton a "bitch," before even recognizing her political achievements and steadfast persona. Likewise, Claire's legislative efforts are often read as too strong and she is caught in a double bind between playing

the warrior woman role and enacting social change, or resolving to be a victim of sexual assault. Her choices are limited, as are many women in leadership positions when they defy gendered norms of femininity and are immediately called “bitch” for their assertive qualities. Because of Claire’s warrior woman personality, the success of her political career is measured by her husband’s gains and her failed legislation. Unfortunately, audiences are encouraged more to evaluate the ways in which she defies gender norms and focus less on the ways in which this rhetorical persona may combat sexual assault in the military. Claire is the anti-hero of the narrative for her warrior woman identity since she fights masculine fire with masculine tactics that pose threat to her male counterparts. The anti-hero image does not always work to solve the problems of hegemony, but in some ways reinforces the hegemonic code. Since she plays up masculinity, she is a warrior woman that aggressively seeks change in a threatening manner. The portrayal of Claire reduces the potentiality her rhetorical persona may have in seeking change.

Clearly, many of the constructed images present in the rhetorical narrative include issues of gender and sexuality, which is not surprising considering that the actual issue of sexual assault in the military stems from a culture of masculinity. The presentation of the warrior women does not seem wholly negative when Claire is positioned to cross gender lines and perform a masculine rhetorical identity. However, the significance of this function of the critique of freedom is that the warrior women communicates that masculine rhetorical tactics are better suited to deal with political issues and, moreover, women’s issues. The warrior woman reinscribes masculinity as the norm and it impedes addressing masculinity through a feminist sisterhood. Like similar gendered constructions of *House of Cards* that serves as a critique of freedom, the presence of essentialist dichotomies limits the potentiality for social change. What

follows next will be an analysis of race, or rather the invisibility of it. An examination of racial oppression signifies the need for self-reflection and critical inspection.

Invisibility of Color

One of the most glaring observations made while watching the sexual assault narrative of *House of Cards* is the lack of representation of women of color, or, what I deem, invisibility of color. Since the rhetorical story excludes women of color, consumers of this narrative would likely think that sexual assault in the military is only a “white” problem and only “white” men and women can fix it as they witness a plethora of powerful, white individuals. This prominence of racist and classist issues draws attention toward intersectionality and in my analysis I will be guided by what Kimberle Crenshaw labels “intersectional subordination.” Crenshaw claims that women of color experience another level of disempowerment when one burden interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities, such as class or race.¹⁸⁵ Through existing scholarship on race and intersectionality, I argue that the “whiteness” of the sexual assault narrative communicates a rhetorical message that sexual assault is exclusionary to the identity of women of color.

The invisibility of color on *House of Cards* not only communicates a rhetorical message, but it reflects the reality that Capitol Hill lacks representation from diverse identities. Following the sexual assault narrative, it is clear that all characters involved with the bill including Jackie Sharpe and Claire Underwood are white, affluent female characters. Even more, the female survivor, Megan Hennessey, whose story is told through interviews, is also white and seemingly middle-class. The characters in *House of Cards* are white, and the real, actual statistics provided by the SAPPRO report (which is posted on Gillibrand’s website) regarding sexual assault in the military also keep race invisible, which proclaims that this issue is a “white” problem. Not only does *House of Cards* keep audiences color blind, but the public address of Gillibrand and MJIA

never once mention race or include a military sexual assault survivor as testimony other than a white female figure. Within SAPPRO statistics, and those proclaimed by politicians on *House of Cards* working on the bill, there is no mention of demographic for race or class. The invisibility of color and exalting of white characters implies that the dominant, hegemonic code is enacted by this mediated characterization. As Shohat and Stam remark, it is an issue of Eurocentrism since the images up for consumption derive from the Eurocentric beliefs that these representations are naturalized, common sense, and the best in thought and thinking.¹⁸⁶ Is it possible that binaristic categories of Black/White, good/evil and devil/angel are lending themselves to the rhetorical message embedded within the mediated narrative?¹⁸⁷ Clearly, we only see a white figure so this fact could be possible. What is certain, what is known, is that the invisibility of color within the mediated narrative communicates that bodies of color are more disposable and less important than white bodies.

Historically, Black women and women of color have been subordinated by a hegemonic, patriarchal system not only with regards to basic human rights, but through media representation as well. Subversive feminists who seek identification and societal recognition for women of color such as Patricia Hill Collins understand that Black women's positionality places them as an oppressed group who require activist praxis in order to combat their oppression.¹⁸⁸ The white characterization of sexual assault is an act of hegemonic oppression. According to Shohat and Stam, "In a systemically racist society, no one is exempt from a hegemonic racist discourse, including the victims of racism. Racism thus 'trickles down' and circulates laterally; oppressed people can perpetuate the hegemonic system by scapegoating one another 'sideways,' in a manner ultimately benefitting those at the top of the hierarchy."¹⁸⁹ Therefore, the fact that all characters on the television show involved with the sexual assault narrative are white and thus,

deemed a “white” issue calls into question how detrimental the oppression by the oppressed can be when violence becomes politicized. In seeking to unearth one form of oppression, *House of Cards* oppresses another group all because eliminating race contributes to the subordination of women of color.

