SILENCE AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN LITERATURE AND DRAMA

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES

(English)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Vancouver)

January 2016

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Abstract

Spanning a variety of genres, including autobiography, fiction, and drama, “This Page Intentionally Left Blank: Silence and Sexual Violence in Canadian Literature and Drama” investigates the use of silence as an aesthetic and political strategy of resistance in depictions of sexualized and gendered violence. I argue that by using silence, selected authors and playwrights challenge expectations of how violence is to be articulated, particularly because speech about violence frequently risks being fetishized, appropriated, or even risks enacting representative violence itself. The introduction establishes a methodological framework for my analysis, tracing a history of silence and its relationship to sexual assault narratives. In Chapter 1, I discuss histories of censorship in order to set up a historical and political context for silence as a tool of oppression. In doing so, I also situate censorship and silencing as a nuanced phenomenon, discussing in particular the ways in which reluctant speech may be imagined as a politics of care for the reader. Chapter 2 investigates the genre of life writing in relation to the narrative expectations of legal testimony. I demonstrate how judicial expectations of speech affect autobiographical works, and how Maggie de Vries’ memoir of her sister’s life (and death) consciously operates outside of these discursive boundaries. In Chapter 3, I move towards a discussion of drama, with a particular focus on how playwrights Marie Clements and Colleen Wagner navigate embodied representations of sexual assault and their legacies within theatrical history. My final chapter examines works of fiction by Emma Donoghue and Anne Stone, articulating their relationship to and contravention of generic expectations of popular fiction. This chapter explores the fraught relationship between sexual assault and discourses of fiction and fact. This dissertation offers several important contributions to the fields of both trauma theory and Canadian literature: it dismantles the binary between speech and silence in order to
form a more nuanced understanding of experience and representation; it theorizes how recuperative silences function across a number of genres; finally, it offers a unifying study of sexualized violence across the diverse field of Canadian literature.
Preface

This dissertation is original, unpublished, independent work by the author, Lucia Lorenzi.
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Acknowledgements

Working on a project such as this one can be a risky business, and I have depended on the support of many in order to be able to take on work that has been so intellectually and emotionally challenging. This research has been made possible with generous funding by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the UBC Faculty of Arts, and the Department of English.

My immense gratitude goes to Deena Rymhs, who has been a part of this project since the beginning, and whose gentle guidance and supervision saw this work through until its end. Her belief in me made it possible to take intellectual risks and to push the boundaries of this field; under her supervision I have always felt it possible to be fearlessly bold. Laura Moss joined this project at a moment when I needed her buoyant optimism and enthusiasm more than I knew. I am forever grateful to her for taking a chance on me, and for always asking the toughest questions with the utmost kindness. Sherrill Grace has been a steadfast mentor and towering model of both academic rigour and grace. Her course on Canadian literature in the spring of 2011 forever altered my career, and I am infinitely grateful to her for helping me to fall in love with such a dynamic field. I must also thank Larissa Lai, who guided me through many of the early stages of this project, and who encouraged me never to lose my creative edge; Jeff Derksen, who mentored me through the early days of wading through theory; Mary Chapman, whose encouragement and wisdom have been beacons of light during the dark days; and Lorraine Weir, who has taught me what it means to be passionate and to have strength of conviction.

Louise Soga has helped me navigate each step of this program with the utmost kindness: for her guidance, her hugs, and her endless supply of chocolate, I will always be grateful.

I have been supported and inspired by a community of fellow scholars and friends (at UBC and beyond): Jamie Paris, Leah Wiener, Danielle Lorenz, Szu Shen, Cameron Paul, Zoe Todd, Brycen Janzen, Ranbir Banwait, Nashwa Khan, Jasmine Spencer, Jane Shi, Maneo Mohale, and so many others. In particular: Robert Bittner for the years of friendship and the endless inspiration regarding what it means to be passionate and determined; Stephanie Fung for the friendship forged during Ontarian thunderstorms and through poetry; Brendan McCormack for the conversations about CanLit and the steadfast encouragement; my comrade Michael
Stewart for encouraging me to write and nurturing my public voice; Erin Wunker for nurturing my feminist killjoy heart; and June Scudeler for being the best dissertation buddy and the most generous and incredible friend.

Writing about such a deeply personal subject such as sexual violence would have been impossible without the love and support from fellow activists and survivors. Thank you for helping me to speak even when my voice trembles. Ashley Bentley: it has been a pleasure to collaborate with you on so many incredible projects at UBC. Terri Rypkema: thank you for helping me to repair some of the broken bits. My gratitude also goes to the Crime Victim Assistance Program of British Columbia, who has made it possible to do the expensive work of healing.

Lori Leonard: you taught me to love literature, and you came back into my life when I needed it the most. Sarah Jo: your laughter and your fierce heart have been part of a friendship I could never have dreamed of until I met you. Ebony Marshman: you are my port in the storm. I love you to the stars. Kat Ndaliro: my dearest woman, I love you so much it fills up all the many miles between us. Jacquelyn Glowa: “flesh and blood are fickle; we are forever.” Lynne Liliedahl: dear friend, I am grateful for your kindness and thoughtfulness. Michaela McMahon: your beautiful cards and thoughtful words are salves for a weary soul.

To Karyn Huenemann, my other-mother: your fierce love and confidence made certain that I did not quit the PhD before I even started. For all the years of nurturing my work, of feeding me delicious food, and of loving me just as I am, there are no words.

To Brad Edwards, Erin Edwards, Gabriel Edwards, Justus Edwards, Erin M. Edwards, Whitney Edwards, and Jordan Edwards: you have made my life complete in a way I didn’t know I needed it to be until it happened. Love makes up for lost time.

To my sistertwin, Maria Lorenzi: you are my other half, my heart. Our shared silences need no explanation. Your constant love makes it possible for me to value my ignorance of what is to come. I’m never gonna let you down.

To my mother, Beate Lorenzi: I owe it all to you.
Dedication

“Wer diesen grauen Alltag erträgt und dabei dennoch Mensch bleibt, der ist wirklich ein Held.”
- Fyodor Dostoyevsky

for my mother
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Introduction: The Quiet Turn: Rethinking Silence and Sexual Violence

Silence can be a plan
rigorously executed
the blueprint to a life
It is a presence
it has a history a form
Do not confuse it
with any kind of absence.

— Adrienne Rich, “Cartographies of Silence”

Sexual Violence: Representations and Cultural Power

In her 2004 Sydney Peace Prize lecture, Indian author Arundhati Roy declared that she was delighted to receive the prize, but must accept it “as a literary prize that honours a writer for her writing, because contrary to the many virtues that are falsely attributed to me, I’m not an activist, nor the leader of any mass movement, and I’m certainly not the ‘voice of the voiceless’” (n.p.). Roy then emphasized that “we know of course that there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless.’ There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard” (n.p.). Roy’s statements elucidate two important issues regarding the relationship between language and oppression: the first is that of the complex role of creative writers as individuals whose participation in the cultural institution of literature positions them to be seen as capable of making interventions that align with other forms of direct action; the second is that of speech itself: who does or does not speak, why, and for whom? Regarding the role of literature vis-à-vis forms of oppression such as sexual violence, many critics might agree with Roy, particularly insofar as “rape narratives relate to real rape incidents in highly mediated ways only” (Sielke 2). Yet, works of literature can nevertheless reveal or trouble the socio-historical conditions that give rise to sexual violence. Indeed, as Sabine Sielke argues, “any historical issue is inseparable
from its various cultural representations, representations that are themselves driven by cultural anxieties and desires” (3). One such cultural anxiety and desire is precisely, as Roy describes, that of silencing, voicelessness, and access to a means of representation. However, as Roy argues, if there is no such thing as the “voiceless,” but rather only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard, I wonder if there also ways in which silence can be used productively.

Whether or not we view the work of literature as equivalent or necessarily connected to activist work, public policy, or even public opinion, examining our responses and relationships to sexual violence—particularly at the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, and institutional power (including that of literature)—seems more pressing than ever. While it is not my aim to suggest that literature is merely mimetic, and while the focus of this dissertation is the representation of sexual violence in literature (rather than as the object of sociological study), I am nevertheless compelled to consider the manner in which sexual trauma continues to haunt Canadian cultural and historical contexts, from the crimes of predators like Paul Bernardo, Karla Homolka, Robert Pickton, and Russell Williams, to the survivors of sexual abuse perpetrated by clergy members in residential schools, to the large number of murdered and missing Indigenous women, particularly in Western Canada. Even as I conducted the research for this project, incidents of sexual violence in Canada sparked widespread national conversations. In the fall of 2013, several prominent Canadian universities, including my own, were revealed to have long-standing histories of violent and degrading rape chants within various student organizations. These instances of violence through language prompted post-secondary institutions to assemble task forces to deal with sexualized violence and rape culture on campuses. In the context of security, rather than education, allegations of sexual assault and harassment within the ranks of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police have been making national headlines for several years.
Since 2011, female members of the RCMP—including 336 members of a class-action lawsuit—are continuing to demand answers and an investigation into sexism and abuse within the national police force (Clancy, n.p.). In early 2014, Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada mourned the loss of a young Inuk researcher, Loretta Saunders, and as I write, continue to place pressure on the federal government to conduct a thorough inquiry into the deaths and disappearances of more than 1000 Indigenous women. Later that year, allegations and charges against former CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi sparked what was seen as a watershed moment in national discussions about sexual violence. Yet, despite these events, tensions still remain: how do such conversations keep going? Who is in charge of speaking, and how?

Acknowledging that literary production is not exempt from considering these questions, I argue that the specific “cultural anxieties and desires” (Sielke) that drive the representations of sexual violence in contemporary Canadian literature are threefold: first, texts which claim to represent any form of trauma are influenced by a series of generic conventions and discourses, which are sometimes contested, deconstructed, or appropriated; second, both Canadian literary and social configurations of community maintain specific investments in (and, frequently, divestments from) narratives which reflect violence within social and historical networks; third, material and historical conditions are shifting the conversations about sexual violence towards a transnational and global conversation, as reflected by the increasing deregulation of narrative production in an age of digital media and access. Contemporary Canadian authors thus face a considerable number of challenges: how can they continue to address the complex representational qualities of sexual trauma, and how can they do so in a manner that resists easy appropriation? How can narratives about sexual violence reveal the deep fissures and inequalities in Canadian society without disengaging the reader, especially given the histories of censorship
of sexual violence in Canadian texts? How can stories about sexual violence maintain their local and historical connections and resist the ways in which globalizing discourses of trauma often tend to flatten and erase the political, geographical, and cultural specificities of violence? In this dissertation, I argue that as a means of negotiating the communal and representative issues of writing about sexual trauma (including but not limited to the contested nature of speech itself) contemporary Canadian writers are turning to various forms of silence—pauses, elisions, omissions, and so on—as both literary techniques and forms of political commentary.

By making connections between texts written by Canadian authors and playwrights between 1977 and 2010, my research focuses on narratives which, while unmistakably enmeshed in scenarios involving trauma (wartime rape, sexual violence and captivity, sexual violence and the sex trade, and the threat of sexualized violence and abduction), deliberately silence particular aspects of these crimes, whether be they the traditionally expected narrative voices of victimization or the graphic details of a sexual assault. Colleen Wagner’s *The Monument* (1995), Marie Clements’ *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* (2002), Maggie de Vries’ *Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss* (2003), Anne Stone’s *Delible* (2007), and Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010) span a wide variety of literary genres, and their subject matter covers a wide spectrum of acts of sexualized, gendered, and racialized violence. Yet, despite their differences, I argue that they share a mutual interest in deconstructing the various discourses—literary, sociocultural, and political—that have come to define many popular narratives about sexual violence. I also examine two works—Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977) and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree* (1983)—whose histories of censorship importantly prefigure and contextualize these contemporary works’ deliberate use of silence.
In her work on literatures of trauma, Kalí Tal notes that “the work of the critic of the literature of trauma is both to identify and explicate literature by members of survivor groups, and to deconstruct the process by which the dominant culture codifies their traumatic experiences” (18). Following from Adrienne Rich’s poetic suggestion that silence is a form of “cartography,” my dissertation thus argues that these texts explicitly and self-reflexively use various forms of silence to deconstruct and resist commodification, familiarization, and appropriation. In doing so, they offer new ways of mapping and locating trauma and its effects.

**Silence and Violence: A Brief History**

At first glance, silence appears to be a profoundly counterintuitive mechanism to deal with sexual trauma, particularly when it comes to the politics of oppression and violence inherent in these crimes. Indeed, the use of silence can be seen not only as counterintuitive, but even as an impossible or inappropriate option, even in literary contexts. After all, when we usually think of silence, it is in direct opposition to speech, which, as Cheryl Glenn notes, “continues to signal power, liberation, culture, or civilization itself. That seeming obverse, silence, signals nothingness” (3). For numerous civil and human rights movements, silence has signified not only nothingness, but also tyranny, and even death. In *Sister Outsider* (1984), Black, queer, and feminist writer Audre Lorde asks: “what are the words you do not yet have? What do you need to say? What are the tyrannies you swallow day by day and attempt to make your own, until you will sicken and die of them, still in silence?” (41). For Lorde, freedom from the tyrannies of racism, homophobia, and patriarchy are sought through the “transformation of silence in language and action,” via the reclamation of language. Noting that “your silences will not protect you” (40), Lorde powerfully emphasizes language’s importance to the bios—to both physical
and political life—by noting that “death [...] is the final silence” (41). As such, “what is most important [...] must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (40).

Other types of activism have also foregrounded the necessity of speech to the preservation of life. One of the most notable and powerful instances in recent memory is the work done by the New York-founded grassroots organization ACT UP, through their response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. ACT UP, which formed in 1987, “emerged not only with the determination to end the AIDS crisis through non-violent civil disobedience, but also with a knowledge and understanding of the mass media that enabled a small group of people to utterly change America's view of AIDS” (Hubbard n.p.). Two of the most poignant and powerful images to emerge from ACT UP were Andreas Sterzing’s photograph of activist David Wojnarowicz with his lips sewn shut, and, perhaps more recognizably, the black poster featuring a pink triangle and the following phrase: “Silence = Death” (Kamps 72). As Raymond A. Smith and Kevin E. Gruenfeld elaborate, “in its manifesto, the Silence = Death Project drew parallels between the Nazi period and the AIDS crisis, declaring that ‘silence about the oppression and annihilation of gay people, then and now, must be broken as a matter of our survival.’ The slogan thus protested both taboos around discussion of safer sex and the unwillingness of some to resist societal injustice and governmental indifference” (n.p.).

While the rhetoric of silence as literal, bodily death has been less frequently invoked in its work, sexual violence activism has similarly called for the dismantling or shattering of silence as a means of gaining access to speech and its personal and political qualities of transformation. After all, while sexual violence may not necessarily mean physical death, the survival of sexual crimes can still signal linguistic death (the alleged “unspeakability” or “unrepresentability” of
trauma), psychic or spiritual death (the psychological and emotional impacts of trauma), and/or social death (the continued stigma or ostracism that many victims still face). Certainly, the importance of speaking out about sexual violence holds great importance for the anti-violence movement, and for individual survivors. Due to notoriously low reporting rates— and even lower rates of prosecution and conviction—public health officials, anti-rape activists, and mental health professionals have often declared sexual violence to be “the silent epidemic.” Not surprisingly, then, as Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray-Rosendale have noted, “the strategic metaphor of ‘breaking the silence’ is virtually ubiquitous throughout the movement: survivor demonstrations are called ‘speak outs’ [...] and the metaphor figures prominently in book titles such as I Never Told Anyone, Voices in the Night, Speaking Out, Fighting Back, and No More Secrets” (260). Like anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQ movements for whom speech is not merely linguistic representation, but action itself, the anti-rape movement emphasizes the specific tasks which speech is capable of accomplishing: “Speaking out serves to educate the society at large about the dimensions of sexual violence and misogyny, to reposition the problem from the individual psyche to the social sphere where it rightfully belongs, and to empower victims to act constructively on [their] own behalf and thus make the transition from passive victim to active survivor” (Alcoff & Gray-Rosendale 262, emphasis mine). Indeed, the proliferation of speech-as-empowerment or speech-as-anti-violence action continues to be prevalent in activist movements: VDAY, a global anti-violence movement founded by Vagina Monologues playwright Eve Ensler, emphasizes the importance of “attacking the silence”

1 In the most recent Statistics Canada report on sexual assault in Canada, Shannon Brennan and Andrea Taylor-Butts note that “about one in ten sexual assaults is reported to police, according to the 2004 General Social Survey on Victimization. With only a small proportion of sexual offences formally documented through law enforcement, the prevalence of sexual assault in Canada has been difficult to quantify” (6).
(VDAY); *Take Back The Night*, a foundation whose activism is rooted in marches designed to reclaim public spaces from the threats of violence, urges survivors and allies to “Shatter the Silence. End the Violence” (TBTN); here in British Columbia, the tagline of an ongoing collaborative campaign between Ending Violence Association of B.C. and the B.C. Lions football team is “Break the Silence on Violence Against Women.” (EVA BC).

Literary production which deals with sexual violence, too, has similarly concerned itself with this need to write against silence, whether as a response to the types of vague narrative production which can “often hide or soften a pattern of dominance and submission, characteristic of much of the love-making in romances” (Hughes 127), or in cases where scenes of sexual violence are needed to challenge institutional or systemic oppression. Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver have noted that many literary representations of rape are part and parcel of the project of “restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation” (4). Higgins and Silver argue, “the insistence on taking rape literally often necessitates a conscious critical act of reading the violence and the sexuality back into texts where it has been deflected, either by the text itself or by the critics: where it has been turned into a metaphor or a symbol or represented rhetorically as titillation, persuasion, ravishment, seduction, or desire […] (4).

In response to this need to speak out and to make concrete what often is perceived as abstract, and, in particular, in response to the histories of censorship of such narratives (which I will explore in my first chapter), sexual violence has become ubiquitous in our current media and entertainment landscape in Canada and well beyond. It is commonly reported in news outlets, is the subject of many highly-visible activist movements and organizations, and has been discussed and graphically featured in a number of commercially successful books, films and television
programs, including the hugely-popular and long-running series *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit* (1999-). If we also consider the plethora of stories featured on talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, the numerous celebrity memoirs which have made reference to sexual abuse or assault, and the hundreds of websites and support groups which are dedicated to giving a space for survivors to share their stories, it would seem that sexual violence is not only widely discussed, but that any dilemma of whether or not one *should* represent or discuss it has been solved. The increase in representations of sexual violence seems to suggest, at first glance, that the solution to the problem of “the silent epidemic” has been to flood the arenas of public discourse, entertainment, and literary production with as many narratives as possible. Pointing to the numerous psychological and behavioural problems that result from trauma, especially when it is repressed or silenced, mental health professionals have suggested that representation is a necessary part of working through trauma, especially if the risk of *not* representing these heinous acts and traumatic experiences is one that will further marginalize or shame victims. As Judith Herman has noted, “the conflict between the will to deny horrible events and to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma. [...] However], far too often secrecy prevails, and the story of the traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom” (1). In an even more important way, the expression of trauma—an act which calls both self and others to remember violence—is a deliberate countermeasure to the ways in which perpetrators “do everything in their power to promote forgetting [since] secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense” (8). Jenny Edkins elaborates on Herman’s analysis of silencing, suggesting that both memory and traumatic representation are not only part and parcel of individuals’ healing from trauma, but also a method that is key to political resistance. Noting the ways in which groups or institutions with power (especially governmental ones) often
deliberately use both forgetting and censorship as a continued means of violence, Edkins emphasizes that “practices that insist on remembering can be insurrectionary and counter-hegemonic” (54). Given the potential personal and political harms of remaining silent, as well as the powerful desire that many survivors have to speak and make meaning of their experiences, it seems logical, and even preferable, for sexual violence to be represented. Fidelity to the “truth,” to victims, and to the pursuit of justice, have all become largely well-intentioned motivations for the production and dissemination of narratives about sexual trauma, and for its inclusion as a thematic element or plot device in many filmic, theatrical, and literary representations. However, as literary critics and cultural theorists well-know, the crisis of trauma and representation—and the issues involved in carrying out such representative acts—goes far beyond the mere question of “to speak or not to speak?”

To begin, we must consider what is meant by the terms “trauma” and “sexual trauma.” What makes a sexual experience (or any experience, for that matter) traumatic or not? Is it limited to the domain of the catastrophic (war zones, violent rapes), or is it also deeply ingrained “at the level of the everyday” (Cvetkovich), in domestic partnerships, in families, on the street, in the experiences that individuals face in their ordinary lives?\textsuperscript{2} Is subjective experience enough to register a forced sexual act as traumatic, or does it require confirmation as outlined through legal

\textsuperscript{2} Laura Brown’s essay “Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma” offers a keen analysis of the definition of trauma and its relationship to gender and sexuality. She notes that trauma has all-too-often been structured as that which is “outside the range” of heteronormative, male life, a definition that not only ignores the fact that certain traumas (such as sexual violence) are overwhelmingly experienced by women, but also the reality that such violations occur with great frequency and as part of many women’s daily lives (in their homes, their relationships, and their workplaces). Citing a need for the recognition that many models of trauma reinforce gendered power imbalances, Brown advocates for a shift in the definition of a male-centric trauma, since “the dominant, after all, writes the diagnostic manuals and informs the public discourse, on which we have built our images of ‘real’ trauma. ‘Real’ trauma is often only that form of trauma in which the dominant group can participate as a victim rather than as the perpetrator or etiologist of the trauma” (120).
discourse? How do cultural representations of trauma inform, \textit{a priori}, victims’ experiences, responses, and reactions, and can there ever be an unmediated experience of trauma?

Even if we can decide what sexual trauma \textit{is}, we must then ask ourselves who is in charge of speaking about it. Is it the victim, the witness, or the perpetrator? What does each perspective offer? Does the victim present a more “honest” or “truthful” narrative, and, if not, what are the limits or criticisms levelled against it? Which victims are perceived as more credible, and why? Can witnesses maintain a stance that is not clouded or jeopardized by their own emotions? Should we hear narratives from perpetrators at all? In cases where sexual violence has taken place within the context of racialized violence, do appropriations of victims’ narratives by outsiders, even for the purposes of raising awareness, risk merely reinforcing the same power dynamics that led to such violence in the first place?

Assuming that there are specific people who can speak about sexual violence, \textit{how} do they do it? In an autobiography or memoir, a novel, a film, or a play? Does the embodied, visual element of plays and films risk merely reproducing the violence of the original assault, or does it offer viewers and audience members a more realistic and jarring take on the physical and emotional devastation of rape? Do novels offer a less visually exploitative medium within which to represent rape, or does fiction itself risk reinforcing rape as a mere plot device or theme? Can academics, such as myself, escape the dilemma of doing criticism in this field, given that we, too, are in the business of representing, deconstructing, analyzing, and critiquing rape and rape narratives, or do we risk “the danger of commodification and the pleasures of academic melancholy” (Yaeger 29)?

And finally, we must also ask ourselves: who is listening, reading, or watching? Are these representations of rape merely consumed as part of confessional culture, a burgeoning
market for eroticism and violence, or as part of a network of individuals who are deeply concerned with human rights issues and the prevalence of sexual violence? Must audience members or readers be concerned with anti-rape, anti-racist, or feminist activism, or can they merely “enjoy” the narrative which they have elected to consume? What happens when narratives about sexual violence are given literary prizes? Can readers’ or audience members’ sense of empathy override their critical faculties, resulting in pity, sympathy or a misidentification with victims?

My dissertation does not claim to answer all of these questions, but I also do not pose them merely as a rhetorical strategy. Rather, over the course of the following chapters, I aim to investigate how the use of silence by authors and playwrights prompts readers and critics to consider these questions, and how various gaps and elisions function not merely as blank spaces, but as sites where narrative expectations or assumptions collapse, are dismantled, or are revealed.

**Theoretical Frameworks**

As I take up many of these questions in my dissertation, and posit silence as a possible way of working through them—or, at the very least, as a diagnostic tool that permits us to ask and consider the implication of such questions—I turn to three main fields to inform my theoretical frameworks: trauma theory, literary criticism, and aesthetic theories of silence. Using a methodological approach informed by both literary criticism and cultural studies, my dissertation blends close readings with analyses of sociocultural, historical, and literary contexts. After all, I am not only interested in how and why audiences consume these stories, or how or why they are created, but also how practices of creation and reception are affected by various historical, social, cultural, and technological contexts, be it censorship and the publishing
industry (Chapter 1), autobiography and discourses of legal testimony (Chapter 2), theatrical history and the mechanisms of stage production (Chapter 3), or the popularity and circulation of literary fiction (Chapter 4).

I first turn to trauma theory precisely because of its interdisciplinary origins as well as its importance in contemporary scholarship on sexual violence. Citing the emergence of the field of trauma theory with the publications of landmark texts such as Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992), Cathy Caruth’s edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), and her solo publication *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Susannah Radstone notes that trauma theory has roots in an interdisciplinary environment, owing its legacy to the work of neuroscientists, literary critics, psychoanalysts, and psychologists alike (11). While specific research in the field ranges from discussions of diagnostic frameworks, to communities of survivors, to the impact of trauma on witnesses, most trauma theory centres around two fundamental principles and their problems: memory and truth; or, as Cathy Caruth puts it, “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing” (*Trauma: Explorations in Memory* ix). Trauma, as Caruth acknowledges, “brings us to the limits of our understanding” (4), whether this limit questions the ability of language to represent experience, the ability for trauma to be integrated into consciousness, or the ability of witnesses to engage with horror. Ultimately, too, these limits of understanding also test the boundaries of community and interpersonal relationships, a problem that is central to an analysis such as my own, which considers trauma alongside national and local cultures. Given my interest in how trauma can affirm or dismantle communities, my project is heavily indebted to the work of theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Kai Erikson, Shoshana Felman, and Judith Butler. In examining how silence is used to challenge or
re-think narrative forms of trauma, I build on the work of Kali Tal, who, in *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996), noted that “traumatic events are written and rewritten until they become codified and narrative form gradually replaces content as the focus of attention” (6).

The contemporary study of sexual violence (including that of literary and dramatic representations of these crimes) has been significantly influenced by the theoretical frameworks of trauma theory. Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver’s *Rape and Representation* (1991) offered an early and important intervention in the field, one which paved the way for many recent works, including Deborah M. Horvitz’s *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women’s Fiction* (2000), Sabine Sielke’s *Reading Rape: The Rhetoric of Sexual Violence in American Literature and Culture, 1790-1990* (2002), Tanya Horeck’s *Public Rape: Representing Violation in Fiction and Film* (2004), and Jane Kilby’s *Violence and the Cultural Politics of Trauma* (2007). These texts have been central to my research, insofar as they emphasize the gaps between experience and representation, as well as the cultural and historical scripts that inform how we read and write about sexual violence. While my work is similarly concerned with these aspects of sexual violence, my research departs significantly from these studies insofar as I take up silence, not speech, as a rich site for political and personal transformation. In order to construct a theory of how silence can challenge the conventional avenues of expression or of political power, by altering form and familiarity, I turn to the work of Ann Cvetkovich, whose book *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Violence, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (2003) articulates a theory of trauma that is nuanced not only by the intersectionality of violence and sexuality, but also by the concepts of public cultures and affective “archives.” I read the possibility of silence much in the way that Cvetkovich does of trauma generally, when
she notes that “trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression” (7), thus “[demanding] an unusual archive” (7). While my dissertation, unlike Cvetkovich’s work, does not focus exclusively on queer narratives, I am likewise interested in how transgressive “genres of expression” can be used by marginalized or minority authors, or by narratives which present alternative voices. In order to address these specific nuances of genre, I also turn to works of literary and dramatic criticism and history pertinent to the genre in question in each chapter: in the first, I turn to criticism which takes up the question of censorship (Cohen); in the second, work on life-writing and autobiography (Rak, Gilmore, Smith, and Watson); in the third, research on theatre (Dolan, Cixous); in the fourth, pieces which discuss historical precedents for contemporary works of fiction (Eagleton, Shires, McEathron). In doing so, I recognize the specific and nuanced histories and contexts which inform different genres’ approach to sexual violence as a topic of representation.

The third lens through which I read my texts involves paying attention not only to the literary or cultural qualities of silences, but also its aesthetic qualities. The art world has expressed both ongoing and renewed interests in silence, ones that have not been taken up as prominently in literary circles. In 1952, John Cage premiered his piece 4’33”, which Toby Kamps named as the “most famous deployment of avant-garde silences” (63). As a piece that uncovered or revealed the presence of ambient noises, Cage’s work was not merely a piece of representation, but rather, as Kamps notes, an embodiment of the theory that “the main function of art is not representation in any conventional sense but should be understood instead as a process by which the artwork opens onto, and thus illuminates, the time, space, and context in which it is located” (63). This diagnostic power of silence—one that is deeply entrenched in the
temporal, geographical, and discursive locations of cultural production—is one that I argue is reflected in the works of my selected primary texts. Indeed, this attention to specificity, including the means and modes of cultural production, is especially important to my argument that contemporary texts concerning sexual violence are fighting for audibility in a world where such narration is often commoditized, re-packaged, or simply lost among the increasing number of voices which are speaking. As directors Josef Helfenstein and Lawrence Rinder note in their Foreword to *Silence*, the catalogue of an exhibition curated by Toby Kamps and Steve Said, examining silence “comes at an especially noisy moment, as the din of digital life increasingly hollows out silence and any attendant powers of concentration” (7). In paying attention to silence as a diagnostic mode, one that responds to material conditions as well as to interpersonal relationships, I also make reference to techniques of defamiliarization and alienation, which can be well translated to the field of trauma and its effects on the witness. Aesthetic theories of silence are also central to my claims that silence—even silence about sexual violence—is not necessarily or inherently powerless or a sign of absence. As John Cage notes, “there is no such thing as silence. Something is always happening that makes a sound” (Cage 191). Thinking through aesthetic (and particularly, material) aspects of silence, I also trouble the notions that silences about sexual violence even exist, which is of particular importance to discourses (especially legal ones) that often perceive silence as absolute.

**Chapter Descriptions**

My dissertation traces various modes of silence through four main chapters. In Chapter 1, I discuss histories of censorship in order to set up a historical and political context for silence as a tool of oppression. Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* (1977) and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In
Search of April Raintree (1983) offer a lens through which to understand the literary inheritances of silence and traumatic representation (especially that of censorship) which contemporary texts are writing out of, responding to, and writing against. However, I also situate censorship and silencing as a nuanced phenomenon, discussing in particular the ways in which reluctant speech may also be imagined as a politics of care for the reader.

