

DISSERTATION

BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL-SYSTEMIC BINARY: ORGANIZING BELIEF IN THE
RHETORIC OF ANTI-SEXUAL VIOLENCE ACTIVISM

Submitted by

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ABSTRACT

BEYOND THE INDIVIDUAL-SYSTEMIC BINARY: ORGANIZING BELIEF IN THE RHETORIC OF ANTI-SEXUAL VIOLENCE ACTIVISM

This dissertation is a rhetorical history of anti-sexual violence activism that challenges what I refer to throughout the project as an “individual-systemic binary,” a rhetorical tool of containment in sexual violence discourses that promotes cultural disbelief of survivors. The individual-systemic binary either isolates victims as individual anomalies or subsumes their stories into broad systemic critiques that flatten intersectional differences among victims and promote oppressive, carceral logics. In the aftermath of the Me Too movement, which I argue highlights the shortcomings of individual and systemic narratives surrounding sexual violence, this dissertation turns to intersectionally-informed, historical and contemporary anti-sexual violence organizing that offers insight about activist rhetorical strategies beyond the individual-systemic binary. To do so, I examine three case studies of U.S.-based anti-sexual violence advocacy, whose discourses offer prescriptive insight surrounding rhetorical resources for challenging rape culture. The first case study analyzes the 1944 movement on behalf of Recy Taylor, a Black survivor who multiple white perpetrators assaulted in Alabama. This campaign, called the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor (CEJ), participated in what I term a “rhetoric of radical belief,” which framed belief as an act of care, rather than an evaluation of a victim’s credibility. Such rhetoric merged the individual-systemic binary by framing Taylor as an individual symbol of systemic democratic failure. The CEJ also inverted the binary by both individualizing the state responsible for ignoring Taylor and bestowing activists with systemic

power. The second case study in this dissertation investigates the rhetoric of the 1970s movement against sexual harassment, which was comprised of working-class women, women of color, and university feminists who framed sexual harassment as a matter of economic exploitation. Through what I identify as a discourse that “(dis)organizes disbelief,” the movement challenged rape culture scripts and shattered the individual-systemic binary by posing the organizational context as a third scale on which violence flourishes. Finally, the third case study of this dissertation centers around a contemporary nonprofit organization, anonymized as the Peer-Led Violence Prevention (PLVP) Program. Drawing upon the data from focus group interviews I conducted with workers in the PLVP, I argue that the PLVP constructs what I call a “belief biography,” or a rhetoric that tracks how cultural belief in survivors is cultivated across time. This model of activism absorbs the strengths of both individual and systemic sides of the binary while avoiding their pitfalls, fostering change through localized, relational practice rather than top-down reform or punitive pressure. Ultimately, this dissertation situates belief in survivors not merely as a moral stance but as a cultural infrastructure requiring sustained rhetorical labor. This project contributes to rhetorical and organizational communication studies by mapping how advocacy efforts can cultivate cultural belief in survivors without reinscribing the hierarchies and exclusions that sustain sexual violence in the first place.

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My great-grandma graduated high school at the top of her class—an accomplishment for which her pride never waned (On numerous occasions, she beamed while eagerly telling me about her status as “salutatorian”). Her love for learning just never had an expiration date. As the first woman in my family to attend college, she obtained the credentials to become a teacher, and she inspired countless students as their instructor in a one-room schoolhouse. Even beyond her years teaching, my great-grandma’s excitement about school continued as she became invested in my educational experiences. For the several years preceding her third and most recent battle

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DEDICATION

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INTRODUCTION: THE INDIVIDUAL-SYSTEMIC BINARY IN SEXUAL VIOLENCE DISCOURSES

***Content warning:** This chapter discusses sexual violence, which may be triggering for some readers.*

In 1991, Anita Hill revolutionized public conversations about sexual violence.¹ By providing a graphic account to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee about how then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her, Hill empowered numerous survivors to share their experiences when many victims' stories remained concealed by a culture that expected their silence.² As Hill remarked in her memoir:

In 1991, before the hearing, sharing experiences of gender-based violence was taboo. Yes, a few exceptionally courageous and forward-looking women sued in courts to stop harassment, but often the court reports reflected only a few of the details of the behavior they endured. Testimony was usually very curtailed.³

Although public disbelief of survivors functioned as a widespread silencing tactic, within months of Hill's widely-televised testimony, the EEOC noted a 71 percent increase in working women's sexual harassment complaints.⁴ In many ways, the moment appeared to be a monumental, feminist shift in public understanding of sexual violence because it encouraged survivors to speak up. At the same time, the extreme villainization Hill encountered—combined with Thomas's subsequent confirmation to the Supreme Court—pointed to an important lesson: telling one's truth about sexual violence certainly does not guarantee that dominant publics and hegemonic institutions will listen.

One notable factor that characterized the Hill/Thomas confirmation hearings was the extent to which Hill was alone. Given she was the only woman standing before an all-male Judiciary Committee, the only Black person testifying before that same exclusively white panel

of senators, and the only survivor accusing Thomas of sexual harassment, it was always unlikely that publics would believe her or that Hill's testimony would thwart Thomas's confirmation. Furthermore, the discursive patterns that permeated the Thomas confirmation hearings also functioned to isolate Hill. Vanessa Beasley describes the communicative differences that characterized the senators' and Hill's 1991 testimonies, which followed "logics of freedom" and "logics of power," respectively.⁵ Logics of freedom are motivated by "self-sufficiency and sustained through self-reliance," positing that individuals have significant freedom and control over what happens to them. By contrast, logics of power emphasize the "extreme interdependence" of one's individual choices and systemic constraints.⁶ During Hill's hearing, members of the Senate Judiciary Committee deployed logics of freedom, interrogating Hill for why she did not report Thomas sooner or make the "choice" to challenge his behavior. Hill, however, framed her experience in accordance with logics of power, asserting that publicly accusing Thomas would have compromised her chances at upward mobility. Because, writes Beasley, logics of freedom lay the neoliberal foundation for U.S. culture and identity, the senators would never view Thomas as culpable for sexually harassing Anita Hill.⁷ She, *alone*, was not believable because she did not fight back.

The Hill/Thomas hearings revealed the dangers that individualistic logics pose for discourses about sexual violence, and anti-sexual violence advocacy that followed the Hill/Thomas hearings would deploy systemic logics of power so that survivors might feel less alone. For example, a global wave of sexual violence allegations surged on October 15, 2017, when actress Alyssa Milano invited survivors of sexual assault and harassment to post "#MeToo" on Twitter. As a response to dozens of sexual violence accusations brought against media mogul Harvey Weinstein, Milano's tweet emboldened one survivor after another to share

their stories on social media, each voice serving as a testament to the sweeping scale of society's problem with sexual violence. Having appeared in over 19 million social media posts within one year of the hashtag's origin,⁸ the "Me Too" phrase emerged as a mission to promote cultural belief in survivors' disclosures.⁹ By October of 2018, organizations had fired hundreds of powerful men who had perpetrated sexual violence against their colleagues.¹⁰ Tarana Burke—who in 2005 originated the use of "Me Too" as a tool of sexual violence activism—explained an important goal behind the phrase: to facilitate "the exchange of empathy between survivors of sexual violence."¹¹ The 2017 hashtag circulated an empathy of enormous proportion, highlighting what Jeannie Suk Gersen articulates as "the power of numbers across time: the difference between a single victim, whose lone account might not be believed, and the choruses of 'me too' that make each individual's account that much more believable."¹² Moreover, the Me Too movement forwarded logics sharply divergent from the individualistic undertones of the Hill/Thomas hearings, seeing as it is much more difficult to blame survivors for the violence inflicted upon them when collectives of victims—rather than individual survivors—shed light on the pervasive, systemic reach of rape culture. As Sara Ahmed attests, "a collective can be what you need for violence to be *witnessed* by others."¹³ Systemic sexual violence discourses, in other words, are a necessary condition for cultivating cultural belief in survivors' stories.

Even as communication scholars are beginning to unpack the productive rhetorical force of systemic sexual violence rhetoric,¹⁴ recent research has also pointed to discursive shortcomings of movements like Me Too and other instances where survivors accumulate their stories in the service of systematizing discourse about sexual violence. Emma Frances Bloomfield summarizes this dilemma, noting that although systemic rhetorics can make anti-sexual violence advocacy "about the shared experiences of those who are victims of sexual

violence,” such an approach “is potentially detrimental, however, in its overshadowing of individual identities, such as the experiences of trans women, people of color, and men who are victims of sexual violence, along with other intersectional identities.”¹⁵ Furthermore, the positive impacts of the Me Too hashtag and its systemic critique were relatively short-lived. Interrupting the “believe survivors” logic that drove Me Too, the Senate Judiciary Committee confirmed another man accused of sexual violence to the Supreme Court less than a full year after the hashtag’s proliferation.¹⁶ In a 2022 social media spectacle that some have called “#MeToo backlash,” the hashtag #justiceforjohnnydepp received nearly 19 billion views on TikTok during a U.S. defamation trial that implicated Amber Heard in libel for accusing Depp of sexual and domestic violence.¹⁷ While Heard had won a similar trial in the United Kingdom after a judge found Depp guilty for 12 domestic violence incidents, she lost in the U.S. court of public opinion when the jury sided with Depp amidst an outpouring of online commentary lambasting Heard as a liar.¹⁸ More recently, the U.S. American people democratically elected a President in 2024 who has, to date, been accused of sexual assault or harassment by 28 women.¹⁹ The Kavanaugh confirmation, the *Depp v. Heard* trial, and the re-election of Donald Trump as the President of the United States have compelled speculation about what many scholars now label a “post-MeToo” era—one that reveals the ever-fleeting nature of Me Too’s collective power.²⁰

The pitfalls of both individualistic and systemic sexual violence discourses amidst a violent post-Me Too moment necessitate scholarly investigation of what I will refer to throughout this dissertation as an “individual-systemic binary”—a discursive trap that promotes cultural disbelief of survivors by confining our rhetorical resources for fighting rape culture to two problematic options: one that nurtures disbelief by framing sexual violence as an individual issue and another that overgeneralizes victims’ stories to prop up privileged identities while

sponsoring disbelief of the marginalized victims most impacted by the terror of sexual violence. While individual frameworks focus on sole instances of sexual violence, systemic rhetorics take one of two shapes: 1) They engage in a collective survivor rhetoric to highlight the magnitude of society's problem with sexual violence, speaking to the pervasiveness of the issue that warrants its treatment as a systemic concern, or 2) They advocate for systemic, often legal, solutions. Given that rhetorical scholars have established the individual-systemic binary as a source of harm in sexual violence discourses,²¹ my dissertation investigates rhetorical strategies activists use to transcend the individual-systemic binary. I ultimately argue that rhetoric beyond the individual-systemic binary will function as a crucial step in our efforts to create a safer world—one in which we can reduce violence by architecting a stronger cultural infrastructure for belief.

Oppressed victims' participation in anti-sexual violence advocacy has often been left absent or rendered peripheral from mainstream narratives of U.S. activism against rape culture.²² Yet, because the individual-systemic binary devastates marginalized survivors most deeply, this dissertation looks to intersectional anti-sexual violence movements for answers as to how activism against rape culture might organize beyond mainstream discursive resources for talking about sexual violence. In recognizing how multiply marginalized people suffer from compounded forms of oppression,²³ I take up an intersectional political stance in this dissertation to indicate that sexual violence functions as a weapon of social control—one that sustains cultural hierarchies related to ability, body size, citizenship status, class, colonization, ethnicity, gender, race, sexuality, among other axes of identity. To do so, I conduct three case studies, each of which evaluates the rhetoric of an intersectionally-grounded, U.S.-based anti-violence movement that stresses how multiple systems of oppression coalesce to disenfranchise marginalized victims.

Every movement I analyze in this dissertation fought (or is currently fighting) rape culture in its own, distinct period of time. For instance, the first campaign I investigate mobilized between 1944 and 1945 on behalf of a Black woman named Recy Taylor. My second case study examines how a diverse group of largely working-class women advocated against workplace sexual harassment throughout the 1970s. Finally, my last analytical chapter conducts a focus group study with a contemporary anti-violence nonprofit organization that conceptualizes sexual violence as a weapon of identity-based oppression. Together, these case studies comprise a mixed-methods rhetorical history of anti-sexual violence advocacy that offers rhetorical topoi for challenging rape culture by *merging/inverting*, *shattering*, and *absorbing* the individual-systemic binary, respectively. By looking to both historical and contemporary instances of anti-sexual violence activism, this dissertation shows how anti-violence rhetoric previously functioned as what David Zarefsky calls “a force in history” and also highlights how such discourse presently functions as a “mirror of history.”²⁴ It is my hope that, beyond these three movements and their specific contexts, their intersectionally-informed advocacy offers us prescriptive, discursive insight for challenging the pervasiveness of sexual violence in modern U.S. culture.

The remainder of this introduction provides a necessary scholarly backdrop for the case studies in this dissertation, revealing tensions between individualistic and systemic narratives of sexual violence. First, I review literature that describes four discursive patterns characteristic of individualized rape culture discourses. I then overview scholarly conversations about how systemic narratives of sexual violence intervene in individualistic scripts. Finally, I draw upon rhetorical research and humanities scholarship to describe the shortcomings of systemic discourses surrounding sexual violence before offering detailed overviews of three case studies that possess potential to reshape binarized rhetorical resources for intervening in rape culture.

Individualized Sexual Violence Scripts

Rhetorical work and humanities scholarship on sexual violence largely center four hegemonic scripts of rape culture that encourage disbelief of survivors by individualizing their experiences. These scripts include: 1) isolating survivors, 2) obscuring victims' experiences with an inadequate linguistic system, 3) minimizing survivors' agency, and 4) villainizing victims.

First, hegemonic narratives of sexual violence minimize the rhetorical power of survivors' testimonies by depicting instances of sexual violence as rare. This discourse of isolation comprises a flawed, individualistic narrative because it discourages survivors from speaking up by making them feel alone in their experiences and "crazy" when they do report. Linda Alcoff's and Laura Gray's theorization of "recuperation" illustrates how hegemonic discourses of isolation counter the transgressive possibilities of survivor speech. Recuperative rhetorics, in essence, respond to survivors' testimony by categorizing it "within the mad, the untrue, or the incredible"—crafting an illusion that sexual violence is an uncommon occurrence and distracting from the systemic forces of rape culture that make sexual violence an inevitable reality for many.²⁵ These discourses of rarity stem from colonial notions of temporality that ignore the degree to which sexual trauma transcends individual instances of sexual violence. As Sarah Deer suggests, Western narratives of sexual violence portray rape as "a short-term, isolated problem"²⁶ because doing so has obscured how "Native women experience the trauma of rape as an enduring violence that spans generations."²⁷ Hegemonic scripts surrounding sexual violence prefer defining sexual violence as a momentary, rather than an extended, phenomenon because recognizing the longstanding consequences of sexual violence would implicate it as a systemic, cultural problem that disproportionately targets marginalized communities.

Rhetorical scholars confirm that discourses of rape culture isolate survivors in efforts to minimize perpetrator accountability. For example, Valerie Wieskamp and Courtney Smith investigate how Indigenous rhetorics of survivance operate as resources for challenging scripts of isolation that “individualize the causes and healing processes of trauma, assign trauma an unrealistic linear timeline, and mask the experiences of women of color.”²⁸ Because Native storytelling acknowledges how “the past repeatedly intrudes upon the present,”²⁹ it disputes the notion that sexual violence is isolated and opens space for the notion that, across generations, sexual violence accumulates to inflict an ongoing, systemic pain upon Indigenous communities. In additional work, I claim that “ephemerality often characterizes hegemonic sexual violence discourses, which operate under the assumption that stifling extended conversations about sexual violence can preserve rape culture’s place in the status quo.”³⁰ As such, my scholarship points to the fact that Black women’s experiences of sexual violence, such as Anita Hill’s, rarely remain the subject of public discourses for long periods of time. Because oppressed survivors’ experiences are infrequently depicted before public audiences, their absence invites audiences to understand their stories as isolated when victims do disclose. Discourses of isolation thus function as rhetorical gaslighting, compelling victims to question the validity of their stories by encouraging them to believe their experiences of sexual violence are a unique problem, rather than a systemic issue.

Second, scholars of sexual violence have also shown how survivors’ individual stories are often powerless against hegemonic linguistic systems that create narrow standards for what it means to experience sexual violence. As Tami Spry asserts, survivors “live in a reality that does not recognize the complexity and diversity of their experiences with sexual assault because the words to describe them do not presently exist.”³¹ Elaborating on how existing language systems

fail people who experience sexual violence, Priya Raghavan explains that words such as “survivor” and “victim” create a binary that renders victims/survivors as either 1) agentic, or 2) agentless and in need of protection—but not both at the same time. Raghavan warns that this “failure to reconcile victimhood and agency within discourses of sexual violence is precisely the condition of possibility for a range of violent, exclusionary and regulatory outcomes.”³² Put differently, “survivor” suggests individuals can heal from trauma, while “victim” insinuates that healing depends on protection from patriarchal, white supremacist, colonial, state structures. When people who experience sexual violence have embodied trauma outside this linguistic binary (e.g., women of color who experience enduring trauma but do not trust racist legal infrastructures to provide justice), their individual stories are not enough to overthrow dominant discursive frames for understanding sexual violence.

Drawing on a similar line of thought, communication research has revealed how commonly used terms within sexual violence discourse do not adequately represent all victims’ experiences, promoting an individualistic frame by excluding survivors whose stories fall beyond normative understandings of how sexual violence unfolds. Problematizing the use of the word “survivor” within sexual violence discourses, Stephanie Larson articulates how rhetorics of “compulsory survivorship” ask victims “to adopt a public persona driven by a social need to overcome, *to appear normal*.”³³ In other words, the term “survivor” perpetuates a discourse that asks sexual violence victims to simply “get over” their assaults. By extension, victims who display signs of trauma are “assumed to have abnormal mental functioning,” and many feel forced to identify with the notion of “survivor” even when it does not accurately encompass their ongoing experiences of pain and healing.³⁴ Critiquing additional linguistic resources available for discussing sexual violence, Kate Lockwood Harris interviewed women who had endured

nonconsensual sex with someone they knew, but many participants were hesitant to label their experiences as “rape” because doing so would have made them feel pressure to engage in performances that are often expected in rape cases, such as refusing to speak to one’s perpetrators or pursuing legal recourse. Yet, since Harris’s participants frequently had pre-existing friendships or romantic relationships with their assailants, most of them did not want to discontinue contact with the men who had assaulted them or report them to the authorities, which complicated the women’s identification with the phrase “rape victim.”³⁵ Ultimately, such work reveals how commonly used linguistic frameworks for discussing sexual violence—in predetermining how victims are supposed to process their trauma—suppress survivors’ stories. Because such hegemonic notions are embedded in the very structures of our language, individual experiences that fall outside these discursive bounds are met with societal disbelief.³⁶

Third, rape culture discourses minimize individual survivors’ agency over their stories by telling alternative narratives that degrade victims. Hegemonic sexual violence rhetoric strives to minimize what Ilaria Michelis and colleagues refer to as a “survivor knows best,” logic—one that trusts victims to provide rational, accurate accounts of their experiences with sexual violence.³⁷ By contrast, mainstream discourses about sexual violence—even those that advocate for survivors—offer narratives grounded in numbers and statistics to supplant victims’ embodied experiences with violence. Stephanie Larson’s work explains that although federal efforts to expand rape kit testing can be well-intentioned, governmental rhetoric on this subject emphasizes the importance of “scientific modes of evidence collection” as substitutions for survivors’ stories.³⁸ In a similar vein, Kate Lockwood Harris articulates that university sexual violence prevention programming often publishes statistics on campus sexual assault that deem trauma a measurable phenomenon.³⁹ Although numbers play a legitimate role in revealing the

pervasiveness of sexual violence, cultural tendencies to reduce this phenomenon to statistics, Sarah Deer warns, “offer nothing in the way of long-term solutions to the crisis”⁴⁰ because they view individual survivors’ stories as insignificant.

Victim-blaming logics also silence the lived experiences of survivors, forwarding the individualistic notions that victims alone can prevent assaults by avoiding “choices” that justify the violence enacted against them. Annie Hill describes how the victim-blaming script operates in dominant discourses, noting that “Rape logic asserts that women who look sexy to men invite sexual violence and are the primary targets of it, which is supposedly why preventing rape pivots on how women appear.”⁴¹ Essentially, this script instructs people who are potentially vulnerable to sexual violence that simple, rational decisions ward off perpetrators. As Stephanie Larson summarizes:

To prevent rape, mainstream discourses ask rapists not to change their own behavior or recognize how rape is a crime of power; rather, they encourage women to deploy self-surveillance tactics that require her to be vigilant of her own body, sustaining the gender imbalance central to the violence of rape.⁴²

By rhetorically situating survivors as the causes of their own violation, victim-blaming scripts attribute sexual violence to individual “choices”—distracting from a deeply-rooted structural acceptance of rape culture that compels perpetrators to sexually assault victims. This victim-blaming script doubly dehumanizes survivors of color, who Daniel Phillips and Rachel Alicia Griffin argue are marked as “unrapable and blameworthy” when they experience sexual violence, given cultural stereotypes that many women of color are promiscuous (and, by extension of dominant logics, culpable for their assaults).⁴³ In essence, the hegemonic victim-blaming script operates under the assumption that the very bodies of women of color supply consent for any form of sexual activity. Dominant discourses, therefore, render the systemic

structures that promote rape beyond blame, allowing far too many perpetrators to assault women of color with impunity.

Ironically, hegemonic discourses position survivors not only as the causes of sexual assault, but also as the sole people responsible for finding solutions to sexual violence. Robin Clair's analysis of Big 10 universities' sexual harassment policies, for instance, shows how these organizations placed the onus for stopping sexual violence on victims by encouraging them to "report it," "keep a record," or simply "say no" rather than by challenging perpetrators' behavior.⁴⁴ Such rhetoric frames survivors—rather than organizations—as individually responsible for confronting systems that enable sexual violence. In further exploration of this notion, Stephanie Larson assesses the anti-sexual violence advocacy of two victims in high-profile rape cases: Chanel Miller and Emma Sulkowicz. While Miller's and Sulkowicz's visceral depictions of their assaults produced a compelling, affectively-driven conversation about sexual violence, Larson's work underscores how survivors must often subject themselves to painful retellings of their experiences for dominant publics to listen.⁴⁵ In summary, rape culture discourses posit that a victim's sexual assault is a victim's responsibility—both in terms of prevention and solutions.

Fourth, rape culture scripts undermine survivors' believability by villainizing individual victims who share their stories and propping up reverse-victimhood narratives. To convert victims of sexual violence into villains, such rhetoric frames survivors as threatening to perpetrators' potential. In what Hannah Shoaf and colleagues describe as "linguistic hijacking of #MeToo terms," opponents of anti-violence activists reframe discourses of perpetrator accountability "as violence toward 'innocent' men."⁴⁶ Other scholars have identified this phenomenon as "himpathy," or the ways in which perpetrators of sexual violence (who are often,

but not always, men) elicit sympathy from audiences on the premise that the women accusing them of violence are the “real” villains.⁴⁷ Frequently portrayed as ruining men’s lives, survivors emerge within dominant discourses as vigilante threats to due process—as a “judge, jury, and (symbolic) executioner.”⁴⁸ Such rhetoric forwards an individualized conceptualization of sexual violence because it places questions about accountability for crimes on survivors, rather than societal systems that sustain rape culture.

Furthermore, as survivors take up a role as villains, the flipped logic that perpetrators are “true” victims acquires traction within public discourse, promoting a rhetoric that inhibits public recognition of survivors as people who most often tell the truth about their experiences with sexual violence. Nickie Phillips and Nicholas Chagnon explain this logic, writing that reverse victimhood narratives function “by posing those defending hegemonic relations as marginalized dissidents and, conversely, posing anti-hegemonic movements as dominating and oppressive.”⁴⁹ To provide an example of this reverse victimhood frame, Amanda Brand’s study of convicted rapist Brock Turner’s rhetoric shows how he “constructed himself as a passive bystander, a ‘true victim,’ and a virtuous martyr, claiming that it was *his* body that was exploited, manipulated, and penetrated.”⁵⁰ When Black women accuse Black men of sexual violence, this “true victimhood” framework emerges as increasingly dangerous. Moreover, in labeling Anita Hill’s accusations as a “high-tech lynching,” Clarence Thomas not only “establish[ed] himself as the victim,”⁵¹ but he also positioned Hill as a threat to anti-racist politics, given a U.S. history of white supremacist lynching against Black men.⁵² Operating as a prevailing script of rape culture, the villain/victimhood frame inverts the relationship between survivors and perpetrators—damaging the credibility of survivors who speak up, and thus, making it difficult for individual victims to

challenge the profound reach of an ideology than views survivors as evil for jeopardizing men's futures.

Systematizing Sexual Violence: Rhetorical Possibilities

Despite the above four scripts' capacities to silence victims by individualizing their experiences, rhetorical researchers have noted the subversive potential of systemic sexual violence narratives that challenge discursive erasure and bolster the credibility of survivors. For instance, many recent studies have analyzed how instances where survivors collectively speak up possess more rhetorical power than instances where one survivor publicly discloses their story of sexual violence.⁵³ Although literature attending to positive examples of communication about sexual violence is far more sparse than studies identifying harmful rhetorics of rape culture, I spotlight scholarly discussions that show how discourses can combat rape logics by systematizing sexual violence, foregrounding four productive ways systemic rhetorics can intervene in the aforementioned rape culture scripts: 1) aggregating survivors' experiences, 2) building community, 3) issuing structural critique, and 4) forwarding logics of perpetrator accountability.

First, when survivors collectively speak about their experiences of sexual violence, they engage in a discourse that disrupts the script of isolation, which dismisses victims on the premise that sexual violence rarely occurs.⁵⁴ As Emily Winderman articulates, "A viral moment like #MeToo's aggregation... argues for the sheer enormity of an issue."⁵⁵ Collective survivors' speech can give magnitude to the issue of sexual violence amidst scripts of isolation that promote cultural disbelief. Furthermore, Valerie Palmer-Mehta maintains that a *New York Magazine* piece documenting the collective experiences of the women who Bill Cosby assaulted constitutes a survivor archive that "serves as a vehicle to put their pain on the public record, creating a

community history of their abuse in the face of institutional neglect and cultivating the conditions for accountability.”⁵⁶ Rather than striving to isolate survivors from one another under the guise that few people are capable of committing sexual violence against others, collective rhetoric offers a systemic indictment of rape culture by legitimizing the scope of the problem. Such rhetoric can “encourage audiences to *sense* the greatness of the problem, to *feel* the weight of rape culture and its effects on victims.”⁵⁷

Second, even though survivors’ collective voices cannot necessarily rewrite a linguistic system that fails to represent their experiences, the communities that emerge when survivors aggregate their voices often grant victims agency over their stories when existing terminology for talking about sexual violence undermines their authority. Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray note that a productive discursive model for communication about sexual violence emerges from:

self-facilitated survivor support groups in which a survivor speaks out among other survivors and in which she participates in a collective process of analysis and evaluation of experience. Such a collective process may enhance a survivor’s individual ability to act as the theorist of her own experience.⁵⁸

In essence, rather than subjecting victims’ testimonies to outside mediation, survivor collectives confer expertise onto the storytelling practices of victims. Valerie Wieskamp and Cortney Smith’s work similarly indicates that in encouraging community-oriented healing processes, Native rhetorics of survivance “challenge dominant Euro-American narratives of trauma which often emphasize individualism, disempower women, and exclude the experiences of Native women and other women of color.”⁵⁹ Ultimately, such work shows how collaborative conversations about sexual violence and collective processes of healing from trauma afford survivors the power of self-definition instead of excluding them based on narrow vocabularies for discussing sexual violence.

Third, survivors' collective advocacy can thwart hegemonic efforts to steal victims' agency by issuing criticisms of systems that allow sexual violence to flourish. Annie Hill's research reveals that although victim-blaming is a pillar of rape logic, the collective voices of SlutWalk protestors challenged this notion "by foregrounding the ubiquity of rape logic and refusing its gendered rhetoric of personal responsibility."⁶⁰ By extension, systemic advocacy against sexual violence can place blame on institutions that tolerate violence, rather than individual perpetrators. Stephanie Larson's work on sexual violence in academia stresses the importance of structural critiques of violence, asserting that "violence circulates in the shadows of academic life" by implicitly placing the emotional burden of supporting survivors upon marginalized faculty most likely to be targeted by sexual violence.⁶¹ Accordingly, sexual violence emerges not as a crime committed by one individual, but as a vicious cycle across college campuses because it traumatizes both student victims and faculty confidants. The solution to sexual violence, therefore, is not to blame victims or hold them responsible for stopping future violence, but to transform our systems of oppression that enable harm beyond the individual moments in which violence occurs.

Fourth, in contrast to dominant discourses that villainize survivors and victimize perpetrators, collective survivor rhetorics push for the accountability of perpetrators. Exemplifying this idea, Katie Gibson's analysis of victim impact statements by survivors on the USA Gymnastics team shows how "multiplying voices of testimony joined together to reorient the framing of sexual violence outward, toward a widespread cultural sickness of rape apology, victim blaming, and institutionalized neglect."⁶² Furthermore, the gymnasts' collective rhetoric cultivated a setting in which survivors were celebrated, rather than villainized, as the judge in the case welcomed their emotional expressions of disdain for the man who sexually assaulted them.

In a similar vein, Stephanie Larson articulates that the Me Too movement’s rhetoric of “feminist *megethos*”—which she defines as a discourse of accumulation that aggregates victims’ stories to elicit affective responses from audiences—can “puncture” cultural attitudes that refuse to hold perpetrators accountable or to help survivors obtain justice.⁶³ In summary, collective survivor speech legitimizes discourses of responsibility through a “power in numbers” logic— a rhetoric that directed villanization at perpetrators instead of victims.

The Rhetorical Pitfalls of Systemic Sexual Violence Discourses

Despite scholarly preferences for systemic narratives over individualistic discourses of sexual violence, recent research points to the pitfalls of systemic communication. Moreover, such work points out that even though collective survivor rhetoric can frame sexual violence as a systemic issue and structural critique can eliminate cultural tendencies to blame survivors for their assaults, systemic discourses risk promoting homogenized narratives of sexual violence that minimize the experiences of the most marginalized survivors. In essence, systemic narratives do not advantage all survivors equally and often favor victims with privilege. Systemic criticism of sexual violence, such as the Me Too hashtag, for example, often participates in a carceral “feminism” that frames state-oriented solutions as ideal and places a burden on survivors to speak up.⁶⁴ As V. Jo Hsu asserts: “While #MeToo has ruptured a pervasive silence around sexual assault, it has also done so largely through a vocabulary of criminalization and carceral punishment.”⁶⁵ Because the Me Too movement advocated for the punishment of perpetrators, it rested on two core assumptions that left marginalized survivors behind: 1) victims must disclose their experiences of violence so their perpetrators receive justice, and 2) punishing perpetrators through the legal system is an effective mechanism for solving sexual violence.⁶⁶ Both premises overlooked the fact that people oppressed based on ability, class, ethnicity, gender, race, and

sexuality have legitimate reasons for avoiding disclosure or reporting their experiences to authorities; namely, the legal system has historically inflicted gruesome violence upon these populations.⁶⁷

The rhetorical erasure of marginalized survivors from discourses about sexual violence promotes their dehumanization and cultural disbelief of their stories, relegating them to the lower rungs of society's survivor hierarchies that deem some people more "worthy" of victimhood than others.⁶⁸ Scholars have thus used the post-Me Too moment as an exigence to explore the rhetorical mechanisms by which Me Too's systemic sexual violence discourses excluded oppressed survivors; these rhetorics constructed white, able-bodied, middle- to upper-class, cisgender, straight, conventionally attractive women as normative victims. In reviewing humanist literature regarding systemic scripts about sexual violence below, I ultimately show how even systemic narratives afford differential treatment to survivors and reinforce victimhood hierarchies central to rape culture's foundations.

Sexual violence in the U.S. has always been just as much a raced phenomenon as it is a gendered phenomenon; rape culture began with colonization of Indigenous people.⁶⁹ Sarah Deer explains that the colonial legal system "supplant[ed] women-centered societies with patriarchal, oppressive structures that condone and thrive on violence as a way to control and oppress members of marginalized communities."⁷⁰ By establishing that Native women's bodies were innately violable through routine rape,⁷¹ white colonizers depended on the sexual dehumanization of Indigenous women as a way to justify theft: both of bodily autonomy and land. This "interconnectedness of surviving colonization and surviving rape"⁷² has made it so that, as Dian Million notes, sexual violence against Native women is "more than an attack on individuals." Rather, rape is a "durable feature of colonial power relations"⁷³ that traumatizes

entire communities—generation after generation of Native women who know the colonial state will always fail to provide them justice. As V. Jo Hsu elaborates, “a federal court system unresponsive to crimes on Native American reservations and centuries of Native dispossession... have left reservations with few resources for survivor defense and support.”⁷⁴ The compounding logics of colonialism and rape culture have created present-day conditions in which Indigenous women experience the highest rates of sexual violence when compared with women in other racial demographic groups.⁷⁵ Because contemporary disbelief has been founded on state-sponsored logics of colonialism, carceral “feminist” rhetoric—however systemic in nature—will not prevent Native women from experiencing the terror of sexual violence.

For Black enslaved women in the U.S., slavery codified sexual violence as an everyday experience. Numerous Black feminist scholars inform that U.S. slavery depended on rape as a weapon of social control because sexual violence compelled Black women to work agonizingly hard, threatened Black men’s masculinity, and incentivized white men to grow their labor force by impregnating enslaved Black women.⁷⁶ As Angela Davis remarks, anti-Black “racism has always nourished itself by encouraging sexual coercion.”⁷⁷ Indeed, Davis laments that the “pattern of institutionalized sexual abuse was so strongly established that it survived the abolition of slavery.”⁷⁸ Following Black people’s upward social advances during Reconstruction, white supremacists put a check on the Black labor force by lynching (and often castrating) Black men in addition to raping Black women—crimes that usually went unpunished by Southern court systems.⁷⁹ Both forms of violence functioned to fuel fear in Black communities—fear that depended on sexual violence to mitigate Black people’s access to citizenship. Because mainstream narratives that Black men perpetrated sexual violence against white women circulated in monumental proportions throughout the early- and mid-twentieth century,⁸⁰

modern-day Black women who experience sexual violence frequently find themselves unlikely to report Black male assailants.⁸¹ Additionally, dominant representations of Black women support stereotypes about Black women's purported promiscuity, which disqualifies them from a status of "worthy" victimhood often necessary to be believed in U.S. courts.⁸² Carceral "feminist" rhetoric will thus, not save Black women.⁸³

U.S.-based, xenophobic rhetorics about sexual violence victimhood also delegitimize the stories of survivors who are residents of Latin American countries, who are in transit from Latin America to the U.S., or who are ethnically minoritized citizens of the U.S. For instance, Michelle A. Holling articulates that U.S. news coverage of feminicides and rape in Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, often underscored the systemic nature violence against women by recognizing its "magnitude."⁸⁴ However, Holling troubles the news media's systemic critique as a form of "discursive violence" that inhibited audiences' "recognition of nameless victims" because it erased their personhood.⁸⁵ Beyond producing discourse that harmfully represents people outside the boundaries of the U.S., interdisciplinary scholarship warns that migrating Latina women experience heightened sexual violence as they move to the U.S. Moreover, there are few protective measures for undocumented women, who in their journeys to the U.S., confront predators who make their pursuit of U.S. citizenship conditional upon their submission to sexual advances.⁸⁶ Additionally, for ethnically minoritized students at U.S. universities, experiences of sexual violence are often accompanied by stories of institutional neglect. Jennifer Gómez's work found that women in ethnically minoritized groups experienced higher rates of sexual violence and institutional betrayal after reporting their assaults than did their peers.⁸⁷ Considering the institutional disdain for people who fall beyond the bounds of normative (i.e., white) citizenship, carceral "feminist" rhetoric will not challenge xenophobia targeted at ethically oppressed groups.

While less studied within rhetorical scholarship, classism cultivates the conditions in which working-class women are routinely dismissed as “worthy” victims of sexual violence—both in the U.S. and beyond. Sujatha Subramanian and Riddhima Sharma evaluated social media activism against sexual violence in India, noting that such rhetorics favored upper-caste women and dismissed the accusations of lower-caste women.⁸⁸ Further, Stephanie Larson studied rhetoric surrounding the federal execution of a woman named Lisa Montgomery, a convicted murderer who had experienced repeated sexual abuse as a child and was mentally ill when she killed her victim. To extend commentary on “worthy” victimhood to the experiences of working-class people, Larson contends that under a legal system often unfavorable to those least able to afford it, “Montgomery’s death became inevitable because she failed to fit the image of an ideal victim: too poor, too unwomanly, and ultimately too deranged to inhabit public space.”⁸⁹ In light of discursive hierarchies that sow disbelief of working-class victims based on their economic status, it is perhaps unsurprising that empirical research reveals the extent to which classism makes a person vulnerable to sexual violence. As one study confirms: “Higher the class of those charged with rape or sexual assault, and lower the class of their female accusers, the greater is the likelihood of exonerations.”⁹⁰ Accordingly, carceral “feminism” will not buy working-class women out of experiencing sexual violence when the prison system that is supposed to protect them profits off the exploitation of poor people.⁹¹

Universalized narratives of sexual violence also pose dangers for queer folks, who are often disqualified from the status of “worthy” victimhood due to stereotypes of queer sexual deviancy. Cooper A. Maher and colleagues, for instance, explain that beyond statistics confirming that queer people experience higher rates of sexual violence,⁹² LGBTQ+ people are more likely to carry a fear of sexual violence with them throughout everyday life. In particular,

trans folks reported the highest rate of fear about the threat of sexual violence.⁹³ Such fears are amply justified considering a carceral system that dehumanizes trans people and contemporary anti-violence movements that wield systemic discourses about sexual violence without acknowledging the unique experiences of trans folks. As V. Jo Hsu remarks, because “the prison cell” functioned as “the presumed endpoint of many prominent Me Too narratives” the carceral “feminist” logics that drove the movement neglected experiences of trans survivors—and, even more so, trans survivors of color—who are disproportionately targeted by law enforcement.⁹⁴ Offering an additional perspective on how dominant sexual violence discourses marginalize queer people, Ragan Fox’s autoethnographic account of victimhood from a gay, cisgender man’s perspective reveals how universalized narratives of archetypal victimhood made him question his status as a survivor. He writes that “Even today, I wonder if the incident is ‘rape’ if it took me nearly three decades to describe it as such.”⁹⁵ Fox’s experience illustrates how even though cisgender men retain privilege because they are often deemed impervious to victimhood, structural, linguistic resources can harmfully limit queer men’s legibility as victims of sexual violence and threaten their capacities to fully comprehend experiences of sexual violence. Because carceral “feminism” rests on a logic of individual perpetrator accountability, it will not account for culturally accepted, victimhood hierarchies that demonize and erase queer people.

Beyond analyzing how race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality constrain survivors’ access to “worthy” victimhood, communication scholarship has only scratched the surface of examining how universal discourses of victimhood negate the stories of survivors who are disabled,⁹⁶ fat,⁹⁷ or men.⁹⁸ Rhetorical research teaches us even less about the distinct stories of people whose experiences of sexual violence are mediated by age⁹⁹ or religion.¹⁰⁰ Given that social hierarchies promote dehumanization that excuses the sexual violence enacted against

members of marginalized communities, it is imperative that anti-violence activist strategies challenge the individual-systemic binary that invites public audiences to disbelieve oppressed survivors' stories. Collectives of survivors' voices can challenge the widespread cultural disbelief of victims, but these systemic survivor discourses—in their efforts to unite victims based on shared experiences—can also flatten important differences by reinforcing an archetypal survivor identity that favors the most privileged victims. Considering the possibilities of collective survivor advocacy coupled with the drawbacks of systemic sexual violence discourses, recent rhetorical scholarship has attempted to reconcile the advantages and shortcomings of systemic narratives by calling for discursive linking between individual and systemic survivor discourses.¹⁰¹ However, communication scholarship has yet to directly explore anti-sexual violence activism beyond the individual-systemic binary. Therefore, this dissertation sheds light on moments wherein activists against sexual violence participate in discourses that transcend the individual-systemic binary of sexual violence rhetoric that often excludes marginalized survivors most subject to its terror.

The following section overviews the three case studies I use in this scholarly pursuit, and I preview how each analytical chapter pushes us beyond the confines of individual-systemic rhetorical resources for advocating against sexual violence. In doing so, my rhetorical history of anti-sexual violence activism highlights how each of the movements I investigate offer hope in the possibility of disrupting social hierarchies endemic to rape culture.

Overview of Chapters

When a Black woman named Recy Taylor was walking home from church along a small-town Alabama street in 1944, six white men kidnapped her, and five of them raped her. After the men released Taylor, she reported her assault to the local police, but the state refused to arrest

Taylor's perpetrators long-term. Even though one of Taylor's assailants eventually confessed to assaulting her, two all-white, all-male juries declined to indict them. Outraged by the state's violent negligence, Rosa Parks helped found a campaign called the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor (CEJ) to draw public attention toward Taylor's case. Such activism, which I broadly refer to as the "justice movement," may not have resulted in the state of Alabama holding her perpetrators accountable, but as historian Danielle McGuire writes, it created a national outcry that paved the way for the civil rights movement, which was "rooted in African-American women's long struggle against sexual violence."¹⁰² Nevertheless, the justice movement's efforts have been rendered largely absent from mainstream narratives of civil rights advocacy and anti-rape activism.¹⁰³ Therefore, in Chapter 2, I investigate the justice movement's rhetoric on Taylor's behalf. I argue that by depicting sexual violence as an attack on U.S. democracy, the justice movement transformed Recy Taylor into a legible victim of sexual violence despite historical discourses that dismissed Black women's claims to "worthy" victimhood.¹⁰⁴ Members of the justice movement took part in what I theorize as a "rhetoric of radical belief." Such discourse uses an ethic of care to conceptualize belief beyond notions of credibility that routinely disenfranchise survivors of color. In Chapter 2, I show how the justice movement *merges* and *inverts* the individual-systemic binary through its rhetoric of radical belief by recognizing community responsibility for solving sexual violence and individualizing the state that dismissed Recy Taylor.

In Chapter 3, I turn to the rhetoric of the 1970s movement against sexual harassment, including legal briefs and opinions for major sexual harassment cases, press releases and meeting notes from feminist organizations, editorial pieces published in newspapers and feminist magazines, as well as transcripts from public speak-outs and congressional hearings about sexual

harassment. A diverse array of voices participated in 1970s anti-sexual harassment activism, from working-class women who pushed for expansive definitions of sexual harassment, to Black women who filed groundbreaking lawsuits that made sexual harassment a violation of Title VII under the Civil Rights Act, to university-based, largely white feminist organizations that put sexual harassment on major news outlets' agendas.¹⁰⁵ What these different sectors of the movement had in common was an ambition to frame sexual harassment as an issue of labor and class exploitation—making activism against sexual harassment starkly different from anti-rape and domestic violence advocacy of the same era, which primarily centered the needs of white, middle-class women.¹⁰⁶ As such, I claim that the movement against sexual harassment leveraged the organizational backdrop of sexually harassing behavior to conceptualize this form of violence as a type of economic exploitation. Drawing on insight from rhetorical scholars in addition to research in organizational communication, I reveal how the movement's activists participated in a discourse of “(dis)organizing disbelief,” which challenged rape culture scripts that promoted the sexual harassment of working women. In doing so, I emphasize how the movement against sexual harassment *shattered* the individual-systemic binary through a rhetoric of organizational culpability—one that implicated organizations as a third source of violence that existed apart from individual and systemic sexual violence discourses.