What is most significant about the invisibility of color within the sexual assault narrative of *House of Cards* is that women of color experience gendered violence much differently than white women. In her work on violence against women of color, Crenshaw addresses how women of color are situated differently in the political, economic, and social worlds, thus, reform efforts enacted for women in a general sense do not meet the needs of women of color as they are ignored, and the needs of the racially privileged are tackled.¹⁹⁰ The fact that all the women who represent the bill on the television show are white communicates the silencing of other marginalized voices who must deal with the burdens of race and class issues, as well as the horrifying realities of a lived experience of sexual assault. Additionally, it communicates that the reform efforts and intervention strategies proposed by the powerful white politicians of the show are what is necessary for women of color. As Crenshaw claims, intervention strategies based upon the experiences of those of different race and class background will be limited to women of color.¹⁹¹ In essence, the invisibility of color, the “whiteness” of the narrative, speaks volumes to the notion that television shows portray sexual assault as a “white” issue. Although the “whiteness” of the narrative could be the narrative interpretation of depicting the military’s systemic hegemony through the white characterization, it still communicates a disregard for the lived experience of women of color. In fact, some reports have claimed that women of color make up one-third of female veterans¹⁹² so the sheer dismissal of a large group of individuals indicates that many voices are left out of the conversation. The transparent silencing of

marginalized voices produced by the television is not dissimilar to the military's culture of silence.

Although *House of Cards* is a response to oppression, the text works in a way to conversely oppress certain individuals who are left out of the conversation. I argue that the invisibility of color within the entertainment text is detrimental largely because it is a visually symbolic gesture. Audiences are bombarded with visual imagery while watching *House of Cards* and the representations portrayed on screen are lasting impressions that audiences use to construct an image of sexual assault and make sense of it moving forward. When audiences only see white female characters it is not that they so naively think sexual assault only happens to white females. It is that they never once think that women of color are survivors. Moreover, those audience members who do identify as women of color do not earn fair representation and cannot relate to the characters. The problem is, when audiences recall military sexual assault survivors they will not likely remember the words on the page they read from an article on *Politico*. The audience will probably recall the image of Megan, the white female victim. Unfortunately, there are different images of survivor other than Megan and the rhetorical narrative shuts the world off from the reality of the issue. This symbolic gesture and removal of race reinforces the notion that women of color can only be voiceless, hidden victims while the "white knight" saves the day. I do not argue that the creators of the television show purposefully left out women of color. What is more alarming is that they forgot to mention women of color altogether. *House of Cards* takes "color blindness" to a new height. In leaving out women of color, these lived experiences are deemed unimportant and irrelevant.

Conclusion

As I have highlighted in my *House of Cards* themes, many of these rhetorical messages are not simply “bad” or “good”; they are simultaneously constraining and transformative. The themes contain elements that enact social change, but also produce moments of critical inspection back on itself. That is why it is essential to dissect the rhetorical story, bit by bit, to illuminate the ways in which this issue is complex and in need of examination. Framing this critical rhetoric as both space for critique of domination and critique of freedom illustrates the complicating nature of an entertainment text.

In several ways, similar to Gillibrand’s public address, *House of Cards* illuminates the power in discourse by depicting a corrupt political landscape and offering a feminist sisterhood as a way of solving sexual assault in the military. In this sense, those who have been dominated are empowered and can locate interventions for social change. However, as I have identified particular themes that perpetuate hegemonic masculinity and promote further silencing of voices and identities, it is significant to note that the text may contain regressive elements. McKerrow mentions that with the critique of freedom, “the telos that marks the project is one of never-ending skepticism, hence permanent criticism. Results are never satisfying as the new social relations which emerge from a reaction to a critique are themselves simply new forms of power.”¹⁹³ The critique of freedom encourages self-reflexivity in that not all texts benefit a social issue. In illuminating the power discourse of military sexual assault, *House of Cards* replaces the hegemonic structure with another form of power. Furthermore, McKerrow states that “the discourse of power creates and perpetuates the relations, and gives form to the ideology which it projects.”¹⁹⁴ By victimizing military assault survivors’, adhering to gender binaries, and ignoring

the subordination of women of color in their understanding of violence, the televised narrative in certain respects propels the dominant code.

In the following chapter, I incorporate a comparative analysis of both the public address of MJIA and the mediated characterization on *House of Cards* to address how texts can illuminate power discourse and at the same time give form to the ideology that produces it. With an understanding of how race, gender, power, and political corruption function in the *House of Cards*' sexual assault narrative, it is essential to analyze the effect these representations can have on a critical rhetoric and for the discourse of military sexual assault. I now turn to a discussion of the implications that emerge from these themes and locate the potentiality for social change.

