

INTRODUCTION: BODIES, FEELINGS, AND THE RHETORIC OF RAPE CULTURE

We talk about rape, but we don't carefully talk about rape.

—Roxane Gay, *Bad Feminist* (2014)

On January 16, 2018, former gymnast Megan Halicek testified to the abuse she endured by Dr. Larry Nassar while being treated for back pain at the young age of fifteen. Speaking in a Michigan courtroom in front of Judge Rosemarie Aquilina and Nassar himself, she recounted her feelings about the assault committed in and on her body:

I am disgusted—disgusted that Larry Nassar, the trusted adult, authority figure, and famous doctor had the audacity to use his incredible power, prestige, and influence to sexually abuse me, a little girl, right there in his office in the safest and warmest of places with such an overlying sense of healing and recovery. [. . .] He broke in loudly without consent or restraint. He was an unwarranted intruder to my most private, intimate, never before touched places without warning, without gloves, and without explanation. [. . .] Treatment after treatment with Nassar I closed my eyes tight, I held my breath, and I wanted to puke. My stomach pierced me with pain. To this day that pain and these feelings are still there.¹

Over 160 other young women who had been previously silenced testified in Aquilina's courtroom to their experiences of being violated by Nassar, marking the case as a remarkable shift in legal proceedings regarding rape and sexual assault. Unlike other cases, dozens of young women entered the

courtroom, one after the other after the other, testifying to being assaulted by Nassar—touched, stroked, pinched, penetrated, and invaded. But what made the Nassar case exceptional was not just that the judge welcomed a magnitude of victims into her courtroom.² Rather, the sheer power and volume of their testimonies, which were widely circulated and publicly revered, gave audiences a way to experience the felt sense of violation—how his fingers crossed the boundaries of young girls’ and women’s bodies, how their bodies clenched in response, how the painful memories and trauma of being trespassed lingered for years.³ That is, the vast circulation of these testimonies emphasized a visceral account of violation, provoking a bodily response in audiences. Hearing testimonies like Halicek’s over and over again prompted audiences to feel their stomachs sink, their throats tighten, or their chests burn—examples of what this book terms “visceral rhetorics,” or instances when the body responds, reacting to certain words or actions.

This book takes interest in moments like the Nassar case when discourses about the embodied experience of rape and sexual assault circulate within public discourse. It ruminates on the extent to which a focus on what violation feels like is able to disrupt and shift public understandings of sexual violence. It considers why the visceral and embodied required this scale of testimony to “count” as evidence, how personal narratives laced with pain are often contained, dismissed, or denied by more authoritative voices—a symptom and outcome of rape culture. But this book also remains keenly aware of the fact that Nassar’s actual conviction of 40 to 175 years in prison unfortunately remains a notable exception. Even though the Nassar case is distinctive in that the judge invited victims into her courtroom, that immediate and wider audiences largely validated their testimonies, that the perpetrator was actually convicted and essentially sentenced to life in prison, it falls short of bringing justice to bear on rape culture. That is, relying on the Nassar case as a symbol of change demonstrates an embrace of the law and criminalization, what Elizabeth Bernstein has called “carceral feminism,” as systems used to respond to sexual violence, systems that continually leave people from trans and queer communities, women of color, and immigrant women—those most structurally vulnerable to violence—often more at risk of violence.⁴ Celebrating Nassar’s outcome fails to disrupt the pervasive logics of rape culture because it aligns justice and progress with punitive action, eliding the insidious everyday acts of violence that occur in rape culture but are hard to pin down. It suggests that response and change can happen under certain conditions: when a serial offender commits a vast slew of sexual abuse crimes against women who were largely in privileged positions

and predominantly white, heteronormative, and cisgender—women who fit our recognized notions of victimhood.

While scholars and activists have long sought redress for crimes of sexual violence, *What It Feels Like* addresses an underexamined reason why efforts to abolish rape culture struggle to achieve wider public success: a denial of the embodied experiences of those who have been raped or sexually assaulted within public discourse. This book builds from scholars who have helped define rape culture, illuminating how it “encourages male sexual aggression,” how it “condones physical and emotional terrorism against women and presents it as a norm.”⁵ Scholars have exposed how within a rape culture “sexual violence is a fact of life,” seen as typical and even “sexy.”⁶ In other words, we know that we live in a society that frequently “excuse[s] perpetrators and demean[s] victims,” a society that cultivates “a cultural climate whereby sexual violence can flourish.”⁷ But rape culture operates through social norms, practices, and scripts that affectively and symbolically support logics of aggression, violence, and sexism—logics that, for instance, allow a doctor to violate his patient during a checkup and then silence that patient when she speaks up—logics that disseminate widely beyond the capacities of a courtroom and continue to go unquestioned in social and cultural life. As a result, *What It Feels Like* examines mainstream public discourse, finding that what stalls progress and change is not so much the need to convict perpetrators like Nassar (though we most certainly should) but rather how patriarchal structures and their influence over public conversations limit the options available for disclosure, curbing the available frameworks for understanding the scope of rape culture today and how it manifests in more ordinary, insidious ways. As noted by Roxane Gay in the epigraph to this introduction, we, as a society today, certainly talk about rape, but we don’t do so carefully, in ways that could respect the felt experiences of victims and furthermore effectively scrutinize the problem and its rhetorical dimensions.

To apprehend rape culture’s commonplaces—its norms, practices, and scripts—*What It Feels Like* asks the following set of questions: What happens when publics deny the embodied experiences of victims? How do these denials happen in legal, medical, or institutional contexts and organize public meaning about rape and the bodies subject to it? And finally, how do bodies and their capacity to provoke feeling serve as powerful resources for challenging public discourse in their efforts to transform rape culture into a more just society? To answer these questions, this book considers how patriarchal definitions of and responses to sexual violence permeate public discourse, shaping and influencing how we talk about rape and those who experience it.

For instance, publics adopt discursive frameworks that center an ideal, white, male, rational speaker and constitute an archetype of the victim that is white, able-bodied, cisgender, and female, bypassing the experiences of women of color and trans women, in particular. When assessing an alleged act, publics often favor a perpetrator's perception of what happened, configuring women's bodies through male desire. Mainstream discourses mimic a legal quest to assign guilt and responsibility and, in the process, target certain bodies as blameworthy or make excuses for why the harms committed against others do not amount to that of assault or rape. Yet the law, as many feminist legal and rhetorical scholars have pointed out, is a system built to ignore or, worse, deny women and minorities and their accounts of injustice.⁸ Over and over again, the law fails to hold perpetrators accountable and properly assess risk and harm. It "does not favor fairness and due process," as Leigh Gilmore has maintained, but instead "produces general, default notions of women's unreliability."⁹ In short, dominant deliberative frameworks prioritize a normative subjectivity that works to obscure victims' own experiences with their bodies, overlooking the roots of power *over the body* central to the violence of rape.¹⁰ Casting aside such evidence reveals how patriarchal structures exercise power over victims by silencing them, how it takes over 160 testimonies to sway the legal system and the public of the malicious gravity of perpetrators like Nassar when only one should have sufficed.

