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“Hideous things have happened here”: Rape myths, rape culture, and healing in adolescent literature

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“Hideous things have happened here”: Rape Myths, Rape Culture, and Healing in Adolescent
Literature

by

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Thesis

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Children’s Literature

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Dedication

“And for a moment, when I’m dancing I am free.”

—Florence + the Machine, “Free”

For Rossana, for always believing I could, and allowing me the space to grow, cry, heal, and dance in the midst of the storm.

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Abstract

Adolescent novels about rape are one way to discuss rape and rape culture with a young audience. These novels can depict and challenge aspects of rape culture, including the myths that ultimately reinforce a culture hostile to rape victims. Considering the prevalence of rape in society at large, as well as its prevalence among adolescents, this thesis examines the elements of rape culture at play within adolescent rape novels, which can serve as pieces of activism as they give voice to adolescent survivors of rape. Adolescent rape novels explore the internal struggles of survivors as well as the external process of reporting their assault and the affect the rape has on their life and the relationships they have with families, friends, and peers. Adolescent rape novels challenge rape culture while also including defining traits that also reinforce contemporary rape culture in an adolescent landscape. These novels, in tandem with nonfiction adolescent works about rape culture, can lend a hand in connecting readers with contemporary movements that speak out against sexual violence and rape, such as the #MeToo movement. This allows adolescents a way to truly understand the impact of rape culture and find ways they can bring an awareness to and ultimately work against rape culture as they become adults in contemporary society.

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Introduction

Halley Bondy writes, “One in nine girls and one in fifty-eight boys will experience sexual assault by an adult before they turn eighteen. And 40 percent of victims experience abuse at the hands of an older or more powerful child” (7). Her book *#MeToo and You: Everything You Need to Know about Consent, Boundaries, and More* reveals a lot of the truth about rape, rape culture, and abuse and how it still prominently affects children and adolescents today. Though there is no doubt rape is an issue that affects people of all ages, adolescents are considered a particularly vulnerable demographic. According to an infographic titled “Teenagers and Sexual Violence” published by National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC), victims who are first targeted for rape or sexual abuse as adolescents become more vulnerable to revictimization by sexual violence in adulthood.

The young adult “problem novel” is one way to inform adolescents about social justice issues that affect them directly. My thesis examines the depictions of rape within three adolescent novels: Courtney Summers’ *All the Rage* (2015), Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999), and Amber Smith’s *The Way I Used to Be* (2016), all of which raise awareness about rape culture and its impact on adolescents. I examine the assumptions, myths, and elements of rape culture that are present within each novel and how the system of rape culture affects the victims and their healing process. In each novel, the victim must try to come to terms with their experience, while being surrounded by strong integrated cultural ideas about rape that ultimately make healing more difficult.

Though there are several hundred adolescent rape novels told from varying perspectives, my thesis focuses on adolescent rape novels told from the first-person point of view of the victim. Furthermore, the novels all include a protagonist who was raped by another adolescent (a

peer, boyfriend, etc.) Although there are also young men and nonbinary individuals who experience sexual violence in their lifetime, the primary texts I examine focus on protagonists who are cisgender young women, as rape prevalence for young women is extremely high. In particular, I value adolescent literature that opens up dialogues about difficult yet prevalent issues for adolescents, especially works in the genre of young adult (YA) realistic literature. In YA realism, plots focus on realistic situations and often present an adolescent voice experiencing the narrative. There are a number of realistic YA rape novels that include depictions of rape and sexual assault of an adolescent, usually a protagonist.

My investment in adolescent rape studies comes from both my experience as a sexual assault survivor and my study of children and adolescent literature in my undergraduate and graduate programs. My experience as a cisgender woman who is a survivor of sexual assault allows me to bring a lens to this conversation that others in the field may not have, as it has guided my advocacy work to bring public awareness to young people, since they are heavily affected by this issue. As a survivor, I also demand change of ideas surrounding rape culture as a whole in order to protect current survivors and potential future victims. A critical look at current rape myths is key to bringing about an end to long-standing cultural ideas about how society perceives rape and rape victims.

Rape Epidemic in the United States

In 2015, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) conducted research titled the “National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey.” The results of the survey revealed rape to be extremely common in the United States. More importantly, the survey laid out exact definitions for rape. Results revealed that one in five women and one in seventy-one men will be raped in their lifetime. The CDC defines rape as follows:

Any completed or attempted unwanted vaginal (for women), oral, or anal penetration through the use of physical force (such as being pinned or held down, or by the use of violence) or threats to physically harm and includes times when the victim was drunk, high, drugged, or passed out and unable to consent. Rape is separated into three types: completed forced penetration, attempted forced penetration, and completed alcohol- or drug-facilitated penetration. Among women, rape includes vaginal, oral, or anal penetration by a male using his penis. It also includes vaginal or anal penetration by a male or female using their fingers or an object. Among men, rape includes oral or anal penetration by a male using his penis. It also includes anal penetration by a male or female using their fingers or an object. (The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey)

Though men, women, and gender-nonconforming people experience sexual violence and rape, in the majority of sexual violence cases in the United States, rapists are men and their victims are women; this is no doubt a crime that affects millions of Americans. In a 2019 publication, *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*, author Amber J Keyser states that “in the United States, the sexual violation of another person’s body is considered a violent crime on par with homicide” (Keyser 8). According to Keyser, Americans despise rape and hold it in the same regard to murder, yet only 3% of rapists will serve time for their crimes. There is an apparent disconnect in what Americans claim about rape and what actually happens when rape accusations are made. This may be why there is a large amount of victim blaming in which victims of rape are bullied for their claims and labeled as liars or attention seekers rather than provided with the support these victims need.

After I obtained definitions and baseline statistics, my research guided me to the prevalence of rape and sexual violence among adolescent girls, an extremely vulnerable group of the U.S population. According to the NSVRC, one in four girls will experience sexual assault before they reach the age of 18. The numbers vary because many rape cases go unreported. While Bondy claims one in nine girls will be assaulted, other researchers, such as the NSVRC, say it could be up to one in four girls. NSVRC says that 8% of girls aged 12-18 will experience either rape or attempted rape. One in three of completed forced penetration rapes happens to girls between the ages of 11 and 17. Of those girls, 43.6% of them experience this sexual violence at the hands of an acquaintance or peer. Many cases of adolescent rape happen at the hands of someone the victim knows, rather than at the hands of a stranger, which represents only 10% of completed forced penetration rapes (Teenagers and Sexual Violence).

The NSVRC also indicates a gap in the statistics about adolescents and rape, as most studies investigate either childhood sexual abuse or statistics of college aged students using varying campus surveys that collect data on sexual violence and rape. There are also gaps present in the statistics of marginalized adolescents, such as racial minorities and adolescents from lower income areas. The NSVRC states that “there are many gaps in research on sexual violence against teens, especially those from marginalized, unserved, and underserved communities” (Teenagers and Sexual Violence).

Rape Culture and the Singular Rape Narrative

Rape culture is a set of culturally accepted ideas surrounding rape, its prevalence, and how rape happens. As such, rape myths refer to the things people believe about rape that are not actually true. Kathryn Ryan shares in her article “The Relationship between Rape Myths and Sexual Scripts: The Social Construction of Rape” that rape myths are “a mistaken belief—a lie”

(774), and these lies have influenced what people believe about rape. Ryan suggests there is a single rape narrative, a rape script, that people believe to be how all rapes happen. About rape scripts, Ryan says, “They involved a stranger who was a crazed male, who attacked a woman outdoors, at night, in a sudden and physically violent attack” (775). Because of this single rape script, or monomyth, people are often quick to discredit a rape that happens in any other way, thus allowing other rapes, such as acquaintance or date rape to happen without repercussion. My thesis examines these rape myths and scripts as they show up in adolescent literature and how these ideas ultimately perpetuate rape culture, making the speaking up, reporting, and healing difficult for the victims.

The singular rape narrative is one of the driving forces that allows rape cases to continue because rape culture creates an unhealthy cycle: rapists, oftentimes acquaintances or known people to their victims, exert power on their victims during rape. Furthermore, ideas people believe about those in power allow them to ultimately get away with their actions. Keyser notes, “so many people [Americans] are eager to make excuses for rapists” (8). Americans are quick to blame drinking, partying, and women’s clothing as reasons why sexual assault happens. This culture of blame allows rapes to continue.

In recent years, there has been an increase in discussion about rape culture and its myths. One vessel that I think contributes to this is the #MeToo movement, a social media movement that launched in 2017. The #MeToo movement was actually first mentioned by Tarana Burke in 2006. Burke first used the phrase MeToo to share about her assault and to stand in solidarity with others who have been assaulted. The hashtag went viral in 2017 when Alyssa Milano, an American actress, tweeted, “If you’ve been sexually harassed or assaulted write ‘me too’ as a reply to this tweet” (Milano 2017). There was a photo of text present within the tweet that stated:

Me too. Suggested by a friend. If all women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem. (Milano 2017)

Since then, the tweet has garnered nearly 50,000 likes, 20,000 retweets, and 17,000 quotes. People all over the world shared #MeToo as a way to display the high prevalence of sexual harassment and assault today. #MeToo stretched beyond women and opened a way for men and nonbinary individuals to share about their assaults as well. As a social media movement, #Metoo has found and touched the lives of adolescents too, making it a way for adolescents to see the problem, if even at the surface level. #MeToo highlights the power dynamics of rape and allows people to see the weight rape can have on an individual, communal, and societal level.

Young Adult Novels about Sexual Assault

As an activist who intently stands against both sexual assault and human trafficking, my research guided me to some of the existing adolescent literature that explores themes of sexual assault. I specifically tried to find novels that fit my criteria, while also exploring some of the other options available to adolescent readers. My goal was to find novels with a female rape victim as the narrator, as well as elements of rape culture present within the novel such as power dynamics, rape scripts, or the rape monomyth.

One of the first novels I looked at was *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Published in 1999, *Speak* is considered to be one of the seminal works that covers sexual assault for an adolescent audience. *Speak* follows thirteen year old Melinda who is raped at a party prior to the start of the novel. When she calls the cops to report the assault, it breaks up the party causing Melinda to start high school as an outcast. The book follows Melinda's attempts to grapple with what happened to her, as she spends a lot of the novel repressing what happened. Once she is

able to acknowledge it herself, she begins to regain her voice in an attempt to move on. *Speak* has garnered a lot of attention in the 20 years since its publication, both by scholars and educators. Though a lot of the writing on *Speak* focuses on Melinda's coming to her voice and healing, I found *Speak* to include a lot of elements of rape culture often not discussed, such as institutional rape culture. This makes *Speak* worth looking at again, since all of the layers it has allow for multiple readings. *Speak* is also noteworthy because a lot of adolescents still read the novel in classrooms, making it a piece of activism teens can use to discuss rape and rape culture. Scholars often commend *Speak* for its willingness to discuss trauma in a form teenagers can access. Chris McGee, in his article "Why Won't Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice," discusses how few adolescent novels have the layers of complexity that *Speak* exhibits. He says that "Anderson's book strives for authenticity as it confronts an extremely difficult topic while simultaneously problematizing the very nature of authentic identity after trauma" (McGee 173). McGee brings up that *Speak* does in fact have areas that readers may view as problematic. He mentions that adults suggest this book to adolescents because of the empowerment narrative but that "in order to read *Speak* in the way these blurbs suggest, however, it seems necessary to have a book that begins with a weak character who, in the problem novel tradition, is healed by the events of the narrative and guided by adult figures who can offer comfort" (McGee 174). McGee ultimately argues that *Speak* is not the traditional problem novel. Its inclusion of empowerment does not follow the other traditional scripts of the empowerment narrative and Melinda's self awareness of what is going on with her actually makes her strong despite being weakened by her rape.

Another popular adolescent novel that depicts themes of sexual assault, and which I chose not to include in this project, is *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher. Ultimately, although

Thirteen Reasons Why shows accurate depictions of rape and sexual assault, I decided against including it as a primary text for a few reasons. One, readers only receive Hannah's perspective through the audio tapes as they are listened to by Clay, a teenage boy. This carries implications of possible unreliability from the narrator, and also does not match my criteria. Two, Hannah's rape being depicted as one of the final straws for her to end her life is problematic for victims of rape and sexual assault because it can glamorize the idea of suicide rather than a focus on healing from trauma. Despite not including it as a primary text, it does reveal some elements of rape culture, and the Netflix adaptation of the book came under scrutiny for its content.

Originally published in 2007, *Thirteen Reasons Why* follows Clay Jensen as he receives a mysterious box of audio tapes at his door. They are from Hannah Baker, who recently committed suicide and left these tapes behind explaining her "thirteen reasons" for ending her life. On Cassette 1: Side A, Hannah says, "*I'm about to tell you the story of my life. More specifically, why my life ended. And if you're listening to these tapes, you're one of the reasons why*" (Asher 7). Throughout the novel, we follow Clay as he listens to the tapes. He learns of Hannah's experience with bullying, gaining and losing friends, and dealing with rape. On Cassette 5: Side B, Hannah discloses that she was an unknown witness to Jessica Davis' rape at a party, as she was hiding in the closet of the bedroom during the assault. Jessica is drunk and passed out on the bed. Bryce Walker enters the room and on the tape, Hannah shares, "*with the bass thumping, no one heard him walking across the room. Getting on the bed. The bedsprings screaming under his weight. No one heard a thing. And I could have stopped it*" (Asher 226). On Cassette 6: Side B, Hannah discloses her own rape at the hands of the same boy. At a hot tub party, she says, "*You [Bryce] started kissing my shoulder, my neck, sliding your fingers in and out. And then you kept going. You didn't stop there*" (Asher 265).

Thirteen Reasons Why is an interesting title to explore not only because of the varying intense adolescent issues, such as rape, drug use, and suicide, but also because of the novel's previously mentioned Netflix adaptation in 2017. Upon release of the Netflix show, several parents' groups and organizations attempted to ban it for extremely graphic sexual assault and suicide scenes. According to Chris Jancelewicz, American parents pushed for Netflix to cancel the show after the second season because it depicted the brutal sexual assault of a teenage boy. This strikes me as strange because season 1 depicts the aforementioned rapes of Jessica and Hannah, yet it took the assault of a teenage boy for parents to raise a ruckus. This reveals an expectation within rape culture that girls being assaulted is inevitable, but that assaults of boys are troubling. Both the show and book have been challenged for depicting these rapes since the very beginning. For example, a 2017 blog post by Cathy Collins explains that the show's "graphic depictions of rape and suicide have re-triggered a censorship debate stretching back to the book's publication" (Collins). Amid the controversy, the series *Thirteen Reasons Why* has managed to stay on Netflix and includes four seasons, three of which take place after the events of the novel.

Speak and *Thirteen Reasons Why* provided a foothold for me to begin my research, but these two books only scratch the surface. Within the last decade, there has been a surge of published adolescent literature covering themes of rape and sexual assault. GoodReads, a popular book reviewing website, has a list to which people can add books based on particular subject matter. According to the list, titled "YA Books About Rape/ Sexual Assault," there are more than 300 adolescent novels that cover rape and sexual assault. Using the list as a starter point, I began sifting through the novels in order to find some with commonalities to *Speak*, but also novels that demonstrated other strong ideas about the prevalence of rape culture.

Using *Speak* as my starting point, I found *The Way I Used to Be*, a 2016 novel by Amber Smith. The protagonist, Eden, is raped by her brother's best friend before beginning high school and the book follows her journey through high school carrying this weight. Told in four parts, freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year, *The Way I Used to Be* explores the dynamics of reinvention after assault, power struggles within modern rape culture, and the unease with reporting a sexual assault. Since the novel uses similar storytelling to that of *Speak*, it is viable as a primary text that also focuses on healing and survival while surrounded by cultural ideas that work against your circumstances.