Chapter Four: Critical Rhetoric

In a testimony before the Response Systems Panel (which is organized to conduct an independent review of the military's investigations of sexual assault), Senator Gillibrand read personal testimony from assault survivors and their families. One mother of a military sexual assault survivor (who remained anonymous) was quoted, "I reluctantly supported my daughter going into the Army, fearing that she may be a casualty victim in combat overseas by some foreign enemy. I never imagined she would be a victim on U.S. soil from the Army she partnered with to protect the USA and our rights."¹⁹⁵ This statement, and other testimony I have previously cited, illustrates how military sexual assault affects our society in multiple ways, including family members of survivors, lax safety and protection for our service members, and most importantly, the absence of a platform from which to speak out about sexual assault without fear and retribution. Indeed, the SAPRO report confirms roughly 19,000 sexual assault cases were reported in 2014, which does not even account for those cases that irrefutably go unreported.¹⁹⁶ Survivors feel like they cannot come forward with their assault experiences believing that military officials will deny them support, dismiss their case, and even worse, retaliate against them. I argue that this impartial reporting system is due in part to the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. As we have seen, much of the military functions under hegemonic masculinity, which appropriates strict gender practices by promoting male-dominance as the norm. Additionally, the military resides under a culture of complicity when military officials cover up assault cases and question survivor's claims as valid, as survivor's personal testimony has proven. In turn, the complicitous nature of the system prevents female survivors from receiving the support and assistance they need and, most importantly, establishes a culture of silence where survivors' voices are muted.

Clearly, the current reporting procedures are in need of change and public attention must be brought to bear on this issue through critical rhetoric to facilitate that change. To contribute to this work, my thesis analyzed two rhetorical texts concerning military sexual assault that can function as a critical rhetoric: the public address strategies of Gillibrand through media news coverage of MJIA and the fictional characterization of MJIA on *House of Cards*.

In my first analysis chapter, I dissected Gillibrand's rhetorical tools for exposing the ideologies that support sexual assault in the military which include her use of the feminine style, the naming of MJIA and Gillibrand as radical, and the ways in which Gillibrand breaks the silence and provides a platform for the voiceless survivors. Together, these themes were shown to unmask the power in military sexual assault discourse and function as a critique of domination. Moreover, Gillibrand's rhetorical public address tactics became a means to promote social change and effectively address military sexual assault in the political arena.

My second case study examined the rhetorical messages of the fictional narrative of military sexual assault on *House of Cards*. Here, I located several themes that elucidate the hegemonic structure. For example, the feminist sisterhood present on the show is a means to combat the male-dominated structure, as well as the theme of unveiling political corruption. Both of these messages serve as a critique of domination by challenging the status quo. However, in presenting a new status quo, the critique of freedom warns that new power dynamics arise and present new forms of oppression. As I point out, the introduction of the dichotomy of the evil male figure and the victimization of women, the catfight representation, the warrior woman character, and the invisibility of color are all consequential rhetorical messages that arise in the show to complicate claims that the hegemonic structure has vanquished. Therefore, the choice to

analyze *House of Cards* using both a critique of domination and a critique of freedom allows for multiple interpretation and provides space for the growth of critical rhetoric.

As my thesis journey has gone from an analysis of traditional public address to the scenes of popular culture in entertainment text *House of Cards*, my rhetorical texts present the possibility for social change. The main purpose of this final chapter is to highlight, in more detail, the role that critical rhetoric plays in regards to my chosen texts and how each of these text informs future critical rhetoric. Much of the analysis within this section is guided by my critical approach outlined in previous chapters. In the following chapter, I begin with a discussion of the implications for military sexual assault that my two rhetorical texts establish. Next, I will compare and contrast the deliberative form of rhetoric with entertainment media as ways to elucidate power in discourse and speak to the issue of military sexual assault. Then, I will describe the implications my two texts have for critical rhetoric and rhetorical criticism more broadly. Finally, I will present closing remarks and propose future directions for research. As such, my concluding chapter serves to inform rhetorical study of the implications of the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity by presenting possible solutions for combatting systemic oppression through mediated text. Although not a perfect and complete answer, critical rhetoric is one of the most effective responses to this hegemonic structure.

Implications for Sexual Assault in the Military

Gillibrand's public address and the fictional narrative of *House of Cards* are rhetorical texts that aid in combatting military sexual assault. These two texts have provided several implications for military sexual assault that include: providing a reflection of the current system, contributing and responding to the hegemonic institution and most importantly, providing space for citizen interest, and civic activism. Below, I outline the ways in which both texts provide

space for social change by informing a mass audience of the need for forceful interrogation of military sexual assault. The similarities of the two texts I highlight contribute to a larger understanding of military sexual assault that has the potential to shape future sexual assault discourse.