What It Feels Like submits that this failure to understand embodied experiences stems from a range of discourses constituted in public that govern how justice claims are made. I attend to this problem by interrogating how patriarchal perspectives rooted in a desire for rationality, heteronormativity, ableism, white supremacy, and male dominance establish the grounds for public discourse about rape, comprised in mainstream conversations in seemingly benign ways. As a result, widespread public opinion of rape largely negates testimonies rooted in feeling, marking such embodied sources of knowledge as gendered and untrustworthy while eschewing the bodies and forms of communication that defy the norms of discourse. To make that case, *What It Feels Like* examines how the laws about, tools that document and adjudicate, and responses to sexual violence are rooted in the need to manage and restrain women's bodies. In the process, I analyze disruptions that illuminate how discussions of the fleshy, bloody, and corporeal body—disruptions like the testimony of Megan Halicek—reveal a new vantage point from which to examine rape culture, one with potential to shift public opinion and provoke change. Probing how the threat of violence can be communicated through affect and feeling sheds light on the repeated, ignored, mundane instances

of rape or sexual assault that chronicle an embodied understanding of violence as an act of power. Put differently, centering the body and embodiment exposes how and in what ways publics fail to take rape seriously, how simply being in public puts some bodies at greater risk, how the violence of rape culture gets disregarded in everyday life. Taken together, this book argues that discourses about rape culture rely on strategies of containment to assert control over a presumed affective excess of femininity but also that those discourses can be challenged by mobilizing forms of embodiment that stress what it feels like to be raped.

In tracing the material and embodied force of rape culture, this book theorizes what I call visceral rhetorics through historic and contemporary case studies to better account for the affective dimensions that accumulate, circulate, and regulate public debates. Across contexts including anti-pornography debates from the 1980s, Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) advocacy materials, sexual assault forensic kits, public performances by survivors, and online social movements, I account for how bodies and their residue of feeling—residue layered with historical, material, and cultural notions of violence—can serve to generate a bodily intensity in audiences with powerful potential for feminist protest.¹¹ Visceral rhetorics foreground how judgment is a process that forms deep within our gut, a process in need of attention when traditional deliberative frameworks do not work as well for inspiring change. For instance, when our hearts race, our teeth grind, or our palms sweat, these are visceral rhetorics at work, rhetorics guiding us toward a force of feeling, one that can serve as an alternative mode of understanding the world around us. Yet, in investigating how patriarchal concepts, definitions, and procedures influence and limit public deliberation in a variety of forums, I show how institutions, groups, and individuals work to quell or control the visceral nature of bodies, concealing their agential and rhetorical capacities, and consequently stall claims for justice.

In other words, I define visceral rhetorics as the bone-deep, felt sense of communication that transpires from a position of flesh and wound in addition to the processes that seek to erase the bodies communicating from this very perspective. Attention to visceral rhetorics, I argue, provides (1) a conceptual framework for exploring how certain modes of recognition central to discussions of injustice deny or ignore bodies and embodied forms of communication; and (2) a hermeneutic for examining alternative modes of embodied protest, intervention, and change. Together, this book's examination into visceral rhetorics reminds us, as rhetorical scholars, how bodies don't simply aid in persuasion or provide an opportunity to theorize the sites

of argumentation or invention in abstract terms. Rather, visceral rhetorics demonstrate how bodies—their very fleshy, corporeal, material, and sensory nature—become caught up in arguments, fueling a rhetoricity that works with and through our embodied attachments to others. Expanding a feminist rhetorical commitment to understand how those who do not fall under the category of Man (read white, male, able-bodied, and cisgender) are excluded from mainstream publics, *What It Feels Like* initiates a new move in feminist rhetorics' long interest in the silencing of women's voices by demonstrating how silencing not only suppresses voices but also suppresses bodies—both the discourse about bodies and their affective capacities.¹²

To elucidate the tensions surrounding fleshy, visceral, and feminized bodies, *What It Feels Like* takes up historical and contemporary artifacts and events that deal with the problem of rape culture. As a feminist rhetorical critic, I have gathered, read, and analyzed a range of artifacts including archived letters; newspaper articles; public campaigns, advertisements, and speeches; medical, political, and legal documents; advocacy efforts; performance art pieces; and Twitter feeds. Throughout, the book places legal, institutional, and medical claims about the raped body alongside testimonial and embodied accounts and analyzes how these juxtapositions reveal arguments that sustain an unequal treatment of violence committed against marginalized bodies. Thus, *What It Feels Like* engages a dual approach: first, it identifies how historical and official discourses narrowly define the act of rape through procedural, linguistic frameworks, and second, it locates embodied acts that call those definitions into question. Examining discourse about women's bodies through these two interpretive lenses illustrates how sensation works alongside more traditional, discursive tools in both propagating and resisting rape culture. Together, its case studies find that while policy makers, judicial authorities, and medical professionals deploy methods that serve to control women's bodies, public performances and creative genres that use bodies in disruptive capacities emerge as fierce ethical interruptions that challenge the operations of power present in political life. Through this broad examination of affect, feminism, and publicity, *What It Feels Like* maintains that investigating how women's bodies serve both to manage and oppose rape culture sheds light on how bodies become necessary for responding to the exigencies of violence, even when their present contexts seek to ensure their erasure.