My second chapter considers the question of genre in relation to testimony and the popularity of life writing as a means of narrating traumatic experiences. Specifically, I argue that in Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss (2003), Maggie de Vries uses silence to bring two important aspects of life-writing into question: first, the very notion of what constitutes “grievable life” (Butler), or lives considered able to be or desired to be recuperated and represented by autobiography; second, the generic conventions which define life-writing about sexual violence. I demonstrate how judicial expectations of speech affect autobiographical works, and how Maggie de Vries’ memoir of her sister’s life (and death) consciously operates outside of these boundaries.

In Chapter Three, I pay careful attention to how silence relates to both narrated and embodied experience within dramatic texts. Examining Colleen Wagner’s The Monument (1995) and Marie Clements’ The Unnatural and Accidental Women (2003), I argue that silence functions as a deliberate process of interruption, an active force that destabilizes the expected outcomes or possibilities of speech and embodiment. In Wagner’s play, I mark the numerous types of silence denoted through the stage directions, and theorize its importance in the context of the play’s foregrounding of witness and perpetrator voices (rather than those of the victims). By using a technique of substituting the silence of victims for the amplified voices of perpetrators, The Monument calls readers to account for the myriad ways in which violence is not
only present within, but also shaped and condoned by, various community formations. In Clements’ play, I argue that the various types of silences faced by the characters serve to foreground a question an oft-discussed query about audibility itself: if trauma occurs in a community in which civic agencies, police forces, and politicians are not around to hear it, does it occur? If so, what happens to it, and what happens to victims’ stories?

In my final chapter, I examine how Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010) uses an unconventional narrator with a limited perspective (a five year-old boy, who was born and raised in captivity) in order to represent long-term violence and its effects. Through the eyes of her narrator, Jack, Donoghue interrogates how violence is described, by whom, and with what level of detail. In doing so, Donoghue wrests depictions of violence away from those intended for mature audiences—audiences that are no doubt accustomed or even desensitized to conventional representations of assault and abuse—and reconfigures them to involve more careful listening and interpretation on the part of the reader. Anne Stone’s novel *Delible* (2007) takes on a familiar narrative of abduction, but reverses our readerly expectations by employing absence and elision as narrative techniques that highlight assumed cathartic and teleological facets of speech, including the reader’s desires for closure. Using a polyphonic narrative, Stone demonstrates how absence and trauma have become overdetermined categories, ones mediated by narrative: as the character of Melissa Sprague notes, “all that empty space she left behind here, it was too much. It kept filling up with stories” (168).

**Conclusion**

Much like John Cage’s interventions into music and silence, my own research is experimental, and at times tentative. Undertaking a defense of silence is a precarious matter, one
that risks reinforcing the same troubling dynamics of power and of representation that are incurred by speech. As such, my dissertation does not seek to be prescriptive, nor does it seek to necessarily conflate literary actions with political or personal actions: silences which work literarily, or theoretically, may not work so well in praxis, nor might they even be desirable. Studying trauma, too, is a slippery business, given the ways in which trauma brings us to the “limits of our understanding” (Caruth 4). It would be simple, if misguided, to assert that because trauma can be “unspeakable and unrepresentable […and] often seems to leave behind no records at all” (Cvetkovich 7), that silence, somehow, approaches the experience of trauma more closely or faithfully. Yet, what I aim to achieve with this dissertation is not to attempt to surpass the limits of understanding, or to prescribe a model which offers a “better” understanding of trauma: rather, my goal is to articulate a series of questions, approaches, and readings that can help us to continue to define these limits of understanding—to listen more closely to our assumptions, our expectations, our desires, our judgments, our revulsions, our criticisms, and our knowledge-formations. As Cage puts it, “we need not fear these silences, — / we may love them” (110).
Chapter 1: “Another kind of rapist:” Censorship in Timothy Findley’s *The Wars* and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree*

The Unbearable Weight of Silence

It is impossible to conceive of radical possibilities for silence without first acknowledging the violent legacy of *silencing*. While for many, silence has been (or has become) either an empowered choice or a right, past and present histories of silencing and censorship remind us all too keenly of how the denial of speech can also be the denial of experience, which, in turn, can become the denial of subjectivity itself. Narratives of sexual violence, in particular, have long suffered from this form of censorship, both in the cases of real-life victims who attempt to speak about their experiences, and in the cases of fictional works that depict acts of rape. Physical violations and textual violations, perhaps not surprisingly, have therefore produced similar discourses about silencing and its effects. If the act of rape is seen as involving or as producing silences, it may be said to function as censorship; in turn, given the ways in which censorship is seen as an act of violation, it may be said to function or to mirror the act of rape. Far from suggesting that censorship and rape are equivalent experiences, critics such as Lynn A. Higgins and Brenda R. Silver have nevertheless traced points of similarities between the two forms of injury, stressing in particular the etymological connection between physical bodies and textual ones: “The term *elision* [...] deriving from the Latin *laedere*, to hurt or damage, and relating to *lesion*, suggests once again the secret ways in which representation is linked to the physical, and damaged stories can represent damaged bodies” (6). Some critics and authors have gone a step
further than Higgins and Silver, however, and suggest not only that damaged stories merely represent damaged bodies, but that they are also like damaged or injured bodies.

In describing the censorship of The Wars’ scene of Robert Ross’s rape by his fellow soldiers, Timothy Findley explicitly compares the act of the censors’ violation of his text to the crime of rape. In an interview with Johan Aitken, Findley says: “They haven’t understood. That person who wants that book removed for that reason, I would say, is a rapist of a kind, a cultural rapist, because he’s taken an event and hasn’t seen through what the artist has done with it and has intended by it” (qtd in Cohen 21). As Marc Cohen emphasizes, “the metaphor of rape is a common one among writers” (21) one that points to the power of the issue of censorship to “provoke strong, visceral responses” (21). In the Canadian context, Findley is not alone in making such pointed statements about the effects of censorship. In his essay on Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s In Search of April Raintree and its subsequent revision for the Native Board of Education of Manitoba, Peter Cumming articulates a similarly strong sentiment. In positing that the scene of sexual violence in Mosionier’s revised text is “not a rape at all—because the hatred, violence, obscenities, body parts, and gender differences which would make it a rape have all been erased” (319), he appears to identify censorship as the literary equivalent of a sociocultural process whereby sexual violence is perpetrated and condoned by various mechanisms of erasure. Cumming, like Findley, minces no words: “Search (the original text) is ‘raped’ by the savage cuts to the rape scene in April (the revision)” (313).

The idea of rape-as-censorship and censorship-as-rape is compelling, especially because rape has come to signify or describe acts other than that of sexual violence itself, including but not limited to censorship. Of course, while neither Findley nor Cumming are suggesting that the damage of censorship is directly equivalent to the physical and emotional trauma of rape (after
all, Cumming uses scare quotes), and while they are also not using the metaphor of rape in the trivial fashion in which many language-users do today (e.g. “That exam totally raped me”), their statements are nevertheless shaped by and reflective of a mutual discourse of violation between bodies and texts. As I will make clear in this chapter, however, the idea of censorship-as-rape becomes complicated by authors’ participation in the revisions of their texts, as well as critics’ perceptions of their involvement. While Findley adamantly fought against his censors with regards to both the textual and cinematic iterations of his story, Mosionier did not perceive the request for revisions as necessarily violent—and certainly not in the same manner as Cumming describes it. Given the ways in which survivors’ experiences are often (violently) defined for them, it is imperative to bear in mind that a critic’s perception of textual violation may square very differently with the author’s own articulation of their experience. Censorship, like rape, can take on a murky definition, one that is shaped and contested not only by those who enact or witness textual silencing, but also by those who undergo the experience of censorship themselves.

In this chapter, I consider what it means for censored writers or texts to be identified as victims, particularly when they are writing about victimization. How is this alleged textual victimization experienced or responded to? How do the societal and legal scripts that shape how we speak about physical rape or violation influence this type of textual injury? Does the notion of censorship-as-rape risk minimizing the physical reality of sexual assault, and if so, how? If authors participate in acts of censorship by agreeing to revise their texts, how do we read their complicity? Should self-censorship be read as an act of textual survival—as a means of ensuring that the texts endure, even if they are altered or damaged—or as an act that suggests that if revisions are agreed upon, there is no real violation after all? How do we read consent and
coercion into these texts’ publishing histories? Beyond providing a jumping-off point for these questions, these historical examples also hint towards the ways in which silencing, as Higgins and Silver argue, “contains the seeds of its own undoing” (5). If, as they contend, violence “remains vicariously as a stain or bruise, as a gap or absence, a failed attempt at repression that ensures the violence will return” (5), then instances of censorship can in fact serve as powerful diagnostic tools, much like ultraviolet lights that illuminate the evidence left behind even after the most careful attempts to clean and sanitize, cover up and wash away.

It can be argued, of course, that by its very nature, trauma of any kind (including sexual trauma) always-already censors itself, both through memory and language. Judith Herman writes that “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” (2). While Herman is referring in part to the ways in which trauma is silenced because of its social taboos, she is also recognizing how trauma itself seems to defy expression, particularly in cases of repression, denial, somatization, and speechlessness. So too, as theorists such as Cathy Caruth have observed, trauma is always experienced belatedly, not fully in the moment of its occurrence: she writes that “something [...] seems oddly to inhabit all traumatic experience: the inability to fully witness the event as it occurs” (7). Traumas such as rape, as Kim Solga points out, “[pose] a fundamental epistemological dilemma: the raped enfold their stories of suffering within their flesh, bones, hearts and brains” (57). Representations of trauma, therefore, are not simply unmediated narratives that then become prone to external forms of censorship that compromise their integrity. Rather, they are stories that like all forms of representation, may not even be aware of the multiple layers of mediation that affect how they are told or re-told.
I begin with this brief articulation of trauma and memory not only to clarify the philosophical complexities of representing trauma through language, but also to suggest that a lack of representation of graphic scenes of rape does not, in and of itself, always reflect an external pressure to hide what would otherwise be made visible. While silence about sexual violence has been undoubtedly inflected by historical practices of silencing, not all instances constitute what we might think of as traumatic acts of censorship. Moreover, in reflecting on the numerous ways in which graphic depictions of or speech about rape are demanded or coerced, it becomes clear that some instances of silencing may, in fact, function as a form of resistance.

Despite the ways in which silence itself can speak to the experience of trauma, a significant facet of injury is also the urge to express, to translate experience into representation, to make what is unspeakable speakable, even if this speech never quite encapsulates the depths of horror. As Judith Herman contends, while one half of the “central dialectic of psychological trauma” is “the will to deny horrible events,” the other half is “the will to proclaim them aloud” (1). Because interpersonal trauma wounds not only the individual but the social fabric, the censorship of trauma derives its importance from the fact that speaking out about injuries is not only an act of representation, but of reconfiguration and repudiation, an act which can have tangible ideological and material consequences: shifts in public policy, the tarnished image of a particular institution, or the arrest and imprisonment of perpetrators. Indeed, as Shoshana Felman argues, speech about violence constitutes a form of testimony, which by definition is a “discursive practice, as opposed to a pure theory. To testify—to vow to tell, to promise and produce one’s own speech as material evidence for truth—is to accomplish a speech act, rather than to simply formulate a statement” (17). Naturally, there are differences between the testimonial qualities and contexts of non-fictional narratives and fictional ones such as Findley’s
and Mosionier’s novels. While they might often make reference to real-life events, genres such as fiction, drama, and poetry are not perceived to make truth claims in the same fashion as first-person testimony does. I am not suggesting, therefore, that the censorship faced by works of art is equivalent to the censorship faced by individuals who give testimony in both judicial and extra-judicial spheres. Yet, the responses to these texts—the outrage, the hatred, the concern, the hasty rush to excise, prohibit, alter, or ban—suggests that even fictional works have the power to act upon or against an audience, and even to threaten institutions. As such, if speech (fictional or non-fictional) is the medium by which a community is challenged, offended, shocked, outraged, or concerned in the wake of trauma, then silencing emerges as a way not only to exclude a survivor or a text from the community, but also to preserve the status quo of whichever sociocultural formation, institution, or political structure risks being damaged by reports of sexual violence. As Kalí Tal argues, “the speech of survivors, then, is highly political. If ‘telling it like it was’ threatens the status quo, powerful political, economic, and social forces will pressure survivors either to keep their silence or to revise their stories” (7). Resisting censorship, then—be it by resisting outright silencing or revisionism—can become a way to “force a shift in the social and political structure” (7). Similarly, Findley and Mosionier’s texts demonstrate that despite their clear status as works of fiction, they wield significant political power. Although they tell sexual violence as it “might have been,” how it “could be,” or how it is “imagined to be,” it nevertheless can have as profound an impact as a real-life survivor telling it “simply as it was.” After all, instances of censorship against fictional works can signal to real-life survivors that if the telling of fictional stories is perceived as dangerous, then the telling of non-fictional ones may be a similarly unsafe or impossible act.
The idea of rape-as-censorship and censorship-as-rape, however, can only be fully understood through the ways in which perpetrators of sexual violence use silence in order to commit and conceal their crimes. Herman writes that “in order to escape accountability for crimes, the perpetrator does everything in [their] power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator’s first line of defense. [...] If [they] cannot silence [the victim] absolutely, [they try] to make sure that no one listens” (8). This type of silencing can take many forms: the child molester who tells a young victim that the abuse is their “little secret”; the sexual abuser or rapist who warns their victims that if they tell, they or their loved ones will be harmed or killed; the perpetrator who taunts their victims with the possibility—and, often, the awful likelihood—that even if they do tell, certain circumstances surrounding the assault can and will be used in order to discredit them. The weapons of secrecy and silence can also be much more extreme, including physical disfigurement and disabling, or the ultimate silencing that is constituted by an act of murder.

While temporally and geographically far removed from the contemporary Canadian context in which I am writing, Ovid’s Metamorphoses powerfully articulates that material threats against speech have been long understood by victims of rape and by artists alike. In the sixth book of Metamorphoses, Philomena, the princess of Athens, is raped by her sister’s husband, Tereus: “The letcher, for enjoyment fully bent, / No longer now conceal’d his base intent; / But with rude haste the bloomy girl deflow’r’d, / Tender, defenceless and with ease o’erpower’d” (228). Despite her violation, Philomena retaliates against Tereus, calling him a “savage, inhumane, cruel Wretch” (228) and threatening that she “thro’ the wild World [his] Actions will proclaim” (229), and that her “mournful Voice the pitying Rocks shall move” (229). Realizing that the shame of incest and violation alone will not silence her, Tereus turns instead to
mutilation as a means of ensuring her silence: he cuts out her tongue. Philomena, however, is resourceful, and finds another way in which to articulate her trauma:

And art makes up, what fortune has deny’d:

With skill exact a Phrygian web she strung,

Fix’d to a loom that in her chamber hung,

Where in-wrought letters, upon white display’d,

In purple notes, her wretched case betray’d. (231)

Philomena’s sister, Procne, eventually receives the piece of weaving, which also results in a loss of words: it “choak’d her Voice, and quite disarm’d her Tongue” (231). Ultimately, both Philomena and her sister Procne face further retaliation by Tereus in the messy aftermath of the rape, but are fortunately saved when the gods mercifully transform them into birds. Philomena, once voiceless and tongueless, becomes a nightingale, a bird known for its powerful and poetic song.

In “Disarticulated Voices: Feminism and Philomena,” Elissa Marder states that Philomena’s story is important as a case study for “the relationship between the experience of violation and access to language” (157) in terms of how it demonstrates that physical violation and textual violation are bound up in each other. Marder writes that “one cannot speak ‘rape,’ or speak about rape, merely in terms of a physical body” (158), an argument which asks us to consider how attacks on the body are also an attack on the body politic, both of the individual and of society at large. Indeed, if we think about how sexual crimes are prosecuted in many countries, including Canada, sexual assault is not only a crime against an individual, but against the State and its value. It is an injury committed against the material body of the victim, but
prosecuted in the interest of the ideological body of a community, writ through the letter of the law.

This is precisely what is at stake, I believe, in the censorship of texts that depict sexual violence, particularly those whose depictions overtly invoke the political and structural forces that lead to such crimes. In depicting the rape of a soldier by his own comrades, Findley’s text upends both the physical as well the political embodiment of the military. The rape undoes the notion of the stoic, rank and file units of bodies working together as one, revealing instead individual bodies participating in cruel and frenzied attacks upon each other. After the rape, Robert Ross is also no longer able to maintain allegiance, and ends up defying his commander’s orders because his faith in the comradeship and leadership of the Canadian military has been utterly destroyed. By exposing the disproportionate violence perpetrated against Indigenous women in Canada, Mosionier’s novel rejects the idea of a unified theory of sexual assault or violence against women, when April is targeted for a vicious sexual attack that is directly motivated by racialized and gendered hatred. Yet, as Marder notes, it is not only the initial act of violation which gives meaning to Philomena’s story, just as it is not Findley’s and Mosionier’s original texts alone which give meaning to the violence contained within them: rather, the acts of censorship and of cutting off the means of representing experience put the violence of the text into stark relief. Marder writes that Philomena’s rape “does not become either fully figured or fully meaningful until it is repeated by the mutilation that ostensibly functions to cover it up. Rather than suppressing the rape, Tereus’ act of cutting off Philomela’s tongue both “represents and repeats it” (158). In my case studies of the specific historical and political contexts surrounding The Wars and In Search of April Raintree, I will explore the notion that censorship
compounds and repeats both these textual and symbolic injuries, and that the violence depicted in the texts are made meaningful and highlighted by the attempts to soften, excise, or prohibit.

Philomena’s transformation into a songbird also reveals how, as Higgins and Silver have pointed out, violence can remain as a trace even in the face of silencing. Philomena’s beautiful songbird voice may be read as redemptive, as a transformation of horror into beauty, or simple as more appealing way of framing the loss and lack of her physical voice, even as this loss also represents the loss of her humanity. It is crucial, thus, to consider how silencing operates in the guise of positivism or optimism. When I think about how institutions such as the Canadian military have had histories of colonial and militaristic violence revealed, when national sounds “are not beautiful to hear but ugly” (Cage 42), I find the ways in which redemptive narratives of beauty or strategies of softening are deployed to be very curious. It is important, thus, to consider not only how censorship may occur under these conditions (here I am thinking of how Mosionier’s revision of her novel “softens” the language of violence for a younger audience) but also how other narratives, which circulate in conjunction with these texts, serve to silence either by means of memorialization or celebration. How do we read Findley’s critique of Canadian militarism alongside national displays of mourning and praise for the valour of our troops? How do we read Mosionier’s novel alongside the stifling language in the sorts of comments made by former Prime Minister Stephen Harper, when he claimed that the murders and disappearances of more than 1000 Indigenous women “should not [be viewed] as a sociological phenomenon” but only “as crime” (CBC News, n.p.). Are all strategies of softening or muffling equal? Does softening, if it is for the consumption of younger or sensitive audiences, risk losing that crucial edge of violence, and if so, is that a risk worth taking?
These difficult questions are made no less complicated by the fact that as demonstrated with recent education debates about graphic violence and so-called “trigger warnings” in post-secondary syllabi, violence in texts can indeed be disorienting, re-traumatizing, or victimizing. Thus, shielding readers from—or at least warning them about—violent passages is not censorship, but rather, can constitute a form of empathy and care. What I am attempting to tease out here is that silencing and censorship, even in seemingly clear-cut cases, are fraught with much more complexity and nuance than they are often given credence. In demonstrating that not all acts of silencing are alike, then, I prefigure my later chapters’ arguments that not all acts of silence function in the exact same way, whether across genre or historical context.

Before turning to more thorough analyses of each novel, it is crucial to point out that as case studies, Findley’s and Mosionier’s novels each represent only one facet of censorship. Unlike other texts, their novels were initially published and distributed, and it was only after their distribution that various institutions and individuals took issue with them. While I am in no way attempting to minimize the seriousness of post-publication censorship, as Marc Cohen notes, one may argue that “post-publication suppression is not ‘true’ censorship because individuals under this system have an autonomy unlike those subject to prior restraint. At least they are free to publish their work: if it is suppressed afterward, that is another matter” (12). In recognizing this difference, I acknowledge that so many stories—both fictional and non-fictional—struggle to even be told at all in a public venue, and are carefully and quietly destroyed or dismissed without anyone’s knowledge. What I argue, however, is that in looking at the struggles faced by Findley and Mosionier regarding their novels, we can begin to see precisely how much stories of sexual trauma can threaten or disrupt political, social, and even narrative conventions.
Censorship and the Disruption of Historical Memory in *The Wars*

At the beginning of *The Wars*, the narrator explains to the reader that “[all] of this happened a long time ago. But not so long ago that everyone who played a part in it is dead. Some can still be met in dark old rooms with nurses in attendance. They look at you and rearrange their thoughts. They say: “I don’t remember.” The occupants of memory have to be protected from strangers. Ask what happened, they say: ‘I don’t know’” (3). As the novel will later reveal, these absences are not merely due to advancing age or carelessness of thought. Rather, they are conscious and deliberate effects of systemic, enforced forgetting—forgetting because remembering is a threat. Prompted to recall, memory closes tight ranks around what ought not to be said, only to be revealed when “someone will forget himself and say too much” (3). From the outset, *The Wars* warns the reader about the ways in which forgetting—both legislated and otherwise—poses a problem of access to information and trustworthiness. The advice is clear: “It’s best to go away and find your information somewhere else. In the end, the only facts you have are public” (3). Beginning “at the archives with photographs” (3), the archivist-narrator—who, through Findley’s use of the second-person narrative voice, is also *us*, the readers—begins with an unstable, damaged past: “as the past moves under your fingertips, part of it crumbles. Other parts, you know you’ll never find. This is what you have” (4). What we have—the only thing that the novel firmly maintains a grip on, even amidst the polyphonic noise of archival and historical instability—is that “many men have died like Robert Ross, obscured by violence” (3).

Despite the massive losses of life that reduced individuals’ lives to mere numbers in the tallies of war dead, not all men in World War One died like Robert Ross: as Findley’s narrator specifies, it is “many” and not “all.” Not all soldiers (or even civilian casualties) were doubly
obscured by both their sexual assaults and their deaths. Not all individuals who were raped and killed during wartime suffered atrocities at the hands of their own comrades or fellow citizens. Therefore, the purpose of Findley’s novel is to articulate the various—and often untold or less-recognized—ways by which Robert Ross (and others) are obscured by violence, not least of which is the relative disposability of young men’s lives in “the war to end all wars.” The brutal loss of life described by Findley is bleak, but not necessarily unfamiliar to readers: “When they made their way back through the trench there was no one there alive. They had all been gassed or had frozen to death. Those who lay in water were profiled in ice. Everything was green: their faces—and their fingers—and their buttons. And the snow” (146). The vivid descriptions of death in the trenches and on the front lines are contrasted with the rather cold logistics of disposability: “Troops were obliterated and the others brought forward. Companies were decimated to the size of sections. Robert [...] lost count of all the numbers that had come and gone. He would only know when he took his tally book to Battalion H.Q. at the end” (147). To any expert in Canadian history, or to any Canadian student who has received the obligatory coverage of World War I history throughout their schooling, these scenes are familiar, if disturbing. The images of Vimy Ridge are seared into national memory; valiant, united, brave.

Yet, as Findley reveals most glaringly through the rape scene, the horrors of war are not only committed on the battlefields, but also in the barracks themselves. The inclusion of the rape scene, and its subsequent censorship after publication, then, raise important questions not only about how the scene functions to critique and challenge images or displays of military valour and national history, but also about the lengths to which nations, military institutions, and even veterans themselves will go in order to disavow this form of violation. In my analysis of rape and censorship, however, I want to focus not only on the larger historical context of military sexual
assault and of national interests that inform the controversy about the censorship of the novel itself. My argument, in brief, is that it is neither the inclusion of the rape scene itself that has been seen as the problem, nor it is entirely the fact that such a scene exposes brotherly betrayal and calls into question our notions of masculinity, sexuality, and power. As Diana Brydon emphasizes, “it is not the story as such, but how it is told that matters” (65). Where and exactly how the rape occurs—the precise manner in which Findley’s novel narrates it—is what destroys the possibility of any redemptive recuperation of national security and military integrity: the devil, as they say, is in the details.

It is understandable, even now, that there is such outrage against discussions of sexual assault within the military, or committed by the military. On the one hand, sexual violence as a feature of warfare itself remains relatively relegated to footnotes in military histories, even when it comprises a significant part of actions committed against enemy civilians. On the other hand, military and paramilitary institutions are (for obvious reasons) highly invested in maintaining an image of cohesiveness, rigour, honour, duty, and impenetrability. An understanding of sexual assault perpetrated against civilians and as well as against fellow military officers calls into question not only which measures of war are perceived as rational or justifiable, but also raises the issue of how rape in war and military units can be viewed as merely a different version of a larger battle against sexual victimization that exists in civilian society, and during peacetime.

Susan Brownmiller’s Against our Will: Men, Women, and Rape (1975) was among the first comprehensive studies of sexual violence and included significant research on the role of sexual assault and rape in war. Brownmiller writes that “rape in warfare is not bound by definitions of which wars are ‘just’ or ‘unjust.’ Rape was a weapon of terror as the German Hun marched through Belgium in World War I. Rape was a weapon of revenge as the Russian Army marched...
to Berlin in World War II. Rape flourishes in warfare irrespective of nationality or geographic location” (32). Brownmiller traces a long history of rape and war, from the raids of the Byzantine empire to writings of international military law made by 17th-century Dutch jurists, to the events of Hundred Years’ War, to assault in numerous 20th-century-conflicts: as she demonstrates, this is not a new element of history, nor one that ought to surprise us. What I am most compelled by, however, are Brownmiller’s thoughts on the meaning of rape as an act of warfare and how individual acts of rape gain meaning within a larger national and political context:

After the fact, the rape may be viewed as part of the recognizable pattern of national terror and subjugation. I say ‘after the fact’ because the original impulse to rape does not need a sophisticated political motivation beyond a general disregard for the bodily integrity of women. But rape in warfare has a military effect as well as an impulse. And the effect is indubitably one of intimidation and demoralization for the victims’ side. (37)

This tension between an “original impulse” and post-rape narrativization is disturbing, insofar as individual acts of depravity, which rapists may commit even outside of their roles as soldiers, can merely be re-inscribed as part of the general tactics of assault. In her play *The Monument* (which I will discuss extensively in Chapter Three), Colleen Wagner examines, in great detail, the ways in which wartime sexual assault become part of what Giorgio Agamben might call a “state of exception,” as that which can be rationalized and excused as part of the necessary dehumanization required in order to win the war and defeat the enemy. “Rape,” writes Brownmiller, “is considered by the people of a defeated nation to be part of the enemy’s conscious effort to destroy them. [...] Rape as a conquering soldier destroys all remaining illusions of power and property for the men of the defeated side. The body of the raped woman becomes a ceremonial battlefield, a parade ground for the victor’s trooping of the colours” (38).
While soldiers’ raping of civilian women can be (and often is able to be) folded into the discourse of “defeat by any means necessary,” it is also frequently viewed, like forms of torture, as that which borders on the extreme or the excessive, as that which reveals some soldiers to be not merely doing their duty, but capitalizing on a situation in order to perpetrate crimes.

Brownmiller wrote in 1975 that “a casual reader of history quickly learns that rape remains unmentionable, even in war. Serious historians have rarely bothered to document specific acts of rape in warfare, for reasons of their own scale of values and taste, as well as for lack of hard-and-fast surviving proof” (40). More than 40 years later, the landscape has certainly changed. After the genocides in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Rwanda, and in the face of the ongoing conflict in the Democratic Republic of Congo, scholars as well as international legal and human rights communities have emphasized that rape is not only part of the collateral damage of war, but a war crime in and of itself. However, it is only within the last twenty years that international criminal tribunals have prosecuted sexual violence as both war crimes and crimes against humanity: the first person to be found guilty of rape as a crime of genocide was only in 1998 (during the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda) and the first person to be found guilty of rape as a crime against humanity was in 2001 (during the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (UN.org). While wartime rape may not have the same level of cachet as mass slaughters or Improvised Explosive Devices, it is beginning—albeit very slowly—to become a primary concern for both human rights organizations and media outlets: organizations such as the United Nations have launched campaigns such as Stop Rape Now; projects such as Women Under Siege (run by the Women’s Media Centre) offer both contemporary and historical accounts of sexualized violence in genocide, including tools such as live, crowd-sourced maps of rape in areas such as Syria. Yet, if it is difficult enough to raise awareness about sexual violence
perpetrated against civilians, uncovering sexual violence within military or paramilitary organizations themselves is even more difficult: while the rapes of civilians can be legitimized as “necessary” military tactics for the defeat of a people, the rapes of fellow soldiers raises fundamental questions about military cohesiveness, kinship, and ethics.

It is hardly unreasonable to envision, then, that the Canadian military, like so many others, is invested in maintaining the most favourable narratives about itself. The importance of a favourable image is crucial for two primary reasons: first, it assures that past losses of life were not in vain, but were integral to national (or, indeed, world) security and memory; second, it ensures that both enlisted members themselves, as well as the public, hold a continued confidence in an institution which both embodies and ostensibly fights to preserve national identity. However, The Wars is not the only—nor the most recent—victim of censorship and backlash on the basis of its critique of Canadian military history. Indeed, Findley’s novel, as well as the censorship surrounding it, shows a kind of prescience into the kinds of heated national debates about Canadian military history that would emerge years later, after the airing of a three-part World War II documentary entitled The Valour and the Horror.