The Way I Used to Be pushes beyond *Speak* because it depicts Eden's actual reporting process as well as her journey with hypersexuality after assault. Hypersexuality is compulsive sexual behavior that can occur in response to an assault. Stewart Adelson et al. share in their 2012 article "Toward a Definition of Hypersexuality in Children and Adolescents" that "hypersexual behavior in children and adolescents is associated with a variety of factors. Social factors include sexual abuse, physical abuse, life stress, and impaired family relationships" (Adelson et al. 481). It is not uncommon for sexually assaulted children and adolescents to develop hypersexual behavior. *The Way I Used to Be* depicts it as Eden navigates high school under the notion that it is too late to report her rape despite wanting to right after it happened.

As I explored various adolescent texts, I realized most of them depicted rape victims from places of privilege. Both Melinda and Eden are white, come from middle class families, and generally have the resources available to them once they speak about their experiences. The aforementioned research from the NSVRC indicated gaps in the data of minorities, but also mentions "oppression (racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc) is one of the root causes of sexual violence" (Teenagers and Sexual Violence). Despite this, very few adolescent rape novels

in which one adolescent is raped by another depict a minority being assaulted, though research on rape prevalence shows that rape culture often does not protect the oppressed. There are novels that demonstrate minorities being raped such as in *Push* by Sapphire. However, *Push* depicts the protagonist, an obese black teenager named Claireese Jones (Precious) being raped by her father. Though molestation and sexual assault affect many children, I chose not to discuss this novel because it opens up discourse on child abuse rather than keeping focus on adolescents and contemporary rape culture.

After sifting through a lot of what felt like the same narrative, I came across the 2015 novel *All the Rage* by Courtney Summers. *All the Rage* follows high schooler Romy Grey. Romy was raped before the events of the novel by town golden boy Kellan Turner. Since Kellan comes from money and happens to be the son of the sheriff, no one believes Romy when she comes forward with the allegation. She is bullied in school because of this. For example, while she is running in gym class, a boy runs up close to her and says, “This too close to you Romy? Gonna cry rape?” (Summers 46). The Turners come from a place of power in the town, while Romy lives on “the wrong side of town.” Though not explicitly stated, Romy, her mom, and her mom’s boyfriend live close to the poverty line. This is indicated throughout the novel by Romy’s need to have a job, the family buying everything secondhand, and Romy riding her bike as transportation when nearly all of her peers are financially well off enough to have their own vehicles.

Romy’s struggles to live in a town where no one believes her story prior to the novel’s events are amplified by Sheriff Turner “picking” on Romy by pulling her over for no reason. One night, both Romy and her ex best friend Penny, disappear on the same night. Romy is found and returns home the next morning and Penny remains missing. Though they were not together, both Sheriff Turner and Romy’s peers harass her for Penny’s disappearance. Ex friends and people she

knew before her assault were enraged that resources of the town were wasted on finding Romy, the neighborhood slut, rather than Penny, a popular and well-liked girl. *All the Rage* captures the frustration women experience when attempting to report crimes committed against them in a world where people are supposed to feel protected from criminals. Most importantly though, *All the Rage* highlights the power dynamics of rape culture, making it important to analyze through this lens.

All the Rage, *Speak*, and *The Way I Used to Be* are my chosen primary texts for a couple of reasons. One, they each are narrated by the victim of rape. This allows readers to see the rape trauma from the perspective of the victim, rather than focusing on the attackers or potential other witnesses who are not as close to the story. Second, all three protagonists are teenaged females, and, according to the NSVRC, one in three completed forced penetration rapes happen to girls between the ages of 11 and 17 (Teenagers and Sexual Assault). Finally, each of the attackers are male, adolescent, acquaintances, reflecting that 46% of all adolescent rapes occur at the hand of an acquaintance or peer. Though all three novels have similarities, the novels also have differences in the ways each protagonist deals with their rape and what resources are available to them. *All the Rage*, *Speak*, and *The Way I Used to Be* all depict rape culture and myths about rape in ways that can educate readers.

Literature Review

In order to break down the effectiveness of rape portrayals within adolescent literature, I prioritized gaining further understanding about contemporary rape culture, an environment depicted in all three novels. Amber J. Keyser's book *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture* includes several trends that perpetrate rape culture within society today. These include power play dynamics, issues with the legal system, the construction of the female body, and toxic

masculinity. The book ends with a call to action that promotes speaking out and standing up against rape culture. Keyser includes real world examples in her book, including power plays within Hollywood surrounding rape culture with people such as Harvey Weinstein and his known victims; Mira Sorvino, Ashley Judd, Salma Hayek, and others. Keyser urges adolescents to stand against rape culture as well and presents avenues for teens to make their voices known as a way to push back. Keyser's book lays an important foundation for my work because it defines rape culture and addresses the severity of the problem. My thesis will expand on the foundation laid out by Keyser by addressing adolescent literature as an avenue in which to explore rape culture.

There is also some existing scholarship on the relationship between rape and adolescent literature. For example, Amanda Charles' 2019 article, "Sexual Assault and Its Impacts in Young Adult Literature," discusses adolescent rape. As a childhood rape survivor herself, Charles' research asks the question of whether adolescent rape novels are helpful or harmful to survivors of sexual assault. She also discusses and evaluates the effectiveness of discussing such novels in a classroom setting and how these discussions can harness readerly empathy among those who have not experienced assault, while also providing strength to those who have. Charles urges caution in looking at some novels with sexual assault in them and says, "if rape is used as a plot line, to add dramatic effect, or slander a character, then the novel itself is perpetuating rape culture in its poor portrayal" (Charles 101). However, Charles notes in her research that many works of young adult literature with rape depictions help to challenge many myths of rape culture and create an emphasis on the character's struggle post rape rather than the super graphic details of the assault. Charles' work lays an important foundation for my research as it discusses the importance of discussing adolescent rape novels with adolescents while also staying mindful that some depictions of rape within adolescent literature are just shallow plot points. My research

ultimately expands on these ideas by using more contemporary examples of adolescent rape novels as well as investigating how effective adolescent rape novels can both work for and against contemporary rape culture.

Another useful resource is Victor Malo-Juvera's 2014 study, "*Speak*: The Effect of Literary Instruction on Adolescents' Rape Myth Acceptance," which highlights common rape myths that our culture plays into, such as the false assumption that a high majority of rapes happen at the hands of strangers or that date rape scenarios are sought out, to see if adolescent literature can help to break down adolescent rape myth acceptance. The study examined the effectiveness of a five-week reader response unit in language arts using *Speak*. Malo-Juvera found that overall there was a significant decrease in rape myth acceptance as a result of the unit, with the scores of the rape myth pretest dropping nearly 10%. Malo-Juvera's work allowed me to look at quantitative data on the effectiveness of teaching adolescent rape novels in school. With proper instruction and data collection, the difference in the students was noticeable in every category of testing. This research demonstrates a transformation in the understanding of rape, but I found myself asking what adolescents can do with this increased understanding. My research will expand on this study by investigating action steps, such as participation within the #MeToo movement and other forms adolescents can use to actively stand against contemporary rape culture.

Since *Speak* is over 20 years old and was one of the groundbreaking texts to deal with adolescent rape, there are quite a few existing articles on *Speak*. Previously published adolescent novels such as *Perks of Being a Wallflower* include these themes, but *Speak* was one of the first to have a rape occur at the hands of a peer rather than an adult or older family member. Angela Hubler, in her article "It Is Not Enough to Speak: Toward a Coalitional Consciousness in the

Young Adult Rape Novel," discusses *Speak* and other rape novels, such as *Those Other People* by Alice Childress, that capture a survivor's inner voice and feelings responding to the rape. This is in contrast to external issues that could be addressed in order to help the rape survivors, such as guidance from adults or therapy.

Hubler argues that, since Melinda is silent for a majority of the novel, the readers have an opportunity to read her reactions and feelings surrounding her rape. However, this internalized approach prohibits readers from gaining an understanding of some of the bigger issues at play when dealing with rape. Issues such as power dynamics, social structure, environments, and safe spaces all play a role within the text, but are not addressed since *Speak* mostly provides an internal perspective on the issue because of Melinda's silence. Hubler emphasizes though that *Speak* provides a great avenue in which to explore the survivor perspective and voice, but it ironically does so by keeping Melinda silent in a world in which feminist movements are encouraging the female perspective be brought out into the external, rather than staying internal. This is an important critique of *Speak*, considering 42% of all rape survivors tell no one about the rape, according to Keyser and other scholars.

Some other noteworthy scholarship on *Speak* comes from Chris McGee and Barbara Tannert-Smith. McGee discusses the irony of adults writing adolescent literature, since trying to have a truly authentic teenage voice from an adult writer is very difficult. McGee says that Anderson's *Speak* plays very well into the irony because Melinda's silence reinforces the ideology that it attempts to challenge when Melinda finally gets her voice back at the end of the novel and decides to tell her art teacher Mr. Freeman about what happened. Since rape culture reinforces power, there is a repeated notion that victims are meant to stay silent after the attack. Victims stay silent because of threats from their attacker or out of fear of the event in general.

Speak challenges this by having Melinda finally share her story at the end, but diminishes that by having her remain silent throughout the novel.

Barbara Tannert-Smith also presents the irony of adolescent literature in her article “‘Like Falling up into a Storybook’: Trauma and Intertextual Repetition in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*.” Tannert-Smith discusses *Speak* to be a critically acclaimed young adult trauma text for its willingness to discuss a fairly taboo topic at the time of publication. However, it also falls into the formula of many other young adult trauma texts in the way that a scary external event alters and transforms the internal of an adolescent, usually the protagonist. Tannert-Smith expands on this by presenting *Speak* as Melinda attempting to alter her reality enough to make her disappear completely, which represents childlike escapism as a solution to what happened. This is also represented in many young adult trauma novels. While a trauma victim is trying to come to terms with what happened, they are working in a way that can be read as both healing while also distorting. Tannert-Smith ultimately suggests that young adult trauma novels may be a representation of adult anxieties about a particular topic and says, “Young adult trauma fiction may in fact be a genre of literature that effectively makes these anxieties manifest” (Tannert-Smith 414). Rather than truly demonstrating an authentic attempt at a big topic, Tannert-Smith suggests that Anderson’s own anxieties about her adolescent experience with sexual assault may be present in the text.

Though Tannert-Smith discusses the presence of adult anxieties as something often present within young adult trauma novels, I think it is something that largely cannot be entirely eliminated. We live in a world in which very scary things happen to adolescents, who are still defined as children according to the United Nations (UN). Halley Bondy, an adolescent literature author, acknowledges her own anxieties about sexual assault in her book, but uses it in a way to

speak to readers about large and pressing issues. Bondy's previously mentioned book *#MeToo and You: Everything You Need to Know About Consent, Boundaries, and More* uses a voice that speaks directly to adolescent readers about the prevalence of rape and sexual assault. There are stories scattered throughout with scenarios that are both real and made up, which is indicated at the start of the story. One of the last stories of the book is Bondy's true story about her writing process.

In her story, Bondy shares, "By being an ally and writing this book, Halley—again that's me, has put herself at risk of being triggered about her own abuse and also at risk of vicarious trauma" (Bondy 158). Bondy suggests that eliminating her anxieties from the book entirely was not possible, and goes on to say that these anxieties are important to face in order to make a book that can reach this audience about a very real topic. Bondy's book includes many trigger warnings and honesty about what each chapter will consist of in order to remain transparent and not to accidentally trigger a reader. Acknowledging triggers when discussing this topic, rather than avoiding the topic altogether, is a transformation I noticed in looking at contemporary rape culture research. This demonstrates understanding that this is a difficult but necessary topic to discuss, while not sheltering teens from the subject.

Jessi Snider's article "Be the Tree: Classical Literature, Art Therapy, and Transcending Trauma in *Speak*" argues that Anderson explores some of the common themes of the problem novel within *Speak* but also uses art therapy as a metaphor for Melinda's communication failures throughout the novel. Melinda receives the assignment to capture trees artistically by the end of the semester from her art teacher Mr. Freeman. The inclusion of Melinda's art provides another avenue in which to explore Melinda's feelings. In the article, Snider lays out the criteria for a problem novel to "tend to feature first person narration, an adolescent protagonist, and taboo

subject matter” (Snider 299). Snider then applies the criteria to *Speak*, defining it as a problem novel but also noting that “*Speak* indeed ends on a note of growth” (Snider 299). Snider notices within her research a high amount of scholarship on *Speak* that focuses on trauma theory, but she argues *Speak* is an effective text to teach adolescents about taboo and complex themes by using symbols and metaphors. Within *Speak*, the use of trees is effective according to Snider because trees have long been a symbol of rape within classic literature. Snider challenges the definition of problem novel, a subgenre which scholars sometimes criticize, by saying the presence of symbolism allows *Speak* to be a gateway into the symbolism of trees in classic literature. Snider’s critical look at the symbolism within *Speak* provides me with a new perspective to use to look at all of my primary texts.

Even though there is quite a bit of research that solely focuses on *Speak*, there is also plenty of research that talks more generally about adolescent rape novels. The 2014 article “Critical Representations of Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature” highlights the importance of adolescent novels that include themes of sexual assault. Authors Erika Cleveland and Sybil Durand argue these novels are teaching tools that can facilitate discussions amongst students about this problematic yet prominent issue. Their research examines four texts, all of which depict sexual assault, but these novels also depict greater factors surrounding sexual assault, such as aggressive sports, victim blaming, and adults unknowingly contributing to existing rape culture. Cleveland and Durand’s work lays out some of the key representations of sexual assault in adolescent literature, providing me with a foundation for examining my own primary texts.

Aiyana Altrows’ article “Rape Scripts and Rape Spaces: Constructions of Female Bodies in Adolescent Fiction” discusses the idea of a “real rape script” as coined by sociologists. This rape script involves a female being violently attacked and raped by a man outdoors. The research

on rape suggests, though, that only about 10% of rapes follow this supposed rape script. This rape script, another myth that perpetuates rape culture, also has the power to limit the definition of rape, which is what allows rape to remain to be the most underreported crime in the United States. Altrow's research looks specifically at rape spaces within adolescent literature, which are "spaces in which rape is portrayed as inherent and the rapist merely fulfils his purpose by raping" (Altrows 51). Examining these rape spaces, Altrows argues female bodies within adolescent literature can serve as rape spaces by providing reason for a rapist to attack. In her chosen novels, Colleen Clayton's *What Happens Next*, Julie Berry's *All the Truth That's in Me*, Jenny Downham's *You Against Me*, and Daisy Whitney's *The Mockingbirds*, there are socially determined meanings for the female bodies within the narratives. She argues "novels which exclude the rapist lack an appropriate outlet for blame and therefore create rape spaces of female bodies through cognitive association" (Altrows 53). Creating rape spaces from female bodies by assuming that the only types of legitimate rape come from the rape script is ultimately problematic because it further marginalizes and victimizes women.

Altrows' article builds a foundation for examining the politicization of female bodies as cultural learning. The representation of the female body in adolescent literature highlights issues that are often political in nature such as food and clothing. These meanings that are projected oftentimes end up further pushing female bodies to be rape spaces, and for others to not consider such attacks as rape because of the harmful rape scripts presented within rape culture. Altrows' work allowed me to closely look at my primary texts for potential rape scripts and spaces. The portrayal of rape scripts and spaces within adolescent literature can serve one of two roles. It can either naturalize these myths so they continue unhealthy patterns of rape culture, or it can call attention to these myths to bring an end, or change to existing issues.

In her thesis, “She Wanted It?: Examining Young Adult Literature and its Portrayals of Rape Culture,” Katy Lewis breaks down the representations of various rape myths within four adolescent novels: *Gabi*, *A Girl in Pieces*, *Speak*, *Inexusable*, and *All the Rage*. Lewis evaluates the novels’ attention to ideologies within rape culture and how these novels can complicate the understanding of rape culture. She addresses rape and rape culture as social constructs that rely on gender constructions and argues “rape, therefore, is not about biology but instead about culturally constructed myths, especially those about femininity and masculinity” (Lewis 17). Lewis’s research also discusses the power of victim blaming and the implications it can have in a victim’s life because victim blaming is a big part of contemporary rape culture.