In what follows, I outline the scholarly contours of this project, situating it in rhetorical, feminist, and affect studies while foregrounding the theoretical and scholarly framework of the book. I then offer a brief discussion of visceral

rhetorics in relation to the structure of the book. The arguments I make here are especially pertinent today given the gridlock of public discourse about rape, a discourse in which gender, embodiment, and language are complexly enmeshed in ways that serve to constrain people's abilities to speak about their own experiences with violence committed against their bodies. My hope is that this book addresses this problem by guiding us toward potential solutions that (1) acknowledge how embodied forms of meaning making have been ignored and silenced and (2) take seriously the role and value visceral rhetorics can play in attempting to reshape public opinion and disrupt the power patriarchy holds over public life. To do so, I examine past legacies of rape culture, how those legacies currently operate in different contexts, and what rhetorical strategies have been and might be effective for uprooting it. Together, we must understand how women's symbolic and material bodies are problematically foreclosed in these arguments in ways that deserve our attention if we desire any sort of change to the status of violence in everyday life. Following the work of Annie Hill, turning toward, not away from, the violated body "proceed[s] from the assumption that feminism is far from finished" and "insist[s] on the urgent need for feminist intervention now."¹³

Rape Culture and Its US Legacies

Feminist scholars from a range of disciplines have intervened in the problem of rape, analyzing how within its discourses, gender and power are deeply and troublingly intertwined.¹⁴ "Rape is part of a system of male dominance," writes Patricia Hill Collins, and has consequently naturalized relationships of fear among certain bodies.¹⁵ Gender roles have been shaped by the everyday nature of rape culture, leaving many in public to assume certain behaviors are normal or acceptable. But because sexual violence is so pervasive, so commonplace, so profoundly chronic, ironically, the actual *violence* of rape or sexual assault is rendered invisible in mainstream conversations. To make legible these invisibilities, this study centers public deliberation to interrogate the logics of rape culture, revealing how contemporary modes of defining and responding to rape and sexual assault reinforce patriarchal approaches that diminish space for embodied, feminist perspectives. In this section, I foreground a brief history of rape culture in the United States in relation to the current project, elucidating how a rhetorical perspective grounded in the body and attuned to difference is critical for exposing how and why the violence of sexual abuse persists uncontested for many in everyday life.

As a term, “rape culture” originally came into public vocabulary during the second-wave feminist movement specifically in the 1970s and remains in usage today.¹⁶ When anti-rape feminists first began using it in public dialogue, they did so to highlight the commonplace dismissal of rape crimes, crimes in which victims of rape were discredited for assaults committed against them. “In ‘rape culture,’” writes Maria Bevacqua, “sexual assault is tolerated, [. . .] women are blamed for being raped, sexist attitudes prevail, and male sexual privilege goes unquestioned.”¹⁷ Rape myths are one of the dominant vehicles responsible for circulating and emboldening such ideas and serve to mark women’s bodies as inherently untrustworthy: “women lie about being raped”; “rape only happens by strangers”; “it only counts as rape if she was physically abused”; “she was drunk, therefore responsible.” Even though these myths are widely false, negative beliefs about victims sponsored by these ideas are “persistently held” and ultimately “serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women.”¹⁸ As a result, women’s bodies are too often subject to scrutiny: what she was wearing, how she acted, where the rape occurred, and how she retaliated “all become evidence for whether a woman was even raped at all.”¹⁹

Understanding how contemporary rape prevention efforts operate through both discursive and sensory means, directing women to comport themselves through disparaging gender norms in order to ward off violence, drives this book’s analytical approach. Because rape myths are so pervasive, normalized in how we talk and move in society, women’s bodies have been coded as “risky spaces” within mainstream rape prevention efforts that focus on things like statistics or the role of the bystander.²⁰ Contemporary prevention efforts turn scrutiny over women’s bodies into foreboding prophecies that direct women not to drink, dress like a whore, or, essentially, *ask for it*. As Catharine MacKinnon has provocatively written, “To be rapable, a position that is social not biological, defines what a woman is.”²¹ Consequently, “the goal” for women, argues Rachel Hall, “is to become physically impenetrable.”²² The very possibility of invasion marks a woman’s body as an unsafe space: “quite literally, she has too many orifices.”²³ In other words, to prevent rape, mainstream discourses ask rapists not to change their own behavior or recognize how rape is a crime of power; rather, they encourage women to deploy self-surveillance tactics that require her to be vigilant of her own body, sustaining the gender imbalance central to the violence of rape. To put it bluntly, women in US society have been taught that the best kind of surveillance is that which performs a virginal subjectivity. A woman who behaves chastely, modestly, and most importantly, quietly—characteristics akin to how Cheree Carlson

has defined “True Womanhood”—may have a better chance of escaping rape by remaining appropriately fearful of what is otherwise doomed to happen.²⁴

But the risk of rape is not shared equally by all, a fact largely unacknowledged in mainstream publics as a result of the discourses of rape that do circulate. That is, rape prevention discourses are grounded in a whitewashed history that has failed to account for how women of color, people from trans and queer communities, and working-class women are significantly more at risk of rape. Part of this problem can be attributed to cases that *do* take shape in the mainstream media, cases that are typically oversensationalized and focus on a particular type of victim. That is, when rape is given a public platform, it is frequently the result of some of the most gruesome, violent, gut-wrenching cases that simultaneously involve victims deemed appropriate for public sympathy. In addition to the Nassar case, for example, take the 1983 New Bedford rape, in which Cheryl Araujo was brutally group-raped in a bar in New Bedford, Massachusetts, or the 1989 Central Park Jogger rape, in which Trisha Meili was attacked and raped while running in Manhattan. Both cases stole the national spotlight and still inhabit a public memory about rape today. They involved beatings in which each woman was brutally attacked, raped by multiple men, and left as a spectacle outside in public. What happened to these women was horrific, tragic, and deserving of national coverage. But the public broadcasting of these and other events like it work to categorize an archetypal victim and obscure the everyday violence of rape culture that still lives on today.²⁵ Put differently, the legacy of women like Araujo or Meili serves to represent all cases of rape, “reinforc[ing] iconic representations of victims (as innocent, white, and/or angelic)” that deflect the affective valences of rape culture that are pervasive yet hard to see when committed against bodies and in contexts other than these.²⁶ Thus, the rhetorical perspective I take here seeks not to weigh one case of rape as more or less gruesome than the next but rather to illustrate how media portrayals such as these provide a framework of assessment that works to persuade publics of the forms of violence and violated bodies worthy of public outcry. The debate comes down to flesh and wound.