Chapter 4 conducts a focus group study with the Sexual Violence Victim Support (SVVS) Center, which is nonprofit in the mountain west region of the U.S. that provides legal advocacy, a 24-hour rape crisis hotline, and therapy services to survivors.¹⁰⁷ The organization has also developed a sophisticated infrastructure for prevention education. One of SVVS's prevention programs that I volunteer for is the Peer-Led Violence Prevention (PLVP) Program, which is an initiative that trains high school student leaders to inform youth about sexual

violence.¹⁰⁸ Essentially, the PLVP teaches high school students to interact with others on subjects such as the definitions of sexual assault and harassment, myths about sexual violence, communicating consent, victim-blaming, structural barriers to sexual assault resources, and support provision for survivors. After completing a course that teaches the high school mentors how to run presentations about these topics, the mentors spread awareness about sexual violence by sharing the PLVP curriculum with other high school and middle school students. In Chapter 4, I analyze focus group conversations with participants who created the PLVP's curriculum and those who help train student presenters. These discussions aimed to acquire insight about how the PLVP approaches communicating their curriculum to public audiences in a way that promotes inclusivity and sponsors cultural belief of marginalized survivors. In Chapter 4, I maintain that the PLVP constructs what I theorize as a "belief biography," or a discourse that organizes against sexual violence by tracing the lifespan of belief across public culture. By harnessing peer leadership as a vehicle for activism, belief biographies show how individualistic advocacy surrounding sexual violence can productively *absorb* the systemic side of the binary and promote localized change in a broader effort to develop cultural belief.

In Chapter 5, I conclude by reflecting on how rhetorics of radical belief, (dis)organizing disbelief, and belief biographies offer positive insight for contemporary anti-sexual violence activism despite overwhelming current political constraints. In the end, I review how the concepts I theorize in this dissertation have potential to intervene in current oppressions caused and sustained by the individual-systemic binary.

Notes

¹ In this dissertation, I use the phrase “sexual violence” as an umbrella term for various types of violation, including (but not limited to) rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. While sexual harassment is generally not discussed in scholarly literature as a form of sexual violence because it often occurs via verbal channels rather than via unwanted physical contact, my choice to use “sexual violence” as a term encompassing “sexual harassment” is a political one that recognizes the extent to which harmful discourses (such as sexually harassing discourses) create the cultural conditions in which material sexual violence is tolerated and encouraged.

² I use the terms “victim” and “survivor” interchangeably because while neither word fully captures victims’/survivors’ experiences and both forward problematic narratives about what it means to endure sexual violence, few other terms exist to fully depict victims’/survivors’ experiences. I use both words to balance out the weaknesses of each term—the former which implies victims’ helplessness and need for protection and the latter that places a burden on survivors to heal from their assaults rather than acknowledging the long-term impacts of sexual trauma. For a full discussion of why both terms fall short as representations for victims’/survivors’ experiences, see Tami Spry, “In the Absence of Word and Body: Hegemonic Implications of ‘Victim’ and Survivor in Women’s Narratives of Sexual Violence,” *Women & Language* 13, no. 2 (1995), 1-9.

³ Anita Hill, *Believing: Our Thirty-Year Journey to End Gender Violence* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), Kindle Edition.

⁴ Carol Kleiman, “Sex Harassment Complaints on Rise,” *The Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 1992, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1992-03-07-9201210842-story.html>

⁵ Vanessa Bowles Beasley, “The Logic of Power in the Hill-Thomas Hearings: A Rhetorical Analysis,” *Political Communication* 11, no. 3 (1994), 287-297, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1994.9963033>.

⁶ Beasley, “The Logic of Power,” 289-290.

⁷ Beasley, “The Logic of Power.”

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⁵⁹ Wieskamp and Smith, “Indigenous Women,” 75.

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⁶² Gibson, “A Rupture in the Courtroom,” 530.

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⁶⁴ I place “feminism” in quotation marks because, ironically, rhetoric that promotes incarceration as a form of punishment for sexual violence props up a U.S. justice system in which sexual violence is an everyday component of life for incarcerated people. Accordingly, support for the so-called “justice” system (again, I use these quotations marks with “justice” ironically) holds a debatable designation as “feminist” according to principles of intersectional feminism. See Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection”; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

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⁷² Deer, *The Beginning of the End*, 17.

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⁷⁸ Davis, “Rape, Racism and the Capitalist Setting,” 40.

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¹⁰⁸ Peer-Led Prevention Program (PLVP) is a pseudonym for this program.

“SHE IS A GOOD AMERICAN CITIZEN”: TRANSFORMING LEGIBLE
VICTIMHOOD AND RHETORICS OF RADICAL BELIEF IN THE JUSTICE
MOVEMENT FOR RECY TAYLOR

***Content warning:** This chapter contains descriptions of racialized sexual violence, sexual violence by multiple perpetrators, and racialized mob violence, which may be triggering for some readers.*

The *Time’s Up* movement launched on January 7, 2018, extending Me Too’s demands for perpetrator accountability.¹ At the Golden Globe Awards that evening, Oprah Winfrey delivered what *Vanity Fair* called a “showstopping” speech, asserting that the age in which sexual violence predators could assault women with impunity had reached its expiration date.² “Their time is up,” Oprah announced of perpetrators, offering hope in the possibility that we may one day build a world “when nobody ever has to say ‘Me too’ again.”³ Wielding the rhetorical power of her global stage, Winfrey also gave voice to one Black woman’s story of survival—a woman whose courage transformed public conversations about sexual violence. The survivor’s name was one that many Me Too proponents had probably never heard: Recy Taylor.

Amidst rampant racism and sexism that muted the experiences of Black sexual violence victims and a Southern justice system unlikely to punish racialized violence, 24-year-old Taylor was walking home from church in Abbeville, Alabama, on September 3, 1944. That evening, six white men held Taylor at gunpoint, drove her to a secluded location, and five of them raped her. Taylor’s attackers said they would kill her if she told the authorities of the crime, but Taylor would not remain silent. She promptly reported her assault to the local police, and law enforcement declined to arrest her perpetrators long-term. Despite one of the rapists eventually

confessing to the crime, two all-white, all-male Alabama grand juries refused to indict Taylor's assailants in an appalling legal process that never resulted in a trial or conviction.⁴ As Winfrey put it, Recy Taylor lived "in a culture broken by brutally powerful men" who refused to hear the experiences of survivors.⁵ Although Alabama ignored Taylor's truth, a large portion of the 1940s U.S. public listened.

Having learned of Taylor's assault, Rosa Parks—a blossoming activist before she emerged as a 1960s symbol of civil rights—ventured from Montgomery to Abbeville, determined to fight the state of Alabama's violent negligence. Parks traveled to interview Taylor multiple times, but the Abbeville police threatened to imprison Parks if she kept returning to the Taylor residence. Even so, Parks persisted. After many interviews, Parks eventually obtained complete records of the assault from Taylor's perspective. She then provided the information to some of the most dedicated anti-racist activists in Alabama, whose subsequent, firm conviction that Recy Taylor deserved justice launched a campaign that historian Danielle McGuire argues "would ultimately change the world."⁶ This extraordinary movement became known as the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor (CEJ). While it originated in rural Alabama, the campaign acquired momentum in most U.S. states between 1944 and 1945. Building upon a robust history of Black activists who used the press as an indispensable medium for challenging white supremacy,⁷ the CEJ plastered Taylor's story in most major Black newspaper outlets, leveraged the attention from the press to acquire thousands of petition signatures in support of Taylor, and recruited hundreds of U.S. citizens to bombard the conservative Alabama governor's desk with piles of letters demanding democratic justice.⁸

While the CEJ never convinced the Alabama legal system or the staunchly racist Governor Chauncey Sparks that Recy Taylor deserved fair treatment under the law, the CEJ's

letter-writing campaign crucially impacted civil rights movement activism. The advocacy tactics Black organizers developed through their support for Taylor, according to McGuire, played a role in inspiring the profound, nonviolent protest strategy of the 1960s—an effort often credited to civil rights men like Martin Luther King, Jr.⁹ In the meantime, advocacy surrounding Black women’s stories of survival has been rendered a peripheral phenomenon not only within popular civil rights movement narratives, but also within mainstream accounts of anti-sexual violence advocacy. Long before white feminists took part in anti-rape speak-outs and founded rape crisis centers during the 1970s, Black women like Taylor “reclaimed their bodies and their humanity by testifying about their assaults,”¹⁰ issuing what Maria Bevacqua deems the first public declaration of sexual violence as “a systemic abuse of women.”¹¹ Early sexual violence advocacy on behalf of Black women, therefore, found success even beyond its material contributions to civil rights activism—the CEJ’s advocacy was also *rhetorically* revolutionary. By centering a Black woman’s experience, the CEJ and the letter writers who defended Taylor showed how systemic histories of racism made possible Taylor’s assault and the legal system’s subsequent dismissal. Accordingly, Taylor’s activists elicited a fundamental destabilization of discursive precedent; rather than conceptualizing sexual violence as an individual act of desire, they implicated rape as a racist crime of U.S. culture. Yet, rhetorical scholarship on anti-sexual violence activism tends to focus on late 20th-century and 21st-century advocacy—movements such as Me Too that have been criticized for their exclusion of Black women’s experiences and promotion of the idea that sexual violence is primarily a gendered issue.¹²

In this dissertation chapter, I analyze hundreds of letters that the CEJ, U.S. citizens, unions, and activists drafted in response to the Alabama justice system’s gross mistreatment of Recy Taylor. This collective comprises what I identify from this point forward as “the justice

movement for Recy Taylor.” The movement’s letters, written between 1944 and 1945, address Governor Chauncey Sparks in efforts to galvanize public support for Taylor and urge the Alabama government to indict her perpetrators. While the CEJ’s discourses might be read as a purely systemic critique, this dissertation chapter unsettles the individual-systemic binary by showing how the movement both *merged* and *inverted* binarized rhetorical resources for discussing sexual violence. I argue that by framing sexual violence as an assault on U.S. democracy and citizenship, the justice movement for Recy Taylor leverages World War II-era patriotic scripts to transform Taylor into a legible victim. In doing so, activists participate in what I theorize as a “rhetoric of radical belief”—one that uses an ethic of care to conceptualize “belief” beyond credibility, thwart logics of hierarchical victimhood, and complicate the individual-systemic discursive binary.

Common to most contemporary anti-sexual violence advocacy, the term “belief” can be used in sexual violence discourses to challenge hegemonic rape culture logics that assign an *a priori* lack of veracity to survivors’—and especially *Black* survivors’—stories.¹³ Despite the productive discursive power of phrases like “I believe you” and “Believe women,” rhetorical theorization surrounding “belief” in sexual violence activism is relatively sparse. In briefly mentioning “radical belief,” Clint Graves and Leland Spencer conceptualize the phrase as a practice of extending “epistemic privilege” to a person who claims to have experienced sexual violence by providing them with “reasoned trust” in response to their accounts.¹⁴ Although such use of “belief” certainly refutes normative rape culture logics that victims should be dismissed, rhetorics of belief that invite logical processes of evaluating a person’s “trustworthiness” possess potential to uniquely harm survivors of color in a white supremacist culture that rarely perceives them as truth-tellers. My chapter thus proposes a *re-radicalization* of radical belief that wholly

removes questions of truth and trust from our conversations about survivors' believability.

Alternatively, I propose a framework for rhetorics of radical belief that transcend a *belief-as-trust* logic in favor of one rooted in *belief-as-care*. An orientation toward care radicalizes rhetorics of belief, deeming survivors as worthy of belief because of the logic that *to believe* is not to evaluate one's credibility based on racist notions of "worthy" victimhood. Instead, *to believe is to care*.

This chapter on the justice movement's rhetoric of radical belief proceeds in the following parts: First, I provide necessary context surrounding the history of U.S. sexual violence and racism, offering insight as to dominant rhetorics present during slavery, Reconstruction, and segregation. Next, I situate the campaign for Recy Taylor within a broader 20th-century movement originated by major Black press outlets, which leveraged World War I and World War II battles for democracy in efforts to petition the U.S. government for Black Americans' civil rights. In doing so, I connect the justice movement's war rhetoric to contemporary rhetorical scholars' conversations about discourses of citizenship. Upon reviewing relevant literature, I then lay out my proposal for tenets of a rhetoric of radical belief, followed by my analysis of how Taylor's activists harnessed the rhetorical power of World War II patriotism to portray Recy Taylor as a legible victim of violence. In doing so, I make four interrelated claims: 1) Activists framed Taylor's assault as a threat to the war effort, 2) The justice movement positioned Taylor as a "good" U.S. citizen, 3) Letter writers understood Taylor's rape as a symptom of systemic racism, and 4) Taylor's advocates forwarded the notion that democratic communities held cultural solutions to sexual violence. To conclude, I offer implications surrounding letter writers' novel mechanisms for breaking down the individual-

systemic binary of anti-sexual violence advocacy. Further, I point to the necessity of using rhetorics of radical belief to center sexual violence as an inherently intersectional phenomenon.

Slavery and Sexual Violence

U.S. histories of racialized violence and sexual violence have always been inextricably intertwined—building a horrific cultural infrastructure that enabled Recy Taylor’s rape. Patricia Hill Collins notes that because “violence is socially constructed in a race- and gender-specific manner,” Black women have always experienced sexual violence differently than other marginalized groups, including Black men, white women, and other women of color.¹⁵ White men’s raping of African women before their arrival on U.S. plantations, for instance, cemented the ways in which sexual violence against Black women would become a fundamental weapon of white supremacy. As Rachel Feinstein articulates, sexual violence “that took place on the slave ships functioned to indoctrinate and transform Africans from free people into submissive, obedient ‘slaves.’”¹⁶ In this sense, rape against Black women was not only a gruesome, material violation of bodily autonomy, but a symbolic theft of their freedom. Southern slavery then entrenched racialized sexual violence into the fabric of U.S. society.¹⁷ Gerda Lerner writes that U.S. law normalized the “free availability” of Black women “as sex objects to any white man,” forbidding Black enslaved women from resisting rape through laws that allowed white plantation owners to kill enslaved people who refused their owners’ sexual advances.¹⁸ Incentivized by economic expansion and justified by the three racist, rhetorical myths of Black female promiscuity, white women’s innocence, and Black male sexual predation, sexual violence played an integral role in sustaining the institution of slavery.

Sexual violence against Black women served an economic purpose for plantation owners in the South, stifling dissent among enslaved people to sustain their productivity as workers. In a passage worth quoting at length, Angela Davis poignantly asserts:

Slavery relied as much on routine sexual abuse as it relied on the whip and the lash. Excessive sex urges, whether they existed among individual white men or not, had nothing to do with this institutionalized rape. Sexual coercion was an essential dimension of the social relations between slavemaster and slave. In other words, the right claimed by slaveowners and their agents over the bodies of female slaves was a direct expression of their presumed property rights over black people in general. The license to rape derived from and facilitated the ruthless economic domination that was the gruesome hallmark of slavery.¹⁹

Worker exploitation, torture, and punishment knew no gender lines on plantations, as enslavers and overseers subjected Black men and women to equal levels of brutality to assert their power over the labor force. Yet, beyond enduring frequent forms of physical violence that Black men and women experienced alike, Black women also faced routine sexual violence. Those who submitted to white men's sexual violence often received small presents for their lack of resistance,²⁰ but Black women who resisted faced severe forms of punishment.²¹ Elaborating on the economic purpose of sexual violence against enslaved women, bell hooks explains that the success of the slavery system demanded "absolute allegiance and obedience to the white imperialistic order."²² By fostering a fear of sexual violence among enslaved Black women, white enslavers maintained that system; rape culture laid an essential foundation for the South's economic success during slavery.

In addition to stifling dissent, sexual violence sponsored plantation owners' economic ambitions because enslavers could force reproduction upon Black women without purchasing additional enslaved people. During slavery, laws sanctioned the economically-driven sexual exploitation of Black women, as children born of Black women—regardless of their father's race—inherited their mother's legal status.²³ White enslavers thus increased the size of their

enslaved population and plantation productivity through rape. As Catherine Clinton remarks: “While mating with his wife to produce a string of legitimate heirs to carry on his name and inherit his wealth, the planter patriarch could endow his reproductive success with an economic component by fathering slaves.”²⁴ Although laws during slavery technically forbade interracial intercourse through fines designed to deter it, these measures were rarely enforced against white men who sexually assaulted Black women. Even with the threat of experiencing financial loss for impregnating enslaved women, the economic incentive to avoid purchasing enslaved people far outweighed its potential costs in a capitalist system that made slavery its most profitable enterprise.²⁵

Besides monetary reasons for violating Black women’s bodies, plantation owners “justified” their assaults of enslaved women based on mythical narratives of Black women’s promiscuity.²⁶ In weaponizing colonial-era logics that regulated women’s sexuality by portraying them as sexual temptresses, white southerners framed white men’s sexual violence against Black women as consensual by blaming enslaved women for “seducing” their enslavers. “From such thinking emerged the stereotype of black women as sexual savages,”²⁷ bell hooks writes, and because white society viewed Black women as sexually “deviant,” “bad,” or as “jezebels,” Black women acquired a status as “unrapable” under hegemonic conceptualizations of “worthy” victimhood.²⁸ Angela Davis furthers: “Viewed as ‘loose’ women and whores, Black women’s cries of rape would necessarily lack legitimacy.”²⁹ Victim-blaming rhetorics rooted in the myth of Black women’s “immoral” sexuality established the societal framework for a barbaric survivor hierarchy—one in which Black women “deserved” sexual violence while white women “deserved” protection from it.³⁰

In the meantime, dominant cultural rhetorics during slavery situated white women as symbols of purity, innocence, and “appropriate” sexuality. White women’s purported chastity provided a necessary baseline for the dehumanization of Black enslaved women, who were forced into sexual activity both with enslavers and with Black enslaved men when plantation owners expected them to bear children. As Patricia Hill Collins points out, the jezebel image of Black women not only reinforced “racial oppression by justifying sexual assaults against Black women,” but it also made “pure White womanhood possible.”³¹ Colonial, Christian attitudes of the 17th and 18th centuries forwarded that both Black and white women were sexually deviant. However, hooks explains that a shift in this logic took place during the 1800s:

The new image of white womanhood was diametrically opposed to the old image. She was depicted as goddess rather than sinner; she was virtuous, pure, innocent, not sexual and worldly. By raising the white female to a goddess-like status, white men effectively removed the stigma Christianity had placed on them. White male idealization of white women as innocent and virtuous served as an act of exorcism, which had as its purpose transforming her image and ridding her of the curse of sexuality.³²

White men’s efforts to uplift white women’s status as symbols of sexual purity coincided with the rise of institutionalized violence against Black women—a time in which white men’s newfound “respect” for white womanhood proliferated everyday discourse,³³ resulting in a redirection of their sexist attitudes toward Black women in the form of sexual assault. Patricia Morton aptly summarizes the hypocrisy undergirding the rhetoric of white women’s so-called purity: “white Southern culture was pervaded by a double standard which prescribed female purity and yet ignored the white man’s sexual exploitation of black women.”³⁴ The myth of white women’s sexual purity was never really about sexual abstinence, or as the Southern euphemism would call it, “the protection of womanhood.” As the movement against Recy Taylor would ultimately argue, Black women were never protected. The figure of the innocent white

woman, by contrast, was a powerful regulatory force that upheld the U.S. racial caste system and excused white supremacist violence.

Sexual Violence from Reconstruction to Recy Taylor

Slavery-era rhetoric that circulated the “bad” Black woman and the “pure” white woman images spurred violence against Black men in the post-emancipation South and the decades that followed, with the myth of the “Black male rapist” acquiring enough ideological force to “justify” the South’s lynching epidemic.³⁵ Dominant constructions of Black men as inherently violent were byproducts of two interrelated, racist myths: 1) Black men’s sexual deviancy stemmed from needs to satisfy promiscuous Black women, and 2) “innocent” white women required protection from Black men’s innate drive to commit sexual violence.³⁶ Accordingly, Angela Davis argues that fraudulent rape accusations against Black men purported to have raped white women comprised “one of the most formidable artifices invented by racism.”³⁷ Lynching was not a common practice during slavery, as it was not profitable for enslavers to murder the enslaved people who were the sources of their financial success. When Black workers began to achieve upward mobility after slavery, however, white southerners intimidated them with lynching—which emerged as an effective strategy for countering the risks Black Americans posed to white businesses and power structures. Davis summarizes that the Black male rapist myth was “methodically conjured up when recurrent waves of violence and terror against the black community required a convincing explanation.”³⁸ Southern Black men rarely assaulted white women, and white women rarely accused Black men of sexual assault. Yet, the rhetoric of white supremacist patriarchy that constructed Black men as a threat to white women’s chastity circulated in monumental proportions, convincing white publics that the brutality of lynching was a necessary defense mechanism for the protection of “pure” white womanhood. Most

lynchings did not even involve alleged instances of sexual violence—a fact “entirely hidden by the blinding power” of the Black male rapist myth.³⁹

In response to institutionalized lynching, anti-lynching activism asserted Black Americans’ right to economic and social equality. Ida B. Wells, for instance, spearheaded the Southern anti-lynching campaign in 1892 after a white Memphis mob lynched three of her friends, all of whom thrived as Black business owners. Under a pen name, Wells founded a newspaper outlet called *The Free Speech*, in which she published the results of her investigative reporting that quantified the extent to which lynchings terrorized southern Black communities.⁴⁰ Wells’s writing compelled thousands of Black southerners to relocate to the North in a massive effort to economically punish white southern businesses, and her anti-lynching rhetoric transformed the white supremacist myth that Black men frequently raped white women by shedding light on how most lynching victims had been guilty of nothing more than achieving financial or political success.⁴¹ Wells’s advocacy also inspired hundreds of additional Black women to fight against lynching and gave the South unwanted, global attention. As historian Paula Giddings remarked:

Wells’s campaign, by undermining the stereotype of Black men, also challenged presumptions of the immorality of Black women. And it was the public defense of the integrity of Black women, by Black women, which opened the way for the next stage of their political development.⁴²

Indeed, Black women’s advocacy against lynching comprised one of the first efforts to link systemic brutality against Black men to sexual politics, as the movement accentuated the hypocrisy of the fact that white men more often assaulted Black women than Black men assaulted white women.⁴³

Critics of the anti-lynching movement, however, claim that because lynching activists focused predominantly on the public horrors of lynching as purportedly the most egregious

manifestation of racism, the racialized sexual violence Black women endured in private spaces has historically been rendered a far less present phenomenon within public discourse. Following slavery, the sexual violence committed against Black women was a pervasive means of drawing out slavery-era stereotypes of Black women's promiscuity. As such, Mikki Kendall describes the grim reality of both the post-war period and the segregated South: "white men could and often did assault [Black women] for sport."⁴⁴ White men routinely attacked Black women and sexually violated them on the job, while they were walking home from work or church, and on public transportation.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, as a problem with "no public name," sexual violence against Black women became a largely backgrounded tragedy while lynching emerged as a mainstream talking point in civil rights circles.⁴⁶ In essence, the spectacle nature of lynching compelled outrage on the part of anti-racist publics—viewed as a far worse form of assault than rape because it was far more perceivable.

While the barbaric nature of lynching and sexual violence makes it difficult to productively compare both crimes, Patricia Hill Collins advises that rape and lynching were "*different* expressions of the *same* type of social control."⁴⁷ In other words, racism and rape culture enforced the same logic: one did not have to directly experience lynching or sexual assault to live in constant fear of such brutal violence. Kimberlé Crenshaw also reports that because white supremacists "justified" the lynching epidemic in the name of white women's protection from rape, Black women's stories of sexual violence were "thought to dramatize racism" and viewed as less of "an assault on the Black community" as a whole.⁴⁸ In light of a culture that expected Black women's silence, movements throughout the 20th century that advocated on behalf of Black sexual violence survivors were thus far less common than anti-lynching organizing. But such advocacy did exist, and it forwarded one of the first efforts to

galvanize mass U.S. public sentiment against racialized sexual violence following the rape of Recy Taylor.

The Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor was formed in response to a drawn-out, dehumanizing Alabama legal process that denied Taylor equal treatment under the law. One month after Taylor's rape, the first Alabama grand jury in the case met on October 3 and 4, 1944, and declined to indict Taylor's perpetrators. Because the police had never arrested Taylor's assailants, the only witnesses present before the all-white, all-male panel of jurors were Taylor's Black relatives and friends, so Taylor's testimony did not compel the white supremacist jury to act. For the remainder of October 1944, Rosa Parks and CEJ activists worked tirelessly to spread the news of the injustice to a broader U.S. audience, and on October 28, 1944, the *Pittsburgh Courier*—the most popular and reputable Black newspaper in the U.S.—ran Taylor's story. Danielle McGuire notes that “The *Courier* article made the rape of Recy Taylor a national example of Southern injustice. It immediately sparked nationwide interest” and received attention in major Black newspapers across the country.⁴⁹

As public outrage proliferated, hundreds of letters, postcards, and petitions protesting Taylor's treatment accumulated in the office of the Alabama governor named Chauncey Sparks. A white supremacist leader who would later sign voter disenfranchisement legislation and become the mentor for the infamous segregationist George Wallace, Sparks realized he needed to squash public pushback. Moreover, given the grim national reputation Alabama acquired 13 years prior during the Scottsboro Boys trial by hastily and falsely convicting nine Black men of raping two white women,⁵⁰ Sparks initiated an investigation of the Taylor case through his Attorney General's office in December 1944. Sparks' investigators then gathered testimony from Taylor and her assailants. During the investigation, all but one of the perpetrators admitted to

having sex with Taylor, with most of them denying the rape charge by stating they had paid her prior to a consensual sexual encounter. At the same time, many of the men's testimonies provided varying depictions of important details, and one perpetrator confessed to the crime by offering testimony nearly identical to Taylor's. Sparks's investigators also discovered local police had lied about the arrest and bail records of the assailants to prevent the case from receiving public attention. One sheriff was even confirmed to have invented stories about Taylor to lessen her credibility, referring to Taylor as "nothing but a whore around Abbeville" and erroneously claiming that he, at the request of the county health officer, had arrested her for carrying a sexually transmitted infection.⁵¹ Considering the investigation results, Danielle McGuire asserted: "With at least one confession and corroborating testimonies among the suspects, not to mention the sheriff's blatant attempt to stuff the entire affair under the carpet, it seemed like a relatively easy case to close. But the all-white, all-male jurors sat stony-faced and silent."⁵² On February 14, 1945, the second grand jury neglected to send the six white rapists to trial. Taylor's case was a permanent legal failure,⁵³ but through the end of 1945, CEJ activists and Taylor's supporters participated in activism that would successfully radicalize the face of anti-sexual violence advocacy.

The Black Press and World War II

When the CEJ began organizing in support of Taylor, it followed a trend in anti-racist activism that harnessed the power of Black newspaper outlets, which comprised what historian Henry Lewis Suggs refers to as "a fighting press" and "a safety valve for boiling black protest."⁵⁴ In a society wherein physical gatherings for Black resistance often drew the threat of mob violence, Black press outlets during the late 19th and early 20th centuries provided an important public medium for circulating and growing anti-racist sentiment. "Across the South, almost

without limitation,” write Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, Black Americans “had access to black weeklies that ridiculed white hypocrisy, spoke out bitterly against racial injustice, reinterpreted the mainstream press, and covered [Black] social and religious organizations in detail.”⁵⁵ The culture of protest in the Black press made a significant difference in its challenge to racialized violence, as historians attribute the early 20th-century decline of lynchings, at least in part, to activism in Black newspapers.⁵⁶

During World War I, however, the Black press confronted a complex paradox. On one hand, Black newspaper editors felt pressure to support the fight for global democracy in a hyper-patriotic wartime culture. On the other, the democratic privileges that the U.S. so adamantly preached about during the war had been grossly denied to Black Americans under segregation. As Jansen Werner summarizes, “This situation ostensibly posed black activists with the following dilemma: support the race at the expense of the country, or support the country at the expense of the race.”⁵⁷ Through rhetorical craft, the Black press discovered a way to do both, using an approach called the “Double V” strategy. A campaign popularized in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, “Double V” discourse claimed that the U.S. must fight for two *victories*: the first over fascism abroad and the second over fascism at home. In doing so, the “Double V” campaign argued that Black Americans could secure social equality if they united around the war effort, and it also convincingly pointed to the hypocrisies of Jim Crow laws in a country fighting to promote global democracy.⁵⁸ Because the “Double V” campaign acquired significant momentum during the world wars, it became what Lee Finkle identified as “the wartime slogan of the black press.”⁵⁹ In newspapers across the country, the “Double V” symbol (VV) appeared in stories that historians estimate could have reached between 3.5 and 6 million Black Americans.⁶⁰

Joining a chorus of Black press protest and a rhetorical pattern of using war rhetoric to make claims against racism, the CEJ acquired much of its political traction from Black newspapers and the World War II fight against fascism. When the *Pittsburgh Courier* initially used the CEJ's reporting to publish Recy Taylor's story, Black press outlets around the U.S. followed suit before white newspapers also began conversations about the atrocious Alabama assault.⁶¹ Horrified by the Taylor tragedy publicized on their front pages, union members, everyday citizens, and Black and white activists alike began their letter-writing crusade to make Governor Chauncey Sparks listen. The broader World War II context informed many—if not most—of the tactics Taylor's advocates used in their communication with Sparks. They, too, questioned the intentions of U.S. democracy-building abroad under the premise that both the rape of Recy Taylor and the subsequent legal treatment she endured undermined democratic structures. By framing the sexual violence against Taylor as an assault on U.S. democracy and its citizenry, I argue that letter writers used citizenship discourses to prop up Taylor as a legible victim of sexual violence.

Rhetorics of Citizenship

Rhetorical scholars' theorization of "citizenship" conceptualizes this phenomenon beyond a mere legal classification and more in terms of how people use discourse to find belonging despite exclusionary logics. Robert Asen's "discourse theory of citizenship" pushes scholars away from considering questions about "what counts" as citizenship (e.g., a U.S. birth certificate), inviting additional grappling with what he calls "the *how* of citizenship," or the ways in which people perform citizenship through discourse.⁶² Even though a discursive conceptualization of citizenship recognizes that "citizen" is a socially constructed rather than a predetermined category, hegemonic structures forward normative logics of citizenship that

preclude many marginalized people from “ideal” citizenship practices. Because the figure of the “ideal” U.S. citizen indexes whiteness, masculinity, and heterosexuality, a significant body of contemporary rhetorical scholarship explores how oppressed people use public communication to claim a sense of citizenship—whether through formal legal petitioning or informal community-building.⁶³ Noting the pervasive reach of citizenship literature within rhetorical studies, Karma Chávez states that “Rhetoric scholars are concerned almost exclusively with citizen discourses...”⁶⁴ In summary, Chávez’s work sheds light on how the history of rhetorical studies can be viewed as a citizenship narrative that documents states’ discursive restrictions of civil rights and marginalized people’s rhetorical strategies for claiming citizenship status amidst state-sponsored constraints.

Rhetoric’s preoccupation with citizenship has caused controversy surrounding both the drawbacks and benefits of centering citizenship discourses in protest scholarship. On one hand, some rhetorical researchers understand citizenship rhetoric as “intrinsically poisonous,”⁶⁵ given that glorifying citizenship means supporting a “a framework that cannot be divorced from its connection to state surveillance and control,” or by extension, carceral politics.⁶⁶ Put differently, appeals to citizenship support a problematic inclusionary politics that adds seats to an oppressive table rather than adopting an abolitionist paradigm or building a new table with no normative standards for who can sit down.⁶⁷ On the other hand, additional rhetorical scholars have viewed appeals to citizenship as necessary for securing material rights and belonging amidst systemic oppression. Isaac West, for example, asserts that “the predisposition to dismiss the exercise of citizenship as necessarily normative needs to be revisited,” maintaining that productive protest can emerge from the appropriation and imitation of citizenship rhetoric.⁶⁸ Most rhetoricians, much like West, acknowledge the extent to which citizenship discourses can reify exclusionary

ideological commitments, but some do so while identifying ways that social movements co-opt nationalist scripts often endemic to citizenship rhetoric. Citizenship discourse, thus, is often neither wholly oppressive nor subversive.⁶⁹

By studying the productive rhetorical features of CEJ's campaign for Recy Taylor and the letter writers who petitioned Governor Sparks to grant Taylor justice, my analysis runs the risk of reifying letter writers' nationalism, given that Taylor's supporters undoubtedly produced arguments appealing to Taylor's rights as a U.S. citizen and routinely glorified the U.S.'s purported democratic values. In doing so, my purpose is not to dispute the well-supported claims of rhetorical scholars who have underscored the harmful consequences of citizenship rhetoric.⁷⁰ Rather, my investigation of activism for Recy Taylor offers a contextually-informed analysis of anti-sexual violence activists in the 1940s, who because of their embeddedness in perhaps the most patriotic culture of the U.S. past, defaulted to citizenship argumentation not just as *a* rhetorical resource, but as perhaps *the* only rhetorical resource available while hundreds of thousands of U.S. soldiers were dying during the bloodiest war in global history. Moreover, this chapter follows the wisdom of Black feminist scholars Brittany Pearl Battle and Amber Joy Powell, who maintain that people "do not necessarily" have "to use the language of carceral or abolition feminism" to promote abolitionist feminist logics.⁷¹ To strike a balance between fully endorsing or criticizing citizenship discourses in efforts to underscore the justice movement's advocacy for non-state solutions to sexual violence, I avoid providing prescriptions about how anti-sexual violence activists can leverage nationalism in contemporary contexts (as they definitively should not), and I do not aim to celebrate citizenship as a sustainable rhetorical appeal in modern anti-sexual violence activism. My analysis instead spotlights how letter writers' appeals to citizenship and their appropriation of nationalist rhetoric generated discourses

of radical belief that possess a powerful potential to transcend temporal and contextual boundaries and effectively challenge rape culture today. By demonstrating how Taylor's activists used citizenship discourses to engage in rhetorics of radical belief, I speak to their unprecedented transformation of a working-class Black woman from rural Alabama into a legible victim of sexual violence and a national symbol of the brutality exhibited by U.S. white supremacist and patriarchal structures.

Rhetorics of Radical Belief

While contemporary connotations of the term “belief” maintain the essence of one of the word's original roots—“to hold dear, esteem, trust”—another root that defined early uses of “belief” meant “to care, desire, love.”⁷² The 12th-century association of “belief” with a person's “esteem” and “trust” made for a natural transition to more current uses of the term, which understand “belief” as “a state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing.”⁷³ Notions of “care,” “desire,” and “love,” however, remain relatively disconnected from uses of “belief” in everyday language. In essence, “belief” has lost its empathetic roots. The problem with “belief” and its etymological attachment to “trust” is that “trust” derives its meaning from the phrase: “reliance on veracity.”⁷⁴ In other words, “trust” is about truth and credibility. Relatedly, whether society chooses to believe survivors frequently boils down to whether its privileged members view a person's commentary as truthful or credible.

“Belief” has attained ideographic status in anti-sexual violence advocacy. To counter hegemonic, victim-blaming discourses that refuse to believe survivors,⁷⁵ people who work on rape-crisis hotlines and in sexual violence advocacy centers are often trained to respond to sexual violence disclosures with the phrase, “I believe you.” Furthermore, the “Believe Women”

movement emerged in 2018 as an extension of the Me Too hashtag, which encouraged widespread belief in survivors' accusations of sexual violence. Yet, the term "belief" and its implications regarding truth and credibility are often weaponized against survivors in U.S. courts of law. While the presumption of innocence is not a rule written into the U.S. Constitution, its recognition as a due process right in numerous Supreme Court cases has popularized a rhetoric of "innocent until proven guilty"—one that Leland Spencer argues is uniquely harmful to sexual violence survivors. Spencer does not maintain that the presumption of innocence is universally problematic, given that the rule makes logical sense in cases involving most types of crimes.⁷⁶ Yet, he does point out the paradoxical fact that the legal system masquerades as impartial while the "innocent until proven guilty" rule forwards a default logic that perpetrators should be believed and that survivors, therefore, are unworthy of belief.⁷⁷ As Clint Graves and Leland Spencer summarize in additional work: "Ironically this standard usually means that people who report violence find themselves presumed guilty of lying until they are proven innocent."⁷⁸

The presumption of innocence further devastates survivors because proving a perpetrator's guilt is nearly impossible. Stephanie Larson highlights that even in contemporary instances of rape when sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) exams indicate physical violence, perpetrators can still claim in court that a sexual encounter was consensual.⁷⁹ Sexual violence is thus framed as primarily discursive—rather than primarily material—in a society that imbues white men's discourse with rhetorical power. This logic pits the words of perpetrators who receive the law's benefit of belief against the words of survivors who, because they are more likely to be women, are stereotyped as incapable of participating in rational or, by extension, trustworthy, credible, *believable* discourse.⁸⁰

Black women survivors have always confronted compounded credibility crises within the U.S. legal system, given pervasive myths of Black female promiscuity that became institutionalized during slavery.⁸¹ Narratives of Recy Taylor’s purported sexual deviancy and two all-white, all-male panels’ strong presumption of innocence for her perpetrators—a presumption so strong that a confession from one of Taylor’s rapists did not function as proof of his guilt—rendered a legal victory an impossibility for Taylor. Although the justice movement often asked the Alabama governor to give Taylor a fair trial, the majority did so through clear expressions of doubt in Alabama’s “justice” system. Because many letter writers possessed a keen awareness of the legal system’s futility in Taylor’s case, rather than merely advocating that Taylor was worthy of carceral justice, activists argued that she was worthy of something else: *belief*.

Yet, for those who participated in the justice movement for Recy Taylor, belief was less about trust, truth, or credibility. Taylor’s activists certainly expressed that they trusted Taylor was telling the truth and that she was a credible witness to the crimes committed against her, but their belief was more radical than conventional, contemporary definitions of the term might imply. In mentioning the notion of “radical belief” in passing, Theresa Kulbaga and Leland Spencer assert that survivors should be given an *a priori* sense of credibility in discourses about sexual violence.⁸² Elaborating upon this idea, Graves’s and Spencer’s later work briefly offers some definitional clarity to the phrase, suggesting that radical belief involves “reasoned trust in the account of a person who reports experiencing violence,” adding that while radical belief does not “take that account as ‘truth,’” it does “extend to that person an epistemic privilege otherwise necessarily eroded by the normatively entrenched discourses of rape culture.”⁸³ In other words, the few works of rhetorical scholarship that address radical belief theorize it as a small shift on

our pendulum of trust. Instead of defaulting to a belief in perpetrators, so this logic goes, we should cultivate a more neutral cultural understanding of sexual violence that views survivors as having *more potential* to be believed, rather than *no potential* to be believed. While existing conceptualizations of radical belief undoubtedly make for productive challenges to rape culture rhetorics, they do so in ways that center trust and credibility as preconditions for belief—presenting dangers for Black victims who are already widely perceived as incapable of articulating the truth. Arguably, then, “radical belief” as we now know it falls short of fully “radical” alternatives to sexual violence discourse.⁸⁴

My chapter thus proposes a re-radicalization of radical belief—one that pushes us beyond established notions of *belief-as-trust* and advocates for a framework that ties “belief” back to its empathetic roots: *belief-as-care*. As the first feminist scholar to theorize care ethics, Carol Gilligan defined logics of care in opposition to logics of justice, articulating that “While an ethic of justice proceeds from the premise of equality—that everyone should be treated the same—an ethic of care rests on the premise of nonviolence—that no one should be hurt.”⁸⁵ Accordingly, ethics of justice accentuate the significance of an individual’s access to fair treatment, but care ethics emphasize the importance of relationality, collectivity, and the interdependence of people that should compel us to care for one another, maintaining that “the incidence of violence is in the end destructive to all, so the activity of care enhances both others and the self.”⁸⁶ Feminist theorists have worked to reconcile the dichotomy between care and justice ethics by declaring that both logics are not mutually exclusive,⁸⁷ and my analysis of advocacy on Taylor’s behalf supports these claims, given that activists directly deploy the term “justice” while also participating a discourse that fundamentally cares about the relationship between Taylor’s assault and broader tolerance for sexual violence in democratic communities. Although the letter

writers' promotion of justice is an obvious component of their rhetoric, my chapter sheds light on a more covert discursive mechanism by which activists' radical belief in Taylor emerges from logics of care and collective responsibility.

Feminist rhetorical scholars have long asserted that beyond *ethics* of care, *rhetorics* of care can promote productive connections among people, places, and things.⁸⁸ Within such literature, care rhetorics are generally conceptualized in one of three ways: 1) as strategies of rhetors, 2) in a way where rhetoric in itself is considered a form of care, and 3) as an orientation of rhetorical critics. First, Olga Idris Davis illuminates how for enslaved Black women, “the creation of food was a rhetorical act of nurturance and care, creative genius, and survival.”⁸⁹ Care thus functions as a rhetorical means of creating connection amidst systemic oppression and violence. Second, Joshua Trey Barnett understands rhetoric in and of itself as care.⁹⁰ Drawing upon Thomas Farrell's definition of rhetoric—“the art, the fine and useful art of making things matter”⁹¹—Barnett claims that rhetoric is “*a fundamental mode of care*” because in striving to give particular topics weight or attention, rhetoric urges audiences to “care *about* or *for*” someone or something.⁹² Third, care can also operate as an analytical orientation that critics take up when evaluating rhetorical texts.⁹³ Kelly Pender articulates that a care-oriented approach to rhetorical criticism emerges from a “willingness to acknowledge where [rhetorics] are lacking... but then to ask *What can we do with them? Where in these rhetorics is there a potential starting place for a rhetoric of care?*”⁹⁴ In essence, care can also mean giving texts the benefit of the doubt in efforts to create *better*—not *perfect*—rhetorics.⁹⁵

All three conceptualizations of care rhetoric are relevant to my analysis of the justice movement for Recy Taylor. Moreover, as a discursive strategy, care operates as a rhetorical expression of concern for Taylor and her interconnectedness with others who are most likely to

be impacted by sexual violence. Next, care emerged through letter writers' amplification—through a rhetoric designed to make a multitude of people care for Taylor. Finally, my approach to assessing the justice movement's discourse also participates in a rhetoric of care—a process in which I look beside the rhetors' appeals to patriotism and U.S. nationalism in efforts to consider how activists' support for Taylor promotes a unique form of radical belief progressively ahead of the many white feminist rhetorical efforts that followed.

An orientation toward care gives “belief” its radical edge. Rhetorics of radical belief, as I theorize them, declare belief in survivors' claims of violence not solely based upon evaluations of one's trustworthiness or credibility, but on the logics that 1) belief expresses care, 2) a person who claims they have been violated deserves a fundamental right to be cared for, regardless of their “trustworthiness,” and 3) acts of belief, regardless of an accuser's individual credibility, promote collective good and thus, demand collective care. By refusing dependence upon vague notions of individual credibility that dismiss Black women as unrapable, “unworthy” survivors, rhetorics of radical belief subvert victimhood hierarchies. In theorizing rhetorics of radical belief, I show how justice movement activists leveraged citizenship discourses to position Recy Taylor as a legible victim of sexual violence. As I argue, the letter writers' rhetoric, in appealing to democratic values, asserts that Taylor, Black women, and all survivors deserve rights to public care—despite widespread, racist stereotypes of the era that may have otherwise compromised Black women's credibility, trustworthiness, or *believability*. Ultimately, the discourses of the justice movement for Recy Taylor offer a productive example of how rhetorics of radical belief grounded in logics of care disrupt dominant, racist logics endemic to rape culture.