Though rape and rape culture is a very prominent issue for adolescents, it can be considered intense and challenging to discuss. In introducing texts with problematic real world issues to adolescents, there is often an argument about needing young readers to be protected from such ideas. For example, *Speak* was listed as the number four most challenged and banned book in the year 2020 according to the American Library Association (ALA). The reasonings for the ban are highlighted on the website as “it was thought to contain a political viewpoint and it was claimed to be biased against male students, and for the novel’s inclusion of rape and profanity” (Top 10 Most Challenged Book List). Considering the frequent upset about books including rape for adolescent readers, I sought out additional research on the impact of this introduction of books to young readers. The 2018 article “Engaging Disturbing Books” by Gay Ivey and Peter Johnston explores choice based reading for adolescents and the results of that. Ivey and Johnston argue for the elimination of incentivized required reading (comprehension questions, book reports, etc.) and, instead, allow students to choose what to read. This allows students to approach reading more strategically and to be more engaged. Furthermore, Ivey and

Johnston found that when allowing students to engage in “disturbing books” such as books with drugs, sex crimes, and psychological issues, students were “drawn to the moral complexities of the narratives more than to any graphic details” (Ivey and Johnston 144). Overall, there was an increase in enjoyment of reading and the notion of “reading for reading’s sake” (Ivey and Johnston 146) in comparison to forced reading for school assignments, projects, or enforcing certain books over others. Ivey and Johnston address students’ responses to engaging in novels that have more problematic themes.

Similar to the work of Ivey and Johnston, Kathleen C. Colantonio-Yurko, Henry Miller, and Jennifer Cheveallier’s article, “But She Didn’t Scream: Teaching About Sexual Assault in Young Adult Literature,” argues adolescent literature is a vehicle for teaching students about topics such as sexual assault. The authors are all English Language Arts instructors and have first-hand experience with the teaching of novels on rape. As teachers, they question “how many times had we missed an opportunity to correct a student’s misconception in the context of teaching such texts?” (Colantonio-Yurko et al. 1). Their article considers action steps teachers can use to introduce sexual assault and other social justice topics to students in a way that breaks down present myths. This includes discussions on victim blaming, and looking at existing real life statistics of rape so students know who is performing attempted and completed rapes, rather than relying on a rape myth.

A Way Forward

Rape remains a stagnant social justice issue worldwide and rape culture plays into that. By introducing adolescents to themes of rape and rape culture by way of adolescent literature, it has the ability to provide perspectives on what actual rape can look like. I have found in my research that adolescent rape novels reveal many patterns of rape culture and understanding these

elements can make people aware of the rape epidemic in the United States. This includes not only the assault itself, but the cultural ideas of rape, and attempted healing from rape in a society dominated by rape culture. There are also examples of nonfiction adolescent literature that explain rape culture in a way that is accessible for teens, including ways to stand against rape culture and how to be an ally for those who may have been sexually assaulted.

My thesis expands on existing scholarship in a couple of ways. I demonstrate the patterns of rape culture in society using young adult literature to explore these issues. I also argue that the structure of rape culture within society often makes healing from rape and sexual assault more difficult because rape culture has scripts for how rape happens, as well as how its dealt with. The works of adolescent literature I examine, comment on these myths and scripts and reveal them to be inaccurate. Finally, I argue how adolescent rape novels are pieces of activism for their targeted readers. Adolescent rape novels such as *All the Rage*, *Speak*, and *The Way I Used to Be*, all narrated in first-person by teen rape victims, bring young voices to rape survivors as they grapple with their unique situation in both their healing and the societal norms of rape culture. They demonstrate healing, regaining identity, and what a traumatic event such as rape can do to an adolescent's day-to-day life and sense of identity.

This project consists of three chapters, all of which discuss different elements of rape culture alongside each protagonist's process of healing. Chapter 1 uses *All the Rage* to discuss power plays within law enforcement, high school, and the difficulties of trying to report sexual assault. Chapter 2 evaluates institutionalized rape culture in *Speak*, labeling high schools as rape spaces that both perpetuate rape culture and stunt the healing process. The final chapter looks at agency in a time of healing from trauma surrounding rape as well as reporting an assault. These elements are present in *The Way I Used to Be*. Finally, I bring these novels together in

conjunction with contemporary discourse on adolescents and rape culture using movements such as #MeToo. With so many adolescents impacted by the prevalence of rape culture, whether by the physical rape itself or the constructs of rape within society, adolescents deserve to have the ability to be a part of the solution.

Chapter 1: Golden Boys and Broken Girls: Power Dynamics, Victim Blaming, and Rape Culture in Courtney Summers' *All the Rage*

Rape is about power. A rapist asserts power and takes power away from his victim. These power relationships are complicated further by societal power structures, as well as the idea of the singular rape narrative. There is an expectation that all rapes occur at the hands of strangers, often at night in back alleys or other secluded areas. In reality, rapists do not look any different from other people. Often, they are allowed to commit the crimes they do with no repercussions because of their power. Rape culture works to maintain that power. When a rape case is reported that does not match the singular narrative, or monomyth, people often blame the victim for their rape, rather than the person committing the crime. The structures that prioritize the powerful over the vulnerable perpetuate rape culture.

Amber J Keyser's *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture* (2019) reveals the power plays of men with authority, who often have the power to harass and assault women with no backlash, saying, "Perpetuators of sexual violence are able to exert their will upon their victims because they are more powerful than their victims" (19). Power takes the form of physical strength during the rape, but there are also social forms of power. Keyser highlights an example of this to be Brock Turner, a Stanford University student who was caught assaulting an unconscious woman behind a dumpster in 2015. Keyser writes, "Turner was a very believable, so-called *nice guy*. He was wealthy, white, blond, blue-eyed, and good looking. He was a star athlete with a promising future" (70). These factors put Brock Turner in a position of power over his victim, especially since many said her drinking was the reason for the rape. The judge of Turner's trial ordered him to serve six months in county jail, rather than the six years the victim's

attorney had asked for. In the end, Turner served only three of his six months and was released on good behavior.

As shown in Brock Turner's case, power is one of the driving forces in contemporary rape culture. In Courtney Summers' *All the Rage*, Romy Grey is raped by the Sheriff's son, Kellan Turner. This event occurs before the events of the novel, which show Romy living in the aftermath of disclosing her rape to the community. Romy doesn't formally report her rape to the police since the accused rapist is the town's "golden boy," and no one believes Romy is telling the truth. As a consequence, Romy must live surrounded by people who reject her because they believe that the sheriff's son would never be a rapist. Romy is frequently bullied at school for "crying rape" and is harassed by the sheriff, who abuses his power to make Romy feel as though she is a liar for accusing his son of rape. This is coupled with the disappearance of Penny Young, a "good" girl who has ties to both Romy and Kellan. Summers explores Romy's attempt to reconcile with her experience and highlights victim blaming and shame to be a driving motive for keeping a rape a secret. I argue the power dynamics present within Romy's narrative in *All the Rage* emphasize how rape victims are blamed for the crimes committed against them, and that this victim-blaming ultimately perpetuates rape culture by allowing many rapists to get away unpunished. Romy's community in *All the Rage* mirrors our society in its perpetuation of rape culture by prioritizing protecting rapists because they are well liked or well-connected.

The act of victim blaming is highly relevant to discussions surrounding contemporary rape culture, considering rape is the most underreported crime in the United States. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center shares that roughly 63% of rape cases are never reported. The principles of rape culture are so ingrained into people's lives, there is often a failure to recognize or acknowledge its influence. This chapter uses *All the Rage* to look critically at the foundations

of rape culture, social power dynamics, and victim blaming and shaming as evidence as to why many rape cases are not reported. In this chapter, I discuss rapists using their positions of power as well as elements of victim blaming that often prevent victims from reporting. Since many rape cases are unreported, it is often impossible for rapists to serve time or receive repercussions for their crime.

What *Is* Rape Culture Anyway?

As stated in my introduction, rape culture is a frequently used phrase to describe the conditions that lead to a prevalence of rape and sexual assault in society. Therefore, breaking down what rape culture means in conjunction with victim blaming is key to unpacking it. Rape culture is a socially constructed set of ideas and beliefs that normalize sexual violence and rape. Keyser says, “Americans live in a culture that makes excuses for male sexual violence and pretends that assault and rape are normal and inevitable” (12). The name “rape culture” came from feminist theorists in the 1970’s who wanted a name for the set of beliefs people hold about sexual violence. The perpetuation of rape culture happens when a set of ideas surrounding rape are reinforced as normal parts of society. Though there is not a set definition of these ideas as they evolve over time, there are many key words that encompass what society believes about rape. These key words include a lot of ingrained ideas about sexual violence, including the expectations of sexual assault and the expectations of response.

Keyser’s book describes rape culture as a “toxic brew,” saying that these ideas have been engrained. Keyser describes rape to be a part of American culture, saying, “Cultural practices and belief systems around the world have particular ways, both casual and legal, of viewing all forms of sexual aggression and sexual violence, including rape” (9-10). These ingrained beliefs are what allows rape to remain such a prevalent part of society. Keyser urges readers to look at

the elements of rape culture, including the myths, in order to understand the size of the problem. An example of rape culture in *All the Rage* is when Romy is automatically assumed to be dishonest when she tells classmates about her rape. She is not believed because she is less popular and less well off than Kellan. This issue will be touched on in a later section as intersectionality and power both play a huge role in contemporary ingrained ideas about rape and rape culture.

Another issue Keyser highlights in her book is problems within the legal system surrounding rape cases, which is something that is also touched on in *All the Rage*. Romy has frequent run-ins with the town sheriff, the father of her rapist. Keyser says, “Studies have shown that the vast majority of rape survivors—92 to 98 percent—are telling the truth about the crimes committed against them. Yet many people in law enforcement assume the victim is lying” (87). In *All the Rage*, Romy has frequent run-ins with the local sheriff, who also happens to be the father of her rapist. The role law enforcement plays in the perpetuation of rape culture directly ties to Romy’s experience in *All the Rage*. Looking critically at Romy’s experience reveals the influences of the justice system that contribute to the perpetuation of rape culture.

Since rape culture is a set of ideas society believes about sexual violence and rape, there are also a lot of cultural myths that people believe. Martha Burt’s article “Cultural Myths and Supports for Rape” highlights a couple of popular rape myths in contemporary society, which include, “‘only bad girls get raped’; ‘any healthy woman can resist a rapist if she really wants to’; ‘women ask for it’; ‘women “cry rape” only when they've been jilted or have something to cover up’; rapists are sex-starved, insane, or both” (Burt 217). The belief of these myths ultimately aids in the perpetuation of rape culture because it shifts the blame to the victims rather than the attackers.

All the Rage depicts myths such as “only bad girls get raped” and “women cry rape” which further ostracize Romy from her community, despite what happened to her being true. From the beginning of the novel, Romy is treated as someone who “cries rape.” For example, in gym class, a boy runs up close to Romy, and he says, “This too close for you Romy? [...] Gonna cry rape?” (Summers 46). Later on in the novel, there is a scene where Romy overhears girls accusing her of crying rape in the bathroom at school. Tina calls her “the girl who cries rape” when they reference Romy going missing the same night as Penny. She says, “The girl who cries rape and half the department was out looking for her on Saturday morning” (Summers 135). However, toward the end of the novel, when the same two girls are discussing whether or not their missing classmate was raped, Romy says that, if she was, “then she’s better off dead” (Summers 250). This allows the people around her to realize that not only was she telling the truth, but that she is still deeply affected by her rape.

In the book *#MeToo and You: Everything You Need to Know About Consent, Boundaries, and More*, author Halley Bondy explores various relationship dynamics for teens, and shares how to help someone who has been abused. Since the book is intended for an adolescent audience, Bondy is intentional with her inclusion of heavier subject matter such as rape. She introduces it with the following warning, “This chapter, and the rest of the book, contain explicit content and definitions of sexual abuse [...] If you do not wish to read about these difficult terms, stick to chapter 1 until you feel ready” (Bondy 37). Bondy’s willingness to explore these ideas with a young audience is necessary to spread messages about rape culture, power dynamics, and relationship struggles for a younger audience. The information included in her book is also relevant to contemporary conversations about rape culture, as it uses the #MeToo movement to speak about the issue.

Bondy's book also supports my argument in its presentation of power dynamics that exist in relationships because of the many power issues within rape culture itself. Bondy emphasizes that every relationship has power dynamics and explains, "If it's possible and appropriate, the person with more power in a dynamic should use their power to be good and helpful to those who have less power. Period" (Bondy 25-26). In the case of *All the Rage*, Romy's rapist Kellan is the son of the sheriff. There is an assumption that police are meant to help rape victims by means of filing a report or ensuring they receive medical care; however, Sheriff Turner only makes Romy out to be a liar, saying things to Romy's mom such as, "You know what they're saying? They're saying Paul's telling people my son raped your daughter to get back at Helen for firing him. Now maybe they fooled around and maybe she was a little too drunk at the time, but rape? You can't just call it something like that" (Summers 97).¹ By minimizing Romy's experience and refusing to acknowledge the word rape as something that may have happened with Kellan and Romy, he is taking advantage of his power over the town rather than helping someone with less power.

Katy Lewis examines portrayals of rape in adolescent literature in her thesis, *She wanted it?: Examining Young Adult Literature And Its Portrayals Of Rape Culture*. Among the four novels she covers, she discusses *All the Rage* as a novel that explores the female experience in response to acquaintance rape.² Romy lives daily in the aftermath of her experience in which no one believes she was raped. Lewis emphasizes this is because of how people regard her, as someone from the rough side of town, versus what they believe about her rapist, a golden boy who has power because of his name and his parents' influence in the community. Lewis

¹ Paul is Romy's biological father who walked out on Romy and her mother, but he still lives in town and frequents local bars. Helen is Kellan's mom and wife of the sheriff.

² Acquaintance rape is a rape that occurs between two people who know each other but have no romantic or personal relationship.

highlights the mistreatment of Romy throughout the novel at the hands of her peers. Using Lewis' work as a foundation, I hope to further argue the danger of victim blaming in cases of rape and sexual assault as something that further reinforces rape culture, and overall contributes to the discourse of adolescent rape cases and prevalence.

A final important contributor to discussions about adolescent rape novels are educators who work with the demographic. Kathleen C. Colantonio-Yurko et al. discuss the importance of teaching novels about sexual assault to high school students. As English language arts instructors, they argue teaching these novels to students can work as activism in society to stand against the existing myths and ideas that define rape culture. They say, "Together with our students, we must address and analyze the societal structures and systems that allow these myths and sayings to permeate society" (Colantonio-Yurko et al. 5). Ultimately, their findings demonstrate that using young adult literature in the classroom to explore the structures of rape culture and the prevalence of sexual assault will help students carry these lessons into existing societal structures, considering how closely some young adult rape novels mirror existing rape culture myths and beliefs.

The Girl Who Cries Rape and The Golden Boy

All the Rage follows Romy through the aftermath of speaking on her rape, as well as the bullying she faces for allegedly making a false claim against Kellan Turner, according to her classmates. Romy is often pulled over by the town sheriff for no reason, since his son is the one he accused. Romy's feelings about what really happened are dismissed by classmates and adults in the community. Halfway through the novel, Penny, Romy's old friend, goes missing and is later found dead. This is significant because before her disappearance, she went to Romy's work to tell her she believed what happened to Romy and urged her to report it. It is later revealed that

Penny was killed by her boyfriend's best friend Brock in order to hide the truth about Romy's potential assault. Since Penny has ties to both Romy and Kellan, news of Kellan assaulting another girl in another town is also revealed. In learning of both the rumors, as well as Penny's death, Romy must then choose whether to formally report her rape to protect future girls or continue to carry the burden of her secret after months of harassment.

Romy's rape is made clear from the very beginning of the novel as is the scrutinizing she receives from her peers.³ The novel begins with a few, scattered flashback sequences from Romy. In these sequences, she provides the context clues for the readers to discover she was raped, though she provides this information in the third person:

He explores the terrain of her body while he pretends to negotiate the terms. *You want this, you've always wanted this and we're not going that far, I promise.*

Really? His hands are everywhere and he's a vicious weight on top of her that she can't breathe against so she cries instead, and how do you get a girl to stop crying? You cover her mouth. (Summers 6)

From here, Romy flashes back to herself and her present, reminding herself that she is not that girl anymore. Before the events of the novel begin, readers understand Romy struggles with her rape even though the events happened around a year ago.