Written by Brian and Terence McKenna, and co-produced by several Canadian broadcasting and film corporations, The Valour and the Horror premiered in January 1992 on both the CBC and on Société Radio-Canada. Its title alone indicated the tensions at play in its depiction of Canada’s involvement in events such as the fall of Hong Kong, the Allied air bombings over Germany, and the invasion of Normandy: filled with pride and courage, yet containing a deep underbelly of fear and unimaginable suffering. As Graham Carr notes, the series’ central claim “was that Canadian soldiers and aircrews had fought valiantly in the war, only to be victimized by inadequate training, as well as military and political leadership that was
devious and incompetent” (317). The series was not merely a criticism of the Canadian military and the Department of Defense, but also a scathing critique of military historians, who director Brian McKenna accused of “[lacking] the guts to explore the conduct of the war in a substantive way” (qtd in Carr 318). While the initial response to *The Valour and the Horror* was positive, the series and its producers (especially CBC, given its status as a publicly-funded broadcaster) soon faced a deluge of criticism from both historians and veterans alike. Teresa Iacobelli describes the backlash as follows:

Veterans believed that in many cases their roles, as well as the roles of their leaders, were maligned. They complained of being vilified in some instances, while at other times portrayed as naïve, incompetent, or simply as pawns used to enact the decisions of inept leaders. While veterans felt personally slighted by the documentaries, many historians questioned their veracity, complaining of quotes that were cut up and misrepresented, gross generalizations without evidence, and factual inaccuracies. (341-2)

The negative response eventually became so heated—and the charges against the series’ approach to history so damning—that a series of public proceedings was held by the Senate Subcommittee on Veterans’ Affairs. These proceedings, which heard testimony from veterans, historians, and members of the media alike, concluded with findings that “as a publicly funded series, *The Valour and the Horror* failed to provide the Canadian public with fair and accurate information” (344). Yet, as Brian McKenna articulated in his Senate testimony, the public hearings were “more than a public debate over six hours of television. They are about history and who gets to tell it. They are about truth and who gets to interpret it” (qtd in Carr 323). As McKenna himself pointed out in the opening moments of the third installment, “Desperate Battle: Normandy 1944,” portrayals of the “true” events of the war were already contentious as
the war was occurring. Intimating the kind of pre-production embargoes that Marc Cohen identifies as one of the most insidious forms of censorship, the episode begins by noting that journalists on the ground were sworn into the army so that their dispatches could be censored. More than this revelation and its ongoing intimations about media bias, however, “Desperate Battle” makes an observation that harkens back to Findley’s status as an artist describing the untold parts of battle: in describing the numerous visual artists who were present on or near the battlefields, the narrator argues that “in a sense, the artists were the only ones allowed to record the truth.”

Here, Brian and Terence McKenna are not referring to a monolithic notion of Truth. Rather, “truth” comes to stand in for alternate knowledges and experiences, particularly those that have otherwise been elided from public record, and those that are often filled in by artists, Timothy Findley included. Like The Wars, The Valour and the Horror was interested in uncovering or revealing some of the untold or unsavoury aspects of war, but, more importantly, was similarly invested in unraveling and complicating the very notions of what history is and how we understand it. Contra David Bercuson and S.F. Wise, who cautioned that the series risked replacing existing myths about Canada’s involvement in the war with new myths, including those of “betrayal by commanders who were either incompetent or downright evil” (10), The Valour and the Horror did not merely flip from blind patriotism to another side of a binary: after all, the series spoke of valour and horror, rather than valour or horror. In my view, it is precisely this move from a binary view of history or ethics to a more nuanced and complex one that so thoroughly troubled critics of the series. While the risks of portrayals at either end of the binary of good and evil are considerable, so are those that collapse this binary, or at the very least, attempt to significantly muddy its waters. I argue that this what is so potentially dangerous
about Findley’s novel, and what is highlighted over and over as the novel builds and culminates in the rape scene. *The Wars*’ argument about whether or not war is honourable or dishonourable cannot, like portrayals which merely flip the mythology of war from one perspective to the other, simply be dismissed as categorically untrue, because it does not paint Canadian soldiers or military leadership as “evil” or “misguided.” The novel, including the horrific scene of rape, paints even the most violent perpetrators as possessing honourable qualities in other areas of their lives. As I will argue, it is precisely this moral and ethical duplicity and murkiness that most troubled critics of *The Wars*.

At this juncture, after much historical context, I wish to focus on the scene of the crime itself: Robert Ross’s rape. In a 218-page novel, the actual description of rape comprises less than two pages of text, and occurs nearly at the end of the book. Yet, after numerous passages in which the ideas of war, soldiers, nationalism, and history are all interrogated (if not directly criticized) the rape scene collapses any possibility for a merely redemptive narrative. In less than two pages, the idealism of war and the honour of soldiers are complicated beyond recognition. I say complicated, rather than destroyed, because while Robert is clearly traumatized and devastated by the assault, the actual incident as it is written does not necessarily suggest that the soldiers who have perpetrated the crime are monstrous. Indeed, such a portrayal would contradict Findley’s entire premise that humanity balances precariously between good and evil, and that contexts such as war only intensify the ways in which humans can do seemingly inhuman things. Not more than 10 pages earlier, the novel offers a glimpse into how we might read the soldiers’ assault on Robert, and, indeed, the atrocities committed during the war more generally:

*Someone once said to Clive: do you think we will ever be forgiven for what we’ve done?*

*They meant their generation and the war and what the war had done to civilization. Clive*
said something I’ve never forgotten. He said: I doubt we’ll ever be forgiven. All I hope is—they’ll remember we were human beings. (180)

When the attack on Robert at Désolé begins, he too, fails to come up with a rationale for what is happening: “His mind went stumbling over a beach of words and picked them up like stones and threw them around inside his head but none of them fell in his mouth. Why? he kept thinking. Why?” (192). What follows is swift and brutal, but the description of the rape is carefully crafted. The assault begins with descriptions of body parts doing things, not people committing crimes, and the verbs used to describe the acts of assault shift uncomfortably between a kind gentleness or intimacy and increasing violence and aggression.

A hand reached underneath his arm from behind and caressed him just above the groin. Fingers dipped down through his pubic hair and seized his penis. Robert felt the length of a naked body press against his back and a mouth press against his shoulder. The fingers holding him started stroking him very slowly. [...] His legs were forced apart so far he thought they were going to be broken. Mouths began to suck at his privates. Hands and fingers probed and poked at every part of his body. (192, emphasis mine)

It is only as the gang-attack progresses to forced penetration that the actions start to be done by people, and not merely by disembodied body parts: “one man still underneath him and now with another on top. All he could feel was the shape of the man who entered him and the terrible strength of the force with which it was done” (192-3, emphasis mine). At the end of the assault, Robert loses consciousness, yet, before he does, he hears the voices of his attackers: “Don’t touch his money, that’s a dead give-away” (193). Both Robert himself and the reader are left with a haunting piece of information: “His assailants, who he’d thought were crazies, had been
his fellow soldiers. Maybe even his brother officers. He’d never know. He never saw their faces” (193).

Robert’s reference to his “brother” officers reveals yet a particularly troubling aspect of rape within military units, namely that it is a form of assault that takes place within a hierarchy and series of relationships that mirrors the structure of the family, as well as one which often dredges up intense homophobic beliefs about male sexuality and aggression in the military. In an interview about their Oscar-nominated documentary about military sexual assault, *The Invisible War* (2012), director Kirby Dick and producer Amy Ziering reflect on the dynamics of kinship, stating that:

> When you’re in the military, you feel like your unit, you’re indoctrinated to believe, psychologically and philosophically, that this is your band of brothers. These are people who have your back. So imagine how much worse an assault is by your fellow soldier. It’s actually hard for you to psychologically compute, and it does register as incest, and an extremely profound core betrayal. […] It’s absolutely shattering, and I think that it’s something that the public at large doesn’t really understand. It’s categorically different for men and women that are raped within the military. (“Beyond the Battlefield” n.p.)

While much discussion of military sexual assault has focused on assaults against female soldiers, statistically speaking, “as many or more men are sexually assaulted in the U.S. military each year as women” (n.p.) Despite the fact that such sexual predators are not focused on the gender of their victim, but rather, are interested in exploiting a dynamic of power and abuse, a long history of legislative and environmental factors has painted same-sex assaults in the military as a hazard
of homosexual desire. Noting that that anti-gay “don’t ask, don’t tell” legislation\(^3\) was only recently repealed in the U.S., Amy Ziering explains that “if any man came forward and reported a sexual assault, they themselves were accused of having a homosexual encounter, and asked were they sure they wanted to report. ... So imagine, you know, the incentive then to not come forward and disclose was extremely intense” (n.p.).

Similar military policies have existed within Canada, ones that intertwine with other federal legislation against homosexuality. While homosexuality was no longer considered a criminal offense in Canada as of 1970, as Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile elucidate, “military policies excluding queers from membership continued in the 1970s” (231). Tracing a long history of Canada’s surveillance of queer communities, as well as the ways in which principles of national security intersected with the regulation of sexuality, Kinsman and Gentile also describe histories of surveillance of “confirmed, suspected, or alleged” queer individuals working within the public service. Despite a similar history of oppression of queer individuals in the military, recent Canadian laws stand as an inverse to the American context. In 1991, two years prior to Clinton’s “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the Supreme Court of Canada ended a longstanding policy of barring gay and lesbian soldiers from joining the armed forces. While, as Clyde H. Farnsworth reported in the *New York Times* immediately following the Supreme Court decision, Canadian laws did not expel service members if they were later “discovered” to be queer, the existing rules nevertheless created a pervasive environment of discrimination:

\(^3\) In 1993, the Clinton administration announced the military’s official policy on gay service members. Known as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell,” the legislation “allowed closeted members of the military to serve, while prohibiting those in the military who were openly gay to serve. Prior to "don't ask, don't tell," there had been an outright ban on gays in the military” (Klapper, n.p.). Formally repealed by President Barack Obama in 2010, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” officially ended in September 2011.
Under existing Canadian military rules, homosexuals are not "knowingly" enrolled as serving members of the armed forces. In those cases where after joining the armed services people have been identified or have identified themselves as homosexuals, they cannot under these rules be forced out, though in practice they are made pariahs by being declared ineligible for training courses, promotion or re-enlistment. (n.p.)

As an openly gay man, Timothy Findley was distinctly aware of these histories which linked sexuality not only to a matter of personal taste or deviance, but as a criminalization of identity and embodiment which were seen to threaten both physical integrity as well as the moral fabric of the nation. Even when the rape scene was excised from the film adaptation, investors at the National Film Board of Canada are said to have commented: “What is this? A fag film?” (qtd in Cohen 30). As Cohen observes, while this comment occurred after the rape scene had been removed, “it nevertheless shows the ideological predisposition behind the producers’ judgment that caused Findley to remove the rape scene” (30). The rape scene, then, is not only a powerful criticism of militarized brutality and betrayal, but also of the larger context of violent homophobia in which queer identity and desire could be seen as a greater threat to national security (or to the morals and sensibilities of readers) than violent acts of combat, patriarchal aggression, and sexual predation.

There are two other features of the scene that seem to present just cause for concern by censors whose judgments are influenced by longstanding narratives of national pride in the military. The first is that the violent rape, which takes place as an ambush in complete darkness, echoes military tactics. Using strategies gained or reinforced through the military, ones which are expressly intended for enemy attacks, suggests a betrayal not only of the victim but of the institution which in good faith has given its members potentially lethal and damaging skill-sets.
The second, which is perhaps much more damning, is that the assault can in no way be rationalized as the action of a lone, deranged predator—an outlier in an otherwise cohesive and honourable unit. The coverage of the rapes and murders committed by former Canadian Colonel Russell Williams, for instance, clearly demonstrates this individualization of violent misogyny. Rather, like the sexual assaults and instances of harassment that more than 282 women in the RCMP have alleged occurred at the hands of their fellow members and supervisors, misogyny and sexual violence are demonstrated not only to be committed by numerous perpetrators, but are thus potentially part and parcel of the patriarchal violence that is built into the system. Robert Ross’s assault demonstrates this insidious violence, and therein lies a great deal of its danger. Of course, as Findley himself notes in an exchange with Margaret Laurence, the rape scene also has a broader and more symbolic meaning of violation: the effects of war themselves. Findley says: “[The scene] has to be there because it is my belief that Robert Ross and his generation of young men were raped, in effect, by the people who made that war. Basically, their fathers did it to them” (Inside Memory 151). I wish to pause for a moment to discuss the rape scene’s status as both a literal act of violence and a metaphor for the greater context of intergenerational violence, particularly given the ways in which metaphorical rapes can often risk dismissing or flattening actual incident of sexual violence. As evident in Findley’s statement about the rape scene (as well as his discussion of critics’ censorship of his novel), he certainly conceived of physical violation as having corollaries with other acts of violation and betrayal. Indeed, Tom Hastings has criticized this blurring of metaphorical and literal lines, most notably in his appraisal of masculinity and fatherly betrayal in the novel. Referring to Findley’s statement that “their fathers did it to them,” Hastings contends that Findley is speaking more generally about generational trauma, contending that “the fathers represent anyone or anything within the realm of the
military that causes suffering for the sons. [...] ‘Father’ refers to a way of being during a particular historical moment rather than to an identifiable entity or being” (99). Interestingly, Hastings suggests that Findley “avoids historical and terminological particularities and instead revels artistically in the suffering of the sons” (99). While it is perhaps true that Findley’s novel is more of a condemnation of war and generational legacies more generally, it is the rape scene that offers the kind of historical specificity that Hastings desires. Indeed, in looking at rest of the exchange with Margaret Laurence, Findley reports that Laurence wondered about whether or not the rape scene needed to be included if the rest of the novel condemned the impact of war on subsequent generations: “Margaret said: ‘But surely that’s implicit in the book already. You don’t have to say so’ (Inside Memory 151). While rape certainly functions as a metaphor for the destruction of kinship and the betrayal of a younger generation, it is also a specific act of dehumanization that soldiers suffered during wartime, one that Findley includes precisely so as to prevent the broad strokes of aestheticizing war without any sense of the distinct individual and physical consequences.

The censorship history of The Wars is certainly much more complex than what I have covered in this brief analysis. However, the censorship of the novel remains a powerful example of how texts that include representations of sexual violence can pose significant threats to national ideologies and public sensibilities, even if these same texts are also the objects of great national literary acclaim (as was The Wars in its winning of the 1977 Governor-General’s Literary Award for Fiction). It is crucial to recognize that the post-publication punishment received by Findley’s work, as Marc Cohen points out, has been potentially significant:

the infliction of some penalty in retribution for someone’s act is usually only one goal of punishment; the other is to prevent that person from committing the act again and to send
a warning to others who would commit such an act again and send a warning to others who would commit such an act. Deterrence makes post-publication suppression as effective a form of censorship as prior restraint. (12)

It is difficult to know precisely what significance this instance of censorship had on other novelists; certainly, for Findley himself, it resulted in a fraught process of impassioned defenses of his work, as well self-censorship and capitulation to the pressures of the makers of the novel’s film adaptation.

Trigger Happy: *In Search of April Raintree and What Happens When Literature Hurts*

The censorship of *The Wars* offers a fairly serious example of the dangers of exposing forms of violence that are perceived to violate both national mythologies and imagined communities. The censorship of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree*, however, raises quite different questions, as the particular type of censorship it has faced does not necessarily ask whether or not a story *can* be told, but rather interrogates the risks and rewards of *how* it is told. Moreover, Mosionier’s own response to the requests for revisions greatly differ from Findley’s response to the censorship of his text. Yet, as exemplified by numerous critiques of the text’s revisions, as well as the current debate about literature’s injurious potential, the case of *In Search of April Raintree* is one that, like Findley’s novel, also greatly complicates the roles and relationships between various players in the literary marketplace: authors, readers, critics, and censors.

In his essay included in the critical edition of Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s *In Search of April Raintree*, Peter Cumming clearly articulates what he thinks of the effects of the novel’s revision: “Beatrice Culleton’s *In Search of April Raintree* (1983) is a moving, well-crafted,
politically powerful novel. Beatrice Culleton’s *April Raintree* (1984), a revised version requested by the Native Education Branch of the Manitoba Department of Education, is not” (308). While Cumming acknowledges that the revised version of the novel was well intentioned on the part of Mosionier herself, as well as educators, editors, and publishers, he ultimately contends that *April Raintree* is “a travesty, a depoliticized echo of *Search*. Created to protect young readers from obscenities, *April Raintree*’s bowdlerization introduces a new obscenity: dishonesty” (308).

At the heart of the controversy surrounding the novel are the circumstances of revising a text for a younger (and thus presumably more sensitive) audience, which is part of a much larger conversation about whether or not certain individuals need to be protected from the potential harms of violent language and depictions of assault. Certainly, as Cumming acknowledges, “not everyone would agree that *April* is a mistake. [Misionier] apparently welcomed the chance to rewrite *Search* for a younger audience” (318). Yet, as Cumming argues in his reference to the work of well-known children’s literature scholar Perry Nodelman, “critics seem to assume that the changes in *April* are necessary if young readers are to read the novel, without problematizing the assumptions about children and young adults which those changes expose” (320). As a means of describing this process of revision, Cumming describes Mosionier’s actions as “self-censorship,” a loaded term which problematically infers that Mosionier’s revisions were not willingly and freely done. Critics such as Cohen, however, and, most importantly, Mosionier herself, articulate a much more nuanced understanding of censorship, revision, and institutional constraints, one which challenges the notion that silencing or softening are always violent tools of censorship.

While Mosionier’s novel is now more than thirty years old, and Cumming’s criticism more than fifteen, the debate about violence in literature—and, in particular, its capacity to
injure, shock, or re-traumatize—continues to challenge the assumptions made on the part of censors, educators, and critics who argue that children and other sensitive parties must be protected, and how this protection ought to be enacted. So too, does it pose a number of crucial questions: why, for instance, if Mosionier welcomed the chance to revise her text, does Cumming accuse her of “dishonesty” and “bowdlerization”? What does it mean for critics such as Cumming to violently describe a process that Mosionier experienced as relatively gentle, and does this not strangely mirror the kind of violence that Cumming himself despises? How exactly is the rape scene presented, and what are the potential impacts of its original description and its subsequent revision?

The controversy over Mosionier’s novel engages a recent upsurge in work by feminist and anti-racist activists and scholars who note that protecting individuals from further harm—or, at the very least, attempting to give them some measure of warning about what it is that they are about to read—is an integral part of empathetic community building, social justice, and pedagogy. In the spring and summer of 2014, a major international conversation was sparked over the use of so-called “trigger warnings” on syllabi in post-secondary classrooms. From The Chronicle of Higher Education to The Guardian to Inside Higher Education and beyond, educators, cultural critics, and anti-violence activists weighed in (often with great disagreement) about the benefits and harms of including content warnings on classroom materials. This most recent discussion emerged from incidents occurring in February 2014, when student leaders at the University of California Santa Barbara passed a resolution to attempt to mandate warnings for triggering content in academic settings.

Not surprisingly, the origin of the resolution, much like the origin of the use of trigger warnings themselves, situates itself alongside the prevalence of sexually violent material in
media and its effect on the numbers of survivors of sexual violence who attend universities and colleges, and thus may be exposed to such content. Noting that triggers are a symptom of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and that PTSD is acknowledged as a disability by UCSB, the resolution states that triggers can not only cause “severe emotional, mental, and even physical distress” but also “affect a student’s ability to perform academically” (n.p.). The student leaders at UCSB were prescient in their statement about potential arguments that could be leveled against the push for mandatory trigger warnings, writing that “including trigger warnings is not a form of criticism or censorship of content. In addition, it does not restrict academic freedom but simply requests the respect and acknowledgement of the affect [sic] on triggering content on students with PTSD, both diagnosed and undiagnosed” (n.p.).

Educators from various institutions and fields of study took serious issue with the notion that trigger warnings ought to be mandated. Seven humanities professors from across North America penned a piece entitled “Trigger Warnings Are Flawed” for Inside Higher Education, in which they wrote that they felt that the movement to mandate trigger warnings was having “a chilling effect on [their] teaching and pedagogy,” noting that they were “currently watching colleagues receive phone calls from deans and other administrators investigating student complaints that they have included ‘triggering’ material in their courses, with or without warnings” (n.p.). The professors made a number of very salient points, namely that what is triggering for students is difficult to predict in advance, and that trigger warnings are not an adequate substitute for supporting students who struggle. More importantly, however, they argued that “there is no mechanism, in the discourse of ‘triggering,’ for distinguishing material that is oppositional or critical in its representation of traumatizing experience from that which is sensationalistic or gratuitous” (n.p.), and put forth the key argument that faculty of colour, queer
faculty, and those teaching in fields such as critical race theory and gender/sexuality studies “will likely be disproportionate targets of student complaints about triggering, as the material these faculty members teach is by its nature unsettling and often feels immediate” (n.p.). For those of us who teach difficult material, these arguments likely resonate deeply. In teaching Canadian and Indigenous literatures, I have seen students struggle in various ways to reconcile the troubling national histories that various novels, plays, and poems seek to expose. The pushback against texts that challenge stereotypes and prejudices emerges in various forms, from passive disengagement to more aggressive confrontations. So, too, do I fear the unpredictability of the texts that I teach: will a particular scene of violence be read as a useful critique of colonial or patriarchal systems, or be viewed as but one more instance of violence in a media landscape already saturated by depictions of harm? How do I engage my students while also negotiating the possibility that some may feel emotionally and psychologically distressed by the material we read?

Despite the flurry of articles and blog posts written in the months following the UCSB students’ resolution, perhaps no response to the debate on trigger warnings has garnered more attention than a piece written by Jack Halberstam, with its provocative title “You Are Triggering Me! The Neo-Liberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma.” Halberstam is clear to note that “debates among people who share utopian goals, in fact, are nothing new” (n.p.). Indeed, I would agree with Halberstam that the majority of the participants in the trigger-warning debate are similarly invested in figuring out how reasonably address such topics in their classrooms. After all, teaching material which addresses violence at the intersections of class, race, gender, and sexuality is a difficult business, and we must attempt to do so without either compromising the benefits of working through challenging material with our students or harming students for
whom the reading of violent material is not merely reading, but a repetition and re-experiencing of a trauma itself. Yet, Halberstam also alludes to what he has identified as a sort of hypersensitivity, the kind that is frequently invoked against activists or so-called “social justice warriors” by those who claim that the politically correct approach of catering to each individual’s needs and sensitivities is either unsustainable at best or ludicrous at worst. In the sense that the term “trauma” (much like the term “rape”) has been diluted and appropriated in order to either refer to everyday situations or to resist engagement with difficult subject matter on the basis of offence (e.g. the claim of “reverse racism”), Halberstam makes a compelling argument. However, Halberstam observes that “it is becoming difficult to speak, to perform, to offer up work nowadays without someone, somewhere claiming to feel hurt, or re-traumatized by a cultural event, a painting, a play, a speech, a casual use of slang, a characterization, a caricature and so on whether or not the “damaging” speech/characterization occurs within a complex aesthetic work” (n.p.). What Halberstam elides in his analysis is the fact that it is not necessarily that there is an increased “intolerance” or mere sensitivity to offensive language or ideas, but that otherwise-normalized forms of representational violence are rightfully being called out for the harms that they enact.

What I suspect is at play in the trigger warning debate, including Halberstam’s contribution to it, is a fundamental anxiety about the nature of trauma and the ways in which it seems to slip through the cracks of easy identification. While trigger warnings were once reserved for events or representations that one might definitively agree might be re-traumatizing (i.e. a scene of rape), an increased understanding of trauma and harm has expanded the conversation to include what others might perceive as innocuous scenes in a novel or film. It is perhaps this all-encompassing potential for trauma to appropriate and affect any type of
representation or experience (i.e. the smell of a particular cologne worn by a rapist, or the colour of clothing worn during a car accident) that means that any effort to create a definitive list of triggering elements is ultimately impossible. Moreover, the delayed impact of trauma also means that trauma can emerge unexpectedly, when a reader may least expect it.

I understand and sympathize with the difficult position in which artists, writers, filmmakers, activists, and educators are placed. After all, exposing the graphic details of violence—details that in turn can aid to expose the mechanisms by which perpetrators commit or legitimize their crimes—is not only a useful exercise, but also a powerful diagnostic tool. Yet, representations which do explore these structures and experiences of violence in a nuanced or critical fashion can be virtually indistinguishable from those that circulate as objects of fetishization. Or, worse, those attempts at critical representation become co-opted and appropriated, and subsequently circulated as objects of fetishization. More than that, the same piece of art can be perceived as either exploitative or critically sound by various parties, especially survivors themselves; hence the fierce debate about trigger warnings. There are, then, these numerous and interwoven strands of representation at play in the novel. There is gendered violence writ large, racial violence writ large, and then the specific intersectional history of gendered and sexualized violence perpetrated against Indigenous women and others in Canada.

Before examining the ways in which these issues are represented specifically in *In Search of April Raintree* and its adaptation, and before offering thoughts on how and why the censorship of the novel quite productively negotiates the “incommensurable double-binds” of representation, I wish to work through some of the nuances of representing sexual violence in art.

Fictional representations of rape are also shaped by the discursive expectations of how experiences of rape are meant to be performed or narrativized. Citing the work of Barbara
Hanawalt, who speaks of a “ritualized recitation” of rape, Kim Solga writes that aesthetic representations of sexual violence have “telling demands according to precedent and expectation” (54). At times, these “ritualized recitations” in fiction can adhere to other formal or generic norms or expectations: depictions of rape can easily fall into either metaphorical or vague processes of description, of the kind that often frames sexual violence as a mere seduction. However, part of this ritualized recitation—for legal testimony as for theatre and fiction—are both the burden and the power to “[make] rape knowable, understandable, and, most importantly [...] believable to those who were not—could not have been—there to bear witness” (56). I wish to pause for a moment here to consider the implications of testimony in the absence of witnessing, as it is gravely important to works which deal with sexualized violence against Indigenous women in Canada, including Mosionier’s novel. Like other works that deal with the acts of violence perpetrated against Indigenous women, In Search of April Raintree is committed to exposing the explicitly targeted brutality of the types of violence that Indigenous women face. This is a violence, on the one hand, which is rarely witnessed due to the fact that sexual violence more generally has often been normalized, and sexual violence against Indigenous women more so, owing to the hypersexualization of raced bodies and the equation of Indigenous women’s bodies with the terra nullius of Canada itself: un-claimed, lacking subjectivity, and therefore rapeable.

On the other hand, these acts of violence are not witnessed—and can no longer be—because their victims have either gone missing or been murdered: others, if they can, must witness for them. As Indigenous communities in Canada continue to call for a national inquiry into the now more than one thousand murdered and missing women, making violence “knowable, understandable, and believable” is of more importance now than ever. In the face of
the recent deaths of Loretta Saunders and Tina Fontaine, and the aforementioned comments by Prime Minister Harper about the “criminal,” not “sociological” (and therefore not systemic) nature of these deaths and disappearances, we see how even non-fictional incidents of violence—real lives, real deaths, real losses—struggle to be taken seriously, or wrestled away from stereotypical representations which result in Indigenous women’s lives being portrayed as merely or inevitably tragic. Should we assume, though, that the novel was designed, or at least used in order to educate non-Indigenous readers on the violence faced by Indigenous women? If so, then the graphic nature of the novel is integral to its aim; censorship, thus, can be seen as an attempt to curb or soften this violence, to transform it from sociological into merely criminal, from a collectively-suffered form of violence into an individual one, from real-life into mere fiction.

After all, April’s rape in the original text is brutal, humiliating, and difficult to read. After countless scenes of racialized violence and humiliation at the hands of teachers, classmates, and foster parents, the novel culminates in a graphic gang rape. Like Findley, Mosionier is careful not to portray the rapists exclusively as inherently monstrous or evil men; rather, her introduction of their violence against April explicitly points out their active decision to enact harm, as well as their knowledge that they have different options. While April describes them as “crazy men with crazy grins,” one of them soon vocalizes his knowledge that perhaps they should not carry out such violence: “The driver said, ‘Hey, we’re only supposed to give her a scare. You’re talking rape, man’” (128). The leader of the gang attack, however, chastises the driver, noting that he is “in this as much as us” (128). April picks up on this faint hope for mercy, although she is aware that mercy does not involve being able to leave the situation unscathed:
I figured that this had started as a lark to scare women, and now the leader and his accomplice wanted to rape me. Maybe I could count on the driver to help somehow. And maybe they weren’t out to do any killing. I just didn’t know. […] I knew I wouldn’t be able to stop them from abusing me physically, so I’d try to be like a rag doll. I’d close my emotions and mind off. Maybe it wouldn’t affect me so much. (128)

April is then beaten, vaginally raped, anally raped, and orally raped, and each act of violation is described with brutal detail: “he shoved his penis into me so violently that when I felt the pain of his thrust tear into my body, my eyes opened wide with terror […] He could see the terror of in my eyes. I think that was what he enjoyed the most” (130). After another man rapes her, her first rapist attacks her again, and finishes by urinating in her mouth. At last, when the threat of April’s imminent vomiting frustrates the attackers’ desires to keep their car clean, she is dragged out of the car and thrown to the side of the road. “Fucking squaw!” one of them yells, as they drive off.

Higgins and Silver argue that a major project of rereading and rewriting rape “requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation” (4). Heather Zwicker echoes Cumming, Higgins, and Silver’s arguments about the impact of such graphic descriptions in her observations about her own response to the text, as well that those of her students. Zwicker builds on Toni Morrison’s observation about the distinction between stories which are “touching” and those that are “moving.” “‘Touching’ novels make their readers feel strong emotions, but only fleetingly. Stories that are ‘moving,’ on the other hand, result in some sort of change: certainly a change of consciousness in the individual reader, but often larger social reform” (323). Zwicker notes that those terms “chart out a useful spectrum” (323) for evaluating Mosionier’s novel, a novel that she writes “undoes me every time I read it” (323). Clearly, In Search of April Raintree is a text that “moves,” rather than
merely “touches,” as is evidenced by the critical essays included in Cheryl Suzack’s critical edition and those written beyond. Yet, as critics such as Helen Hoy continue to suggest, “a reading of the novel as spontaneous, cathartic truth-telling, the laying bare of shocking but revealing realities, is complicated […] by an expurgated/adapted edition” (282). Yet, Hoy points out (unlike Cumming), that this adapted version is not just “a bowdlerized, diminished version of the original” (282). Indeed, what Hoy suggests, is that Mosionier’s cooperation the Native Education Branch of Manitoba Education is “more than a coerced concession to necessity” (282). Rather, its existence alongside the original is a “textual twinning [that] marks a recognition of the plurality and particularities of places of discursive practice” (282).

It would be easy to suggest, as I think Cumming has implied, that the revised text is symptomatic of Canadian settler-colonialism’s discomfort with (or rejection of) narratives of Indigenous suffering, and that it therefore falls under the same umbrella as sanitized Canadian history itself. As Cohen notes, “Native and Black writers censor themselves. Sometimes this self-censorship is performed in deference to the demands of other members of the minority group itself. More often, though, it is the intentional or unconsciously internalized adoption of mainstream values that leads marginalized writers to alter the form or content of, or even fully suppress, the expression of their views” (147). I take Cohen’s point about the internalization of colonial values. Yet, when I think about Mosionier’s target audience, which undoubtedly included a large number of Indigenous youth, I also think about the questions of ethics and responsibility that scholars and students have raised. On the one hand, seeing oneself (and even one’s struggles) reflected in art can be positive; on the other hand, it can also inflict harm, particularly when individuals and communities continue to experience particular types of violence. As Cohen mentions, debates about portrayals of violence and their effects also take
place within the communities being represented. For example, in a May 2014 discussion at The New School, bell hooks discussed her reaction to the film *12 Years a Slave*, for which Lupita Nyong’o received an Academy Award for her performance as the slave Patsy. While numerous black feminist scholars, including Melissa Harris-Perry, have argued for the merits of the film, hooks firmly stated that “as a black woman, when I see images like myself, abused, beaten, raped, tortured… I don’t feel entertained… if I never see another naked, enslaved, raped black woman onscreen as long as I live, I’ll be happy” (n.p). hooks’ ardent reaction to the depictions of racialized and gendered violence is powerful, in that it also suggests that the presence of violence in art may provoke a kind of protective self-censorship. Faced with representations of violence that all-too-closely echo their lived experiences, readers may never pick up a book, and viewers may never watch a film, even if these works of art have other aesthetic merits or political impacts. In that sense, when Cohen speaks of a “deference” to the demands of a minority group, he is speaking about these needs; but I am not entirely certain that deference ought to be construed negatively. Rather, I view it as an ongoing conversation about the various needs of community members vis-à-vis their experiences and their circumstances.