This book examines how this archetypal victim can be traced in contemporary prevention and response efforts, shaping how publics fail to understand a variety of cases that count as rape. For instance, legislative efforts today that center their attention on the college campus still carry this image of the rape victim: she is college-aged, cisgender, white, upper-middle-class, educated, heterosexual, and able-bodied. In other words, the typified victim of rape is always imagined as white and female in public discourse, foreclosing a

broader awareness of the range of bodies subject to sexual violence. Thus, I use “woman” or “women” in this book not to ignore femmes, queer women, people from trans or nonbinary communities, or men, who most certainly experience rape and sexual assault, but rather to acknowledge a public obsession with focusing solely on cis, white women in predominant rape prevention discourse. Furthermore, while these discourses may encourage us to characterize rape as a problem of *male* dominance and control over *female* sexuality, this book understands the problems inherent to rape and its influence over public discourse as those of “*white* male regulation of *white* female sexuality,” as Kimberlé Crenshaw reminds us, a problem rooted in a history of rape statutes that obscures the legacy of rape and sexual assault for women of color, specifically.²⁷

Apprehending why this archetype surfaced and took grip in the 1980s and still exists today requires examination of the history of rape in this country and how anti-rape measures first began politically. When anti-rape feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Susan Brownmiller started to protest rape, they did so by organizing as a grassroots, anti-state movement committed to helping the needs of battered women. While critiquing the state’s failure to protect women, second-wave feminists applied for and received government grants to help target the issue of rape culture and raise public awareness of it. Yet, as Kristin Bumiller has pointed out, accepting money from the government left these second wavers—who were already part of a movement problematically tied up in white feminism—permanently tied to the state, specifically at a time when the fear of violence (due to things like the war on drugs and the AIDS crisis) circulated widely. The anti-rape movement thus coincided with a “crime control mentality” that typified not only the rape victim but also the perpetrator and the act of rape.²⁸ Placing sex in the context of what were then perceived as social ills “resulted in a panic over sex crimes that contributed to wrongly directed fears about the omnipresence of predators and to opportunistic prosecutions.”²⁹ State-sponsored efforts—particularly those that formed the foundation of VAWA—constructed the rapist as a stranger, racialized as nonwhite and typically black, and generalized the fear of the sex criminal who lurks in a dark alley, preying on young, innocent, white women. With the help of advocacy centers today such as the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network (RAINN), we know and can confirm that the majority of rape cases, however, simply don’t occur like this.³⁰ And yet, the legacy of these archetypes largely circulates in the public imaginary about rape, how it happens, and who experiences it, emerging throughout several cases examined in this book.

Along with interrogating sensationalized rape cases, the second-wave feminist movement, or VAWA, scholars have also pointed out how perceptions of rape and its stereotypes stem far deeper in this country's founding history. For instance, Collins has turned to the early twentieth century and the legacy of enslavement in the United States to unveil a much more complex and intersectional understanding of rape and its naturalized presence in society. In *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*, she underscores how black women and their experiences with rape have largely been erased historically, given "no public name [. . .] or significant public censure."³¹ This failure to acknowledge the plight of rape for black women, she argues, is a complicated result of advancing the rights of black people more broadly in the decades following the American Civil War, particularly at the height of the Jim Crow era. Though black women were commonly at risk of rape, it was far easier, Collins argues, to outline the injustices of lynching—a spectacle that intentionally took place in public—than it was to argue the injustice of rape—an act committed against black women who were often the target of violence by powerful white men. "Whereas lynching (racism) was a public spectacle," she writes, "rape (sexism) signaled *private* humiliation."³² Black women were overwhelmingly subject to sexual abuse by slave holders in the Antebellum South but also white men in law enforcement during the mid-twentieth century. Yet, the pervasiveness of these actions went largely unnoticed in public, engendering the central linking of toxic masculinity and white supremacy that began centuries ago yet still grossly persists today.³³ In other words, the maintenance of white male dominance in the United States does not only include sexual violence; rather, it is predicated on a history of normalized sexual abuse largely committed against women of color by white men in power.

To be clear, this book recognizes that rape is a central component of this country's foundation, its very presence as a nation-state and economic world power, supported by a powerful legacy of misogyny and white supremacy. This history establishes what I take "rape culture" to mean in this book, embedded into this country's very civic and political makeup from the beginning, a history that buttresses current exercises of power and abuse that occur in ordinary interactions and continue to go unaccounted for or ignored, seen as normal, if not logical. Most certainly, colonization and slavery in the United States were perpetuated by rape, and, consequently, their mechanisms simultaneously served to control and populate enslaved people through the proliferation of sexual abuse.³⁴ "The reproductive capacity of enslaved and native women," writes historian Rickie Solinger, "was the resource whites relied

on to produce an enslaved labor force, to produce and transmit property and wealth across generations, to consolidate white control over land in North America, and to produce a class of human beings who, in their ineligibility for citizenship, underwrote the exclusivity and value of white citizenship.”³⁵ Sexual violence served “as weapons of racial domination,” weapons of “white supremacy, patriarchy, and genocide” that have long been overshadowed by the colonized stories we continue to tell of the nation’s founding.³⁶ What’s worse is that the laws protected slave holders from punishment. According to Virginia state legislation passed in 1662, “the children resulting from rape of enslaved women by white men were not considered legally free, nor were they recognized as part of the white family, which enabled free white men to conceal their sexual behavior with enslaved women and avoid responsibility for their actions.”³⁷ In other words, the law “financially incentivized rape of enslaved women,” writes Rachel Feinstein, because slave holders profited off the children born into their households.³⁸

What It Feels Like builds from scholars who have investigated how the law has skirted rape in the United States to understand how central the history of paternalism and masculinity is to rape culture, demonstrating how the legacy of this history lives on today in how rape laws are classified and understood publicly. In addition to this dark, underacknowledged but powerful legacy of sexual violence, one other reason for this historical and public erasure of rape deals with where the act of rape often happens. Because rape is understood legally to take place in private, historically, rape has been framed not as a criminal matter, but rather one that requires civil intervention on behalf of the (male) head of the household. For much of US history, the home operated outside of the “law’s sovereign domain,” as Jennifer Andrus has argued, and “because it [was] the duty of the husband to control the world within it, [. . .] he had the power to exercise sovereign control by punishing the bodies of his subjects.”³⁹ Thus, in cases of rape that occurred between a husband and wife or master and enslaved person, the private sphere of the home constituted rape as an issue outside of the rule of law. Rape was “presented unapologetically as common sense,” an unfortunate consequence, or even a regrettable outcome of marital relations, if recognized at all.⁴⁰ It was not until the late twentieth century—well after the Nineteenth Amendment was passed—that paternalistic laws of property were finally broken.⁴¹