Though Romy still struggles with the trauma of her rape, she is unsupported by her peers, who often go out of their way to pick on her and to accuse her of lying about her rape. For example, while she is out running errands with her mother, some classmates stop and vandalize Romy's side of her mother's car with the word "slit." Romy says, "Slit. Because 'slut' was just too humanizing, I guess. A slit's not even a person. Just an opening" (Summers 38). In this instance, Romy is reduced to an object rather than a person. The objectification of women is

³ Hard cover versions of the book disclose Romy's rape on the inside flap of the novel.

something also discussed as being a part of rape culture. Sarah J. Harsey and Eileen L. Zurbriggen's article, "Men and Women's Self- Objectification, Objectification of Women, and Sexist Beliefs," describes the objectification of women as "as the treatment or perception of individuals as sexual bodies or as collections of sexualized body parts" (Harsey and Zurbriggen 861). When Romy is referred to as just a slit, she is seen as less than a person. Harsey and Zurbriggen argue that the objectification of women oftentimes leads to negative psychological consequences such as reduced self esteem, or generally negative thoughts about oneself. Romy spends a majority of the novel under the assumption that no one will believe her if she tries to speak about her rape. When Romy's old friend Penny asks Romy to report it, they share the following exchange: " 'I can't make it right. I can't make it right with you, Romy. I know that. But what happens if another girl-' 'Then get *her* to report it,' I say" (Summers 91). The amount of disbelief and torment Romy has faced in the novel makes her afraid to speak on her experience, despite someone else finally believing her story. This demonstrates the negative effects of the teasing, humiliation, and objectification Romy experiences.

Romy is outcast for her decision to try to speak about her rape. A boy accusing her of "crying rape" is a common rape myth as highlighted by Martha Burt. Since Romy's rapist, Kellan, is well liked, Romy's classmates believe him to be a good person, someone not capable of a crime. Consequently, since Romy is accusing him, they are quick to cast her accusations of rape as lies. It is also clear within the novel that Romy's peers are highly influenced by a culture of rape and rape myths. When another female student claims to be injured, mean girl Tina shares in the locker room, "She's faking" (Summers 15). The kids in this novel are quick not to believe one another for small mundane things, especially people with less power, which translates to bigger things such as Romy's rape as the novel unfolds.

Aside from Romy “crying rape” and being unpopular for that, there are also clues about her character that make her less liked around school. Romy comes from a lower class family, and Summers includes many references about Romy’s family not having very much money. Romy and her family shop at “THE BARN” a store Romy describes, explaining, “Everything is here. Food and movies, clothes and cheap furniture that looks nice and falls apart fast. At the back of the store, there’s candy, toys, decorations for whatever upcoming holiday, then all your personal hygiene needs. The grocery department belongs to itself. In Grebe, there are two kinds of people: those who shop local and those who shop here” (Summers 39).

Romy describes other cars as luxury vehicles, while Romy, her mom, and her mom’s boyfriend all share one car. Romy also works a job at the diner on the poorer side of town, as she knows she must work to earn her way to college someday, unlike her peers who do not work. Romy’s low socioeconomic status (SES) is noteworthy because, not only does it isolate her from her peers, rape studies show that women and girls with low SES are more vulnerable to rape and sexual assault. The National Sexual Violence Recourse Center (NSVRC) says, “Sexual violence does not happen in isolation. Oppression (racism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, etc.) is one of the root causes of sexual violence” (Teenagers and Sexual Violence). Romy being among the lower class in her town and school automatically makes her more vulnerable to acts of sexual violence in contrast to her middle and upper class peers. Romy having a low SES puts her in a lower power position than many of her classmates, especially the Turner family as they are wealthy because of Mrs. Turner’s businesses.

In contrast, Romy’s rapist, Kellan Turner, is immediately conveyed to readers as being a good person with lots of opportunity. This is reinforced by the power the Turner family has in town. Romy describes her rapist from the beginning of the novel as someone who is special and

highly regarded, going so far to say that Kellan is patient in asking Romy to have sex because he is a “good boy” She says:

He waits. He waits because he’s a nice boy. A blessed boy. He’s on the football team. His father is the sheriff and his mother sits at the top of a national auto supply chain and they are both so proud. He waits until he can’t wait anymore.

(Summers 5)

The passage illustrates Kellan’s role in town. His father being the sheriff and his mother being a highly regarded business woman puts the family in a position of power. Not only is the Turner family well liked, they have money because of his mother’s job. Also, since Kellan plays football, he possesses power within the high school dynamic.

Some power dynamics are harder to spot than others. Halley Bondy relays these types as being blurry, saying, “Maybe two peers are the same age, but one student is considered *very* popular and has lots of friends, while the other is brand new to the school and doesn’t have many friends yet. The popular kid has more power in this situation” (Bondy 25). Kellan is clearly more popular in school than Romy. With his popularity, comes the power he has to exist freely without serving time or being punished for his crime. It is also worth noting that though Kellan is frequently discussed and brought up throughout the novel, he is not actually present aside from the flashbacks Romy experiences of her rape, and in the things people say about him. This choice feels deliberate on Summer’s part because the reader is only exposed to Kellan in Romy’s memories and the town’s perceptions. This allows readers to use these tools to draw their own conclusions about him. Though Kellan is not present, readers see the Turner family often by way of his parents and his younger brother, Alek, who coincidentally is dating Penny, the missing girl.

Power and Control

Romy frequently reminds readers that the Turners are not a family to mess with, saying, “You speak against a Turner, you best pray you never need help in this town” (Summers 108). Since Romy has spoken out against Kellan Turner, Romy is isolated even further from others because of the amount of power the family holds in the small town. Keyser highlights the influence power can play in cases of sexual assault. She shares in her chapter “Power Plays” that “when people hold power, they are less likely to be challenged and held accountable for their behavior” (Keyser 19). Since Kellan comes from the Turner family, a high-power unit in a small town, speaking out against them often creates more problems than solutions. For example, when Romy is pulled over randomly by Sheriff Turner, he exerts his power in the confrontation they have: “‘There’s a lot of ways I could make this go,’ he tells me. ‘You were speeding, driving erratically. That’s not your car and I’m guessing your license isn’t on you. So that little sobriety test would be the least of your worries. But you know what? I am going to give you a break and hope you learn something from it’” (Summers 79). This interaction illustrates the influence and power the Turners have in town. Romy was not drunk, speeding, nor driving erratically. Sheriff Turner saw it was her behind the wheel, and chose to act. Though Romy has not yet formally filed a rape report, Sheriff Turner automatically being against her makes the task of reporting more difficult because of the influence Sheriff Turner carries over the town. There is also a layer of complexity added because Romy would need to report her rape to him, and he already does not believe her.

Romy’s situation is difficult because Sheriff Turner automatically sides with his son. Keyser argues law enforcement carries a lot of power in rape cases. This ultimately increases the gap between rapists who receive repercussions for their crimes and those who do not. Keyser

highlights the power law enforcement has in rape cases, saying, “If the police officer investigating the victim of rape does not believe the victim, the officer will declare the case to be unfounded” (Keyser 90).⁴ The real danger then comes from officers exerting their power to name cases unfounded simply because they do not believe the victim, whether a formal investigation occurs or not. Sheriff Turner does not believe Kellan to be a rapist, and relays this often to Romy’s mother. He says, “Paul [Romy’s father] was at the bar the other night and laid out some pretty serious accusations. You know how word travels around here. He said my son raped your daughter. . . of course no one believes it but that still doesn’t mean he can go around saying it. I want to know why he’s saying it” (96). Romy’s mother is questioned as a result of rumors being spread. Sheriff Turner would not believe Romy if she were to file a formal report of her rape. Instead, she remains silent after facing ridicule from everyone. Romy learns through this mistreatment that no one will believe what she has to say if she makes a report, so she chooses not to.

The doubt Sheriff Turner has about his son raping Romy carries out into the town. Notably, Kellan’s brother Alek is always quick to believe Romy is in the wrong. After the confrontation Romy has when Sheriff Turner pulls her over, Alex shares with his best friend Brock, ““Hey Brock,’ Alek says loudly, as a group of students pass. They slow. ‘You hear how my dad pulled Grey over yesterday night? She was drunk’” (Summers 83). Alek believes anything his father tells him, and so do classmates since Alek is part of the Turner family. This carries over with what classmates say to Romy about her rape. She is repeatedly told she “cried rape” rather than being believed. A classmate says, ““So did you enjoy it? [...] Getting fucked?”” (Summers 129). The repeated comments, ridicule, and mistreatment Romy faces has pushed

⁴ Unfounded cases are defined by the FBI as “determined through investigation to be false or baseless.” The trouble lies when law enforcement claim cases to be baseless because of their own bias, opinions, or ideas about the case in question.

Romy into silence about her experience, a burden she carries mostly by herself. Power of both rapists and law enforcement can lead to both an under-reporting of rape crimes as well as a lack of willingness to speak up from victims. This power and control perpetuates rape culture by shifting blame onto victims rather than perpetrators.

You Can Still Report It

One of the turning points of *All the Rage* is the disappearance of Penny Young, a girl who used to be friends with Romy until Romy's accuses Kellan of rape. The night she goes missing, she visits Romy at the diner to apologize for the mistreatment she has given Romy in response to her assault. She reminds Romy, "'You didn't report it. You can still report it,' she says and I reach under the table, dig my nails into one of the scabs on my knees until the wet tells me it's open 'I looked it up. You still have time. If you do it, something would have to happen'" (Summers 90). At this moment, someone else in town believes Romy and urges her to report it. Romy, though, says that someone else can report it if it happens to them, and reacts angrily to Penny discovering the truth. Romy reflects, "No—no. Fuck her. Fuck her for saying that. You can't just see something like that on someone's face" (Summers 90). After not being believed for so long, the thought of reporting it, or having someone believe her ultimately makes Romy angry, and she pushes Penny away, rather than taking action.

In many cases, reporting a rape is more complex than just telling someone. Oftentimes, an investigation is done by way of a rape test kit to collect evidence. Rape test kits, however, can be invasive and challenging for survivors of rape to handle. It is also noteworthy that many rape kits are on back log for being evaluated for evidence. In 2013, Hilary Hylton published an article for *Time* called "The Dark Side of Clearing America's Rape Kit Backlog." According to Hylton, there are approximately 400,000 rape kits in the United States that have yet to be tested for

evidence. A backlog of this size often delays both investigation and results for evidence marking purposes. This delay not only prevents evidence from getting to law enforcement, but it also allows for law enforcement to label cases as unfounded if there is no evidence. This contributes to the difficulty of formally reporting rape. Penny urging Romy to report her case is more difficult than it seems. Also, since a lot of rape cases are not immediately reported, using a rape kit is not always possible, thus adding to the difficulty of reporting.

Romy is repeatedly made to feel at blame for her rape, and later, the disappearance of Penny contributes to the difficulty she faces. Tina, Alek, Brock, and her other classmates make Romy feel responsible for Penny's disappearance. This is because Romy was also missing the same night Penny went missing, and people claimed she wasted resources. This is because a lot of the police force were looking for both Romy and Penny, even though Romy was found the next day. Later in the novel, readers find that Brock, Alek's best friend, gave Romy drugs, took her out to the middle of nowhere, and wrote "RAPE ME" on her stomach. Despite blatant harassment against Romy, no one believes her in the instances when it counts. Her classmates gossip in the bathroom, "The girl who cries rape and half the department was out looking for her on Saturday morning. They brought Grey home. Not Penny" (Summers 135). Incident after incident has people blaming Romy for the events that happened. Since Penny is more liked than Romy for her higher status and popularity, Romy is blamed for Penny not being found.

"Why didn't you say something sooner?" is a common phrase asked to rape victims upon finally coming forward about their assault. Heather Stewart's article "Why Didn't She Say Something Sooner?": Doubt, Denial, Silencing, and the Epistemic Harms of the #MeToo Movement" looks closely at the harm rape victims can experience in the reporting of the crime. Stewart highlights a key reason as to why women hesitate to speak up is "testimonial injustice."

Testimonial injustice refers to preconceived notions or stereotypes that are placed on someone prior to someone disclosing a testimony of their experience. Stewart highlights some examples of this as “women are ‘overblowing’ subjective claims to pain, harassment, discrimination, and so on” (Stewart 73). Women are often labeled as over emotional, and dramatic which leads to the assumption they are overexaggerating their circumstances. There is also a long standing rape myth that asks the question “What was she wearing?” This myth places the blame of the woman for wearing provocative clothing to be the reason they were sexually harassed or raped. This ultimately makes reporting a rape more difficult if the people already think negatively of the victim. *All the Rage* demonstrates this repeatedly in both Romy’s classmates’ and Sheriff Turner’s reactions to her. She is frequently blamed for actions that are not her fault, which isolates her further and keeps her quiet about her assault.

Stewart highlights gaslighting as another reason women often do not speak up about their rape. Gaslighting is a manipulation tactic when someone is made to feel their feelings or situation is not serious, and therefore should not be taken as such. She defines gaslighting as “when a hearer tells a speaker that the speaker's claim isn't that serious, that they are overreacting, or that they are being too sensitive, or that they are not interpreting events properly” (Stewart 73). As a consequence, many rape victims are afraid to speak on their experiences out of fear of being gaslit, or not believed. The strong myths about women who report rape leaves space for gaslighting to occur, which can sometimes be more damaging than just not reporting a rape at all.

In *All the Rage*, Romy is often gaslit by Sheriff Turner whenever he relays the stories being told around town. When readers discover Penny Young was found dead in the river, this moves Romy to disclose what happened to her. She reveals someone drugged her and wrote

“RAPE ME” on her stomach to Sheriff Turner. She remarks, “He was going to rape me” (Summers 303) about the person who did it, who she believes is Brock. Turner replies with “Why would he ever—” (Summers 304) and Romy reminds Sheriff Turner of the incident, saying, “Because he knew we would get away with it, like. . .’ This. This is why she’s gone.⁵ ‘Like Kellan did’” (Summers 304). Upon Romy trying to speak on her rape, Sheriff Turner immediately gaslights her in response:

“No,” he says and he stands and I step back. “Alice, you want to do something about your daughter. I have *never* seen anyone so desperate for attention in my life.” He stares at me with such hatred and disgust and he tries to make me wear it. “You want to make Penny’s death about your lies—” I step back again. “Your lies about my son. I will not let you do it—I won’t—” (Summers 305)

In multiple instances in *All the Rage*, Romy is not believed by Sheriff Turner. Since he is part of the law enforcement, the chances of her rape case going to trial are highly unlikely given the power the police can have in filing reports on rape. Romy’s story and many other real ones like it reveal the patterns with the underreporting of rape cases. When victim blaming is so ingrained, rapists are able to walk freely with little to no consequences while their victims suffer, often in silence, out of fear.

“You should have believed me.”: Standing Against the Victim Blaming of Rape Culture

Though Sheriff Turner is unchanged throughout the events of *All the Rage*, mean girl Tina Ortiz comes around to believing Romy. At the end of the novel, Romy and Tina share a heartfelt exchange in which Tina apologizes to Romy for not believing her. Romy tells Tina, “You should have believed me. . . I don’t know why you didn’t—” (Summers 313). Before apologizing, Tina admits, “Because it was easier” (Summers 313). Tina acknowledges her error

⁵ “She” in this quote refers to Penny.

in realizing Romy was right all along, and tries to reconcile with her once she realizes the harm it can do. Victim blaming has the power to perpetuate ideas of rape culture because it shifts the blame from what the real issue is. Tina admitting it was easier to go with the crowd of people who did not believe Romy, in this case people so heavily influenced by myths of rape and rape culture, ultimately hurts Romy who is trying to heal from a traumatic event. In multiple instances throughout the text, rape culture has prevented Romy from coming forward. In Romy's case, the power struggle she faces in being of low SES and being in direct conflict with the Sheriff of Grebe make her chances of being believed really low. As for a formal police report, readers never find out whether Romy is able to make one or not. As evidenced by the text and her relationship with Sheriff Turner and the Turner family, the probability is unlikely. Despite this, Romy does still have support from her mom, her mom's boyfriend Todd, Penny, and in the end Tina.