Recy Taylor: A Legible Victim Deserving of Radical Belief

Justice movement members transformed Recy Taylor into a legible victim by revealing the relationships among Taylor's assault, racialized sexual violence, and U.S. democratic values. The justice movement's rhetorical efforts to garner support for Taylor consisted of four broad discursive strategies: 1) framing Taylor's assault as compromising the war effort, 2) situating Taylor as a "good" democratic citizen, 3) attributing Taylor's assault to histories of failed democracy, and 4) forwarding that democratic communities—rather than oppressive legal systems—possessed solutions to racialized sexual violence. In the four subsections that follow, I proceed by first, defining the above discursive strategies, and second, explaining how letter writers' care-oriented rhetoric of radical belief used each of the four rhetorical moves to transform Taylor into a legible victim of sexual violence.

Recy Taylor's Assault: Compromising the War Effort

Activists involved with the justice movement for Recy Taylor asserted that Taylor's assault and the Alabama legal system's racist response compromised the U.S.'s World War II fight for democracy, bolstering Taylor's legibility as a victim by situating her treatment as antithetical to U.S. democratic values. To do so, letter writers associated sexual violence with Nazi behavior, compared delayed legal action in the Taylor case to fascist governmental systems, argued that U.S. war efforts demanded strong ethical commitments from U.S. citizens, and maintained that the rape of Recy Taylor posed hazards for global democracy. Because of a hyper-patriotic World War II culture and an American public universally passionate about upholding democracy, letter writers' rhetoric about Recy Taylor—much like Black activists' "Double V" strategy—used the wartime context as leverage to challenge the hypocritical logics of white supremacist culture.⁹⁶ As such, justice movement activists made their fight on Taylor's

behalf part of a global battle for basic rights conferred upon democratic citizens, taking Taylor's believability for granted to discourage undemocratic acts of violence that would harm additional U.S. citizens and the war effort. Such discourse forwarded a rhetoric of radical belief—one that participated in a paradigm of care because it prioritized human interdependence, revealing how the broader U.S. citizenry's access to democratic rights was contingent upon Alabama's handling of Taylor's case.

In declaring that committing rape was a form of Nazi violence, justice movement activists asserted that the men who assaulted Taylor were un-American. Recy Taylor, by contrast, emerged as a legible survivor of sexual violence because she had been victimized by men who mimicked the ultimate villain of U.S. culture: Adolf Hitler. In reference to Taylor's attackers, one anonymous letter writer remarked that "Hitler himself with all of his genius for human torture could think of no penalty adequate to the status of this unspeakable, this sordid, this odorous crime of these brutes."⁹⁷ Another activist noted that "the deed," or in other words, the rape of Recy Taylor, "was one of the most horrible I have read of including the war atrocities..."⁹⁸ According to these letter writers' standards, sexual violence is motivated by the same kind of cruelty necessary for perpetrating genocide in undemocratic nations. During the world wars, civil rights activism was unpopular. "To the dominant white culture," Jansen Werner reports, "black civil rights activism signaled a disruption of wartime unity."⁹⁹ Paradoxically, Recy Taylor activists framed the World War II fight for democracy and activism on Taylor's behalf not as divisive, but as complementary goals.

Other activists warned Sparks of his potential to sponsor Nazi-like behavior through mishandling of the Taylor case. Leo Fenster demanded of the governor: "This crime, whose abominable features belong rather in Hitler's Germany than in our own United States, should be

punished with the full weight of the law.”¹⁰⁰ Another writer cautioned: “You have a deep responsibility to all Americans in this war; what do our allies think of Hitlerite hoodlumism going on in an American state against a woman who belongs to a group who have never gotten a square deal in 300 years?”¹⁰¹ Here, both activists framed the governor’s indifference toward Taylor as a form of racist “punching down” in a country that loudly proclaimed its commitments to uplifting international democracy. In light of the “hoodlumism” that characterized Taylor’s treatment, she symbolized a viable victim of sexual violence—one who obtained increased believability in the face of men whose ethics rivaled the moral emptiness of a global dictator.

In addition to correlating the sexual violence against Taylor to Nazism, letter writers argued that Taylor’s treatment under Alabama state law reflected fascist principles within U.S. culture. Opposing Taylor, therefore, meant supporting the ideological mission of the Axis alliance and signified one’s complicity in assisting anti-democratic war enemies. Taylor thus stood as a legible victim because believing her was a necessary condition for U.S. citizens to claim their allegiance to the U.S. military. Activist Julius Crane, for instance, asserted that to fail Recy Taylor during the legal process was to place Alabama “on Hitler’s list as a possible post war refuge” and “to betray every principle we are fighting for, and give aid and comfort to our enemies.”¹⁰² Accordingly, one’s refusal to believe Taylor ensured one’s status as a war traitor. Likewise, a letter from the 21st Congressional District Non-Partisan Committee referenced Taylor’s assault by lamenting: “What material for Axis propaganda experts! They are trying their best to drive wedges between sections of our people. They are delighted to show that we do not live by the principles that we proclaim.”¹⁰³ Letter writers, in essence, posed that fascist governments were looking to the U.S. in efforts to legitimize their own brutality.

In the name of ending fascism and the sexual violence it enables, the justice movement leveraged wartime anxieties about authoritarianism by imagining Axis governments as mirror images of the U.S. As activist Muriel Santilli remarked: “While our boys on the battlefields are fighting to see that Fascism is wiped out, the seed of Fascism must not be allowed to become fertile and grown on our own native soil.”¹⁰⁴ A pamphlet written by CEJ executive members furthered: “The boys lined up against Hitlerism must know that their wives, their sweethearts, their sisters, their mothers [cannot] be mistreated with impunity as was Mrs. Taylor. They must know that those they love are secure and safe in a democratic America.”¹⁰⁵ Organizing on Taylor’s behalf, therefore, was a strategy to remove fascist cultural roots from a nation purportedly invested in the cause of global democracy. The activists’ critique of fascism and its potential to thrive in the U.S. ultimately ignored questions of Taylor’s credibility in favor of preserving U.S. democratic values that a failed indictment would have inevitably sacrificed.

Additionally, by operating under the assumption that the rape of Recy Taylor was an act of racial discrimination, activists evoked the deaths of U.S. soldiers to argue that mass loss of life demanded racial equality in the U.S. In essence, the credibility of Taylor meant less to letter writers than did the assurance that all U.S. citizens deserved care as a gesture of gratitude toward deceased World War II fighters. One anonymous writer who self-identified as “An [Angry] American Citizen” expressed: “We are fighting a war so that all people can enjoy protection and justice—regardless of the color they may be—soldiers are not fighting & dying so that their [wives] are unsafe from other Americans.”¹⁰⁶ Writing on behalf of a transport workers’ union, several other activists argued: “The least we can do for our servicemen and women is to assure them that while they are fighting our country’s battles against sinister powers, fighting against enemies who encourage and condone the type of thing that was perpetrated against Mrs. Taylor,

[their] families back home are safe.”¹⁰⁷ By these logics, wartime sacrifices for the preservation of democracy necessitated that all U.S. citizens be cared for by the democratic right of safety.

To assert Taylor’s place as a legible victim of violence, many letter writers also stressed that Black soldiers had carried a heavy proportion of the U.S.’s war effort. Throughout World War II, “rhetorical appeals for national unity” had stymied Black activism, deeming civil rights advocacy a distraction from what really mattered to white America.¹⁰⁸ Nevertheless, Taylor’s advocates emphasized Black men’s war labor to show how justice for Recy Taylor would advance the war’s cause. Activist Shaemas O’Sheel described the Black men who had fought abroad as “sturdy, intelligent, and proud of their Americanism. They have earned the right to the full stature of citizenship for themselves and their womenfolk and children.”¹⁰⁹ Organizers in support of Taylor thus sought Governor Sparks’s approval by maintaining that Black U.S. soldiers had fought valiantly, too, and that they had died in vain if any Black U.S. citizens would be denied democratic rights in a post-war period. Another justice movement member expressed that “In interest of the Negro Soldiers [who] are war workers now fighting for their country¹¹⁰—after this disgraceful episode they have every reason to wonder—what am I fighting for, anyway?”¹¹¹ Despite Taylor’s Blackness and womanhood, the justice movement capitalized on the World War II global fight for democracy to deem Taylor a human worthy of the same rights guaranteed to all U.S. citizens. In doing so, activists spotlighted how the respective brutal experiences that both Taylor faced at home and that Black U.S. soldiers faced abroad were interconnected because they both involved gruesome acts of fascist violence. As such, activists promoted a broad anti-violence rhetoric that believed Taylor on the principle that society must respond to violence with care and empathy regardless of one’s credibility.

To place pressure on Sparks, letter writers also frequently referenced the legal injustice during the Taylor case to emphasize the credibility crisis faced by both the State of Alabama and the broader U.S. during the World War II period. Such rhetoric transformed Recy Taylor into a believable victim by placing the American people's morals *in question* should *they question* Taylor's credibility. To do so, letter writers accentuated the fact that the crime committed against Recy Taylor had reached a large audience. As Ethel C. McBee expressed, "I have read a great deal about the case of Mrs. Recy Taylor... and I feel very strongly that Alabama is on trial before the world."¹¹² Another writer supported McBee's suspicion, arguing that the injustice directed at Taylor "is a disgrace to Alabama, a disgrace to the entire nation, and a disgrace to all the world at large which calls itself civilized."¹¹³ Implicating all people with privilege in the dehumanization of Taylor, this line of logic thwarts individualistic narratives of sexual violence by inviting a sense of collective guilt and a community-oriented responsibility for Taylor's care.¹¹⁴ Additional letter writers directly confronted the U.S.'s hypocrisy as a source of its potential post-war downfall. For instance, Alice Lightner wrote: "We can hardly pose as the liberator of the oppressed [throughout] the world... Such a pose will appear extremely ironic, if we allow the same injustice we have been fighting to flourish in our own back-yard."¹¹⁵ By calling attention to the irony of U.S. claims to social justice, Taylor's activists empowered Sparks to provide solutions to racialized sexual violence and to build a better, more caring global image of the U.S. upon its defeat of fascist governments.

World War II rhetorics surrounding Taylor centered her interconnectedness with the larger citizenry's access to democratic rights in a way that refused questions of believability often inherent to rape culture discourses.¹¹⁶ While rape culture rhetoric and evaluations of a victim's credibility typically make inquiries about survivors' character before discussing

mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable, justice movement rhetors skipped this initial, routinized script by posing that a failure to support Taylor or to punish her perpetrators would implicate the U.S. as a callous nation—one that loudly self-congratulated its democratic values and its fight in World War II while hypocritically denying all its citizens equal care. Such discourses forwarded a rhetoric of radical belief—one that in skirting questions of believability in the first place, took Taylor’s truth as a given and asserted her rights to democratic justice based on the fundamental presumption that to care for Taylor was to care for all U.S. citizens.

Recy Taylor: A “Good” American Citizen

The justice movement also mobilized the ideological power of citizenship discourses to frame Recy Taylor as a true democratic citizen. Because such rhetoric established Taylor’s citizenship status in a society that viewed Black women as un-citizen, this second rhetorical strategy drew upon Taylor’s Americanness both as a plea for Black women’s citizenship and to claim Taylor’s “worthiness” as a victim. Providing a fitting summary of this logic, one writer wrote that “Mrs. Recy Taylor is a Negro woman but she is not just a Negro woman. She is a good American citizen living in the U.S.A. and a native of Alabama and therefore is entitled to proper protection under Alabama law.”¹¹⁷ Activists’ leveraging of citizenship appeals depended upon a discourse that foregrounded Taylor’s innate humanity as a warrant for fair treatment—one that in using citizenship appeals to bestow Taylor with a sense of personhood, made several rhetorically important moves: situating Blackness as an acceptable criterion for victimhood, emphasizing that womanhood qualified Taylor for protection, depicting Taylor’s rape as beyond the boundaries of human imagination, and centering personhood as a foundational criterion for legible victimhood. Such discourse disrupted racialized survivor hierarchies that had historically

been weaponized against Black women who shared their stories of sexual violence, ¹¹⁸ upholding the logic that one's humanity alone qualified a victim for care.

To challenge cultural stereotypes that viewed Blackness as antithetical to victimhood, Taylor's activists contrasted white and Black victims' treatment in ways that unmasked the senselessness behind the disproportionate dismissal of Black women. Eugene Henderson, for instance, posed a question unanswerable by anything other than racism: "Why isn't Negro womanhood as sacred as white womanhood?" Henderson elaborated that upon returning from military work at sea, his morale sunk when he heard "that a woman of my race [had] been brutally raped by six white men and nothing done about it. If the woman involved had been white and her rapists [colored], the whole state of Alabama would be in an uproar if they were not immediately sentenced to death or—lynched!"¹¹⁹ Henderson's definitive declaration that white women's accusations would be taken seriously revealed that within the South's "protect womanhood" rhetoric, the term "woman" exclusively indexed white womanhood.¹²⁰ One communist club similarly remarked: "Were the situation reversed and a white woman the victim I do not have to remind you how swiftly and surely the wheels of Alabama 'justice' would turn."¹²¹ The letter writers' unprecedented support for Taylor directly confronted rape culture by refusing to buy into stereotypes of Black women's supposed promiscuity and untrustworthiness.¹²² Rather than viewing sexual violence as a logical response to Black women's purportedly "deviant" sexuality, movement members drew attention to the hypocrisy of a legal system that reveled in its racist degradation of Black women, using irony to render white supremacist victimhood hierarchies illogical.

Letter writers bolstered Taylor's claims to legible victimhood by conceptualizing her rape—and the broad phenomenon of sexual violence—as an inherently-raced, rather than a

strictly-gendered crime. As Marie J. Reed summarized: “In view of the South’s well-known interest in protecting American womanhood, we can only understand this miscarriage of Alabama law as an example of race prejudice.”¹²³ Justice movement letter writers ultimately framed sexual violence as a weapon of racial terror against Black U.S. citizens, opposing white supremacist logics that made Blackness an exclusionary criterion for “worthy” victimhood. Another activist furthered, “All through the South it has been the claim, and often the boast, that womanhood would be protected. [It] will be stamped to the whole world as hypocrites if they refuse to punish those of their own race who violated the womanhood of a defenseless Negro woman.”¹²⁴ Operating under the assumption that motivations for rape were racialized, activists supported the logic that personhood on its own—outside of a person’s credibility mediated by race—qualified humans as deserving of compassion following experiences of sexual violence.

To collapse survivor hierarchies, other activists supported Taylor by forwarding that her Blackness made her especially worthy of full citizenship in a democratic society. Nearly three dozen U.S. soldiers fighting in Belgium signed a letter to Sparks indicating that the degradation of Black womanhood would pose heightened hazards for preventing the rise of fascism in the U.S. They wrote:

The fact that Mrs. Taylor is a Negro makes the matter doubly important. Before Hitler could lead the German nation back to savagery—and train them as the butchers and torturers of the peoples of Europe and American prisoners of war—he first had to create a special class of Germans, outside the protection of the law and the rights of citizens. He did it by building upon the already existing prejudice against Jews and Communists. Under the republic the Nazi gangsters roamed the streets, attacking all who opposed them as Jews or Communists or their agents. They were not brought to court for these crimes against ‘inferior Germans’; on the occasions when they were, they escaped with little or no punishment. . . . If the men accused of this assault upon a Negro woman in Alabama are not indicted and tried, that will encourage every enemy of democracy. . . . to organize further violence against the Negro. . . .¹²⁵

In essence, racism was an “enemy of democracy,” and Recy Taylor—a subject of racist, undemocratic treatment—emerged as an extra “worthy” victim whose access to justice determined the health of the U.S.’s democratic system. Other writers further expressed: “The question in Mrs. Taylor’s case is not merely one of justice to an individual. An attack such as this one by six white men upon a Negro woman represents the fascist way of thinking that the rights of the Negro need not be respected by a white man.”¹²⁶ Under such logic, Taylor’s fair treatment as a sexual violence victim became a necessary condition for broader cultural support of Black Americans’ civil rights and freedom from violence. This declaration of Taylor’s membership within a broader democratic community conferred upon her a sense of humanity that transformed her into a legible survivor. The justice movement’s efforts to humanize Taylor through citizenship appeals rendered questions of Taylor’s believability obsolete; because writers recognized Taylor as a human and a member of their communities, they viewed her as worthy of care regardless of her purported credibility.

Additionally, justice movement letter writers appealed to Taylor’s womanhood as a criterion that made her a viable victim deserving of protection in a democratic society. Calling attention to the South’s hypocritical prioritization of white survivors, two women addressed Governor Sparks: “In the interest of decency & democracy we support you in your fight against corruption of all womanhood, regardless of race, creed, color or national origin.”¹²⁷ While feminist movements throughout history have often participated in an “all women” rhetoric that redirects attention away from racial difference to center gender as a more primary source of oppression,¹²⁸ justice movement activists engaged in an inverted “all women” discourse. Moreover, by drawing upon patriarchal logics that make chastity a precondition for “good” womanhood, activists paradoxically challenged racist Southern logics to position Black women

as women, too. As activist Shirley Norris simply stated of Recy Taylor in her inclusive “all women” rhetoric: “She is a woman. She is an American citizen. She deserves the protection of your State and its laws.”¹²⁹ Another writer stressed that women in a democratic nation deserved a basic sense of safety, noting: “I have been following the Recy Taylor case, which I consider to be a disgrace to our country. If it is possible for such an action to take place against a helpless colored woman then no decent woman can consider herself safe.”¹³⁰ In this vein, Recy Taylor emerges as a “good” woman—one who did not fulfill stereotypes of Black female promiscuity used to lessen Black victims’ credibility. Rhetors thus imbued Taylor with an added humanity that demanded Alabama’s respect for her experiences.

In framing the rape of Taylor as beyond the bounds of human imagination, justice movement activists emphasized the inhumanity of the men who sexually assaulted her, elevating Taylor’s status. Referring to Taylor’s rape as “brutal cannibalism,” the Secretary of the National U.S.A. Freedman’s Aid Bureau wrote that “the crime is beyond the realm of the human, the animal, the vegetable, and mineral kingdoms.”¹³¹ A dozen letter writers on the Alabama Committee for Equal Justice (ACEJ)¹³² additionally referenced the rape as a “monstrous act” by white men who knew “they would ‘get away with it’ because their miserable skins were white and hers black.”¹³³ Other activists declared that “the beasts who did this atrocious thing must pay for their crime...,”¹³⁴ or that “[we] have sunk to the level of the Nazi ape-man.”¹³⁵ In establishing Taylor’s perpetrators as cannibalistic, both animalistic and sub-animalistic, monstrous, miserable, and bestial, justice movement activists described the perpetrators as inhuman. This removal of the rapists’ personhood, by extension, undermined their worthiness as U.S. citizens. In contrast to her attackers, Taylor symbolized a “good” American, who the ACEJ argued was entitled to “general rights” given that she and other Black Americans did “all the many things

that are demanded of citizens, regardless of race, color or creed.”¹³⁶ Because Taylor performed “good” citizenship, she obtained a sense of believability unrelated to racial hierarchies, but instead, grounded in concern for the fact that non-human, non-citizen actors brutalized her.

Lastly, justice movement writers expressed their affective investments in Taylor’s case, forwarding a rhetoric of radical belief based on a shared point of connection as fellow U.S. citizens. Writer Melvin R. Rubin, for instance, expressed that although “It’s impossible for me to feel the fear, horror, and the humiliation that the [defenseless] Mrs. Taylor experienced,” her story “moved me so much I felt it my duty as a citizen of a country that professes equal rights for everyone.”¹³⁷ As such, Rubin understood his letter to Sparks as both an ethical and democratic responsibility. Hegemonic sexual violence discourses often operate through dehumanization, questioning the personhood of survivors.¹³⁸ Yet in this instance, Rubin’s rhetoric also stressed that Taylor was capable of feeling—an innately human quality that compelled activism on her behalf. Another activist furthered that upon reading of Mrs. Taylor’s case, that “This, Governor, I can readily assent, is the most humiliating article yet to come to my attention. The justice shown by your state in permitting [six] criminals to be at large is the most deplorable, in consideration of the splendid character, Ecclesiastical culture, and dignity possessed by this woman.”¹³⁹ In essence, the empathy that this letter writer felt in response to Taylor’s case stemmed from respect for Taylor’s personhood and a belief that Taylor deserved dignified, caring treatment.

For other justice movement members, shared womanhood with Taylor propelled them to express solidarity. Charlotte Ormond wrote to Sparks: “You may wonder why a woman in Michigan writes to you in Alabama. It is to urge you to see that Mrs. Recy Taylor receives the same justice that any woman has right to expect from her government.”¹⁴⁰ Georgia Benjamin

added: “As an American citizen Mrs. Taylor, a negro, is entitled to as prompt and unprejudiced justice as am I, a white woman, also of the South.”¹⁴¹ Both women activists imbued Taylor with a sense of citizens’ agency, framing her as having rights to possess “expectations” and “entitlements” under U.S. law. Such discourse, in humanizing Taylor because of her shared womanhood status, legitimized Taylor’s legibility as a victim.

Implicit in the justice movement’s rhetoric was the notion that citizenship grants people personhood and access to legible victimhood when they need it. In essence, within activists’ discourses, citizenship and logics surrounding what it means to be a “good” human became conflated in ways that—although potentially problematic by contemporary standards—generated a public position that Taylor deserved an *a priori* sense of belief because her Americanness made her believable. Put differently, Taylor’s status as a U.S. citizen negated typical, racist impulses to dismiss victims based on cultural stereotypes of promiscuity. Activists radically believed Taylor because her citizenship among members of a democratic community—and the humanity that emerged from her citizenship—necessitated that Taylor be radically believed.

Sexual Violence and U.S. Democratic Failures

Participants in the justice movement used a third broad rhetorical strategy to support Recy Taylor: depicting Taylor’s assault as an outcome of the U.S. democracy’s racist, systemic shortcomings. To do so, Taylor’s activists deployed a critique of broad systemic oppression while underscoring the unique experiences confronted by Black survivors, forwarding networked rhetorics that V. Jo Hsu argues function “as a method of situating individual voices within state and global configurations of power.”¹⁴² Moreover, movement rhetors conceptualized the rape of Taylor as inextricably intertwined with U.S. histories of racialized and gendered brutality, creating a synecdochical relationship between Taylor and the U.S.’s institutionalized white

supremacist patriarchy. In doing so, they challenged hegemonic, temporally-isolated depictions of sexual violence by framing Taylor's rape as rooted in historical racism yet crucial to the U.S.'s future democratic prospects. Such discourse advanced a logic of care by claiming that U.S. citizens are inescapably bound to historical instances of racialized sexual violence and that consequently, Americans share a collective responsibility for transforming cultural logics that degrade Black women.

To align the injustice committed against Taylor with systemic U.S. racism throughout U.S. history, letter writers leveraged Alabama's threatened reputation by evoking the Scottsboro Boys trial—an Alabama tragedy in which nine Black men were convicted of raping two white women in 1931. The case's outcome was based on little evidence and a hasty legal process that left the defendants a few days to secure a lawyer without the hope of obtaining adequate legal counsel. The Scottsboro Boys acquired national attention given their appeals to the U.S. Supreme Court in *Powell v. Alabama*, a landmark case that ruled in the Scottsboro Boys' favor by asserting the Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process Clause granted defendants reasonable time and opportunity to obtain legal representation.¹⁴³

In comparing Alabama's rushed handling of the Scottsboro case to the state's slow response to Taylor's rape, justice movement rhetors conceptualized sexual violence as a racialized phenomenon—one meant to punish Black men and to degrade Black women. For example, a CEJ pamphlet observed: “The State of Alabama, with a highlight efficient legal apparatus for punishing rapists, acts slowly, with deep reluctance. Its machinery, as smooth as oil in prosecuting the innocent Scottsboro boys, creaks and hesitates.”¹⁴⁴ Activist Morris Davis reminded Sparks with comparable commentary: “We, in New York, also remember the case of the Scottsboro Boys which was a blot on America's democratic traditions.”¹⁴⁵ In sum, when

considered together, the Scottsboro Boys and Recy Taylor cases indicated a pattern of white supremacy that plagued Alabama's judiciary and threatened the democratic rights of Black Americans. Racism, according to justice movement letter writers, was not the property of a few bigoted southerners; it was a systemic form of dehumanization embedded in the so-called "justice" system. By such logic, there was no need to evaluate Taylor's credibility because white supremacy's grip on the law meant the courts would not take a Black woman seriously even if they did deem a Black woman trustworthy.

Justice movement activists reasoned that the Scottsboro Boys and Recy Taylor cases offered clear evidence as to how white supremacy ingrained itself into the fabric of U.S. democracy. The repetitive, racial politics of both cases made an even clearer case as to why Taylor's story necessitated public belief in Black survivors' experiences. One letter pushed advocacy on Taylor's behalf beyond reference to the Scottsboro Boys alone, noting that Alabama's denial of justice to Taylor resembled what is widely considered the most flawed, racist legal decision in U.S. history: *Dred Scott v. Sanford*. Moreover, the writer reasoned that "The case of Mrs. Recy Taylor may possibly take a place alongside the Dred Scott Decision, The [Scottsboro] Boys... History remembers—and today admits with shame—the mistakes made in these now famous but sad travesties of legal justice."¹⁴⁶ By analogizing the 1857 Supreme Court's denial of citizenship to Black Americans to the Recy Taylor case, such rhetoric showed how white supremacy was embedded in U.S. "democracy," forwarding the logic that Alabama's dismissal of Taylor was a natural yet devastating progression of Black people's exclusion from the boundaries of "U.S. citizen." Alabama's response to the sexual violence against Recy Taylor thus provided grounds for justice movement members to issue a systemic indictment of the racism that emboldened Taylor's perpetrators to rape her. Accordingly, Recy Taylor emerged as

a legible survivor through the justice movement’s rhetoric—a believable victim not due to evaluations of her credibility, but to the U.S.’s long, predictable history of legal devastation hurled at Black communities.

Justice movement letter writers further declared their support for Taylor by weaving institutionalized white supremacy with rape culture, conceptualizing racism and sexual violence as mutually reinforcing. As two activists poignantly put it: “The only reason a black woman was singled out was that owing to economic, social and political inequality established during and held over from slavery, she was unprotected and, therefore, easy prey.”¹⁴⁷ According to this letter, racism cultivated the conditions in which perpetrators could assault Black women with impunity, as it equipped white men with the knowledge that the legal system would not hold predators accountable. The logical extension of such an argument contributed to the legibility of Taylor’s victimhood because, based on accumulated empirical evidence, the crime committed against her and the Alabama government’s subsequent dismissal were unsurprising. Racism, in essence, routinized sexual violence against Black women.

Not only did letter writers assert that white supremacy enabled sexual violence, but they also claimed that sexual violence expanded the reach of racism. In reference to southern cries for the protection of white womanhood that were “a pervasive fixture of racist ideology,”¹⁴⁸ Henrietta Buckmaster—a widely-acclaimed 20th-century activist and the leader of the CEJ— lambasted how rape culture upheld white supremacist patriarchy. “The sacred white-woman-cult of the South,” Buckmaster wrote, “is a blood-sucking disease which affronts me as it affronts you. It robs the white woman of hope and self-respect, and it strips the negro woman of dignity and confidence.”¹⁴⁹ In essence, “protecting” white women from sexual violence provided a rationale for lynchings of Black men—a phenomenon that Angela Davis would later argue

served as a cover for the overarching economic suppression of Black Americans.¹⁵⁰ Another Taylor advocate wrote Governor Sparks by imploring him to consider a similar sentiment:

the failure of legal protection to a colored mother reveals lynching in its true bestiality. It does more. It reveals a depth of moral depravity on the part of the organized community as a whole which makes crystal clear the true excuse for lynching. The protected crime reveals that lynching is but a rationalization, an excuse for the sheer moral depravity of the South as a region.¹⁵¹

Within post-civil war Southern ideology, “It was simply taken for granted that lynching was just a response to barbarous sexual crimes against white womanhood.”¹⁵² Yet, in justice movement rhetoric, evocations of lynching operate as intersectional interventions in anti-sexual violence discourse. Although anti-sexual violence rhetoric functioned to shield white women’s sexuality from slavery to segregation, Recy Taylor activists highlighted that “protecting” white women was always about protecting white men’s rights to control white women, to lynch Black men, and to rape Black women.

Moreover, justice movement rhetors emphasized that, like racism, sexual violence against Black women was not a rare occurrence, but a pervasive phenomenon that warranted increased attention to Black women’s survival stories. In doing so, they rhetorically crafted a synecdochical relationship between Recy Taylor and institutionalized sexual violence against Black women. For instance, a Philadelphia agricultural union asserted that “This attack against Mrs. Taylor is not an isolated incident, but is a symbol of the pattern of oppression which degrades American womanhood in many parts of the South.”¹⁵³ The rape of Recy Taylor, in essence, came to symbolize that sexual violence and racism were innate systemic failures of U.S. democracy. A CEJ pamphlet added: “Yes, there is more to Mrs. Taylor’s case than her having been raped. Mrs. Taylor is not the first Negro woman to be outraged...”¹⁵⁴ Sexual violence, therefore, was a byproduct of rape culture—a phenomenon sponsored by community tolerance

for brutality against Black women. Refusing hegemonic paradigms that deemed Black women “had no virtue to protect,”¹⁵⁵ letter writers maintained that the true virtue deficit stemmed from age-old racist systems that enabled Black women’s assaults.

In evoking violently redundant, institutionalized histories of racialized sexual violence, justice movement members understood Taylor’s believability as an inevitability; sexual violence against Black women was far too common for Taylor to be lying, so activists did not question her truth. Yet, for the justice movement, Taylor also represented hope in the possibility that systems of institutionalized racism and sexual violence could be overthrown. Furthermore, a CEJ pamphlet circulated to countless citizens who would write letters on Taylor’s behalf declared that “Mrs. Recy Taylor has become the symbol of free womanhood.”¹⁵⁶ While unmasking the democratic hypocrisy that created the conditions for Taylor’s rape and her subsequent dismissal, justice movement rhetors exposed an oppressive system designed to exclusively support the interests of white men. By using synecdoche to frame Taylor’s story as a small part in a large, discriminatory system, writers of the justice movement asserted that fighting on Taylor’s behalf could play a fierce force in challenging white supremacist, patriarchal logics that once hid under the guise of white women’s “protection.”¹⁵⁷

Justice movement activists also leveraged Recy Taylor’s story to disrupt linear narratives of sexual violence, situating the Taylor case as an outcome of racist history and as essential for the future health of U.S. democracy. Contrasting with discourses of closure that emerge through logics of individualization,¹⁵⁸ the systemic nature of the movement’s critique led to the assertion that Taylor’s assault would have a cascading, ongoing impact on U.S. citizens. As letter writer Gloria Getmansky urged: “I think the case of Mrs. Recy Taylor should set the law on a fair trial against the [six] men who attacked her. In the case of Democracy I ask you to see that it is

done.”¹⁵⁹ Getmansky did not argue here that a fair trial and carceral solution in Taylor’s case would necessarily solve society’s problem with sexual violence, but she did maintain it would shift future precedents of caring for Black women when they experienced sexual violence. Another activist warned Sparks of the catastrophic potential of his failure to take Taylor’s rape seriously. “Gross injustice will inevitably lead to violent resentments and finally to explosions,” he explained, furthering that “such an injustice, committed in another Abbeville just 180 years ago... in the name of humanity, led finally to the French revolution. History will repeat the same course of events whenever the human conscience becomes outraged by unavenged cruelty and barbarism.”¹⁶⁰ Here, the writer positioned the movement on Taylor’s behalf as merely in its origin story—a movement possessing radical potential to rupture white supremacist structures that extended far beyond Alabama’s injustice toward Recy Taylor.

True justice for Recy Taylor thus meant an unending battle to build a democratic system in which all people deserved freedom from violence, or in other words, in which all people deserved care. Writing shortly after World War II ended, one activist noted the ongoing nature of the fight for Recy Taylor despite the war’s conclusion: “Yesterday and today the nation celebrates a victory over fascism, but the prevalent racial hatreds prove undeniably that [it] still lurks in our midst.”¹⁶¹ The words of Alice Hartman, a 12-year-old letter writer, echoed similar sentiments about Taylor’s rapists: “As long as our country has people like... these men our fight for [peace] is not over.”¹⁶² Activists’ emphases on the predictability of racialized brutality and the necessity of future fights to end racism provided profound warrants for Taylor’s believability—her entitlement to care in a society that had far too long tolerated the sexual violence committed against Black women.

Democratic Communities as the Solution to Sexual Violence

As a fourth broad activist strategy, members of the justice movement for Recy Taylor claimed that democratic communities must share the responsibility for solving sexual violence. Activists identified U.S. Americans as collectively at-risk in moments when the state enabled perpetrators of sexual violence, deploying a discursive move that laid the foundation for a “power in numbers” rhetoric—one which drew upon mass investment in Recy Taylor’s story to reify democratic support for Taylor and her image as a legible victim. Taylor’s advocates thus participated in a discourse that refused to solely promote state solutions to sexual violence, acknowledging the role that empathetic communities can play in shifting hegemonic cultural narratives surrounding sexual violence. Although rhetors in the justice movement called on Governor Sparks to act, they also imparted upon themselves a duty to collectivize in the name of working outside an unshakable discriminatory system, asserting their vision of a purer democracy and demanding that the right to be believed is a right of any U.S. citizen who may experience sexual violence.

Justice movement letter writers conceived of Alabama’s failure in the Taylor case as an assault upon citizens of the U.S. democracy. Further, they offered a prequel to the “injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere” logic of care that would later acquire traction through Martin Luther King, Jr.’s civil rights advocacy.¹⁶³ As one family succinctly stated: “An offense against a citizen of this country is an offense against every American!!”¹⁶⁴ A common script in advocacy for Recy Taylor, activists often deemed the rape of Taylor as an attack on all U.S. citizens invested in the cause of democracy—taking part in a discourse that illuminated how the attack against Taylor should be considered an American cultural problem that could be solved by recognizing the interdependence of all U.S. citizens. Another letter writer directly confronted the

systemic failure of Alabama’s legal system in response to the Taylor case, noting that in addition to offering perspective on the U.S.’s treatment of Recy Taylor and Black women, “Here in a nutshell, it seems to us [as] summed up the key test of our system.”¹⁶⁵ Despite Taylor’s Blackness, activists conferred upon her an innate sense of citizenship, given their assertions that Taylor’s rape set a dangerous precedent for the degradation of democracy in other parts of the U.S. Echoing a similar sentiment, Joseph H. Gilbert asserted Taylor’s place among legible victims of violence in his letter, warning that “To tolerate such crimes only encourages repetition, with disastrous repercussions on all of us.”¹⁶⁶ The justice movement rhetors’ activism ultimately claimed that sexual violence has the potential to proliferate in a society that allows rape culture to flourish, and that efforts to protect one person from the brutality of rape may prevent future citizens from victims. Ultimately, letter writers grounded their firm conviction that Taylor deserved better treatment from the state on the premise that justice for Taylor would make great strides toward ensuring all citizens’ care and freedom from violence.

Operating under the assumption that the U.S.’s systemic rape culture required abolishment, citizens advocating for Taylor also harnessed a “power in numbers” logic to reify democratic support for her. They maintained that the U.S. people—rather than the state—had the power to reject unjust ideologies in response to Alabama’s authoritarianism. In essence, U.S. citizens could compel other U.S. citizens to care about Recy Taylor—a fact that they hoped would elicit anxieties among Sparks and his colleagues working for Alabama’s government.

Threatening Governor Sparks with an accumulated sense of public logic, John Kuiper warned:

Please be assured that there are thousands of men and women scattered throughout the nation who are eager to see on your part vigorous and courageous action. The issue involved is so utterly basic, the principle that needs to be applied is so clear, and the opportunity for dispelling accusations of prejudice so notable, that failure to prosecute will be a grave miscarriage of justice.¹⁶⁷

The state of Alabama—diminutive in proportion to an outraged American citizenry—needed to fear the justice movement’s supporters, according to writers like Kuiper. Radically believing Taylor, per the justice movement members, was not just a matter of morality; it was a matter of rationality—and U.S. citizens *en masse* reassured Sparks that they possessed the logic necessary for claiming Taylor’s status as a legible victim. Leveraging the power of collective advocacy has become common to contemporary anti-sexual violence activism, as the rhetoric of large groups of people can elicit a much stronger impulse to believe survivors than individual stories.¹⁶⁸ Aptly, then, the executive secretary for the CEJ bluntly addressed Sparks by focusing on the justice movement’s sheer quantity: “I am sure you are aware that hundreds of thousands of people in the United States—all Americans—have their eyes on the little town of Abbeville in your state of Alabama.... With this letter I am enclosing a number of petitions signed by justice-loving citizens of the United States.”¹⁶⁹ If Alabama would continue its violent indifference toward Taylor, the justice movement asserted that the state and the “little town of Abbeville” would be no match for the reach of Taylor’s numerous activists and their radical belief in her truth.

The people of the U.S. who supported Taylor thus granted themselves an authority as true mediators of democracy, rhetorically inverting the relationship between the systemic power of the state and individualized agency. As one activist noted: “It is impossible to hide such an outrage against American womanhood from the ears and eyes of the nation.”¹⁷⁰ Beyond watching the results of Alabama’s approach to handling Taylor’s case, members of the justice movement were prepared to take action upon learning of an unjust outcome. Reiterating that “This is a case of nation-wide interest and tragedy,”¹⁷¹ writer Marjorie Jestrem and the justice movement—a collective of U.S. citizens struck by the brutality of Taylor’s rape and the state’s refusal to

believe her—wanted Sparks to know “that this fight will not stop...”¹⁷² Imbuing those who participated in the justice movement with system-like qualities due to their sheer power in numbers, letter writers claimed a collectively-possessed capacity to squash the “smaller” state’s fringe racism by the simple exercise of caring for Taylor.

Not only did letter writers view themselves as having the power to organize against the state, but they also situated the pursuit of justice for Recy Taylor as the responsibility of “good” American citizens. By extension, those who failed to support Taylor lacked “goodness” and decency, a line of logic that appealed to people’s senses of morality as an impetus for collective caring. To establish a sense of risk and question the morals of U.S. citizens who did not believe Taylor, one union, for instance, wrote to Sparks that “The people of the entire nation are watching this case. In a large measure we are all on trial.”¹⁷³ In summary, Recy Taylor’s fate and the fate of U.S. citizens’ morality rested on whether the citizenry would come to believe Taylor. Invoking unified pronouns of “we” and “our,” letter writers also urged that the U.S. citizenry held a collective responsibility toward Taylor. For instance, one minister wrote Governor Sparks while addressing an implicit audience of U.S. citizens invested in democracy, articulating that “We cannot presume to pass by such an outrage as the attack upon Mrs. Taylor without repudiating everything for which this democracy stands.”¹⁷⁴ By attempting to work with Sparks to ensure the dissolution of undemocratic logics, justice movement advocates understood their letter-writing as the fulfillment of a unified obligation that U.S. citizens had to promote all people’s immunity from violence.

Other Recy Taylor activists participated in rhetoric that explicitly constructed one’s support for Taylor as both a precondition for citizenship and a democratic duty. One CEJ brochure circulated to numerous letter writers, for instance, implored movement members: “It is

the duty—as well as the right and privilege—of every American to see that this fight [for Recy Taylor] is successful.”¹⁷⁵ Dismayed upon reading CEJ reports of the Taylor case, twelve signatories on another letter expressed the futility of the Alabama legal system and the responsibility of citizens to grow in their humanity despite the state’s ideological stagnation. As they wrote: “We would wish that equal justice could be ours without the necessity for laws to enforce it, a sad commentary on our democracy. We would wish that people of their own accord would feel, acknowledge and practice the common law of humanity—EQUAL JUSTICE FOR ALL.”¹⁷⁶ In the end, justice movement activists recognized that U.S. citizens possessed a responsibility to fight rape culture in the absence of a “justice” system interested in caring for those most subject to its marginalization. As Fred I. Cairns remarked: “It is time we in America, and especially we who have lived in the Southland, and love it, undertook to set aright this state of affairs which the whole world recognizes as wrong.”¹⁷⁷ Accordingly, democratic communities—not actual governmental systems—held the systemic solutions to sexual violence. The movement’s overwhelming support for Recy Taylor’s justice—which letter writers viewed as the obvious, logical response to her assault—legitimized Taylor’s believability as a victim of sexual violence.

Conclusion

When Oprah Winfrey spoke Recy Taylor’s name and story before a contemporary audience during the 2018 Golden Globes ceremony, she entered a Black woman’s experience of survival into Me Too movement conversations—discourses that had largely centered victimhood narratives of white women. In doing so, Winfrey implicitly called upon modern audiences to consider how believability discourse—when grounded in logics of trustworthiness—disenfranchises the marginalized women who are most vulnerable to sexual violence. As

Winfrey noted: “For too long, women have not been heard or believed if they dared to speak their truth... But their time is up.”¹⁷⁸ In analyzing the 1944 justice movement’s efforts to appropriate patriotic scripts in ways that made Recy Taylor a legible victim of sexual violence, this chapter theorizes rhetorics of radical belief—discourses that transcend a trust-oriented paradigm for evaluating survivors’ believability. Furthermore, I asserted that justice movement letter writers’ rhetoric believed Taylor because not only did it demand care for Taylor in a specific sense, but it also urged broad care for all members of the U.S. democratic community who may endure the trauma of sexual violence. This analysis of the justice movement offers prescriptions for how modern anti-sexual violence activists may build upon the legacy of Recy Taylor and the activists who supported her. Beyond evoking a Black woman’s story in contemporary advocacy, as did Winfrey, contemporary anti-violence advocates can harness the power of the justice movement’s rhetorical efforts by using their discursive strategies to both address the shortcomings of individual-systemic discursive binaries and to collapse racist victimhood hierarchies through rhetorics of radical belief.

First, individual-systemic binaries undermine anti-sexual violence rhetoric by either silencing survivors or flattening differences among them, but the justice movement’s rhetoric of radical belief offered hope in the possibility that individual and systemic discourses about sexual violence may be productively merged or inverted. The Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas Supreme Court confirmation hearings and the Me Too hashtag serve as apt case studies for illuminating the shortcomings of both individual and systemic anti-sexual violence rhetorics, respectively. For instance, Anita Hill’s Blackness, womanhood, and the fact that she stood alone as the only survivor before the Senate Judiciary disqualified her from being believed. The fact that no other survivors existed to corroborate her testimony made Hill easily dismissible.¹⁷⁹ By contrast, the

Me Too hashtag acquired traction because millions of people shed light on the profound reach of rape culture.¹⁸⁰ The sheer quantity of survivors who issued a systemic critique during Me Too overwhelmed publics with the ubiquity of rape,¹⁸¹ but the Me Too movement both treated disclosure as an ideal in a society that often only listens to white survivors and erases the experiences of women of color.¹⁸²

The justice movement, however, arguably reconciles the failures of both individualistic and systemic logics by finding ways to draw upon the strengths of each paradigm to merge them into one, neither wholly individualistic nor wholly systemic discourse. Moreover, Taylor's advocates appealed both to values of "justice" and "democracy" in their efforts to increase Taylor's legibility as a victim of sexual violence. Activist Charles A. Collins, for instance, wrote to Sparks that should the Governor take action on the Taylor case, he would join the ranks among those "who are dedicated to the lofty ideals of *justice* and *democracy*."¹⁸³ Many movement members expressed similar sentiments across their uses of the four broad rhetorical strategies I outline in this chapter: leveraging World War II commentary, deploying citizenship appeals, referencing historical racist violence, and situating democratic communities as the solutions to sexual violence.