If and when a person does choose to report a case of rape or sexual assault, the offense is categorized by degrees of severity that vary state by state, both in number of degrees and how they are termed. While rape law within the latter half of the twentieth century and current twenty-first century has

undergone several changes in definition, rape is typically thought of today as *sexual intercourse without consent*, intercourse imagined with a man and woman. Sexual assault, however, is often defined as *unwanted or nonconsensual touching* (for instance, with one's mouth, fingers, or fists), which may include attempt to rape. Thus, as legal scholars have pointed out, "the crime of rape centers on penetration"; adjudication procedures operate "from the male standpoint"; a man's bodily parts determine how to catalog, measure, and account for violation.⁴² While the majority of sexual assault cases, including rape, are classified as felony offenses, some states categorize sexual assault cases as misdemeanors, which receive a lesser sentence and are those typically involving nonconsensual touching such as grabbing someone else's genitalia without permission. With all of this said, however, it must be noted that rarely are those who commit rape or sexual assault convicted of such crimes. For instance, according to RAINN, out of every thousand cases of sexual assault reported, only forty-six will lead to an arrest and of those, only five will receive a felony conviction.⁴³ We still see that, as Judith Butler has described, "the status given to the law is precisely the status given to the phallus, the symbolic place of the father, the indisputable and incontestable."⁴⁴

Sexual violence has been ingrained in the very institutions that define this country, making rape a central component of our cultural DNA, invisible yet fundamental to US identity. Rape culture has flourished in this country since before it was even recognized as one. Yet testimonies that women or those feminized by discourses of rape offer of their own experiences with their bodies are often viewed as inherently unfit for the public sphere, marked as less valuable, irrational, or excessive.⁴⁵ Debates about rape cases quickly devolve into cases of he-said, she-said—a binary that, as Gilmore has argued, will always seek "to taint" her words in the service of supporting his.⁴⁶ Victims' testimonies are denigrated as private and personal, biased on the grounds that they are not perceived as universal or of public concern, compounded by discriminations that pile up for women, women of color, poor women, people from trans or queer communities, and so on. In response to these gendered injustices, *What It Feels Like* investigates how prioritizing the male perspective at the expense of hearing from a variety of people targeted by rape carries over into the way we talk about, investigate, and adjudicate rape, a perspective nearly indistinguishable yet integral to these discussions. Examining rape culture in this book, thus, goes far beyond analyzing individual acts; rather, this book uses a rhetorical approach to apprehend how everyday life is saturated with a network of violence seen as commonplace, an approach equipped to interrogate how such insidious acts are linked to a uniquely

sexist and racialized history of power that has long operated for financial, colonial, legal, and political gains at the expense of justice and equity for all.

Fleshy Bodies and the (Im)Possibility of Being Heard

In *Living a Feminist Life*, Sara Ahmed argues that “feminist history is affective.”⁴⁷ “Words surround us,” she writes, “thick with meaning and intensity.”⁴⁸ When I invoke the discourse of sensation, feeling, or embodiment, I am thinking of scholars like Ahmed. Words and actions make us feel a certain way, feelings that have potential to sink in deep within our bones. When people use their bodies to articulate violence, however, they draw upon alternative communicative frameworks to express the experience of harm from a perspective grounded in these exact feelings. In the case of rape culture, I view these actions as rhetorical forms seeking to combat the stigmas projected onto victims. Honing how meaning can be made at the fleshy sites of violation illustrates how affect operates at the “edges of language,” to borrow from Debra Hawhee.⁴⁹ Language leaves felt residue; belief is sensed in the gut; persuasion is never an entirely rational operation that acts outside of the physical body. This book aims to shift rhetorical scholars’ sense (pun intended) of the material body to grasp how feelings transpire in ways that not only circulate arguments but also constitute their very being. Bodies are corralled by institutions, tinkered with by tools; judgment percolates under the surface; fear is felt; women seethe with anger. The goal of this book is to understand how visceral rhetorics—these thick, material, bone-deep, gut-felt sensations—illuminate the body’s capacity to expose a reality of inequity and the need for change, a powerful capacity that operates with and beyond language and reveals the fictional promises of rationality patriarchal discourses seek to promote. In this section, I begin to unpack how rhetorics like these interact with publics, theorizing visceral rhetorics as a tool equipped for attending to women’s experiences and justice claims broadly.

While rhetorical study has long considered the body, this book moves beyond theories that have treated the body as an abstract concept or in two-dimensional fashion by viewing it solely in terms of representation and image.⁵⁰ When first approaching the body, scholars viewed it as a site of persuasion akin to a visual object, a representation or protest, a place where arguments could form.⁵¹ Best said by Hawhee, “Contemporary theory [. . .] has a tendency to freeze bodies, to analyze them for their symbolic properties, thereby evacuating and ignoring their capacity to sense and to move through time.”⁵² When unquestioned, the abstract body, Karma Chávez argues, may serve to amplify “taken-for-granted

values like civility, respectability, and normative identity,” further producing theories and practices of rhetoric that continue to identify certain bodies as important, and, thus, as the grounds for theories and practices that remain deeply entrenched in unmarked power.⁵³ I echo Chávez and seek to understand material bodies at the intersections of race, class, gender, dis/ability, location, and sexuality. I treat the body as Hawhee does, as a “vital, connective, mobile, transformative force, a force that exceeds—even as it bends and bends with—discourse.”⁵⁴ This study follows Jay Dolmage, who defines rhetoric as the circulation of power in communication by specifically tracing the body’s fleshy, moving capacities, “its phenomenological and persuasive importance,” to understand how bodies mingle with perceptions of rape culture in public.⁵⁵ Working from this groundwork, I consider how bodies *make meaning*—how bodies break with convention; how bodily differences emerge and call into question our theories of rhetoric; how fleshy, corporeal forms of embodiment shift the modes available for making meaning.

But this rhetorical attention to fleshiness and corporeality is inspired by a feminist goal. That is, *What It Feels Like* critically expands this body of scholarship by interrogating how assumptions about material bodies serve as a primary motivator for silencing women, theorizing the body in relation to the feminist rhetorical trajectory of silence. Rape, as Hill has argued, continually shapes women’s words and actions: “Fear of rape, and of being accused of inviting assault, influences where women go, to whom they speak, and how they experience public and private spaces. It affects what they wear based on the pervasive belief that a woman’s appearance can communicate consent to sex.”⁵⁶ Rape culture, in other words, is an enterprise of power over one’s body and one’s voice. While women’s mental capacities and bodily processes have long been subject to stigmas that serve to define women as incapable of speaking rationally or meaningfully, a woman’s body becomes a key source of public anxiety when assessing an act of rape: her body appears weak, meager, or angry after an alleged attack; she cries uncontrollably or yells loudly when she speaks of what happened; her drunken altered mental state marks her as untrustworthy; blood could mean anything. These bodies seep unwanted excess—both material and symbolic—that mark them as awkward, tainted, or even out of control. Amy Koerber writes that “the idea [is] that women are motivated by something inside themselves that they cannot control, whereas men control themselves through rationality and the male brain.”⁵⁷ Consequently, speakers responding to victim disclosures employ rhetorical tactics that seek to circumvent women’s bodies, the wounded sites of trespass, and the feelings that result from rape.