With victim blaming so heavily ingrained in rape culture, it will take a lot of intentionally standing against it to see change. However, an understanding in the power plays that occur behind the scenes in rape culture, allows people to understand the bigger issues that may be at play. The statistics are a living example of rape culture. Keyser says approximately 92% of rape victims who choose to report are telling the truth, meanwhile only 3% of rapists will ever serve time or receive repercussions for their crime. Romy's narrative in *All the Rage* accurately displays the power struggles present in contemporary rape culture and why many rapists still roam free. This novel has the ability to have an impact on adolescent readers in the way it highlights issues surrounding rape culture and how they may either contribute to rape culture or challenge long standing myths. This could look like believing their peers instances of rape and sexual harassment, rather than claiming them to be lying, or attention seeking.

To see change, it becomes necessary to take a stand against victim blaming, simply by believing victims when they come forward, as well as a willingness to stand with victims as allies. Sexual Assault activist and rape survivor Halle Bondy relays in her book *#MeToo and You: Everything You Need to Know About Consent, Boundaries, and More*, that simply, “Abuse victims need people to believe them and to listen to them” (Bondy 144). Small scale change can evolve into a better future in which victims feel safe to report their rape if they so choose, rather than suffer with their trauma in silence. An instance of rape carries an emotional toll that is made worse by victim blaming and shame. Standing with victims of rape, rather than against, has the power to combat rape culture as we know it.

Chapter 2: “We are now the Merryweather Tigers. Roar”: The Institutionalized Rape Culture of High School and Horizontal Healing in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson is about 13-year-old Melinda Sordino, who is raped at a party the summer before she begins high school. The novel follows Melinda through her first year of high school, as she faces ridicule, mistreatment, and misunderstanding because she does not share her experienced trauma with any of her peers or teachers. Throughout a majority of the novel it is unclear exactly what happened to Melinda. Melinda is a shy and intelligent girl beginning high school as a social outcast. All of her old friends shun her, and she remains quiet and in solitude. Her grades begin to drop, the one friend she did make leaves her behind, and her parents are constantly commenting on the girl she used to be and how she has changed. Later in the novel, it is revealed that Melinda was raped at her first ever high school party by senior Andy Evans. She calls the police, who break up the party, but she is unable to speak about her rape. The plot follows Melinda through her inner voice as she navigates high school, the weight of her experience, and her progression toward healing from her trauma.

In my previous chapter, I discuss the societal power structures that allow rape culture to be perpetuated. In this chapter, I shift more to specific spaces in which adolescents spend their time. *Speak* has been read by thousands of teenagers in its 23-year lifespan. The novel does not shy away from depicting the aftermath of rape. Rather, it confirms that not only does rape happen amongst adolescent high school students, but the very institution in which they spend a lot of their time perpetuates rape culture, ultimately making it more difficult for rape victims to heal. In *Speak*, Melinda’s healing is eclipsed by the continued perpetuation of rape culture within the school and student body, causing a more prolonged and difficult healing.

In *Speak*, readers gain an understanding of Melinda's experiences of her rape through her inner voice, but Melinda's voice also articulates the realities of high school alongside dealing with her personal trauma. In order to observe the institutionalized rape culture within the novel, I perform two close readings of the text. In the first, I focus on Melinda's "healing" as she navigates her freshman year. For the second, I focus more on the outside factors and individuals around Melinda. After the close readings, I connect my research of *Speak* to contemporary rape culture. I look specifically at the perpetuation of rape culture within adolescent spaces in *Speak* and the ways Melinda's behaviors link directly to present rape myths that create major problems in discussing and coping with rape.

***Speak's* Twenty Year Legacy**

Being over 20 years old, *Speak* has garnered a lot of scholarship, criticism, and censorship. Scholars have looked at *Speak* from so many different approaches and angles, demonstrating its complexity as an adolescent novel with multiple layers of meaning. According to a *New York Times* article from 2018 titled "Using Young Adult Novels to Make Sense of #MeToo" by Julia Jacobs, Anderson "did not initially see her book as a piece of activism" (Jacobs). Jacobs goes on to say that when it was first published, Anderson spoke on the book as "a piece of literature, rather than a lesson on rape culture" (Jacobs). For years, scholars have evaluated *Speak* for its effectiveness as a recovery narrative from sexual assault, which opens a dialogue for readers about rape culture and its effect on an adolescent.

In her article, "It Is Not Enough to Speak: Toward a Coalitional Consciousness in the Young Adult Rape Novel," Angela E Hubler discusses the internal nature of *Speak* and argues that other young adult rape novels such as Sandra Scoppetone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978) and Erika Tamer's *Fair Game* (1993) say more about the social structures of sexual

violence by allowing for multiple first-person narrators. A lot of young adult novels are written in the first-person in order for readers to help better connect with the characters. However, first-person rape novels usually allow for the connection of the victim's inner self and feelings, rather than a look at the external and links that may break down patterns.

Hubler argues that *Speak* and other young adult rape novels are “weakened by first-person narration which depoliticizes and privatizes rape by emphasizing the trauma experienced by survivors without exposing the social origins of sexual violence” (Hubler 116). *Speak* however, is written in first-person and captures the social origins of sexual violence through her rapist Andy believing he has the power to assault and harass Melinda and other women through his actions in the novel. Though Melinda is clearly traumatized by her experience, she is silent to those around her, and this internal perspective of her trauma sadly only further allows patterns of sexual violence to exist around her. Melinda internalizes the fear she feels when her rapist Andy Evans starts showing interest in her ex best friend Rachel/Rachelle saying to herself, “Let her lust after the Beast, I hope he breaks her heart. (What if he breaks something else?)” (Anderson 149). Melinda speaking on her rape right after it happened could have prevented Rachel from going after him and the potential violence that might have affected her.

Chris McGee is another scholar to have evaluated *Speak*. His article “Why Won't Melinda Just Talk about What Happened? *Speak* and the Confessional Voice” reviews the ways in which *Speak* is typically read, and he suggests a reading that accounts for Melinda's entire journey, both internal and external. McGee says readers commonly connect Melinda's journey to that of a traditional empowerment narrative: a character weakened by an experience or trauma who then comes into their power by the end of the story. However, McGee emphasizes that

“Melinda’s power does not come only from speaking about what happened. Just as often it comes from not speaking about what happened” (McGee 176). Melinda’s silence is often empowering on its own because she uses her silence to explore her experience. When Melinda finally comes around to naming her experience, she does this internally in which she plays out a TV show scenario in her head, in which she shares: “If my life were a TV show, what would it be? If it were an After-School Special, I would speak in front of an auditorium of my peers on How Not to Lose Your Virginity. Or, Why Seniors Should Be Locked Up. Or, My Summer Vacation: A Drunken Party, Lies, and Rape. Was I raped?” (Anderson 164). McGee suggests for readers to resist the urge to read the novel as a traditional empowerment narrative because Melinda demonstrates strength in both her silence and her willingness to speak about her experience. Melinda’s narrative follows the inner workings of her mind in choppy, fragmented sections that capture a survivor narrative but also demonstrates high self awareness as she works through her trauma as demonstrated in the after school special thoughts. Some readers who look at *Speak* as a traditional empowerment narrative in which Melinda comes into power by speaking make an assumption that Melinda is weak. However, McGee argues Melinda “finds strength despite her lack of a traditional ‘voice’” (McGee 176).

Melinda’s “healing” is something highly debated in young adult rape novel discourse. In addition to McGee, Barbara Tannert-Smith also discusses Melinda’s healing from trauma in her article “‘Like Falling up into a Storybook’: Trauma and Intertextual Repetition in Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*.” Tannert-Smith argues that since Melinda is 13 years old, she is at the beginning of her adolescence. Since adolescence is a time for developing one’s sense of self and identity, Melinda begins high school with a distorted sense of identity. Melinda shares early on, “I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude and I

don't have anyone to sit with. I am Outcast" (Anderson 4). Melinda is fully aware of her lack of identity and arguably searches for herself in high school post rape by trying to forget what happened. Another example of this is Melinda's desire to go somewhere else. She says, "I know my head isn't screwed on straight. I want to leave, transfer, warp myself to another galaxy. I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistakes and anger to someone else" (Anderson 51). She continues with the notion of a beast living in her gut and scraping away at her, and that getting rid of the memory will not get rid of the beast. The memory Melinda is referring to is clearly her rape, and though she tries to forget, she knows that it will stay with her.

Finally, Artso Ahmed and Rebwar Mohammed in their 2020 article, "Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*: The Effects of Rape Culture and the Construction of the Recovery Narrative," describe *Speak* and being more than just a traditional rape novel. Her external silence and behavior do not match the internal struggles she shares within herself, and these follow closely with a recovery narrative. Ahmed and Mohammed argue Melinda demonstrates post-traumatic characteristics, and these align with trauma theory laid out by scholars such as Judith Herman in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence: from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Furthermore, they argue Melinda's transformation happens slowly through daily acts of reconciliation with what happened to her. They share, "As the novel progresses, Melinda becomes more self conscious of her condition, begins to reconcile with her situation, and grows a sense of awareness of her vulnerability, which is significant to the thriving of herself as an individual" (Ahmed and Mohammed 85). Melinda coming to the realization of her rape in light of the traumatic experience, ultimately is what allows her to work toward acceptance and healing.

In my initial review of *Speak*, there is a lot of emphasis placed on Melinda's healing by speaking about her rape, thus creating an empowerment narrative. Though the novel is only around 200 pages, Melinda's narrative takes place in an entire year in which readers witness her grades fall and her social withdrawal increase while she remains adamant in keeping quiet about her rape. There is tension present within the novel because although she appears silent and withdrawn to those around her, she is constantly speaking to us as readers through the first person narration. This aligns with a recovery narrative, which, according to Judith Herman in her previously mentioned book, is normal amongst rape victims. Herman says, "The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word *unspeakable*" (Herman 1). While silence after trauma is common, I argue that Melinda is trapped in an institution that not only perpetuates rape culture, but makes the speaking on her rape aloud more challenging.

Schools as Rape Spaces

In "Speaking Out," an essay about writing *Speak*, Anderson highlights the creation of Melinda as a child of her nightmares. She would hear Melinda crying in the middle of the night and knew she had to write about her. More so, Anderson highlights the steps she took to ensure the novel has an authentic adolescent feel. Anderson says, "I had plenty of memories from high school, but I didn't know if they applied to the world of today's teenagers. To research, I headed to the twin touchstones of suburban adolescence: Taco Bell and The Mall" (Anderson 25). Anderson discusses important adolescent spaces, but neglects to mention the value of the school as an adolescent space within the novel, as it is where a lot of the novel takes place and is the social space that ultimately traps Melinda within her trauma.

According to Aiyana Altrows' article "Rape Scripts and Rape Spaces: Constructions of Female Bodies in Adolescent Fiction," rape spaces are "spaces in which rape is portrayed as inherent and the rapist merely fulfills his purpose by raping" (Altrows 51). Altrows argues that the construction of female bodies within such spaces contributes to their rape being inherent or something that will automatically happen. High schools, specifically Merryweather Highschool in *Speak*, can be rape spaces in the way they perpetuate rape culture. Melinda being trapped in the social bubble of Merryweather High, where rape seems accepted, only pushes Melinda further from speaking on her experience and thus working toward her ultimate "healing."

One of the ways in which Merryweather Highschool perpetuates rape culture is in the administration's attitude toward the mascot changes throughout the novel. Though included to provide comedic relief in Melinda's mind as she navigates high school, her observations provide insight on the administration's attitude towards sex, namely toward abstinence. At the start of the novel, Melinda mentions, "The school board has decided that 'Merryweather High – Home of the Trojans' didn't send a strong abstinence message, so they have transformed us into the Blue Devils" (Anderson 4). In this example, trojans do not convey abstinence because of the connection to a major brand of condoms. Furthermore, it is clear from the first few pages of the novel the school board prioritizes abstinence, the withholding of sexual intercourse until marriage. Treating sex as something that is forbidden until marriage ultimately does not prevent teenagers from engaging in sexual intercourse, rather, it prevents safe sex. Teaching adolescents, specifically girls, to wait until marriage before having sex as the only option perpetuates rape culture because it makes females responsible for protecting their virginity.

The preaching of abstinence in school is still happening today as part of some sex education curriculums. According to Samantha Sneen's article "The Current State of Sex

Education and its Perpetuation of Rape Culture,” only 29 states require sex education in schools. Sneen also shares that “thirty one states require any sex ed offered to stress abstinence—often withholding vital information students need to stay healthy” (Sneen 472). Not only does abstinence only sex education often omit information about contraceptives to protect students, Sneen argues it reinforces gender stereotypes and emphasizes female responsibility in association to sex. Sneen also says, “Abstinence-only programs reinforce dangerous sex stereotypes such as rape and coerced sex by hinting that male sex drives are uncontrollable and women need to be ‘gatekeepers of chastity’” (Sneen 473). The current requirement of abstinence only sex education in 31 states encourages these harmful stereotypes. We can see the effects of abstinence education when, in *Speak*, Melinda feels responsible for what happened to her, going as far as referring to her rape as a mistake. She hides in closets both at home and at school. In her closet, she reflects and shares:

I want to confess everything, hand over the guilt and mistake and anger to someone else. There is a beast in my gut, I can hear it scraping away at the inside of my ribs. Even if I dump the memory, it will stay with me, staining me. My closet is a good thing, a quiet place that helps me hold these thoughts inside my head where no one can hear them. (Anderson 51)

Melinda is also made to feel responsible for the rape by her rapist, Andy Evans. In the final confrontation in the school closet with Andy, he says to Melinda, “You know that’s a lie. I never raped anybody. I don’t have to. You wanted it just as bad as I did” (Anderson 194). Since abstinence is clearly the main aspect of sex education within the novel, Andy is then seen as a male with an uncontrollable sex drive and Melinda is made responsible for protecting her virginity. In addition to the implications of a censored sex education curriculum, the school board

also censors books that might be helpful to victims of sexual assault. Melinda decorates her closet with a poster of Maya Angelou given to her by the librarian and she shares that “the poster was coming down because the school board banned one of her books. She must be a great writer if the school board is afraid of her” (Anderson 50). The book Melinda is talking about is Angelou’s autobiographical work *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In the book, Angelou discloses her childhood rape by her mother’s boyfriend and how she kept the rape a secret for so long. The banning of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings* is significant because it prevents Melinda from reading about an experience similar to her own. Despite this, Maya Angelou herself remains a symbol of strength for Melinda throughout the novel.

Melinda’s closet at school is often cited as her safe space. In the novel, Melinda finds the closet and shares, “This closet is abandoned—it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me” (Anderson 26). Melinda uses the Maya Angelou poster to cover a mirror so she is unable to see herself. In Don Latham’s article “Melinda’s Closet: Trauma and the Queer Subtext of Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*,” he discusses the mirror stage in developmental psychology in which an infant is able to recognize themselves in a mirror. As a result of her rape though, Melinda “can no longer accept the illusion that she is a whole, integrated self” (Latham 374-375). The beautiful irony is that Melinda covers the mirror with the poster of Angelou. Latham says, “It is unclear whether Melinda knows how closely Angelou's experience parallels her own” (Latham 375). Despite this, readers know Melinda admires Angelou because of the banning of her book. Furthermore, there is strength in Melinda using a broken mirror piece in the final confrontation with Andy. Finally acknowledging the mirror and herself within the reflection is an opportunity for Melinda to really see herself, despite her rape, and to use her experience to save herself from a second attack from Andy.