Although "justice" and "democracy" are certainly complementary ideas—and letter writers often viewed justice as a precondition for democracy—each term speaks to a different side of the individual-systemic binary. Moreover, per Carol Gilligan, the notions of independence, separation, and individuality connote justice, rather than relationships, community, and interconnectedness.¹⁸⁴ Alternative to "justice," the term "democracy" can be much more closely associated with systemic rhetoric, given its roots in the Greek term "*demos*," which means "common people."¹⁸⁵ Put differently, Taylor's activists appealed to Sparks in

efforts to secure individual justice for Recy Taylor, but in doing so, they situated Taylor as a symbol for the potential degradation of the U.S. democratic system and the rights afforded to the U.S. citizenry as a collective. Ultimately, combined appeals to “justice” and “democracy” do tremendous rhetorical work in the justice movement’s letter-writing campaign. By leveraging “justice” to frame sexual violence as an undemocratic assault upon Recy Taylor and deploying “democracy” to position rape culture as a threat to the U.S. people, Taylor’s activists participated in a rhetoric that productively drew upon individualistic logics to generate empathy for a Black women’s unique experiences while also critiquing a failed system of oppression that enabled Taylor’s rape. Because Taylor’s identity as a Black woman undergirded the movement’s systemic critique and calls for community support for Taylor, collectivizing on the part of movement members did not occur at the expense of society’s most marginalized survivors. Unlike the Me Too hashtag, the justice movement for Recy Taylor forwarded a truly intersectional rhetoric that harnessed the power of a Black survivor’s story—radically believing her because to do so was to advocate for care and a better future for *everyone*.

In addition to spotlighting how simultaneous appeals to “justice” and “democracy” might merge the individual-systemic binary, Recy Taylor’s activists revealed that anti-sexual violence rhetoric might invert perceptions of individuals and systems. Individualistic narratives of sexual violence, in addition to dismissing the testimony of lone survivors, also function as what Kate Lockwood Harris calls “bad apple” discourses—or rhetorics positing that the punishment of a few, morally bankrupt perpetrators is the best solution to sexual violence, rather than exploring how communication from everyday citizens can create the conditions in which rape culture thrives.¹⁸⁶ In essence, blaming sole sexual violence predators for rape culture is a scapegoating tactic that absolves the broader citizenry of its responsibility for sustaining rape logics. However,

an irony seethes beneath “bad apple” scripts, given that while the phrase or its logics are often evoked to claim that one perpetrator’s behavior does not represent an entire group (usually of white men), “bad apple” discourses emerged from the adage: “One bad apple spoils the whole barrel.”¹⁸⁷ In other words, one “bad” decision on the part of the state could create conditions in which an entire system fails. When proponents of rape culture deploy “bad apple” scripts, they ironically use such rhetoric in ways that are in direct opposition to the phrase’s original meaning—separating the “good” public from the few “bad apples” and asking the state to let the “bad apples” *rot* in prison.

However, the idea that Alabama’s failed handling of Taylor’s case could “spoil” the U.S.’s entire system of democracy proliferated across the justice movement’s advocacy in a way that was consistent with the original “bad apple” expression. As the CEJ announced in one of its brochures mailed to mass public audiences: “The fight for justice for [Recy Taylor] has become the fight for equal justice and democracy.”¹⁸⁸ To summarize, Taylor’s activists flipped the “bad apple” script—challenging problematic evocations of “bad apple” rhetoric typical to carceral “feminist” sexual violence advocacy by forwarding a line of logic consistent with initial uses of the phrase.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, they asserted that the state and its avid protection for a small group of perpetrators could create dangerous conditions for all and “spoil the whole barrel” of U.S. democracy.

With the recognition that they possessed the agency to either enable rape culture as passive bystanders or act on Taylor’s behalf, justice movement members chose to act—deeming their collective voices as capable of overthrowing authoritarian, state promotion of violence. According to activists in the justice movement, they possessed power *en masse* that was much stronger than did a fringe group of racist men in Alabama who ran the state’s government or the

six men who had disqualified themselves from citizenship by raping Taylor. Deeply committed to validating Taylor's experiences and preventing future instances of sexual violence, the CEJ warned that an extensive network of Taylor's supporters would change cultural discourses surrounding sexual violence with or without the state's guidance and permission. By locating agency within communities of anti-sexual violence activists, justice movement letter writers used rhetoric to invert the traditional relationship between systemic and individual power. Through their discourses, the movement emerged as a system—robust because of its numbers, rational in its conviction that believing Taylor was a logical imperative, and ready to care for victims of sexual violence amidst state apathy. Conversely, the state of Alabama was isolated, illogical, and indifferent—alone in its racist commitments to upholding rape culture by refusing to support Recy Taylor.

Second, rhetorics of radical belief offer positive insight as to effective discursive mechanisms for dismantling survivor hierarchies and for centering sexual violence as an inherently racialized problem. Rape culture has always been about racism, and the racism used to “justify” sexual violence against Black women has always been about hierarchy. As Annie Hill astutely articulates, three core beliefs undergird rape culture:

(1) belief in a hierarchy of women predicated on sexual purity; (2) belief that women are raped because of their sexual activity or signs of it; in other words, women are raped because they are ‘sluts’ or they dress *like* ‘sluts’ and are thus victims of mistaken identity; and (3) belief that a woman's appearance signifies her sexual desire and consent. The advice simultaneously elides the racism embedded in rape logic, which hyper-sexualizes nonwhite women by fixing ‘slut’ to skin color and making it impossible for them to assume an innocent appearance.¹⁹⁰

Victimhood hierarchies make rape culture possible; in supporting the logic that people, in general, can actually “deserve” to be raped, these discourses ask survivors to compete for positions along a hierarchy of legibility. White women can often take their places atop the

hierarchy as “less deserving” of sexual violence—although white women, too, are often blamed for the sexual violence enacted against them. But the very nature of being a woman of color relegates Black, Indigenous, Latina, and Asian women to a much more violent place along that legibility ladder. These racialized hierarchies of victimhood, as Hill implies, are based on the extent to which a white supremacist culture deems women of color as trustworthy, credible, or *believable*. Yet, because Blackness automatically indexes promiscuity under white heteropatriarchy, believability discourses rooted in notions of trustworthiness and credibility will routinely fail Black victims of sexual violence. “Believe Women” rhetoric in anti-sexual violence advocacy will only go as far as communicating “belief” means to communicate care, rather than to evaluate credibility. As such, my theorization of rhetorics of radical belief grounded in care points to how contemporary anti-sexual violence activists might productively dismantle racist victimhood hierarchies.

While the outcomes of contemporary sexual violence cases rarely reach the level of legal absurdity that characterized Alabama’s handling of the Recy Taylor case, the rhetorical remnants of mid-20th century Southern rape culture still encourage and excuse the sexual violence committed against women of color. Take, for instance, that in 1991, political pundits asserted that Anita Hill was “a little bit nutty and a little bit slutty.”¹⁹¹ In 2015, Harvard University allowed a law student named Brandon Winston to reenroll at the institution after he had been accused of sexually assaulting a Black student named Kamilah Willingham. Harvard dismissed Willingham’s activism in the documentary called *The Hunting Ground* as “a seriously false picture both of the general sexual assault phenomenon at universities and of our student Brandon Winston.”¹⁹² In 2016, a California judge sentenced Brock Turner, a Stanford swimmer, to six months in jail after he was found guilty of sexually assaulting Chanel Miller, a Chinese

American woman.¹⁹³ In 2021, comedian Bill Cosby was set free from prison after the highest court in Pennsylvania overturned his sexual assault conviction, despite having been accused of assaulting over 60 women—many of whom were women of color.¹⁹⁴ This devastating list could go on much longer.

Beyond a multiplicity of specific tragedies related to racialized sexual violence, statistics surrounding the rates at which women of color experience sexual assault offer a devastating picture of how systemic racism continues to legitimize the violence visited upon them. 35 percent of Black women experience some sort of contact sexual violence during their lifetimes, and 20 percent of Black women are survivors of rape.¹⁹⁵ Undocumented workers in the U.S.—primarily from Latin American countries—face disproportionate rates of sexual violence and harassment, fearful to report the crimes committed against them, given few options for legal recourse.¹⁹⁶ Indigenous women confront some of the highest rates of sexual assault; they are 2.5 times more likely to experience rape than non-Native women, with 33% of Native women having endured rape.¹⁹⁷ Racist victimhood hierarchies plague our contemporary culture, supporting broader rape logics that situate people as “deserving” of sexual violence based on vague notions of one’s trustworthiness or credibility that are often deeply associated with one’s race. Because rape culture at its very core depends on racism for survival, activism on behalf of sexual violence survivors must attack rape culture at its source: the racial hierarchy established through credibility discourses.

Rhetorics of radical belief grounded in notions of care, rather than credibility, may serve as an answer to this call. By centering a Black woman’s experience of sexual violence in its 1944 advocacy, the justice movement for Recy Taylor uncovered the possibility that lies within a rhetoric of radical belief—the possibility of believing survivors by seeing them for their

humanity instead of their credibility. Through their radical belief in Taylor's story, justice movement activists produced *better* rhetorics about sexual violence that showed how justice and democracy, when granted to a Black woman, would make the world more livable for everyone. Taylor's advocates, in a way, even preceded the Combahee River Collective, a radical Black feminist organization that would famously write in 1977: "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression."¹⁹⁸ Indeed, the justice movement's efforts to free Recy Taylor from her oppression offer hope that through rhetorics of radical belief, we may one day build a healthier democratic community—one in which all people are liberated from the necessity of legible victimhood.

Notes

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² Yohana Desta, “Golden Globes 2018: Read Oprah’s Entire Showstopping Acceptance Speech,” *Vanity Fair*, January 7, 2018, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2018/01/golden-globes-2018-oprah-winfrey-cecil-b-demille-acceptance-speech>

³ “Read Oprah Winfrey’s Rousing Golden Globes Speech,” *CNN*, January 10, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/01/08/entertainment/oprah-globes-speech-transcript/index.html>

⁴ Danielle L. McGuire, *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance—A New History of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 2010): Kindle Edition.

⁵ “Read Oprah Winfrey.”

⁶ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

⁷ Henry Lewis Suggs, “Preface” in *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (West Port: Greenwood Press, 1983): Kindle Edition Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006): Kindle Edition.

⁸ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

⁹ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

¹⁰ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

¹¹ Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000), 21.

¹² See Kristan Poirot, *A Question of Sex: Feminism, Rhetoric, and Differences That Matter* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014); Kate Lockwood Harris, *Beyond the Rapist: Title IX and Sexual Violence on US Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Stephanie R. Larson, “Survivors, Liars, and Unfit Minds: Rhetorical Impossibility and Rape Trauma Disclosure,” *Hypatia* 33, no. 4 (2018): 690, <https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12435>; Emily Winderman, “Anger’s Volumes: Rhetorics of Amplification and Aggregation in #MeToo,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3, (2019): 327–346, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1632234>; Maggie M. Werner, *Stripped: Reading the Erotic Body* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020); Burke, *Unbound*; Lauren L. Buisser, “Erasing Race: Convenience Memories of Anita Hill and Rhetorics of White ‘Worthy Victimhood’ in News Coverage of the Ford/Kavanaugh Hearings,” *Southern Communication Journal* 89, no. 3-4 (2024): 153-166, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1041794X.2024.2389813>.

¹³ Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray, “Survivor Discourse: Transgression or Recuperation?” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 18, no. 2 (1993): 260-290; Annie Hill, “SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response to Rape Logic: The Politics of Reclaiming a Name,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 23-29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1091940>; Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).

¹⁴ Clint G. Graves and Leland G. Spencer, “Rethinking the Rhetorical Epistemics of Gaslighting,” *Communication Theory* 32 (2022): 42, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ct/qtab013>.

¹⁵ Patricia Hill Collins, *Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 158.

¹⁶ Rachel A. Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal: The Untold History of Sexual Violence During Slavery* (New York: Routledge, 2019): 17. To move beyond problematic linguistic binaries that use the terms “slave owner/holder/master” and “slave,” I use the terms “enslaver/plantation owner” and “enslaved people” in my own writing, with the exception of when I use direct quotations that contain more outdated terminology, as was the case in this quotation.

¹⁷ Janell Hobson and Donna E. Young, “Black Women, Sexual Violence, and Resistance in the United States,” in *The Routledge Companion to Black Women’s Cultural Histories*, ed. Janell Hobson (New York: Routledge, 2021): 352-362.

¹⁸ Gerda Lerner, *Black Women in White America: A Documentary History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972): 149-150. *See also* Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal*.

¹⁹ Angela Y. Davis, “Rape, Racism and the Capitalist Setting,” *The Black Scholar: Journal of Black Studies and Research* 12, no. 6 (1981): 40.

²⁰ bell hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981); Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

²¹ A. Davis, “Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting”; hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman*.

²² hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman*, 27.

²³ Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman’s World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982); Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black*

Women on Race and Sex in America (New York: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1983); Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal*.

²⁴ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*.

²⁵ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*; Giddings, *When and Where*; Feinstein, *When Rape Was Legal*.

²⁶ “Justified” is placed in quotation marks to communicate irony in my prose, given that no legitimate justifications exist for sexual abuse.

²⁷ hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 52.

²⁸ Mikki Kendall, *Hood Feminism: Notes from the Women that a Movement Forgot* (New York: Viking, 2021); 60. See also hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*; Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983); Giddings, *When and Where*.

²⁹ A. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 182.

³⁰ “Deserved” is placed in quotation marks here to depict the absurdity behind logics that frame some people as more or less deserving of sexual violence.

³¹ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000): 142.

³² hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 32.

³³ “Respect” is noted here in quotation marks because white men’s stereotypes of white women as sexually pure indicate an ideological perspective that disrespects women’s bodily autonomy.

³⁴ Patricia Morton, *Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991): 9.

³⁵ Ersula J. Ore, *Lynching: Violence, Rhetoric, and American Identity* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2019).

³⁶ See A. Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting"; Lerner, *Black Women in White America*; Giddings, *When and Where*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; Kendall, *Hood Feminism*.

³⁷ A. Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting," 40; See also Jacqueline Dowd Hall, "'The Mind That Burns in Each Body': Women, Rape, and Racial Violence," in *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: New York University Press, 1983): 328-349.

³⁸ A. Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting," 40.

³⁹ A. Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Capitalist Setting," 43.

⁴⁰ Mildred I. Thompson, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett: An Exploratory Study of and American Black Woman 1893-1930* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc, 1990).

⁴¹ Paula Giddings, *IDA: A Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).

⁴² Giddings, *When and Where*.

⁴³ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Southern Horrors: Lynch Law in All Its Phases," *On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans* (Salem, 1991).

⁴⁴ Kendall, *Hood Feminism*, 52.

⁴⁵ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

⁴⁶ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 217.

⁴⁷ Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*, 218.

⁴⁸ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991), 1273.

⁴⁹ McGuire, *At the Dark End*, Kindle Edition.

⁵⁰ Dan T. Carter, *Scottsboro: A Tragedy of the American South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969); James Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994); James R. Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy: The Cases that Challenged American Legal and Social Justice* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2008); James A. Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro: The Legacy of an Infamous Trial* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

⁵¹ Report of Recy Taylor investigation, submitted by N. W. Kimbrough and J. V. Kitchens, December 14, 1944, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 1, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁵² McGuire, *At the Dark End*, Kindle Edition.

⁵³ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

⁵⁴ Henry Lewis Suggs, "Preface," in *The Black Press in the South, 1865-1979*, ed. Henry Lewis Suggs (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1983).

⁵⁵ Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*.

⁵⁶ Giddings, *A Sword Among Lions*; Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*.

⁵⁷ Jansen B. Werner, "Black America's Double War: Ralph Ellison and 'Critical Participation' During World War II," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 18, no. 3 (2015): 442, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.18.3.0441>.

⁵⁸ Lee Finkle, "The Conservative Aims of Militant Rhetoric: Black Protest During World War II," *The Journal of American History* 60, no. 2 (1973): 692-713, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1917685>; Patrick S. Washburn, *A Question of Sedition: The Federal*

Government's Investigation of the Black Press During World War II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Roberts and Klibanoff, *The Race Beat*; Werner, "Black America's Double War."

⁵⁹ Finkle, "The Conservative Aims," 705.

⁶⁰ Finkle, "The Conservative Aims."

⁶¹ McGuire, *At the Dark End*.

⁶² Robert Asen, "A Discourse Theory of Citizenship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 90, no. 2 (2004): 191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0033563042000227436>.

⁶³ Susan Zaeske, "Signatures of Citizenship: The Rhetoric of Women's Anti-Slavery Petitions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 2 (2002): 147-168; Josue David Cisneros, "(Re)Bordering the Civic Imaginary: Rhetoric, Hybridity, and Citizenship in *La Gran Marcha*," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 97, no. 1 (2011): 26-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2010.536564>; Belinda A. Stillion Southard, *Militant Citizenship: Rhetorical Strategies of the National Woman's Party, 1913-1920* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2011); Isaac West, *Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁶⁴ Karma R. Chávez, "Beyond Inclusion: Rethinking Rhetoric's Historical Narrative," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 101, no. 1 (2015): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2015.994908>.

⁶⁵ Hector Amaya, *Citizenship Excess: Latinas/os, Media, and the Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2013): 4.

⁶⁶ Chavez, "Beyond Inclusion," 165.

⁶⁷ V. Jo Hsu, "Voting Rights, Anti-Intersectionality, and Citizenship as Containment," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 3 (2020): 269-276, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2020.1785636>; Amaya, *Citizenship Excess*; Karma R. Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics: Activist Rhetoric and Coalitional Possibilities* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); J. David Cisneros, "Rhetorics of Citizenship: Pitfalls and Possibilities," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 100, no. 3 (2014): 375-388, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2014.982161>; Chavez, "Beyond Inclusion."

⁶⁸ West, *Transforming Citizenships*, 8.

⁶⁹ Cisneros, "(Re)bordering"; Stillion Southard, *Militant Citizenship*; Lisa A. Flores and Mary Ann Villarreal, "Mobilizing for National Inclusion: The Discursivity of Whiteness Among Texas Mexicans' Arguments for Desegregation," in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier*, ed. D. Robert DeChaine (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012): 86-100; Michelle A. Holling, "A Dispensational Rhetoric in 'The Mexican Question in the Southwest,'" in *Border Rhetorics: Citizenship and Identity on the US-Mexico Frontier*, ed. D. Robert DeChaine (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012): 65-85; Chavez, *Queer Migration Politics*; West, *Transforming Citizenships*.

⁷⁰ Amaya, *Citizenship Excess*; Chávez, *Queer Migration Politics*; Cisneros, "Rhetorics of Citizenship," Chávez, "Beyond Inclusion."

⁷¹ Brittany Pearl Battle and Amber Joy Powell, "'WE KEEP US SAFE!': Abolition Feminism as a Challenge to Carceral Feminist Responses to Gendered Violence," *Gender & Society* 38, no. 4 (2024): 533, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432241263582>.

⁷² "belief (n.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*
<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=belief>

⁷³ “belief, noun,” *Merriam-Webster*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/belief>

⁷⁴ “trust (n.),” *Online Etymology Dictionary* <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=trust>

⁷⁵ Hill, “SlutWalk.”

⁷⁶ An example of why the presumption of innocence is necessary can be illustrated by this hypothetical: If a robbery occurs across town at a time while a person was sleeping alone in their home, it would be almost impossible for them to prove their innocence because they would not have a witness to the fact that they were sleeping. Because innocence is difficult to prove, the legal system views it as an unfair burden to place upon defendants.

⁷⁷ Leland G. Spencer, “Performative Neutrality and Rape Culture in Naomi Iizuka’s *Good Kids*,” *Text and Performance Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2020): 215, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462937.2020.1807044>.

⁷⁸ Graves and Spencer, “Gaslighting,” 57.

⁷⁹ Larson, *What It Feels Like*.

⁸⁰ Larson, *What It Feels Like*.

⁸¹ A. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman*; Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*; Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins”; Hill, “SlutWalk.”

⁸² Theresa A. Kulbaga and Leland G. Spencer, *Campuses of Consent: Sexual and Social Justice in Higher Education* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2019): 42.

⁸³ Graves and Spencer, “Gaslighting,” 57.

⁸⁴ Vanessa Bowles Beasley, “The Logic of Power in the Hill-Thomas Hearings: A Rhetorical Analysis,” *Political Communication* 11, no. 3 (1994): 287-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10584609.1994.9963033>; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; Joshua Daniel Phillips and Rachel Alicia Griffin, “Crystal Mangum as Hypervisible Object and Invisible

Subject: Black Feminist Thought, Sexual Violence, and the Pedagogical Repercussions of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 38, no. 1 (2015): 36-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2014.964896>. Hill, “SlutWalk”; Tarana Burke, *Unbound: My Story of Liberation and the Birth of the Me Too Movement* (New York: Flatiron Books, 2021).

⁸⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982): 174.

⁸⁶ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*, 74. *Note:* Gilligan’s work on feminist care ethics has been critiqued for its capacity to reify oppressive, binarized gender norms. For more insight on these criticisms, see Dennis M. Senchuk, “Listening to a Different Voice: A Feminist Critique of Gilligan,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 10 (1990): 233-249, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00367746>. A full discussion of work that opposes Gilligan’s ideas surrounding care ethics is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is important to mention here that I utilize Gilligan’s discussions of collective interdependence and relationality to argue that care can (and should) be practiced by people of all genders.

⁸⁷ D. Lynn O’Brien Hallstein, “A Postmodern Caring: Feminist Standpoint Theories, Revisioned Caring, and Communication Ethics,” *Western Journal of Communication* 63, no. 1 (1999): 32-56, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374627>.

⁸⁸ Olga Idriss Davis, “A Black Woman as Rhetorical Critic: Validating Self and Violating the Space of Otherness,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 21, no. 1 (1998): 77-90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.1998.10162414>; Olga Idriss Davis, “In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance,” *Western Journal of Communication* 62, no. 3 (1999): 362-381, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10570319909374647>; Katie L. Gibson, “Lois Gibbs’s Rhetoric of Care: Voicing a Relational Ethic of Compassion,

Inclusivity, and Community in Response to the Toxic Disaster at Love Canal,” in *Green Voices: Defending Nature and the Environment in American Civic Discourse* eds. Richard D. Besel and Bernard K. Duffy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016): 123-131; Pamela Pietrucci and Leah Ceccarelli, “Scientist Citizens: Rhetoric and Responsibility in L’Aquila,” *Rhetoric and Public Affairs* 20, no. 1 (2019): 95-128, <https://doi.org/10.14321/rhetpublaffa.22.1.0095>.

⁸⁹ O. I. Davis, “In the Kitchen,” 368.

⁹⁰ Joshua Trey Barnett, “Unthinking Care,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2 (2024): 163-172, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2024.2343896>.

⁹¹ Thomas B. Farrell, “The Weight of Rhetoric: Studies in Cultural Delirium,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 41, no. 4 (2008): 470, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25655332>.

⁹² Barnett, “Unthinking Care,” 169.

⁹³ Kelly Pender, *Being at Genetic Risk: Toward of Rhetoric of Care* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018); Phaedra C. Pezzullo, “Environment,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, ed. Jon F. Nussbaum (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2017); Savannah Greer Downing, “Toward Reproductive Justice Rhetorics of Care: State Senator Jen Jordan’s Dissent of Georgia’s Heartbeat Bill,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 109, no. 4 (2023): 376-399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2023.2255640>.

⁹⁴ Pender, *Being at Genetic Risk*, 149.

⁹⁵ Celeste M. Condit, “Rhetoricians on Remaking and the Project of Genomics,” *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* 1, no. 1-2 (2018): 19-36, doi: 10.5744/rhm.2018.1007; Downing, “Toward Reproductive Justice.”

⁹⁶ Finkle, “The Conservative Aims”; Washburn, “A Question of Sedition.”

⁹⁷ Correspondence from G. R. Fox to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 27, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁹⁸ Correspondence from Christine R. Bull to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, February 19, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

⁹⁹ Werner, "Black America's Double War," 442.

¹⁰⁰ Correspondence from Leo Fenster to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, February 14, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰¹ Correspondence from Ordway Southard to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 16, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰² Correspondence from Julius Crane to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 18, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰³ Correspondence from the 21st Congressional District Non-Partisan Committee to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 13, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰⁴ Correspondence from Muriel Santilli to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 9, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰⁵ Pamphlet authored by Earl Conrad, Eugene Gordon, Henrietta Buckmaster, and Bert Adams for the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor titled “Equal Justice Under Law,” SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 10, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰⁶ Correspondence from an anonymous U.S. citizen to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 25, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰⁷ Correspondence from Ernest Scott, Herman C. Gray, and Joseph Thomas to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, December 20, 1944, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 2, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁰⁸ Werner, “Black America’s Double War,” 442.

¹⁰⁹ Correspondence from Shaemas O’Sheel to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 12, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 15, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹⁰ The term in this quotation used to describe Black Americans that is derogatory by contemporary standards is not one that I use in my own prose, given that I am a white scholar. It is only mentioned in this draft in the letters written by members of the justice movement.

¹¹¹ Correspondence from Penny Peyser to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, November 15, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹² Correspondence from Ethel C. McBee to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, May 29, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 13, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹³ Correspondence from Carrie Chapman Catt to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 19, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹⁴ Emma Frances Bloomfield, “Rhetorical Constellations and the Inventional/Intersectional Possibilities of #MeToo,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 43, no. 4 (2019): 394-414, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0196859919866444>; Larson, “Survivors, Liars”; Valerie Wieskamp and Cortney Smith, “‘What to Do When You’re Raped’: Indigenous Women Critiquing and Coping through a Rhetoric of Survivance,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 106, no. 1 (2020): 72-94, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630.2019.1706189>; Katie L. Gibson, “A Rupture in the Courtroom: Collective Rhetoric, Survivor Speech, and the Subversive Limits of the Victim Impact Statement,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 44, no. 4 (2021): 518-541, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2020.1839991>.

¹¹⁵ Correspondence from Alice Lightner to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 14, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 15, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹⁶ Hill, “SlutWalk”; Spencer, “Performative Neutrality.”

¹¹⁷ Correspondence from Muriel Santilli to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 9, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹¹⁸ hooks, *Ain’t I A Woman*; Davis, *Women, Race & Class*; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*.

¹¹⁹ Correspondence from Eugene Henderson to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 16, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁰ Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress*.

¹²¹ Correspondence from the Roxbury Communist Club to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, December 20, 1944, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 2, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²² Spencer, "Performative Neutrality," 214.

¹²³ Correspondence from Marie J. Reed to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 30, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁴ Correspondence from Carter Wesley to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, February 12, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁵ Correspondence from John F. Halloran and other U.S. soldiers to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 27, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁶ Correspondence from Walter Barry and Katherine Hoffman to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, March 3, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 6, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁷ Correspondence from Sylvia Greene and Ruth Greene to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, December 17, 1944, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 2, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹²⁸ Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins"; Collins, *Black Sexual Politics*; Buisker, "Erasing Race."

¹²⁹ Correspondence from Shirley Norris to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, March 7, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 5, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁰ Correspondence from Lester Moskin to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 19, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 17, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³¹ Correspondence from G.R. Fox to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 27, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³² The Alabama Committee for Equal Justice was a smaller division of the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor (CEJ).

¹³³ Correspondence from Rita Heyman and other citizens to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, March 21, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 7, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁴ Correspondence from Delphine Berg to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 21, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 17, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁵ Correspondence from M. Diehl Ross to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 25, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 16, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁶ Correspondence from Rita Heyman and other citizens to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, March 21, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 7, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁷ Correspondence from Melvin R. Rubin to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 10, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 16, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹³⁸ Alcott and Gray, “Survivor Discourse”; Phillips and Griffin, “Crystal Mangum”; Larson, *What It Feels Like*.

¹³⁹ Correspondence from Mrs. Harold Eugene Warden to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 16, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 17, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴⁰ Correspondence from Charlotte H. Ormond to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 20, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴¹ Correspondence from Mrs. Georgia K. Benjamin to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 30, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 16, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴² V. Jo Hsu, “(Trans)forming #MeToo: Toward a Networked Response to Gender Violence,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 42, no. 3 (2019): 272, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2019.1630697>.

¹⁴³ Carter, *Scottsboro*; Goodman, *Stories of Scottsboro*; Acker, *Scottsboro and Its Legacy*; Miller, *Remembering Scottsboro*.

¹⁴⁴ Pamphlet authored by Earl Conrad, Eugene Gordon, Henrietta Buckmaster, and Bert Adams for the Committee for Equal Justice for Mrs. Recy Taylor titled “Equal Justice Under Law,” SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 10, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴⁵ Correspondence from Morris Davis to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 5, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴⁶ Correspondence from Gilbert Wilson to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, February 8, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁴⁷ Correspondence from Frank Clay and Olga Zenchuk to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, February 21, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 4, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

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¹⁵⁹ Correspondence from Gloria Getmansky to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, January 13, 1945, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 3, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

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¹⁶¹ Correspondence from Myrt S. Crumpley to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, August 16, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 15, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

¹⁶² Correspondence from Alice Hartman to Governor Chauncey M. Sparks, September 12, SG12505, Chauncey Sparks Papers, 1943-1947, Folder 17, Alabama Department of Archives & History, Montgomery, Alabama.

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“IF YOU ARE BELIEVED, IT IS A MIRACLE”:
(DIS)ORGANIZING DISBELIEF IN THE RHETORIC OF THE ANTI-SEXUAL
HARASSMENT MOVEMENT

Content Warning: This chapter discusses the sexual harassment of women, which may be difficult for some readers.

Janet worked as a waitress and bartender for seven years. Her profession presented what she called “an interesting problem,” given that her “living wage earned [was] via the tips... which [were] also dependent on the good will of the customers.”¹ Because being “pleasant and courteous” at work was foundational to Janet’s modest income, she had very little capacity to challenge restaurant customers who routinely left large tips before sexually propositioning her and rubbing her back without obtaining consent.² Janet’s identity as a woman and her economic precarity left her with an important life choice that was not much of a choice at all: submit to men’s sexual advances or go without paying her bills.

Carol started a modeling career when she was 16. One day, while she was changing in a dressing room, her boss charged at her when she was nearly naked. Carol expressed: “He had me in a perilous position; there was nothing I could do. I was absolutely petrified.”³ Carol physically fought her boss, and while he never raped her, he issued Carol an ominous warning: “If I really wanted to do something to you, there’s really nothing you could’ve done to stop me.”⁴ The supervisor’s threat made Carol feel trapped in the face of her employer. She lamented: “I really didn’t know how to respond. I decided that I was just going to ignore it.”⁵ Her efforts to fight back could only go so far.

Lou labored in a mail room for two and a half years before her boss began to, as she described, “put his hand on my behind or put his arm around me.”⁶ When he started sliding past her and snapping her bra, Lou assertively asked him to stop. Her boss then placed a letter in Lou’s file saying that she “was not what he would consider a really good worker.”⁷ Lou asked her boss’s supervisor for support, but he instead threatened to sue her for libel. The intolerable working conditions forced Lou to resign, and she never found another job. Lou’s time at her workplace impacted her life far beyond the shifts she completed on the organization’s behalf. “I’m still afraid to talk about the whole thing,” she mourned.

50 years ago, Janet, Carol, and Lou each recounted their experiences with sexual harassment on May 4, 1975, at the first anti-sexual harassment speak-out in U.S. history.⁸ That day, these women’s testimonies in Ithaca, New York, spoke volumes alongside the stories of numerous other victims, whose collective courage challenged codes of silence that had long kept survivors of sexual harassment quiet. Together, hundreds of women took part in the speak-out as a consciousness-raising effort—one designed to caution U.S. working women about the pervasive nature of the sexual harassment that “they had all experienced but rarely discussed.”⁹ The Ithaca speak-out was one component of a broader movement against sexual harassment that began in the early 1970s, caught traction in the mid-to-late 1970s, and dissipated in the early 1980s.¹⁰ Members of the movement defiantly challenged rape culture scripts that encouraged and excused the sexual harassment they experienced at work.

Scripts common to rape culture discourse—which sponsor cultural tolerance for both sexual assault and sexual harassment¹¹—presented the movement against sexual harassment with a complex rhetorical problem driven by three interrelated, harmful logics. First, the dominant ideological position of the era was that a victim’s desirability provoked acts of sexual violence—

an idea that deepened societal skepticism of survivors by reducing their distress to personal choices.¹² Second, normative attitudes surrounding sexual violence asserted that women needed to “fight back” against their perpetrators to become worthy of public belief. One’s refusal to challenge their perpetrator, per this logic, functioned as tacit consent for sexual activity.¹³ Third, widely-circulated discourses conceptualized sexual violence as a rare phenomenon with confined, momentary impacts on victims’ lives, rather than an ongoing issue.¹⁴ All three scripts placed obstacles before the movement against sexual harassment and victims of this violent problem. Moreover, these rape logics 1) ignored the extent to which systems of power made marginalized people vulnerable to sexual harassment (as evidenced by Janet’s story), 2) undermined the fact that “fighting back” against one’s perpetrator could produce additional risks for victims (as revealed in Carol’s case), and 3) discounted the long-term impacts of sexual violence on survivors’ lives and the importance of continued resolution (as demonstrated by Lou’s struggle). Yet, the anti-sexual harassment movement possessed rhetorical solutions to these rape culture scripts; its discourses comprised a transformative step in historical efforts to (dis)organize cultural disbelief of survivors.

In this chapter, I analyze hundreds of pages of archival documents that the movement against sexual harassment produced in response to the pervasive trauma that sexual harassment inflicted upon working women throughout the 1970s. These documents—located in a digital archive of the justice-oriented information servicing organization called Alexander Street—consist of legal briefs and opinions for major sexual harassment cases, press releases from feminist organizations, editorial pieces published in newspapers and feminist magazines, as well as transcripts from public speak-outs and congressional hearings about sexual harassment.¹⁵ I argue that by framing sexual harassment as a form of economic exploitation, activists leveraged

the organizationality of sexual violence to challenge hegemonic discursive patterns that promote disbelief of survivors. The movement participated in a rhetoric that I term “(dis)organizing disbelief,” which pushed back against the cultural tendency to disbelieve survivors by offering an intersectional, power-laden critique of workplace sexual violence, unpacking how organizational violence trapped victims into silence, and accentuating the longevity of material turmoil that sexual harassment brought upon its victims. In other words, the movement (dis)organized disbelief by targeting the scripts that negatively impacted Janet, Carol, and Lou.

In theorizing the anti-sexual harassment movement’s (dis)organization of disbelief, I build upon organizational communication research that, on one hand, associates *organizing* with “stability, predictability, shared realities, and fixed meaning.”¹⁶ On the other, such work understands *disorganizing* in terms of “instability, disruption, or open and contested meanings.”¹⁷ Despite offering seemingly oppositional definitions, this body of scholarship refuses to treat organizing and disorganizing as antonyms, conceptualizing a dialectical relationship between both terms.¹⁸ Because research on communication’s potential to disorganize identifies how people use discourse to dispute organizational norms and values,¹⁹ it also recognizes how discursive disruption functions as an organizing force that arranges new, shared, and stable realities. My use of “(dis)organizing disbelief” as a parenthetical phrase thus acknowledges the dialectical relationship between organizing and disorganizing, connoting two interrelated meanings that represent how the movement against sexual harassment challenged rape culture logics: 1) Rhetorics that (dis)organize disbelief encompass activists’ efforts to *disorganize* the stability of hegemonic sexual violence scripts, and 2) Rhetorics that (dis)organize disbelief also underscore that in using *disorganization* as a confrontational

discursive strategy, the movement's anti-sexual harassment rhetoric *organizes* new cultural attitudes that direct disbelief at rape culture scripts—not survivors.

Organizational communication literature on sexual harassment identifies the discursive mechanisms by which tolerance for sexual violence becomes sedimented into cultural attitudes, or, put differently, how sexual violence is an *organized* phenomenon that holds a predictably violent place in workplace life.²⁰ At the same time, less is known about rhetorical strategies that disorganize sexual violence.²¹ This dissertation chapter thus offers perspective surrounding strategies of rhetorical (dis)organization that both disrupt rape culture scripts and imagine new mechanisms for intervening in dominant sexual violence discourses. In spotlighting how the movement against sexual harassment forwarded a rhetoric that (dis)organized disbelief, this analysis shows how activists attacked rape logics that deemed sexual harassment an act of desirability, declared victimhood as conditional upon one's ability to "fight back," and defined sexual harassment as a temporally bounded phenomenon.

By showing how the movement's (dis)organizing of disbelief depends on the organizational context as a backdrop for advocacy against economic, sexist, and racist oppression, I also claim that organizational communication research possesses unique potential to expand our understanding of intersectional activism. Although the subfield of organizational communication has traditionally been criticized for its capitalist-driven, anti-intersectional history,²² this chapter's analysis of the movement against sexual harassment activates an intersectional potential of communication scholarship about workplace life and calls for further scholarly attention to labor-driven social movements.

Accordingly, I proceed by first offering further context surrounding the work of the anti-sexual harassment movement. Next, I examine literature related to the politics of the

organizational communication field, oppressive sexual violence scripts, and research on (dis)organization. My analysis of the movement's rhetoric follows, during which I reveal how activists (dis)organized disbelief by intervening in hegemonic understandings of sexual violence. I conclude by reflecting upon how this case study productively complicates binary thinking about individual and systemic sexual violence discourses and note the significance of (dis)organizing disbelief in our contemporary context.

Diverse Voices in the Movement to End Sexual Harassment

The movement against sexual harassment between the 1970s and 1980s consisted of racially and economically diverse women: Black women whose landmark lawsuits established legal precedents for targeting sexual harassment, middle-class white women in university-based feminist groups who raised public awareness about sexual harassment, and working-class women who championed innovative definitions of sexual violence that encompassed a broad range of survivors' experiences. Indeed, the anti-sexual harassment movement comprised a pluralistic wing of second-wave feminist advocacy; its story challenges what Carrie Baker argues is a whitewashed academic narrative of women's liberation that "obscured much of the complexity of the second wave of the women's movement."²³ Because sexual harassment poisoned women's time at work and inflicted trauma across race and class, 1970s anti-sexual harassment activism "brought women together across differences to fight a common problem."²⁴ The intersectional composition of the movement against sexual harassment shaped activists' diverse strategies for demanding recourse to an issue that plagued most working women's experiences. Their efforts promoted legal, cultural, and organizational change.

Legal Victories in Anti-Sexual Harassment Organizing

Between 1971 and 1975, victims of sexual harassment fought courtroom battles that transformed the legal system by asking the courts to take responsibility for supporting working women's interests. Black women filed many of the most precedent-setting sexual harassment lawsuits, including *Williams v. Saxbe*, *Miller v. Bank of America*, and *Barnes v. Costle*. Although later anti-sexual harassment activists criticized the racial bias of the judiciary to promote extralegal remedies to sexual violence, Black women's compounded oppression under white supremacist patriarchy contributed to their pursuit of legal solutions. For instance, in 1972, a Black woman named Diane Williams filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) that resulted in *Williams v. Saxbe*—the first successful sexual harassment lawsuit in U.S. history. Eventually decided in 1976 by the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, the case found that sexual harassment qualified as a form of sex discrimination under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, which bars workplace discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.²⁵ Before *Williams v. Saxbe*, Title VII had been historically leveraged to prevent racial workplace harassment, but its use in sex discrimination cases was far less common.²⁶ Yet, plaintiffs like Williams, who were “primed by their experiences with racial discrimination and harassment,” tolerated years of courtroom ridicule because their understanding of racial harassment helped them recognize that sexual harassment constituted “wrongful civil rights violations, rather than interpersonal problems to be endured in silence.”²⁷ Black women's legal perseverance made path-marking contributions to the growth of the movement against sexual harassment. As Carrie Baker attests, “Even before feminist activists had coined the term ‘sexual harassment,’ the courageous women who brought these suits

conceived of sexual coercion in the workplace as sex discrimination and brought lawsuits, despite terrible odds.”²⁸

Beyond landmark court cases as sites of intervention for the movement against sexual harassment, university settings produced consciousness-raising spaces in which white, middle-class women made sense of their shared experiences with sexual dehumanization, garnered public support for their cause, and directed survivors across the U.S. toward options for legal counsel. Despite racial and educational privilege, these women discovered that sexual harassment still tarnished their future employment and economic opportunities. As such, at Cornell University, women who used consciousness-raising to coin the phrase “sexual harassment” in 1975 founded Working Women United (WWU)—an organization meant to combat the issue.²⁹ WWU activists arranged the Ithaca speak-out, during which 275 women listened as numerous speakers risked “retaliation and embarrassment by public talking of their experiences of being sexually harassed.”³⁰ Local news media outlets covered the event, and the speak-out organizers asked attendees to fill out a survey in what became an important effort to quantify the pervasiveness of sexual harassment. Upon discovering that 70% of survey respondents reported experiencing sexual harassment, WWU activists used their survey results as leverage to persuade public audiences that sexual harassment required immediate solutions.³¹ The organization found great success in its public education programming, which circulated through its newsletter, *Labor Pains*, and eventually compelled the attention of national press outlets such as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Chicago Tribune*.³² By using media outlets to reach broad audiences, WWU “built an extensive network of organizations and individuals around the country interested in helping sexually harassed women.”³³ WWU laid a critical foundation upon which an increased number of victims could

seek legal counsel, having recruited 300 attorneys nationwide in efforts to give survivors recourse through the judicial system.³⁴ Whether through precedent-setting court cases or efforts to expand networks of activist attorneys, the movement against sexual harassment used the law as one source of intervention as it sought to end the sexual exploitation of working women, but legal advocacy remained, in many ways, secondary to the movement's promotion of community organizing.

Grassroots Anti-Sexual Harassment Organizing

White, middle-class members of the movement raised awareness about sexual harassment and expanded opportunities for victims to access the legal system. In contrast, working-class activists—both women of color and white women—participated in grassroots advocacy meant to support victims' healing and spark cultural change, rather than depending on judicial systems for redress. The Alliance Against Sexual Coercion (AASC) was a Massachusetts feminist organization that began its work on behalf of working-class sexual harassment victims in 1976.³⁵ The AASC offered extensive counseling resources for survivors who had experienced psychological trauma from sexual harassment.³⁶ Furthermore, leaders of the AASC developed “some of the first in-depth theoretical analyses of sexual harassment,” drawing upon their knowledge of the anti-rape movement to demonstrate how sexual harassment functioned not as a crime of individual desirability, but as I will illustrate, a product of patriarchal, cultural attitudes that viewed women's worth solely in terms of their sexuality.³⁷ Baker writes that the AASC “did not believe legal victories alone would eradicate the causes of sexual harassment. Instead, they supported tactics such as public education to change attitudes about women and the inequality of power between men and women.”³⁸ A founding member of the AASC named Lynn Wehrli, for instance, wrote a master's thesis about sexual harassment as a tool of social control by noting

that classism, racism, and sexism had marginalized working-class women of color by historically minimizing their access to the labor market. By extension, Wehrli's writings framed sexual harassment as a means of reinforcing social hierarchies that produced compounded discrimination for those subject to multiple forms of oppression.³⁹

Because working-class anti-sexual harassment activism viewed sexual violence as a phenomenon intricately linked to class, gender, and race discrimination, the AASC only pursued legal advocacy in civil contexts—an effort meant to avoid supporting the criminal legal system's known bigotry toward people of color and working-class defendants.⁴⁰ By refusing to fuel the justice system's punishment of individual wrongdoers, AASC activists furthered their commitment to the notion that sexual harassment was a power-driven, cultural phenomenon—not simply an individual's lapse of judgment or sexual desire. When the AASC did pursue legal recourse for survivors, they sought civil institutional liability; grassroots activists wanted to hold *organizations* accountable for creating workplace cultures that tolerated sexual harassment. Thus, they also advocated for educational programming that empowered organizational leaders as agents of change who could make the workplace a safer space for all employees.⁴¹ The AASC forwarded that education about workplace sexual harassment could give potential perpetrators the language to preemptively understand their behavior as wrong. Such argumentation came to the forefront of public discourse in 1979, when an outpouring of anti-sexual harassment activists spoke before a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee consisting of male representatives who were passionate about ending sexual violence against working women. In efforts to show public audiences why sexual harassment harmed victims, I argue that members of the anti-sexual harassment movement emphasized the material implications of sexual harassment in ways that

(dis)organized mainstream rape culture scripts of desirability, normative victimhood, and temporal closure.