Thus, while the concept of visceral rhetorics, as this section suggests, carries implications for a variety of rhetorical studies, I theorize it in this book as a feminist rhetorical project. Attention to physical bodies and embodiment illuminates the constraints of disclosure, placing this book in conversation with a long history of feminist scholarship that has investigated the genre of personal testimony.⁵⁸ Examining how silencing permeates our entire notion of gender and embodiment allows me to locate how patriarchy trickles into the rhetorical situation beyond what gets spoken and who speaks, how mechanisms that restrict, limit, or render impossible the act of women speaking operate both generally in public but specifically in the case of sexual violence. As a result, this book remains aware of how discourses about rape serve to keep women in their “proper place” by denying the discourses they offer of their own bodies.⁵⁹ Taken together, it reveals how the surveillance of behavior and embodiment become tools to manage and assess the experience of rape, invoking old strategies in new forms that serve to deny a woman’s place in the public sphere.

In addressing the body’s capacity to transpire visceral meaning, *What It Feels Like* stems from recent scholars who have advanced the rhetorical study of affect and sensation by uncovering its critical role in public engagement and belonging.⁶⁰ Feeling acts as a kind of circuitry to any rhetorical situation, and traces of such affective phenomena, as Jenell Johnson has argued, “tell us *a public was here*.”⁶¹ This book builds critically from the work of Johnson, who defines the capacity of the visceral as an “*intensity* of feeling,” an intensity different than Brian Massumi’s initial theorizing of affect and one more akin to “a matter of scale, of saturation, what physicists would describe as power per square unit and what rhetoricians might describe as magnitude.”⁶² As Jenny Rice argues, “The problem is not that public subjects feel. Rather, the problem is that feeling too often serves as the primary connective tissue to our public spaces.”⁶³ Bodies engage, are subject to, and even challenge ideas about rape culture, constituting affect as a tool of public formation in addition to the tools of discourse and the visual. What sets this study apart, though, is that it demonstrates how visceral phenomena not only congeal publics but also serve as strategic sources of counterpublicity. That is, while fleeting, feeling moments of connection emerge from and converge publics, they can also tell us *this public is hostile*, unwelcoming of certain bodies and their forces.

Because this study deals with the violence of rape, it cautions against treating pain solely in terms of representation and instead calls us to understand its visceral impressions with the outside world, how the physical experience of pain moves us to judgment in ways that words alone might not. For

rhetorical scholars, experiencing pain demonstrates how meaning circulates and calls audiences to connect with a speaker at the level of feeling. That is, *feeling pain*, as opposed to simply hearing about pain, as Elaine Scarry has famously theorized, encourages a level of certainty unavailable under strictly discursive frameworks.⁶⁴ We come to know and understand our embodied existence when we feel, when we grasp—even if only for a moment—a sense of harm or wound. The experience of pain is “bound up with how we inhabit the world, how we live in relationship to the surfaces, bodies, and objects that make up our dwelling places.”⁶⁵ Pain transcends discursive frameworks, it moves audiences to certainty, and it illuminates an experience of violence beyond language—all of which reveal how central feeling is to meaning making. But “pain leaks,” as Margrit Shildrick points out, and attention to visceral feelings, specifically, locates the intricate connection between the body’s insides and outsides that highlight the production of boundaries.⁶⁶ Understanding how people use their bodies to make audiences feel the violation of a boundary in an effort to protest institutions that failed to recognize what happened to them as rape illustrates how the body becomes necessary for foregrounding identification and subjectivity in contexts that have so desperately sought to ignore them. In the process, this book explores how our lived, embodied experiences are not simply shaped by our relation to others; rather they are *constituted* by such communal, potentially dangerous, and even painful public encounters.

Witnessing the sensation of pain encourages us, or rather, demands that we confront the inequity among bodies who move through public space. In other words, reckoning with justice and its limits requires moving beyond language. To understand how humanity is granted to some bodies and not others, I draw from Hortense Spillers, who has carefully argued that some bodies are merely granted “flesh” (instead of marked as Man or even a whole body) and dehumanized as a result.⁶⁷ The flesh, as Spillers theorized it, is a distinctively gendered concept, drawn from the experiences of black women in slavery. Being “flesh,” for those made captive under enslavement, is different than having “a body,” for those granted the recognition of humanity, in that the flesh occupies “that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography.”⁶⁸ The flesh persists within capitalist society even if it functions outside of subjectivity or ideology, rendered legible often in commodity form. Black female flesh has always been “unprotected,” a “materialized scene” that “offers a praxis and a theory, a text for living and for dying, and a method for reading both through their diverse mediations.”⁶⁹ This idea of the flesh leaves

the “marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside,” marks of violence that can be traced in what Spillers views as the internalization of violence, or what this book cites as visceral phenomena.⁷⁰ By pressing on naming practices, she guides our thinking to investigate how identities are formed through corporeal power and meaning, articulations that are never fixed, past the limits of ideology or what ideology seems to refuse.

Interrogating how the state manufactures norms that restrict protection over certain bodies, Alexander Weheliye, building on Spillers, invites scholars to focus on the “zones between the flesh and the law” to render these bodies visible, an approach I take in this book.⁷¹ He urges scholars to note “the importance of miniscule movements, glimmers of hope, scraps of food, the interrupted dreams of freedom found in those spaces deemed devoid of full human life.”⁷² In other words, expanding attention toward these moments where humanity is *barely graspable* sheds light on how the state disregards certain bodies as abject forms of life. Following Spiller’s and Weheliye’s guidance, I trace the grit of pavement that brushes with a victim’s body or the tools deployed to scrape a body’s orifices to capture visceral moments of flesh present in my objects of study. These messy, dirty, and earthy encounters call me to see how the state participates in a body’s capacity to be seen as human, foregrounding the processes of racialization, debilitation, and gendering that so often shape a rhetor’s ability to speak and be heard. A focus on the flesh—skin, bones, and everything in between—illuminates the biopolitical processes that deny certain bodies the subjectivity of hu/man and exposes how affective safety is granted to few.