Though the Merryweather High School board bans the reading of *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*, Melinda reveals they read *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne in her English class. *The Scarlet Letter* tells the story of a Puritan woman who must wear the mark of her sin of adultery as a symbol of shame. Hester is shamed for her sexual behavior, which reinforces the idea in abstinence only sex education that women are made to be responsible for their sexualities and behaviors while men's desire is deemed uncontrollable. In the reading of *The Scarlet Letter*, Melinda finds connection with the protagonist Hester. She shares with the reader, "I wonder if Hester tried to say no. She's kind of quiet. We would get along. I can see us living in the woods, her wearing that A, me with an S maybe, S for silent, for stupid, for scared. S for silly. S for shame" (Anderson 101). This moment in which Melinda reflects on what her letter would mean gives readers a big insight about how she feels about her rape, without going into too much detail. She sees herself in Hester's narrative in a way that affirms her decision to stay silent or else be shamed for her rape. This decision then prolongs her breaking her silence which stunts her healing. Melinda finds herself connecting closely with Hester in the reading of her story, noting they would get along. Not only is rape culture represented within the curriculum of Merryweather High, Mr. Neck, one of the instructors, also acts in a way that perpetuates rape culture. Mr. Neck is Melinda's social studies teacher and one who causes her a lot of trouble throughout the novel. In their first big interaction, Melinda has mashed potatoes thrown at her during lunch and tries to leave the cafeteria. Mr. Neck, however, gives her a hard time, saying, "I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you. I've taught twenty four years and I can tell what's going on in a kid's head just by looking in their eyes" (Anderson 9). Melinda does not bother trying to explain what happened in the cafeteria, asking readers, "Would he listen to 'I need to go home and change?' [...] Not a chance. I keep my mouth shut" (Anderson 9).

From this first interaction onward, Melinda feels as though she cannot trust Mr. Neck. His description from the beginning of the novel makes him sound intimidating. Melinda says, “My social studies teacher is Mr. Neck, the same guy who growled at me to sit down in the auditorium. He remembers me fondly. ‘I got my eye on you. Front row’” (Anderson 7). Mr. Neck is made to be authoritative throughout the novel and demonstrates that he would not believe Melinda simply because of his own conclusions he draws himself. He singles Melinda out and makes her feel as though she is trouble, simply for looking disheveled because of her experience over the summer, in addition to the bullying she experiences throughout the school year. Instead of hearing her out, Mr. Neck immediately brands her “trouble,” which ultimately silences Melinda from speaking for fear of not being believed.

Though not explicitly stated in the novel, all of these small details give readers an impression of the Merryweather High School as an institution that ultimately perpetuates rape culture. Mr. Neck branding Melinda as trouble, and her consequent discomfort in sharing with him further silences her. Also, the condoning of abstinence as sex education helps to further reinforce harmful rape myths in which woman are responsible for their virginities, which causes Melinda to feel as though her rape is her mistake and her fault. Maya Angelou’s autobiographical work in which her childhood rape is disclosed is banned from being read while students are forced to read a work in which a woman is made to feel shamed for her sexual behavior, curricular decisions that show the possible priorities for the selected texts. Melinda is in this school environment constantly, an environment that makes her healing more difficult and her experience more painful to name.

A Student Body Strengthened by Reinforced Rape Myths

The Merryweather High school board enforcing a curriculum and practices that ultimately perpetuate rape culture is also reflected in the behavior of students at school. Melinda is immediately placed at fault by a vast majority of the student body for calling the cops at the party that she was raped at. However, since no students know what happened, Melinda knows and understands that she is beginning high school as an outcast. Friendship and peer relationships are considered to be very important to forming identity in adolescence. Since Melinda lacks these things, it makes her experience of coming to terms with her rape more difficult, especially when surrounded by peers who have been conditioned to believe rape myths at the hands of the school environment.

As part of the annual Children's Literature Association 2022 conference in Atlanta Georgia, Amanda Greenwell discussed the impact of institutionalized violence against youth within *Speak*. Greenwell argues that vertical power structure hierarchies are present within the novel from the very beginning. Melinda has knowledge of the power structures and differences in upperclassmen from her first experience in the high school, going so far to say that "the indoctrination begins" (Anderson 5) upon being herded in the auditorium on the first day of school. This indoctrination lays out expectations for new students in order to thrive in the school environment. Ultimately, these expectations work alongside social structures ingrained by the system of the school, making the entire high school experience more difficult for Melinda.

Greenwell emphasizes social connection within high school social structures are vital to finding one's identity in adolescence. Furthermore, having these social and identity markers can ultimately help an adolescent succeed in adulthood. On Melinda's experience, Greenwell says:

Indeed, the assault as well as her phone call to the police that breaks up the party where it occurred means that Melinda begins high school both traumatized and having lost all of the social markers that are conventionally understood to be age-appropriate growth icons for an adolescent American girl headed to successful adulthood: a circle of close girlfriends and a hetero love interest, motivation to succeed in academic work, and engagement in extracurricular activities. (Greenwell 4)

Melinda is changed by the circumstances of her rape and her decision to call the police. Because of this, she is unable to grow vertically in the way the school structure wants her to, along with her peers. Melinda reflects upon meeting new girl Heather, “I used to be like Heather. Have I changed that much in two months?” (Anderson 24). Despite her acknowledgement of change, being unable to keep up with her peers only further isolates her and makes her healing challenging.

Early on, Melinda attempts to reconcile with her peers about breaking up the party. She longs to tell Rachel, her ex best friend, though Rachel mouths, “I hate you” (Anderson 5). When confronted at a pep rally, a student says, “My brother got arrested at that party. He got fired because of the arrest. I can’t believe you did that. Asshole” (Anderson 28). Melinda, using her “headvoice”⁶ says, “You don’t understand” (Anderson 28) but she ultimately keeps this to herself. Melinda has accepted her public shame from peers for calling the cops at the party despite her headvoice longing for someone to understand why she made the decision she did. Because of this treatment, Melinda falls prey to a common rape myth in victims of rape and sexual assault, that no one will believe them if they speak up.

⁶ “Headvoice” is the voice inside Melinda’s head that often wants her to think and act rationally and wants to move on from her rape. However, her headvoice rarely ever leaves her head, which means oftentimes only readers know what Melinda is really thinking and feeling.

As discussed in Chapter 1, rape myths are common things people believe about rape and sexual assault that ultimately further perpetuate rape culture. According to Amber J. Keyser in her book *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*, rape culture gives society a specific way to believe and react to rape. She says, “Rape culture tells us a very specific—and false—story about what rape is and who commits it” (Keyser 63). Because this story involves a violent stranger snatching a virginal woman from the street and violently raping her, people have a hard time believing actual stories of rape in which most victims are assaulted by acquaintances. Such is the case for Melinda as her rape occurs at the hands of popular and well-liked senior Andy Evans. Since Andy’s position in the student body is an elevated one, he acts from a position of power throughout the novel. He knows the power he has and often uses it to make Melinda feel small. When Melinda is hanging a poster up, Andy Evans comes up to her and the following unfolds: “‘Freshmeat.’ That’s what IT whispers to me. IT found me again. I thought I could ignore IT. There are four hundred other freshman in here, two hundred female. Plus all other grades. But he whispers to me” (Anderson 86). Andy is aware of the power he holds over Melinda throughout the novel and often uses it to his advantage in interactions like this. His awareness of his own power, and other student’s awareness of his power makes high school as a rape victim more difficult for lack of being believed. Andy feeling comfortable enough to harass Melinda in school demonstrates the power he carries. In another scene, Melinda hears other girls speaking about Andy Evans. They ask if Andy “is as bad as everyone says” (90) and have the following conversation:

Siobhan: “It’s just a rumor.”

Emily: “Fact—he’s gorgeous. Fact— he’s rich. Fact— he’s just the itsiest bit dangerous and he called me last night.”

Siobhan: “Rumor—he sleeps with anything [...]”

Emily: “I don’t believe it. Rumors are spread by jealous people.” (Anderson 90)

With this interaction from two other girls, there is evidence to show that Andy might be problematic, however it is dismissed as a rumor started by a “jealous person.” Girls at school refusing to believe that Andy is bad reinforces ideas in rape culture that boys with power have the ability to get away with things, such as rape or otherwise.

Toward the end of the novel, Melinda attempts to reconcile her friendship with her ex best friend Rachel. She musters up courage to speak about what happened to her the night of the party. She writes in a note⁷ to Rachel, “*Some guy raped me. Under the trees. I didn’t know what to do*” (Anderson 183). Rachel meets Melinda with responses such as “*Oh my God, I am so sorry*” (Anderson 183) and “*Are you OK???????????*” (Anderson 184). However, when Rachel asks who did it and Melinda tells her it was Andy Evans, Rachel explodes with “Liar!” (Anderson 184). Rachel then highlights why Melinda is a liar, using examples that demonstrate the impact of rape culture within the student body. Rachel says “You’re a twisted little freak and you’re jealous that I’m popular and I’m going to the prom so you lie to me like this” (Anderson 184). Rachel places high importance on popularity, as many high school girls do, and perpetuates rape culture by playing into the myth that rapists are only scary, violent, strangers. Andy Evans’ popularity, thus power within the student body, makes it easier for him to get away with his behaviors. Andy’s popularity juxtaposed with Melinda’s role as an outcast reinforces male power, which is another piece of rape culture that makes believing the common myths about who rapes people easy to believe. It is easy to believe a violent, strange, man is a rapist, but difficult to believe an athletic, popular, attractive high schooler is also a rapist.

⁷ The italic interactions represent a series of notes Melinda and Rachel pass back and forth to each other.

Trees and Horizontal Healing

As Greenwell mentions in her work, Merryweather High School functions on a vertical power structure in order for students to be both academically and socially prepared for the adult world. For Melinda, being a rape victim and social outcast stunt her from growing vertically in the way the school and adults in her life want her to. Despite the difficulty of Melinda coming to terms with her own trauma, she is able to find some solace in horizontal growth through her tree art project. Horizontal growth, as the name suggests, is something growing outward side to side, rather than up and down. Trees grow outward horizontally and Melinda's art project on trees mirrors horizontal growth.

Throughout the novel, one of the few places Melinda feels comfortable within the school dynamic is in art class. The section in which Melinda talks about art class is titled "Sanctuary," which implies Melinda feels safe. Each student is asked to pick a piece of paper from the globe and that will become their project they work on for the year. Upon selecting "tree" Melinda tries to put the paper back, however, her art teacher Mr. Freeman stops her and says, "Ah-ah-ah, he says. You just chose your destiny, you can't change that" (Anderson 12). Melinda attempts to create her trees multiple times throughout the school year and they often are a reflection of how she feels.

Melinda's tree projects throughout the book reflect her coming to terms with and moving toward healing from her rape. Jessi Snider's article "Be the Tree: Classical Literature, Art Therapy, and Transcending Trauma in *Speak*" relays the connection that trees have in classical literature as a symbol for rape and how including trees in *Speak* is an opportunity for Melinda to explore her trauma. Snider argues Anderson "mirrors the enforced silence of Philomela, a girl raped in the woods, with Melinda's symbolic silence in *Speak* (Snider 301).⁸ Furthermore,

⁸ A minor female character in greek mythology who is said to have been raped in the woods by Ovid.

Melinda's repeated attempts to draw trees as well as Mr. Freeman telling her to "Be the tree" is a way to closely connect her trauma to her art.

One of Melinda's first attempts at trees demonstrates the connection between herself and the trees. She says, "I've been painting watercolors of trees that have been hit by lightning. I try to paint them so they are nearly dead, but not totally" (Anderson 30-31). As the story progresses, her trees change and transform alongside her. Snider argues Melinda heals with the creation of art through the support of her art teacher Mr. Freeman. He tells her she needs to add roots to the tree, and Snider says, "Roots then, like trees, symbolize both the lasting effect of the trauma and yet the possibility of moving beyond it, as a being affected but not destroyed" (Snider 304). Melinda's creation of art is the only piece of "therapy" she receives in the novel and readers have an opportunity to witness her work toward healing in the way she creates her trees.

Though the walls of Merryweather High are mostly unsafe for Melinda, Mr. Freeman cultivates a space where Melinda feels free to work on her art and ultimately heal from her experience. Mr. Freeman also is noted to have challenged a lot of the school's policies, namely not filling out paperwork since the school cut his supply budget. Melinda says, "Teachers just handed in the second marking period grades and Mr. Freeman gave out 210 A's. Someone smelled a rat" (Anderson 91). Mr. Freeman is also seen to take to writing on the walls after getting caught for not keeping paperwork. He challenges the uptight, traditional mode most of the teaching staff adapts. His challenge of the status quo of Merryweather High makes him someone Melinda can trust and what ultimately leads her to telling him her story at the very end of the novel.

Trees grow up, but ultimately outward. This outward growth models the horizontal and prolonged healing Melinda experiences. Toward the end of the novel, after Melinda has repeated

attempts at carving trees out of linoleum blocks, her classmate Ivy suggests a new medium.

Melinda and Ivy then use pencils to work on the tree:

We sit there trading pencils. I draw a trunk, Ivy adds a branch, I extend the branch, but it is too long and spindly. I start to erase it, but Ivy stops me. "It's fine the way it is, it just needs some leaves. Layer the leaves and make them slightly different sizes and it will look great. You have a great start there." She's right.

(Anderson 146)

As Melinda starts to see her trees differently, she starts to look at her trauma differently as well. When she extends the tree branch outward and ultimately decides not to erase it, Melinda is slowly working toward acceptance of her art and her trauma. Melinda spends a lot of time in the novel both avoiding trees, and avoiding "IT," her rapist. This slow-moving acceptance of her experience is ultimately what helps her at the end of the novel with her final confrontation with Andy.

At the end of the book, Melinda is trapped in a closet with Andy Evans. In trying to free herself, she says, "My fingers wave overhead, looking for a branch, a limb, something to hang on to" (Anderson 195). This language represents her grabbing for a metaphorical tree to save her, and ultimately she grabs part of one of her art projects to break the mirror and save herself. This final confrontation with Andy allows Melinda to find acceptance in her experience. She heartfully confesses, "IT happened. There is no avoiding it, no forgetting. No running away, or flying, or burying or hiding. Andy Evans raped me in August when I was drunk and too young to know what was happening. It wasn't my fault" (Anderson 198). The realization Melinda comes to at the end is vital toward her future healing. She becomes aware that she can grow and the

semblance of trees and art creation throughout the novel help connect her to her experience and healing in the end.

Difficult, Not Impossible

Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson is considered to be a timeless piece of activism in contemporary adolescent rape discourse. Not only does Melinda's journey capture healing after rape, it does so in a realistic adolescent space that makes it relatable to all high school students, whether or not they are victims of rape or sexual assault. The events in *Speak* end on a note of growth, but approach healing in an environment that makes it more difficult. There are strong power structures in the novel, both the administration's take on English and sex education curriculum, and the construction of the student body that makes excuses for "popular boys." These structures only further perpetuate rape culture. Since the structures in *Speak* so closely mirror the realities of many high schools and student bodies today, the novel illustrates how rape culture is allowed to operate and flourish under these circumstances.

The halls of Merryweather High perpetuate contemporary rape culture. Because of this, *Speak* is still an important piece of adolescent rape discourse because it has remained relevant and timeless. It will remain timeless until a serious reform of the American High School system occurs. I propose reform that breaks down existing power structure dynamics both in administration and in the student body. In addition to a critical look at the power structures, there should also be careful examination of abstinence-only sex education programs, which give young girls unrealistic ideas about responsibility for their virginities and sexualities. Keyser writes that, "to dismantle rape culture, we must pay attention to the aspects of rape culture throughout our daily lives. We must call them out and refuse to participate in them" (Keyser

113). In doing this, we can slowly move toward healing for *all* rape victims, and challenge the spaces in which rape occurs “safely” for rapists and dangerously for their victims.