Broadening Definitions of Sexual Harassment

Working-class activists' conceptualization of sexual harassment as both a cultural and organizational problem precipitated the legal system's willingness to abide by more inclusive definitions of sexual harassment. Moreover, in the 1976 District Court case of *Williams v. Saxbe*, the ruling understood sexual harassment as primarily quid pro quo, or in other words, as an exchange between supervisors and supervisees of workplace advantages for coerced sexual intimacy. Working-class women, however, experienced sexual harassment differently from the primarily white, middle-class women employed in office-based, secretarial roles.⁴² Carrie Baker notes that "As with African-American women who brought many of the first sexual harassment cases, the working environments, backgrounds, and identities of blue-collar women in male-dominated fields shaped their experiences of sexual harassment and their strategies and resources for addressing the problem."⁴³ Thus, women who worked in construction, coal mining, and other occupations in which they were subject to men's constant verbal harassment understood sexual harassment not only in terms of direct sexual propositions, but also as the foundation for hostile workplace environments that made work life intolerable for an economically vulnerable class of victims unable to quit their jobs.⁴⁴ Working-class women's experiences ultimately compelled famous attorney Catharine MacKinnon to distinguish between two types of sexual harassment in 1979: 1) quid pro quo, and 2) harassment that "arises when sexual harassment is a persistent condition of work"⁴⁵—a definition that would come to be known by contemporary standards as "hostile environment" sexual harassment.

State courts began considering hostile environment sexual harassment a legitimate concern in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For instance, in 1980, the Minnesota Supreme Court ruled in favor of a Black woman plaintiff named Willie Ruth Hawkins when she complained that her factory employer ignored her claims of “explicit sexually derogatory remarks” and “verbal sexual advances.”⁴⁶ Hawkins reported that her white male coworkers cited enslavers’ historical raping of Black enslaved women as justification for sexually harassing her—behavior that eventually compelled Hawkins to leave her job. Early courtroom victories for women like Hawkins proved necessary when the mid-1980s arrived, which was when the Supreme Court of the United States finally acknowledged that hostile environment sexual harassment—in addition to quid pro quo sexual harassment—qualified as violations of Title VII under the Civil Rights Act. Importantly, the addition of “hostile environment” sexual harassment to the public’s understanding of sexual violence emphasized the material consequentiality of sexually exploitative discourse because it welcomed the perspective that working-class women had the most to lose from sexual harassment. As organizational communication scholars argue, studies of labor, discourse, and material impact sharpen critical efforts to enhance the quality of work life for employees marginalized at various intersections.⁴⁷ The women’s movement against sexual harassment thus poses a novel case study for producing understanding of discourses that improve material conditions for all members of the labor force.

The Intersectional Promise of Organizational Communication

The mid-20th-century origins of the organizational communication field depended upon a managerial bias that systematically erased people marginalized by class, gender, and race from the bounds of relevance in organizational scholarship. Dennis Mumby and Timothy Kuhn trace the discipline’s history by highlighting how organizational communication scholarship emerged

as a product of the Fordist era—one in which a largely white, male, middle-class branch of the labor force benefitted from mass production and consumption, living wages, and the promise of welfare capitalism between the 1920s and 1970s.⁴⁸ Organizational communication research blossomed near the end of the Fordist period, offering prescriptive advice about how organizations could use communication to increase corporate efficiency and maximize profits. Joan Acker summarizes that consequently, “concepts, explanations, modes of thought, and relevant questions used by organizational researchers” had been “congruent with the everyday ways of thinking of managers.”⁴⁹ Managers thought about money, and academics studied white, middle-class men who made money—a great irony given that Black people’s labor during slavery built the U.S. economy, that the sustainment of the U.S. economy has depended on the exploitative work of low-income people since the end of Reconstruction, and that women comprised a significant proportion of the labor force during and following the world wars.

The field’s hypocritical preoccupation with a privileged sector of the workforce left little space for people of color, women, and working-class folks’ experiences to guide organizational communication theorizing—a problem that went widely unacknowledged until the 1990s and has yet to acquire full traction within contemporary disciplinary dialogues.⁵⁰ Scholars drew attention to the discipline’s lack of feminist and anti-racist perspectives in the 1990s and early 2000s, and more recent organizational communication research points to the necessity of deeper engagement with social class in the field—especially given that one’s membership within an employment organization often dictates one’s socioeconomic status.⁵¹ Despite decades of academic calls to center marginality in organizational communication scholarship, disciplinary conversations as recent as 2019 have minimized the important work of early-career scholars who strive to enter intersectional research into academic conversations among organizational communication

scholars.⁵² Following a senior scholar's declaration that the field did not have time for intersectionality, Jenna Hanchey put it this way: organizational communication—more so than many other disciplines of communication studies—is not a home for “centering racialization, coloniality, intersectional feminisms, queer theory, and [trans] approaches...”⁵³ Accordingly, research surrounding the intersectional marginalization of organizational members holds a necessary place in cultivating and sustaining disciplinary commitments to social justice—particularly in a communication subfield marked by its overwhelming privilege and its poignant erasure of oppressed people. As numerous organizational communication scholars imparted in 2020: “We *only* have time for intersectionality.”⁵⁴

Although organizational communication research has routinely failed to hear the voices of employees often excluded from the confines of who counts as a “professional,”⁵⁵ extant scholarship does point to possibilities for expanding the field's intersectional horizons. Karen Ashcraft and Dennis Mumby, for instance, explain how organizational research might “shift attention from communication *in* organization to communication *about* organization.”⁵⁶ Moreover, by attending to discourses *about* work, recent communication research points to the idea that social movements preoccupied with class-based exploitation in the faces of capitalism and organizational hierarchy have much to teach us about how work-related discourses outside organizations transform organizational members' access to just working conditions.⁵⁷

In this chapter, I take up and extend this claim by asserting that organizational communication research on social movements possesses unique potential to extend discursive knowledge on intersectionality, given that organizational contexts lay a foundation for economic exploitation. Furthermore, because organizations are society's primary sites of class-based oppression under capitalism, social movements that challenge workplace marginalization

through their discourses *about* work offer unique insight as to how social class vulnerability compounds additional forms of structural oppression for organizational members. As Dana Cloud remarks, “a more traditional rhetorical occupation with the study of social movements, particularly labor, should inform scholars interested in understanding and transforming relations of power, both material and symbolic, in the workplace.”⁵⁸ When the women’s movement against sexual harassment brought awareness to the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, the U.S. government responded by formally defining sexual harassment as a workplace problem⁵⁹ because anti-sexual harassment activists comprised a labor movement—one that grew out of collective outrage toward sexual harassment’s use as a form of economic exploitation.⁶⁰ Given anti-sexual harassment activists’ assertion that class-based vulnerability disproportionality impacted women and exponentially harmed women of color, their focus on a workplace issue was the foundation on which their intersectional rhetoric flourished. Not only does my analysis recognize the value of studying organizational communication *about* work as central to intersectional scholarship, but I also maintain that the anti-sexual harassment activists’ focus on economic exploitation intervened in rape culture scripts that traditionally promote disbelief of survivors.

(Dis)Organizing Desirability, Normative Victimhood, and Temporal Closure

Rhetorical scholars provide a crucial foundation for underscoring the discursive patterns of rape culture that the anti-sexual harassment activists (dis)organized. Moreover, literature surrounding sexual violence discourse offers insight about three scripts that anti-sexual harassment activists targeted: 1) the idea that desirability drove sexual harassment, 2) the notion true victims needed to fight against their perpetrators, and 3) the logic that consequences of sexual harassment could be reduced to momentary acts of violence.

First, hegemonic discourses individualize the problem of sexual violence by promoting the notion that sexual desire is what drives perpetrators to assault and harass victims. This desirability myth obscures the degree to which cultural practices, organizations, and systems of oppression encourage sexual violence against marginalized people—chalking up society’s problem with sexual violence to the impulsive lack of self-control by what I described in Chapter 2 as a few “bad apples.”⁶¹ Perhaps more egregious than individualizing crimes of sexual violence, however, is the idea that sexual violence is rooted in desire because it places responsibility for violence upon victims, rather than perpetrators. As Annie Hill articulates, rape culture logics that promote sexual assault and harassment can link “sexual desire and consent to a woman’s appearance.”⁶² Accordingly, desirability discourses “[reverse] responsibility from assailant to victim and [dislocate] agency to de-emphasize an assailant’s actions and accentuate a victim’s appearance.”⁶³ Victims of sexual violence, by this standard, are not actually “victims” at all. Because victims’ bodies are construed as automatic warrants for consent, perpetrators merely oblige their targets’ invitations with sexually violent acts that victims are supposed to understand as flattery.⁶⁴

The logic that desirability motivates sexual violence fortifies cultural disbelief in survivors, whose claims of pain and trauma are considered self-inflicted. Yet, I argue that the movement against sexual harassment (dis)organizes the disbelief that stems from desirability narratives by revealing how systems of interlocking oppression (including classism, sexism, and racism) make marginalized victims sexually exploitable. By this logic, power and control—rather than desirability—motivate sexual harassment, and victims do not deserve blame for having been sexually harassed. Organizational scholar Consuelo Vásquez and colleagues indicate that communication possesses a capacity “to create order and (dis)order

simultaneously.”⁶⁵ In targeting the desirability script, the movement’s critique of sexual harassment (dis)organizes normative discursive resources for discussing sexual violence while ordering a productive, power-laden paradigm for anti-violence advocacy.

Second, dominant sexual violence discourses forward a tightly woven, limited narrative of what “counts” as sexual violence in an effort to disqualify most survivors from the bounds of normative victimhood.⁶⁶ This narrative insinuates that survivors must “fight back” to obtain a “true victim” status. Stephanie Larson describes how stories about sexual violence frequently unfold, which consist of “the rapist as a stranger, racialized as nonwhite and typically black... who lurks in a dark alley, preying on young, innocent, white women.”⁶⁷ Although most instances of both sexual assault and sexual harassment occur by known perpetrators,⁶⁸ the myth of the stranger assailant celebrates the story of the survivor who did not “allow” their assault by “fighting back” and escaping the perpetrator.⁶⁹ Left beyond the purview of this script are those less able to “fight back”—victims who had consented to prior sexual activity with their perpetrators,⁷⁰ victims who freeze in fear,⁷¹ or, as in the case of sexually-harassed people at work, victims whose multiply-oppressed identities make “fighting back” impossible or unaffordable.⁷² Furthermore, while rhetorics surrounding rape and sexual assault often evoke visceral reactions from public audiences via graphic depiction of violence,⁷³ sexual harassment—a far more discursive than material phenomenon—does not match the overarching narrative of stranger rape that qualifies as “true” sexual violence. When victims’ stories of sexual harassment fail to match dominant depictions of sexual violence, disbelief toward sexual harassment victims has fertile grounds to flourish, operating on the assumption that victims are overly sensitive or incapable of accepting jokes.⁷⁴

However, I claim that the movement against sexual harassment (dis)organizes hegemonic depictions of sexual violence by recognizing sexual harassment as a legitimate form of dehumanization exacerbated by economic precarity and organizational negligence. Sonia Ivancic and Jessica Ford demand that organizations should be responsible for “embracing the opportunity to (dis)organize” against sexual harassment by believing victims, dismantling discourses that construct privileged people as impervious to perpetrating sexual violence, and reviewing organizational policies that encourage sexual harassment.⁷⁵ Such (dis)organization, they write, is essential to structuring “organizational and societal change.”⁷⁶ Similarly, I argue that anti-sexual harassment activists in the 1970s (dis)organize disbelief through a rhetoric of organizational culpability. Activists’ discourses not only contest rape culture logics by showing how the organizational context operates as an economic trap that inhibits “fighting back,” but they also organize a new vocabulary for sexual violence discourse that transcends narratives of normative victimhood.

Third, rape culture longs for closure and forwards linear temporal narratives about sexual violence, as I discussed in Chapter 1. Consequently, rape culture rhetorics take on an anti-invitational quality—one that promotes survivors’ silence by pushing discourses about sexual violence beyond the public sphere.⁷⁷ Elsewhere, I theorize the ephemerality of sexual violence discourses, arguing that “It becomes far more difficult to recognize the pervasiveness of sexual violence when conversations about rape culture exit the public sphere almost as quickly as they arrive.”⁷⁸ Scripts of closure operate both by placing temporal restrictions on survivors’ processing and by promoting temporally-bounded, carceral solutions to sexual violence. On one hand, rhetorics of what Larson calls “compulsory survivorship” pressure victims “to overcome, to appear normal.”⁷⁹ This framing implies that those who have experienced sexual violence

should simply move past their trauma, and victims who continue to exhibit signs of distress are too sensitive or mentally weak.⁸⁰ Valerie Wieskamp and Cortney Smith add that colonial, Euro-American discourses about sexual violence support the notion that “those who fail to fully leave their trauma behind remain forever victimized, and that those who become survivors remain thenceforth empowered.”⁸¹ On the other hand, carceral logics pervade mainstream sexual violence discourses, constructing legal forms of punishment as the most legitimate “solutions” to sexual violence.⁸² When hegemonic rhetorics emphasize courts as appropriate sites of recourse for sexual violence, they often neglect the necessity of ongoing cultural sexual violence prevention—confining the significance of sexual violence cases to a timeline on which they become “closed” in court. Resolving societal tolerance for sexual violence is a “prolonged fight,”⁸³ but limited temporal conceptualizations of sexual violence prop up harmful ephemeral logics by neglecting that stories of healing are often enduring and transcend the moment of a judge’s decision. Cultural disbelief thrives amidst short-lived sexual violence discourses; survivors routinely confront disbelief when faced with questions about why they did not report their perpetrators’ behaviors sooner.⁸⁴

To (dis)organize temporally-confined narratives of sexual violence, I suggest that the movement against sexual harassment takes part in a rhetoric that defies scripts of closure by highlighting the long-term effects of sexual violence. Per Conseulo Vásquez and Timothy Kuhn, the concept of (dis)organization reveals the “process through which order is appropriated out of disorder.”⁸⁵ By disorganizing oppressive temporal scripts surrounding sexual violence, I argue that the movement against sexual harassment orients public audiences toward an innovative timeline of trauma that recognizes how sexual harassment forces survivors to grapple with enduring pain and economic exploitation.

Ultimately, the movement's effort to (dis)organize disbelief—one focused on the economic impacts of sexual harassment—paved space for understanding sexual harassment in terms of power (not desirability), legitimized survivors' inability to "fight back" through discourses of organizational culpability, and emphasized the permanent nature of the trauma that routinely accompanies sexual violence victimhood. In the analysis subsections that follow, I analyze the discourses of the anti-sexual harassment movement and reveal activists' discursive strategies for (dis)organizing disbelief.

(Dis)Organizing Disbelief in the Movement Against Sexual Harassment

Defying Desirability Logics and Protesting Power Structures

The movement against sexual harassment flatly challenged rape myths of desirability, instead offering a power-driven critique of rape culture that showed how intersecting systems of patriarchy, white supremacy, and capitalism wielded sexual violence as a weapon of social control. Recent rhetorical scholarship confirms that social hierarchies related to class, race, and gender encourage and excuse sexual violence against oppressed survivors through rhetorical erasure that "render[s] absent the possibility that marginalized victims are capable of being violated."⁸⁶ Anti-sexual harassment activists made early claims to this logic of power, (dis)organizing disbelief by urging audiences to abandon the script of desirability as an excuse for sexual harassment and situating sexual violence within broader oppressive systems. In centralizing sexual harassment as a form of economic exploitation, activists leveraged the workplace and its association with sexual harassment to directly challenge the dominant myth of sexual desirability and to demonstrate how sexual violence functioned as what Kate Lockwood Harris calls "a collective social process that becomes enacted through communication."⁸⁷

Members of the anti-sexual harassment movement adopted a confrontational persona, explicitly challenging the logic that men's desirability caused women's experiences with sexual harassment. According to members of the movement, sexual harassment propped up men's efforts to sustain power over women because it was one means by which men expressed domination over the workforce in an era wherein a growing number of women had emerged as heads of households and sought upward economic mobility. Writing in the popular feminist magazine *Ms.*, activist Karen Lindsey debunked the myth that desirability drove sexual violence, sharing anecdotes from women who had experienced sexual harassment yet claimed to be undesirable due to their ages and body types. Lindsey remarked: "It's proved over and over again that you don't have to be glamorous or young to face sexual harassment."⁸⁸ Instead, men's insecurities compelled them to humiliate victims; sexual harassers felt "threatened by women in the workplace" and used sexual harassment "to shore up their self-image as masculine and therefore superior."⁸⁹ As rhetorician Annie Hill reminds us, the myth of desirability asserts that "how a woman appears is claimed to communicate messages" that give men permission to violate victims.⁹⁰ Yet, activists refused to subscribe to this script by noting that men who led organizations possessed monetary incentives to sexually harass women. In the first book-length project on the topic of sexual harassment, for example, author and activist Lin Farley articulated that sexual harassment functioned as a means of "hierarchical regulation to ensure [men's] continued control of female labor."⁹¹ Activists claimed that unmotivated by the myth of sexual desire, sexual harassment emerged as backlash to women's economic advancements.

To further dispel scripts about sexual harassment as an expression of sexual desire, activists unpacked socialization processes that rendered women—regardless of their purported desirability—vulnerable to sexual harassment. Kate Lockwood Harris asserts that a crucial step

in advocating against organizational violence is to look toward “the institutional processes and procedures, the public modes of thought, and the social assumptions that surround an instance” of sexual violence.⁹² Therefore, in the first informational brochure that the Alliance Against Sexual Coercion (AASC) mailed to a large public audience, the pamphlet writers’ discourses *about* work directly noted how organizations sponsored the desirability myth:

MYTH: Women invite sexual harassment by their behavior and/or dress.

FACT: Sexual harassment is not a sexually motivated act. It is an assertion of power expressed in a sexual manner.

FACT: Often women are expected to act or dress seductively both to get and keep their jobs.⁹³

Because victim-blaming attitudes sowed doubt in survivors’ claims of victimhood, such rhetoric spelled out that working women encountered an impossible choice between financial precarity or acquiescing to men’s prescribed dress codes—standards irrelevant to women’s ability to perform their job responsibilities. In drawing attention to this dilemma, the AASC absolved victims of personal responsibility for the violence enacted against them, instead detailing how women had been socialized to perform gender in accordance with organizations’ degrading expectations for female sexuality. As writer Joan Willmer similarly expressed in the first edition of Working Women United (WU)’s newsletter about sexual harassment titled *Labor Pains*, “A waitress was fired recently because she refused to shave her legs... Waitresses have to be more than clean, well-groomed and good at their work; they must provide a ‘come-on’ for male customers.”⁹⁴ Such rhetoric ultimately encouraged readers to consider that the sexual harassment women experienced due to their purported seductive behaviors had actually stemmed from organizational leaders’ sexual objectification of women. Necessary for keeping women subservient in the workplace, sexual objectification and harassment emerged in the movement’s

discourses as products of organized violence that were beyond the whim of individual perpetrators' desires.

Having detailed sexual harassment as an outcome of gender hierarchies, anti-sexual harassment activists built upon their arguments about patriarchal oppression to offer intersectional analyses of overlapping systems of domination. Moreover, activists compared defining features of classed and gendered hierarchies to reveal the mutually-reinforcing qualities of capitalism and patriarchy, producing insight about how gender was “not the sole social feature affecting how blame [was] assigned and credibility achieved.”⁹⁵ By pointing to both economic and patriarchal incentives for sexual harassment, the movement's activists (dis)organized the myth of sexual desirability. Advocating against sexual harassment from an academic perspective, Lynn Wehrli's master's thesis pointed to the similar features of capitalism and patriarchy. Wehrli wrote: “Given the fact that the conditions for dominance are present in male-female and employer-worker relationships...the conditions for dominance are present in the relationships between victims and perpetrators of sexual harassment at the workplace, particularly when the victim is a woman worker and the perpetrator is a male employer.”⁹⁶ Here, the double hierarchy of inferior employment status and gender identity exacerbated women's vulnerability to sexual harassment. As Catharine MacKinnon elaborated, “the sexual harassment of women can occur largely because women occupy inferior job positions and job roles... Sexual harassment, then, uses and helps create women's structurally inferior status.”⁹⁷ Because the movement showed how sexual harassment used women's gender identity to excuse economic inequality while creating additional economic hardship for women, activists revealed how sexism and classism depended upon one another for survival.

In highlighting how patriarchal and capitalist logics had the potential to compound the oppression of working-class women, activists' efforts to (dis)organize cultural disbelief pushed back against desirability scripts by describing how organizations benefited from the suffering of working-class women. Sexual harassment against working women, per activists in the movement, was economically incentivized. As Lindsey noted, "the women who are hardest hit by sexual harassment on the job are waitresses, clerical workers, and factory workers—women who are poorly paid to begin with and who cannot afford to quit their jobs."⁹⁸ Male bosses, by this logic, could weaponize sexual harassment against their women employees' financial precarity to prevent women from resigning, retain workers who would accept low wages, and maximize organizational profits. MacKinnon furthered:

Women work because they need the money. Close to three quarters are either single (23 percent), divorced, widowed or separated (19 percent), or have husbands who earn less than \$10,000 a year (29 percent). Many working women are heads of households and the sole support of their families. They cannot typically afford to risk loss of work.⁹⁹

And so, the anti-harassment activists argued, sexual harassment preyed upon the economic vulnerability of women and their dependents to preserve organizations' bottom lines. Poor working women became collateral damage in this mid-20th-century fight to preserve capitalism.

The link that activists established between sexist and capitalist oppression provided a necessary foundation for their anti-racist advocacy, which made connections between class- and race-based discrimination to underscore the unique burdens sexual harassment placed on women of color. As activists argued, sexual harassment was a phenomenon motivated and sustained not by *sexual* desire, but by a *social* desire to sustain the white supremacist order. Weaving together the harmful consequences of classism, sexism, and racism, writers for the anti-rape magazine called *Aegis* explained that while working-class men and women experienced torment because of their social class, women also experienced sexual harassment. Accordingly, "Under capitalism,

being a woman worker is a double liability. And for minority women, there is the additional liability of racism.”¹⁰⁰ Despite evidence of the second wave’s tendency to exclude women of color, the anti-sexual harassment movement’s understanding of class-exploitation drove their commitment to advocacy against white supremacy. The AASC, for example, drew connections between classist and racist exploitation in a brochure that read:

Low wages, low status occupations and high unemployment among minority women workers directly reflect their perilous economic position. These factors, coupled with pervasive racist attitudes of white employers and co-workers, demonstrate the particular vulnerability of minority women in regard to sexual harassment at the workplace.¹⁰¹

As such, the movement against sexual harassment claimed organizations needed to abolish racist, classist, and sexist attitudes to eliminate sexual harassment. Wehrli also noted, “one might predict that the incidence and severity of sexual harassment would increase... as the pervasiveness of phenomena such as sexism and racism increase.”¹⁰² Because centralizing identity-based oppression based on class, gender, and race was integral to the movement against sexual harassment and its attack on the desirability myth, anti-sexual harassment activists’ discourses reveal how organizations used sexual violence as what Ashley Hall calls a weapon of “racial terror.”¹⁰³ The movement’s rhetoric revealed the crucial role that intersectional confrontation plays in (dis)organizing normative rape logics of desirability.

Negating Normative Victimhood and Substantiating Silence

By highlighting victims’ powerlessness in the face of organizational negligence, the movement against sexual harassment (dis)organized rape culture narratives that suggested survivors must “fight back,” forwarding instead that survivors’ silences did not indicate untruthfulness, but a complicated series of bureaucratic obstacles that left victims with no incentive to advocate for themselves. Moreover, in spotlighting how sexism, economic insecurity, and violent bureaucracy trapped survivors into silence, activists (dis)organized the

premise that victims must challenge their assailants to be considered worthy of belief. To do so, they emphasized the magnitude of social, political, legal, and organizational obstacles that diminished survivors' agency. The movement thus redirected responsibility for sexual harassment away from victims or individual offenders to organizations—reframing discussions about sexual violence activism in terms of organizational culpability.

To claim that sexual harassment trapped working women into an inevitable spiral of workplace injustice, activists noted that systemic attitudes created conditions for workplace sexual exploitation by trivializing sexual harassment and rendering victims' claims insignificant. In showing how sexist logics made fighting back an impossibility, their rhetoric (dis)organized the claim that many victims “made up” their stories of dehumanization. As anti-sexual harassment advocate Dierdre Silverman put it: “In popular literature, sexual harassment is treated as a joke of little consequence. The actress who ‘succeeds by means of the casting couch, the ‘Fly Me’ airline stewardess and other stereotypes permeate American/male humor. Are women laughing along?”¹⁰⁴ Such rhetoric emphasized how “jokes” facilitate organizations' disbelief of survivors because workplace “humor” was supposedly harmless. Sexual harassment scholars warn us that workplace harassers often assume that their “behaviors would fine if it were not for the fact that some people get offended.”¹⁰⁵ Activists thus claimed that the intent behind sexual harassment “jokes” did not matter; such humor, per the movement, was inevitably offensive because it functioned as a discourse of social control that minimized organizational accountability. Telling the story of Carmita Wood, who was among the first women at Cornell to coin the term sexual harassment, Silverman also described how pain in Wood's neck decreased after she left a workplace where she faced sexual harassment. The hearing's mediator responded by asking if Wood's assailant “was a pain in the neck?”¹⁰⁶ Such trivialization of sexual

harassment, Catharine MacKinnon stated, had “been a major means through which its *invisibility* [had] been enforced.”¹⁰⁷ By making *visible* the cultural attitudes that promoted victims’ silence, the movement’s activists targeted the idea that survivors must fight back to be considered real victims.

Another cultural problem that facilitated a lack of accountability for organizational sexual harassment was the workforce’s pervasive shame of women’s (and especially Black women’s) sexuality. When Diane Williams, a Black woman, spoke before Congress about her experiences with sexual harassment, she explained how her employer depended on stereotypes of Black female promiscuity to undermine her claims of victimhood. Moreover, she expressed that her former organization was “trying to make [her] out to be a ‘loose woman’” in court.¹⁰⁸ When activist Enid Nemy broke the first nationally-circulated newspaper story about sexual harassment, she confirmed that slut-shaming of victims functioned as organizations’ routine mechanism of dismissal, quoting the story of one victim who expressed: “Most male superiors treat it as a joke. At best, it’s ‘not serious.’ Even more frightening, the woman who speaks out against her tormentors runs the risk of suddenly being seen as a crazy, a weirdo or, even worse, a loose woman.”¹⁰⁹ Fear of sexual shame, according to activists, legitimized survivors’ decisions to keep silent about their experiences. Describing the story of another survivor, an activist wrote that one supervisor “would make comments to his friends about [his victim’s] figure or legs whenever she wore a dress, implying that she was a loose woman and would do anything with anyone.”¹¹⁰ In response to societal critiques of victims’ silence, Catharine MacKinnon confirmed that “Women’s worst fears about the impact of complaint are amply justified.” The movement’s forceful identification of sexual stigma as a legitimate reason for victims’ silence supported the notion that one did not have to speak up about their experiences of sexual exploitation to be

considered a victim of sexual harassment. Organizations' universal degradation of sexuality along intersectional axes of oppression validated survivors' victimhood status with or without victims' disclosures.

When victims put aside their feelings of shame and reported sexual harassment to their supervisors, activists repeatedly noted how bosses ignored victims or minimized the severity of their claims—implicating organizations as passively violent aggressors against victims. Put simply, activists reasoned that survivors could not “fight back” because no one believed them or cared enough to help them. As one respondent stated in a survey that was read during congressional hearings dedicated to stopping sexual harassment: “I personally feel it is useless to complain. If you are believed, it is a miracle. At best you will be labeled a troublemaker.”¹¹¹ Ultimately, members of the movement against sexual harassment emphasized the futility of their disclosures against workplace managers who cared more about their profit margins than victims' humanity. As Karen Lindsey described:

A waitress who worked double shifts to support her five children was constantly subjected to customers who pinched her buttocks and breasts or reached their hands up the short-skirted costume that she was required to wear... When she complained to the restaurant manager, he told her this was all part of her job; that the regular customers had worked out a betting system, with a dollar-value attributed to each part of a waitress's body that they succeeded in giving “a good feel,” and that this meant business for the restaurant.¹¹²

Here, activists show how working-class women—and notably, working-class mothers—suffered at the hands of greedy organizations, who forced employees to choose between poverty or sexual humiliation. Sonia Ivancic and Jessica Ford caution that employers have “entrenched cultures of harassment through overtly encouraging silence,”¹¹³ and the movement against sexual harassment focused on this sentiment. Discussing how the reach of management's empathy deficit extended to multiple organizational levels, one speaker who testified before Congress

explained the story of a woman who worked in a law firm and reported her boss to a senior partner. She was told “that he really couldn’t do anything about it; it was a personal matter and that if she wasn’t interested in the man then she should just ignore him.”¹¹⁴ Over and over again, advocates against sexual harassment told the stories of victims who sought organizational recourse and experienced discouragement by workplace supervisors who refused to help them challenge their perpetrators, ultimately (dis)organizing the myth that victims can easily fight their assailants.

Beyond managerial apathy, activists articulated how other supervisors made silence the only option for sexual harassment victims by retaliating against those who did report. Because submitting to managers’ sexual advances was the option for many women (and especially working-class women of color) seeking to avoid financial turmoil, activists’ rhetoric (dis)organized cultural disbelief by asserting that sexual harassment emerged as an organizational trap they could not escape. The AASC noted that when an individual reports, “A lot of the foremen resent you; they just see you as a troublemaker, and they don’t need any more problems. So they work you to death, give you more than you can possibly do in a day. They try to drive you out; they want to make life so miserable for you that you’ll quit.”¹¹⁵ In Kate Lockwood Harris’s terms, activists demonstrated how sexual violence is “woven through an organization’s processes and systems.”¹¹⁶ Movement members explained how managers often made life miserable for victims with material retaliation in the forms of both physical violence and theft of victims’ economic potential. Two activists wrote up the following story of a policewoman:

Her precinct [sergeant] approached her for sex one day in his office. She refused. He attacked her. After struggling with him, she managed to get away. Greatly upset, she didn’t return to work for two weeks and when she did return she found she had been fired—the reason given being her unexplained two week absence. She has taken her case

to her state's enforcing agency of Title VII since the sexual harassment she experienced is a clear example of discrimination. However, her two week absence has jeopardized her case, lending credence to the police department's claim that she wasn't a good worker.¹¹⁷

In centering their rhetoric around the false choice of either submitting to sexual harassment or suffering from economic precarity, the movement against sexual harassment legitimized survivors' claims of victimization, justified their fears and decisions to not speak up, and implicated the organizational context as a central source of victims' trauma. Essentially, fear functioned as a regulatory force in survivors' decisions to not "fight back," according to the movement—a strategy that played well, particularly in the face of a major U.S. recession during the mid-1970s that made work a necessity for many women.¹¹⁸ One additional speaker explained her risky economic situation during the Ithaca speak-out, noting that her supervisor became "a little more antagonistic or hint[ed] that it might be worth my while... I think he meant that I had a job if I played along." While members of the movement against sexual harassment advocated on behalf of survivors, an important feature of their rhetoric was that one did not have to experience retaliation to fear it because violent organizational cultures and the threat of economic turmoil teamed up to make women scared.

In further (dis)organization of scripts that condition victims' believability on their efforts to ward off their perpetrators, activists adamantly called attention to organizational policies that placed an unfair burden of reporting on survivors, who the movement deemed rightfully reluctant to report their experiences to organizations that routinely strove to protect sexual predators. Sonia Ivancic and Jessica Ford confirm that organizational policies surrounding sexual harassment ironically direct people to both "speak and not speak about sexual harassment."¹¹⁹ And while activists' commentary certainly emphasized how organizations promoted victims' silence, members of the movement also articulated that the expectation for survivors to report

subjected victims to organizational violence. An attorney named Jan Leventer argued in front of Congress that “Women should not be required to complain to employers about sexual harassment because it may be that such complaints will be futile or that they will subject the claimant to greater ridicule or humiliation.”¹²⁰ In additional congressional testimony, another speaker added: “Women making sexual harassment complaints, like women who have been sexually assaulted, are treated as the culpable party, rather than as the victim.”¹²¹ Anti-sexual harassment activists, in their targeting of organizations as responsible parties for sexual harassment, stressed that victims could not challenge their perpetrators when they were not just up against one boss, but an entire network of sexist attitudes that attacked working women for challenging men’s behavior. Because organizations warned victims to both stay silent and report their stories, activists pointed to the workplace hypocrisy that barricaded women into a double-edged trap of organizational exploitation.

As if the refusing to take victims’ concerns seriously was not enough reason to legitimize their decisions to not fight back, activists cited violent organizational and legal bureaucracy as other forces that punished survivors for behavior they did not commit—directly (dis)organizing the notion that survivors should challenge their assailants to acquire recognition as real victims of sexual harassment. When a congressman asked Diane Williams—an anti-sexual harassment activist and the plaintiff in the landmark case *Williams v. Saxbe*—how she maintained her sanity throughout a 7-year-long, ongoing legal battle with her employer, she announced that “It is not very easy at times” and that her frustration would often cause her to “start hollering and screaming and pulling [her] hair.”¹²² An attorney for the Women’s Legal Defense Fund similarly described the unique violence of bureaucracy in sexual harassment cases, noting that although all complainants of unlawful discrimination confronted an “administrative morass,” that

the deterrent is particularly strong where the complaint is of sexual harassment. Like a victim of rape, a victim of sexual harassment is often embarrassed and ashamed to admit to the problem, and the embarrassment and shame are magnified at the prospect of a drawn-out administrative process.¹²³

The movement framed its rhetoric around the idea that survivors' silence did not signify dishonesty, but instead stemmed from a complex web of bureaucratic barriers that discouraged victims from speaking up.

In revealing how organizational contexts produced the “perfect storm” of an environment for the sexual exploitation of women, activists also reframed the notion of “voluntary quitting” as an act devoid of any agential capacity on the part of victims. The movement’s emphasis on survivors’ ultimatum—to be sexually harassed or unemployed—indicated that working-class women never really had a “choice” to “fight back.” Prior to the movement’s activism, the U.S. government had often denied employment benefits to women who quit their jobs because of sexual harassment, arguing that they had left their jobs for “voluntary” reasons. Nevertheless, in her speech at an anti-sexual harassment speak-out, activist Carmita Wood told the story of a perpetrator and two victims at a law firm: “This man was ambitious, he got both of them. They *had* to quit.”¹²⁴ In other words, the fact that one supervisor could avoid accountability after harassing not one, but *two* women made the organization’s tolerance for sexual harassment indestructible. The only alternative, per the movement against sexual harassment, was that women *had* to leave their jobs. One activist’s testimony before Congress spelled out this logic bluntly: “For a woman who quits her job due to sexual harassment does not do so voluntarily; she is as much coerced into leaving as if she were fired. She does it as a last resort, to preserve her self-esteem and her dignity.”¹²⁵ Because sexual harassment inherently disempowered victims, the movement against sexual harassment centralized survivors’ lack of agency to redirect responsibility toward the organizations that made their victimization possible.

To intervene in problematic narratives that place the responsibility of personal advocacy upon survivors of sexual violence, activists in the women's movement against sexual harassment removed this burden of "fighting back." Kate Lockwood Harris tells us that "administrative violence occurs when organizations avoid their own culpability by suggesting that violence involves individuals."¹²⁶ Yet, activists did not situate the problem of sexual harassment as one that survivors needed to solve. As one activist before Congress put it:

Sexual harassment is a very real fact of life for thousands of working women. It is the result of misuse and abuse of authority, inappropriate attitudes toward women and negligence on the part of employers. Blaming the victim will not make it go away. Ignoring it or trivializing it will not make it go away.¹²⁷

By arguing that sexual harassment flourished in light of organized violence, the movement's activism sought to (dis)organize disbelief by demonstrating how organizations made it impossible for victims to fight back. Because the movement placed blame on organizations—rather than victims or individual perpetrators—its members organized new potentials for anti-violence advocacy by shifting the language of sexual violence activism toward one of organizational accountability.

Confronting Scripts of Closure and Transforming Temporal Narratives

By accentuating the ongoing nature of trauma and financial stress caused by sexual harassment and advocating for extralegal solutions to sexual violence, the movement against sexual harassment (dis)organized narrow temporal conceptualizations of sexual violence. Kate Lockwood Harris teaches us that "Trauma and violence are not solely local. They are not events, they are not bound to one segment of linear time."¹²⁸ As such, anti-sexual harassment activists focused on long-term consequences that plagued survivors' experiences, including ridicule at work following their reports of sexual harassment, difficulty in finding new jobs, physical ailments, and psychological trauma. By recognizing that sexual harassment was an ongoing cycle

of dehumanization from which no one could fully recover, activists opposed scripts of closure associated with legal “solutions” to sexual violence and advocated for organizational action that, in preventing harassment, would reduce instances in which victims experienced harassment and needed to heal.

Anti-sexual harassment activists often described the degrading workplace behaviors that ensued following victims’ reports of sexual harassment—indicating that their suffering lingered beyond localized experiences of sexual harassment and purported organizational “remedies.”¹²⁹ For instance, one activist wrote of an assembly line worker who endured sexual harassment by one of her co-workers. Although his behavior ceased after she complained, the activist explained that other “co-workers still stare at intimate parts of her body, make lewd comments, and complain that she ‘never smiles.’”¹³⁰ Despite the company’s willingness to offer a “solution” by telling the victim’s perpetrator to stop, such rhetoric reveals how the cultural attitudes that promote sexual violence transcend organizational resolutions in individual instances of sexual harassment. Wieskamp and Smith offer insight as to how Euro-American narratives of sexual violence portray survivors as having “the possibility of being forever cured” of their trauma.¹³¹ Yet, activists maintained that no true antidote existed for those who suffered from workplace sexual harassment. Another member of the Ithaca speak-out explained that although reporting her experiences with her supervisor’s sexual harassment put an end to his violent conduct, higher officials within the organization threatened that they would sue her for libel if she spoke of the scenario to anyone. This activist expressed, “My boss was so threatening about bringing a libel suit against me that I’m still afraid to talk about the whole thing.”¹³² In articulating that victims traded an end to their sexual harassment for additional maltreatment at work, members of the movement against sexual harassment indicated that violence persists in organizational contexts.

Additional members of the movement revealed the enduring nature of sexual harassment by sharing stories of how their career prospects and earning potential had been irreversibly altered by their decisions to challenge their perpetrators. Karen Lindsey's write-up on sexual harassment described one working-class victim's experience, who quit the job "she badly needed" after her supervisor repeatedly unzipped his pants in front of her. Lindsey explained that "though she had done the secretarial work with great efficiency (and he had hired two women to replace her), he gave her poor work references."¹³³ Activists' repeated discussions of sexual harassment's long-term consequences framed sexual harassment as a pervasive, ongoing issue that devastated women's entire careers over actions for which they were not responsible—making a compelling case against scripts of closure used to minimize survivors' stories. While Kate Lockwood Harris explains that often, "we do not learn techniques for noticing what precedes and exceeds" individual movements of sexual harassment,"¹³⁴ the movement against sexual harassment illuminated the (dis)organizing power of expanded temporal narratives surrounding sexual violence. An additional member of the movement against sexual harassment used a speak-out as a platform to share her frustrations with similar experiences. She stated:

I came to work, [and] he handed me a letter that had gone into my file, telling me and anybody who read my file that I was not what he would consider a really good worker, that I was... That I disobeyed his rules and if I was to ever disobey anything, he told me after that I would be fired immediately. And I got really angry because I'd worked with the man for two-and-a-half years and put up with all his shit, and all of a sudden, I was no good. So, I went to Personnel, and I said, "Please take the letter out of my file," and they said, "Well, we're sorry; we can't do that."¹³⁵

The working-class victim in the above example quit her job and never found a new one.

According to survivors who spoke within the movement, sexual harassment was not just a means of economically trapping employees inside an organization; it was also a mechanism for economically trapping them once they left.

Beyond sharing how their financial prospects had been harmed, activists centered their stories of survival around another material consequence of their experiences with sexual harassment: physical illness. Although rhetoric scholarship tells us that ephemerality “typifies broader sexual violence discourses, which strive to quickly push survivors’ experiences out of public view,”¹³⁶ members of the movement against sexual harassment continually directed attention toward their physical suffering. One waitress, wrote Karen Lindsey, “acquired an ulcer and a distrust of men that keeps her from having any personal relationships with them, even outside her job situation.”¹³⁷ Another victim “suffered weight loss, headaches, extreme nervousness and illness for which she sought medical help” before finally quitting her job.¹³⁸ A third woman “became extremely nervous and developed eczema.”¹³⁹ Again and again, activists targeted the myth that sexual harassment was an experience from which one could easily recover, giving gravity to the long-term, physical consequentiality of a phenomenon that workplaces routinely enabled and trivialized. Pointing out the ridiculous nature of victims’ prolonged experiences with sexual harassment, one activist demanded of Congress that “Women should not have to develop medical conditions before they feel that they have subjected themselves to enough abuse to be able to get unemployment.”¹⁴⁰ In essence, activists imparted to audiences that society needed to recognize sexual harassment as an ongoing cycle of dehumanization.