We must, of course, turn to Mosionier’s statements themselves. As with the discussion of *The Wars*, it is important to hear directly from the author, particularly when they have participated in the processes of revision. As I alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, if we are to consider the correlations between sexual violation and censorship, then is important for victims as well as authors to define the terms of their experiences themselves. In her essay “The Special Time,” Mosionier talks about both the inspiration for the novel as well as her process of writing it. In response to questions about the issue of racism in the text, she writes that “readers have asked me how to get rid of racism, and I thought that we can’t get rid of it, we can only
prepare the receiving end for it, so that the hurt is not so deep” (249). I hear the echoes of ethical responsibility here, a responsibility that in the context of revising the novel for a younger audience, highlights the importance of preparing racialized and gendered individuals as realistically but as gently as possible for what are likely inevitable harms. Yet, Mosionier does not suggest that the answer is to eliminate all references to harm. Citing the work of Jane Elliot, a teacher whose “Blue-eyed/Brown-eyed” exercise is seen as a significant (if distressing) way of teaching about the effects of racism and segregation, Mosionier says that “many medicines […] can be hard to swallow, but [despite their difficulty, are] powerful and effective” (250). Both Mosionier’s original and her revised text are both powerful medicines, the latter of which is not a mere dilution of the former; rather, both are appropriately measured doses for different types of impacts upon a variety of readers.

Conclusion

In tracing—however broadly and briefly—the history of censorship and sexual violence in two Canadian texts, I have opened what feels like a Pandora’s box of ethical dilemmas: the ways in which depictions of sexual violence threaten national decorum and military history; the participation of authors in the revisions of their texts; the complex challenge of balancing a necessary realism with the possible impacts of harm and of re-enacting violence. The participation of both Findley and Mosionier in the censorship of their texts is particularly important to consider, as it complicates the notions that silences are merely imposed on texts without consent or consultation. Findley’s fierce insistence on maintaining the scene of rape in the film adaptation, contrasted with Mosionier’s gentle concern for her youth audience in her revision, complicates a monolithic view of censorship, how it is defined, and how it functions.
What these cases do offer, however, is a way to acknowledge that no matter the imposition of silence or the choice to be silent, something is always lost, complicated, or fraught. Without diminishing the serious political implications of the (ongoing) suppression of narratives of sexual assault, formal acts of censorship are merely but one avenue of this type of loss, as *The Wars* and *In Search of April Raintree* make clear. The duplicity of texts and their subsequent instances of censorship are that they demonstrate, as Helen Hoy articulates regarding Mosionier’s works, that “neither [version] can stand as the definitive text of the narrative, each offering details and exhibiting merits which the other lacks” (284). In the context of formal or legal acts of censorship, this can appear terribly problematic; as a feature of representation (and of traumatic representation in particular) it is the unavoidable dilemma or sacrifice that is made when stories are told. Contemporary Canadian authors no doubt recognize the ongoing burden of silencing in their own lives and communities, both as a structural feature of oppression as well as a symptom of trauma. Yet, as I argue in the following chapters, their deployment of silence honours these epistemological dilemmas and these systemic re-enactments of violence while also strategizing to create new ways of grappling with the complex challenge of representing sexual assault.
Chapter 2: The Right to Remain Silent: Reframing Reluctant Speech in
Maggie de Vries’ Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss

Mirroring and Mapping: Reading Rape and the Expectations of Genre

“By chance or by choice,” writes Giancarlo Maiorino, “we may not read an entire book, but we do read its title” (2). Suggesting that titles function as “literary nutshells,” Maiorino argues that because they offer an “introductory overview of etymological roots, semantic complexity, and literary echoes, [titles] ought to loom as large in the reader’s mind as they do on the book’s spine” (2). Following Maiorino’s line of reasoning, I pause to glance at the large pile of memoirs currently stacked on my office desk. Now somewhat of a curated collection, the memoirs of sexual assault usually occupy a significant portion of my shelf space. What do their titles reveal? Alice Sebold’s Lucky (2002) is not particularly evocative of rape, of course, but certainly of survival. Patricia Weaver Francisco’s Telling: A Memoir of Rape and Recovery (1999) locates itself clearly within the genre of memoir, and specifically within the genre of memoirs about rape; it too, shares the promise of survival and of recovery. Liz Seccuro’s Crash Into Me: A Survivor’s Search for Justice (2011) does not immediately reveal which crime has been survived, but there is no doubt about the act of survival itself, nor about the possibility that survival and justice can go hand-in-hand. There’s Nancy Venable Raine’s After Silence: Rape & My Journey Back (1998), Susan J. Brison’s Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self (2003), Jane Doe’s The Story of Jane Doe: A Book About Rape (2004), Jessica Stern’s Denial: A Memoir of Terror (2010), Laura Gray-Rosendale’s College Girl: A Memoir (2013), Elizabeth Smart’s My Story (2013), and Samantha Geimer’s The Girl: A Life in the Shadow of Roman
Polanski (2013). Slowly, I glance at the books at the bottom of the pile. Cathy Winkler’s One Night: Realities of Rape (2002) catches my eye, a stark reminder that the myths and fictions surrounding sexual assault are so pervasive that one must counter them by detailing the realities of the crime. As I look at Karyn L. Freedman’s recently-published memoir, One Hour in Paris: A True Story of Rape and Recovery (2014), I grit my teeth ever so slightly, irked that a memoir of sexual assault, even one published so recently as 2014, must still persuade the reader that it is a “true” story, lest it is to be confused with the stories of those whose assaults are presumed to be invented, fantastical, or malingering. Yet, the memoirs of Winkler and Freedman, too, fit rather neatly into the index of titles that I have come to expect. This is not unusual, for as Maiorino writes, “between the indexical and the significant, we can find an array of titles that are more or less successful in raising textual expectations” (2). From direct references to rape and violence to the more poetic or allusive turns of phrase, these memoirs, by their titles alone, already recognize and participate in a series of generic conventions surrounding how sexual violence is to be narrated and understood.

When I look, then, at the title of another book—Maggie de Vries’ Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss (2008)—something vastly different emerges, even though the title locates itself, however tentatively, within the existing genre of memoir. De Vries’ title does not participate in the same triumphant sense of recovery, nor in the bold pursuit of justice: ultimately, it is memoir of loss, made much more poignant by the fact that its subject—Maggie’s sister Sarah—is located within the title, rather than listed as the author. Using this small but powerful gesture of difference as a starting point for this chapter, I investigate how de Vries’s memoir works both within and against the genre of life-writing about sexual violence, and, in doing so, looks at how it works both within and against existing notions of citizenship and vulnerability. Building on
Julie Rak’s argument that because memoir “is about the movement from private to public [...and that] it often contains ideas about citizenship” (212), I argue that de Vries’ memoir challenges not only how citizens are expected to publicly express or testify to the violence they have suffered, but that it goes a step further by asking us to consider precisely whose stories of violence are permitted within the public sphere, and whose lives, as Judith Butler might ask, are considered “grievable.” To do so, I will first trace a history of sexual assault memoirs, describing the particular constraints of form that have traditionally governed their production and reception.

I examine textual elements that seem to either replicate or resist mainstream narrative expectations or identities for survivors. For instance, as a means of illustrating how the constraints of legal and psychological discourses still hold sway in survivors’ autobiographical accounts, I analyze the use of graphic descriptions of sexual assaults and linearity of narrative in relation to the presumed expectations and outcomes of legal testimony. Specifically, I argue that by mirroring the discourse expected of survivors within a courtroom, these memoirs also explicitly and implicitly reinforce various norms for survivor identities themselves. In doing so, I also illustrate Rak’s claim that memoirs of sexual assault are “subject to—and profit from—

4 In Precarious Life, Butler theorizes violence as that which reveals our interdependence, and that it is not only loss, but how we are affected by (or grieve) that loss which both “produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human” (xiv-v). While Butler’s focus is on death and mourning (which will certainly be applicable in the case of de Vries’ memoir), memoirs of sexual assault also call into question how particular types of injuries and particular types of victims merit both individual as well as collective attention. While Giorgio Agamben explores similar concepts of violence and citizenship through his notions of bare life and states of exception, Butler usefully explores the nuances of violence’s affective and tactile dimensions, which is important insofar as memoirs of sexual violence so often focus and rely on evoking the affective and the physical.

5 While the genre of memoirs about sexual violence also clearly includes memoirs of incest (such as Elly Danica’s Don’t: A Woman’s Word [1988]), I have chosen not to focus on these works. I consider these memoirs quite distinct from others in terms of the types of violence they describe, and the particular notions of vulnerability and social relation that they explore.
generic expectations” (7). After all, as Rak states, memoir “remains a way to construct, package, and market identity so that others will want to buy it” (7).

Despite the popularity of these texts and the ways in which they speak out against violence and inequity, women’s memoirs of sexual violence are still implicated in systems and structures that may diminish their ability to be subversive. The exploitation of graphic details, for instance, or the pathologizing of such stories means that they often risk being “subsum[ed] in such a way as to disempower [them] and diminish [their] disruptive potential” (Alcoff and Gray 270). Alcoff and Gray’s Foucauldian analysis of the precariousness of survivor speech highlights the need for “new ways to analyze the personal and the political” (283) as well as the need for an analysis of “the conditions of speaking” (284). However, they do not articulate a particular means by which such disruptive work can take place, since their article is primarily focused on a theoretical analysis rather than on close readings. In this chapter, I build on their theory by suggesting that if certain narrative techniques or narrative aims (such as the teleology of freedom or justice) risk keeping survivors within prescribed roles, genres, or power dynamics, then others might function productively not only as a means of disrupting, unbinding, and deconstructing conventional narratives about sexual violence, but also challenging dominant beliefs about what constitutes the “truth” or a “representation” of a particular experience.

In fleshing out my analysis through Rak’s notion of memoir as citizenship technology, I also examine how memoirs function both within and as discourses of kinship. I interrogate the ways in which such narratives are often circulated in order to facilitate universalized discussions of violence, ones that often fail to recognize the various intersections of oppression which inform marginalized women’s experiences of sexual trauma. In terms of how it negotiates these complex politics of relation, Missing Sarah is a unique text with which to explore the successes and
failures of kinship. While Maggie and Sarah are sisters, the memoir nevertheless articulates the various points of difference between them, and the work required to communicate and to empathize within these spaces of difference: one sister who is adopted, one who is not; one of multiracial origin, one who is white; one who suffered from addiction, one who did not; one who engaged in survival sex work, the other who made a living through higher education and writing; one dead, the other alive. While Sarah’s words (through her journal entries) are prominently featured in the memoir, they exist within the larger context of the platform occupied by her sister, who maintains a social (and thus narrative) privilege that Sarah would not have otherwise had access to. Maggie is not unaware of these positions of privilege and of the ways in which her sister’s story becomes heavily mediated through her own words; indeed, Maggie’s own struggles to balance kinship with the politics of representation becomes a useful case study with which to understand the dynamics between Sarah’s story and readers-at-large.

I also turn to Missing Sarah as text that, in more ways than one, attempts to defy or re-imagine these conventions or politics of genre. I read the memoir through Leigh Gilmore’s discussion of limit-cases of autobiography, which she defines as “texts that draw on a range of discourses and representational practices to tell complex stories of injury” (Limits 43). Gilmore’s definition of limit-cases usefully describes texts that operate on the margins, whether by virtue of the types of lives they articulate or the textual strategies they employ. While Gilmore does not attempt to narrowly-define limit-cases and thus constrain possibilities for their resistance to generic conventions, she nevertheless provides a series of qualities and features that these types of texts possess:

[these] stories are not the familiar ones; the trauma is not necessarily documented or documentable from the text at hand, the writing is not pressing for a specific remedy,
and the boundaries of the trauma are not limited to an act or event. Rather, they grow to indicate how those boundaries reveal and restructure other boundaries and limits. (43)

Central to Gilmore’s definition—as well as to the arguments set forth in my analyses—is an emphasis on a lack of centralized or universalized narrative form or narrative function. In resisting documentation, they also resist the discourses of legal or judicial judgment that evaluate experienced based on evidence; in refusing to deploy the narrative in the service of a singular aim or goal, they ask readers to question how, why, and if things like justice can be achieved; in stretching the boundaries of what constitutes trauma, both spatially and temporally, the notion of injury is expanded to include multiple layers and acts of oppression. Working both within and against generic expectations, limit-cases offer us different frames with which assess the representation of others’ lives, as it also moves towards an “enlarged frame of justice” (43). Gilmore’s framework, therefore, is useful insofar as Missing Sarah complicates the boundaries both of singular authorship and testimony, as well as the boundaries between life and death that inform how we conceive of memoir’s relationship to violence, survival, and justice.

**Reading Rape in the Context of Autobiography**

Autobiographical works, unlike forensic data or even fictional accounts of sexual violence, significantly complicate the moments of representing, witnessing, and responding to
sexual trauma. From memoirs distributed by large publishing houses to blog posts, works in this genre seem to call forth questions of history, memory, vulnerability, and truth in a way that fictional works often do not. Despite the challenges associated with non-fictional accounts, as Leigh Gilmore points out, autobiography has become “the genre in the skittish period around the turn of the millennium” (Limits 2). Paraphrasing Gayatri Spivak’s work on autobiography, Gilmore notes a “cultural awareness that something significant [is] happening around and through memoir, [...that has] crystallized in relation to the recognition of trauma’s centrality to it” (2). Memoirs about trauma or addiction, as Rak argues, carry a particular weight in this regard, especially concerning the ways in which authors whose lives would otherwise be marginal are made accessible and popular by their proximity to trauma. “The public interest in unknown people who survive or accomplish something extraordinary,” Rak writes, results in “an attachment to the protagonist through the account’s veracity. [...] The account is interesting not because it is well written [...] but because the pressure of the event makes the identity of the author important in relation to the event itself” (184).

Gilmore has previously identified the context of the significance or severity of an event and its relationship to the ways in which legal discourses inform testimony that occurs even outside the context of the courtroom, a context that is crucial in memoirs about sexual assault or other forms of gendered violence. Identifying this phenomenon as “autobiographical analysis. Yet, as I discuss in terms of Gilmore’s work on limit-cases of life writing, these very terms and definitions of practices of life writing are frequently contested and are in process of renegotiation by various practitioners of life writing.

7 Gilmore associates this “skittishness” with a series of “aesthetic forms that cultural practices of self-representation” at the turning of the millennium, including but not limited to shifts in the literary marketplace and the “surge of social and political movements of the past thirty years that have made it possible for a broader range of people to publish accounts of their life experiences” (16).
jurisdiction,” Gilmore argues that memoirs which offer “non-legal testimony in a public sphere” marked by legalistic definitions of truth-telling, evidence, harm, and redress” often risk “[testing] the limits of self-representational writing” (“Jurisdictions” 695). Where fiction can seem to lend a certain suspension of disbelief that allows readers to enter more willingly into exposure and acceptance of characters’ narratives of sexual trauma (because they are only fictional ones), writers of life narratives must explicitly face the “contest [as to] who can tell the truth, [and] the risk of being accused of lying (or malingering, or inflating, or whining)” (Gilmore, Limits 3). This arduous process not only risks “[threatening] the writer into continued silence” (3), but also “invites judgments [that] may be too similar to forms in which trauma was experienced” (3). More simply put, a criticism deployed against a work of fiction may result in a declaration that a rape “might not have happened that way” whereas criticism deployed against the depiction of rape in a memoir can range from a judgment that “it didn’t happen the way she is telling it” to the disavowal that “it did not really happen at all.” Because of these potential risks of silencing, shaming, and personal re-victimization, authors of life narratives must carefully negotiate the conditions of their trauma’s production as much as that production’s eventual reception, interpretation, and dissemination.

It is not a surprise, then, that some of the most compelling (and, therefore, often the most popular) stories are those told and written by survivors who have gone through the legal system and whose speech has been validated—via the use of their sworn testimony—as that which has

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8 We might think, for instance, of the ways in which perpetrators who are accused in non-legal settings are said to be “tried in the court of public opinion.”

9 I use compelling here to denote both a sense of popularity but also a sense of perceived success in persuasion that seems to result in few negative reactions to these texts. I suggest that the intense process of scrutiny that accompanies the traditional publishing process contributes to the success of these texts, although these processes of vetting memoirs for publication also invoke the discursive pressures of “truth” or “believability” as key elements of whether or not a text is deemed marketable.
helped to secure the convictions of their assailants. Indeed, while many of these survivors do offer staunch criticisms of the judicial process, including the struggle to be believed or taken seriously, the fact that their speech nevertheless contributed to the conviction of a perpetrator (and therefore has been deemed “truthful” relative to the purposes and expectations of the law) offers them, in a way, the very space and credibility needed to make such criticisms, even when they do so in non-legal (literary) contexts.

Of course, it is not merely the act of speech itself within the legal context that affords these survivors the opportunity for their memoirs to be accepted by audiences. Survivors must, first of all, be deemed qualified or allowed to speak, a reminder that certain “sociohistorical conditions [make] it possible for [certain] women to write [or speak] at all” (Lashgari 4). As Alice Sebold notes in her memoir *Lucky*, a distinct combination of gender and sexuality, race, and class factors made it possible for her speech to be heard and perceived as “truthful”:

[...] I knew what the superficials were and knew they stood in my favor. I was a virgin. He was a stranger. It had happened outside. It was night. I wore loose clothes and could not be proven to have behaved provocatively. There were no drugs or alcohol in my system. I had no former involvement with the police of any kind, not even a traffic ticket. He was black and I was white. There was an obvious physical struggle. I was young and a student at a private university that brought revenue to the city. He had a record and had done time. (168)

Sebold is extremely self-reflexive and cognizant that details other than the rape itself are central to the assault actually being read as rape, and therefore as meriting seriously attention from law enforcement. These details, seemingly “superficial” to the case, are, as Sebold well knows, were actually integral parts of how her case was evaluated. Sebold’s self-reflexive analysis of the
context of her rape also re-frames the initial description of the rape at the beginning of the memoir; readers are no longer simply presented the assault without its clearly political context, but are asked to consider how and why details matter, and to whom. Susan Estrich, a lawyer who prefaces her 1986 article on jurisprudence in sexual assault cases with a description of her own rape, describes a similar understanding of the identity politics involved in confirming her speech (and, in turn, her experience) as valid:

They asked me if he was a crow. That was their first question. A crow, I learned that day, meant to them someone who is black.

They asked me if I knew him. That was their second question. They believed me when I said I didn’t. Because, as one of them put it, how would a nice (white) girl like me know a crow?

Now they were on my side. (1087)

If heterosexual, middle-class white women who are raped by strangers must carefully tally up the factors which permit them to speak in a courtroom (and, in turn, to write about these experiences), then the burdens faced by those who are marginalized by virtue of race, sexuality, relationships (in addition to their gender) are certainly even more complex. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s 1989 study of sexual violence as seen through the lenses of gender and race examines this issue. Drawing attention to the indissoluble intersections of oppression at which Black women experience assault, Crenshaw writes that “the location of women of colour at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experience of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different than that of white women” (1245). After all, the question of whose stories of violence are considered recognizable also depends on whether or not that violence is recognized as violence. Of course, all victims potentially face the erasure of violence
via the arguments that the sexual act was “enjoyed” or “desired,” but this is qualitatively different from the perception of certain bodies as inherently and totally incapable of being violated.

The hyper-sexualization of women of colour or the commodification of sex workers’ bodies often nullifies or disavows the capacity for their violations to be perceived as such. In 2007, for instance, a municipal court judge in Philadelphia ruled that that the gang rape of a sex worker who had originally intended to have sex for money but then later withdrew her consent was not rape at all: rather, Judge Teresa Carr Deni ruled that there was no assault, but rather, a “theft of services” (Wolfe, n.p.). In terms of sexual violence that occurs at the intersection of race and gender, Andrea Smith’s *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (2005) offers an astute and comprehensive analyses of the ways in which particular bodies not only experience the disavowal of sexual violence, but how certain bodies are constructed as non-violable. Smith writes: “Because Indian bodies are ‘dirty,’ they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapeable,’ and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count. For instance, prostitutes are almost never believed when they say they have been raped because the dominant society considers the bodies of sex workers undeserving of integrity and violable at all times” (10). This violence is not merely historical, as Indigenous scholars and activists keep reminding us. In 2011, an intoxicated Indigenous woman from the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation who had been arrested was taken out of her cell by an RCMP constable and driven back to his home. Not only did officers in the detachment encourage the constable to engage in sexual relations with this woman, but as documents from the RCMP’s adjudication demonstrates, a senior officer said: “You arrested her, you can do whatever the f--k you want to do” (Moore). That the woman’s position as subordinate to the power of her arresting
officer, never mind her state of physical intoxication clearly suggests a malicious and
dehumanizing sexual assault. The language used by the RCMP in its adjudication not only
negates the inherent violence of the power dynamic, but also hints at consensual intimacy: the
constable, they write, was attempting to “pursue a personal relationship” (Moore, n.p.). This
incident, which is one of many (including recent allegations of widespread abuse of Indigenous
women in Val D’Or by members of the Sûreté du Québec) is, as Kwakwaka’wakw scholar Sarah
Hunt points out, demonstrative of the fact that “Indigenous peoples’ bodies have become sites of
violence, and are marked by this violence while the perpetrators are not marked in the same way.
[...] Everywhere, violence against (Indigenous people) is normalized, embedded in the social
fabric of colonial relations” (549-51).

The significant political and legal struggles faced by women of colour (as by sexual
minorities, or by women in the sex trade) directly affects their ability to write publicly about
their assaults. If certain women’s rapes are not considered rapes at all, how can they possibly
write about these experiences? How can they, as Audre Lorde writes, do so “without fear—of
visibility, of the harsh light of scrutiny and perhaps judgment, of pain, of death” (43). I want to
elucidate, because it is vital to do so, that the majority of popular memoirs 10 about sexual
violence written in North America are not written by women of colour, nor from other locations
of marginalization. Indeed, all of the memoirs listed at the beginning of this chapter are written
by white, middle-class, heterosexual women. This is not to say by any means that such memoirs

10 There are, of course, memoirs by women of colour and queer women who address sexual violence. Perhaps the
most well-known examples are Maya Angelou’s I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings (1969) in America, and, in
Canada, Lee Maracle’s I Am Woman (1988). However, these works are not exclusively focused on singular incidents
of sexual violence alone, but feature sexualized and gendered violence as part of their larger analyses of colonialism,
racism, and patriarchal culture. Several high-profile resource sites for sexual assault victims, including
aftersilence.org and The Pandora Project, generally only list a handful of the best-selling memoirs, including
Sebold’s Lucky and Francisco’s Telling.
are not valuable or vitally important, or that they should not be published: rather, they reinforce (even without the intentions of the authors to do so) the dynamics of who has the power to speak, to be heard, and to be believed.

To be clear, subject-positions *alone* do not make for autobiographical speech that aligns with the generic expectations of rape memoirs. Women who write from positions of privilege, for instance, are not automatically believed or offered validation for their stories. The generic and formal conventions of particular discourses, especially legal testimony, considerably influence which form of survivor speech is most seen as meriting the trust or truth-value that might allow it to be used in service of these outcomes. Attention to detail, especially relating to the specific acts and events of a sexual assault, features prominently in numerous women’s memoirs of rape. Despite the fact that both scientific and philosophical studies continue to articulate and demonstrate the precariousness of memory and eyewitness testimony, detailed speech nevertheless continues to be *perceived* as an indicator of credibility. In a frequently cited applied social psychology study of eyewitness testimony and degrees of detail, Brad E. Bell and Elizabeth F. Loftus note that there is “unequivocal support for the hypothesis that subject-jurors are impressed by details” (1191). Out of the subjects interviewed by Bell and Loftus, a significant percentage “stated or implied that the eyewitness who gave high-detail testimony was more aware, attentive, perceptive, had a better viewing/hearing position, and/or had a better memory for details than the eyewitness who gave low-detail testimony” (1187). Bell and Loftus’ work, then, confirms that in terms of achieving credibility or being perceived as conforming to generic conventions it matters not only who speaks, but also *how* they speak.

Sebold’s memoir offers an example of this emphasis on a high level of detail. The text begins with a short preamble, a description of a small, peripheral detail from the night of her
rape: “during [the rape] my eye caught something among the leaves and glass. A pink hair tie” (3).

In these opening moments, Sebold establishes herself (whether deliberately or not) as an astute and perceptive narrator, capable not only noticing obscure details (the almost-hidden hair tie) but also of noticing them during a moment of extreme trauma. From here, Sebold narrates a thirteen-page description of her brutal assault in painstaking, linear detail, from descriptions of the clothes she wore—“soft-soled moccasins” (5)—to the horrendous acts of violence perpetrated against her by her rapist. There are no metaphors in the narration of violence, no flowery descriptions of “ravishment,” and no vague or simple statements of “being raped.” Rather, the details are brutal, agonizing, and explicit: “He began to knead his fist against the opening of my vagina. Inserted his fingers into it, three or four at a time. Something tore. I began to bleed there” (9). If such detail itself were not enough to prove credibility, in the midst of her description of this moment of trauma, Sebold emphasizes that the details are recalled with forensic accuracy, and are somehow untouched or unfettered by the brutality experienced by her body: “all that remained unpossessed was my brain. It looked and watched and catalogued the details of it all” (11). Not surprisingly, the book reviews of Lucky, which preface the text in the 2002 Back Bay edition, echo the affective impact and the perception of reliability reported by Bell and Loftus’ subjects:

Reading Lucky, you understand how Sebold succeeded in persuading a judge that what happened to her occurred precisely—word for word, detail for detail—the way she described it.

— Francine Prose, Elle

This carefully detailed memoir is a tour de force of memory and rage.

— Self
I want to pause for a moment to unpack these statements and to pay careful attention to the language they use in order to describe the success of Sebold’s work. While the review from *Self Magazine* is slightly more understated in its praise of careful details, Francine Prose’s review much more explicitly makes the connection between autobiographical speech and testimony. After all, it is not just that Sebold’s memoir is a compelling narrative, but that it is also persuasive and reliable in the kinds of terms laid out by legal discourse. What might have happened, I wonder, had Sebold chosen not to recount her rape “word for word, detail for detail”? By association, what are readers instructed to make of accounts of sexual violence that do not employ these techniques? While Sebold herself often displays tremendous self-reflexivity about the process of storytelling and trauma, these paratextual elements work against Sebold’s text, reinforcing a particular reading of it that makes it difficult to disentangle from notions of reliability and trustworthiness.

Other memoirs take a similar approach in their use of speech, mirroring the linear form and attention to detail expected of victims. Cathy Winkler’s memoir *One Night: Realities of Rape* (2002) resembles Sebold’s work in its use of a graphic, detailed account of the rape as the initial exposition presented to readers. Winkler’s prose is even more meticulous and extended than Sebold’s, stretching out over 25 pages. It is difficult to read and much like one might imagine the experience of the assault itself, feels never-ending. Like Sebold, but much more explicitly, Winkler describes (and, in turn, seems to experience) her rape through the lens required by witnesses for the State. In describing her thought process at the moment of the rape, she recalls thinking “*Be rational, be calm, keep cool. Assess the situation. Note his agitation*” (6). After having noticed a small scar near her assailant’s penis, Winkler recalls that this small detail could “convince everyone” (8) and she thus “began to collect data for the police” (8),
knowing that she had to “memorize the details” (17). Interestingly, however, Winkler’s text not only replicates a normative identity (witness for the State) and behaviour (the required notation of detail) for victims of sexual violence, but also goes a step further in prescribing identities, behaviours, and narrative techniques for other victims. For instance, Winkler criticizes brief, objective descriptions of physical attacks as “common,” suggesting that the tone and style of such descriptions are “typical.” In her analysis of an attack described similarly to Susan Estrich’s, Winkler points out that “first, the rape attack was a brief twenty minutes like most attacks,” and that another reason for “brevity in published descriptions of attacks is that spending time meticulously writing about each of the movements of the rapist is to relive the nightmare of the attack itself. Abbreviation is easier” (32). Of course, Winkler may have a point here. Speaking about the precise details of a sexual assault, particularly in forensic detail, is certainly not an easy matter. But Winkler seems, perhaps unconsciously and non-deliberately, to privilege the hours-long experience of rape as somehow more traumatic than a “brief” attack, and seems to imply that brevity in the confession or description of a rape is likely a form of denial, repression, or emotional pathology. The privileging of normative confessional structures and discursive norms culminate in her designation of all survivors, *a priori* (including herself) as “VISAs” (VIctims as Survivor and Activist). This designation, while likely well meaning, negates the privilege of economic status and educational position that allows Winkler to speak both as a survivor and activist, and also reinforces the notion that survivor speech is always active, in the service of some external force or institution. As Alcoff and Gray argue, “when breaking the

11 I am grateful to Laura Moss for her observations about the acronym “VISA” and the ways in which it conjures up connections to both a form of commercial/economic transactions (i.e. a VISA credit card) and a document that signal governmental/political/geographical mobility.
silence is taken up as the necessary route to recovery or as a privileged political tactic, it
becomes a coercive imperative on survivors to confess, to recount [their] assaults, to give details,
and even to do so publicly. [This is] justly deserving of the critique Foucault offers of the way in
which the demand to speak involves dominating power” (281). Freedom through speech, in this
configuration, is no longer merely one of a series of possibilities for survivors’ unbinding from
the trauma of rape: rather, speech—and in turn, the pursuit of freedom and justice—becomes
mandated.