Chapter 3: “I’m so far gone now, sometimes I feel like maybe it’s almost enough”:

Reinvention After Rape in Amber Smith’s *The Way I Used to Be*

Working toward healing can be a complicated process for anyone who experiences rape, especially with the ingrained aspects of rape culture often weighing the victims down. Trauma theorist Dr. Judith Herman discusses this in her book *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror*. Herman argues that victims often need to acknowledge their traumatic event in order to heal from it, but a lot of factors can play into traumatic events, especially if they remain secret for a long time. She says, “When the truth is finally recognized, survivors can begin their recovery. But far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as verbal narrative, but as a symptom” (Herman 1). In this case, symptoms refer to the side effects one might experience as a result of rape or other traumatic event. Someone who experiences trauma often exhibits changes in behavior such as social withdrawal or changes in appearance or mannerisms.

Though theorists like Judith Herman have mapped out a possible path toward healing, it is important to note that each situation and victim is unique. Victims need the power to make decisions for themselves about their situation and allowing them to have agency over their situation helps them work toward acceptance and healing on their own time. Agency is also something heavily discussed in children's literature because agency, or an ability to make decisions, gives children and adolescents power within literary and personal narratives. In Amber Smith’s *The Way I Used to Be*, fourteen-year-old Eden’s life completely changes when her brother’s best friend rapes her in the middle of the night. Though silent about her experience for a majority of the novel, Eden decides to take her circumstance into her own hands and decides to reinvent herself as a means of forgetting. Told in four parts, freshman, sophomore, junior, and

senior year, readers get to know Eden and her trauma as she works towards acceptance of her rape.

The Way I Used to Be tells the story of Eden, who is raped the summer before her freshman year of high school by her older brother's best friend Kevin. Readers follow Eden through high school as she attempts to make sense of her life post rape. This includes each year of high school highlighted in the way she transforms and changes as a result of her trauma, which includes changing her appearance and redefining her definitions of relationships. Eden goes so far as to become known as a girl who sleeps with a lot of boys, resorting to a hypersexual state in order to forget the rape. In the end, Eden finds the courage within to report her rape as a means of true healing as well as a way to protect future victims.

Throughout the novel, Eden feels silenced by integrated ideals of rape culture and rape myths, which make her experience difficult to bear and ultimately makes her feel as though her rape is an unspeakable experience. Rape culture says that women are lying; that rape is their fault and not the fault of their attacker. Despite her rape ultimately weighing her down through high school, deciding to reinvent and redefine herself in the midst of rape trauma ultimately gives her the courage to report her rape to the police in the end. In this chapter, I argue Eden's agency in choosing to reinvent herself post rape, while still entangled in her rape trauma, is what ultimately allows her to report her rape. This agency is what carries her through her experience in both high school and toward reporting her rape in the end. The reporting of her rape is symbolic for the young and hurt version of herself in the beginning, and ultimately saves her, another victim, and any future victims her rapist could have. Though turbulent at points, Eden's means of self discovery through trauma response reflects a coming into agency that is depicted in many adolescent novels.

In my analysis of *The Way I Used to Be*, I share the findings from my close reading of the patterns of rape culture depicted within the novel. Eden experiences slut shaming, victim blaming, and not being believed throughout the novel. Eden's experience also aligns with contemporary trauma theory. I use the groundwork laid out by Judith Herman in her book as the basis for understanding the way Eden works toward healing and hope for her future as she comes to terms with her experience of rape and works toward moving on. In a final discussion, I will bring together the elements of rape culture and healing within the book and how they work together to make the novel worthwhile reading for adolescents. The elements within the novel that work together are ultimately what makes this book an outstanding piece of literature for adolescents, both those who have experienced trauma or sexual assault and those who have not.

Reinforced Rape Culture in *The Way I Used to Be*

In *The Way I Used to Be*, there are many elements of rape culture depicted throughout the novel. These elements force Eden to push her trauma down into herself and deal with it alone, rather than seeking support for her experience from her loved ones. When Eden wakes up the morning after her rape at the hands of her brother's best friend Kevin, she tries to immediately tell her mother about what happened. There is blood on her sheets and her nightgown, so her mother concludes Eden's period caught her off guard. Eden starts to tell her, saying, "'Mom, Kevin—' I start, but his name in my mouth makes me want to throw up. 'Don't worry, Edy. He's out back with your brother'" (Smith 5). When Eden's attempt at disclosing her trauma backfires with her mom missing the cues, and her unable to get the words out, Eden concludes, "I know somehow if it's not now, it has to be never. Because he was right, no one would ever believe me. Of course they wouldn't. Not ever" (Smith 5).

The idea that Eden must never report her rape since she couldn't do it right away is a popular idea backed up by the myth that if someone does not speak about their rape right away, they are not telling the truth, or their experience is invalid because they did not speak up sooner. The myth that anyone who does not report their rape within a few days of the attack is lying, causes hesitation for victims to report later on, though this is often easier for rape victims to do. This is because time allows the victims to separate themselves from their circumstance, allowing victims to feel prepared to report their experiences. It's usually within the first few days of the attack that its easiest for victims to gather evidence of their attack via rape kit, which means that waiting to report means there will be no physical evidence—only the word of the victim.

The myth that victims are lying when disclosing their trauma directly contradicts the research. For example, Amber Keyser says in her book *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*, that “studies have shown that the vast majority of rape survivors—92 to 98 percent—are telling the truth about the crimes committed against them. Yet many people in law enforcement assume the victim is lying” (Keyser 87). Society chooses to prioritize the 2-8% of false accusers over validating the experiences of the victims. I argue this may not be fully intentional, because ideas of rape culture are so fully ingrained into society that people are unaware of these ideas. Ultimately, not believing victims at their word only further reinforces rape culture because it places the blame on the victims for speaking up, or makes them feel guilty for doing so. Victim blaming is one of the key elements of rape culture as discussed in chapter one of my thesis. By placing blame on victims of rape instead of their rapists, more rapists are allowed to continue to get away with rape because women are oftentimes too worried to report out of fear or not being believed.

After her rape, Eden's attitude surrounding Kevin dramatically changes. She comes downstairs to breakfast with her family, including Kevin, and her brother Caelin immediately notices a difference. He says, "Okay, you're being really weird and intense right now" (Smith 6). When the behavior continues after breakfast, Caelin and Eden have a talk about the change in her behavior. Eden expresses discomfort in Kevin being around, reminding Caelin, "'You're my brother.' I feel the words collapsing in my throat like an avalanche. 'Not Kevin's!'" (Smith 15). and the two share this exchange:

"You've never had a problem with him being around before. In fact, it's almost like the opposite." [...]

"What do you mean" —I shudder— "the opposite?"

"I mean maybe it's time to drop the whole schoolgirl-crush thing. It was cute for a while, Edy—funny, even—but it's played itself out, don't you think? It's obviously making you, I don't know, mean or something. You're not acting like yourself." And he adds, more to himself, "You know I guess I should have seen this coming. It's so funny because me and Kevin were just talking about this." (Smith 15)

Caelin's assumption that Eden still has a childish crush on Kevin, rather than thinking something could have happened between the two to cause her to act differently is harmful to Eden in the end. Eden claims that her brother knows her better than anyone else, so him not being able to see the harm Kevin has caused ultimately pushes Eden into herself as she withdraws from those around her.

Eden's narrative is told in four parts; freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior year. This allows readers to see her experience throughout high school and how her rape affects her as she

grows up. One of the defining things that happens to her in high school is the slut shaming she receives from Amanda (Mandy), Kevin's little sister. Meredith Ralston's book *Slut-Shaming, Whorephobia, and the Unfinished Sexual Revolution* defines slut-shaming as "ways to embarrass, humiliate, and 'police' women and girls for suspected sexual activity that is not considered socially acceptable" (Ralston 5). Mandy seems to know throughout the novel that something happened between Eden and her brother, but without the full story, she takes matters into her own hands by writing things in the school bathrooms, such as "Eden McCrorey is a whore" (Smith 88). Ralston says things like slut-shaming are about control of women and their sexualities. Making Eden feel dirty or slutty for her rape only prolongs her from finally coming forward as she does in the end of the novel. This is similar to Melinda's experience in *Speak*, as Melinda spends her year feeling dirty for her rape, only to finally feel empowered to talk about it at the end with Mr. Freeman.

As a consequence of Eden being slut-shamed, she develops a reputation in the novel that makes the acknowledgement of her trauma more difficult. Eden lives in fear of Kevin being able to control her forever as a consequence of raping her and taking her virginity. Eden decides sophomore year that she needs to find someone to replace her "first time" saying, "[And] suddenly, the thought of having someone else there in place of him is something I required-wanted-needed, in the most severe of ways. And I don't really care who, anyone else at all will do" (Smith 92). Eden uses the slut-shaming she experiences as a chance to become a self fulfilling prophecy. She decides to start hooking up with lots of guys as a means of forgetting her rape and what happened to her. She ends up being known as a slut, rather than a rape victim who is truly hurting inside.

By the end of high school, Eden is known as someone who sleeps with a lot of different guys. The first time she tries it, readers see the fear she has as part of her unhealed trauma. She reflects on her body as a crime scene, saying, “My body is a torture chamber. It’s a fucking crime scene. Hideous things have happened here, it’s nothing to talk about, nothing to comment on, not out loud” (Smith 109-110). Eden’s feelings about her body and hooking up with others evolves as the novel progresses, and she gets more numb to her experience. Eden is able to summarize her encounters as follows: “Hands pushing my skirt up. Underwear peeling down my legs. Belt buckle comes undone, scraping against my skin. The sound of a zipper. Heavy breathing. It’s over before I even fully believe it’s happening” (Smith 209). Ralston discusses the idea of sexual double standard that is present as a result of rape culture. In this double standard, men’s uncontrollable sexual desires are prioritized over women’s. When a woman shows interest in sexual behavior, she is desirable in the bedroom for guys but is also considered to be a slut, whore, or an improper girl. Eden chases the idea of becoming a slut via self fulfilling prophecy because she already is slut-shamed for being raped. By the climax of the novel, she is demonstrating hyper-sexual behavior, a trauma response that will be touched on in the next section.

Eden’s trajectory throughout the novel is something that is seen throughout other adolescent rape novels. She finds it hard to disclose her rape throughout because of the power myths and ideas of rape culture are holding her back. Ultimately, what allows Eden to speak up about her experience is when Kevin rapes someone else, and this woman goes to the police. Her brother Caelin doubts the report of Kevin raping someone, telling the story to Eden, “This girl in our dorm is saying he raped her! Caelin shouts. [...] He didn’t, obviously, but I don’t know what’s going to happen. The police came and—” (Smith 312). Since Caelin and Kevin have been

best friends for so long, Caelin does not believe at all that Kevin is capable of rape. Despite this, Eden finally finds it in herself to share her story and she formally reports her rape to the police. Though it takes a long time because of the ideas repeated in her head, Eden finally sharing allows her to work toward healing and overcoming the experience she faced.

Contemporary Trauma Theory and “Healing” in Adolescent Rape Novels

One of the common components of an adolescent rape novel is the victim’s work throughout the novel toward their healing. In the other primary texts of my thesis, *Speak* and *All the Rage*, the victim spends the novel working through the elements of their rape, which occurs in the past, and ultimately working toward healing. In *The Way I Used to Be*, Eden experiences her rape in the present text along with the readers at the very beginning of the novel, though she paraphrases the experience at the beginning using questions, such as, “Why it didn’t register that something was wrong—so mercilessly wrong—when I felt the mattress shift under his weight. Why I didn’t scream when I opened my eyes and saw him crawling between my sheets” (Smith 1). This beginning moment allows the reader to go through the entire journey with her as she finds healing in the end through reporting.

Though many adolescent rape novels end on a note of hope, it is important to note that oftentimes healing from a traumatic event such as rape takes a lifetime. When thinking about the effect of psychological trauma on an individual, Judith Herman says, “Traumatic events are extraordinary, not because they occur rarely, but rather because they overwhelm the ordinary human adaptations to life” (Herman 33). Traumatic events of any form take a toll on the individual and the way they live their lives afterward. Since books like *The Way I Used to Be* inevitably end, inclusion of optimism and closure is important, especially for adolescent readers, but the lives of the protagonists will forever be altered by their circumstances. In this section, I

will align Eden's experiences through each section of the book using examples from trauma theory to demonstrate Eden's attempt at regaining control of her life, which ultimately ends with her reporting her rape to the police.

Freshman Year

Eden is raped by Kevin in the middle of the night in the summer before high school starts. She tries to tell her mother immediately, but her pre-conceived notions of not being believed prevent her from doing so, and she decides that she will never tell anyone as Kevin's voice echoes in her head, "*No one will ever believe you. You know that. No one. Not ever*" (Smith 5). Eden decides to move forward living in silence of her situation, and she struggles, something that Judith Herman highlights. Herman opens her book with the idea that traumatic events are often labeled as "unspeakable." Though Eden tries to speak, she ultimately fails to do so, and concludes that she will now never tell. As a result, Eden spends a majority of the novel trying to function with repressed memories of her trauma and her trauma itself.

She fumbles through her first year of highschool with her best friend Mara. Toward the end of freshman year, Mara tells Eden she would look great with contacts. Eden uses this as a chance for reinvention. She begins this process by asking her parents for contacts. When they say no, she fights back which in the end, results in her getting the contacts. Before sophomore year starts Eden proclaims, "*The next week I have my contacts. It is my first small victory in the battle of control over my life. No more Mousegirl. No more charades. No more babygames*" (Smith 59). Though she feels she not able to report her rape right away, she demonstrates agency by trying to take control of her life and figure out who she is.

Sophomore Year

The second section of Judith Herman's book highlights possible steps a victim of trauma must realize as they work toward healing. Firstly, she says, "The first principle of recovery is the empowerment of the survivor" (133). Beginning sophomore year, Eden feels empowered to reinvent herself. Along the way, she meets a senior boy named Justin who she is interested in. Her empowerment is displayed in her attempts to control her relationships, including the one with Justin. When Justin expresses interest in her, Eden remains in control with strong boundaries about how everything will go between them. After agreeing to hang out with Justin, Eden says this to him: "I mean, we're not going to go out on dates or anything like that. I don't want to be introduced to your friends. I don't want to go parading down the halls holding hands or having you wait for me by my locker. I'm definitely not going to be the girl cheering you from the sidelines at your basketball games" (Smith 105). Though Justin agrees at first, this behavior is ultimately abnormal for someone in a relationship with someone else. I argue Eden is struggling with the trauma of her rape and this control is necessary for her to try to feel normal, even though the control she imposes on her relationships with others ultimately is not helping her recovery.

Eden and Justin's secret relationship eventually escalates into sex. Though Eden is hesitant at first, she decides this to be something that will help her forget. During the encounter, Eden expresses anxiety and discomfort, but at the end, says, "I'm vaguely aware when it's over. Vaguely aware of him touching my face, vaguely aware of words coming out of his mouth. I am alive. I did it. I'm okay" (Smith 112). This point in the novel is the part where Eden uses her empowerment to try to forget about her real first time, the rape. This is the same time that Mandy, Kevin's little sister begins to slut shame Eden, which leads to her being harassed by

upperclassmen as a consequence. This creates a setback in Eden's healing because she ends up trying to deflect the teasing by then becoming known to hook up with other boys.

Junior Year

By junior year, Eden is more comfortable with sleeping with people as a means of forgetting. Instead of going through each motion for the reader, everything is shortened to demonstrate Eden's lack of feeling about everything. She walks through the motions in list form, showing how desensitized she has become. Eden transforms from someone who feels paralyzed at the thought of sex because it reminded her of her rape, to someone who needs sex to feel normal. She is no longer the sweet, innocent girl she used to be. Rather, she has become a rebellious girl so deep into the trauma of her past that she does not know how to move forward.

Eden's response to use sex as a coping mechanism is seldom talked about, but not uncommon. According to Stewart Adelson et al., children and adolescents who are sexually abused in childhood have an increased chance of displaying overly sexual or hypersexual behavior. Their article "Toward a Definition of 'Hypersexuality' in Children and Adolescents" discusses these definitions of what hypersexual behavior may look like in both children and adolescents, as well as why these behaviors occur. Hypersexual behavior is acts that are considered to be outside of the developmental age for the children. For adolescents, this may be repeated sexual encounters. In terms of cause, they say, "High-risk sexual behavior has been described in youth with a variety of mood problems, including depression and low self-esteem" (Adelson et al. 482). Eden's behavior during junior year reflects that she is hurting inside about what happened with Kevin. It takes some serious interventions for Eden to realize the harm of her actions and choices, and these do not arrive until senior year.