In a glaring, yet significant way, *House of Cards* and Gillibrand's public address produce knowledge about sexual assault in the military and sheds light on the political nature of the issue. The overall concept of the fictional sexual assault narrative in and of itself illuminates power discourse by simply including the topic as a storyline in the second season. More importantly, the television narrative aims to unmask the struggles legislators' face, particularly with issues that seek to change institutional influence and order. I argue that *House of Cards* tells another story of sexual assault that communicates political and institutional complicity. The narrative reveals how many with political status do not agree with MJIA-like changes and implementations. *House of Cards* interprets the very real nature of sexual assault within our communities; many individuals, despite growing awareness and education on the matter, still do not conceptualize sexual assault as an issue of power and systemic oppression. The mediated sexual assault narrative illuminates the political stakeholders involved with a hotly contested issue as well as the reflection of a society that is still struggling to understand the causes and preventative measures of sexual assault. Similarly, through real facts and testimony, Gillibrand makes the audience aware of the reality facing many female military members. The issue of sexual assault is no easy topic to tackle as Gillibrand's MJIA has demonstrated. The hurdles that Claire Underwood has faced on the television show are likely similar to the ones Gillibrand may have encountered in promoting MJIA. By reflecting the true nature of the current system and

shedding light on the issue of military sexual assault, both texts can bring awareness to a mass audience and inform the public of a need for a military cultural shift.

Gillibrand's public address and the *House of Cards* narrative also both contribute to the conversation of sexual assault in the military and responds to the growing concern in the political arena. For the audience watching *House of Cards* it is not simply about understanding the issue of sexual assault, but also how the dramatic retelling elicits public feelings. According to Roderick Hart, "Television redefines how we feel about politics. Not what we *know* about politics, but how we *feel* about politics."¹⁹⁷ How one feels and thinks while watching *House of Cards* or reading an online article about MJIA can be attributed to the function of critical rhetoric in the sense that it promotes social change. By contributing to the discourse on sexual assault in the military and responding to the hegemonic system, both texts encourage more political action, promote future reform legislation, and call for a change in the military culture. In several news reports of MJIA and Gillibrand, the tone of institutional change is represented in the way journalists report that the military is in need of a cultural shift. Citing that the "broken military justice system" was full of "toxic leadership" that was complicit in fostering an environment rife with "institutional cancer" and "unfair legal proceedings" communicates to readers that the issue of military sexual assault lies in the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity. Both texts are responding to the military's hegemonic culture and providing space for civic engagement by inciting audiences with a call to action.

Lastly, these rhetorical messages from both texts do not merely contain educational purpose or respond to the hegemonic system; they speak to the audience in a way that evokes social change on an individual level. Essentially, by informing the audience of systemic oppression, individuals are more aware of what is going on around them and how voices are

silenced. Raising awareness is not just simply informing; it is the process of providing audiences with resources to go out and enact change in their own community by starting the conversation. Media news coverage plays a role in the shaping of political identities, more or less. According to Peter Dahlgren, “media institutions are, in theory, accessible to constructive policy intervention – if, of course, the political interest can be mobilized.”¹⁹⁸ I argue that the political interest can and has been mobilized by the public address text and *House of Cards*. MJIA and Gillibrand have not disappeared. *House of Cards* included the narrative as an important plotline. Unlike documentary predecessors like *The Invisible War*, the Netflix original series *House of Cards* is watched on a daily basis by thousands of viewers who tune in to watch the political drama. This issue will not dissolve and never return. Legislation on military sexual assault will likely change and develop over time, but it is important to note the ways in which citizens can be engaged in democracy by a rhetorical text. Strengthening democracy, establishing space for citizen political engagement and participation as well as the visibility of more voices leads to advances in deliberative communication that our current political system is in need of.

Deliberative Text vs. Entertainment Media

A common theme of many works of rhetorical criticism and feminist scholarship are opportunities to compare and contrast multiple texts. This approach is beneficial because it avoids the impulse to read these texts so that one is better or worse. Rather, compare and contrast discussion builds a conversation between texts to produce a richer examination. The two analysis chapters of this thesis equally provide an ideal situation for identifying similarities as I have provided above. My two texts of study expose the systemic oppression of the military’s culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity in ways that promote social change. In the pages to follow, I will detail the ways in which the deliberative text differs from entertainment text which

includes: deliberative as a public text, emblematic of real and newsworthy information, and less appealing to popular attention. Then, I will discuss the differences of entertainment text by investigating how entertainment texts are fictional, provide audiences connections to characters, and offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse into a cultural interpretation of the political landscape. Putting the two texts in conversation will then set up a discussion of each texts' contribution to critical rhetoric.