In uncovering how certain bodies are perceived as at risk while others are constituted as risky, this project asks that rhetorical scholars and others who are committed to interrogating questions of injustice attend to moments of flesh and feeling—prickles of pain that jolt us, instinctive or knee-jerk reactions that attempt to tell us something’s not right.⁷³ Institutions endeavor to monitor and assess risk through their own frameworks, and yet “a gut has its own intelligence,” one that is consumed with the capacity to persuade only if we let it.⁷⁴ While discourses about rape strive to contain the body and all of its visceral, fleshy, and generative modes of articulation, these are exactly the forms of communication that hold potential to break the status of rape culture. In these moments of deeply constrained engagement, one may require a sort of “affective whiplash” that strives to smack us back into reality and restore a sense of equity in public life, a form of persuasion yet to be given its due attention.⁷⁵

Even as this book adds to a legacy of scholars dedicated to unveiling the injustices committed against women and their bodies, the tactics of visceral protest and disruption found in performances by Emma Sulkowicz or the virality of #MeToo demonstrate possibilities for change. Acts such as these—while not without flaws—explicitly move beyond rational discourse and instead employ tactics of feeling, visceral rhetorics, or what we might even consider rhetorical tactics of the last resort deemed necessary when communicative mechanisms continue to limit the testimony of rape. This book argues that protests and responses that call upon the body as a central rhetorical tool are deployed to make audiences *feel the pain of rape*. They invoke what Teresa Brennan terms the “transmission of affect,” that which is a “physiological shift accompanying a judgment.”⁷⁶ When victims turn toward their own embodied sources of meaning making, they offer a glimpse into how feelings transpire viscerally in ways that make and move powerful arguments otherwise ignored in public. They provoke audiences to feel how they feel by coming into contact with other people and other environments, demonstrating how affect holds the potential to “enter into another” and inspire audiences to act.⁷⁷ Words have not always worked well for people attempting to disclose rape, but perhaps feelings can.

Visceral Rhetorics: On Methodology and Chapter Outline

My analysis is guided by my own training as a feminist rhetorical critic and an ethics of recognition informed by rhetorical and cultural theorists of affect and the body I outline here. When I trace *feelings*, I follow rhetorical scholars like Hawhee and Johnson, who have turned to the work of Ann Cvetkovich when tracking such extra-discursive material.⁷⁸ For Cvetkovich, “retaining the ambiguity between feelings as embodied sensations and feelings as psychic or cognitive experiences” is important.⁷⁹ Feelings are “intentionally imprecise,” she maintains, and allow for a fluidity in understanding the relationship between affect and emotion.⁸⁰ To avoid going down a rabbit hole of distinguishing the differences between affect and emotion, as Massumi famously underscored, I, too, use the word “feeling” for such reasons.⁸¹ On the one hand, I search for how bodies are described, portrayed, and discursively constructed in ways that associate women’s bodies with particular feelings. On the other, I locate how affective responses to rape “become not just the basis but the very stuff of ideation and of critique.”⁸² Meaning has the

capacity to “take hold,” as Butler has described; responses to rape are layered with affect and constitute certain feelings about rape that move us closer to a physical, material understanding of violence.⁸³ In short, feelings construct our primary interpretations, compelling us to make certain judgments about the world and those around us.

In theorizing visceral rhetorics, I extend these ruminations of feeling and affect to account, in material terms, for how bodies communicate the raw, vulnerable threat of violence. The visceral regards “the surfaces and orifices—the skin, the mouth, the lungs, the alimentary tract,” according to Johnson, the boundaries between the body’s insides and outsides.⁸⁴ Attention to the visceral offers us a glimpse into the felt experience of violation, what Spillers calls “an interiorized violation of body and mind,” or what we might consider the material, felt, fleshy experience of violence.⁸⁵ Building from Johnson’s work on bodily intensity, I trace how feelings illuminate a deeply vulnerable and internal understanding of violation and, in the process, can serve to connect publics but also to violate them, to rupture them and call for change. Viscerality has the capacity to “reveal primal truth” about our relationships to others; it communicates meaning felt deep within the body; it draws acute attention to the body’s edges as sites of potential danger and as sites of action, praxis, and change.⁸⁶ Pushing rhetorical scholarship to reconsider rhetoricity at the level of feeling, I trace what Ahmed refers to as an “affectivity of pain” across changing contexts, locating its force in encouraging audiences to *feel* certainty and believability—a rejoinder to Scarry’s theory of pain.⁸⁷ In considering this affective, felt capacity, I argue for an understanding of rhetoric as “a feeling of bodily change.”⁸⁸ When my stomach knots, my skin crawls, or my heart feels heavy—these are all forms of visceral rhetorics that guide us toward recognition and judgment. Visceral rhetorics that communicate by way of the body’s organs, I suggest, are powerful for moving audiences to persuasion. When victims call us to consider the earthy, gritty, and even bloody accounts of rape, we are invited to engage with these forms of visceral rhetorics, forms that work with and beyond language, calling us to reconsider our relational lives in public.

Bringing together an interdisciplinary perspective informed by gender, publicity, and affect studies, *What It Feels Like* makes two important contributions.

First, the various perspectives mobilized in this book expand what constitutes the ground of rhetorical work specifically in a context of violence. Focusing on meaning made about violation and wound from a visceral perspective moves rhetorical theories of affect and sensation further into the realm of politics and ethics and expands feminist materialist theories within rhetoric to better account for how bodies become tangled up in arguments.⁸⁹ In

the process, *What It Feels Like* demonstrates a methodology for how rhetorical scholars can capture these fleeting, affective, and visceral engagements by attending to how communication interacts with and engages the flesh and the internal nature of bodies, illustrating opportunities for examining affect's force and effect on discursive interactions more broadly. As a whole, this study offers utility for examining how bodies collide with language and are subjected to communicative frameworks that, together, serve various instances of violence and injustice in US society today, emphasizing a range of stakes for scholars across disciplines.

Second, demonstrating how individuals are subjected to a variety of tactics that function to contain their bodies and deny their felt experience of violence marks visceral rhetorics not only as a tool for apprehending women's experiences but one capable of interrogating rape culture more broadly. Within institutional, medical, and official discourses of rape, rhetorical tactics are deployed to circumvent victims' testimonies of what happened, serving to manage victims' bodies by dismissing what is often portrayed as an excess of feelings. Seeing, hearing, and sensing victims' bodies on their own terms, however, exposes these limits and offers a chance to understand contemporary prejudices due to sexual violence present in everyday life in new and necessary ways. Moving beyond efforts to recover women's voices in history, this renewed feminist rhetorical approach better accounts for how commonplace presumptions about women's bodies undergird a widely acknowledged silencing of women's voices in US publics.