Critiques of discourses and narrative techniques in survivors’ speech are not limited to
stories about sexual violence, but such stories certainly illustrate the problems involved with
speaking. From Gayatri Spivak’s provocative query about whether or not the subaltern can speak
to Audre Lorde’s declaration that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house,”
postcolonial, feminist, and queer theorists have long debated the possibilities of enacting
transgression or liberation by speaking out in particular terms. Therefore, in thinking through
how survivor speech is constructed, I find myself facing a series of perplexing questions about
how speech is deployed. The contentiousness of speech and its subversive qualities continues to
manifest itself in a variety of debates, although the resultant questions are no by means ones to
which there are singular answers. Does the repetition of sexual violence through its articulation
become a kind of re-enactment of the moment of trauma, part of a larger culture of spectacle12 or
the grotesque? Can these strategies of writing be said to be truly liberatory, or are they only

12 Guy Debord’s theses in The Society of the Spectacle (1967) connect well with my present concerns about both the
representation of sexual violence as well as its distribution. When Debord claims that “all that was once directly
lived has become mere representation,” I think of how representations of sexual violence in media can inform how
survivors of sexual violence themselves experience such violence. Whose experiences of sexual violence, particularly in an age where images are used to instill risk management in citizens, are thus not always-already
mediated?
potentially liberatory in a personal sense, rather than in a collective or political sense, especially if we consider the problems of those who are seen to speak for others, or those who claim to speak from a universalized position? Are these strategies sustainable in the long-term, or, as Lorde writes, are they ones that “may allow us temporarily to beat [the master] at his own game, but [...] will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (112)? If popular autobiographical techniques or forms risk replicating the dynamics of judicial power and confessional structures, or reifying and aestheticizing violence, how, as Alcoff and Gray query, “can we maximize the transgressive potential of survivor discourse in such a way that the autonomy and empowerment of the survivor who is speaking as well as of survivors elsewhere will be enhanced rather than undermined?” (282). Further, I ask, how do we give space to survivors who have not gone through the legal system, whether by choice or by limits on their ability to report? How can we make way for the articulation of a variety of types of sexual violation, many of which may not align with social myths about violence or dominant norms of race, gender, sexuality, and class? In which ways can we or might we move away from survivor speech as a form of testimony, as that which “promise[s] and produce[s] speech as material evidence for truth” (Felman 17), rather than as that which potentially interrogates, questions, troubles, or theorizes the very nature of experience and the functions of language themselves? If the perpetrators of violence have the legal right not to speak lest such speech be injurious to them\(^\text{13}\), why can victims not be afforded

\(^{13}\) Perhaps the most well-known incarnation of this right is the Miranda warning, a right to silence given to criminal suspects in police custody in the United States: “You have the right to remain silent when questioned.” In *R v. Hebert* (1990), the Supreme Court of Canada reaffirmed that a suspect’s pre-trial right to silence is protected under Section 7 of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*: “The rules relating to the right to remain silent adopted by our legal system, such as the common law confessions rule and the privilege against self-incrimination, suggest that the scope of the right in the pre-trial detention period must be based on the fundamental concept of the suspect's right to freely choose whether to speak to the authorities or remain silent.” Unlike the Miranda warning, which is standardized, the precise wording of the right-to-silence arrest caution varies depending on the particular police agency.
the same right? On whose shoulders rests the burden to speak, and in whose service is this speech? There are no definitive answers to these questions, nor do I wish to burden Missing Sarah with having to attempt to answer them. Such burdens, in my view, are not the task of individual survivors—nor that of individual texts—to bear. What I can do, however, is offer a series of readings that addresses these questions in new and interesting ways. First, I wish to address a crucial context that informs my readings, namely the affective relationships that readers have with stories about violence.

**Scrutinizing the Sisterhood: Kinship and Discourses of Violence**

Thus far, my focus has been centered primarily on how more conventional or popular women’s memoirs of sexual violence are structured, and the connections between literary discourses and other frameworks that shape our understandings of sexual violence. Of equal importance to this project is not simply seeing how these texts are structured, but understanding the interactions these structures create between the texts and their readers. If, as Rak argues, the genre of memoir concerns itself with ideas of citizenship and public life, then it is also deeply relational, insofar as it offers a way for “people to access the life and experiences of another” (213). Reflecting on the affective dimensions of citizenship as theorized by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who “saw citizenship not as a condition of being subject to a state but as an emotional expression of belonging” (210), as well those proposed by Lauren Berlant, who speaks of “intimate publics” (211), Rak argues that a central characteristic of memoir—as a technology of citizenship—is precisely the affective relations it constructs. These relations, which are both textual and political, thus have the capacity to either reinforce or re-imagine “ways of being social” (213). But what does it really mean, as per Rak’s framework, to “access the life and
experiences of another”? In the case of memoirs of sexualized violence in particular, I argue that there is much at stake in the relationship between the text and the reader, and that a politics of access is borne out by the text and reader’s interpretation of it. In accessing the life and experiences of another, we are invited not just to know something but also to feel something.

When I look at the stack of memoirs on my desk, I feel something. It is a sense of unease I feel, given that I have a strange relationship to these texts. After all, I don’t really know much about the women who have written them, although save for one—Jane Doe—I do know their names. Sometimes there are photographs of them on the cover or hidden away on the last page: they’re usually smiling in these, and for some reason, that makes me feel a little relieved that they are not only presented as tragic figures. These women are not merely configurations of ink marks on a page, but exist, as people, outside of the texts. But ultimately, there’s no handshake, no “how-do-you-do,” no “where do you live and what’s your occupation” to start things off in this relationship. The first (and often the last) things I know about these women are the most intimate and violent details of their lives. I know when they were raped, how they were raped, how long the assaults lasted, and what their rapists said to them. I have been privy to their police investigations, and to the trials of their perpetrators. I may not always know or remember what their faces look like—and would likely not recognize some of them were I to pass them on the street—but I can envision their bodies in painstaking detail: bloodied, bruised, violated. As a reader, I feel connected to these women, intimately so. However, when I pause to think about it, the familiarity deeply unsettles me in more ways than one: in the first instance, I am troubled by the immediacy of the violence that I am permitted to know about; in the second, I am disturbed by the fact that insofar as I, as a reader, might claim to know or relate to these women’s lives, they are only made intelligible to me through violence, and through the telling of violence alone;
in the third, I am unnerved that I relate so much to these women’s stories, and can easily conceive of the incredible shock of being sexually assaulted by a stranger, particularly as I write this dissertation during a string of unsolved sexual assaults on my campus. What am I, then, to make of my relationships to the texts? What kinds of violence do readers risk enacting upon the text, despite their best intentions?

In its most extreme form, a memoir’s “unique quality of connection between private and public worlds” (Rak 33) can result in a number of potentially harmful effects on both the author and text. If, as Rak argues, “lives go public as they become public” (33), yet these lives are only made public in the context of violence, then people’s lives before and after their assault are often silenced. This can have the effect of making it seem as though there was no person or political actor before the trauma: not even simply a different person, but no person at all. In the cases of women whose lives are often always-already read exclusively through the lens of trauma or of marginal identity (i.e. sex workers, Indigenous women, queer and trans women), this reification or congealing of traumatic identity can often mirror the ways in which their bodies are perceived as necessarily prone to violence. Such inevitability often precludes meaningful engagement with these groups in preventing or addressing the violence they experience, or it merely frames their experiences of violence as spectacle or cautionary tale. In other cases, the reader’s relationship to the violence in the text can deploy a presumed clause in the author-reader pact whereby intimacy invokes the appropriative gaze of the viewer, a tendency for readers to adopt either a position that resembles the expert confessor who sanctions survivor speech by evaluating it as “truthful,” or, perhaps more commonly, the overly-empathic witness, who risks “identify[ing] with the victim to the point of making [themselves] a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position” (LaCapra 722).
Dominick LaCapra, a historian whose theoretical work is based largely on responses to survivor testimony of the Holocaust, points out that all too often, witnesses of first-person narratives of trauma empathize to the point of adopting the subject-position or affect of the victim, despite the fact that “trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it” (722). In the aforementioned book reviews of Alice Sebold’s memoir *Lucky*, for instance, Sarah Kerr writes that “Sebold’s commanding skill as a narrator [...] forces you to relive her terror.” At the end of the memoir, in the reading guide provided for discussion groups, one of the questions asks the reader to consider how their actions might have differed from Alice’s: “Imagine yourself in Alice’s shoes that October afternoon on Marshall Street in Syracuse: the day Alice found herself face to face with her attacker for the first time since the rape. Would your reaction have been different from Alice’s? Since there was a police officer nearby, might you have approached him immediately?” (qtd in Sebold 12). However, as LaCapra notes, the ethical role of empathy and of witnessing refutes these types of questions and presumptions that one can indeed “relive” the terror experienced by another, even if one has also been the victim of a particular type of crime or trauma: rather, witnessing “involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place” (722).

When it comes to memoirs about sexualized trauma and violence, I argue that these affective dimensions of textuality and citizenship become somewhat more complicated because of the ways in which women’s memoirs of violence circulate both *within* and *as* discourses of kinship. As anti-violence movements become increasingly globalized, the discourse of kinship has been deployed to articulate both the global scale of sexualized and gendered violence, as well as to establish connections between women worldwide. Not surprisingly, however, these
invocations of solidarity or shared experience\textsuperscript{14} have resulted in a number of problems: often, only one particular set of women’s stories becomes the ground for a universalized discussion of violence and its effects, and marginalized women’s stories of violence become sites of either appropriation or erasure.

The notion that we are all vulnerable to harm and might share in recognizing this vulnerability while reading memoirs of sexual violence is not an entirely unproblematic, given the very real threats that women face. After all, frequently quoted statistics suggest that one in three women will experience sexual or physical violence in her lifetime. Workplace, online, and street harassment haunts many women’s daily movements through social and physical space, and numerous public service campaigns frequently alert women to these dangers (thus encouraging hypervigilance). Thus, it is not unreasonable that readers may feel a sense of camaraderie with the authors and their situations, even if they have not experienced an assault themselves. As Rak notes, one of the key reading strategies of therapeutic narratives is recognition (191) and to recognize the spectre of violence in women’s lives remains a powerful and defiant act, particularly in a world where neoliberalism and risk management often obscure how systems of oppression exact harm.

\textsuperscript{14} In “Notes on Trauma and Community,” Kai Erikson discusses this relationship between individual and communal trauma, and the ways in which individual experiences can create community. Erikson writes that “traumatic wounds inflicted on individuals can combine to create a mood, an ethos—a group culture, almost—that is different from (and more than) the sum of the private wounds that make it up. Trauma, that is, has a social dimension” (185). While Erikson notes that the nature of trauma means that this social dimension does not involve the “easy comradeship one often finds among those who live through telling experiences” (186), he nevertheless notes that those who suffer similar traumas “know one another in ways that the most intimate of friends never will, and for that reason they can supply a human context and a kind of emotional solvent in which the work of recovery can begin. It is a gathering of the wounded” (187). While I agree with many of Erikson’s claims, I also see the ways in which this sense of community or mutual understanding is often viewed as a given, rather than a site of possibility for connection. In thinking through this, I reflect on the ways in which many women of colour, particularly Black and Indigenous women, have raised concerns about movements such as SlutWalk, which often elide the hypersexualization of race and gender which generally precludes women of colour from “reclaiming” discourses of sluthood.
In reading these memoirs, readers might almost certainly see the mirroring of Judith Butler’s statements about vulnerability and risk, because “in a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life” (29). However, as Rak also makes clear, recognition is only one part of this readerly relationship to difficult narratives. Although Rak makes her argument within the context of addiction narratives, similar discourses of recovery and recuperation manifest themselves in both memoirs of sexual violence and the ways in which they are marketed. The transformative qualities of sexual assault memoirs are generally said to be twofold: they provide hope to the reader by showing that violence has not succeeded in curtailing the life of the survivor (because they are alive, and because they are writing about their recovery from rape), and they demonstrate that telling such stories—difficult as that process may be—can create meaningful change in social attitudes and policies.

Of course, as Butler reminds us, these two strategies of political and textual relation (recognition and transformation) are dependent precisely on whose lives we are able or willing to recognize ourselves in, and whose lives (or deaths) motivate us to create sociopolitical change. As Butler argues, we do not all experience violence in the same way, and are not all at similar risk to it, because “lives are supported and maintained differently, and there are radically different ways in which human physical vulnerability is distributed across the globe. Certain lives will be highly protected [...] other lives will not find such fast and furious support and will not even qualify as ‘grievable’” (32). For communities in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, where Sarah de Vries’s experiences of sexualized and gendered violence are mapped, it is all too clear that there, the politics of recognition and transformation have rarely functioned in the same way as they do in other sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Although much attention has been given to the violence faced by Indigenous women, sex workers, and those suffering from
addiction in the DTES, all too often, recognition merely manifests itself as the appropriative gaze, and the burden of transformation is turned back on the victims themselves. As I demonstrate in my reading of the text, *Missing Sarah* forces us to reframe and reconsider the politics of recognition, and to take the affective and political labour of transformation upon ourselves.

**Rethinking the Limits of Life-Writing: *Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss***

*Instructions to the reader.* Glance at the cover of *Missing Sarah: A Memoir of Loss.*

STOP. You are confronted with a photograph of a missing persons’ poster. On the poster, an image of Sarah de Vries, sitting. She stares out at you from the photograph, her lips perfectly painted, her eyebrows arched. You can make out the text on the poster well enough, but it is already suffering from the politics of erasure, a politics you will come to know well in the pages to follow: “Sarah de Vries—28 years of age. Last seen April [---]. Princess and Hasti [---]. Call 669-904 [---].” *Open the cover.* First page: scan the list of literary awards the book has received—shortlisted for the Governor General’s Literary Award for Non-Fiction, among other honours—and read the numerous excerpts from book reviews. *The National Post* urges you to “settle in, turn off the phone and have a box of tissues beside you” (de Vries ii), because this book deserves to be read in one sitting” (de Vries ii). *The Montreal Mirror* cautions you that it is “a compassionate but chilling story” (ii), and the *Red Deer Advocate* emphasizes that this “sad and tough story […] puts a face, a family face, on the sex worker, and it calls for different treatment of those involved in the trade” (iii). *Flip the page.* You learn a bit about the author, Maggie de

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15 It is a curious choice to frame *Missing Sarah* as a “tearjerker,” given the ways in which sentimentality has often been deployed in order to portray narratives as shallow or as overly dependent on emotional manipulation.
Vries, and her previous works. *Flip the page again.* Frontispiece: the title and the author’s name, featured again in big bold type. If you didn’t remember this was a memoir of loss, you are reminded of it now: you know that you are not to expect a triumphant story of survival and courtroom drama as you are perhaps likely used to. *Flip the page again. STOP.* You see a photograph of a smiling face. It’s Sarah’s face again. Her eyes meet your gaze as she rests her face on one hand, her lips turned slightly upwards in a smile. It is a startling surprise: after all, most of us know Sarah and the other missing and murdered women from Vancouver’s notorious Downtown Eastside from a collective inventory of mostly-mugshots of ravaged faces and empty stares: the infamous poster\(^{16}\) of missing women produced by the Vancouver Police Department. If we do not know their faces, or know them well enough to remember, it is likely that we know which fragments of their bodies were found on Robert Pickton’s pig farm in the outskirts of Vancouver. When coverage of the atrocities hit the press in February 2002 following Pickton’s arrest, consumers of local and international media were offered few details of these women’s lives, but plenty of details of severed body parts found in garbage pails or stored away in freezers. Soon, you’ll find out how Maggie de Vries came to find out about the horrific details of her sister’s death. You’ll know of “the horror of imagining that [her] sister’s teeth are in a lab somewhere, which leads to the horror of imagining where they were before and how they got

\(^{16}\) The well-known poster of the missing women (and their subsequent inclusion in Vancouver artist Pamela Masik’s 2011 exhibition “The Forgotten Project”) have sparked considerable discussion about how these women’s lives have come to be represented. In her article on Masik’s work and the controversy surrounding it, Laura Moss describes how Masik created her collection of sixty-nine portraits based on the thumbnail images from the Vancouver Police Department’s poster. Moss describes the paintings thus: “Some of the paintings are straightforward reproductions of a woman’s face rendered in a large scale. Others represent a woman with knife slashes, broken bones, blood, newspaper clippings, cellophane, and garbage bags embedded on and in the portrait” (51). Masik’s collection was meant to be exhibited at the University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology in 2011, but due to pressure from members of groups such as the Downtown Eastside Memorial March Committee, the show was cancelled a month before its opening. As Moss notes, criticisms of the show included fears of causing further pain to the women’s families, as well as “the perceived problems of appropriating suffering for public gain, and the question of who had the right to memorialize the missing women in a public space” (51).
there” (xv), but not before you’ve seen Sarah’s face twice, not before you know that those teeth were once in the mouth of a living, breathing woman, one who wore lipstick and who smiled. The photo is accompanied by a dedication: “To sex workers everywhere, in memory of Sarah Jean de Vries” (viii). As you are coming to understand, this is not a story about all women’s experiences of violence, nor is it dedicated to some nebulous abstraction of female lives. This is not a story you have heard before, although perhaps you still think it is: perhaps you are used to stories about missing women and murdered prostitutes, the sorts of stories that serve as fodder not only for true-crime investigative shows, but for any number of popular primetime television series dedicated to heinous crimes of gendered and sexualized violence. Perhaps you think you know what to expect, that you know how to approach this text, that you know how to face the images of dismembered women. *Flip the page again. STOP.*

You may have gotten past the reviews and the photographs, but you are now faced with a voice that you may not have expected. Before Maggie tells you the story of how her sister lived and died, she offers some of Sarah’s own words: “*If you could look inside my mind / Would you like the woman you find? Would you understand me? / Would you want to love me?*” (ix). Although Sarah “addressed a readership” (xv) in journals, Maggie uses Sarah’s words to directly confronts the relationship between the text and the audience, interrogating the reader’s presumed or possible relationships to the subject of Maggie’s narrative. Although Maggie is presenting Sarah’s words to an audience that she may not have necessarily been writing for, it is nevertheless clear that Sarah invites the reader of her poem to “*look deep into [her] windows / past the mass hysteria of confusion*” (ix). In doing so, Sarah calls for a nuanced and complex form of relation, although she does not necessarily presume that the reader can or will be capable of it. She also refuses to do the work of interpretation for readers, asking instead for them to
respond: “If you can, what do you see?” (ix). Invoking a distinct politics of relation, which clearly requires the reader to actively participate in the process of reading themselves as well as others, Sarah’s words stand as a warning that if there are readers that may be unable or unwilling to enter into an empathic position of witnessing, that they should not engage with her story: “Don’t look if you don’t care” (ix).

Moreover, Sarah warns that if they look without such care, they will be unable to access her story at all. Linking the violence of appropriative gazes with acts of sexualized and gendered violence themselves, Sarah powerfully articulates that survivors are (rightfully) frightened of the violence contained within certain reading practices and within certain relationships to other political actors: “Like a child, beaten and raped, / I’ll run and hide for my safety’s sake” (de Vries ix). While acknowledging her position of vulnerability—“My defences are weak / [...] down on my knees, begging, pleading” (ix)—Sarah nevertheless articulates a politics of hope, and the possibility of ethical relation: “Please, God, one, just one of them must really care for me” (ix). While her poem primarily makes use of the second-person pronoun “you” in order to emphasize a personal connection with the reader, in the last line, Sarah shifts away from this presumed intimacy towards the third-person “them.” Reflecting the Othering gaze back onto the readers (we become the nebulous, faceless “them”), Sarah does not presume that it is “you” or I who will care for her. Maggie’s editorial choice in placing this particular poem of Sarah’s at the outset of the memoir is calculated: it has the effect of calling any presumption of easy relation or access into question. This opening poem sets up readerly connection as an open-ended possibility, a responsibility that will be borne out by the reader as they navigate the next 282 pages of the text.
In carrying out such a detailed reading of the first few paratextual elements of *Missing Sarah*, it becomes clear, I hope, that this memoir is working differently from other works in the genre of women’s life writing about sexualized and gendered violence. In doing so, it signals an important moment in autobiographical studies both in Canada and beyond. In *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore argues that certain instances of autobiographical writing identify, more than others, the limits of “form and subjectivity that the self-representation of trauma entails” (6). Acknowledging that language itself always-already contains limitations, insofar as it is “asserted as that which can realize trauma even as it is theorized as that which fails” (7), there are nevertheless, as I have demonstrated in my close reading of the paratextual elements of de Vries’ memoir, a series of discursive norms or relations which attempt to crystallize how trauma can and should be spoken about. While all authors of memoirs and, in particular, those who write about sexual violence, face obstacles in their pursuit of the “therapeutic balm of words” (7), Gilmore notes that in order to do so, some writers are “[moving] away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions” (7). Instead, they are taking up what Gilmore calls a “radical engagement with self-representation” (7).

While some of these engagements come as a matter of an author deliberately choosing a different formal quality or structure for life-writing, some come as an inevitable result of the particular life or trauma that is being written about. *Missing Sarah* is a cogent example of the type of limit-case that Gilmore describes. Categorized generically as both memoir and true crime, and written by two sisters—one alive, one dead—*Missing Sarah* asks us to reframe and rethink both the signifiers of “life” and “writing” in what we popularly call the genre and/or the act of life-writing. In doing so, a whole host of other signifiers (victim, survivor, violence, assault) are reworked, as are the relations between the text and its readers, and between witnesses
and those who have suffered harm. In the first close reading I have provided, paratextual elements illustrate how the text engages with these complexities, and reflects (even in its opening pages) many of the qualities that Gilmore describes as being unique to limit-cases.

Rather than suggesting that Missing Sarah somehow establishes a completely new genre, I wish to continue my gestures towards the spaces in which I see the numerous questions about genre being taken up by the text. I agree with Helen M. Buss when she writes that she prefers “to leave the question of genre as open as possible because of the transgressive nature of women’s approaches to genre decisions and in order to preclude too swift a closure in a territory where mapping has only recently begun” (18). In the next few pages, I draw from a few more sections of the memoir in order to flesh out how I see Missing Sarah as pressing up against the limits of life writing about sexualized and gendered violence. Building on my previous section regarding graphic detail, I look at the actual incidents of sexual violence within the text and how they are described. In doing so, I examine the relationship between Maggie’s authorial voice and that of Sarah’s, and what the duality of narrative voice contributes to our understanding of violence and kinship. In addition, I focus on the presence of absence in the text, and the importance of listening to Sarah’s silences, both physically (through her death), and textually (in the rhetorical strategies she uses).

Maggie de Vries, who has become a powerful and outspoken sex worker rights advocate, argues that male interactions with sex workers are not one-dimensional. She writes: “Men who go to prostitutes must be as complex and varied a group as sex workers themselves; their motives must be as varied or even more so, because prostitutes are almost always working for economic reasons. Men can be trying to meet sexual needs, or to meet a need for a sense of power or for companionship or for touch” (158). De Vries, whose position on sex work articulates the
problems with equating all acts of prostitution to sexual slavery (102), nevertheless speaks bluntly about the disproportionate risk faced by sex workers: “then there are the men who seek out prostitutes to hurt them” (158). This violence, which is symptomatic of the structures that refuse to protect sex workers, and the ways in which “we almost believe that violence is just part of their job” (104), was well-known to Sarah: “Sarah was badly hurt by men many times, at least twice to the point where she feared for her life” (158).

I want to focus on a section of the memoir in which Maggie relays Sarah’s discussion of her experiences of this violence in some detail, because while it is not the only time in the text in which rape is alluded to, it is one of the few times where Maggie shows Sarah explicitly speaking about having been assaulted. The archive of this experience comes from her 1986 interview with journalist Daniel Gautreau, which Maggie draws from in order to elucidate Sarah’s experiences on the street. As Maggie listens to Sarah’s voice on the tape, she notes that “in a matter-of-fact tone she describes horrors” (108). When Daniel asks her “what the bad things were about life on the street including being a sex worker” (109), Sarah replies:

I never really had anything bad happen to me till I was about fifteen when a trick tried to beat me up. And I got raped just last March. A couple of weeks later I didn’t feel right. I was throwing up when I woke up in the morning, and I went to 575 Drake Street and got a blood test done. I found out I was pregnant, and I had to go in for an abortion. That’s about the worst that ever happened to me, that I got raped by a bad trick and I was carrying his kid, and it doesn’t feel really great, it made me feel really shitty. I was depressed for quite a while. I cried a lot for no reason. I would be walking down the street and I would start crying for no reason at all. (109)
As I reflect back on my earlier discussion of confessional discourses, the expectations of graphic detail on the part of witnesses, as well as the presumed affect with which witnesses are often expected to recount their assaults, I am struck by what Maggie observes as the “matter-of-fact” tone in Sarah’s words. The entire description of the rape and its aftermath is no more than a few lines long, and rather than describing the aftermath of rape in the language of horror we have often come to expect (as noted, in particular, by the types of terms used by book reviews), Sarah displays what may appear to some as a rather understated but bluntly honest affect: “it doesn’t feel really great [...] it made me feel really shitty” (109). This incident of rape exists within a larger presence of violence, one that is unique to survival sex work and the lack of protection and care offered to those in the industry.

In a journal entry dated December 1995, Sarah writes powerfully about this fear, noting that she “can’t shake it” (159), articulating a sense of disorientation—“no sense of direction, balance or time” (159)—as she contemplates the “pathetic growing fear that maybe just maybe my time draws near” (159). Once again, she employs the rhetorical strategy of questioning that is featured in the text’s opening poem: “Am I next?”, she asks. “Is he watching me now? Stalking me like a predator and its prey. Waiting, waiting for some perfect spot, time, or my stupid mistake? How does one choose a victim? Good question, isn’t it? If I knew that, I would never get snuffed” (159). As a reader, I pause here. I pause because of all of Sarah’s questions, “am I next?” is among the most haunting. The question, which I suspect many women have asked themselves in the context of violence (particularly in terms of the seemingly ever-present threat of violence in public spaces) takes on a much different nuance when it is posed by someone who most certainly faces a disproportionate risk, not only of violence, but of severe and deadly violence that is rarely investigated or prevented. More than twenty years after Sarah posed this
question in her journal, the same phrase has been taken up as a political call to action by Indigenous women in Canada, who continue to put pressure on the federal government to call a national inquiry into the epidemic of disappearances and deaths. Following the murder of her cousin Loretta Saunders (an Inuk woman who, at the time of her death in 2014, was studying missing and murdered Indigenous women as part of her graduate work), Holly Jarrett took to social media to create the #AmINext campaign, in which Indigenous women take photos of themselves holding a sign with the question on it. The discursive situation created by such a question is particularly powerful: will the reader or listener answer in the affirmative (thus reinforcing the idea that certain lives are disposable) or will they be compelled to answer in the negative, and thus actively participate in the transformation of a society in which colonial violence still runs rampant?

Of course, one of the problems that comes up with anti-violence discourse regarding marginalized populations is precisely the manner in which these questions risk being taken up as universal ones. After all, “how does one choose a victim?” (159) is a question that numerous women (especially those who are survivors of sexual assault) have asked themselves. Sarah’s elaboration on these questions once again shifts the lens and the readerly relationship, asking the reader to view the specific intersectional context in which these questions are posed. “It’s getting to be a daily part of life,” she writes. “Somebody dies and it’s like somebody just did something normal. I can’t find the right words. It’s strange. A woman who works the Hastings Street area gets murdered, and nothing” (159). Sarah’s tone then markedly shifts as she hammers her point home regarding the inequality in coverage and public responses to violence: “Yet if she were some square john’s little girl, shit would hit the goddamn fan. Front page news for weeks, people protesting in the streets. Everybody makes a stink” (159). I argue that although Sarah is not
explicitly calling out specific cases in which Canadian publics mobilized with empathy and outrage, that most readers would be able to reflect on which incidents garner significant media coverage and engagement with citizens and which do not.

As I reflect on the specific time in which Sarah was writing this entry—just a few years after the massacre at the École Polytechnique as well as the brutal rapes and murders committed by Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka—I understand and I feel a shared sense of injustice and frustration, and continue to see the ways in which our politics of memory treat certain incidents or forms of violence differently from others. As Emma Morgan-Thorp writes in “The Politics of Memory: Feminist Strategies of Commemoration in Canada,” public engagement with violence against women has taken on vastly different forms. Pointing to specificity as one major difference between how the École Polytechnique massacre and Missing and Murdered women are memorialized, Morgan-Thorp observes that

we know the names of the fourteen women killed at the École Polytechnique and we know the name of the man who shot them. In contrast, hundreds of named and unnamed women have been killed at the hands of many across the continent. Most telling is that those women identified as ‘First Nations’ and as ‘impoverished’ are so often forgotten despite their proximity to gendered forms of violence. (n.p.)

I feel my own complicity in this phenomenon as I read Sarah’s words, noting that I have attended memorial events for December 6th more times than I have the annual February 14th march that weaves its way through the very streets from which so many women have disappeared. I acknowledge that of the thousands of murdered and missing Indigenous women and sex workers from the Downtown Eastside, the Highway of Tears, and across Canada, I can only ever recall a handful of their names, and know their faces even less well, whereas by contrast, I know the
names of the victims of Bernardo and Homolka: Tammy Homolka, Kristen French, and Leslie Mahaffy. This is not to say, of course, that the women who died in the Montreal Massacre or Bernardo or Homolka’s victims are not also deserving of commemoration: rather, I am curious about what it means for certain names (and thus certain lives) to register less profoundly as subjects of collective memory. Writing about specificity and familiarity in the context of global violence post-9/11, and, in particular, in the case of journalist Daniel Pearl, Judith Butler observes that “his story takes me home and tempts me to stay there. But at what cost do I establish the familiar as the criterion by which a human life is grievable?” (38). Sarah de Vries’ story, I believe, similarly asks the reader not simply to grieve loss or to mobilize against violence for those whose lives tempt us to stay “home,” but rather, to consider “the conditions under which a grievable life is established and maintained, and through what logic of exclusion, what practice of effacement and denominalization” (38).

Thus far, as an attempt to reconcile these logics of exclusion and to situate this chapter as working through and perhaps even against them, I have focused primarily on Sarah’s words, rather than Maggie’s, even though it is through Maggie that we have come to know Sarah’s story. In fact, Maggie herself does this throughout the text, opening up a large portion of the memoir as space for her sister to speak: “she helps me to do that through her journals, which she kept for many years. Periodically throughout this book, she speaks for herself” (xv). What is so compelling about this memoir, and the way in which it differs from so many others, is that it embodies the often-fraught relationship between witness and victim. In the section of the memoir entitled “Search and Acceptance,” Maggie notes the terrible belatedness of working through these points of difference. After reflecting that her sister is “(she thinks) chopped up into little pieces in the dirt” (262), she asks herself why she is “coming to this only when [Sarah]’s dead”
Maggie reflects on the notion of kinship, suggesting (as I have) that it does not necessarily guarantee or facilitate understanding:

If only I could have really, truly opened my heart to her when she was alive, so much could have happened, for both of us. I could have accepted her as she was and opened up to her more about who I was. I am learning just how much we had in common. I know that we all learn things in our own way, in our own time, and often too late. That is the way life works. In my experience, the deaths of loved ones hold enormous opportunities for growth in those who survive, but always, of course, too late for that growth to inform the relationship with the loved one who is gone. All we can do is move on and apply what we have learned to the living. (262)

Maggie is a witness who maintains a complex relationship to the subject of her writing, and the structure and form of her memoir lays this out to the reader. Five years after the memoir was originally published, Maggie wrote an epilogue for the 2008 edition of the memoir released after Pickton’s trial, in which she acknowledges the ongoing process of working through her relationship with her sister (both as a family member and as an author). “I used to think,” writes Maggie, “that I was standing in for Sarah, that I was doing the work that she could have done (better than I) if she had lived. I no longer believe that. If Sarah had lived, she would have done her own work. I don’t know what she would have done, but whatever it would have been, it would have been her journey. I am on my own journey. I am not standing in for my sister” (268). Maggie does not set herself up as a witness who is immune from the pitfalls of witnessing simply because Sarah is her sister; rather, as revealed by Maggie’s re-appraisal of her previous writing, her assumptions about kinship are heavily challenged by the process of talking about Sarah.