Gillibrand's public address and its relation to democracy and civic engagement can be understood as a form of deliberative rhetoric presented in the public sphere. Jurgen Habermas has defined the public sphere as a realm of social life in which public information and concerns are deliberated so that public opinion can be formed.¹⁹⁹ In relation to Habermas' public sphere, my public address text is deliberative because it is believed to be public and not kept behind closed doors. Policy makers and the public actively participate in the text since deliberative public address reflects the merits of ideas instead of political alliance. Before I continue with my conversation of Habermas, it is crucial that I name how numerous feminist scholars have critiqued his work for the very fact that certain voices (usually female) are left out his conversation of the public sphere.²⁰⁰ I am calling attention to this valid critique since my entire project is about the silencing of voices and I would be largely remiss to not mention the ramifications of such a reading. The choice to include Habermas is best stated by author Peter Dahlgren when he claims, "Habermas' intellectual roots lie with the Frankfurt School, and his theses about the public sphere became inspirational for much critical media research,"²⁰¹ which adds depth and clarity to a thesis project that contains elements of media criticism. These notions of the public sphere theorized by Habermas speak volumes to the function of media news coverage, in that my public address text as a form of deliberative rhetoric provides space for

democracy and civic engagement different from entertainment television. In other words, the public address text is truly a public form of rhetoric in that politics is not an elusive, closed-off activity, but an open and unrestricted access into government happenings.

Additionally, my deliberative public address text is different from entertainment text because it is thought of as emblematic of real and newsworthy information. Habermas argues that how we make sense of who we are takes shape from the public sphere because it can determine if we will participate in our communities. Even more, the public sphere is not just a “marketplace of ideas;” it is a mechanism for the production of culture and politics.²⁰² As the public sphere shapes and influences mass media, citizens can be activated and immersed into political issues of the day by choosing to become engaged citizens by receiving real and newsworthy information. “Ultimately, it is the audience-public that must insist on the substantive uses of media, both within the political system and in other areas of social and cultural life, by transcending the ambiguous role of recipient.”²⁰³ Media news coverage can provide both institutional conditions that promote citizenship as well as value and belief systems that create solidarity.²⁰⁴ I argue that the deliberative nature of public address promotes democracy unlike popular culture in that real-time legislative coverage sets up civic engagement. The reason deliberative text is emblematic of newsworthy information, thus promoting civic engagement is due in part to the deploying of evidence and argument. As Gillibrand’s rhetorical tactics have demonstrated, the use of clear, sound reasoning by way of evidence in the form of facts, statistics and testimony mark this deliberative text as a reflection of reality that incites citizen participation in the public sphere.

Lastly, the deliberative text differs from entertainment media in that it is less palatable, and does not draw popular attention like *House of Cards*. With the onset of an Information Age

and advancements in technology, the buzzword in media studies and social media research today is the millennial generation. I would be remiss, considering my discussion of television and the Netflix Corporation, to not mention that *House of Cards* invites a millennial audience in a unique way that print media and online news coverage cannot. The millennial generation – which includes those who reach young adulthood around the early 2000’s and will be the upcoming future generation, do not consume news media as much as their predecessors have. According to Paula Poindexter, in her book *Millennials, News and Social Media*, only 27% of millennials enjoy keeping up with the news and 23% actually read a newspaper regularly as indicated by the Pew Research Center.²⁰⁵ Poindexter argues that with the decreasing interest in news consumption, the danger of news disappearing – from newspapers, to nightly news programs and even online news sources – will increase. She elaborates that millennials have become more educated than ever before, yet they are news avoiders. The reason Millennials are disinterested in say *The New York Times* is because our current era is inundated with instant gratification from social media, texting and online access to almost anything an individual desires.²⁰⁶ Why read about MJIA and sexual assault in the military when it is only a click away and a passive intake through visual stimuli? Why would one bother to exert the effort to actively engage in a reading over being entertained by Robin Wright and Kevin Spacey nightly in the comfort of their living rooms? The millennial generation informs scholars that the decrease in news consumption and increase in interest of political television satires and entertainment programs imply the need for closer inspection of rhetorical production.

On the other hand, as I briefly alluded to in the previous section, I argue that the entertainment popular culture text of the television show *House of Cards* serves as a fictional and cultural interpreter of the political landscape. By this, I mean that entertainment media like

House of Cards can provide an audience member with a very different reading of a social issue. Uniquely, entertainment television serves an important role in society that other mediated text, like news coverage, cannot necessarily provide in that it is a cultural interpreter of the social and political landscape. As mentioned earlier in my thesis, Bonnie Dow, who largely informs my argument, claims that television programming functions as cultural interpreters in that it articulates the main line of reality.²⁰⁷ Dow further elaborates that media is a part of political life in that television can serve social change when it works to accomplish some ends.²⁰⁸ Television is a cultural interpreter of reality and the important social and political issues that occur in the everyday. Although there are media scholars that believe entertainment programming is a means to escape the everyday mundaneness, it is important to note that entertainment television is also grounded in reality so that audiences can make sense of the societal messages they consume. Similar to Dow's argument, Brian Ott writes that television simultaneously contributes and responds to the broader social landscape.²⁰⁹