Another key element of the movement’s effort to (dis)organize linear narratives of disbelief was by explicating the horrors of the prolonged mental trauma that accompanied workers’ victimization. Writing in *Ms. Magazine* on behalf of the AASC, Rochelle Lefkowitz expressed that “for thousands of women, sexual harassment turns an otherwise tolerable job into a nightmare.”¹⁴¹ Victims in the movement described their experiences with the “nightmare” of

sexual harassment as something they could “no longer handle,”¹⁴² as “unbearably difficult from an emotional standpoint,”¹⁴³ and as “a life-shattering event.”¹⁴⁴ One waitress at the Ithaca speak-out explained that upon refusing a customer’s sexual advances, “He turned around and he started yelling at me and calling me a witch and cursing me out in the restaurant... and I was shaking, and I had to go in the back, and... I was in tears by the end, because he was this big man, and I was intimidated. It was really awful.”¹⁴⁵ By speaking of the psychological consequences of sexual harassment for many survivors in an effort to demand change, activists recognized that victimhood was an identity from which no person who experienced sexual violence could truly rid themselves. As one member of the movement remarked: “We are deeply concerned that once sexual harassment has occurred, it is difficult, if not impossible, to make the victim psychologically and emotionally whole again.”¹⁴⁶

Legal solutions to sexual violence, given their capacity to confine resolutions to a specific moment without accounting for the longevity of sexual harassment, emerged as a last-resort option for members of the movement. Unsettling the idea that the judicial system functioned as a site of closure for victims, activists described how the bureaucratic nature of court cases prolonged survivors’ suffering. In a piece for the *Aegis* magazine, Martha Hooven and Freeda Klein elaborated upon this idea by writing that “For many women, the unavailability of legal options only adds further trauma. She must now confront the gap between her feelings of violation and the limitations of the criminal justice system, in addition to coping with the specifics of her victimization.”¹⁴⁷ The accessibility of the legal system for marginalized women created barriers to timely resolution and facilitated drawn-out trauma. Speaking from a Black woman’s perspective, even Diane Williams—a law student and activist who used legal channels to fight sexual harassment—expressed frustration with the fact that her case extended seven

years beyond the time her boss harassed her. Sarcastically, she announced to Congress: “I am supposedly the plaintiff in the landmark 1976 decision known as *Williams v. Saxbe*. However, recent developments in that case make me feel as though I am the defendant instead.”¹⁴⁸ Given Williams’s identity as a woman of color, she was disqualified from the status of “worthy victimhood” by the grip that the “white social imaginary” had on the legal system.¹⁴⁹ Members of the movement against sexual harassment thus framed the courtroom not as an end to sexual harassment, but as a perpetuator of sexual harassment’s grounding in racist and classist attitudes. As the AASC noted, the “legal processes often discriminate by imposing penalties on the basis of race and class.” Accordingly, courts would not “eliminate the problem itself,” given that they reinforced economic, racial, and gender hierarchies that laid the foundation for sexual harassment in the first place.¹⁵⁰

Instead of depending wholly on the legal system, the movement against sexual harassment (dis)organized linear conceptualizations of sexual violence by arguing that the ongoing problem of sexual violence demanded ongoing organizational solutions, rather than seemingly “closed” court cases. Because anti-sexual harassment activists recognized workplaces as complicit in sustaining cultures of violence, they viewed organizations as the most crucial sites of accountability amidst societal scripts that “absolve the organization of accountability and promote cultural logics that silence survivors.”¹⁵¹ Thus, Martha Hooven and Freada Klein argued that “the company as well as the individual must be held accountable for explicitly or implicitly condoning harassment.”¹⁵² Further activism elaborated that organizations needed to clearly articulate an ideology of zero tolerance for sexual harassment if they wanted to set a positive example for their employees. As one activist stated, an important asset in the fight against sexual harassment was “an attitude—an attitude by the agency that spells it out: ‘This will not be

tolerated.’ That is preventative medicine, and we won’t have to spend as much time curing the ailment.”¹⁵³ In demanding long-term organizational solutions, the movement against sexual harassment recognized the cultural origins of a problem that would require ongoing commitments from all members of an organization’s community.

Activists also promoted public understanding of sexual harassment as a drawn-out phenomenon by offering broad, inclusive definitions of sexual harassment that challenged linear narratives of closure. The movement’s efforts to expand definitions of sexual harassment came from its interest in serving the needs of working-class women, who more frequently experience hostile environment sexual harassment, as opposed to quid pro quo forms of sexual coercion. Accordingly, activists’ definitions of sexual harassment often targeted behavior typical of working-class, male-dominated professions, rather than simply defining sexual harassment as a proposition that conditioned one’s employment on their participation in sexual favors—a phenomenon much more common to middle-class, office-based labor. Because hostile environment definitions push understanding of sexual harassment beyond one moment of violent interaction, activists sponsored such language to ensure public audiences knew that sexual harassment resulted in extended consequences for working-class people subject to its dehumanization. One definition that activists posed before Congress consisted of the following language:

Broadly stated, sexual harassment is any unwanted physical or emotional contact between workers or supervisors and workers, which makes one uncomfortable and/or interferes with the recipient’s job performance or carries with it either an implicit or explicit threat of adverse employment consequences.¹⁵⁴

By this standard, sexual harassment was an enduring phenomenon for two reasons: 1) because its potential “emotional” impact transcends the moment of sexual harassment in itself, and 2)

because it “carries consequences” that can impact a victim’s career within and beyond their organization. In a similar vein, Catharine MacKinnon proposed that:

Sexual harassment may occur as a single encounter or as a series of incidents at work. It may place a sexual condition upon employment opportunities at a clearly defined threshold, such as hiring, retention, or advancement; or it may occur as a pervasive or continuing condition of the work environment.¹⁵⁵

Here, sexual harassment took on an “environmental” quality within organizations—one that made it transcend individual moments by acknowledging, as Debbie Dougherty puts it: how “Sexual harassment is woven into organizational cultures.”¹⁵⁶ Indeed, sexual harassment was (and is) embedded in the fabric of organizational life. By defining sexual harassment in terms of its temporal longevity, however, activists in the anti-sexual harassment movement invited public consideration of organizational solutions to sexual violence that had (and have) an enduring potential to (dis)organize cultural disbelief.

Conclusion

When Lin Farley took to the stage at the Ithaca speak-out, she proudly announced, “I think we’re making history.”¹⁵⁷ Luckily, for all working people across the U.S., Farley’s instinct was correct. Beyond the material improvements that the 1970s movement against sexual harassment made for the workforce by increasing cultural awareness of the problem, setting legal precedents that emphasized organizational accountability, and offering definitions of sexual harassment meant to prioritize the needs of marginalized people, their rhetorical strategies have much to teach us in our contemporary fight to eradicate sexual violence. By investigating the movement against sexual harassment and its (dis)organization of disbelief, I argued that its activists capitalized on the material, economic discrimination endemic to the organizational context to challenge dominant rape culture scripts of desirability, normative victimhood, and temporal closure. The movement’s efforts to offer a power-driven critique of rape culture, to

legitimize survivors' decisions to not "fight back" in the face of organizational violence, and to extend the public's temporal understanding of sexual violence offer us communicative strategies with potential to break down the binarized individual-systemic discursive resources that limit our conversations about ending sexual violence. Anti-sexual harassment activists' (dis)organization of disbelief also provides hope in the possibility of generating momentum in contexts where anti-violence advocacy confronts monumental constraint.

First, by centralizing the idea that organizations are complicit in perpetrating sexual violence—rather than merely individuals or solely systemic forces—the anti-sexual harassment movement shattered the individual-systemic binary that often confines societal discourse about sexual violence in the service of oppression. Because the movement framed the organization as a third site for intervention beyond punishing perpetrators and systems, activists troubled the binary language that categorizes our available rhetorical resources for talking about sexual violence—a language that narrows our narratives to either individualistic or systemic scales. Organizational communication scholarship has pointed to the notion that organizations have the potential to act as a third source of violence beyond individual predators and systemic forces of oppression. Kate Lockwood Harris has demonstrated, for instance, that "Violence is organized. Its material-discursive intra-actions are woven through an organization's processes and systems."¹⁵⁸ Yet, while extant research has informed us as to the potential of organizations' violent behavior, communication scholarship tells us less about discourses that activists can use to resist organizations' violence. I argue that the movement against sexual harassment, in its explicit declaration of organizational complicity, teaches us that rather than conceptualizing anti-violence discourse as a binary, we might envision anti-violence discursive resources as a web of individualistic, organizational, and systemic narratives that inform and reify one another.

Moreover, activists in the movement against sexual harassment shared individual stories of economic, workplace oppression to challenge systemic discourses of desirability, normative victimhood, and linear time. Organizations rarely publicize information about *internal*, micro-level workplace dynamics of sexual violence, operating under a motive to preserve their reputations and profits.¹⁵⁹ Yet, by listening to the movement against sexual harassment and its members' individual discourses *about* work, this chapter indicated that labor-driven social movements can offer novel narratives that cultivate understanding of sexual violence beyond the bounds of rape culture and organizations' frequent promotion of it. Organizations will routinely be unlikely and unwilling participants in discourses of (dis)organization and organizational culpability. But social movements organized around labor issues—through both their collective, systemic power and the individual stories of oppression they bring to the forefront—will routinely (dis)organize and hold organizations accountable for their violence.

Activists' discourses *about* work revealed the intersectional potential of rhetorics of organizational culpability, showing how organizations served as mediating forces between individual, economic experiences with exploitation and the systemic forces of capitalism, patriarchy, and racism that compelled individual exploitation based on gender and race. Put differently, the movement explained how organizations that were operating in the systemic, capitalist context enabled and promoted individual harassers' acts—an insight that would unlikely be acquired by studying discourses *within* workplaces. By pointing out organizations' violent behavior and promoting organizational responsibility for sexual harassment, activists propel us beyond binary anti-violence advocacy that compromises the intersectional project. Given the history of organizational communication's managerial aims and erasure of marginalized people, scholars have rightfully maintained that the field must evolve toward

intersectional commitments.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, this study responds to academic calls for intersectionality by revealing how organizations' positioning within webs of individual marginalization and capitalist exploitation make activist discourses *about* organizational life a unique springboard for intersectional knowledge production.

Second, the movement against sexual harassment and its (dis)organization of disbelief offers hope that anti-violence advocacy can still make progress amidst overwhelming obstacles that stem from ubiquitous cultural tolerance for sexual violence. The rhetorical problem that the anti-sexual harassment confronted was one where discourses that fully encapsulated survivors' material experiences did not exist.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, activists found strategies for organizing innovative narratives surrounding sexual violence that played a difference in making work a safer endeavor for all people¹⁶²—narratives that, rather than asking audiences to do something new, invited them to reconsider familiar scripts within sexual violence discourses and appealed to changes that public audiences were more likely to make.

In many ways, our current cultural moment resembles the rhetorical situation of the anti-sexual harassment movement. While contemporary anti-violence advocacy certainly still possesses rhetorical resources brought forward by the movement—including power-driven critiques of sexual violence, reasoning behind why survivors often do not speak up, and temporally expanded linguistic frames for interpreting sexual violence—an unprecedented conservative political context threatens our current prospects for advocating against sexual violence. As I write this, the sitting President of the United States was democratically elected by his numerous supporters—42 percent of which, in 2020, confirmed that they would vote for him even if he was found guilty of perpetrating rape. As I write this, the presidential administration's creation of a federal funding crisis is “[imperiling] the work of community groups that run rape

crisis centers and programs aimed at preventing sexual violence.”¹⁶³ As I write this, the U.S. government’s EEOC page that defines sexual harassment under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act is “being reviewed for compliance with the law and executive orders and will be revised”¹⁶⁴ (see Figure 1 below).

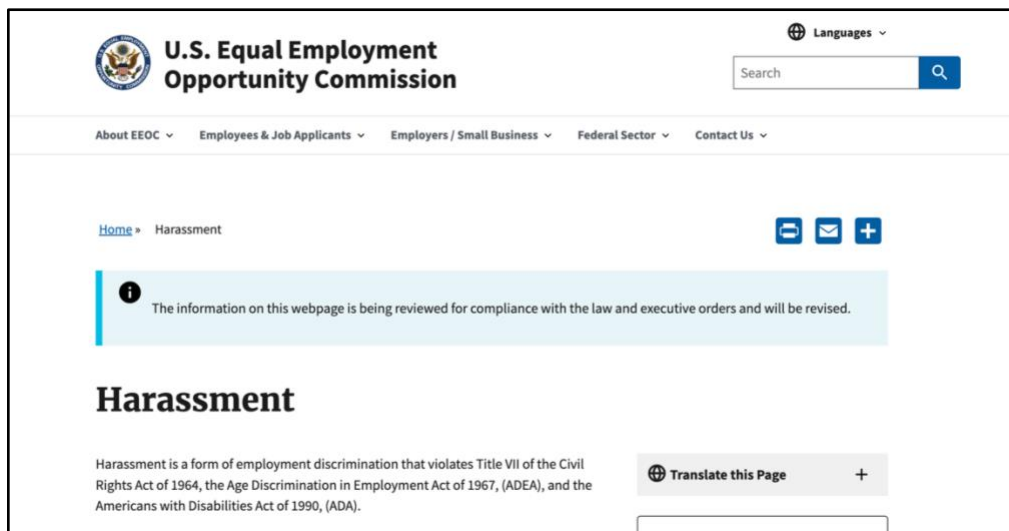


Figure 1. A screenshot of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s definition of harassment. (Photograph by Lauren L. Buisker, March 15, 2025).

Accordingly, demanding that our contemporary culture believe survivors may be too much of an ask. Rhetorics of (dis)organized disbelief, however, operate as an alternative to directly asking people to believe survivors amidst a political crisis that deems victims unworthy of care. The movement against sexual harassment imparts that we can attack familiar scripts when our existing linguistic resources cannot fully encapsulate pain and suffering. As such, challenging dominant rape culture scripts by (dis)organizing disbelief—rather than always attempting to organize belief—may function as an important defense mechanism in our efforts to curtail sexual violence.

Notes

¹ Transcript of an anti-sexual harassment speak-out in Ithaca, New York, on May 4, 1975, titled “Speak Out on Sexual Harassment of Women at Work,” Archival collection titled “How Did Diverse Activists in the Second Wave of the Women’s Movement Shape Emerging Public Policy on Sexual Harassment?” by Carrie N. Baker, Document 5, Alexander Street (hereafter cited as Transcript, Ithaca speak-out).

² Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

³ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

⁴ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

⁵ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

⁶ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

⁷ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out.

⁸ Transcript, Ithaca speak-out; Carrie N. Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁹ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 1.

¹⁰ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

¹¹ Annie Hill, “SlutWalk as Perifeminist Response to Rape Logic: The Politics of Reclaiming a Name,” *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies* 13, no. 1 (2016): 29, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14791420.2015.1091940>; Lauren L. Buisker, “Articulating Hierarchical Victimhood: Rhetorical Mirroring in Anti-Fat and Rape Culture Discourses,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 54, no. 5 (2024): 467-482, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2024.2408555>.

¹² Hill, “SlutWalk”; Buisker, “Articulating Hierarchical Victimhood.”

¹³ Tami Spry, “In the Absence of Word and Body: Hegemonic Implications of ‘Victim’ and Survivor in Women’s Narratives of Sexual Violence,” *Women & Language* 13, no. 2 (1995): 1-9; Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels Like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021); Kate Lockwood Harris, “The Next Problem With No Name: The Politics and Pragmatics of the Word *Rape*,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 32, no. 1 (2011): 42-63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2011.566533>.

¹⁴ Kate Lockwood Harris, *Beyond the Rapist: Title IX and Sexual Violence on US Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019); Stephanie R. Larson, “Killing a ‘Monster’: Lisa Montgomery, Carceral Logics, and the Rhetoric of Sexual Trauma” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 46, no. 2 (2023): 117-136, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2023.2171935>; Leland G. Spencer, *Rape, Agency, and Carceral Solutions: From Criminal Justice to Social Justice* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2023).

¹⁵ See the following link for the publicly accessible archive used in this project: <https://documents.alexanderstreet.com/d/1001113109>

¹⁶ Sonia R. Ivancic and Jessica L. Ford, “(Dis)Organizing Sexual Harassment: Patterns of Bystander Communication,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2023): 335, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08933189231179653>. See also Linda L. Putnam, “Constituting Order and Disorder: Embracing Tensions and Contradictions,” in *Dis/Organization as Communication: Exploring the Disordering, Disruptive and Chaotic Properties of Communication*, eds. Consuelo Vásquez and Timothy Kuhn (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁷ Ivancic and Ford, “(Dis)Organizing Sexual Harassment; See also Putnam, “Constituting Order and Disorder.”

¹⁸ Putnam, “Constituting Order and Disorder”; Consuelo Vásquez and Timothy Kuhn, “Introduction,” in *Dis/Organization as Communication: Exploring the Disordering, Disruptive and Chaotic Properties of Communication*, eds. Consuelo Vásquez and Timothy Kuhn (New York: Routledge, 2019).

¹⁹ Putnam, “Constituting Order and Disorder”; Vásquez and Kuhn, “Introduction.”

²⁰ Robin Patric Clair, *Organizing Silence: A World of Possibilities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Harris, *Beyond the Rapist*; Ivancic and Ford, “(Dis)Organizing Sexual Harassment.”

²¹ Ivancic and Ford, “(Dis)Organizing Sexual Harassment.”

²² Karen Lee Ashcraft and Brenda J. Allen, “The Racial Foundation of Organizational Communication,” *Communication Theory* 13, no. 1 (2003): 5-38, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2885.2003.tb00280.x>; Karen Lee Ashcraft and Dennis K. Mumby, *Reworking Gender: A Feminist Communicology of Organization* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2004); Shiv Ganesh, Heather Zoller, and George Cheney, “Transforming Resistance, Broadening Our Boundaries: Critical Organizational Communication Meets Globalization from Below” *Communication Monographs* 72, no. 2 (2005): 169-191, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750500111872>; Brenda J. Allen, “Theorizing Communication and Race” *Communication Monographs* 74, no. 2 (2007): 259-264, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03637750701393055>; Kirsten J. Broadfoot, and Debashish Munshi, “Diverse Voices and Alternative Rationalities,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 21, no. 2 (2007): 249-267, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318907306037>; James McDonald, “Organizational Communication Meets Queer Theory: Theorizing Relations of ‘Difference’ Differently,” *Communication Theory* 25, no. 3 (2015): 310-329,

<https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12060>; Devika Chawla, “An Extra-Ordinary Critical Intervention Forum,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 120-121, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>.

²³ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 5.

²⁴ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 5.

²⁵ Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, 42 U.S.C. 2000e (1964).

²⁶ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

²⁷ Serena Mayeri, “Intersectionality and Title VII: A Brief (Pre-)History.” *Boston University Law Review* 95, no. 713, (2015): 725, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.journals/bulr95&i=735>.

²⁸ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 25.

²⁹ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 32.

³⁰ Kerry Segrave, *The Sexual Harassment of Women in the Workplace, 1600 to 1993* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc. Publishers, 1994): 209.

³¹ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

³² Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

³³ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 40.

³⁴ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

³⁵ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 41.

³⁶ Segrave, *The Sexual Harassment of Women*, 209.

³⁷ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 41.

³⁸ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 45.

³⁹ Baker, *The Women’s Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 42-43.

⁴⁰ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 46.

⁴¹ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

⁴² Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*.

⁴³ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 68.

⁴⁴ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 68.

⁴⁵ Excerpts from a book written by Catharine MacKinnon, 1979, titled *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, Archival collection titled "How Did Diverse Activists in the Second Wave of the Women's Movement Shape Emerging Public Policy on Sexual Harassment?" by Carrie N. Baker, Document 31, Alexander Street (hereafter cited as MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*).

⁴⁶ Baker, *The Women's Movement Against Sexual Harassment*, 77.

⁴⁷ Ashcraft and Mumby, *Reworking Gender*; Dana L. Cloud, "Fighting Words: Labor and the Limits of Communication at Staley, 1993-1996," *Management Communication Quarterly* 18, no. 4 (2005): 509-542, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318904273688>.

⁴⁸ Dennis K. Mumby and Timothy R. Kuhn, *Organizational Communication: A Critical Introduction* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2019).

⁴⁹ Joan Acker, "Gendering Organizational Theory" in *Gendering Organizational Analysis*, eds. Albert J. Mills and Peta Tancred (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 1992): 248-260.

⁵⁰ Buzzanell, Patrice M. "Gaining a Voice: Feminist Organizational Communication Theorizing." *Management Communication Quarterly* 7, no. 4 (1994): 339-383, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318994007004001>; Ashcraft and Allen, "The Racial Foundation"; Allen, "Theorizing Communication and Race"; Debbie S. Dougherty, *The Reluctant Farmer: An*

Exploration of Work, Social Class, and the Production of Food (Market Harborough: Troubador Publishing, 2011); Chawla, “An Extra-Ordinary Critical Intervention Forum.”

⁵¹ Cloud, “Fighting Words”; Dougherty, *The Reluctant Farmer*; Angela N. Gist-Mackey, (Dis)Embodied Job Search Communication Training: Comparative Critical Ethnographic Analysis of Materiality and Discourse During the Unequal Search for Work,” *Organization Studies* 39, no. 9 (2018): 1251-1275, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0170840617736936>.

⁵² Chawla, “An Extra-Ordinary Critical Intervention Forum”; Joëlle M. Cruz, “Object: Letter of Disappication,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 126-132; <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Angela N. Gist-Mackey, “The Pain of Performative Professionalism: Emotionally Embodying Business as Usual,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 140-143, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Jenna N. Hanchey, “Beyond Race Scholarship as Groundbreaking/Irrelevant,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 122-125, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Kate Lockwood Harris, “Time to #ToneUpOrgComm,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 147-151, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Peter R. Jensen, “Reflections on Complacency and Inadequacy in the Face of Violence,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 137-139, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Sean Charles Kenney, “(Un)Disciplining the Graduate Student, and a Queer Otherwise,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 144-146, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>; Kathryn Joan Leslie, “Scenes from the Margins: One Queer’s Response to Navigating Professionalism at NCA,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 133-136, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>.

⁵³ Hanchey, “Beyond Race Scholarship as Groundbreaking/Irrelevant,” 122.

⁵⁴ The emphasis here is mine. Joëlle M. Cruz, Angela N. Gist-Mackey, Jenna N. Hanchey, Kate Lockwood Harris, Peter R. Jensen, Sean Charles Kenney, and Kathryn Joan Leslie, “#ToneUpOrgComm: A Manifestx,” *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research* 9, no. 2 (2020): 152, <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.120>.

⁵⁵ Buzzanell, “Gaining a Voice”; Ashcraft and Allen, “The Racial Foundation”; McDonald, “Organizational Communication Meets Queer Theory.”

⁵⁶ Ashcraft and Mumby, *Reworking Gender*, 42.

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¹²⁸ Harris, *Beyond the Rapist*, 82.

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“WE ALWAYS START BY BELIEVING. NO QUESTIONS, NO EXCEPTIONS”:
THEORIZING BELIEF BIOGRAPHIES IN ANTI-SEXUAL VIOLENCE ORGANIZING

Content Warning: This chapter discusses sexual violence targeted at children, which may pose difficulties for some readers.

In August of 2022, I started volunteering with a local anti-violence nonprofit called the Sexual Violence Victim Support (SVVS) Center,¹ which provides legal services, medical advocacy, a 24-hour rape crisis hotline, and therapy to victims of sexual violence. Within my role, I serve the SVVS’s sophisticated sexual violence prevention campaign called the Peer-Led Violence Prevention (PLVP) Program,² which is a youth-led initiative that depends on the passion, leadership, and relational ethos of high school students to inform their peers about the devastating consequences of sexual violence and the ways we can use communication to challenge rape culture. Essentially, the PLVP—in partnership with the K-12 Mountain West School District³—trains high schoolers, or “peer educators,” on subjects such as the definitions of sexual assault and harassment, myths about sexual violence, communicating consent, victim-blaming, structural barriers for marginalized survivors, and support provision for victims. Once the youth peer educators have completed a course that teaches them how to run presentations about topics related to sexual violence, they spread awareness by sharing the PLVP’s curriculum with other high school and middle school students during health and wellness course sessions. The program is *communication-forward*; rather than training students to change individual behaviors purported to minimize their risk for sexual violence, the PLVP gives its audiences specific discursive strategies they can use to intervene in rape culture logics when speaking with their friends, family, and members of their communities about sexual violence.

As a “peer mentor” for the PLVP program, I help teach the high school peer educators how to facilitate PLVP sessions, and I regularly attend their presentations to offer support to the educators and audiences of the curriculum. In September of 2024, I attended a PLVP training event for peer educators, during which I ran small-group discussions about legal cases pertaining to sexual violence. One of our conversation pieces was the tragic story of the athletes victimized by USA Gymnastics and Larry Nassar, a physician who sexually assaulted hundreds of girls who competed on the organization’s behalf. Nassar’s terrifying predation persisted for more than two decades while USA Gymnastics routinely dismissed the young victims’ cries for help.⁴ When I explained the case to the soon-to-be peer educators and asked them why they thought Nassar’s behavior continued for so long, one student replied with a profound comment that I will never forget: “It’s because the athletes knew that no one in the organization would believe them.” In essence, disbelief had been *organized* into the fabric of the culture at USA Gymnastics.

The USA Gymnastics organization is a microcosm for broader cultural degradation that silences survivors by fostering disbelief as a default response to their disclosures. The Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN) reports that out of every 1,000 assaults, 975 perpetrators do not face incarceration.⁵ In noting this somber statistic, I am by no means advocating that prison systems offer the most effective solutions to sexual violence. These numbers, if anything, reveal the futility of existing legal structures for keeping people safe from sexual violence and indicate that disbelief of survivors is an institutionalized phenomenon. Given my knowledge of systemic barriers to cultural belief, my volunteerism with the PLVP has always prompted me to ask questions about the program’s discursive mechanisms for deinstitutionalizing pervasive cultural disbelief. Kate Lockwood Harris articulates that “organizations enact violence”—both in their discursive participation and in the subsequent

violent communication forms their discourses encourage.⁶ Simply put, violence transcends individualized violent behavior because, on a larger scale, organizations normalize singular acts of violence. In Chapter 3, I underscored how the 1970s anti-sexual harassment movement sought to (dis)organize instantiated violent scripts enabled by organizational communication. In our present movement, however, we know less about how organizations may enact *nonviolence*, or in other words, what types of discursive strategies comprise *organizational* efforts to *organize* against systemic sexual violence.

For this dissertation chapter, I conducted a case study with the PLVP to explore the organization's discursive resources for anti-violence organizing. To do so, I moderated three semi-structured focus groups, each of which consisted of workers and volunteers in charge of administering the PLVP's curriculum. In addition, I completed a textual analysis of the *PLVP Presentation Guide*, a manual that lays out the program's curriculum. Considering that I play an active role in forwarding the PLVP's mission through my volunteer work and that the PLVP played an active role in designing this study, the project qualifies as an act of community-based participatory research (CBPR).⁷ I thus offer my own reflections on the PLVP's curriculum to provide supplementary insight into the program's communication and organizing. Ultimately, I argue that the PLVP constructs what I theorize as a "belief biography," or a discourse that organizes against sexual violence by tracing the lifespan of belief across public culture. As I will demonstrate, the PLVP's depiction of belief's lifespan implicates all discourses of belief as connected to and constitutive of one another in ways that constitute audiences of the PLVP's curriculum into anti-violence activists.

Belief biographies extend Sara Ahmed's concept of "complaint biographies," which underscore how histories of complaint and reactions to complaint alter present and future

instances of complaint.⁸ Similarly, belief biographies identify how cultural histories of belief mediate belief's future trajectory, forwarding the notion that one declaration of belief (or disbelief) inevitably influences future public commitments to belief (or disbelief). In this sense, belief is self-sustaining—constitutive because belief increases the potentiality of more belief. The PLVP's belief biography consists of three rhetorical strategies that strive to create a culture capable of replenishing belief: rooting belief, redefining belief, and rippling belief. I maintain that through these three tactics, the PLVP's belief biography makes discursive strategies such as “rhetorics of radical belief” and “(dis)organizing disbelief” workable in a contemporary context while also posing a novel discourse for anti-violence organizing that transforms its participants into change agents.

Furthermore, the PLVP's belief biography is made possible by one of its alternative organizational features: a peer leadership model that constitutes followers of the program as active leaders in the fight to end sexual violence. Scholars of organizational communication have centralized collaborative leadership models as integral to alternative organizing practices that challenge capitalist, oppressive organizational forms.⁹ Although peer leadership certainly qualifies as a type of collaborative leadership, this understudied phenomenon has been overlooked as a tool for social justice organizing because critical organizational scholars often suggest that communication from large collectives is the most effective mode for resistance-oriented organizing.¹⁰ Accordingly, I argue that peer leadership functions as a productive modality for belief biography discourses in ways that allow individualized anti-violence advocacy to *absorb* the systemic component of the individual-systemic binary. As I will demonstrate, the PLVP's peer-leadership model draws on a constitutive ethos of interpersonal

relationality that transforms the PLVP's individual audience members into an activist network capable of overgrowing rape culture's systemic roots.

This chapter proceeds in the following parts. First, I review literature relevant to constitutive organizational communication and organized violence before turning to scholarly insights surrounding peer leadership and alternative organizing. I then outline theoretical guidelines for the notion of a belief biography. Upon detailing my study's methods, I share its findings by revealing how the PLVP's communication consists of three rhetorical tactics that undergird belief biographies: rooting, redefining, and rippling belief. Finally, I discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this project, which point to alternative, peer-led organizing as a mechanism for challenging the individual-systemic binary and indicate the positive potential of belief biographies for community-based, anti-violence advocacy.

Constitutive Organizational Communication and Organized Violence

The communicative constitution of organizations (CCO) school of thought reshaped organizational communication by transcending disciplinary "container" metaphors that once conceptualized organizations as mere spaces in which transactional communication occurs.¹¹ Instead, Linda Putnam and colleagues crafted a "production" metaphor for categorizing organizations—one which underscored how "communication and organization produce each other."¹² In this vein, organizational communication possesses two cyclical modalities: "text and conversation."¹³ Conversation occurs through micro-level, interpersonal interactions that form collective organizational identities and norms, or texts. In turn, macro-level organizational texts guide mundane interaction.¹⁴ The mutually constitutive, mediating capacities of text and conversation comprise "an ongoing process, without an identifiable origin or end."¹⁵ As such, "organization" and "communication" are inextricably related. Additional CCO theorists posit a

near interchangeability between definitions of “organization” and “communication.” As James Taylor and François Cooren articulate, not only does an organization become “what it is by its construction as an actor in a universe of communication,” but communication is “always organizational” because of its capacity to activate a collective agency.¹⁶ In other words, to *communicate* is to *organize*.

By drawing upon postmodern theoretical commitments, CCO made space for the notion that organizational discourse possesses material power.¹⁷ Recognizing that communication constitutes organizational realities, Stanley Deetz and Dennis Mumby assert that “discourse is both a medium and product of the power relations that characterize organizational behavior.”¹⁸ In other words, discourse produces organizational hierarchies. These hierarchies, in turn, compel organizational discourses that sustain uneven power dynamics. Critical organizational communication scholars have thus produced insight into the mechanisms by which organizational discourse distributes unequal amounts of power—thereby materially impacting (and often harming) marginalized people.¹⁹ Karen Lee Ashcraft and Dennis Mumby, for instance, “view communication itself as a material act”—one that regulates how organizational members perform identity and respond to differences along lines of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among additional axes of identity.²⁰ The destructive material consequentiality of communication has been made apparent by studies demonstrating the devastation of organizational discourses that promote racism,²¹ bullying,²² anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment,²³ classism,²⁴ and—especially related to the purpose of this study—sexual violence.²⁵

Scholars of sexual violence and organizational communication offer compelling examples of how communication functions as a constitutive force—one that can legitimize material violence. In essence, such work posits that sexual violence is just as much a discursive

problem as it is a material exploitation of another's body. Early organizational research on sexual harassment underscored the role that organizations play in increasing the likelihood of sexual harassment. For instance, Robin Patric Clair studied how predominant narratives of organizational sexual harassment encouraged victims to trivialize their experiences, reproducing logics that minimized the harm of sexual harassment and encouraged future sexual harassment behaviors.²⁶ Taking a cultural approach to studying sexual harassment, Debbie Dougherty and Mary Jeanette Smythe maintain that organizational cultures shape "the performance of sexual harassment in organizations."²⁷ Accordingly, organizational communication plays an indispensable role in building a culture either tolerant or intolerant toward sexual harassment. As Kate Lockwood Harris summarizes, foundational work on organizational sexual harassment reveals how "violence is woven through organizational processes and dynamics."²⁸

Beyond conceptualizing organizations as spaces in which violent communication encourages material harm, recent critical scholarship proposes that organizations possess the potential to behave as violent actors.²⁹ Harris argues that organizations communicate violently by supporting a broader cultural system in which sexual violence is acceptable.³⁰ In doing so, Harris forwards a macro-level trajectory of scholarship on the "violence *of* organization" that shows how violence transcends individual moments of material bodily harm. She writes:

The violence *of* organization perspective usefully complicates definitions of violence. "Violence" does not signal only an individual's attempts to injure another human. It becomes less discrete and less immediate. From this perspective, it is possible for the organization to be a violent actor and to participate in ongoing physical-symbolic processes connected to violence.³¹

In essence, organizational communication is a constitutive vehicle by which violent logics come to pervade society. My study of the PLVP takes up Harris's assumption that organizational discourse and material violence are innately linked. Yet by contrast, the PLVP's communication

serves as a case study for how organizational discourse about sexual violence may unravel violent systemic structures rather than producing and reifying them.

Peer Leadership, Alternative Organizing, and Belief Biographies

To organize against structural rape logics, the PLVP depends on peer leadership—a genre of leadership that has been given sparse attention in organizational communication literature despite research across other disciplines that attests to peer leadership’s efficacy in prevention curricula for various public health issues, including sexual violence, dating violence, HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, and suicidal ideation. Peer leadership education on these topics has typically been studied for its ability to positively impact youth audiences, given children’s peer-centric actions and attitudes.³² Yet, some scholarship points to the productive capacity of peer-led education among adults; this body of research highlights the potential usefulness of a peer-led model within organizations with primarily adult memberships, such as workplaces and universities.³³ In the PLVP, youth are the primary presenters and audiences of anti-sexual violence curriculum, but I argue that the PLVP’s peer-centered model of leadership poses implications for organizational contexts beyond activists, non-profits, or youth-led education programming. Moreover, in building its rhetorical strategies around a peer leadership education model, the PLVP complicates traditional structures of hierarchy present in most organizational contexts by cultivating hybridized hierarchical relationships grounded upon expertise-sharing and mutual respect.

Although at times mentioned in passing by organizational scholars,³⁴ peer leadership and its communicative dimensions have received almost no conceptual development within the field. In essence, empirical literature tells us that peer-led education is effective at preventing harmful behavior or decision-making, but we know less about the discursive dimensions of peer-led

education that help make this model productive. Therefore, this study analyzes the discursive tactics of a peer leadership educational program to shed light on how its peer medium for conveying messages amplifies the rhetorical power of the PLVP's curriculum. Put differently, the peer-led nature of the PLVP's curriculum reshapes the context in which audiences of the program receive information about sexual violence in a way that usefully constitutes the program's learners as agents of change.

While peer-leadership arguably deserves more attention among organizational scholars, the communication field has made productive advancements in leadership studies by departing from psychological leadership perspectives that conceptualized leadership as a trait of specific individuals.³⁵ Defying the idea that leadership is an individualistic phenomenon, they emphasize the extent to which leadership is inherently relational. Gail Fairhurst and Stacey Connaughton, for instance, conceptualized leadership as the “comanagement of meaning” between both leaders and followers—a process that privileges neither leaders nor followers by acknowledging how leadership itself is accomplished through communication, not an individual.³⁶ In summary, one acts as “leaderly” not because of a psychological trait, but instead because they participate in communication processes that compel audiences to follow them. As Ziyu Long and I paraphrase this paradigm of thought in other work, “Leadership cannot exist outside the communicative practices that define it” and legitimize it.³⁷

This social constructivist leadership perspective has legitimized a line of research on collective leadership that collapses hierarchies between leaders and followers—often doing so by abstaining from designating the two categories. Shiv Ganesh and colleagues, for instance, note that “discursive approaches to leadership can facilitate critical studies of the transformative potential of ‘leaderless movements,’” or in other words, resistance made possible through a

multiplicity of leaderly communicative contributions, rather than individual leaderly figures.³⁸ While the term “leadership” on its own is imbued with a managerial, hierarchical bias, collective leadership—frequently referred to as “collaborative,” “shared,” “distributed,” “relational,” or “network” leadership³⁹—offers potential to disrupt power imbalances that often categorize traditional leader-follower relationships through its promotion of plurality.⁴⁰ However, as Gail Fairhurst and colleagues posit, ambiguity characterizes recent definitions of collective leadership, with some challenging leader-follower hierarchies⁴¹ and others reifying power discrepancies between leaders and followers.⁴² Collective leadership, in summary, functions both within formal, hierarchical contexts and informal, egalitarian scenarios; researchers must produce scholarship that reckons with the interplay of both genres of collective leadership, rather than dismissing formalized, hierarchical leadership relationships as inherently incapable of resistance.⁴³ Consistent with Heather Zoller’s and Gail Fairhurst’s influential claim that leadership, even in hierarchical contexts, possesses the potential to mobilize resistive organizing,⁴⁴ this study shows how the PLVP’s peer leadership—neither fully hierarchical nor distributed in nature—functions as a central mechanism for alternative, anti-sexual violence organizing.

Alternative organizations often operate as spaces for subversive leadership.⁴⁵ As defined by George Cheney and Debashish Munshi, alternative organizing means to communicate in ways that “are understood in opposition to the familiar, traditional, mainstream, predominant, or hegemonic institutional arrangements.”⁴⁶ Furthermore, alternative organizations are “less hierarchical, less bureaucratic, and more attuned to human and environmental needs” than organizations embedded in capitalistic rituals.⁴⁷ Comprising what Dennis Mumby and Mie Plotnikof assert is a “more expansive [conception] of what counts as organizational

communication,”⁴⁸ the notion of “alternative organization” does not always designate a stable, organizational entity that communicates; moreover, the practice of “alternative organization”—or alternative *organizing*—is a process by which communication organizes collectives around a common logic that challenges hegemonic realities.⁴⁹ The PLVP, despite its status as an alternative organization, communicates with public audiences in ways that promote ongoing, alternative *organizing* beyond the organization itself. By drawing upon a resistive model of peer leadership, I argue that the PLVP’s alternative organizing is made possible by what I term a “belief biography,” which is the PLVP’s common logic that challenges cultural tendencies to disbelieve survivors by narrating a lifespan of belief—and by extension, disbelief—within public culture.

The concept of a “belief biography” builds upon Sara Ahmed’s theorization of “complaint biographies.” In studying the trajectory of sexual harassment complaints in academic institutions, Ahmed uses the concept of “complaint biographies” to trace the history of complaints within organizational cultures and the degree to which an institution’s handling of a complaint mediates the potentiality of future complaints. In a passage worth quoting at length, she writes:

A complaint biography is not simply what happens to a complaint, a story of how a complaint comes about, where it goes, what it does, how things end up; that is, it is not simply about the institutional life (and death) of a complaint. To think of a complaint biography is to recognize that a complaint, in being lodged somewhere, starts somewhere else. A complaint might be the start of something—so much happens after a complaint is lodged, because it has been lodged—but it is never the starting point. And then what happens when you make a formal complaint (or don’t make a formal complaint) affects what you might subsequently do. Some people decide not to make a complaint because of their past experiences of having made a complaint and not getting anywhere. Some people decide to make a complaint because they regretted a decision they had made not to complain before. Where a complaint goes, or what happens to a complaint, can affect whether we make them.⁵⁰

Essentially, a person's decision to complain is reactive, enactive, and constitutive. An individual with a reason to complain *reacts* to a history of norms surrounding institutionalized complaint cultures in their decision to lodge (or not to lodge) a formal complaint. Further, a person with a reason to complain *enacts* agency because their decision to complain (or not to complain) possesses the potential to redefine or reify institutional norms of complaint and silence. Finally, the choice to complain *constitutes* agents—encouraging future people to complain or to feel a responsibility for complaining. As Ahmed summarizes, “Collectivity can be how we make a complaint as well as an *effect* of making a complaint.”⁵¹ In other words, when one complains, one makes possible a collective of similarly situated people with shared reasons to complain. For Ahmed, a complainant is never alone.

Likewise, belief biographies trace the lifespan of public belief in survivors' experiences, indicating how the belief (or disbelief) of an individual victim emerges as a *reaction* to accumulated cultural rhetorics regarding survivors' believability, as an *enactor* that changes how we understand belief, and as a *constitutive force* that encourages people to become agents of belief (or disbelief). Ahmed's logic “that a complaint comes up because of what has already come up” directly transfers to the concept of belief here.⁵² Moreover, it points to the notion that a single instance of belief (or disbelief) is embedded in a discursive web of cultural logics that connect all instances of belief (or disbelief). Because belief creates precedent for belief and disbelief creates precedent for disbelief, belief and disbelief are temporally extended phenomena that have a lifespan.

In pointing to the temporal dimensions of belief within public discourse, the PLVP's construction of a belief biography functions as a mechanism for organizing against rape culture. Ahmed articulates that a complaint biography is about “what gets repeated; it can be about what

gets stuck or about getting stuck.”⁵³ Likewise, belief (or disbelief) accumulates in a constitutive manner. Present scripts within hegemonic sexual violence discourse have accumulated an overwhelming sense of public *disbelief*. As Clint G. Graves and Leland G. Spencer note, default narratives surrounding sexual violence presume that survivors are “vindictive liars.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, cultural hierarchies related to race, gender, and class leave marginalized survivors “beyond the purview of ‘believable victim’” by dismissing the credibility of populations most often subject to the terror of sexual violence.⁵⁵ Dominant, cumulative cultural logics thus make “belief” a difficult phenomenon to organize. Nevertheless, this study is guided by the following research question: *How do the PLVP’s discourses organize belief?* I ultimately argue that by deploying a belief biography discourse—one that traces the lifespan of belief and disbelief in public cultural rhetorics—the PLVP demonstrates how rhetorical intervention in individual contexts can target rape culture’s structural foundations. The PLVP’s “belief biography” offers hope in the promise of a novel discursive strategy that organizes public belief in survivors. Not only do belief biographies translate rhetorics of radical belief and (dis)organizing disbelief into a contemporary context, but they also constitute audiences as authors of a new story in belief’s biography who use their communication to outline the steps we must take to make our societies safer.

Method

Case Overview

The PLVP program has existed for over 30 years, and to SVVS’s knowledge, it is one of the oldest peer-led sexual violence prevention programs for youth in the U.S. The PLVP curriculum reaches approximately 4,000 K-12 students annually, and it continues to grow. During the Fall 2023 semester, for instance, the initiative set a record for the most youths

reached in a single semester: 2,612 students.⁵⁶ Members of SVVS’s “prevention team” use their expertise to develop an evidence-based curriculum surrounding sexual violence. Additionally, the PLVP’s students provide annual feedback on the curriculum that contributes to the program’s improvement. Finally, financial support from the Mountain West School District propels the curriculum’s reach. As Michelle, a study participant and SVVS employee, remarked:

“Something that’s really unique and special about the PLVP is the collaboration between the Mountain West School District and the SVVS Center... And that has helped it to be so long-standing.” The district’s role in the PLVP involves approving a standardized manual—the *PLVP Presentation Guide*—that peer educators use to read the presentations. Once the school district signs off on the annually updated *PLVP Presentation Guide*, its officials provide additional administrative support by contracting school guidance counselors and teachers to mentor the PLVP peer educators. These facilitators of the program often teach leadership courses or supervise school clubs, which allow structured discussions with peer educators about their support needs and roles in the PLVP. Beyond the prevention team and school administrators, the PLVP requires volunteer peer mentors (like me) who receive extensive training on the PLVP’s curriculum, help students learn the presentation content, and sit in during presentations to support the peer educators as well as the district’s students who receive the programming.