After all, while the memoir is about Sarah and frequently features her writing, it is ultimately
Maggie’s story that is being told, shaped as it is by her various experiences and positions of privilege.

Given its strengths as a text, it might be easy to fall into a simplistic view of *Missing Sarah*. With its paratextual elements, the presence of two narrative voices, the use of persuasive questions, and the self-reflexive qualities of witnessing that it exhibits, the memoir offers a vastly different portrayal of missing and murdered women than many readers are used to. Opting to keep certain elements silent (such as the graphic details of Sarah’s rape, her drug use, and her death) and to focus instead on Sarah’s life both before and after her entrance into sex work and drug use, the memoir “[leaves] the gritty image of the sex worker behind and [asks us to begin] to see real people, real women, to look them in the eye and smile at them and want to know who they really are” (xv). However, I still worry that it is far too easy not to listen to or to notice the numerous silences that still exist within the text, ones which are critical parts of understanding Sarah’s story, ones which signify precisely the limits of representation that the memoir works towards exposing. This is both the gift and the curse of text as that which outlives flesh: one can hear a voice through words on a page and forget that that voice was once embodied. Ultimately, the presence of Sarah’s words is testimony to and evidence of her absence, her silence. Her death is that which haunts the text, from the cover photograph to the last word of the back blurb, which reminds us that it is Maggie’s tribute “to her late sister.” But the text is also haunted by the silences of dozens of other women, not just those in the sex trade who have been unable to tell their stories, but those who will never be capable of doing so: the dozens of other victims whose names grace the verso page at the beginning of each chapter. What does it mean for Maggie to hint towards their stories, but not say more about them? Is this silence a recognition of their presence, or an indication of Maggie’s position as someone who cannot speak for them? Is it
The deliberate marking of this silence has an effect that many other memoirs do not: it acknowledges the inability of one text, one author, or one experience to represent all or any other experiences of sexualized or gendered violence.

**Conclusion**

Women’s narratives about sexualized and gendered violence signal an important and necessary contribution to both public and private archives and discourses, particularly given the legacy of silence that is part and parcel of histories of gender violence, including the textual and archival violence of elision and erasure. As Cheryl Glenn notes, “silence has long been considered a lamentable essence of femininity, a trope for oppression, passivity, emptiness, stupidity, or obedience” (2). I also take seriously Audre Lorde’s injunction towards speech when she writes that “while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us” (44). However, as I have articulated in this chapter, there remain a number of serious concerns about the ways in which survivor speech is mandated and adjudicated.

In *Mapping Our Selves: Canadian Women’s Autobiography in English* (1993), Helen M. Buss offers an alternative approach to autobiographical criticism. Rather than viewing autobiography as a mirror of existing discourses, or suggesting that such mirroring is in fact desirable, Buss suggests that we look at life writing as a form of mapping. Beyond the different kinds of maps that can be created of a particular terrain—say, that of sexual violence—mapping “also recognizes that the world changes over time” (10). For Buss, conceiving of autobiography as a process of mapping recognizes both the palimpsest of layers in human subjects and the erosion of those layers; it recognizes that the contours of the world, the language people use to shape the
self, to communicate the self, the ways that language assigns meaning, creates symbols, have not always been the same. Indeed, mapping itself and its technologies change constantly, shifting and readjusting our concepts of the self and world. (11)

Perhaps most important in Buss’s argument is that mapping serves as a useful metaphor because “a map does not pretend to reflect the world [...] Problems with representing perspective, scale, size, relief, and the arts used to overcome these problems are externalized in the map itself” (11).

*Missing Sarah* does not claim to reflect the world of gender violence, but rather one very specific location and experience of it, and, more than that, it expands the scope to see where those maps intersect with others, both material (i.e. the physical location of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and experiential (i.e. sexual violence in the context of sex work, albeit not in the ways traditionally presented by media). The problems with representation, too—the problem of writing through loss, or the particular challenges that trauma always—already poses to representation itself—are always traced through de Vries’ work. To be clear, those texts which I define as more “conventional” autobiographies do not map trauma in “less useful” ways. There are not narratives that are “better” than others in charting the experience of sexual violence, for as Susanna Egan notes, memoir is always a “genre of crisis” as well as a genre *in* crisis. For some women, telling their stories in graphic, linear descriptions may well be a source of empowerment, particularly in a world that still often silences trauma. To say that these memoirs were somehow lacking, or necessarily coerced into dominant discourses of life-writing would be to wholly discredit the agency of their writers, a type of violence which, in my view, too-closely mirrors the denial of agency during a sexual assault itself. Yet, in attending to various nuances of genre, and in shifting them through both form and content, *Missing Sarah* expands the range of
possibilities for women to write about and through sexualized and gendered violence, including through various forms of silence.
Chapter 3: Staging Silence: Performative Possibilities in Colleen Wagner’s
_The Monument_ and Marie Clements’ _The Unnatural and Accidental Women_

**Prologue: Rehearsing Rape**

“I stopped going to the theatre,” wrote French feminist author Hélène Cixous in 1984, “[because] it was like going to my own funeral” (546). Gesturing towards just a few of the numerous women in classical theatre around whose deaths or assaults tragedy is writ large—Electra, Ophelia, Cordelia—Cixous argues that within the context of the theatre, “it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for a play to begin. Only when she has disappeared can the curtain go up; she is relegated to repression, to the grave, the asylum, to oblivion and silence” (546). In the more than thirty years since Cixous’s assertion, performance-makers, theatre-goers, and critics alike continue to wrestle with the implications of sexual violence on the stage, particularly in terms of the seemingly precarious line between staged assaults and incidents of real-life violence. As with many issues surrounding violence and representation, this debate is far from resolved. Contemporary theatrical productions (both in Canada and abroad) continue to prompt necessary questions about the many complexities of featuring violence on the stage: whom does the portrayal of violence serve? Are such portrayals recuperative and empowering, or objectifying and reductive? Can they be both at the same time? What ethical responsibilities are theatre-makers tasked with in their representations of violence, particularly in terms of plays that are based on real-life cases? In the paragraphs that follow, I discuss a number of recent productions that powerfully illustrate how staged violence continues to pose challenges for playwrights, actors, audience members, and critics alike.
In 2013, following the gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey—a young Indian woman who was attacked while traveling on a bus in Delhi—South African playwright Yael Farber premiered a piece at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival loosely based not only on Pandey’s tragic death but also on the larger epidemic of sexual and domestic violence. Entitled *Nirbhaya* (meaning “fearless,” it is the name by which Pandey was known before her identity was revealed), the play explores a variety of violations, from molestation to gang rape to acid attacks. Predictably, the play’s subject matter raised serious questions about the merits of art that revisits and represents many women’s daily realities. Noting that “most of the performers [had] experienced the abuse they acted out in front of us,” Tiffany Jenkins bluntly declared that the performance of *Nirbhaya* essentially amounted to “pay[ing] to see a woman raped and abused at the Edinburgh Fringe” (n.p.). Citing Scottish playwright Alan Bissett, who critiques pornography as a medium in which “women are raped as entertainment,” Jenkins asks us to reconsider the reasons why we consume such narratives and ultimately urges theatregoers to “look away from this filth” (n.p). Writing about the play nearly two years later in *The Independent*, Sarfraz Manzoor takes a vastly different approach to the play than Jenkins does. Similarly commenting on the real-life abuse faced by the actresses, Manzoor writes that “the women who tell their stories in the play are also fearless; it takes courage to break the silence in a culture where the fear of shame is so overpowering” (n.p.). Acknowledging that *Nirbhaya* is “not an easy play to witness,” and conveying through her interviews with the cast that the women do not report feeling a sense of catharsis, Manzoor nevertheless believes that the play may inspire change in the audience. Observing that the play ends “with each woman standing up, saying her name and slowly raising a fist in the air,” Manzoor suggests that they “do not look like victims: they are heroic, defiant” (n.p.), a stark contrast to Jenkins’ impression of a play which merely re-visits
images of battered and broken women. These vastly divergent arguments—one, which frames the play as spectacle in which female actors are objectified; the other, which views the actors as empowered and active agents—illustrate the particular dilemma of who theatre is seen as benefiting: the actors? Or the audience?

In 2014, a production of Shakespeare’s notoriously gory Titus Andronicus at London’s Globe Theatre was publicized with “a warning that it is ‘grotesquely violent and daringly experimental,’ with a ‘terrible cycle of mutilation, rape, and murder’” (Furness, n.p.). While Telegraph arts correspondent Hannah Furness notes that “with 14 deaths, brutal rape scenes, mutilation, and cannibalism, [the play] has never been one for the fainthearted,” the amount of violence and gore in this particular production took a significant toll on several audience members, five of whom fainted after seeing the character of Lavinia emerge after her brutal rape, with her tongue cut out and her hands cut off. Others, Furness reports, confirmed feeling ill and “warning of sleepless nights.” The Globe’s production of Titus Andronicus was not the first in England’s contemporary stage history to include such brutality, although the play’s gore has a long tradition of being toned down. As Florence Waters reports in a fascinating article on the make-up artistry involved for a different production staged by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 2013, many iterations of the play have turned towards the symbolic rather than the realistic, including the use of red ribbons rather than blood. Yet, as Waters points out, citing director Michael Fentiman, modern audiences are drawn to such plays precisely because of their extravagant violence and gore: “Quentin Tarantino’s films prove that the kill-rate of a play like Titus Andronicus isn’t wholly unattractive to a modern audience.” However, Fentiman is clear that while the “taps will open…and there will be buckets of [blood],” there must still be meaning in its inclusion on the stage, and that it must “be very carefully handled” (Furness, n.p.).
Fentiman’s caution about the need to carefully handle blood onstage also point to the theatre’s fundamental differences with media such as film. Onstage, violence is immediate and physical—and perhaps most importantly, staged in real-time, with no opportunity for editing.

Contemporary Canadian theatre has seen similar controversies, most recently with the 2013 premiere of Governor General award-winning playwright Colleen Murphy’s play *Pig Girl*. Murphy’s play, which is more-than-loosely based on the crimes committed by Robert Pickton at his pig farm in Port Coquitlam, B.C., graphically details “The Killer’s” violence against the female protagonist—named only “The Dying Woman,” an appellation that Cixous would no doubt take issue with. “The Dying Woman” and “The Killer” are joined onstage by “The Police Officer” and “The Sister”—who represent, respectively, the indifference of the authorities and the frustrated desperation of loved ones of murdered and missing women. Murphy’s contentious decision to stage graphic violence itself is reflected in reviews of the play, which themselves also make significant representative choices about how much violence to reveal. In her extended piece on *Pig Girl*—which features a lengthy discussion of the play’s issues of racial representation, including the non-Indigenous playwright and cast members—Paula Simons of the *Edmonton Journal* begins with a no-holds-barred description of what unfolds onstage:

> At the centre of the stage, we watch, with horrified, sickened fascination as a woman, a sex trade worker from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside fights for her life, using her wits, her guile, her physical strength to try to escape the rural pig barn where she’s being held captive. In real time, we watch her captor rape her, abuse her, taunt her, and, eventually, hang her by a meat hook, then strangle her with his legs. She screams in pain. She screams for help. She screams for her mother, her sister, her dog. It is theatre
so visceral, so upsetting, so difficult to watch, people kept getting up to leave as the show progressed. (n.p.)

In an interview with Murphy, Simons questions the decision to include such a high level of violence, to which Murphy responds that she “wanted the play to be violent, that disturbing, because she wanted us to all bear witness to the kind of suffering and terror Pickton’s victims must have felt.” Yet, as Simons queries, “[is] there a point where bearing witness to a staged rape and murder veers into a kind of sadistic voyeurism? When the audience is watching a sort of sexually titillating live snuff film? At what point are we implicated in the killer’s own sadosexual pathology?” Ultimately, Simons decides that “the shocking on-stage violence of the play is morally problematic,” but as I note, she herself at least partially replicates this violence as the opening to her own review.

While expressing similar concerns about Pig Girl, Edmonton Sun writer Colin MacLean takes a different approach in his review and is careful to self-reflexively question his own complicity or responsibility as a reviewer. MacLean begins by describing the content note apparently featured in the lobby before the play: “The warning in the lobby for Theatre Network’s unsettling production of Colleen Murphy’s Pig Girl lays it out for you. It warns of the extreme violence to come. Take it seriously.” After briefly explaining the historical context and the plot of the play, MacLean then takes a restrained yet bitingly critical approach to his description of its violence, with a nod to articles or reviews that graphically describe it:

Bound and suffering in the centre of the stage is what Murphy calls “The Dying Woman” (Nadine Chu) and with a name like that there’s not much suspense there.

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17 To be clear, MacLean’s article was published on November 8th, 2013, while Simons’ was published on November 16th, 2013, thus making it impossible that his critique was specifically about her piece.
Presiding over it all is the filthy and menacing “Killer” (Randy Hughson). For eighty-five minutes we watch as The Dying Woman is violated, tortured and finally ... Well, you probably have read the details and there is not much value in repeating them here. And, despite Bradley Moss’ real and wrenching production, I see little value in repeating it in such detail on a stage.

The anxieties in Simons’ and MacLean’s reviews are compelling: even as Simons recounts the violence, she articulates being deeply morally unsettled by it; although MacLean’s job requires him to describe the play, he seems to wrestle with its very existence on the Edmonton stage, expressing a Cixous-like exhaustion with viewing such depictions of cruelty.

The plays of Farber, Shakespeare, and Murphy are all different, and they each make a variety of theatrical choices, informed not only by their historical and social contexts, but also by the declared intentions of their playwrights, directors, and actors. While I agree with Lucy Nevitt’s contention that “writers and performance-makers do not engage in the study and depiction of violence because they like or admire violence, but because they profoundly dislike it and seek to contribute to the making of a more peaceful and less violent world” (75), the often-divergent reviews of each play demonstrate that onstage violence is anything but a subject towards which reviewers and theatre-goers are merely ambivalent, and that the effects of staged violence depend on much more than the performance-makers’ motives or intentions.

At this juncture, I must emphasize that this controversy over the representation of violence is not necessarily unique to theatre, as is evidenced by the other chapters of this dissertation, which take up life writing and fiction. And certainly, the debates sparked within other visual forms—film, television, photography—as well as increasingly within digital
communities, illustrate that such discussions are nuanced across and in-between various genres and media. Yet, as a mode of storytelling that maintains a unique relationship to violence precisely because of its form of embodiment—live and in real-time, with an audience—theatrical depictions of violence offer a particularly rich avenue of inquiry into the relationships between experience, representation, and witnessing. Unlike textual or strictly oral forms of narration, performance does not necessarily only represent violent acts (if we are to define representation as the movement between experience and language) but also potentially re-enacts them. As Lucy Nevitt observes within the specific context of sexual violence, “the spectators are not encountering ‘rape’ as an abstract concept, they are witnessing two actual bodies in that specific relationship of powerful sexual aggressor and powerless victim” (33). How, then, do we take seriously the imperatives of theatre critics such as Lyn Gardner, who writes that “a theatre which did not contemplate violence would be a theatre which was turning a blind eye to the realities of the world in which we live” (n.p), while also heeding the critiques of feminist writers such as Cixous, who asks how we can “go to the theatre without lending our complicity to the sadism directed against women, or being asked to assume, in the patriarchal family structure that the theatre reproduces ad infinitum, the position of victim?” (546). Are theatremakers, as Alvis Hermanis argues, “still convinced that the best way to communicate with the audience is by

18 In the past year, discussions of violence against women as featured in video games culminated in the notorious GamerGate scandal, in which female game developers and critics were viciously and brutally targeted with threats and harassment precisely for their views on such violence and gender inequity in gaming. Indeed, the value of representing or replicating violence in mainstream media and entertainment continues to be a hotbed of debate, controversy, and, indeed, legitimately grave concerns for those who speak out against violence in entertainment. Video games are not alone: television shows such as Law and Order: SVU, CSI, and Criminal Minds often feature the violations or murders of women as the inciting action to their plots; indeed, the enduring popularity of these franchises can be said to be rooted in the predictability of these (often sexually) violent plots, particularly when such stories are “ripped from the headlines.” Moreover, despite shows such as Law and Order: SVU ostensibly supporting real-life victims via the show’s supposed advocacy, victims have complained about their stories being appropriated (without consent) as plot-lines, most notably in a 2013 episode which wove together several notable American survivors’ stories of campus rape.
using aggression and violence” (8), having long exhausted (or distorted) the effects of radical techniques such as Antonin Artaud’s theatres of cruelty? Do realistic portrayals of violence provoke compassionate responses on the part of the audience, or do they risk merely effecting emotional manipulation and shallow pretenses of identification, as critiqued by Bertolt Brecht? 

Although I cannot address these questions comprehensively or prescriptively, I turn to two pieces of contemporary theatre written in Canada, Colleen Wagner’s The Monument (1996) and Marie Clements’ The Unnatural and Accidental Women (2005), as a means of productively interrogating these questions, as well as discovering ways in which theatremakers are taking up the challenge of addressing gendered and sexualized violence. While numerous works of Canadian and Indigenous theatre have explored the topic, be it with reference to personal experiences (Aguirre), as loosely based on events in Canada (Ryga, Highway), or with regard to sexual violence in the world of seventeenth-century Italian art (Clark), I argue that Wagner and

19 In Theatre and its Double (1958), Artaud argued that a renewal of culture would begin with a “protest against the idea of culture as distinct from life as if there were culture on one side and life on the other” (10). Namely, Artaud’s argument was that theatre cannot be considered as autonomous, but as informing and informed by society and history. This led Artaud to the creation of an outline for what he called the “theatre of cruelty,” a series of techniques by which theatrical productions could unsettle audiences and explore the depths and contradictions of human life. As Albert Bermel notes, Artaud’s theory was more about an overhaul of theatrical norms, rather than outright violence (although, as Hermanis’s statements might exemplify, there has been conflation of cruelty with violence within the theatre). In my reading of Artaud, however, I see “cruelty” as a term for that which undoes the merely intellectual or the merely fetishizing gaze of the theatregoer. By using various techniques to enlarge the vocabulary of the theatre, including an emphasis on noise, music, colour, and human noises, Bermel suggests that Artaud’s technique would cause audience members to “surrender themselves to a performance, live through it and feel it, rather than merely think about it” (7).

20 Like Artaud, Brecht’s critique of contemporary theatre was related to its relative depoliticization as mere entertainment. Brecht’s main critique was related to the emotional manipulation of the theatre, which caused audiences (and actors) to falsely identify themselves with the characters, even when, as L.M. Bogad points out, “the character had nothing in common with them or their interests.” Such emotional manipulation, Brecht argued, was also embedded in the materiality of the theatre and its usual techniques: the fourth wall, realistic sets, naturalistic lighting, etc. In response, Brecht developed what he called the “Verfremdungseffekt” (or alienation effect). Like Artaud’s “theatre of cruelty” and historian Dominick LaCapra’s later development of “empathic unsettlement,” the alienation effect was designed to provoke self-critique, to incite questions about ways in which political actors themselves use theatre and spectacle as tools of emotional manipulation, and to transform theatre into social criticism.

Clements’ plays not only employ unprecedented techniques to deal with the subject matter (in terms of staging and characterization) but also importantly offer more than the usual trajectory of violence and victimization.

Wagner’s play, situated loosely in the context of the Bosnian genocide, explores the dynamic between Stetko, a young war criminal, and Mejra, an elder in the village, who holds him to account for his crimes. Rather than hearing from the victims themselves, audiences are asked to consider the complex positions of both the perpetrator and the witness, as well as the meaning of justice and accountability. Speech does not come easily: indeed, the play is littered with silences as both individuals struggle to make sense of their own stories and the depths of the horrors Stetko has committed. Yet, in giving a voice to the perpetrator, one which challenges characterizations of rapists and murderers as merely evil, audience members are asked to question the ways in which violence can be reconciled with humanity. Clements’ play, which takes on the real-life cases of women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside whose deaths at the hands of Gilbert Paul Jordan were ruled as “unnatural or accidental,” not only explores the negligence of the authorities, but also makes room for the spectral presence of Jordan’s victims to carry out their own form of justice: killing him. Rather than simply emulating plays which offer revenge as a plot point or outcome, Clements’ work chooses instead to investigate and deconstruct the very discourses and locations of justice that audience members may be familiar with. As a means of critiquing the methodologies underlying juridical conceptions of justice, Clements juxtaposes sound and silence in order to convey how injury is either heard or dismissed, and the consequences of deliberately choosing not to hear those who speak out against oppression.
Whether through journeys that lead to the possibility of redemption (Wagner) or the enactment of a different kind of justice (Clements), both plays embody what performance theorist Jill Dolan calls “utopian performatives,” defined as “small but profound moments” which “make palpable an affective vision of how the world might be better” (5-6). For Dolan, who relates this concept to the theatrical traditions of Brecht (among others), utopian performatives are not prescriptive but are predicated on presence and possibility, on spectators’ engaged experiences with the work itself as well as their capacity to be “rallied to hope for the possibility of realizing improved social relations” (14). Rather than merely rehearsing the same outcomes or inevitabilities (i.e. death and/or revenge), both plays unsettle audiences by asking them to consider how they themselves rehearse and stage narratives of violence in their own understandings and interpretations of the issue. So too, do both plays press up against the limits of genre, exposing the uneasy relationship between theatricality and real life: in The Monument, the theatres of the courtroom and the stage are at times indiscernible from each other; in The Unnatural and Accidental Women, the audience members’ viewing of the lives and deaths of Jordan’s victims—which, in the conventions of the theatre, situates their spectatorship as mute and inactive—eerily mirrors the quiet, complicitous gaze of many Canadians to violence against Indigenous women.

Lucy Nevitt writes that “a piece of theatre is a collaborative act of imagination in which theatre-makers and their audiences can explore known possibilities and fantasies as well as reconsidering known realities” (6). By re-working sounds and silences to shift performative expectations, Wagner’s and Clements’ plays invite audiences to actively participate not only in challenging existing portrayals and understandings of sexualized and gendered violence, but also
in creating new performative possibilities, ones which have the capacity to be carried out from the collective community of the theatre into civic life and relationships.

A Long, Long Silence: Unsilencing Perpetrator Narratives

Silencing victims in favour of hearing perpetrators’ accounts is a contentious approach to elucidating the issue of sexual violence: indeed, it has often been framed as an illogical or deeply dangerous course of action. Acknowledging the likelihood that perpetrators may deny their actions, blame victims, or otherwise be less than forthcoming, these narratives are generally given less credibility or importance (perhaps, at times, rightfully so). However, perpetrators’ accounts of their actions have historically been integral to processes ranging from the prosecution of war crimes to the securing of a confession for the purposes of an individual assault case. As citizens, and perhaps also as spectators, we continue to remain fascinated by their stories.

Two recent documentaries on sexual assault, for instance—Lesley Udwin’s India’s Daughter (2015) and Kirby Dick’s The Hunting Ground (2015)—both feature interviews with convicted rapists. In the case of Udwin’s documentary (based on Jyoti Singh Pandey’s gang rape and murder) the interview is with one of Pandey’s attackers, Mukesh Singh. Interviewed from his prison cell, where he awaits a death sentence, Singh is said to show no remorse for his victim (Sarkar). Given this content, India’s Ministry of Information and Broadcasting banned all news channels from airing the documentary, citing as its reason that “the excerpts appear to encourage and incite violence against women” (Park & Singh). This ban on the documentary raises a key concern about depictions of violence and its ability to act upon audience members. While there are significant concerns about the ways in which representations of violence may
psychologically injure or harm the audience member, there remain ongoing anxieties about whether or not such representations (i.e. video games in particular) also have the capacity to incite viewers or audience members to engage in violent acts themselves. Representations of assault, therefore, are not merely educational in the sense that they elucidate an issue; rather, they become potentially instructional.

In order to bolster their argument about rape on college and university campuses, *Hunting Ground* director Kirby Dick and producer Amy Ziering tracked down, as Eliana Dockterman notes, “someone rarely heard from in this debate: a convicted rapist. The man, whose face is blurred out, describes the ease with which he and fellow college students would deploy alcohol as a weapon to incapacitate girls and assault them.” Whether our fascination lies in the YouTube video of the confession of convicted Canadian rapist and murderer Russell Williams, the 2010 Oprah special which featured interviews with convicted child molesters, the controversial thread on the popular website Reddit, in which redditors “from the other side of the [sexual assault] story” were asked to detail “their motivations” for sexual crimes, the consumption of convicted and alleged perpetrator narratives is avid, regardless of one’s opinion on the values or potential dangers of their public circulation. However, as demonstrated by the censorship of *India’s Daughter*, as well as a psychiatrist’s critique of the Reddit rapist confessional as both “very possibly triggering rape cravings in rapists” as well as “teaching

22 On one video footage of former colonel Russell Williams’ murder confession featured in an episode of CBC’s *The Fifth Estate*, YouTube commenters state that “this is remarkable footage,” “one of the most superb films in the History of Criminology.” While the commenters marvel, in part, at Williams’ pathology, they also demonstrate a fascination with and admiration for Ontario Provincial Police Detective Jim Smyth’s interrogative techniques (which are now used as training tools for other investigators). In this way, a perpetrator’s narrative serves not merely as spectacle, but as a site of valuable inquiry and knowledge for investigators who seek to help shape the narrative process for the purposes of securing a confession.
rapists how to rape better,” it is clear that some strategies for including or framing these discussions are more contentious than others, and that while these stories may serve to support advocates’ and victims’ arguments about the beliefs and intents of perpetrators, they may also (echoing Cixous’ concerns) merely serve as a spotlight or stage for unrepentant violence.

These representative dilemmas—faced by journalists and artists alike—are unenviable. On the one hand, keeping rapists’ voices silenced risks relegating them to the shadows, painted as incomprehensible, evil monsters lurking on the fringes of society, rather than as individuals whose actions and attitudes are embedded in and shaped by a variety of social, cultural, economic, and political relationships. As Terry Eagleton warns in his profound meditation, *On Evil*, such characterizations also do not really tend to hold perpetrators accountable: “if we are not to humanize these ogres, so the assumption goes, there must simply be no rhyme or reason in their actions. But it is precisely the fact that they are human that makes what terrorists [or other criminals] do so appalling. If they really were inhuman, we might not be in the least surprised by their behaviours” (9). As Eagleton later elaborates, those we consider to be evil or to do evil things are not simply aimless or purposeless. While they may “seem to lay waste simply for the hell of it […] we have already seen that they visit violence upon those who pose a threat to their own identity. [They] also smash and sabotage to ease the hellish conflict in which they are caught […] the evil are in pain, and like a lot of people in pain will go to extreme lengths to find relief” (103). Far from simply excusing perpetrators’ actions or invoking perpetrator trauma as a means of garnering sympathy, Eagleton is pointing to a broader argument about the possibility for reparative and restorative forms of justice, including a large shift in the sociocultural, economic, and political structures that are also part and parcel in shaping perpetrators’ beliefs and attitudes.
Far from suggesting that perpetrator narratives should be disseminated widely and uncritically—bearing in mind the effects that these might have on victims and witnesses alike—I am, nevertheless, curious about how they can be shaped, presented, and distributed in ways that might serve Eagleton’s suggestion of creating a more nuanced understanding of how violence occurs. What might it mean for us to un-silence perpetrators and listen to them? What might it mean to understand the ways in which they may also suffer injury, and how do we address the suffering of those who inflict harm? As Dominick LaCapra points out, “there is the possibility of perpetrator trauma which must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices” (79). If “such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator with the victim” (79), what strategies must we use in order to achieve a form of ethical distance? What do we do in situations where victims no longer remain to testify to their injuries, where perpetrators also become the sole witnesses to what has transpired? If, as Dolan has argued, theatre can be a venue in which difficult stories can still achieve reconciliatory or redemptive moments through utopian performatives, how precisely can theatre stage perpetrator narratives? Is it enough to merely have a play that ends on a positive note? Which dramatic techniques might aid in creating a complex, layered, considerate narrative that balances the stories of victims and witnesses with those of perpetrators?

Colleen Wagner’s The Monument offers a unique example of how these questions are negotiated, although, as I will argue, the play’s ending—in which perpetrator and witness somewhat hastily and oddly enter into a moment of tender and tentative forgiveness—is not necessarily what is most interesting or transformative about Wagner’s storytelling. Indeed, I find myself somewhat ambivalent about many critics’ readings of the ending of the play, in which,
after enacting the same kind of physical violence she disdains in the perpetrator, Mejra (the mother and witness) realizes that revenge is not the answer. The play, which in Wagner’s stage directions, “ends on a slow fade on the monument of Mejra and Stetko in a moment of possibilities” (85), is said, by director Richard Rose, to “[leave] the characters at the fulcrum of change and the audience at the tipping point of judgment” (vi). As Rose point out, the play is unwilling or unable to come to a point of ethical or moral certainty; yet, despite this ambiguity, it also opens the door for possibilities for hope. Yet, I am much more interested in how Wagner gets to this ending, rather than the fact that she ultimately does. As a play that traces the uneasy relationship between the humanity and the inhumanity of a perpetrator, between the seemingly justifiable and the wholly unjustifiable, *The Monument* utilizes a series of distinct tactics to either elicit or suppress information. More than simply a play in which a perpetrator confesses horrific crimes and the grieving mother of one of his victims holds him to account, *The Monument* is concerned with how information is hindered or helped in its transmission. Wagner achieves this through the deliberate use of a wide vocabulary of silences: voids into which questions fall, pauses in which hesitation occurs, contemplative stillness, awkward speechlessness. Indeed, while the play appears to be about a plethora of speech (both confessional and otherwise), it is ultimately a story about what cannot be said about violence, by whom, and why. Yet, far from being solely a site of impossibility, silences serve as Dolan’s utopian performatives, as places in which speech itself no longer becomes necessary, and quiet serves a distinct and powerful purpose.