The entertainment television narrative has the potential to reach audiences cross culture, gender, and age group in a way that makes the issue more visceral and hit home with the creative molding of characters that public address texts cannot accomplish. As Ott asserts, "TV is also a therapist, and viewers its patients. Just as viewers once adjusted their TV antennas for better reception, TV adjusts us to better receive our ever-changing social world."²¹⁰ Television performs the role of social, cultural and political interpreter by giving audiences the tools to make sense of the world around them. Through the creative fashioning of characters and storyline, audiences embark on their own social journey given the polysemic nature of television. *House of Cards* provides viewers the rhetorical tools to help achieve social change in their own lives and on a systemic level since, as Ott's statement above suggest, they are adjusted to better

receive the social world. Audiences connect with the characters of entertainment media and are potentially positioned to think and feel in a certain way. The presence of important political and social interpretations on television do not always equate with individual social change, but by starting the conversation, visibility will likely generate positive outcome.

Another noticeable difference is that the entertainment television text is largely comprised of visual symbolism that invites a behind-the-scenes viewpoint. Although many of the online articles were accompanied with a picture of some sort such as the face of Gillibrand or McCaskill, the pictures were secondary to the actual language used and in my opinion, only supplement to the rhetorical narrative. There is a persuasive force in visual rhetoric that is different than the written and spoken word of public address texts. Humans rely on visual stimuli to make sense of issues and the representation of a mediated sexual assault narrative can generate more affective response than reading an article. In his analysis of the film *V for Vendetta*, author Brian Ott claims that affective responses occur when our body experiences sensations from watching a film coupled with our body experiences such as memory. He continues that the sensation of fear produced by visual framing can generate an affective response in that an audience can virtually touch the sweat oozing from the characters pores.²¹¹ Likewise, the *House of Cards* audience can experience affective response at a much stronger degree of sensation than just reading about the issue in an online article. For instance, the scene in which Claire forcefully pushes Megan against the wall – likely triggering past trauma for Megan – generates an affective response that communicates to viewers that they are witnessing a behind-the-scene’s event unlike public address texts. Moreover, Ott distinguishes visual representation by claiming, “Television, which is ‘structured’ differently than print media, therefore privileges a different way of knowing. Unlike the highly sequential character of language, images favor a logic of

simultaneity. When viewing an image, one processes multiple signs at once as opposed to processing them in a sequential, authorially determined manner.”²¹² In essence, the visual and authorially determined narrative of an entertainment text is an invite into the world of politics that deliberative text cannot necessarily provide. The *House of Cards* audience is provided a glimpse unto an imagined cultural interpretation of the political landscape through affective, visual response and therefore, afforded a fictional representation of the backstage happenings of Washington, D.C.

As I have explained, there remains difference between deliberative and entertainment text that should be examined, particularly for their ability to engage weighty issues such as military sexual assault. Deliberative public address texts are beneficial for providing individuals with real, newsworthy and public information that promotes civic engagement and connects citizens with their elected representatives. Conversely, the entertainment text is also beneficial in engaging society with social justice issues since the visual representations and creativity of character fashioning connect audiences with the storyline. Moreover, *House of Cards* has the ability to promote awareness to an audience more in tune with popular culture than print media which suggests that future engagement with critical issues explore the possibility that entertainment texts can advance political and social activism. No one text is more beneficial to the study of military sexual assault over another; instead, my thesis illustrates how different types of rhetorical texts can elicit differences in style and public response that help to direct rhetorical scholars in future study.

Implications for Critical Rhetoric

As I have outlined above, the traditional public address text of Gillibrand, as well as the entertainment text *House of Cards* each exhibit elements of a critical rhetoric. The media news

coverage is a written text that in many ways unmasks the power discourse of military sexual assault and enacts social change through a critique of domination. Likewise, the *House of Cards* text demystifies dominant ideology by serving as cultural interpreter of the current political landscape. However, the rhetorical messages in *House of Cards* functions as a critique of freedom in that the gender and race representations act to resituate the dominant code. Each text reveals the potential for critical rhetoric and the social change that can arise from rhetorical messages and strategies. My thesis demonstrates that an analysis of multiple texts about military sexual violence for their reflection of a critical rhetoric greatly contributes to the field of rhetorical criticism. In the following section, I will present ideas for how rhetorical scholars should approach critical rhetoric moving forward. First, I suggest that each of my text exhibits the need for rhetorical scholars to focus on more than academic analysis by bridging the community and focusing on the feminist praxis of lived experience. Then, as *House of Cards* shows us, I suggest that critical rhetoric include rhetorical production as a form of critique to address the critical lens within mediated texts. The implications I present aim to promote critical rhetoric as an effective tool in addressing issues such as military sexual assault that contain complex layers of power.