Participants

This case study conducted three semi-structured focus group interviews with workers and volunteers who administer the PLVP’s curriculum to the Mountain West School District students. I used snowball sampling to recruit participants involved with the PLVP programming.⁵⁷ Given my volunteerism with the PLVP, I submitted my recruitment materials to my volunteer supervisor (a member of the prevention team). My supervisor subsequently sent the

study's recruitment information to additional PLVP workers, who consented to participate in my study. Among those who agreed to participate were prevention team members ($n = 4$), Mountain West School District administrators and teachers ($n = 5$), as well as peer mentors ($n = 4$). Of my study's 13 total participants, 10 identified as cisgender women, and three identified as cisgender men. All discussants identified as white, and three were members of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants ranged in age from 24-78 years, with an average of 34.5. They had also been involved with the PLVP for anywhere between six months and 13 years, with an average of 4.2 years. Each participant selected their own unique pseudonym to represent the data and insight they contributed to the focus group.⁵⁸

Data Collection Procedures

Semi-Structured Focus Groups

I assembled this study's focus groups based on particular PLVP roles that my study's participants occupied. Moreover, Focus Group A consisted of prevention team members, Focus Group B involved administrators and teachers in the Mountain West School District, and Focus Group C included volunteer peer mentors. Each focus group lasted 90 minutes and was comprised of 4-5 discussants. Ideal "for producing insights that uniquely result from group interaction," focus groups were an appropriate data collection mechanism for this study, considering that the PLVP curriculum is collaboratively designed and distributed.⁵⁹ Further, focus group questions were "designed to produce *complementary interactions*," or conversations in which participants complement one another by expanding upon each other's contributions while working toward shared understanding or reflecting on similar experiences.⁶⁰ I asked participants questions that addressed their collective identities and experiences as anti-violence activists, which included (but were not limited to) the following "What is the biggest challenge

facing nonprofits and/or activists who wish to prevent sexual violence?” and “Write down one emotion that working with the PLVP program makes you feel.” Given Thomas Lindlof’s and Bryan Taylor’s assertion that complementary focus groups can promote “high-spirited” and fun interactions, this approach was an ideal mechanism for bringing levity to a topically difficult, potentially triggering type of conversation.⁶¹

In additional efforts to design a trauma-informed study and recognize the possible risks associated with discussing sexual violence, I requested that participants engage in creative drawing—a method known for its capacity to be “restorative for people experiencing trauma or pain.”⁶² Further, to start the focus group conversations, I invited participants to draw something they viewed as a metaphor for the PLVP program. I then asked the rest of the group to interpret the metaphors that their fellow participants had drawn. This process allowed participants to draw “complex and subtle information that [was] difficult to verbalize.”⁶³ As other discussants made sense of each drawing based on their unique perspectives, the group offered multiple modes for interpreting emotional phenomena that were challenging to describe.

Textual, Experiential, and Survey Data

Beyond verbal and visual focus group data, the most recent three editions of the *PLVP Prevention Guide* served as supplementary resources for this case study, often providing necessary context for my participants’ commentary about the PLVP. I also share broad insights from my own experiences volunteering as a PLVP mentor to offer contextual insight surrounding how PLVP presentations frequently unfold. Finally, I distributed a qualitative survey to participants following their participation in the focus group interview, which asked them questions such as “Is there anything else you would like to add to our earlier focus group discussion?” and “Was there anything that you did not want to say in front of the group that you

would like to share?” Because focus groups “can provide researchers with a false sense of unified meaning from participants,”⁶⁴ the qualitative follow-up survey offered participants the chance to share divergent opinions they may not have felt comfortable disclosing to the group.

Community-Based Participatory Research

In conducting a case study with the PLVP, I took part in community-based participatory research (CBPR), which Karen Hacker describes as a method that includes community partners in the process of designing a study and distributing its results.⁶⁵ CBPR’s ambition is to promote clear research translation and “bidirectional connections between academics and the communities that they study.”⁶⁶ Rather than presuming that researchers should create distance between themselves and the causes they study, CBPR encourages researchers to play an active role in connecting with and bettering the communities they observe.⁶⁷ As Bailey Flynn and colleagues note, “CBPR projects are oriented toward addressing a community need rather than generating research for research’s sake...”⁶⁸ The connection I cultivated with the PLVP began long before my volunteer supervisor and I pondered the possibility of working together in a shared research collaboration. During that time, I have learned that despite the curriculum’s legitimacy in its community, the SVVS Center’s nonprofit funding model often emerges as an obstacle in retaining passionate workers and extending the program’s impact. As such, when I met with my volunteer supervisor to discuss a plan for this project, we collaboratively decided that our ambition was to produce white papers and infographics that spotlight the PLVP’s innovative, subversive work. In turn, the organization will use reports from my study to apply for grant funding in the hopes that the PLVP may more sustainably meet the needs of its community. Consistent with CBPR practices, my volunteer supervisor and other members of the PLVP prevention team took part in conceptualizing the study, drafting the IRB application, recruiting

participants, writing the interview protocol, designing our data collection process, and member checking.

Positive Deviance Case Selection

In selecting the PLVP as a case example of productive anti-violence organizing, I designed this study using what Ryan Bisel and colleagues call “positive deviance case selection (PDCS),” or a method that deliberately chooses case studies in efforts to explore “intentional, nonnormative, and honorable” forms of communication within a narrow context.⁶⁹ Accordingly, I asked participants about the *intent* behind their particular strategies for communicating the curriculum to public audiences, making inquiries such as “What PLVP strategies are particularly successful for promoting believing?” and “How does the PLVP’s peer-led model promote listening?” Furthermore, I asked about *nonnormative* sexual violence rhetoric within the PLVP, inviting participants to respond to questions like “What types of survivors are we less likely to believe in society?” or “What problems does the value of ‘belief’ solve?” These questions prompted reflection about survivor positionality and the differential impact of sexual violence targeted at marginalized survivors. Considering that the PLVP’s mission is to prevent sexual violence, their curriculum represents an *honorable* mode of communication. When asked about the emotions that working for the PLVP program sparked in participants, many articulated that they felt “hope” in the possibility that the program’s students would initiate meaningful, *honorable* change. As one peer mentor named Jerry expressed: “Being involved with PLVP is one of the most meaningful things I currently do.” Bisel and colleagues indicate that PDCS “supports practical theorizing” and contributes “to organizational communication scholarship that engenders novel and transformational insights.”⁷⁰ Therefore, this study uses PDCS to show

how the PLVP offers practical, discursive mechanisms for anti-sexual violence organizing that promote the sustainability of anti-violent discourses.

Data Analysis

To code data from the focus groups, *PLVP Prevention Guides*, and the qualitative survey results, I used Sarah Tracy’s phronetic iterative approach, which “alternates between emic, or emergent, readings of the data and an etic use of existing models, explanations, and theories.”⁷¹ In other words, I depended on emergent data to discern unique characteristics of participants’ experiences while coding for specific elements that, based on my knowledge of broad sexual violence discourses, would build theoretical understanding of how we might organize cultural belief in survivors. Upon completing the data immersion phase of phronetic iterative analysis, I assigned descriptive, primary-cycle codes to each thought unit of data—a process that resulted in 107 codes. I then reviewed the primary cycle codes to determine what appeared as the most forceful, repetitive, and recurrent phenomenon within the data.⁷² This process propelled my secondary-coding phase, during which “Rather than simply mirroring and distilling the data,” researchers “explain, theorize, and synthesize” the data.”⁷³ In collapsing my primary cycle codes into 11 secondary codes, I considered how participants’ discourses mirrored Ahmed’s “complaint biographies” while advancing a complex understanding of communication’s relationship to public belief. Upon completion of the secondary-coding phrase, I identified how the PLVP’s data indicated the presence of three broad, discursive strategies that comprise what I theorize as a “belief biography”: rooting belief, redefining belief, and rippling belief.

Findings

Belief biographies, like complaint biographies, are reactive, enactive, and constitutive. My findings reveal how PLVP workers deploy belief biographies in the program’s curriculum,

tracing the lifespan of belief in public discourse through three discursive strategies that organize against rape culture. First, to “root belief,” PLVP workers explain how the curriculum is designed to *react* and respond to historical, institutionalized disbelief in survivors’ experiences and set a precedent that survivors will be believed. Rooting belief, for the PLVP, often involves rhetorical strategies that “(dis)organize disbelief” by directly refuting rape logics. Second, in “redefining belief,” the PLVP is *enactive* because it establishes new paradigms for thinking about belief that encourage survivors to tell their stories. The PLVP’s efforts to redefine belief are frequently made possible by “rhetorics of radical belief” that take victims’ credibility for granted. Third, the PLVP functions in a *constitutive* fashion by “rippling belief,” or in other words, calling its audiences into an identity in which their newfound knowledge of their responsibility for promoting belief invites them to become difference-makers in the fight to stop future instances of sexual violence.⁷⁴ In the sections that follow, I report the PLVP’s use of these three discursive strategies, revealing the roles they each play in comprising the PLVP’s belief biography.

Rooting Belief

“Rooting belief” occurs when the PLVP traces the history of cultural disbelief in survivors. In a metaphorical sense, identifying the roots of cultural practices that degrade survivors plants a new discursive seed—one that possesses the potential to outgrow tired narratives of sexual violence that discourage survivors from sharing their stories. As the PLVP points to the roots of institutionalized disbelief, the program also participates in rhetorical practices that strive to cultivate a precedent for believing survivors. PLVP focus group participants often explained how the curriculum aims to (dis)organize disbelief by targeting

disbelief's cultural history, highlighting mechanisms for institutionalizing belief, destigmatizing belief, and modeling belief.

Confronting histories of disbelief, the PLVP spells out a common consequence when a person does not believe a survivor: that the victim will hesitate to share their experience if they endure the trauma of sexual violence again. As a peer mentor named Jerry remarked: "When a child accuses someone in their family... They are usually accused of making it up." Prevention team member Amber added: "The fear of 'am I being believed?' is already in the back of their head." Accordingly, participants discussed how the PLVP and its personnel strive to transform these violent roots of gaslighting.⁷⁵ Sara, a school administrator, explained that the PLVP always promotes responding to survivors with the phrase "I will believe you" because some children who disclose sexual violence "weren't believed in the past." In my personal experience working with the PLVP, students of the curriculum have directly notified me of past difficulties they confronted when trying to convince adults to believe them, which creates fear surrounding future reporting. School administrator Josh confirmed the prevalence of this phenomenon, noting there is a pervasive rate at which children face dismissal: "How many times has that student already said something to somebody else? And they didn't believe them? So, they're going to be less willing to share..." Belief, in essence, possesses a lifespan because our communicative norms surrounding belief and disbelief affect survivors' choices to disclose their experiences or seek help.⁷⁶ As the *PLVP Prevention Guide* warns students: "If you have a friend tell you that [sexual violence] is happening to them, **believe** them. You may be the first person your friend talks to about the harassment or assault. If you don't believe them, you may also be the last person they choose to tell." Such rhetoric situates all receivers of its message as central to destroying the

roots of rape culture that enable assault by keeping survivors quiet, directly targeting cultural infrastructure for disbelief.

Drawing attention to additional roots of mainstream disbelief in survivors, participants showed how the PLVP (dis)organizes disbelief by both criticizing historically common logics that make excuses for perpetrators and using evidence to challenge misconceptions. Debbie, a prevention team member, articulated that “people want to believe that we can point out who perpetrators are: gross perverts always. It’s never someone who is admired or has power.” Echoing the idea that people ordinarily held in high esteem are overlooked as potential perpetrators of sexual violence, administrator Elaina recited a script that often emerges when people have positive relationships with an individual accused of sexual violence, ironically stating: “No, I know that person, so you must have it wrong.” In these instances, facilitators of the PLVP continually acknowledged the roots of why people often believe perpetrators but disbelieve victims. Offering an additional perspective on the sources of societal logics that dismiss survivors, peer mentor Goldie stated that “We, as human beings, might believe myths or misinformation because we don’t want to believe that it can happen to us.” In essence, the PLVP is keenly aware of personal motivations used to dismiss survivors, and the program strives to teach its audiences how making excuses for perpetrators is often a natural response to being embedded in rape culture.

Because victim-blaming functions as a coping mechanism for handling fears of violence, according to PLVP facilitators, Elaina noted that the PLVP’s statistics play an important role in debunking myths about sexual assault, including part of the curriculum that mentions how a perpetrator is “most likely to be someone that you know.” As the *PLVP Presentation Guide* mentions, “93% of minors who were sexually assaulted knew their perpetrator.” Perpetrators

“could be a romantic partner, family member, friend, or someone they simply know,” the guide continues. The curriculum also makes fighting rape culture a personal issue for audiences of the program. One activity during the PLVP presentation involves reading the students a list of nine experiences of sexual assault and harassment that are common to youth their age, inviting students to silently “give themselves a point” for each statement that rings true for themselves or someone they know. The audience is then prompted to raise their hands if they counted five or more points. Having supervised dozens of PLVP presentations throughout my volunteer work, I found that every single audience I have mentored has had a majority of students raise their hands during the PLVP’s activity—even during the middle school presentations I have attended. The program’s curriculum reveals to students that sexual violence is a localized issue, not a distant one—a problem that impacts audiences of the curriculum and the people they care about. The PLVP communicates to its audiences that, despite the popular myths that strangers often commit sexual violence,⁷⁷ survivors are worthy of belief because perpetrators have a presence in everyday (and everyone’s) life. In directly targeting rape myths, the PLVP intends to root belief by (dis)organizing disbelief.

Furthermore, PLVP discourses protest dominant sexual violence narratives of “perfect” perpetrators and “worthy” victims that, throughout history, have sewn disbelief among marginalized survivors most susceptible to the terror of sexual violence.⁷⁸ Participants routinely noted that the “perfect perpetrator” often indexes men of color in popular discourses, while the “worthiest” or most “perfect” victims are often assumed to be white women. For example, prevention team member Olivia articulated: “Stories that aren’t easily digestible are very difficult... I do think the ‘perfect perpetrator’ probably looks more like most victims, as in maybe belonging to more of those marginalized groups... And with that, I think the ‘perfect victim’ is

usually a young white girl.” Rhetorical research confirms Olivia’s speculation that men of color are routine archetypes for sexual violence predators, while dominant discourses most often portray victims as white women.⁷⁹ Yet, when marginalized survivors experience sexual violence, the roots of rape culture make them susceptible to dismissal, per Olivia’s commentary. Expanding upon a similar idea, Amber noted that when a victim “didn’t fight back, that doesn’t paint this image of this helpless victim” or provide people with a sense of personal security. She continued, “I think that there are people out there who are less likely to believe somebody in that situation.” Nevertheless, Olivia asserted that the PLVP functioned “to get rid of the ideas or images that we have in our head based on historical narratives that have been set for a really, really long time.” In essence, the PLVP traces harmful ideologies surrounding sexual violence to their roots, underscoring specific societal logics that, if changed, would make survivors feel believed even in instances where their story of victimhood did not align with widely-circulated, often-oppressive narratives surrounding sexual violence.

Beyond targeting historical, mainstream narratives of disbelief in efforts to depict the origins of belief’s biography, the PLVP’s rhetoric aims to institutionalize a culture of belief by drawing on systemic sources of authority to legitimize the curriculum. For instance, one school administrator named Doug asserted that the Mountain West School District’s institutional sponsorship of the PLVP “speaks volumes to the program. And it tells our students that the whole district is behind this and supports this.” The district’s role in the PLVP, according to Doug, was a powerful feature of the program that symbolized the district’s belief in the systemic nature of sexual violence; the school’s institutional support rhetorically authorized the advocacy of the PLVP activists. Feyre, a peer mentor, furthered that school is “the most official venue that children have, right? So, it brings this validity into what we’re talking about” when the district

makes a point to put PLVP programming in the regular school curriculum. Institutional support, for school administrator Aurora, sent the following message to students: “You’re just not alone.” She furthered: “Seeing the number of staff that come in, they’re vocal and like ‘Yes, I’m going to support this.’ I think that gives kids courage.” Ultimately, the school district’s systemic status and belief in the devastating reach of sexual violence emerged as an important talking point with students of the curriculum—one designed to compel students to recognize the magnitude of rape culture’s influence and the importance of local advocacy in effort to (dis)organize cultural logics of disbelief.

In addition to naming institutional support as a powerful symbolic force to acquire buy-in from students, participants suggested that the local community’s valuing of the program generated further belief in the PLVP’s capacity to make a difference. Michelle, for example, remarked that part of the PLVP’s merit came from the fact that “the program has been around so long; those roots are already pretty deep in the community.” In a similar vein, Goldie observed that “just the fact that the PLVP program exists, like believing that this is an issue that needs prevention” had the potential to challenge “a lot of people who still just don’t even want to believe that [sexual violence] is a thing.” In essence, the community’s long-term buy-in with the PLVP program gives the curriculum ethos because the mere presence of such a sophisticated prevention infrastructure indicates the community’s investment in the power of local anti-violence advocacy.

PLVP workers also expressed how the curriculum aims to promote belief by recognizing the stigmatization that has categorized dominant historical discourses about sexual violence. Doug explained that members of his generation “were never trained in this. We didn’t really talk about it... And I think a lot of adults have a harder time talking about it.” Across conversations

with workers for the PLVP—both in my role as a focus group moderator and volunteer—one central point of agreement among us was that most of us never had access to a sexual violence prevention curriculum at all, much less a program built on the power of peer leadership. The PLVP, then, according to Sara, was designed to root belief by giving “permission to talk about [sexual violence]” in light of cultural taboos.

Other participants also emphasized that talking about sexual violence is difficult. For instance, during focus group discussions, participants were asked to draw metaphors that they believed represented the PLVP program. Feyre created a rainbow with spikes that led to a pot of gold, as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Feyre’s drawing of a rainbow with spikes as a metaphor for the PLVP. (Photograph by Lauren L. Buisker, July 12, 2024).

When asked to interpret Feyre’s drawing, Goldie responded: “Obviously, it’s not all sunshine and rainbows when you’re talking about sexual violence. So, you have to have the harder conversations, or prevention programming, to get the rainbows, to get the pot of gold where there is change.” Jerry agreed, noting that “It’s a spikey road onto the pot of gold.” In sum,

participants claimed that talking about sexual violence required courage to confront past cultural stigmas. Within the PLVP's curriculum, discussing the history of silence that damaged belief's cultural biography helps public audiences move forward in productive promotion of belief.

Another mechanism by which participants and the PLVP strive to root belief is by modeling acts of belief in situations unrelated to believing survivors. For instance, PLVP workers indicated the importance of multi-layered belief, noting that by believing in students' ideas and concerns, they set an example for what it means to assume an individual's positive intentions. Michelle explained that "when you're working with young people, as adults, in order for it to feel relevant and engaging and impactful for them, we have to incorporate their feedback and their examples and their stories." For Michelle, students deserve to be heard when they share insight about the curriculum, given that the PLVP's objective is to instill in students that survivors deserve to be heard. Therefore, the PLVP strives to obtain students' buy-in by including them in the curriculum design process. Similarly, Elaina expressed that learners of the program and adults administering the PLVP needed to view expertise as reciprocal. She stated: "You have the adults who are running the program, but also... It's important to know from the peers or from that demographic what's working, what's not working." In direct response to Elaina, Sara added: "Getting [feedback] specifically from kids... is really important. Because what we think might be right is so not right in the minds of kids," especially with regard to a stigmatized topic like sexual violence. Essentially, to move beyond disbelief and delegitimization of survivors, the PLVP makes a point to believe in the power of students' concerns because doing so sends a message about the necessity of valuing and listening to victims' perspectives.

Communicating belief, for the PLVP, also involves modeling belief by committing to hearing out adversaries who may have deeply-rooted ideologies that support rape culture. Amber shared that when confronted with students who assert myths about sexual violence, prevention programs need to acknowledge that the students “heard it from somewhere.” In other words, the PLVP facilitators avoid blaming students for perspectives that were likely conveyed to them by adults embedded in a culture that tolerates and perpetuates sexual violence. Accordingly, the PLVP workers grapple with challenges to their programming by striving to “hear those myths that people hold, validate [them], show that we really did hear and listen, and then try to offer up facts and correct information.” In agreement, Debbie responded to Amber’s commentary by offering that to “change the culture and the myths that do exist, having a head-butting approach unfortunately doesn’t work.” In other words, Debbie sought to (dis)organize disbelief, rather than to directly confront students with arguments about the necessity of cultural belief. Listening to harmful scripts surrounding sexual violence and responding with care, for Debbie, was an effective approach “to try to shift attitudes with people that maybe totally believe something different.” In the end, the PLVP organizes cultural belief by setting a precedent that to believe is not to dismiss; to believe is to recognize the roots of one’s concern—however misguided it may be—and to care enough about that person to help facilitate their eventual growth. Rooting belief requires recognition of where belief’s biography began—a story that started with institutionalized disbelief but possesses the potential to evolve in productive directions through rhetorical practices of redefinition.

Redefining Belief

“Redefining belief” is the second component of a belief biography—a rhetorical strategy the PLVP uses to transcend conventional definitions of “belief.” If “rooting belief” tells us about

where belief has been and the rhetorical practices we might use to uproot rape culture, “redefining belief” exemplifies the definitional strategies the PLVP is using to orient belief in a new, enlightened direction. The PLVP’s redefinition of belief often functions through a rhetoric of radical belief grounded in care, operating in contrast to rape culture discourses that frame the choice to believe a survivor as illogical and immoral. Instead, by taking survivors’ credibility for granted, the PLVP situates belief as logical and caring, offering narratives of sexual violence that encompass marginalized victims’ experiences. This new paradigm for thinking about belief is enactive because, by teaching audiences of the curriculum to deploy belief as a default response to survivors, it gives victims a safe space to seek support.

The PLVP forwards a novel definition of belief through the notion that recipients of victims’ stories have no authority to “investigate” what happened—setting forth a new trajectory of belief’s biography in which survivors’ credibility is not to be questioned. In essence, the PLVP’s rhetoric of not “investigating” functions as a rhetoric of radical belief by refusing to evaluate survivors’ credibility. As Olivia explained: “[The PLVP], it’s very victim-focused. A lot of emphasis on ‘it’s not your job to investigate—just your job to listen and to believe and to assume that the person is telling the truth.’” Elaborating on the notion of what it means to be victim-focused, the *PLVP Presentation Guide* defines wanted sexual intimacy versus sexual violence by stating: “The only person who defines what is wanted or unwanted is the **receiver**. If the receiver feels uncomfortable, embarrassed, or threatened by someone’s behavior, that’s a problem. It doesn’t matter what was intended.” Because the perpetrator’s intent is irrelevant to whether an instance of sexual violence occurred, those tasked with supporting survivors have no grounds to ask victims questions about the details of their assault, the sexual violence they experienced, or what the perpetrator *meant* to do, according to the PLVP. Out of care for the

survivors, the PLVP's contemporary rhetoric of radical belief refuses to ask survivors questions that might insinuate blame. Maggie, a peer mentor, spelled out this phenomenon by discussing how one explicit quotation in the *PLVP Presentation Guide* "says 'it's not our job to investigate,' and specifically lays out questions not to ask. 'Don't ask why questions.' 'Don't ask leading questions.'" Michelle confirmed that belief should be considered a quick response to a disclosure during the prevention team focus group: "We always start by believing; no questions, no exceptions." While dominant discourses surrounding belief deem it "illogical" to subscribe to an idea that one cannot see, the PLVP curriculum flips this script by refusing to evaluate survivors' credibility and opting for victims' care.

For the PLVP, belief is the sole, appropriate reaction to sexual violence; PLVP workers argue that belief should function as a formulaic response to victims' stories—a box that anyone supporting a survivor should check. The *PLVP Presentation Guide* notes:

Tell them you believe them. Tell them what happened to them is **not their fault**. Remember that victims often blame themselves for sexual violence. You may be the first person to tell them it's not their fault. **Believe** that they have been seriously affected and are not over-reacting, don't expect a certain reaction or judge them if they act otherwise. Don't judge their perception of what happened or their actions.

Maggie articulated that granting victims an *a priori* sense of belief is an important feature of the PLVP because "There isn't moving forward if you don't start with the assumption of belief." In other words, cultural articulations of belief as "illogical" inhibit victims' stories from being told by preventing survivors from seeking help. Yet, for Maggie, belief is a logical action because it gives voice to victims who can seek support and strive to heal after they have shared their stories. In this sense, believing survivors comprises the first step in caring for them. Likewise, Josh explained that belief gives survivors courage. He said, "Just saying the word 'believe' means that you're going to share something with me and I'm going to believe you." Counterintuitively, the

PLVP forwards that believing a survivor means to not evaluate their believability in efforts to encourage them to find help. Because the PLVP aims to make belief a guarantee following disclosures, the program supports victims' voices by using a forward-looking definition of belief that does not question survivors' credibility.

The PLVP also deploys a "power in numbers" rhetoric to assert that belief is a logical reaction to the pervasive nature of sexual violence. Doug expressed that the PLVP's frequent sharing of statistics about the number of people impacted by sexual violence has "always been pretty profound." The presentation calls attention to the significant number of children who have experienced sexual violence, pointing out how many students in any given classroom have likely been victims in light of what studies tell us about the prevalence of sexual violence; the *PLVP Presentation Guide* writes that "in an average class size of 32 students in [our state], someone has experienced felony-level sexual assault." Reacting to the PLVP's statistics, Doug furthered: "When you see those numbers, in the back as an observer, and you're watching your 50 kids, you're like 'oh, my gosh.' That's large." By pointing out the magnitude of sexual violence victimization, the PLVP aims to make survivors feel less alone.⁸⁰ Sara also described the PLVP's process of sharing how many student disclosures within the school district took place among school administrators. "There are so many," she said, that are made possible by the safe space that the PLVP cultivates; she continued that "It's astounding, like hundreds. How can you not believe that? You know, that's telling." Given the sheer quantity of people impacted by sexual violence, disbelieving survivors is framed as illogical because it challenges what the PLVP argues is an objectively devastating feature of reality.

The PLVP's move to situate sexual violence as an issue with "objective" levels of devastation forwards a novel notion of belief in which survivors' stories deserve the benefit of

the doubt because statistics support their truths. However, instead of merely sharing statistics about sexual violence to argue that sexual violence is a systemic problem, the PLVP intentionally avoids subsuming survivors' stories with numerical narratives by sharing anonymized stories of victims in the local community. These survivors wrote about their experiences and volunteered to have their testimonies printed in the *PLVP Presentation Guide*. As Doug remarked, when audiences of the curriculum hear the survivors' stories, "I think they see themselves potentially with some of these warning signs," meaning that some audiences begin to recognize their own harmful attitudes that legitimize sexual violence. Doug furthered that this personal aspect of the program, especially boys in the program, made him "hopeful that they are seeing the negative impact" sexual violence had on people in their own communities. Ultimately, the curriculum's communication trusts survivors' embodied knowledge as rational based on both systemic and personal data, offering a persuasive warrant for victims' believability.

Belief is not only a logical response to the magnitude of sexual violence, but according to the PLVP, it fulfills an ethical obligation. To forward a novel definition of belief that associates the term with moral decision-making, the PLVP argues that society's capacity to create a culture of belief depends upon our efforts to create a culture of care. Participating further in their rhetoric of radical belief grounded in care ethics, the PLVP understands belief as a moral undertaking based on the premise that to believe a person means to recognize their value as a person worthy of care. As Feyre put it:

The opposite of belief in some of these circumstances, it's not disbelief. It could just be not caring enough to act on it. You know, the whole "boys will be boys" [saying]. I just got chills saying that. You know what I mean? Where it's a lack of caring enough to take action or to want to disrupt the power systems that exist, or that whatever impact that action had on the victim is less important than the impact of doing something about it would have on the perpetrator.

In this case, belief is enactive because it means choosing to value a survivor's humanity over a perpetrator's reputation and promoting a new definition of belief that shows victims they deserve kindness and care. Highlighting a core component of the PLVP's mission, Debbie also noted that the program teaches students "to listen to survivors' stories in a non-judgmental, open-minded way." To reveal how judgment is often cast down upon survivors within hegemonic rhetoric, the *PLVP Presentation Guide* instructs audiences of the curriculum on what *not* to do when striving to believe survivors in a judgment-free way: "**Listen** without judging your friend. Don't ask blaming questions like 'Did you lead them on? What were you wearing? Why didn't you tell them to stop?'" By giving students these tangible scripts to avoid when supporting survivor disclosures, the PLVP deems declarations of non-judgmental belief enactive; they *do* something positive for victims amidst a culture that produces fear and shame.⁸¹ Sara explained this morally sound consequence of belief: "It provides that sense of safety; there's no judgment attached to belief." While dominant discourses frame survivors as immoral threats to perpetrators' potential,⁸² the PLVP offers a definition of belief that presumes survivors' morality. Moreover, cultural belief activates victims' disclosures by subscribing to a logic that telling one's story of survival cannot be equated with causing harm.

When belief is not the response to survivors' disclosures, disbelief is enactive because it promotes the flourishing of rape culture. Yet, one individual's willingness to believe a survivor can set new precedents that compel a chain reaction where victims feel safe enough to speak their truths. When reciting the *PLVP Presentation Guide*, the peer educators explain that "If victims report, then perpetrators would be more likely to be held accountable. If perpetrators are held accountable, there might be less perpetration of sexual violence." The PLVP curriculum then invites audiences to play a role in promoting an innovative conceptualization of belief

grounded in ethical commitments. Moreover, by arguing that “small things like **stereotypes, jokes, and language** we use can contribute to a **culture** that supports violence,” the program advocates for more careful communication practices that cultivate a safe space for survivors to feel heard and make it more difficult for perpetrators to commit acts of violence. The following interaction played out between Goldie and Feyre, whose commentary illustrates this claim:

Goldie: How cool that the PLVP is creating space for students who haven't been believed to have the opportunity to feel empowered and stand up for themselves and advocate for themselves in ways that feel good for them, even though they've been screwed over by [a legal] institution that needs to make a lot of changes...

Feyre: One word you just said was ‘advocate...’ And that really stuck out to me because every time we believe a student or somebody who discloses, they are learning that they can come forward. They're learning to advocate for themselves, and maybe next time that kid will be President one day, instead of the perpetrator.

Belief's enactive capacity thus lies in the power of collective, community care that provokes healing processes among survivors, and in doing so, creates a new chapter in our cultural narratives of belief. Because belief, according to the PLVP members, can temporarily alleviate the pain and trauma that often accompany victims' experiences with sexual violence, communicating one's belief in a survivor qualifies as a moral, community-oriented undertaking that minimizes suffering.

Care-oriented, radical belief also operates through discourses that recognize and respect victims' autonomy. Elaina explained that when a person experiences sexual violence, “they've been vulnerable; they had choices taken from them and made for them.” Accordingly, the PLVP's promotion of discourse that gives victims several options following instances of sexual violence plays an important role in empowering survivors' choices. The PLVP, as Elaina mentioned, sponsors a logic of “Here are your options, and I'm here to support whatever you want to do with that.” In essence, the PLVP encourages care for survivors by revealing the

importance of restoring their autonomy. Additional participants indicated that the PLVP teaches its students to recognize the personhood of survivors as a characteristic that qualifies victims for belief. Jerry described the PLVP as an effort to promote “understanding of boundaries and enlightenment about the treatment of other people.” Believing, by this uniquely crafted PLVP standard, means to respect a person’s autonomy to define their boundaries and set terms for how they deserve to be treated.

In contrast to dominant discourses that render one’s believability dependent on societal schemas of racism, sexism, cisheteronormativity, classism, and ableism, among other systems of oppression, the PLVP defines belief as a resource that should be distributed equally regardless of social hierarchies. To do so, its curriculum breaks down cultural hierarchies that promote disbelief of marginalized survivors or victims whose stories do not match problematic, imagined societal narratives about how sexual violence is “supposed” to occur. Debbie, for instance, maintained that there is a “perfect story that people want to hear.” Examining the types of narratives inconsistent with that “perfect story,” she continued: “We do not want to believe that it’s possible for someone to freeze and not fight back. We don’t want to believe that a family friend is going to assault a minor.” To extend this list, Amber explained the main “image that we have [is] ‘They were walking down the street and someone jumped out and attacked them. And they were helpless. And there was a weapon involved...’ A lot of people in society want that to be the story.” Belief is often conditional upon whether an occurrence of sexual violence complies with narratives that infrequently align with victims’ lived experiences, but the PLVP produces a new narrative that refuses to place survivors in a confining box of self-blame.

To shift belief’s biography productively forward, the program’s curriculum gives its audiences the language to make sense of experiences they may not have otherwise understood or

perceived as sexual violence.⁸³ Sara suggested that without programs like the PLVP, children who become victims of sexual violence “don’t have the vocabulary to truly express what they want to say.” Per Jerry’s commentary: “The corollary of that is that it’s pretty easy for people in the position of power to make other people and even the child believe that they just made this shit up.” Therefore, the PLVP pushes its audiences’ understanding into a new epistemological terrain made possible by productive vocabulary. Aurora, for instance, explained that PLVP’s clear differentiation of sexual harassment and sexual assault gives potential victims the knowledge to process the severity of acts of violence that others commit against them. She noted: “Differentiating harassment and assault—that education piece does open up people to believe victims more” in instances where, for example, they may not have realized that “de-pantsing of another person is assault.” In other words, the PLVP uses language to construct novel definitions of what qualifies as assault, laying a foundation for the longevity of belief’s biography by giving audiences the capacity to understand nuances surrounding experiences with sexual violence that fall beyond the bounds of hegemonic narratives.

Furthermore, the PLVP emphasizes the fact that “sexual violence affects everyone,” according to its presentation guide. “It happens to adults, kids, old, rich, poor, straight, gay, bisexual, people of any gender, and people from all different ethnic and racial backgrounds,” the manual continues. The notion that all people are susceptible to the threat of sexual violence drives discussions about the types of people in society who are less likely to be believed and the mechanisms by which society may strive to make all victims feel seen. Josh discussed how men are often absent from mainstream conversations about victimhood because “[in] thinking about all the typical hetero-men stereotypes, you don’t want to talk about it because that shows

weakness and shows vulnerability and that you're not strong and able to take care of yourself."

Offering the PLVP's curriculum as a solution to men's erasure, Amber also stated:

If we're sharing statistics, and we don't have any examples that have a male survivor, then it just feels maybe lonely. Whereas if we're able to include lots of different types of scenarios and examples, then hopefully those kids can see themselves and can see "Okay, someone will believe me, or somebody will want to hear my story and get me help."

She continued that "including statistics that reach a broader population of people, whether that's the LGBTQ community or BIPOC individuals," can "make sure that we are inclusive of all people's identities." Indeed, the *PLVP Presentation Guide* offers statistics specific to many marginalized communities' experiences with sexual violence, including queer folks, women of color, people with disabilities, and working-class individuals. By forwarding narratives that encompass numerous experiences with oppression, the PLVP programming encourages marginalized survivors to share their stories, showing oppressed audience members that the initiative is striving to build a world in which a person's believability is not mediated by their gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, ability, or socio-economic class. In centering marginality in its curriculum, the PLVP redefines our terms for who "counts" as a believable victim.⁸⁴

Beyond including minoritized identities in its curriculum, the PLVP accentuates the fact that survivors among oppressed populations confront differential amounts of degradation when sharing their stories of sexual violence. The *PLVP Prevention Guide* provides a fitting summary of how the curriculum creates conversation surrounding identity-based oppression. It writes:

Sexual assault is often misrepresented in our media as an issue of sex or sexual desire. In reality, it is about gaining or maintaining **power** and **control** over someone else... Sexual violence can happen to anyone. However, some individuals have been given **less power** in our society; therefore, they are more often targeted for this kind of violence... These facts demonstrate how perpetrators will use their power to take advantage of someone who may not be able to identify the abuse, report it, access resources, or seek help.

Olivia noted that the intention behind communicating differential effects among victims, stating that because "sexual violence is an issue that affects everybody," it is important for students to

know that not all victims experience sexual violence in the same way. “So, there are groups of people,” she continued, that maybe are more likely to be affected than others, or that experience it differently.” For Debbie, discussions of sexual violence are inseparable from conversations about power and inequity, which are integral “to understanding the whole picture of sexual violence and how it has to end.” Within the PLVP curriculum, she viewed it as “crucial” that sexual violence is recognized as “completely related to other power imbalances that we have in our society: gender, racial, and socioeconomic. We talk about these things in the training.” By redefining sexual violence as a crime of power instead of an act of desire, the PLVP indicates that anti-sexual violence activism must (dis)organize disbelief that harms oppressed survivors and forward an activist paradigm that values differences instead of erasing them. With narratives about marginalization at the forefront of its curriculum, the PLVP offers an example of activism that pushes discourses about sexual violence in productive, inclusive directions.

Further, participants recognized the powerful role that cultural belief would play in dismantling power systems that harm marginalized victims. Goldie suggested that future activists may use belief to orient away from credibility discourses that reinforce societal identity hierarchies. She explained: “As a world, [we] will cling to keeping power away from people who don’t have it by minimizing the credibility that they have, therefore not listening to them, often not even giving them the opportunity to be believed.” By extension, then, discourses revolving around a survivor’s believability must be replaced with a cultural impulse to simply believe victims. As Maggie articulated, “if the person with less power was believed, it would take away power from the powerful... It would dismantle the power system.” Defined by the PLVP as logical, moral, and something that should be unconnected to social hierarchies, belief holds the capacity to redistribute power. The PLVP’s version of belief enacts a new paradigm for

understanding sexual violence, organizing a community in which survivors may feel safer within a culture that views their stories as rational forms of self-advocacy. Such rhetoric strives to grow a culture in which all members of our society are less likely to endure the terror of sexual violence; it paves a path for new definitions of belief to support a positive story arc in belief's biography—one that empowers victims and facilitates perpetrator accountability.

Rippling Belief

The final component of the PLVP's belief biography—"rippling belief"—is a constitutive discursive strategy that calls upon audiences of the PLVP's curriculum to become future agents of change in the fight to end rape culture. While "redefining belief" involves altering the epistemological resources we possess for thinking about belief and survivor support, "rippling belief" invites audiences to step into an activist identity—one wherein they fulfill their potential as anti-sexual violence advocates by using their newfound knowledge of belief to expand the PLVP program's reach and generate collective rhetorical power. To examine the future trajectory of belief's biography, PLVP focus group participants demonstrate the curriculum's capacity to ripple outward by conceptualizing belief as a relational phenomenon, suggesting that knowledge-sharing and advocacy practices are mechanisms for obtaining power, and revealing the discursive processes the PLVP deploys to produce agents of change.

The PLVP curriculum imparts to its participants that belief is a relational activity. Essentially, belief occurs in individual contexts when people have believed in other previous contexts, so establishing a culture of belief requires PLVP students to draw upon their relational ties with others in efforts to start chain reactions of belief. When asked to identify a metaphor that characterized the PLVP, Goldie drew the image pictured in Figure 3 below, which illustrates this phenomenon.



Figure 3. Goldie’s drawing of a campfire as a metaphor for the PLVP. (Photograph by Lauren L. Buisker, July 12, 2024).

The campfire in the drawing is producing sparks that have the potential to leave the immediate vicinity of the fire itself and start other objects on fire. In reference to the PLVP program in her artwork, Goldie wrote: “It only takes a spark!” given that one peer educator always possesses the capability to spread their ideas in ways that have unknown, significant impacts on their communities. Accordingly, belief is constitutive because belief is precedent-setting; it sparks more belief. Moreover, the foundational, peer-oriented nature of the relationships between PLVP peer educators and students of the curriculum lays a foundation for conversations about sexual violence that offer hope in the possibility of inspiring additional activists. As Amber explained:

What's really powerful about the peer-led model is just how much more willing I think other students are to listen to what is being said. I think it's probably more impactful than their health teacher just getting up there and talking about this and being like, "Oh, just another adult, who's here to lecture me about something." [It's] "I have my friend from math class, who's up there like talking about this, and they seem passionate about it, and they care about it."

When anti-sexual violence advocacy turns belief practices into relational phenomena grounded in peer support, as does the PLVP, such programming can ripple in its impact due to an ethos built on mutual respect and shared care for an issue often stigmatized by dominant discourses.⁸⁵ In capitalizing on this peer leadership model, the PLVP amplifies the constitutive capability of its belief biographies. Put differently, belief biographies are already constitutive because they recognize the interdependence of past, present, and future interactions surrounding belief. But belief biographies are *hyper-constitutive* because the respect that categorizes the relationship between peers compels from audiences a heightened sense of responsibility for taking part in ethical belief discourses.

Beyond depending upon pre-existing relationships to inspire change, the PLVP's peer-leadership model functions to build community identity around the shared goals of supporting survivors and ending sexual violence. Doug, for example, brainstormed that "campfire conversations" were a fitting metaphor for the PLVP. As he described, "When you sit around a campfire... You're having fun. But then also, campfire conversations can get more serious sometimes, and you feel really connected after you've spent time around a campfire." The PLVP ultimately forges connections between the peer educators and the program's learners that compel audiences of the curriculum to advocate for themselves. Peer educators possess a semi-hierarchical position in relation to their classmates who participate in the PLVP as audience members, given that the peers possess knowledge that their fellow classmates may not have encountered. However, the peer-like nature of the role still makes the educators approachable; as

Goldie explained, “I think that a lot of students who have experienced a PLVP presentation and have their peers present that to them—they have found this freedom in being able to share their voice.” Whether their voices operate in self-disclosure or, as Debbie puts it, out of a desire to “spread the ability to be an advocate” for survivors, the PLVP cultivates a community that draws upon relationality to generate confidence among survivors who may be scared to tell their stories and among activists who feel a responsibility for creating a safer society.

Shared knowledge networks also become a mechanism by which the PLVP’s educators and students cultivate power that organizes against rape culture by extending belief’s lifespan beyond the temporal bounds of individual presentations. The PLVP’s peer educators aim to create legacies of belief that transcend their work with the program. One metaphor collaboratively generated by Debbie and Olivia aptly summarizes this idea:

Debbie: You plant the seed of information with PLVP, but then it will grow throughout their lives.

Olivia: Affecting the rest of the ground and the other plants.

In essence, belief can become a self-sustaining, thriving ecosystem because peer-leadership lends itself to supporting belief networks that grow each time an audience member of the PLVP relays the curriculum’s knowledge to someone else.⁸⁶ According to the PLVP, any one person’s safety depends upon the broader health of a community—a reality that cultivates among students a sense of interdependence and a collective duty to share their newfound knowledge of the PLVP’s curriculum. As the peer educators note when reading from the *PLVP Presentation Guide*:

Ending sexual violence can feel really overwhelming. But we’re here today because we **believe** we can end sexual harassment and assault by **altering some of the ways that our culture supports violence...** We want you to leave class today feeling like there are **tangible things** you can do to make our community safer and less tolerant of violence.