Senior Year

In the final section of the book, Eden carries on with her behavior until she hurts the feelings of Steven, a guy who actually likes her for who she is. This leads to her ultimate spiral and a final confrontation with Mandy, Kevin's sister, about what happened several years ago. When Kevin is accused of rape at college, Eden finds the courage to report her rape to the police and from there, she begins to move forward. Though Eden hits an extremely low point, this point was necessary in order for her to work toward true healing from what happened.

On healing from trauma, Herman highlights that healing must occur both within the self and in relationships with others. She says, "Recovery can only take place within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation" (Herman 133). In forming new, healthy connections with other people, recovery from a traumatic event can be attained. This can be for the sake of support, as well as learning how healthy and unharmed relationships work. Eden finds herself withdrawing from connections with people unless it is sexual. Toward the end of the novel, she says she grows numb to it, admitting, "I've been with fifteen different guys—sometimes it seems like too many, other times it seems like not nearly enough. But each one takes me a little farther away. I'm so far gone now, sometimes I feel like maybe it's almost enough" (Smith 235). Eden's response to her trauma is to try to go as far out of her body as possible from where she was first hurt.

There is research to suggest that the body remembers trauma, which means that similar experiences, actions, and movements can trigger the body's nervous system. Philip Browning Helsel discusses this in his article "Witnessing the Body's Response to Trauma: Resistance, ritual, and Nervous System Activation." He discusses one of the nervous system activations related to trauma, the Enteric Nervous System (ENS), which creates a freeze response in the

body. He says, “ENS activation leads to a freeze response, so there is a biological basis for this apparently lifeless and helpless position” (686). In the novel, Eden’s approach to sleeping with other guys is one that allows her body to freeze by means of forgetting. She goes as far to say that sex is the only way for her to feel something, since her everyday function is altered by her trauma.

Ultimately, Eden follows a path of someone who is trying to heal, but her actions make this more difficult. She demonstrates strength despite the hidden hurt that does not come out until the end of the novel when she finally reports her rape. *The Way I Used to Be* demonstrates a strong, empowered victim in a way that shows temporary relief from healing, while also showing the big steps needed sometimes to work on long term healing from a traumatic event. I think Hermans’s ideas about healing from trauma align with Eden’s path, making it an authentic example of the messy process of trauma healing for an adolescent audience. Ultimately, Eden finds healing in speaking up and attempting to repair her self image, and her relationships with people around her, such as her family and best friend Mara.

“Maybe,” Another Word for Hope: Healing and Combatting Rape Culture

Eden coming to terms with her rape for herself is one of the pivotal moments of the novel, similar to other adolescent rape novels such as *Speak* by Laurie Halse Anderson. Eden finally discloses her story out loud during her senior year to Justin, who is away at college and comes back to see her when he realizes she is struggling. She first shares she was raped by writing it out in crayon at a restaurant. She later confesses in his car, “‘Kevin Armstrong!’ I scream it. Finally. ‘It was Kevin! It was Kevin!’” (Smith 346). Finally admitting what happened to her out loud is pivotal for Eden because a key thing in healing from trauma is to speak about it as a way to move forward.

Another thing that will ultimately contribute to Eden working toward healing is to resolve issues between her family and friends. Eden's drastic change throughout the novel causes a lot of strain in her relationships. Eden's best friend Mara is the one who encourages them both to get out of band and into the social scene in the beginning of high school. However, their relationship becomes strained as a consequence of Eden's withdrawal from her loved ones. During senior year, Mara finally tells Eden she is different and acknowledges her promiscuity by saying, "All you have to do to get over a guy is take a shower—that's pathetic" (Smith 261). Eden was shocked by this revelation from her best friend, thinking she was keeping most of her avoidance to herself. Though readers do not get the opportunity to see Mara and Eden resolve their issues by the end of the novel, Eden does reflect after reporting to the police, saying, "Maybe I'll explain this to some people. Maybe Mara" (Smith 367). This demonstrates change in Eden because she no longer feels as though she must hide everything. She is bringing the unspeakable into the spoken, something Herman suggests will help in healing from trauma.

As highlighted in the previous section, Eden's plan for forgetting takes a turn when Kevin is accused of raping someone else in his dorm. This is another pivotal point in the novel because Eden finally contemplates sharing the truth, allowing her to repair her relationships with others. This revelation also works to combat ideas of rape culture. Kevin's sister Mandy goes from someone who slut shames Eden, even though she did not know the full story, to giving Eden's name to the police when her brother is accused of rape. Mandy says to Eden, "I had to tell [the police] [...] I just had to" (Smith 364). Mandy also confesses that Kevin told her that Eden was the one who wanted to sleep with him, and she believed it up until this point. During their phone call, Mandy heartfully confesses to Eden:

You know, I always looked up to you so much when we were younger. I don't know if you ever knew that. He knew that, anyway. And he tried to make me believe that it was okay. Normal. That you—if you did it, wanted to—I mean—then, you know what could be wrong with that? [...] The sickest part is that I actually believed him— about you— I believed every word. Until the other day. (Smith 365)

Though not justified, Mandy's perspective demonstrates elements of rape culture at play within the novel and how Kevin used his position of control to manipulate Mandy into hating Eden.

Eden revealing her rape to her brother Caelin in the end not only aids in Eden's overall coming to terms with her trauma, it also combats some of the elements of rape culture I discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Caelin and Kevin have been best friends for so long, so much so that Kevin spends a great deal of time around Eden and the rest of her family. When Caelin learns what happened to Eden back when she was a freshman and he was about to go to college, his world is rocked. Despite this, he knows what Eden is telling him is the truth, and Eden realizes her truth is important. She says, "I watch as his body melts down to the floor and I start to understand everything too. That this isn't all about me. This thing, it touches everyone" (Smith 359). Though shocked, Caelin demonstrates a positive social response to Eden's story by believing her, which not only combats ideas of rape culture that say the victims are at fault, but also will allow her to heal.

For rape victims to heal, it is important for them to receive positive social responses in order to repair their relationships with themselves and those around them. Rebecca Campbell et al. published a study that discusses how giving positive social responses to a rape victim who shares their trauma is positive for the psychological well being of rape and trauma victims. The

study distinguishes two types of social responses, positive and negative. Positive social responses include listening to and believing victims, and offering support, whereas as negative responses include victim blaming, shaming, and other negative aspects that are present because of rape culture.⁹

According to Campbell et al., the findings were that although positive social responses did not aid in recovery from the experience, it did reduce symptoms. Campbell writes, “Rape survivors who had someone in their social network believe their accounts of the assault, and experienced this social reaction as healing, had lower post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, and health symptom scores than rape survivors who experienced this reaction, but perceived it as hurtful” (Campbell et al. 293). In the novel, Eden views being believed when she shares her rape as a positive social reaction, as it allows her to realize that she is truly not alone, and can begin to heal. The support of her brother is what allows her to report it to the police, where she is also believed. This allows Eden to work toward moving forward in life despite the circumstances of her trauma. After leaving the police station, she puts together a group of “maybes,” things she will do to fix her relationships and life. The novel ends on Eden’s realization, “All these maybes swimming around my head make me think that ‘maybe’ could just be another word for hope” (Smith 367).

The Way I Used to Be is an impactful piece of adolescent literature for both victims of trauma and sexual assault, as well as those who have not experienced it. The high school structure of the novel allows it to demonstrate coming of age in a time of trauma, something a high amount of teens may experience in their high school years, as many rape victims’ first

⁹ It is important to note that Campbell et al. highlight that perception of positive and negative within the study remain subjective, as each rape victim may view certain social reactions to be positive while other may view it as negative.

encounter of trauma happens between the ages of 11 and 17.¹⁰ It encompasses both coming-of-age elements as well as problem novel elements making it relatable to the adolescent experience.

Adolescent rape novels are pieces of activism for teens on issues surrounding rape culture. Books such as *The Way I Used to Be* reveal elements of rape culture that adolescents are effected by daily and show the consequences rape culture can have on victims of rape and sexual assault. The reading of this novel, and other novels like it, allows a perspective on the issue from a teenage voice. The novel shows healing in a world dominated by misconceptions of rape culture, and how to heal internally in a society working against your experience. It also speaks on the issue so that teens may learn and ultimately work to combat elements of rape culture and aid in the healing of trauma for themselves and also those around them.

¹⁰ Statistics from National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC).

Conclusion

One in five women will experience rape or sexual assault in their lifetime. According to Alexandra Rutherford, this number has remained a steady one in five since early anti rape activists started seeking out change on rape culture when the term was coined in the 1970's. Now, scholars such as Halley Bondy and resource groups such as the NSVRC have shared that one in eight girls will be raped or sexually assaulted before the age of 18. Incidences of this horrendous crime have remained stagnant over the last 50 years in part due to the culture surrounding rape and what people believe about rape.

At the beginning of my project, I proposed the idea of the monomyth of rape, or the singular rape narrative. This singular narrative is the strongest myth that plays into contemporary rape culture, as shared by scholars Aiyana Altrous and others. In reality, only 10% of all rape cases in the United States are the single rape narrative: a lone young woman is violently attacked in a dark, secluded area, by a scary and mysterious male attacker. By playing into this monomyth, the other 90% of all rapes are discredited by a series of excuses and myths that people hold in their minds as a result of cultural norms and societal expectations. In cases where both the victim and rapist are adolescents, claims of rape are often discredited because of a refusal to believe that teenagers have power, and can use their positions of power in this way to make others feel small.

None of the protagonists in my primary texts were assaulted using the singular rape narrative trope. Romy, Melinda, and Eden all knew their attacker and, more so, cared about or for their attacker at one point. As a result, all three of them were hesitant to come forward out of fear of not being believed. As a result, they fell victim to the rape myths and integrated ideas of rape culture that surrounded their daily lives. This is a present reality of real life rape victims. A

society so heavily influenced by rape culture ultimately damages the victims and their ability to heal, report, and come to terms with their experiences. I argue these texts, *All the Rage*, *Speak*, and *The Way I Used to Be*, are pieces of activism for the ways in which they talk about rape and healing, also for the ways they highlight the problems surrounding rape culture as we know it today. These novels do not shy away from difficult discussions about rape; they explore it and include real examples of the realities of adolescent rape.

As demonstrated throughout my project, there are a handful of elements that play a strong role in the continued perpetuation of rape culture. Chapter 1 discussed power dynamics both at a societal level, including law enforcement, and terms of the power dynamics in high school where social class or popularity can influence positions of power. In Chapter 2, I looked at the high school as an adolescent rape space that allows for the perpetuation of rape culture through avenues such as the sex education curriculum or through books taught in English classrooms. In Chapter 3, I discussed the intangible myths of rape culture and how these can make reporting a rape more difficult. Also, in each chapter, I touch on each girl's healing as something that is made more difficult because of rape culture and the structures that allow it to remain intact.

Amber J Keyser, author of *No More Excuses: Dismantling Rape Culture*, highlights in the end of her book that as long as we allow humor and misinformation to be spread concerning rape, there will be no change. She ultimately suggests, "Eliminating sexual violence requires more than simply punishing offenders. It requires healing in the broadest sense—for survivors, perpetrators, and families" (Keyser 112). In working toward healing the damage done to both the individuals, and the harm done to communities, there is a potential for a future that is not so heavily influenced by power, and using said power to allow rape and sexual violence to continue.

As a result of the continued perpetuation of rape culture, the #MeToo movement was born in America as a way for anyone who has been sexually assaulted to speak out on various social media platforms, such as Twitter and Instagram. Through this movement, the increased awareness of who can and has been affected by sexual assault became very prominent. Though rape affects adolescents directly and regularly, there is often a question of what they can do about this ever growing problem. A *New York Times* article by Julia Jacobs suggests that works of young adult literature can help teens to make sense of the #MeToo movement. Jacobs writes, “As the country continues to respond to the #MeToo movement, teachers and librarians are turning to fiction to help teenagers understand emotional trauma and make sense of this cultural reckoning” (Jacobs). As a result, teens are able to name their own experiences, and stand with others against rape and the culture that allows it to continue. These works of fiction are a safe way for adolescents to explore the topic and then apply them to real life experiences and situations.

In the years following the launch of the #MeToo movement, there have also been a handful of nonfiction works that have been published with a teen audience in mind in order to inform them about a topic that affects them directly. Halley Bondy’s previously discussed book, *#MeToo and You: Everything You Need to Know About Consent Boundaries, and More* sets out to inform adolescents about the impacts of the #MeToo movement and the abuse and assault that can happen as a consequence. The first few chapters of her book highlight the #MeToo movement. Bondy talks directly to her intended audience of her book, teens. When discussing the movement’s history, she highlights, “Many of these abuses happened when these victims were your age—middle to high school—but it took growing up into adulthood and feeling empowered by #MeToo to speak out. That shouldn’t happen” (Bondy 6). The work Bondy does

in her book is work that will increase awareness surrounding sexual assault and rape, thus working toward dismantling of rape culture as a whole.

One of the most prominent sections of Bondy's book is the final chapter, "Taking Action." Here, Bondy highlights the issues that need to be addressed at large to see an overall decrease in rape cases in the future. Bondy argues, "Many abuse issues need to be fixed, such as the justice system, victim blaming, and fear of reporting" (161). Each of these systems and ideas Bondy mentioned I have also addressed in my argument as these issues contribute to the continuation of rape cases. Bondy also gives a list of actions steps teens can take within their own lives, schools, and communities to work against rape culture and cycles of abuse. She suggests identifying present problems as one of the leading actions to see change for the future of the #MeToo movement. If there is one take away from this project, it is that rape culture is very much alive within many avenues, and the prevalence of cases is a huge underlying problem. Rape is not a monomyth; it has thousands of variants that cause each rape case and situation to be different. Despite this, I have found in my research that a lot of rape cases are dealt with the same. There are excuses made for rapists, saying "they're a good kid" or "they have a bright future" as a means of erasing their actions. There is blame placed on victims, questions about whether or not they were drinking or what clothing they were wearing, which are ways to make victims feel at fault for their circumstances. Ultimately, rape culture allows the prevalence of rape to remain at a steady one in five women, and this will continue for the next 50 years unless something is done about rape culture.

In my findings, I have found that education and information is needed to bring awareness to the complexities of rape culture. This can take many forms, one of which could be using fiction, as Jacobs suggests, to understand the patterns of rape culture that exist within young

adult literature. Each of my primary texts, *All the Rage*, *Speak*, and *The Way I Used to Be* highlight these patterns in a way that is applicable to teens but to adults as well. These books allow for a way to understand the patterns and how to carry over this information to existing rape myths and struggles with contemporary rape culture. Keyser presents restorative justice as means to dismantle rape culture. She writes, “Restorative justice focuses on healing the violation of relationships and the damage done to communities” (Keyser 112). With restorative justice, offenders of sexual violence are held accountable for their actions, and as a consequence, survivors are able to feel heard in a way that promotes their healing.

As a sexual assault survivor myself, I am acutely aware of the healing process from a trauma as complex as this. Though healing is not linear, understanding rape culture as an element that prolongs and often worsens the healing process allows for restorative justice that allows survivors to move forward from their experiences. Considering that many sexual assault victims will be assaulted before the age of 18, adolescence is not “too soon” to have these conversations with teens about rape culture. Laurie Halse Anderson, author of *Speak*, on writing her memoir about her own experience with sexual assault said, “It finally dawned on me that adults have a responsibility to be honest with kids about what they are facing every day” (Jacobs). To discredit and remove teens from the conversation entirely contributes to an overall refusal to acknowledge the impact rape culture still has. Acknowledgement of rape and rape culture is a necessary step in attaining the research, information, and education needed to dismantle rape culture for all.

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