*The Monument* is bursting with silences. An inventory of the stage directions in the 85-page manuscript of the play reveals 27 “pauses,” 29 “silences,” 4 “long silences,” 4 “long, long silences,” and 3 instances of “no response.” There are some other indications of a lack of speech:
at one point, for instance, Stetko “goes to speak but thinks better of it” (20), and Mejra “stops for a breath” (21). Such distinctions between various types of silence is testament not only to the precision with which Wagner conceives of the dialogue, but is also an indication of the incredible challenge faced by the actors to translate each instance with the depth, breadth, and weight with which it is intended. Of course, silences are expected within the theatre, as they are within regular conversations, be they written or spoken. Pauses, even as brief as the breaths indicated by commas, semi-colons, and periods, shape and define how we communicate.

In *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, Cheryl Glenn makes a helpful distinction between expected and unexpected silences, offering as examples that “in a courtroom, we must stand silently when the judge enters, when people are testifying, when the attorneys are talking, or we will be charged with contempt of court. At the funeral home, we cannot chat or laugh; we are supposed to speak in hushed tones, if at all” (11). Glenn notes that “expected silence can carry meaning (such as respect), and unexpected silences, silences delivered instead of language, can carry meaning too. Expected silences can go unrecognized, but unexpected silences are quickly labeled” (11). Whether through a lack of response from a friend that worries us or through “speech blunders” such as forgetting what we were about to say, unexpected silences unnerve us, making visible the structures of speech that often go unnoticed. In the theatre, however, silences are augmented, heightened. The pact of silence taken by the audience as part of their attendance at the show frames the entire performative experience from beginning to end. As the lights dim, pre-performance chatter quiets into a rapt hush as an audience waits for the curtain to rise. As the play unfolds, audiences’ silence conveys the traditional type of expected silence: respect. A wayward cough is often suppressed or muffled with embarrassment; the buzz of a mobile phone or the unwrapping of a particularly loud piece of candy is looked at askance, often with derision
or annoyance. As the play comes to a conclusion, the audience watches and listens intently for cues that the performance has come to a definitive end: the silence is often broken by a few tentative claps that then give way to the whole audience’s participation in congratulating the performers. Like the sounds that unceremoniously disrupt performances, breaking the audiences’ pact with the actors, so too can silences emanating from the stage seem to unceremoniously disrupt audiences’ comfort level and expectations.

Right from the start, The Monument uses silence to complicate audiences’ expectations. The play begins in medias res, with Stetko strapped to an electric chair, confessing his crimes:

STETKO: The one I liked best was seventeen, maybe
Eighteen.
And pretty. With watery eyes.
Like a doe’s.
She was like that.
I was her first.
I mean, she was a virgin. (4)

As he speaks in vague terms about this particular rape, Stetko pauses briefly, after a mere 14 short lines of dialogue. Wagner seems to be testing the audience here, letting them absorb (if only for a few moments) the context of a criminal confessing to his crimes while ostensibly also facing the death penalty. At this first pause, one might wonder: is this the beginning of an apology? Will there be remorse? How much could a man on the electric chair possibly have to say?

After the first pause, Stetko switches abruptly to a discussion of his own motives, declaring that he doesn’t “care for orgasm for some men” (4) while also detailing encounters
with the doctors who have attempted (and seemingly) failed to figure out how and why he came
to be “like this” (4). Two pages and 52 lines of script pass before he pauses again, after
confessing that he doesn’t remember where the bodies of his victims are. Yet, this pause is only a
brief respite for both Stetko and the audience, as he launches into a three-page monologue
detailing not only his fraught relationship with his girlfriend (with whom we learn that Stetko has
not yet had sex), the apparent pressures placed on him by his fellow soldiers to commit his first
rape and murder, and the terribly young age—just seventeen—at which he enlisted in the army.
“The other men forced me,” (7) Stetko says, later confessing that “everybody was doing it. I
don’t know why” (8). After this long diatribe, in which Stetko’s conflicting status as both a
perpetrator and a young, naïve soldier is revealed, two pauses frame a particularly interesting
piece of his monologue: his first apologies.

STETKO: I’m not proud of what I did and I’m sorry my girl-
friend found out.

I’m sorry we couldn’t do it before I die.

The previous pauses have seemed to lead up to this moment; after all, the death-row apology is a
frequently expected narrative trope, if not a reality. Yet, the pauses serve only to highlight and
frame the reality of Stetko’s frame of mind. His regrets and apologies are a strange conflation: on
the one hand, he demonstrates a distinct sense of shame for his actions, but only insofar as being
cought has impacted his relationship (and the potential of sex) with his girlfriend. Before the
audience gets a chance to ponder his sincerity, Stetko picks up the narrative again with the
gruesome details of one of his rapes and murders. After the next pause, he shifts into a reflective
tone, offering a rather convincing philosophical argument for the complex and irrational state of
exception that leads to wartime assault:
STETKO: If war is a crime why do we keep having them?
Why isn’t everybody arrested?
They show us porno films and tell us doing it to
women is good for morale and they bring women
in and then after the war is over they tell us what we
did is a crime.
After it’s over you find out there were rules.
Like no raping women. (10)

Stetko, we are reminded in the stage directions, is not only speaking to the actual audience of the theatre, but also to “spectators sitting in a gallery behind or around him” (3). The imagined spectators, like the real-life audience, must remain silent in the face of these questions, tempting as it might be to erupt with answers to his obviously provocative questions. Stetko’s seven pages of dialogue end with bitter resignation and indifference: “I don’t care who wins the war. It was just a job. I guess rape is just part of it” (11). It is at this point, presumably when the audience is already feeling the distinct discomfort of having listened to a seemingly endless monologue of horrors as the start of their theatrical experience, that Mejra enters. Like the silences of the play, Mejra is difficult to grasp at first: “she’s dressed in black and stands to Stetko’s right, which makes it difficult for him to see her” (11).

It is here that the pauses stop, and another form of quiet makes its intervention: the silence. After Stetko’s monologue, it is hard to tell whether the silence is welcome, or whether the context of its existence (the appearance of Mejra, who Stetko presumes to be the executioner) signals yet another disturbing turn of events that the audience is merely helpless to watch.

Sensing Mejra’s presence, there is a long, long silence before Stetko asks if she is the
executioner. There is no response. “I guess it’s only fitting that a woman do it,” (11) says Stetko. Silence. “I’m as ready as I’ll ever be. I guess. I suppose going for a piss before we begin is out of the question.” He laughs. She remains silent. Stetko, aggravated with the perceived demands of Mejra’s silence, confronts her: “I’m not going to say I’m sorry if that’s what you’re waiting for. […] It won’t make me a better man” (13). After Mejra finally responds—“Won’t it?” (13) — silence becomes a framing device to contextualize Stetko’s troubled relationship to remorse, much like the previous pauses.

STETKO: I’M SORRY.

Silence.

I don’t mean it, of course, and so how can I expect forgiveness. (13)

Unlike the pauses, which signaled Stetko’s negotiation of speech in the absence of a direct interaction with others, the silences herald something entirely different: relationality. For Stetko, Mejra’s silence is perceived as an injunction to speech, and not just any kind of speech: confessional speech, speech designed to make amends; speech that also performs an action.

While Mejra ends up taking Stetko into captivity, forcing him to work for her while he is chained, both Stetko and Mejra continue to use silence as a bartering tool. In this complex dance between the characters, silences in particular become ways of revealing that their positions as captor and captive, witness and perpetrator, are never so simply defined. Stetko employs silence as a means of provocation, a way of demonstrating that while Mejra may have physical dominion over his body, he retains control over how much information he shares. Because Stetko is both

23 Here, I am speaking of J.L. Austin’s notion of “performatives” in How To Do Things With Words. Austin states that there are cases “in which to say something is to do something; or in which by saying or in saying something we are doing something,” (12) countering the notion that language only ever merely states something. Throughout the play, the speech act of the apology is frequently contested and interrogated, precisely because the action it performs is measurable often only by and through its very articulation, without concrete or tangible outcomes.
the perpetrator and witness to his crimes, he is fully aware of the power of the information he has: the location of the bodies of his victims. Mejra employs similar techniques, taunting Stetko with pieces of information about his girlfriend that she often refuses to confirm or deny. “She’s dead,” (22) claims Mejra, after which there is a silence. When Stetko pleads with her to “tell him she’s] lying” (23), Mejra acquiesces, but follows up the statement once again with a silence. “I have a right to know the truth!” pleads Stetko, clearly becoming aggravated by Mejra’s psychological manipulation. Mejra counters with a long, long silence. Her refusal to give Stetko the information he desires triggers his own insecurities and paranoias, mirroring the same kind of behaviour he enacts with Mejra when he claims he “can’t remember” where the bodies of the victims are placed:

STETKO: She’s alive.
I know it.
You’re playing games with my mind.
I know about mind games.

This scene signals a reversal of roles, and indicates yet another in which Wagner works to complicate the roles of victim, witness, and perpetrator. While certainly not equivalent to Stetko’s violent use of women’s bodies for sexual pleasure, Mejra also enacts violence against a woman’s body. While her use of Stetko’s girlfriend’s body is figurative (rather than literal) violence, it nevertheless calls into question the various tactics used against perpetrators in order to solicit confessions, and situates Mejra as a complex and dynamic witness, rather than simply a passive stand-in for confessional culture.

As the play progresses towards the ending, spanning the search for bodies and the building of a monument, silences, pauses, and long silences become more intertwined. There are
philosophical pauses as the characters reconcile their own actions and grief. Silences begin to serve no longer solely as tools of manipulation but as sites that accurately reflect the limitations and impossibilities of speech, including the difficulty of recalling memories. There are, however, two silences that dominate the last few pages of the play. After Stetko confesses to having killed Mejra’s daughter Ana, she strikes him with such force that she believes she has killed him.

“Mejra pursues him and strikes him a single hard blow to the head. He falls still and silent, his feet extending beyond the bodies. Silence” (79). For the first time in the play, silence seems to be terrifyingly final, which also signals its immense power. Of course, Stetko is not really dead, but merely injured, and he confronts Mejra about her desire to wield silence in such profoundly destructive ways. For both Stetko and Mejra, this brush with silence’s most grave consequences is obviously a profoundly transformative moment. Yet, despite the play’s unusually optimistic ending, the heavy presence of silence is neither wholly inescapable nor resolved.

Ultimately, we are still confronted with the gaping silences left by the numerous women killed by Stetko, whose dead bodies form part of the monument that he has built under duress. This is, perhaps, the most effective and most damning part of Wagner’s work; a part that I argue is frequently overlooked in many readings of the play. Gilbert McInnis, for instance, argues that through the act of forgiveness, Mejra’s “earlier monument to violence has been transformed into a monument of reconciliation” (90). Yet, the final stage directions and dialogue do not necessarily indicate that such reconciliation is easily achieved, if at all. While Mejra asks Stetko how she can forgive him, and while Stetko finally articulates his remorse, there is no deliberate indication that allows us to read the play’s ending as simply suturing up the echoing silences that have resonated throughout the previous scenes.
While the stage directions indicate that “Mejra unconsciously makes a movement in [Stetko’s] direction” (85), it is vital to note that she does not respond. Stetko’s request for forgiveness, after all, is not phrased as a question. Rather, it is stated as a demand, an imperative, one to which victims are too-often accustomed to: “Forgive me” (85). Both Mejra as character and Wagner as playwright use silence one last time to withhold information, and to resist the easy conclusion. The utopian performative here, I argue, is not that Mejra actually forgives Stetko, but rather, that the power to forgive is placed squarely in her hands to do with what she will: it will not be demanded by the State, nor by the perpetrator, nor even by audiences who readily seek a neat, happy ending to their discomfort. Having made the contentious choice to give space to the voice of a perpetrator, Wagner is careful to ensure that the play does not merely replicate the injunction for forgiveness that so often circulates around confessional discourses. While Stetko may have the last line of the play, it is through her powerful silences that Mejra, ultimately, decides who has the last word.

Selective Hearing: Silence and Relationality in The Unnatural and Accidental Women

When it comes to speaking out about sexual violence, it matters not only who appears to have the last word, but also who is said to have had the first word; that is to say, who is seen as bringing important conversations to the fore, and thus as an authority or leader on any particular aspect of sexualized or gendered oppression. In the fall of 2014, as CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi faced multiple allegations (and subsequent charges) of sexual and physical assault, Canadian media suddenly became a very noisy environment. While discussions of sexualized and gendered violence had made headlines in years prior, particularly with regards to rape chants and sexual harassment on Canadian college and university campuses, national coverage of this...
issue in mainstream media was unprecedented. For several weeks, both private and public national broadcasters and newspapers convened panels, published thoughtful and comprehensive stories about the issue of sexual violence, and promised to continue$^{24}$ the national conversation on this topic. Indeed, the allegations of violence against Ghomeshi arrived at a moment when Canadians were frequently being reminded of the presence of sexual violence in Canadian culture, even within treasured national institutions and organizations such as the CBC, the RCMP, the military, and prominent post-secondary programs.

As writer Denise Balkissoon quickly noted, no less than a week after the Ghomeshi allegations first emerged, characterizations of the incident as a “watershed moment” in Canadian history were not only grossly inaccurate, but also patently misleading. “Why is now that moment?” Balkissoon asked: “why wasn’t it when Robert Pickton dismembered dozens of women’s bodies in Port Coquitlam, B.C., and fed them to his pigs?” Bitterly reflecting that “if only there had been other opportunities: hundreds of Indigenous women in this country [going] missing, going back decades,” Balkissoon’s article not only criticizes the continued negligence of the federal government as various law enforcement agencies, but also the ignorance of decades of Indigenous women’s organizing of anti-violence initiatives, including memorial marches and direct calls for a national inquiry into murdered and missing Indigenous women. Linking the issue of violence against Indigenous women to larger failures by the state to address sexual violence, Balkissoon expresses both disbelief and distrust in the nation’s newly-apparent attitude of enlightenment and action.

$^{24}$ One such example includes #Project97, an initiative spearheaded by Rogers Media. Through its broadcasting and media outlets, including Chatelaine, Maclean’s, Canadian Business, Flare, Today’s Parent, Chatelaine, L’actualité, and City News, the project is designed to address issues of sexual assault, abuse and harassment from various angles. The program takes its name from the statistic that “the vast majority of sexual assaults against women in this country—about 97 per cent—are never recorded as crimes by police.”
In thinking specifically through the continued ignorance of systemic colonial violence against Indigenous women, I am reminded of an old philosophical and scientific question, one that calls into question our ability to listen \(^{25}\) and respond: “if a tree falls in a forest, and nobody is around to hear it, does it make a sound?” On the one hand, the answer is deceptively simple: in the absence of a subject possessing auditory receptors, the sound is not heard, but the sound waves themselves still physically exist. On the other hand, the answer—and indeed, the question itself—is much more complex, involving careful considerations of the relationships between forces, events, and their effects on and knowledge by human beings. It is of little surprise, then, that this particular example has become a stand-in for the greater questions surrounding experience and witnessing. If something is not witnessed—be it through auditory, visual, or tactile means—did it really happen? Must an event or a force act upon us directly in order to be legitimized, or like the sound waves themselves, do they still leave a trace, even in our absence or our reduced ability to readily perceive them? For instance: if Indigenous women and girls go missing or are murdered, and the State does not pay attention, how are these deaths and disappearances made to matter in terms of State-based protections against violence?

In *Precarious Life*, Judith Butler takes up this issue by asking us whose deaths are considered grievable, whose lives and whose losses fit into “culturally viable notions of the human” (33). In this sense, Butler is not only asking whether or not the unattended trees in the forest make a sound, but rather, if we even consider the trees to exist at all. To pose these

\(^{25}\) I wish to stress that the use of aural analyses or metaphors can be difficult to navigate, particularly when they intersect with notions of ability and disability, such as hearing and deafness. It is for this reason that I choose very specifically not to describe political acts of not listening through the language of the Deaf community, i.e. as “deafness” or as being “deaf to” something. While my arguments focus specifically on silence and speech as they are enacted in the physical performance spaces of the theatre, they are also as much about these elements as textual indicators of speech (given that I am writing about things such as stage directions) as well as terms which stand in for more abstract, ideological conceptions about how information is or is not transmitted or received.
questions about how lives are not only delegitimized but also made unreal is, as Butler says, to prompt “an insurrection at the level of ontology, a critical opening up of [a number of] questions” (33). Butler asks us to consider the following:

What is real? Whose lives are real? How might reality be remade? Those who are unreal have, in a sense, already suffered the violence of derealization. What, then, is the relation between violence and those lives considered as ‘unreal’? Does violence effect that unreality? Does violence take place on the condition of that unreality? (33)

In terms of the relationship between violence and the theatre, then, I might ask how performance itself either participates in or works against this violence of derealization, bearing in mind Cixous’ reminder that it is precisely at the moment of derealization that the spectacle of theatre begins.

In considering violence against Indigenous women in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside, Marie Clements draws on these questions of violence and its social effects, as well as the specific example of falling trees, as key dramatic gestures in her play The Unnatural and Accidental Women. Clements, whose works are dense with soundscapes of all kinds—ones which ultimately challenge even the most capable of sound designers and actors—distinctly links the seemingly unheard falling of trees with the often-unheard falling of women’s bodies (7), and thus with the questions of derealization that has so frequently thwarted attempts to raise the issue of colonial violence against Indigenous women and girls. However, far from arguing that like the abandoned trees in the forest, Indigenous women’s deaths are entirely muted and neglected, Clements uses the interplay between speech and silence to construct what she calls “scenes of hearing” (7). Throughout the play, the silences faced by women who speak are deconstructed not as failures on their part to transmit sound, but rather they are revealed as failures on the part of government
agencies and Canadian citizens to listen. For instance, Rose the telephone operator speaks about her attempts to create connection, and, ultimately, the difficulty of bearing witness to disconnection:

ROSE: Again, the pure gentle darkness that says I have listened and you were lovely, no matter how loud your beeping cry becomes, no matter how many times I wanted to help but couldn’t. There is something maternal about it, the wanting to help, the trying, going through the motions on the switchboard, but in the end just being there always it seems just listening to voices looking for connection, an eternal connection between women’s voices and worlds. (19)

Throughout the course of the play, Rose interacts several times with Mavis, who is calling in order to try to reach various people in her life. Yet, each time, Mavis’s calls go un-heard. In the first instance, the ongoing rings of a telephone punctuate her call—“sound of telephone ringing empty” (24) and break up her message. When Mavis tries yet again, after Rose puts her call through, Mavis reaches a disconnected number: “SFX: Voice Over—I’m sorry, the number you have reached has been disconnected. Please call your operator…” (35). In spite of this, Mavis tries to “talk over the recording as if nothing is wrong” (35). During the third phone call, in which she attempts to speak to her sister, Mavis reaches an answering machine, a technology that holds the promise that speech might be heard later on: “We’re not in right now, but if you leave a message we’ll get back to you as soon as possible” (45). The last interaction between Mavis and a telephone is a particularly violent form of disconnection or failure to communicate: after briefly abandoning the phone to investigate a sound outside, she comes back into the room to find the Barber waiting for her. Mavis never completes another telephone call, and the
telephone’s possibility to function as a tool not only of communication, but of aid, is ultimately unrealized:

*SFX: Voice Over—Sound of static from the receiver and…*

“If you need help, just hang up and dial your operator…if you need help, just hang up and dial your operator.”

_Lights fade._ (58)

Mavis, whose presence in the play is so wholly centered on sound and speech, ultimately has her death quietly registered with text projected on a slide. This silent text, unlike her vocalized attempts at connection, ultimately does reach an audience and completes its connection by breaking the frame of the play: it connects with and is registered not by other characters, but by the spectators of the play itself. Like the inaudible sound waves that can still affect our bodies in spite of our not being able to hear them, women’s deaths in the play also function as spectral sonar presences, as waves of energy that ripple out to impact not only the lives of their loved ones, but also the lives of those (like the murderous barber, as well as the Canadian state) who might otherwise assume that their actions of violence or neglect will not return to haunt them. Like Wagner, Clements’ choice to focus not only on the visual but also the aural as a site for staging violence is important, particularly given the frequent visual embodiments of murdered and missing Indigenous women that we are presented with. So too, as Cixous writes, one of the key strategies for ridding the stage of the “staginess” that often reduces women’s suffering to spectacle is precisely this technique of “lessening our dependency on the visual and stressing the auditory, learning to attune all our ears, especially those that are sensitive to the pulse of the unconscious, to hear the silences and what lies beyond them” (547). In exploring the issue of women’s lives and deaths through a surrealist soundscape that challenges the audiences’
perceptions of absence and presence, Clements creates both a theatrical “insurrection at the level of ontology” (Butler) as well as a space in which audiences can observe Dolan’s utopian performatives, unsettling as they may be to the hegemony of the Canadian settler-colonialist project. In this section, I focus on one “scene of hearing” in the play that exemplifies Clements’ techniques of complicating how both audiences and Canadian citizens listen to stories of violence against Indigenous women—namely, how Clements takes up selective hearing through the motifs of falling trees and falling women.

The first act begins with interplay between Clements’ characteristically rich and nuanced soundscapes and the context of the women’s deaths. This juxtaposition, perfectly elucidating the ontological problem of unheard violence, sets up the themes that the rest of the play will continue to unfold, unravel, and complicate. As the play begins, there is a sound effect of “a collage of trees whispering in the wind” (9). Among these whispers, the first of several slides is projected: “The Unnatural and Accidental Women” (9). Bookending the first instance of the women’s presence—an announcement that takes place in the silence of projected text—is the exploration of the sound made by a single tree at the long moment of its destruction:

*SFX: The sound of a tree opening up to a split. A loud crack—a haunting gasp for air that is suspended. The sustained sound of suspension as the tree teeters.* (9)

For Clements, the question of violence quickly becomes not whether or not the sound is or is not heard by others (a context which often unduly focuses on the experience of the witness as a source of legitimizing experiences), but rather, whether or not we recognize or understand the experience of the tree itself as it is being felled. This is no quick cut: the process of violence committed against the tree is slow, possibly able to be stopped at any time with correct
intervention and care. It is not a rapid toppling-over: it first opens to a split, then gasps for its life with a loud crack; finally, the tree teeters. The suspension is long, sustained. As the lights come up on the character of a logger, looking up at the tree, it becomes readily apparent that, of course, the tree was not felled of its own accord. Unlike the neoliberal myths of violence prevention and response that so frequently characterize discussions of sexual violence against Indigenous women in particular, acts of violence do not occur without the intent and action of the perpetrator. To trace the social relations which lead to acts of assault and murder, then, is to trace not only the effects of violence in the victim (the tree being cut down), but the actions of the perpetrator, including the structures of colonial and patriarchal power that empower assailants to commit such crimes, often without fear of punishment.

As the opening scene continues, the character of Aunt Shadie “emerges from a bed of dark leaves” (9). Surrounded by the traces of violence, Aunt Shadie temporarily takes reprieve in the fact that she is still alive: “she bolts upright, unfallen” (9). Yet, she continues to be immersed in the forest of colonial violence that Clements is beginning to make known to the audience. As Aunt Shadie follows “the sounds and images of the trees” (9), the audience is presented, silently, with yet another slide—the first fallen woman featured in the play:

SLIDE: Rita Louise James, 52, died November 10, 1978, with a 0.12 blood-alcohol reading. No coroner’s report issued. (9)

The uncanny silence of the projected slides in contrast to the noise of the trees is integral to Clements’ project of framing Indigenous women’s deaths with dignity and respect. This tactic of

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highlighting the conditions under which violence occurs, but not directly staging or vocalizing the deaths themselves, pushes back not only against the media (in terms of the sensationalized ways in which the deaths of Indigenous women are reported) but also against the structures of repetition and performativity that victims of sexual violence are often forced to submit to in order for their suffering to be acknowledged and witnessed. In the case of media representations\(^{27}\) of murdered and missing Indigenous women in the context of the Pickton trial, Julia Emberley writes that “representational violence in the media identification of the murdered women registered at the level of their non-humanity, their figuration as objects of social wastage, deserving to be no better than absent from the reader’s or viewer’s consciousness” (71). Indeed, the 2005 Talonbooks edition distinctly points this out by prefacing the text of the play with examples of the dehumanizing and sensationalistic speech which often surrounds the deaths of these women, speech which often both replicates the violence of their deaths by describing them in graphic detail. One such cited excerpt from a October 22, 1988 *Vancouver Sun* article entitled “Death by Alcohol,” notes that “[a victim] was found lying nude on her bed and had recent bruises on her scalp, nose, lips, and chin” (8). With the coverage of Jordan’s crimes as well as those of Pickton, “the media text contributed to an already established framework of ‘knowledge’ in which the colonization of Indigenous female bodies generated the naturalization and normalization of those bodies as objects of violence. Such bodies came to *embody* violence” (Emberley 80). In Clements’ play, the women’s deaths are registered as purely informational

\(^{27}\) Like Emberley, Jiwani and Young (2006) offer important contributions to the discussion of media representation of Pickton’s case. Their argument focuses largely on the ways in which the media constructed Pickton’s image as deviant male outsider, rather than as symptom of a colonial, patriarchal culture that has a long history of white men’s violence against Indigenous women. In doing so, Jiwani and Young argue, collective societal inaction is justified, since violent acts are viewed as individual points of exception.
text, providing only their names, their ages, the blood-alcohol levels at the times of their death, as well as the investigative (lack of) responses. Their deaths are not physically enacted on the stage, nor are deaths generally the first instance in which we meet the various women. Rather, their bodies are figured as present both in life and in death, as actively engaging with and acting upon each other and as well other characters, including The Barber. In presenting the moment of death neither as a theatrical repetition or re-enactment, nor as a form of linguistic performativity that re-stages real-life crimes, Clements compels the audience to examine their own expectations or desires for representational violence on the stage. While Emberley notes that in order to “heal or repair relations that have been torn asunder due to violence, terror, or fear, the text [or performance] must recount or reproduce the stories of violence” (73), such reproductions need not always be visceral or detailed: “sometimes the story and its healing may be precisely about acknowledging that violence has taken place” (73).

As the opening scene of the play continues to unfold, Clements uses sound and silence to both complicate perceptions about the impact of violence against Indigenous women as well as to make necessary connections between violence against Indigenous bodies and land-based violence in the form of resource extraction. After the first tree has fallen, another sound of violence is emitted: “sound of a long saw sawing under softly in lengths” (10). While the ontological question of a tree falling in a forest may address a particular moment of violence, the

28 Sharon Sullivan’s reading of the deaths in the play share similarities with my own reading, although she points out that part of Clements’ staging choices may not only be about decentering the act of murder in order to subvert “any glorification or gratification from the slayings” (66), but also about the impossibility of accurately representing such experiences. Citing James Phelan’s notion of the “the stubborn,” which describes a sense of unyielding resistance to representation, Sullivan contends that “Clements understands that some horrors, like these murders, can never be accurately represented” (67). I disagree with Sullivan’s notion that the reluctance to portray these deaths is about not trying to “master the experience of realistically portraying the homicides” (66), as I believe Clements questions why the murders need to be represented (that is, re-presented for either consumption or validation) at all.
effects of violence that ripple outward from each death (or fallen tree) are often rarely interrogated, whether it is the numerous industries built out of violence against Indigenous communities, the frequent denial of the communal and intergenerational impacts of sexualized and gendered violence—including the legacy of abuse at residential schools—or indeed, Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s disavowal of individual acts of sexualized and gendered violence as part of a sociological phenomenon.29

“Everything here has been falling,” says Rebecca, “they laid on their backs trying to catch their breath as the loggers connected them to anything that could move, and moved them, creating a long muddy path where the ends of trees scraped the ground, whispering their last connection to the earth. This whispering left a skid. A skid mark. A row. Skid Row” (10). Here, Clements is articulating not only the ways in which both resource extraction and violence against Indigenous women leave the traces of violence30 behind (i.e. the whispering, the skid, the row),

29 In 2014, when pressed to respond to renewed calls for an inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Prime Minister Harper said: “I think we should not view this as sociological phenomenon. We should view it as crime” (qtd in Boutilier, n.p.). Rather than viewing Indigenous women’s deaths and disappearances in a larger context of violence, Harper contended that they should be seen as individual crimes, to be addressed solely by the police, rather than by the government.

30 Here, I am speaking not only about the terrible impact left by violence within communities, including intergenerational trauma, but also about how the traces of violence cannot be entirely erased in relationship to how settler-colonial States attempt to define and assert themselves. In Precarious Life, Butler speaks of the ways in which violence against those who are derealized by the State continues to haunt the State: “If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated. But they have a strange way of remaining animated and so must be negated again (and again)” (33). Cynthia Sugars and Gerry Turcotte describe similar configurations of haunting in Unsettled Remains: Canadian Literature and the Postcolonial Gothic (2009). Linking Freud’s notion of the uncanny with elements of the Gothic, and joining those to the postcolonial, Sugars and Turcotte suggest that haunting takes on a number of different forms, including “anxiety about forgotten or occluded histories […] and interrogations of national belonging and citizenship” (ix). While I am not necessarily asserting that the spectral traces in Clements’ play are Gothic, I see similar themes of “haunting presences that challenge the national imaginary” (xiv) at work, both through the soundscapes of the trees as well as through the women’s ghosts who later aid Rebecca in killing The Barber. Yet, what I find unique about Clements’ work is that these hauntings, or these traces of violence, are not only present in obvious ways (the ghosts of the murdered women), but in subtle, nuanced ways, such as the dense layers of sound effects that she chooses to frame the play.
but also, crucially, the ways in which Indigenous women and communities are *actively resisting* such violence. In describing the work of performance artist Rebecca Belmore, Emberley notes that her piece “Vigil” (2002) “breaks the frame of the representational violence associated with Indigenous women’s bodies through a performative enactment of rage and pain” (82). The tearing of clothing to shreds as well as the ripping of roses through Belmore’s teeth, much like Clements’s trees which “scrape the ground,” leaving a mark behind, “do more than testify to the violence done to Indigenous women. They work with the violence of postcolonial nationalism in order to show what it is that violence *does* to the lives of people and communities” (Emberley 82). Unlike stabs or punctures (which convey localization, as well as varying depth) rips, tears, and scrapes are longitudinal forms of injury, ones that traverse spatial (and, in the case of historical traumas, temporal) distances. As the play unfolds, Clements reveals these “long muddy paths” and “scrapes” left behind by colonial gender violence, most notably through the protagonist Rebecca’s desperate search to find her missing mother Rita (Aunt Shadie), as well as by the ghostly presence of Jordan’s other victims. Unlike many mainstream portrayals of colonial gender violence, the moment of disappearance, death, or assault is not the sole instance of trauma in Clements’ play. Rather, trauma extends outwards in myriad ways, seen as an intergenerational wound within specific families (Rebecca’s search for her mother), as a cultural wound that affects Indigenous communities at large, as well as a spiritual and ancestral wound, as embodied by the presence of Jordan’s other victims.