To begin, I turn to the 1980s to understand how and when certain legacies of rape culture have taken hold in US society, leaving a mark we still feel today. In 1985, President Ronald Reagan appointed Attorney General Edwin Meese to spearhead the second national commission aimed at assessing the effects of pornography on public life. Like the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance hearings led by Dworkin and MacKinnon just a few years earlier, the US Attorney General's Commission on Pornography (popularly termed the Meese Commission) invited victims of sexual assault to testify during six public hearings across the country to their experiences with sexual violence. In 1986, the Commission issued a final report that drew a causal link between "substantial exposure to sexually violent materials" and "antisocial acts of sexual violence."⁹⁰

In chapter 1, I investigate what frames are available for deliberating sexual violence by exploring citizen letters sent to the Meese Commission. Through the lens of Butler's theory of grievable bodies and Jasbir Puar's concept of debilitation, I examine how letter writers circumvented women's

actual experiences with violence and instead focused on what seeing naked women's bodies does to the health of the nation.⁹¹ In making claims to legally censor pornography, letter writers generated hysteria over male bodies and linked the experience of sexual violence with contemporary fears of social deviance, aligning raped, violated bodies with nonnormative, nonwhite, poor, single or nonmonogamous, and queer bodies—those perceived outside the boundaries of the nation-state. I argue that this case reveals a tacit linking among sexual citizenship, risk, and sensation that lives on today and ultimately serves to generate panic over those accused of rape or sexual assault while disregarding those made victim to violence.

Chapter 2 extends the concern for how publics deliberate the problem of rape by examining two contemporary VAWA rape prevention campaigns: *It's on Us* and *1 is 2 Many*. In 2014, each of these government-sponsored campaigns entered into mainstream media by including in their promotional materials high-profile celebrities who identified as bystanders also responsible for rape culture. By suggesting that the problem of rape is “on all of us” or that “one case of rape is too many,” these campaigns revived attention to the problem of rape. Drawing from each campaign's public advocacy and marketing materials, this chapter examines how the specter of patriarchy looms in the background of the voices of bystanders, who are given center stage, haunting public knowledge produced about rape and who experiences it. Investigating how speakers frame a heteronormative “victim”—a heterosexual, cis, white, able-bodied, US American, middle-class woman—in need of protection from a male body and male gaze, I theorize a new methodology, what I call “patriarchal spectrality,” a methodology capable of hailing those who remain present in the discourse but ignored in state-sponsored conversations about rape. By looking to a contemporary focus on the bystander, this chapter explores how publics understand solutions to rape culture as those supported by white and male subjectivities, subjectivities that serve to codify contemporary anxieties over normative sexual and political identities. Taken together, these first two chapters identify how institutional discourses construct the problem of and solutions to rape culture through male-centric lenses, lenses that seek to contain and expel bodies deemed unfit for the body politic and normative social order.

The next two chapters examine how women's bodies are leveraged politically to respond to sexual violence. Chapter 3 considers how sexual assault forensic evidence kits—commonly referred to as “rape kits”—serve as powerful tools for rape adjudication even though a backlog of tens of thousands of untested and unprocessed rape kits has accumulated on law enforcement

shelves. Tracing the rhetoricity of women's bodies through an analysis of public conversations about the backlog, this chapter reveals how assumptions about these medico-legal tools play out in public discourse to suppress embodied, visceral accounts of rape and privilege technological sources of evidence for adjudicating rape. In the process of prioritizing the need for "hard" evidence, I argue that legislative support for the use of such technological tools constitutes an attempt to remove rape justice from the realm of the rhetorical.

Chapter 4 turns to recent high-profile public performances by survivors who used embodied forms to protest institutional and legal failures to understand what counts as rape. During 2014 to 2015, Emma Sulkowicz engaged in a series of public art performances that sought to comment on the faulty institutional standards and procedures universities and colleges use when assessing rape. In 2016, Chanel Miller (anonymized during and after the case as Emily Doe) read her victim impact statement aloud in court during the trial of the *People of the State of California v. Brock Allen Turner*, a man who raped Miller behind a dumpster at a party on the Stanford University campus. In this chapter, I theorize how each individual calls upon their body as a source of evidence and protest, constituting what I call "visceral counterpublicity," acts that seek to shift the grounds by which we understand what counts as rape. By calling into question how mainstream publics define and discuss rape by way of the law, this chapter exposes the need for public opinion over cases of embodied violence to include visceral frameworks when deliberating the problem of rape.

The final chapter and conclusion consider the role of embodiment in writing for people living in the aftermath of rape. In 2017, the hashtag movement #MeToo went viral, leading millions across the globe to participate in a conversation about rape culture unlike any before it to date. Chapter 5 argues that what happened during #MeToo reveals a feminist deployment of an old strategy, *megethos*, or magnitude, matters of scale like those deployed in the Nassar case. People engaged with the #MeToo movement in multiple social media platforms by linking together intentionally brief disclosures or commentaries about rape culture, which formed a massive list that documented a multitude of experiences about sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape. I maintain that listing tweet after tweet generated a visceral magnitude of testimonies that served to establish a collective believability about the contemporary realities of rape culture and overwhelm viewers into feeling the pervasive ubiquity of sexual violence in US society. Theorizing what I term "feminist *megethos*" through the idea of a list extends theories of magnitude beyond the ideas of coherence or amounting excessive detail and

toward a theory that captures how magnitude can work to replace problematic assumptions about rape culture with a collective understanding of sexual violence central to victims' actual experiences.

In the conclusion, I reflect on how we move forward in US society knowing the limits of political, cultural, and public life by turning to the writing of popular writer and scholar Roxane Gay. Here, I examine how Gay has consistently employed strategies of viscerality and embodiment in her critiques of rape culture. I suggest that the rhetorical tactic of seething demonstrated throughout her work as a black woman living and writing in the aftermath of rape today offers a methodology for change, one that calls attention to how anger manifests across time and history in and through the body. In attending to how anger seethes, boils, and percolates silently yet viscerally, I conceptualize justice as a matter of visceral safety, a form of justice that might lead to an ethical possibility of interconnection if (and only if) the risk of harm is acknowledged in everyday life, material risk most certainly not equally shared by all.