Shifting cultural values is made possible by the program's conceptualization of discourse and information-sharing as forms of power—as communicative tools for constituting a culture that believes. In other words, the PLVP's curriculum participates in a rhetoric that recognizes the significance of discourse in the fight to end sexual violence. “The culture change that we want to see,” explained Michelle, “is a lot harder to do... with an adult coming in for a one-time presentation and leaving. But having the students who are there and in that culture being able to influence it, and then get older and become adults and have that knowledge and skill set. It's really powerful.” While the program's impacts in themselves are difficult to measure outside the data surrounding how many students receive the PLVP curriculum, the organization's goal of sparking a “culture change” understands how communication functions as a conduit for attitudinal shifts that result in less material violence.⁸⁷

In addition to providing students with the communicative skills to intervene in rape culture, the PLVP aims to create ripple effects with its curriculum by allowing students to practice what it means to believe survivors. To do so, the program employs role-playing activities. One feature of the training program for the peer educators involves small-group discussions with the students, during which a mentor reads a scenario of how assaults often occur. At a recent PLVP event, for instance, I helped peer educators work through a hypothetical case study during which one person in the scenario sexually harassed a member of their family. In doing so, I read the case and asked the peer educators what they would say to the victim if that person were a friend at school. Aurora explained that such “modeling with the role plays... teach[es] students how they can interact and be a support for one another.” In offering opportunities for students to practice supporting victims with belief, the PLVP helps cultivate confidence necessary during real-life disclosure scenarios when survivors require support and

resources. “Within the programming itself,” Goldie furthered, “having the role playing activities is really impactful for modeling what listening can look like and thinking about what it means to listen to understand, rather than listening to respond.” The PLVP curriculum, reported Goldie, gave students the chance to think through several variables impacting a particular case study surrounding sexual violence—inviting them to thoughtfully consider how to respond so they might feel better-equipped to do so when asked for help in real life. As Sara put it: The PLVP demonstrates a “ripple effect piece” by teaching students to “be a listening ear for somebody else.” The PLVP program, in its transformative capacity, constitutes audiences of its curriculum as having the ability to make change because it is designed to make them feel practiced in how to believe and support survivors. The learners’ agency, constituted in discourse,⁸⁸ gives life to belief’s longevity within public culture.

To provide evidence of the PLVP’s constitutive power, focus group participants discussed the program’s success by using metaphors of transformation and explaining how many of the PLVP’s students went on to share the PLVP’s curriculum beyond immediate audiences. Sara and Elaina both drew butterflies when asked to produce a metaphorical picture of the PLVP. Each of them explained that the transformation of caterpillars into butterflies represented how PLVP audiences start at a knowledge deficit surrounding sexual violence but shift into advocates following the training. Another conversation about metaphors for the PLVP resulted in Olivia’s drawing, which is pictured in Figure 4 below.

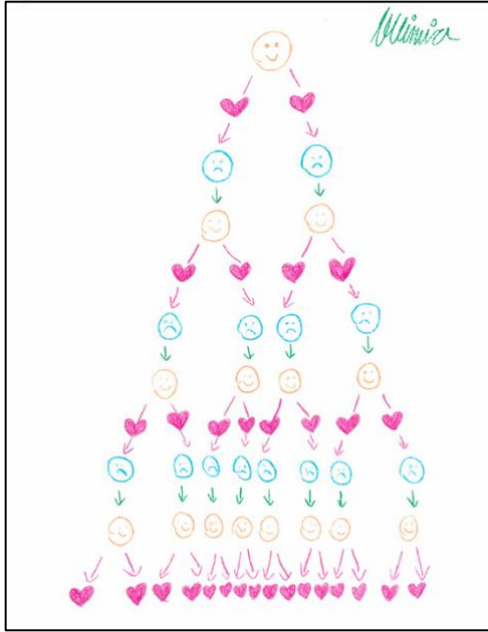


Figure 4. Olivia’s drawing of what Debbie referred to as an “MLM,” a metaphor for the PLVP. (Photograph by Lauren L. Buisker, July 10, 2024).

When asked to interpret Olivia’s metaphor, Debbie replied: “It kind of looks like multi-level marketing,” or for short, an MLM that converts product consumers into product sellers. The group laughed at Debbie’s MLM comment, so she clarified that the PLVP was not an MLM: “We’re not selling a product; we are promoting healthy behaviors.” Yet, Olivia ultimately identified the metaphor of an “MLM” as a comparable analogy to the PLVP. She expressed:

The green arrows were supposed to indicate transformation—so, with peer educators spreading that support and knowledge to other people who might be feeling down or not knowing how to handle these situations. And then that, in turn, makes them also not into peer educators, but also into advocates of sorts, who are then able to affect other people... So, in a way, it is a little bit like an MLM. But the end result is love, and I think that’s pretty cool.

The rhetorical power of the PLVP emerged from the curriculum’s capacity to transform its students by convincing them that one person can play a significant role in impacting multiple people and compelling them to care for others. By constituting peer educators and audiences of

the PLVP as capable of producing a large change, the PLVP intends to give its members the tools to become activists.

Indeed, many people involved with the PLVP carry their experiences with the curriculum well beyond their K-12 education. Michelle told the story of a former PLVP peer educator who, in college, “had a roommate that was doing inappropriate things and had some problematic behaviors. And the PLVP peer had his PLVP guide still and got it out and shared the presentation... with his roommate.” Josh shared a similar narrative upon declaring that the PLVP’s impact “goes well beyond just that 90-minute meeting.” Exemplifying how the PLVP empowers students to transform their communities, he noted: “One of our students—he was the president of his fraternity, and he incorporated a PLVP-type presentation for his fraternity. That’s empowering to me.” In the end, the PLVP’s orientation toward the future imparts agency onto its students, whose enlightenment allows them to step into an identity in which they understand that we all possess a responsibility to fight rape culture by believing survivors.

Conclusion

In my volunteer work for the PLVP, I have witnessed firsthand the curriculum’s capacity to transform young generations of learners into activists. To conclude my focus group interviews with the PLVP’s workers, I asked them how assisting with the PLVP’s curriculum made them *feel*. One of their most common responses was “hopeful,” as indicated in Figure 5 by the fact that 10 out of 13 participants listed this emotion.



Figure 5. All the sticky notes on which participants noted that the PLVP made them feel “hope” or “hopeful.” (Photograph by Lauren L. Buischer, July 12, 2024).

Jerry, for instance, expressed that working with the PLVP made him feel “hopeful,” because “To see all these high school kids, and even middle school kids... Their eyes are open, and they’re looking to the future... They’re getting it. And we’re gonna carry this on.” Amber echoed that “watching a next generation of kids ask questions and do things that are big and scary and really want to take charge of a culture change—that’s very hopeful.” Aurora also explained that the PLVP sparked hope for her because “It just gives me faith in our younger generation... I always leave those presentations feeling I have a lot to learn from all the students.” The future-oriented outlook of the program is largely made possible by the PLVP’s construction of a belief biography—one that directly confronts the roots of rape culture in efforts to re-root belief, offers new definitional parameters for belief that push cultural logics in just directions, and aims to ripple belief by constituting its students as difference-makers—ones who are capable of creating

safer communities in light of their novel knowledge surrounding belief. This case study of the PLVP and theorization of belief biographies offers practical recommendations for anti-violence activists, both in terms of peer leadership as a counter to the individual-systemic binary and in terms of belief biographies as tools for unravelling violent systems of oppression that legitimize harm by silencing victims.

First, the PLVP's peer-led model of activism, a vehicle for narrating belief's biography, indicates the usefulness of peer leadership as a mechanism for challenging the individual-systemic binary that plagues sexual violence discourses.⁸⁹ The PLVP's model provides insight into how individualistic narratives about sexual violence may be used to productively *absorb* the systemic side of the binary. Peer advocacy is individualistic in nature; it depends on interpersonal relationships for its momentum and ability to build a community that extends belief's longevity with public culture. In essence, peer leadership is motivated by what Vanessa Beasley describes as "self-sufficiency" and "self-reliance," or in other words, the power of individual agency and the decisions of individuals to take responsibility for the problem of sexual violence.⁹⁰ Individualistic logics in sexual violence discourses, per many rhetorical scholars, place too much responsibility on survivors in a society wherein those most often targeted by sexual violence are not viewed as credible enough on their own to participate in believable communication.⁹¹ Yet, in alignment with Heather Zoller's and Gail Fairhurst's assertion that leadership can operate as a resistive means of organizing,⁹² peer leadership must not be dismissed because it complies with the individualistic logics that often cause harm in sexual violence discourses. Furthermore, the PLVP's rhetorics that promote peer leadership demonstrate how individual advocacy—when oriented toward constituting peer followers as agents—can absorb the toxic cultural system that enables sexual violence. Put differently, peer

leadership as a medium for sharing belief biographies can dismantle systemic oppression by constituting advocates that overgrow the system's roots.

The PLVP's programming assumes that individuals make a difference in the fight to end sexual violence and can instill cultural belief. The *PLVP Presentation Guide* contains what it calls the "Pyramid of Violence," which explains how smaller-scale acts of violence like sexual harassment, cultural and gender stereotypes, and interpersonal communication that degrade others legitimize more severe forms of sexual violence, including assault and rape. As the manual notes:

To reduce the acceptance of sexual violence in our culture, we can start by reducing these lower-level forms of violence. For example, if sexual assault victims knew they wouldn't be blamed or called dehumanizing names after coming forward, they might be more likely to report. If victims report, then perpetrators would be more likely to be held accountable. If perpetrators are held accountable, there might be less perpetration of sexual violence.

Reducing cultural tolerance for sexual violence, per the PLVP, rests on interpersonal intervention. And peer leadership, as this study shows, offers a uniquely constitutive power to intervene in hegemonic sexual violence narratives, especially among audience members at an impressionable age.

Organizational communication research about leadership often falls within one of two paradigms: 1) a traditional line of thought that views leaders and followers as separate, hierarchical categories, and 2) a critical perspective that renders categorization of leaders and followers unnecessary in efforts to break down hierarchies.⁹³ Yet, peer leadership discourses in the PLVP's curriculum organize against sexual violence by constituting followers as leaders and leaders as followers. Students who share the messages are followers of the program's commitments who lead by distributing its information, and audiences of followers are subsequently constituted as leaders of change who give voice to the curriculum's content. As

Amber explained, there is a somewhat hierarchical dynamic that categorizes peer leadership, with those who have the PLVP's training carrying the status of "expert," as opposed to those who may not understand. She noted that peer educators "just gain all this knowledge and experience." Nevertheless, because of the constitutive force of the programming—its motive of using rhetoric to call audiences into an activist role by stressing the interconnectedness of belief discourses—PLVP students "can share with their peers, their friends, their family, and potentially carry off with them into college and beyond," Amber said.

By drawing on an ethos of interpersonal relationality and the assumption that interpersonal interaction can cultivate feelings of safety, the PLVP's use of expertise and hierarchy to collapse the status between leaders and followers aims to spark a chain reaction of activism. The more the PLVP makes productive communication relevant enough to circulate across interpersonal contexts, the less power the system maintains in efforts to keep survivors silent. The individualistic quality of peer-leadership is thus, perhaps, its greatest strength: peer-leadership harnesses the potential of personal relationships to build a community of advocates that—with each additional person—absorbs the power of the oppressive system. Organizational communication scholarship has explored various iterations of collaborative leadership, including instances in which multiple leaders delegate responsibilities among themselves in efforts to manage followers,⁹⁴ and circumstances in which "leaderless" organizing occurs because all members of a collective hold equal democratic power.⁹⁵ Yet, in examining the PLVP's use of peer leadership, this study yields insight about the productive, practical potential of peer-leadership—an under-theorized leadership model in organizational communication with a distinct capacity to organize powerful networks amidst often inevitable, hierarchical structures within most organizations.

Future organizational scholarship on both alternative organizing and traditional organizational settings might attend to the subversive potential of peer leadership discourses among adult interlocuters. Beyond studying the impact of formal peer-to-peer communication like the PLVP's curriculum, researchers might also explore how peers lead one another through informal information-sharing channels to organize against oppressive forces. For instance, scholars could examine workplace settings in which adult peers—rather than supervisors—distribute knowledge about sexual harassment to their colleagues either through formal, anti-sexual harassment trainings or informal whisper networks. Furthermore, during an era in which diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are under siege in many organizations,⁹⁶ other studies could inquire about the efficacy of peer leadership in conveying DEI-related knowledge that turns workplaces into safer spaces for everyone. Such scholarship might offer insight about peer leadership's ability to challenge hegemonic ideologies among less impressionable audiences. Importantly, future peer leadership scholarship could also yield crucial lessons for redesigning harmful organizational structures that depend on relational hierarchies instead of collaboration,⁹⁷ legitimize identity-based discrimination instead of inclusion,⁹⁸ and stifle dissent among those who experience oppression instead of valuing the plurality necessary for organizing against violence.⁹⁹

Second, my theorization of belief biographies identifies a specific discursive mechanism for organizing belief in survivors. From communication literature, we have gathered that violence is an organized phenomenon—one made possible through communication.¹⁰⁰ At the same time, far less is known about rhetorical strategies that organize non-violence. Belief biographies, however, highlight a typology of rhetorical moves that have made the PLVP's programming productive: rooting belief, redefining belief, and rippling belief. These strategies

work together to tell a story of belief's lifespan, revealing how individual declarations of belief and disbelief are interwoven and constitutive of future instances in which survivors will require belief to heal from their pain. Accordingly, this study of the PLVP's belief biographies responds to the necessity of identifying effective discursive tactics for dismantling the violence that has been organized into the fabric of our contemporary society. I noted in the introduction of this dissertation that in November of 2024, the Republican nominee for President of the United States competed for the nation's highest office after having been accused of sexual assault by 28 women—and he won.¹⁰¹ The dawn of a post-Me Too era is no longer approaching; our post-Me Too moment is here. No one—and especially not marginalized people—can consider themselves safe from the threat of sexual violence. Yet, belief biographies offer novel discursive strategies for challenging rape culture during a time in which sexual violence, systems of oppression, and fascist political policy-making are deteriorating cultural belief and so many people's freedom from violence.¹⁰²

Furthermore, the positive, activist potential of belief biographies transcends contexts involving sexual violence and may be productively leveraged to promote safety and peace for those subject to an array of cultural violences. This study points to the idea that using communication to organize a culture of belief could play a central role in dismantling other oppressive systems. As Goldie claimed, the PLVP:

gives the students a practical skill that they can apply, not only in contexts of sexual violence, but what does it mean to believe people when they tell you that they aren't doing well or they're having different challenges? So, I think the believing piece...having the baseline of being able to apply believing to different contexts, including sexual violence, is a really important life skill.

Goldie's assertion that belief is a "life skill" alludes to prevalent cultural problem: that our cultural belief deficit facilitates the functioning of numerous violent forces. More often than not,

disbelief discourses constitute disbelief, rather than belief discourses constituting belief. Take, for instance, scripts that often leverage disbelief to promote trans hate, mental health stigma, and genocide, to name a few. When legislation has attempted to reduce trans suicide by providing trans youth with life-saving healthcare, President Donald Trump called such policy “left-wing gender insanity.”¹⁰³ According to such rhetoric, to be transgender is to be “insane” because members of the far-right often do not *believe* that trans people exist. Furthermore, society regularly fails to *believe* that people struggling with mental health should be taken seriously, often stigmatizing mental health suffering and treatment. For instance, Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services, argued that we can minimize the violence of mass shootings by placing people with depression in concentration-camp-like “wellness farms” and prohibiting them from taking antidepressants.¹⁰⁴ Even though U.S. public audiences, since October of 2023, have before our eyes witnessed the murders that Israel’s military has committed of over 50,000 innocent Palestinians, it is common to hear discourses that justify Israel’s genocide while failing to *believe* in the reality of Palestine’s pain.¹⁰⁵

Our mainstream, cultural tendency to use disbelief as a default is a problematic, pervasive instrument of oppression that maintains our violent status quo. When asked about the most significant obstacles that anti-sexual violence activists confront today, Jerry put it concisely: “The denial that it’s a problem.” To build communities free of the despair that inevitably accompanies experiences with oppression, we first must believe that the stories of marginalized people are real, as doing so will inspire more people to believe in the reality of oppression. By making this seemingly obvious claim, I risk concluding this chapter—with all its theoretical complexity—in a reductive manner. However, forces of white supremacist heteropatriarchy have complicated the simplicity that should characterize public willingness to believe violence

victims, incentivizing dismissal and silence for the purpose of sustaining social hierarchies.¹⁰⁶

Disbelief, thus, demands sophisticated rhetorical solutions. By targeting the origins of rape culture, imagining new epistemological resources for understanding belief, and constituting agents of change, belief biographies can serve as crucial, complex discursive resources for future activists as we continue our efforts to organize a world without violence.

Notes

¹ Sexual Violence Victims Support (SVVS) Center is a pseudonym for this organization.

² Peer-Led Violence Prevention (PLVP) is a pseudonym for this program.

³ Mountain West School District is a pseudonym for a school district.

⁴ For fuller discussions of the Larry Nassar case and its rhetorical implications, see Katie L. Gibson, “A Rupture in the Courtroom: Collective Rhetoric, Survivor Speech, and the Subversive Limits of the Victim Impact Statement,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 44, no. 4 (2021): 518-541, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2020.1839991>; Amy K. Way, “Cruel Optimism as Organizing Strategy in USA Gymnastics: The Threat of High-Stakes Organizations in Precarious Times,” *Human Relations* 76, no. 4 (2021): 577-601, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00187267211054689>; Amy Koerber, “The Rhetorical Infrastructure of Sexual Misconduct in Michigan State University’s Sexual Abuse Scandal,” *Rhetoric of Health & Medicine* 5, no. 3 (2022): 250-279, doi:10.5744/rhm.2022.50013; Shari J. Stenberg, “Feminist Witnessing from the Bench: A Study of Judge Aquilina’s Epideictic Rhetoric in the Nassar Sentencing Hearing,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 53, no. 1 (2023): 61-73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2022.2078871>.

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CONCLUSION: BEYOND THE BINARY, TOWARD FUTURES OF BELIEF

Content warning: In this chapter, I discuss contemporary barriers to preventing sexual violence and supporting survivors that may be deeply difficult to read, especially for those who have experienced sexual violence.

Disappointment in the Post-Me Too, Trumpian Era

Writing in 2021, Anita Hill lamented that “disappointment is mounting in those who expected #MeToo to be the wake-up call our government needed to address gender-based violence.”¹ Indeed, while the 2017 Me Too movement advanced a systemic argument against sexual violence, I have called throughout this dissertation for the acknowledgement of a “post-Me Too era” because, importantly, the movement failed to galvanize enough support to generate much systemic change—often excluding marginalized people most vulnerable to sexual assault and harassment.² It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that in the face of U.S. political turmoil in 2025, disappointment—along with fear and anger—has peaked in the eyes of many anti-violence advocates. Rape culture flourishes daily when accused sexual predators hold some of the highest seats of governmental office,³ making the effects of sexual violence activism appear negligible. The day I began drafting this conclusion of my dissertation, I attended a PLVP presentation during which high school audience members heard and responded to two survivors’ stories. One student remarked, “We live in a scary world.” Another frustratingly announced: “I feel like our justice system is useless at handling sexual violence.”

Certainly, public disappointment, fear, and anger are warranted amidst public systems that routinely decline to protect survivors and frequently abandon policies that could prevent sexual violence. Current federal discourses related to Title IX offer just one example of why our

society should be scared. In August of 2024, the Biden administration updated federal Title IX guidelines implemented during the first Trump presidency; Trump's administration authored these rules in a 2020 moment of Me Too backlash and right-wing politicians' heightened concern for perpetrators' well-being.⁴ Trump's Department of Education narrowly defined sexual misconduct in a way that placed an intensified burden on survivors, forwarding that victims must prove sexual harassment "effectively denie[d]" them equal access to educational programming.⁵ By contrast, Biden's Department of Education defined sexual misconduct as "deny[ing] or limit[ing]" one's equal access to education.⁶ Title IX under Trump also required universities to hold live hearings between victims and perpetrators following accusations of assault or harassment, subjecting survivors to potential re-traumatization and requiring them to face cross-examination from their assailants.⁷ Furthermore, the 2020 regulations confined educational institutions' investigative jurisdiction to on-campus occurrences of sexual violence, making it difficult for survivors to seek recourse when victimized off-campus by university peers or faculty.

The Biden administration's Title IX policy strengthened survivor protections in educational contexts and targeted the woeful inadequacy of Title IX under Trump. Yet, in February of 2025, Trump's second-term Department of Education declared that the U.S. would revert to his original Title IX policy. Of course, a sitting U.S. President like Trump, who was found legally liable for sexual abuse,⁸ would have every incentive to implement Title IX regulations that silence survivors and forward the notion that sexual violence is not a systemic problem worthy of widespread concern. Of course, any predator benefits when a system that is supposed to support survivors protects perpetrators instead. And, of course, any perpetrator thrives on the silence that makes victims feel alone. In our current moment, survivors in the

U.S.—and especially marginalized survivors—have every reason to doubt a system that refuses to believe us.

Systemic failures often call for systemic solutions—not the punishment of individuals who cause harm. Systemic problem-solving typically 1) mobilizes collectives that legitimize the magnitude of a public problem (as did the Me Too movement), or 2) breaks down political and legal barriers to justice (as did Biden’s overhaul of Trump’s Title IX policy). However, as both the above examples reveal, systemic activism surrounding sexual violence offers incomplete, often-temporary insight about steps we can take to build a safer society. Throughout this dissertation, I have theorized what I term an “individual-systemic binary” that categorizes mainstream discourses about sexual violence, and I have demonstrated how the individual-systemic binary—even when deployed among anti-violence activists—often falls short of truly transformative change. Moreover, the individual side of binary isolates victims by framing sexual violence as rare,⁹ and the systemic side—often driven by carceral feminism—overgeneralizes survivors’ experiences in ways that force marginalized victims to rely upon a justice system designed to fail them.¹⁰ This project thus studied three cases of intersectionally-informed anti-sexual violence advocacy that I argued deployed discursive strategies capable of transcending the individual-systemic binary. Each case study in this dissertation invites consideration of novel rhetorical resources that may push our conversations about sexual violence in productive directions, despite overwhelming political opposition and negligence. Collectively, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 offer a typology of activist discursive strategies that complicate how rhetoric about sexual violence unfolds by merging/inverting, shattering, and absorbing the individual-systemic binary, respectively.

A Typology of Anti-Sexual Violence Activist Strategies Outside the Binary

The Justice Movement's Rhetoric of Radical Belief: Merging and Inverting the Binary

The justice movement for Recy Taylor (CEJ) merged the individual-systemic binary by showing how one survivor's story symbolizes systemic failure, and it also inverted the individual-systemic binary through rhetorical strategies that individualized state systems. CEJ activists were rhetorically revolutionary in how they framed sexual violence not just as a gendered crime, but as a racist one.¹¹ To do so, the CEJ's discourses took part in what I introduced in Chapter 2 as a "rhetoric of radical belief," which calls for an ethic of care that removes the burden of proving credibility from survivors—especially victims of color—who white supremacist logics deem "unbelievable." Rather than relying on a belief-as-trust framework that evaluates survivors' truthfulness, rhetorics of radical belief embrace *belief-as-care*, affirming survivors' humanity regardless of cultural biases about credibility. The justice movement's discourses positioned Taylor's assault and the Alabama legal system's response as a betrayal of American democratic values during World War II, indicating how the rape of Recy Taylor threatened the moral foundation of the U.S. war effort. Although the CEJ's discourses might be perceived as nationalistic by contemporary standards, I join rhetorical scholars who underscore how appeals to U.S. democratic citizenship can be co-opted in the name of minimizing violence.¹² This chapter spotlights rhetorics of radical belief for their positive dimensions that offer innovative discursive resources for challenging the individual-systemic binary.

The justice movement's rhetorics of radical belief grounded in care ethics hold abolitionist potential even though CEJ activists often appealed to the state for recourse.¹³ CEJ activists merged the individual-systemic binary through simultaneous appeals to both justice (an

individual phenomenon)¹⁴ and democracy (a systemic phenomenon).¹⁵ To summarize, the movement both advocated for Taylor's individual justice and asserted that Taylor's circumstances symbolized the potential decline of democratic rights for U.S. citizens. Even though the CEJ appealed to the state to ask that Taylor receive justice, activists' telling of Taylor's individual story, combined with a discussion of the state's systemic failure and the potential consequences for democratic collectives, transformed a working-class Black woman from the South into a legible victim of sexual violence amidst instantiated stereotypes sexual promiscuity and Black women's purported "unrapability." Sharing individual stories of sexual violence while connecting victims' experiences to conversations about systemic problems merges the individual-systemic binary in a way that offers a damning, abolitionist indictment of the state—rather than a whole-hearted endorsement for nationalism.

In the movement's discursive moves to invert the individual-systemic binary, the CEJ's activists recognized the futility of state-based solutions to sexual violence, calling upon democratic communities to assume responsibility for creating collectives of care and promoting attitudinal shifts necessary for preventing sexual violence. Across the movement's discourses, democratic communities framed themselves as the "system" while positioning the state as the "individual." Indeed, while the movement's rhetoric assumed collective, systemic power in the thousands of letters sent to the Alabama governor's office, activists capitalized on the movement's magnitude by portraying the state as a fringe group of racists whose backward ideas fell short of an enlightened public's radical belief in Recy Taylor. According to the CEJ, democratic communities would prevent sexual violence with or without the state's permission; the Alabama legal system was thus individualized—it was alone in its bigotry. My analysis of the justice movement's rhetoric in Chapter 2 points to the idea that rhetorics of radical belief—

ones deployed in the service of caring for marginalized victims—are capable of leveraging individual stories to offer scathing critiques of oppressive, violent systems without overgeneralizing victims’ experiences or fully propping up carceral logics. The CEJ’s social climate in the 1940s necessitated democratic appeals, given the World War II context, but rhetorics of radical belief and efforts to merge or invert the individual-systemic binary need not be limited to historical moments of heightened patriotism. As I articulated in Chapter 2, rape culture’s racist remnants degrade victims of color in current contexts and demand that our contemporary anti-violence activism break down social hierarchies that render marginalized people vulnerable to sexual violence.¹⁶ Accordingly, rhetorics of radical belief grounded in care ethics might be used to target the individual-systemic binary in our current moment.

While recent rhetorical scholarship on anti-sexual violence activism does not use the language of “rhetorics of radical belief” or the “individual-systemic binary,” some intersectionally-informed research does allude to the productivity of activism that both cares for victims and merges/inverts the binary. V. Jo Hsu, for instance, wrote a 2019 article that implicitly explored rhetorical options for challenging the individual-systemic binary, analyzing the rhetoric of an anti-sexual violence movement called *#SurvivedAndPunished*. This campaign created a guidebook for activists in support of incarcerated survivors, often telling the stories of marginalized victims most targeted by the criminal legal system, including people of color, immigrants, and queer folks. Hsu writes:

#SurvivedAndPunished foregrounds the experiences of those who are multiply marginalized, allowing their stories to direct the search for more equitable solutions. Stitching together a wide range of individual narratives, *#SurvivedAndPunished* maps these stories onto a longer history of how incarceration has been used to contain minority communities.¹⁷

Hsu labels the rhetoric of *#SurvivedAndPunished* as “a networked response”¹⁸ to sexual violence, but Hsu’s observations also point to how a rhetoric of radical belief can merge the individual-systemic binary outside the confines of the patriotic scripts that categorized the justice movement for Recy Taylor. Moreover, *#SurvivedAndPunished* centered sexual violence victims who are stigmatized as perhaps, the most “unbelievable” victims according to hegemonic logics: incarcerated people. While discourses about incarcerated people often forget the humanity of those serving sentences for crimes,¹⁹ *#SurvivedAndPunished* arguably cared for incarcerated individuals. Rather than participating in stigmatizing discourses about their credibility, the campaign forwarded that as human beings, incarcerated people did not deserve to experience sexual violence. Because *#SurvivedAndPunished* uplifted the stories of individual incarcerated victims out of concern for their humanity while connecting their experiences to systemic failures of the criminal legal system, the campaign’s abolitionist rhetoric successfully merges the individual-systemic binary in a contemporary context.

In addition to revealing current approaches for merging the binary, recent scholarship indicates how anti-sexual violence activism might invert the relationship between individual and systemic narratives of sexual violence. Offering an unspoken example of such inversion, Valerie Wieskamp’s and Cortney Smith’s study of a children’s book written for Indigenous girls explains how survivors might claim narrative agency amidst systemic constraint. The book, titled *What to Do When You’re Raped: An ABC Handbook for Native Girls*, participates in a rhetoric of survivance that frames preventing and healing from sexual trauma as community responsibilities. As Wieskamp and Smith explain, the book’s “focus is not on how one individual survives, but on how a whole community does so,” emphasizing how readers can support victims of sexual violence in their communities.²⁰ Furthermore, the *ABC Handbook* critiques the federal

government's failure to address rape against Indigenous women and "asserts that Native communities must handle this problem themselves because of this failure."²¹ Although this study of the *ABC Handbook* does not use the language of "inversion," it still offers insight about contemporary rhetorical resources for inverting the individual-systemic binary. Given that Wieskamp and Smith show how Indigenous communities generate systemic power through collective healing and "unsettle the notion that Euro-American culture ultimately entails progress for all peoples,"²² their work points to the idea that caring for marginalized survivors can reframe the state as individualistic—as incompetent in its fringe obsession with tradition and as incapable of adopting the moral high-ground of the communities it is supposed to serve.

In the end, contemporary examples of anti-sexual violence activism allude to the productive potential of rhetorics of radical belief in their capacity to complicate the individual-systemic binary. Put differently, discourses in the *#SurvivedAndPunished* campaign and the *ABC Handbook* reveal how current activists can extrapolate the positive dimensions of discourses in the justice movement for Recy Taylor, leave 1940s nationalism behind, and advocate beyond the individual-systemic binary in a way that foregrounds the stories of current victims and communities most marginalized by the forces of rape culture.

The Anti-Sexual Harassment Movement's (Dis)Organizing of Disbelief:

Shattering the Binary

The rhetoric of the 1970s movement against sexual harassment can also be harnessed in the service of fighting sexual violence in our contemporary moment. In Chapter 3, I argued that the anti-sexual harassment movement shattered the individual-systemic binary by revealing how the organizational context functions as a third site of violence, neither fully individual nor systemic in nature. To do so, the anti-sexual harassment movement used discourses that I labeled

as “(dis)organizing disbelief,” which conceptualized sexual harassment as a form of economic exploitation to directly target hegemonic sexual violence scripts related to desirability, normative victimhood, and temporal closure. In doing so, the anti-sexual harassment movement resisted attitudes of the era that rendered women—and especially women marginalized according to class and race—deserving of sexual harassment. Criticizing the organizational context as a scale on which rape culture thrives, activists’ rhetoric implicated organizational actions as complicit in sexual violence—directing their criticism primarily at workplaces while also acknowledging the responsibility of individual harassers and legal systems that failed to regulate organizations’ handling of sexual harassment.

By stressing how sexual harassment operated as economic exploitation and (dis)organizing rape culture scripts that excused organizations’ role in sustaining sexual violence, the anti-sexual harassment movement shattered the individual-systemic binary, offering a third plane on which activists may direct blame and strive for solutions. Organizational communication scholars have long noted that workplaces are sites where intersectional experiences of oppression compound in the face of workplace hierarchies. Experiences with oppression become amplified when those with organizational power also possess identities atop social hierarchies.²³ Yet, far less has been revealed about the strategies by which social movements attack workplace injustices beyond the walls of organizations themselves. Because workplaces are central spaces of class-based oppression under capitalism, Chapter 3 asserts that social movement discourses about organizational discourse can reveal the intersectional potential of the organizational communication field. Additionally, the concept of “(dis)organizing disbelief” possesses a conceptual usefulness in that it encourages organizational members’ literacy of organizations’ rape culture discourses and provides strategies activists can use to

dismantle harmful organizational logics related to sexual violence: 1) power-based critiques, 2) narratives of organizational responsibility, and 3) non-linear temporal rhetorics.

While the anti-sexual harassment movement's discourses about sexual violence leverage the organizational context to shatter the individual-systemic binary and point to the intersectional potential of studying labor-oriented social movements, it would be an error to argue that the 1970s activists produced perfectly intersectional rhetorics directly applicable to our contemporary context. Much like the justice movement for Recy Taylor problematically leveraged nationalist appeals to secure empathy for her cause, the 1970s activists participated in rhetorics that, in some ways, undermined the movement's goals. For instance, the anti-sexual harassment movement emphasized sexual harassment as primarily a "women's issue." And although cisgender women were, in fact, the primary targets of sexual harassment in the 1970s, our contemporary context has shifted the landscape of who experiences sexual harassment. Statistics from 2024 tell us that 82% of U.S. women and 42% of U.S. men have endured sexual harassment or assault in their lifetime,²⁴ and while little is known about the rates of transgender and nonbinary people's experiences with sexual harassment, recent scholarship confirms that relative to cisgender people, trans and gender diverse individuals experience elevated rates of sexual violence, broadly—with almost *half* reporting they endured sexual assault.²⁵ Not only does the language of the anti-sexual harassment movement fail to address current demographics of sexual violence victims, but activists' routine commentary on men's sexual aggression forwards heteronormative narratives of sexual harassment and fuels the notion that men are the sole perpetrators of sexual harassment against women. In reality, women perpetrate sexual violence, and sexual violence occurs between same-gender victims and perpetrators.²⁶ Beyond excluding cismen and queer folks from the bounds of sexual violence victimhood, rhetorical

scholars have questioned such “all women” rhetoric for its intersectional shortcomings that, in the name of stressing similarities among women, exclude women of color and others in our modern moment.²⁷ While characteristic of the second feminist wave, “all women” discourses fall short of modern practicality.

Even so, the anti-sexual harassment movement’s intersectional leveraging of the organizational context and discourses that (dis)organize disbelief may be taken up as what Celeste Condit calls “better rhetorics”²⁸ in contemporary times—rhetorics that I argue have productive potential when deployed to challenge the individual-systemic binary in the service of abolition. Illustrating one current, useful example of (dis)organizing disbelief, Jessica Hatrick and colleagues wrote an autoethnographic piece on their experiences working with an abolitionist organization on the University of Southern California (USC) campus—a group that understood how carceral solutions to the proliferation of sexual violence at USC “would ultimately fail to provide survivors with the support necessary for adequate recovery while disproportionately punishing men of color.”²⁹ Accordingly, the USC abolition group circulated zines, or self-published texts associated with progressive information-sharing, across campus that spelled out a long history of USC’s negligence toward sexual violence—a history that ranged from 1968 to the present. While USC’s abolitionist activists did not describe their zines as (dis)organizing disbelief, the group arguably participated in this rhetorical strategy by spelling out USC’s two primary hegemonic scripts: 1) framing sexual violence as rare, and 2) scapegoating Greek communities as the central cause of campus sexual violence. Such rhetoric, the authors explain, absolved the university of its responsibility for creating an organizational climate in which survivors experienced disbelief.³⁰ The USC abolitionist group, according to the study, did not directly grapple with a public need to believe survivors, instead (dis)organizing

disbelief by focusing its energy on challenging organizational scripts that encouraged and excused ongoing dismissal of sexual violence victims. An abolitionist possibility lies under the surface of the women-centric rhetoric of (dis)organization that categorized the 1970s anti-sexual harassment movement; namely, the movement's rhetoric indicates how contemporary discourses can push for organizational accountability instead of the carceral logics that reify the individual-systemic binary.

The PLVP's Belief Biography: Absorbing the Binary

In Chapter 4, I conducted a focus group case study with facilitators of the Peer-Led Violence Prevention (PLVP) Program, arguing that the PLVP's discourses organize against sexual violence by constructing what I term a "belief biography." This concept builds upon Sara Ahmed's theorization of "complaint biographies"³¹ to narrate a lifespan of cultural belief, and I suggest that declarations of belief and disbelief are always precedent-setting; each choice to believe or not believe a survivor shapes future discourses and possibilities for believing survivors. The PLVP's belief biography uses three rhetorical strategies to reveal how belief discourses are always intertwined, including *rooting belief* (tracing histories of disbelief to re-root belief), *redefining belief* (challenging traditional definitions and assumptions about who qualifies as "believable"), and *rippling belief* (encouraging the spread of belief by empowering audiences of the PLVP as change agents).

Because belief biographies argue that belief and disbelief discourses—those in the past, present, and future—are constitutive, the PLVP's efforts to trace belief's lifespan hold a power to constitute individual learners of the program as activists capable of intervening in rape culture. Furthermore, the program's use of a peer leadership model as a channel for communicating belief's biography amplifies the power of individual voices in the fight to end sexual violence.

My study of the PLVP shows that peer leadership operates as a productive vehicle for belief biographies because it offers an avenue by which individualistic narratives about sexual violence can ultimately absorb the systemic side of the binary. In essence, individuals can leverage interpersonal ethos to constitute networks of activists who overgrow the roots of rape culture. Belief biographies recognize the constitutive force of any discourse about belief, but peer leadership—in its capacity to draw on an ethos stemming both from expertise and mutual respect—compounds the constitutive nature of the belief biography discourses. Moreover, peer-led messages that convey belief biographies invite audiences of the PLVP’s curriculum to recognize their own constitutive power, and thus, their responsibility for using language to target cultural systems that promote disbelief of survivors. Individuals who constitute a more productive cultural system for responding to sexual violence thus absorb the power of hegemonic systems as they grow networks of belief.

Aside from complicating the individual-systemic binary of rape culture through absorption, the PLVP’s belief biographies make theoretical ideas like “rhetorics of radical belief” and “(dis)organizing disbelief” actionable in our contemporary context—pointing to current mechanisms for merging/inverting and shattering the individual-systemic binary. For instance, *rooting belief* often works by (dis)organizing disbelief, directly confronting how cultural defaults for disbelief depend on histories of rape logic and social hierarchies. Unlike the 1970s anti-sexual harassment movement, which used “all women” rhetoric to critique class-based abuses of power, the PLVP’s modern efforts to (dis)organize disbelief implicate sexual violence as not just an abuse of power by men over women. Rather, (dis)organizing disbelief, for the PLVP, involves directly teaching learners of the curriculum about oppressive systems—like racism, classism, ageism, and ablism, to name a few—that compound marginalized victims’ sexual trauma. Yet

the PLVP does not merely focus on systemic failures; it shatters the individual-systemic binary through a rhetoric of organizational culpability. Consider, for instance, how one of my PLVP mentees shattered the individual-systemic binary when I asked them a question about Larry Nassar's individual behavior at USA Gymnastics and why he was able to bypass accountability for so long: "It's because the athletes knew that no one in the organization would believe them," the PLVP peer educator said. The organization, in addition to the perpetrator and oppressive systems, shared responsibility for the tragedy at USA Gymnastics, per the astute observation of a high school student who had undergone the PLVP's training.

Additionally, the PLVP uses rhetorics of radical belief in its redefinition of belief, but in contrast to the justice movement for Recy Taylor, the PLVP does not need to deploy nationalistic scripts for its rhetoric to persuade public audiences; the ethos built from the program's peer leadership model instead compels care based on interpersonal relationships—not democratic relationships. As my focus group participant, Jerry, described: "I think the peer-to-peer stuff is really important because they learn much more actively when it's coming from someone that's their age group. And I see it sometimes when... one of the peers [is] presenting, a couple of the kids... [in] class will" point to the presenters and say, "'My big sister!' or 'My twin brother!' And then there's that connection." Per the PLVP, evaluating survivors' credibility is both illogical and immoral, as I demonstrated in Chapter 4. But as Jerry's comment indicates, rhetorics of radical belief and taking victims' credibility for granted occurs much more naturally when a personal, peer connection between a rhetor and an audience member functions as a modality for merging individual and systemic narratives, generating community necessary to invert the individual-systemic binary, and organizing belief. Moreover, the PLVP's peer-led

model shows how individualistic narratives about sexual violence can absorb systemic power by constituting audiences of the PLVP as authors of belief's biography.

Limitations

Readers of this dissertation might, at this point, inquire as to why studies of the 1940s justice movement for Recy Taylor and the 1970s anti-sexual harassment were necessary components of this project, given the PLVP's capacity to use both rhetorics of radical belief and discourses that (dis)organize disbelief. Not only did the PLVP deploy the rhetorical strategies I theorize in Chapters 2 and 3, but the program's belief biographies also, in some ways, transcended the productive capacity of the first two movements I studied in this dissertation. By highlighting the constitutive nature of all belief discourses, the PLVP's novel rhetorical strategies aim to *constitute* audiences of the curriculum as agents of change—a discursive strategy far less prevalent in the justice movement and the movement against sexual harassment.

In acknowledging that the PLVP leveraged discursive strategies I theorized in the earlier chapters of this dissertation, it is important to note here that the demographics of participants in my study of the PLVP—and the location of the PLVP itself—still present limitations for a project that has, across five chapters, claimed to take up an intersectional political stance. Moreover, participant demographics for this study were not a proportional representation of the identities that most victims of sexual violence occupy. In the largely middle-class, predominantly white community where the PLVP's curriculum operates, my participants were all white, even though women of color routinely endure sexual violence at higher rates than white women.³² In addition, while sexual violence survivors are more likely to be queer than straight—with trans folks experiencing particularly high rates of sexual violence—only three out of 13 participants identified as LGBTQ+, and all of them were cisgender.³³ Furthermore, many of my participants

possessed a middle-aged privilege that made them fall beyond the age group most likely to experience sexual violence.³⁴ These statistics are not to say that my participants fail to uphold the intersectional project. As I hope to have demonstrated in my analysis of their commentary, the PLVP and my study's participants are very attuned to the fact that overlapping systems of oppression complicate and compound marginalized people's experiences of sexual violence. Nevertheless, had I studied the PLVP on its own for this dissertation, I would have failed to credit the rhetorical wisdom of anti-sexual activists who spoke belief to power long before the PLVP's founding. Importantly, the PLVP has, for 30+ years, positively impacted students and survivors in its community. Yet, activists for Recy Taylor and victims of sexual harassment in the 1970s took part in intersectional anti-sexual violence activism before "intersectionality" was coined in academic literature and popularized across the kind of contemporary feminist advocacy we see present in the PLVP's curriculum.³⁵

This mixed-methods dissertation—one focused on historical and present activism against sexual violence—offers perspective about how the rhetorical remnants of both movements spill over into current sexual violence activism in a way that makes marginalized people safer from the terror of sexual violence. While it would be impossible to trace the true origins of rhetorics of radical belief or activist efforts to (dis)organize disbelief, the justice movement for Recy Taylor and the anti-sexual harassment movement deserve places in our broader rhetorical history of anti-violence organizing because their discourses were far ahead of their time. Historians have confirmed that neither the justice movement nor the movement against sexual harassment has received significant mainstream attention for its contributions to modern understandings of sexual violence.³⁶ This erasure is an injustice. Both movements carved spaces for anti-sexual violence rhetoric beyond the individual-systemic binary, which, in many ways, places them

ahead of the most recognized anti-sexual violence movement in global history: Me Too. For this reason, the justice movement for Recy Taylor and the 1970s anti-sexual harassment activists give me hope—right here, right now. Hope, alone, justifies my recognition of their discourses in this project amidst monumental disappointment flowing from our current political context. My dissertation not only listens to historical anti-violence activists’ rhetorical wisdom, but it thanks them for that hope.

What Do We Do with Disappointment?: Anita Hill’s Answer

Anita Hill warned of the potential for continued disappointment in systems we expect to protect us from sexual violence. The current proliferation of rape culture in the U.S. demonstrates that Hill’s concerns were founded. While studying rhetoric about sexual violence, I have been routinely reminded of our culture’s disbelief of survivors, and when disbelief thrives, I find it difficult to believe that things might get better. Indeed, during the last year of writing this dissertation, the sparks of hope I gained from the activist voices in this project were often countered by current events that made me disappointed, fearful, and angry. But in the encouraging words of Anita Hill: “Rage can serve many purposes. It can offer some clarity on issues that have perplexed and frustrated us. It can help us focus on what we feel passionate about and why. And it can also inspire us to join with others to act.”³⁷ May the collective rage of the justice movement for Recy Taylor, the 1970s anti-sexual harassment activists, and the students of the PLVP inspire the disappointed among us to unite in belief.

Notes

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