As each of my text illustrates, the issue of sexual assault in the military has far-reaching effects that spread beyond the survivor. The military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity affects survivor families, current and future military members and establishes unsafe environments. Because this issue is felt so deeply by those inside and outside the military, it is important to examine this issue as a form of critical rhetoric in zones other than academic analysis. More specifically, since critical rhetoric often addresses issues of oppression and marginalized groups who do not have a platform from which to speak, scholars must examine

nonacademic methods to better reflect their voices and concerns. Gillibrand's rhetorical strategies include the use of personal testimony from survivors', families, and military supporters which is in line with the feminist approach I employ throughout my thesis. Additionally, *House of Cards* fictionally depicts the telling of shared experience between Claire and Megan. These representations of personal experience demonstrate the effectiveness of employing lived experience as a form of feminist reasoning and nontraditional methodology. As I pointed to earlier in Kate Lockwood Harris' piece on the naming practices of rape, the discourse of sexual assault should consider the power of lived experience.²¹³ This feminist practice is a step away from Western logic and reasoning that academic work is fashioned around. Sharing lived experience is not only a challenge to male-dominated epistemology, but it provides the opportunity to bridge the community (including assault survivors' and military members') with the academic world. I suggest that future study of critical rhetoric adopt approaches that defy traditional academic methods in order to more broadly connect with its audiences and interested parties. Sharing lived experience will truly present the chance for social change and citizen participation.

A final and significant implication for critical rhetoric which I have identified more specifically in my analysis of *House of Cards* is the inclusion of rhetorical production as a form of critique. The *House of Cards* rhetorical narrative recognizes the intricacies of military sexual assault and complicates the story by presenting the "manifold relations of power" described by Foucault.²¹⁴ The mediated narrative not only unmask the primary power discourse of military sexual assault similar to Gillibrand's public address, but it brilliantly unlocks the multiple oppressions that take place within a specific power discourse. Thus, future scholarship on critical rhetoric must locate rhetorical production, or rather, entertainment media and popular culture as

a form of critique. To be clear, I do not propose that rhetorical production is the best way to study critical rhetoric or that individuals should receive their news information from a fictional television show; instead the purpose of my project is to illuminate how a rhetorical text – specifically a popular culture piece – which is often times regarded as contributing to the dominant code, can in many ways demystify power discourse and provide space for social change. In order to fully understand how *House of Cards* responds and contributes to the social and political landscape by uncovering multiple oppressions and multiple sites of domination, it is important that rhetorical production be taken seriously with an eye toward its possibility for challenging hegemonic structures. Considering my previous conversation about audience, the millennial generation, and the decline in news consumption, rhetorical production as a form of critique is a response to the cultural, political, and social landscape. It is my goal in this thesis project to emphasize the potential for social change that television programs can enact. Indeed, television shows do more than create a fan base and reap accolades at award shows; they can subtly evoke feminist ideologies with the hopes of change.

Future Directions for the Study of Sexual Assault

As this thesis comes to a close, it reveals several lines of future inquiry for other scholars to productively pursue. These future directions include: the need to further study military violence and sexual assault generally, and to do both of these through a communication studies lens. Below, I detail the ways in which my project can grow and potentially promote future work for social change.

As my testimony and statistics prove, the need to study military sexual assault becomes increasingly important as the current reporting procedures in place are not remedied, and in turn, the culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity persists. My analysis therefore elucidates the

need to further study military structure and power dynamics beyond the issue of sexual assault. In this thesis, I established that much of the problem of military sexual assault resides in the toxic leadership so deeply influenced by the military's harmful culture. Given this culture's reach, it seems inevitable that it has produced causalities elsewhere worthy of consideration. Locating other spaces in which the military is complicit of internal violence will only help to build a safer and healthier work environment for our military members. Interrogating a long-standing, traditional institution like the military is difficult and risky, but we need scholars, especially those with a critical feminist lens, to attend to this risky work and improve lives.

Furthermore, the study of military sexual assault also sheds light on the issue of sexual assault more broadly, whether it is workplace harassment, acquaintance rape, or assault on college campuses. Any conversation of sexual assault must involve a discussion of power. My institutional and systemic argument aids in our society's understanding of sexual assault since it clearly involves issues of dominance and power. Investigating sexual assault from the perspective of dominance can segue into the power dynamics at play with other forms of sexual violence. For instance, certain college campuses across the U.S. do not have reporting procedures in place that encourage the disclosure of sexual assaults on campus. Keeping my argument in mind, future scholars can follow my conversation of the military's culture of masculinity, silence, and complicity by applying it to other similar institutional settings. The framework of critical rhetoric I have established in my thesis can be applied to other forms of sexual violence and the rhetorical messages that are produced from it. More scholarly contribution to the research of sexual assault can only help combat the issue and produce preventative measures.

Lastly, my thesis urges future communication study and rhetorical criticism of military violence and sexual assault. The focus of critical rhetoric in the communication discipline will undoubtedly expand and my contribution of a critique of rhetorical production can provide a framework for rhetorical criticism of entertainment media. It is necessary for communication scholars, specifically rhetorical critics, to address the concern of sexual assault since the issue lies with power dynamics, and rhetoric as a discipline is suited to address oppression and ideology. In other words, rhetoricians are trained with a critical lens that allows them to deconstruct a message with multiple interpretations and find ways to construct an argument around an interpretation that betters human communication amongst people and in communities. Of course, sexual violence in any form should be studied in different disciplines and with different epistemologies, but rhetorical criticism ensures that survivor voices will be heard when critics give survivors the chance to explain their stories.

Conclusion

Military sexual assault survivors' have shouted out that it is time for a change in the system. Politicians and scholars alike are taking heed of this call to action, but in order to solve the issue we must not stop at failed legislation or an appearance on a popular television show. The importance of studying military sexual assault under a critical rhetoric framework seems like an obvious choice; unmasking power discourse to enact social change and potentially giving voice to the voiceless. I argue that the military is a culture of silence and complicity in that female survivors of military sexual assault are denied a platform to speak up and receive fair legal treatment. Studying military sexual assault by framing a text as a form of critical rhetoric can help shape the future direction of military order and protect military member's rights with the unveiling of gross abuses of power. The military system is a necessity for safeguarding

national security. True – without good order and discipline it is difficult to imagine a system that can protect the nation. That is why it is so critical that good order and discipline be established in the form of fair legal prosecution for survivors of sexual assault in order to maintain a safe working space and ensure justice. Prospective women who wish to join the military should feel comfortable with their decision without the looming thought that sexual assault is a possibility. Female survivors who are already a part of the system should never have to fear retaliation or doubt for coming forward with their stories. Perpetrators of sexual assault should never be protected by the institution and allowed to retain their position with the potentiality to commit a crime again. As research on sexual assault has grown, the U.S. Department of Justice indicates that imprisoned sex offenders were more likely to have prior convictions of sex offense.²¹⁵ To me, this statistic proves that when sex offenders are protected, then they are more likely to commit an act of violence again, in part based on the principle that they will not be punished. The military system will continue to place Band-Aids on an old wound with their own preventative measures that do not allow for civilian oversight, but what the broken system truly needs is a cultural shift. My thesis project and the critical rhetoric I examine like Gillibrand’s public address and *House of Cards* are a call to action. The answer is never to simply stand by on the sidelines, passively waiting for the institution to take control and fix the issue. It is the responsibility of those in positions of power and with political status to unveil the discourse of power and fight for the voiceless so that sexual assault may never silence again.

Endnotes

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²⁰⁰Nancy Fraser, “Transnationalizing the Public Sphere: On the Legitimacy and Efficacy of Public Opinion in a Post-Westphalian World,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24, no. 4 (2007). Nancy Fraser is one such feminist scholar who has critiqued Habermas’ work for the loss of a critical lens. Fraser claims that public opinion should be “normatively legitimate” and all individuals should be equal participants. Thus, as I mention, marginalized voices, specifically women’s voices are often left out of public opinion.

²⁰¹Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1995), 9.

²⁰²Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, 23.

²⁰³Klaus Bruhn Jensen, “The Politics of Polysemy: Television News, Everyday Consciousness and Political Action,” *Media, Culture and Society*, 12 (1990).

²⁰⁴Peter Dahlgren, *Television and the Public Sphere*, 125.

²⁰⁵Paula M. Poindexter, *Millennials, News and Social Media: Is News Engagement a Thing of the Past?*, (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2012), 6.

²⁰⁶Paula M. Poindexter, *Millennials, News and Social Media*, 18.

²⁰⁷Bonnie J. Dow, *Prime-time Feminism*, 8.

²⁰⁸Ibid., 7.

²⁰⁹Brian L. Ott, *The Small Screen: How Television Equips Us to Live in the Information Age* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 23.

²¹⁰Brian L. Ott, *The Small Screen*, 171.

²¹¹Brian L. Ott, “The Visceral Politics of *V for Vendetta*: On Political Affect in Cinema,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27, no.1 (2010): 49.

²¹²Brian L. Ott, *The Small Screen*, 9.

²¹³Kate Lockwood Harris, “The Next Problem With No Name,” 60.

²¹⁴Michel Foucault, *Power/knowledge*, ed. C. Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 93.

²¹⁵US Department of Justice, “Bureau of Justice Statistics: An Analysis of Data on Rape and Sexual Assault,” February 1997, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/SOO.PDF>.