In “breaking the frame of representational violence” (Emberley 82) through demonstrating the impact of violence in communities, rather than only the acts themselves,
Clements also illustrates the myriad ways in which Indigenous women’s agency asserts itself in the fact of colonial gender violence. Rather than depending on the intervention of the police in solving the deaths and disappearances of Indigenous women, the play situates Rebecca as the locus of investigative power and justice\(^{31}\), aided by the ghosts of the dead women who offer both spiritual and physical assistance to her. Moreover, these actions, including the play’s ending (wherein The Barber has his throat slit by Rebecca and the other women), also provoke the audience to reconsider how they see Indigenous women in relationship to the Canadian justice system, as well as their own beliefs about how justice can or should be enacted. Unlike the ending of *The Monument*, which veers more towards a model of restorative justice (one that can be still seen as aligned with conventional judicial models), the ending of *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* empowers the characters to operate outside of existing colonial systems of justice. Within the context of a surrealist play, the revenge killing of The Barber is fashioned not as an extra-judicial action that would be considered “illegal,” but rather, as a performative re-imagining of both justice and legal orders themselves.

\(^{31}\) I am grateful to Dr. Dory Nason for her observations on the ways in which several Indigenous women’s narratives of sexualized and gendered violence take up and complicate the genre of “rape-revenge” narratives, including Blackfoot and Sámi film-maker Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers’ 2012 film “A Red Girl’s Reasoning.” In Tailfeathers’ film, the character of Delia, who was herself the victim of a racially motivated sexual assault, offers her services of justice to other women in the community who have been similarly assaulted. What distinguishes narratives such as Tailfeathers’ and Clements’ from those produced by and starring non-Indigenous women, however, is that the notions of both “rape” and “revenge” are differently inscribed. For instance, following the observations that Indigenous women’s assaults or deaths are often not viewed as crimes, the notion of “revenge” may thus be seen as invalid or unduly aggressive in ways that it is not for non-Indigenous women. For further critical contexts of the rape-revenge genre, I turn to Jacinda Read’s *The New Avengers: Feminism, Femininity, and the Rape Revenge Cycle*, particularly for her observations about the ways in which rape-revenge movies also “present overt displays of female violence as specifically eroticized” (48). Thinking through Read’s observations on the “femme fatale” and the “fatal femme” in the context of Indigeneity, in which women’s bodies are already hypersexualized, it is important to consider how Clements in particular resists this eroticizing of women seeking revenge, both through the characters of Rebecca and the ghosts of the dead women.
It is crucial to note, that Clements’ play does not simply end when The Barber is killed. Refusing to fetishize the apparent closure provided by the usual rape-revenge narrative—which, in the context of neoliberalism, absolves bystanders and judicial systems of their due responsibilities—Clements once again brings in the noise of the falling trees to remind the audience members that the incarceration or death of one perpetrator in no way offers a solution to the overarching epidemic of violence against women, and Indigenous women in particular. After the women collect their braids, which were severed by The Barber before their deaths, the lights begin to fade on them, “and the sound of their voices becomes the sound of trees” (Clements 126). As Rebecca exits the barbershop, she walks to the “sound of tree leaves moving in the wind” (126), which is then interrupted by “the loud sound of a tree falling...” (126).

Throughout the play, the sounds of the falling trees have been seemingly unheard by the characters, and perhaps also by the audience; yet, in these final moments, Clements insists that practices of selective hearing must end: “[Rebecca] stops and listens to the sound” (126). I note here, that Rebecca stops to listen not only after the tree has already fallen. Like the opening soundscapes of the page, Clements embeds the audience and her characters in the long, drawn-out, historical process of falling as well as the brief, ephemeral moment at which the fallen tree—or fallen woman—hits the ground. As Rebecca stops to listen intently, she hears “the sound of the tree hitting the ground with a thud” (127). If the audience has listened correctly throughout the play, they are forced to confront the fact that more trees continue to fall. More Indigenous women continue to face disproportionate levels of sexual and physical violence, including acts which result in murder. The juxtaposition of a seemingly predictable performative ending (The Barber’s death) with its unexpected re-framing through the return of the falling trees embodies precisely the complexity that Jill Dolan ascribes to utopian performatives, when she
writes that they spring from a “complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (8).

In allowing the audience to both experience the catharsis of revenge and the unsettling return of violence, the play asks audience members to view the process of addressing violence against Indigenous women as a long-term project and civic commitment, rather than as a series of quick fixes or of actions which do not take up the larger contexts of colonialism and patriarchy. As with the ending of Wagner’s play, there is no specific plan set out for precisely how these reparative, restorative, or reconciliatory processes are to be enacted; Clements leaves us with the possibilities that arise out of the acknowledgement that the problem exists and persists. Within the seeming-silences of the falling trees (among other silences that Clements explores in the play), audiences are asked to “critically rehearse civic engagement that could be effective in the wider public and political realm” (Dolan 7). The engagement offered by The Unnatural and Accidental Women is not a rush towards intervention that characterizes much settler-colonial reaction towards violence against Indigenous women, nor is it passive, leaving the task of solving colonial gender violence solely up to Indigenous communities and individual women. Suggesting that attention (and not merely a selective one) must precede action, Clements’ work invites audiences to interrogate why and how they listen, to engage in a contemplative silence that may transform into a more nuanced engagement with stories of violence outside of the theatrical encounter.
Conclusion

“If I go to the theatre now,” declared Hélène Cixous, “it must be a political gesture, with a view to changing, with the help of other women, its means of production and expression. It is high time that women gave back to the theatre its fortunate position, its raison d’être and what makes it different—the fact that there it is possible to get across the living, breathing, speaking body” (547). As I conclude this chapter on the challenge of representing sexualized violence on the stage, I am both buoyed by the performative possibilities of plays such as The Monument and The Unnatural and Accidental Women as well as deeply troubled by the continued staging of graphic violence against women in theatrical productions. Ultimately, I find myself negotiating a difficult and ongoing process of how we produce, respond to, and engage with violence on the stage, with no easy answers as to how playwrights, critics, and audience members should respond Cixous’s call to action. I struggle with the knowledge that making violence visible is indeed a necessary part of unshackling it from histories of silencing, and that its embodiment can serve to dismantle violence as mere myth or linguistic abstraction and shift our understanding of it towards a physical, kinetic, and lived experience. While recognizing, as Lesley Ferris does, that “theatre is an art of repetition and memory” (49)—one which can ostensibly perform the important function of keeping us from forgetting violence—I also (like Ferris) worry that “we are doomed to keep playing these images, these songs, these dramatic moments over and over again” (40).

Bearing in mind Cixous’s call for a more political engagement with theatre, I return once again to a series of questions. How, as theatregoers (whose social and economic capital has a large impact on the theatre world, via the purchase of tickets, by our presences in the theatre, and by our reviews), do we politically engage? Does this engagement look like the boycotting of
plays like Colleen Murphy’s *Pig Girl*, which do not seem to take up the subject matter in a nuanced fashion, or does it mean attending but participating in critical dialogues afterwards? Does it look like the audience at the June 29th, 2015 premiere of Rossini’s *William Tell* at the Royal Opera House in London’s Covent Garden, who during the performance, loudly heckled and booed director Damiano Michieletto’s decision to graphically stage a scene in which military officers “force champagne down the woman’s throat, molest her with a gun and, in the scene that caused the most commotion, strip her and force her to lie on top of the banquet table” (“William Tell”)? Does it involve attending plays such as Wagner’s or Clements’, and if so, does mere attendance at these performances constitute political action in and of itself, and is its effect spatiotemporally bounded by the few hours one spends watching a play? Moreover, must we as audiences expand our political engagement beyond our attendance at plays? As Jill Dolan queries, “[how] can we—or should we—bring the clarity of utopian performatives to the rest of our lives? Should utopian performatives work outside the frame of the performance? Do they fail if they don’t translate to more quotidian life?” (19).

As a writer who in this chapter is attempting to make the performative possibilities of theatre stretch well past the boundaries of a singular performance into the realm of textual analysis, I want to bring the utopian performative beyond the physical space of the theatre, and even beyond direct or intimate knowledge of the texts of the plays, in order to offer readings of Wagner and Clements’ works which may bring new insights or new strategies of listening to violence. Of course, as Dolan observes, “writing, like performance, is always only an experiment, an audition, always only another place to practice what might be an unreachable goal that’s imperative to imagine nonetheless” (168). In this chapter, I have offered readings of two plays that are wholly experimental, ones that are dependent on accepting theatrical silences
not merely as the inevitable pauses in between pieces of dialogue, or as the obvious absence of sound within the space of the theatre. In *The Monument* and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women*, silence enacts a wide variety of performative functions, from aural environment to dialogic tool, from strategy of remembrance to a one of elusiveness and forced forgetting. Quashing notions of passivity, these works situate silence as an engaged, active force.

In *Theatre & Violence*, Lucy Nevitt writes that we require an approach to performance response that “will vary according to the particular and shifting nature” of the myriad contexts in which violence occurs. Nevitt argues:

Some performances offer political and social commentary on war and violence; some engage with a post-violence desire for reconciliation or justice, or address issues relating to trauma; other performances are aimed at giving voice to particular people or perspectives during or in the aftermath of a violent conflict. Theatre and performance are used in all these ways and more, but different sorts of focus need and respond to different points in time and space in relation to the violence itself. (72)

While Nevitt is speaking more of a temporal approach to drama, her argument nevertheless resonates with the kinds of strategic silences that occur in Wagner and Clements’ plays. Amidst a plethora of plays and other forms of visual and embodied media that graphically display violence, and either outrightly or covertly shun silence as a useful tool with which to explore the subject of sexual violence, Wagner and Clements’ strategic use of silences stand out as works that adapt to the various historical saturations of violence in the media and actively resist falling into generic norms which might otherwise commodify or reify violent acts and depictions. Far from suggesting that the material reality of violence can or should not be addressed—after all, both *The Monument* and *The Unnatural and Accidental Women* still feature an overwhelming
amount of violence, whether it be through the actors’ dialogue, or through acts such as the murder of The Barber—the plays offer additional strategies to use as part of an engagement with the subject. Silence, staged as both an artistic and political intervention, allows us—theatre-makers, actors, and audiences alike—to rehearse and then perform a different kind of listening.
Chapter 4: Tracing Absences of Violence in Emma Donoghue’s *Room* and Anne Stone’s *Delible*

**Rated R for Rape: Violence in Fiction**

As I have illustrated in my previous two chapters, the collision of the subject matter of rape with any particular genre reveals both the limitations and the possibilities of genre itself. When it comes to autobiographies or works of life-writing, authors must negotiate how representations of rape interact with and come up against the demands of non-fiction and discourses of testimony; when it comes to dramatic works, playwrights face the distinct challenge of representing violence not only through speech, but also through embodiment. Authors of prose fiction face similar challenges, because they must discern how to capture the physicality of assault within a text and how to tackle the real-life topic of sexual violence within a fictional world. Yet, writers employing the genre of the novel face the problem of operating within a form that is both extremely popular as well as extremely hard to define. Indeed, as depictions of sexualized and gendered violence have become increasingly abundant in popular culture and entertainment (including novels), so too have public discussions of the various representative problems that accompany them. While numerous writers and critics have offered commentaries on the presence of rape in fiction for several years, the increased public sensibility towards representations of rape have recently reached a tipping point. Understandably, given the unprecedented number of real-life cases of sexual assault that are currently dominating the headlines and raising serious questions about how and why survivors’ stories come to be
accepted as fact or dismissed as fiction, readers and audience members are interrogating the mechanisms by which these types of violence have come to be a rather predictable trope.

Many best-selling English-language novels of the past decade or so (several of which were later adapted for the screen based on their literary success) feature sexualized and gendered violence as a prominent element or overarching theme. From Alice Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* (2002) to Stieg Larsson’s *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* (2005), from Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* (1999) to Gillian Flynn’s *Gone Girl* (2012), plots featuring sexual violence certainly not relegated to being featured in novels that are deemed marginal or obscure. Rather, readers are drawn to these plotlines for myriad reasons—be it an interest in the subject matter of assault, or an interest in thrilling or crime-related plots—sending sales sky-high and landing many of these novels on bestseller lists for weeks or months at a time. As such, I ask: what do we make of the popularity of such texts? When sexualized and gendered violence remain such prominent threats and realities in many individuals’ lives, what drives readers towards these storylines? What are the outcomes depicted in these novels, and does the narrative trajectory of each story (i.e. revenge or justice) affect how readers engage with it? At a historical moment when the distribution of novels is easier than ever, with online shopping and texts immediately available for download on digital devices, how do we reconcile the ease of access to fiction that depicts violence with real acts of violence? If, as *WIRED* magazine’s Laura Hudson contends, many fictional rape scenes are “lazy writing” (n.p.), what are the challenges faced by novelists who wish to take on the topic in a medium that permits an extended engagement with the subject yet also risks reproducing some of the same representative problems as visual media? How does one measure effort and effectiveness in texts, if, as Laura Tanner affirms, “literary representations of violence perpetuate, revise, or transform the reader’s attitude toward empirical
violence, often in ways of which the reader is not fully aware” (3)? Moreover, given histories of censorship in literary history, such as the ones I discussed in my opening chapter, how do authors balance the imperative to meaningfully take up the issue of sexual assault yet not merely fall into the easy sensationalism that a relative lack of censorship currently seems to permit? If, as Georg Lukács argues, the novel is a “hazardous genre”, how do authors negotiate the pitfalls of their genre, and do they do so by either engaging with or rejecting past conventions such as the use of the perspective of the victim, or the inclusion of graphic exposition regarding a rape?

In this chapter, I will take up these questions through the work of two Canadian novels—Emma Donoghue’s *Room* (2010) and Anne Stone’s *Delible* (2007)—which address sexualized and gendered violence not only by featuring it as the primary, overarching plot of their books (rather than as a singular event of character development) but also by representing it in what is currently considered an unusual fashion: through silence. Donoghue, whose novel is written with inspiration from high-profile cases of captivity, features a story in the voice of 5-year-old Jack, who is unable to fully grasp the extent of the traumatic context into which he was born. His mother, however, whom one might otherwise consider to be a more likely or reliable narrator, is largely presented as a silent character: her psychological processes and traumatic experiences are either absent, only intimated, or presented through the limited perspective of a child. Stone, who takes her cues from several missing persons cases in Canada, writes a polyvocal novel that gives few clues as to the fate of the missing protagonist, 15-year-old Melissa Sprague. Attempts to solve Melissa’s disappearance are consistently thwarted, either by a disinterest in her case, or by the ambivalences of Melissa’s own actions and character, ones which make it impossible for characters and readers to deduce what might have happened, let alone what actually did happen. Donoghue’s and Stone’s narrative choices are disarming and certainly seem unconventional in
their approaches. Yet, as I will also argue, their strategic uses of silence are not without historical precedent or context. While I will argue that both *Room* and *Delible* offer distinctive contemporary interventions into the precarious art of addressing sexualized and gendered violence through prose fiction, like works in any other genre they also benefit and suffer from the literary and historical inheritances of the novel itself. A number of significant literary debates—both contemporary and historical, in Canada and beyond—have materialized around novels that take up issues of sexualized and gendered violence, in no small part because of the ways in which trauma presses up against and challenges the boundaries of representative practices. My aim in this chapter, therefore, is to trace the ways in which Donoghue’s and Stone’s works address prior literary iterations or context of silence, but do so with a keen attention to contemporary concerns about speech and representation.

“A Hazardous Genre”: Between Contentiousness and Popularity

In *The Novel: A Biography*, Michael Schmidt contends that attempts to define the novel, whether narrowly or broadly, are ultimately somewhat impossible, given that the genre “takes in and takes on invention like no other literary form” (14). The vast sub-genres of fiction within which rape narratives might fall—crime fiction, literary fiction, detective fiction, magic realism, historical fiction, science fiction, young adult fiction—indicate that not all fictional treatments of sexual assault are similar and that each sub-genre of fiction has its particular idiosyncrasies and relationships to a genealogy of the novel that changes how authors write scenes of assault and how readers engage with them. The novel as a genre is not only filled with these ambivalences and multitudes, but as Georg Lukács points out in *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1920), it is also a genre that both
reflects and is formed by the sociohistorical fractures and fragments of modernity. The following passage offers a summary of the consequences of modernity on history and aesthetics, and also beautifully describes the literary paradox of attempting to describe or represent any experience (especially trauma):

A totality that can be simply accepted is no longer given to the forms of art: therefore they must either narrow down and volatilize whatever has to be given form to the point where they can encompass it, or else they must show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and the inner nullity of their own means. And in this case they carry the fragmentary nature of the world’s structure into the world of forms.

(Lukács 38-9)

For Lukács, as for Schmidt and other critics, this fragmentation is not merely static, but dynamic, a quality that lends itself as much to instability as to innovation. As he writes, “the novel, in contrast to other genres whose existence resides within the finished form, appears as something in the process of becoming. That is why, from the artistic viewpoint, the novel is the most hazardous genre” (71-72). Caught at the crossroads between the past and the future, between repetition and innovation, between fact and fiction, and between fragmentation and the attempt at coherence and totality, it is no surprise that the novel, as a “hazardous genre,” has historically presented itself as an ideal site for the representation of events (such as sexual assault and gender violence) that themselves exist at numerous such crossroads. By navigating these hazardous narrative waters and exploring the possibilities for form to mirror content, novels that depict rape and sexual violence have become associated with significant developments in prose fiction.

Current debates regarding rape scenes in works of fiction point to the ways in which the mere use of rape scenes in a novel does not necessarily result in a thoughtful engagement with
either the genre or the subject matter. In 2012, author Jim C. Hines wrote that “reading books
and stories where the author added a rape to make things ‘edgier,’ or to motivate the heroine, or
simply because he or she didn’t know what else to do to that character—it gets old fast” (n.p.).
Rather than suggesting that authors avoid the topic outright, Hines carefully and thoughtfully
counsels writers on a series of best practices for representing rape in their writing, ultimately
asking them to “write thoughtfully. Write with knowledge and understanding. Write well” (n.p.).
Recently, writers and critics have become much less tolerant of sexual violence as frequent plot
point.

In the past year, impassioned discussion about rape in fiction has emerged with renewed
energy and anger, particularly in response to controversies over rape scenes in HBO’s wildly
popular Game of Thrones, a television series adapted from George R.R. Martin’s bestselling
novels. American writer Robert Jackson Bennett contributed to the discussion with a simple
question to his fellow authors: “why are you writing a rape scene?” (n.p.) Making it clear that
this query “isn’t an accusation,” but rather, “a genuine question,” Bennett ascertained that Game
of Thrones is not the sole culprit in what some have called “almost a ritual” (Hudson): the
ubiquitous use of rape tropes in popular works of fiction. That rape has become a conventional
plot point, or that the subject matter is engaged in conventional ways in popular fiction hardly
comes as a surprise, given the ways in which readers of popular novel both demand and have
become accustomed to particular stories. As Scott McCracken argues in Pulp: Reading Popular
Fiction (1998), “the bestseller must answer some of the needs of its consumers. […] Equally, the
narrative of the bestseller must be available for appropriation by its readers” (45). This
appropriation, unlike that encountered with the readers’ relationship to non-fictional or
autobiographical texts, is more of a purely imaginative one, and perhaps even a hopeful or
fantastical one. McCracken emphasizes that “popular fiction has the capacity to provide us with a workable, if temporary, sense of self. […] It can give our lives the plots and heroes they lack. While the same can be said for all fiction, narratives read by large numbers of people are indicative of widespread hopes and fears” (2). Indeed, many novels featuring sexual assault reflect an imaginative capacity in the face of these much-feared acts of violence. In Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, the protagonist Melinda’s muteness is eventually transformed into the capacity to disclose her sexual assault; Stieg Larsson’s Lisbeth Salander enacts revenge against her rapist, first by securing video proof of his crimes, then by raping him herself, and finally by tattooing him with a permanent reminder of his cruel actions; Alice Sebold’s Susie Salmon is raped and killed, but nevertheless finds an existence in Heaven after her death, and comes to peace with her fate when her rapist and murderer is himself killed in a freak accident.

Even in cases where fictional rapes do not necessarily culminate in catharsis or revenge, such as George R.R. Martin’s *Game of Thrones* series, the assaults serve to provide a historical accuracy and texture to the fictional world. In an interview with *The New York Times*’ Dave Itzkoff, Martin addressed the backlash in the following manner:

> My novels are epic fantasy, but they are inspired by and grounded in history. Rape and sexual violence have been a part of every war ever fought, from the ancient Sumerians to our present day. To omit them from a narrative centered on war and power would have been fundamentally false and dishonest, and would have undermined one of the themes of the books: that the true horrors of human history derive not from orcs and Dark Lords, but from ourselves. We are the monsters. (And the heroes too). Each of us has within himself the capacity for great good, and great evil. (n.p.)
Martin is writing not only about a fictional and fantastic world, but also one that takes inspiration from the fairly distant past of 15th-century England’s War of the Roses. One might argue, for instance, that such depictions serve to locate widespread brutality and gender violence as a thing of the “unprogressive” past or the “Dark Ages”: yet, as Martin himself notes, “I have to take issue with the notion that Westeros is a ‘dark and depraved place.’ […] It is no darker nor more depraved than our own world” (Itzkoff n.p.). Despite Martin’s clarifications, it is evident that so many interpretations of his texts seek to locate violence as part of the “depraved” past (or, as we often see in commentary on violence in other countries, as part of the depraved “elsewhere”) that he feels the need to comment on it. Certainly, this impulse is understandable: as we face the constant reminder that change in terms of gender equality and violence is at times slow (if not seemingly going in reverse) the desire to locate it as part of a linear narrative of progress that situates it firmly in the past or in fantasy can serve to buoy our much-needed sense of hope for the present and future. More ominously, it might also ask us to disregard the ways in which violence forms a part of our all-too-real history as it is currently unfolding across the globe, including the ways in which actual incidents of sexual assault are treated as flights of fancy or as mere myth.

As both economic and cultural commodities, works of fiction (especially popular ones) hold a particularly important relationship with public discourses on sexual assault and representation, and, as a result, the relationship between experiences of sexual violence and representations thereof is not merely unidirectional. Reading informs how we understand sexual violence in the real world, and vice versa. As Laura Tanner writes, “the reader brings the conclusions generated about violence through representation back to the empirical world, even as he or she brings the empirical experience of violence to the representation” (10). This is, perhaps,
the most significant hazard associated with the representation of rape and sexual violence in works of fiction, one that not all authors either recognize or address. However, rather than distancing themselves from the hazards and pitfalls of the genre, I argue that writers ought to work self-reflexively to understand precisely what those hazards and pitfalls are.

In order to understand how Donoghue’s and Stone’s novels employ this type of self-reflexivity around representation, it is vital to understand not only the contexts of speech or representation that they inherit, but also the contexts of silence and a lack of representation that they face. As I have elucidated in my opening chapter, acts of censorship against such texts constitute an important debate about the literary inheritances of novels that discuss sexual crimes; yet, so too, do specific uses of form and narrative voice.

**Historical Precedents: Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles***

Without suggesting that contemporary Canadian novels’ use of silence is at all equivalent to that used by their historical precedents, I nevertheless wish to trace a genealogy of silence through two key works of English-language fiction: Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) and Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*. While recognizing the specific historical, cultural, and societal influences of 18th and 19th century British literature—ones which do not necessarily translate to 21st century Canadian literary culture—these works’ use of silence demonstrate similar literary effects to Donoghue’s and Stone’s novels, and similar authorial engagements between the subject matter of sexual violence and the genre of the novel. What particularly intrigues me is the fact that within two vastly different historical contexts (one, in which literary representations of sexual violence were seen as taboo; the other, in which literary representations
of sexual violence are numerous and explicit), silence functions as a powerful tool with which to interrogate how and why narrative conventions are formed and upheld.

I turn first to Richardson’s epistolary novel, observing the fact that Donoghue explicitly situates Room within its literary lineage. During the course of *Clarissa*, which Frances Ferguson characterizes as the “first full [example] of the psychological novel” (98), Richardson conveys the protagonist’s drug-facilitated rape at the hands of the rake Robert Lovelace not through an omniscient narrator, but rather through Clarissa’s own psychological states as evidenced through the letters she writes, as well as through Lovelace’s own account of the incident. “The occurrence of rape within a novel like *Clarissa,*” argues Ferguson, “represents the novel’s ability to convey, as the stage could not, private aspects of experience such as sexuality. Moreover, the rape becomes the vehicle for the contrast between what could be said in public and proved and what is said in private and believed” (99). As Ferguson affirms, the importance of this narrative strategy lies precisely in the ways in which it both mirrors and critiques the narrative constructs that shape real-life understandings of sexual violence via the discourse of the law (99), particularly given the shift in sexual assault law towards a question not only whether or not observable injury was done to the body, but also as to the mental states of both the alleged victim and perpetrator.

Given that both Lovelace and Clarissa produce different accounts of the incident, readers are asked to consider not only their presumptions about the fictiveness often associated with victims’ accounts of sexual assault, but also to consider how both legal systems and cultures at large often posit sexual violence not as a question of objectively observable violence, but rather as a question of competing fictions, including analyses of narrative style, and of narrative credibility. As Ian Watt notes in his analysis of *Clarissa*, the novel offers “formal resources...
capable not only of supporting the tremendous imaginative expansion which Richardson gave his theme, but also of leading him away from the flat didacticism of his critical preconceptions into so profound a penetration of his characters that their experience partakes of the terrifying ambiguity of human life itself” (238). In its exploration of a “terrifying ambiguity,” it is not so much that *Clarissa* derives its uniqueness from its lack of proximity to real life, for as Terry Eagleton notes, “there is nothing ‘novel’ about *Clarissa*: this is no trashy escapism, no idle ‘imaginative’ creation, but the true history of women’s oppression at the hands of eighteenth-century patriarchy” (17). Rather, the terrifying ambiguity of *Clarissa* lies in its keenly self-reflexive articulation of its own narrative proximity to both fact and fiction: “by suspending his text between history and fable, Richardson seeks the best of all possible ideological worlds” (Eagleton 21). Reflecting on Richardson’s mastery of this careful balance, Schmidt contends that “*Clarissa* is a kind of acid test for the reader. It is not merely a stage in the evolution of the European novel: it is one of the great novels, and a reader who develops the taste to appreciate it will understand on the pulse what the novel form can do” (113).

Both historically recognizable enough to conjure up lived experience and fictionally distant enough to invite an imaginative response, *Clarissa* uses the form of the novel to provoke readers to consider what they do or do not know about the private lives of their fellow citizens, and how the narration of these private lives ultimately intersects with publicly created and enacted notions of justice. In an 18th-century context, Richardson’s work reflects the limits of what was traditionally permitted to be spoken aloud. *Room* employs a similar approach of psychological interiority, but does so for vastly different reasons than Richardson. With plenty of fictional treatments of sexual violence which offer psychological perspectives from both victims and perpetrators, Donoghue’s choice to frame events through the lens of a young child
complicates readerly notions and expectations of narrative credibility and introduces new perspectives on the subject of traumatic experience.

Richardson’s novel is not the only work of English literature that has prefigured significant contemporary considerations of fictional representations of rape and their relationship to issues of genre. Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Presented* (1892) rather infamously does not feature what actually happens between Tess and Alec in the forests near the Chase, resulting in both textual and critical uncertainty about how to characterize the incident: as rape or as seduction. In “Tess: A Less Than Pure Woman Ambivalently Presented,”—an article whose title plays on the irony of Hardy’s “faithfulness” of presentation—Laura Claridge notes that the reader’s judgment of the incident is complicated not only by the absence of the scene itself, but also by the ambivalence with which the narrator refers to it. Linda Shires similarly argues that Hardy “relies on multiplicity and incongruity. He adopts these strategies within a general structural framework of tragic and ironic ambiguity. In doing so, Hardy questions the very foundations of traditional representation and belief” (147). At a time when oral testimony functioned as the primary form of evidence for sexual assault cases (rather than today’s large reliance upon physical and scientific evidence), Hardy’s refusal to offer up a textual or narrative account of the events challenges fundamental presumptions about how and why one can prove that an event (particularly an assault) has actually occurred.

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32 In “Tess and the Subject of Sexual Violence,” Ellen Rooney offers a feminist analysis of the effects of the narrative ambivalence and the dangers of rape and seduction collapsing into each other. As Rooney argues: “Rape and seduction reappear in similarly tangled relations throughout the novel: sometimes presented as continuous, sometimes as radically opposed, and sometimes as practical equivalents” (102). In terms of Hardy’s narrative strategy and its effect on the reader, Rooney convincingly argues that “the problem Hardy represents is thus a problem of reading, of locating in its external form, in the ‘substance’ or letter of one’s text, its true meaning. The ambiguity of the scene of sexual violence is refugured as an ambiguity within Tess and as a fatal discontinuity that separates appearance from reality, external from internal, and leaves the reader hopelessly depending on his own desire to ground his reading” (105).
While Hardy’s novel faced rejection\textsuperscript{33} and forms of censorship\textsuperscript{34} because of its themes of sexuality and violence (both prior to its serialization and before its publication as whole) Shires argues that the violation scene’s ambiguous absence is not solely the result of Victorian morality or censorship, but rather, is linked to Hardy’s intention to deliberately complicate readers’ notions of experience and representation:

[The] facts and details of the violation scene remain unnarrated. To be sure, Victorian propriety would necessitate coding or silence about sexual intercourse. Still, there is a distinct pattern here of key scenes omitted, a pattern for which Victorian propriety cannot be the only reason. The night scene is marked by fog and confusion. When Alec returns, Tess is sound asleep. It remains unclear whether Alec rapes or seduces Tess. Whether Tess fights being raped or surrenders with half-willingness remains equally veiled, because, quite simply, the narrator does not tell us, nor does any character ever say. (152)

As Scott McEathron explains, there is “widespread agreement” that issues of pre-publication editorial concern and censorship aside, Hardy nevertheless wished for his novel to portray these ellipses and ambiguities, and that “he also wanted readers to engage with the narrative processes

\textsuperscript{33} Scott McEathron directly links the difficulty faced by Hardy’s text with the aforementioned ambiguities and ambivalences, noting that “Hardy’s success with Tess of the d’Urbervilles did not come easy. The manuscript was submitted to several family magazines for serial publication, and repeatedly rejected because it employed inflammatory topics—rape, fornication, illegitimacy, religious skepticism and even murder—in ways that problematized conventionally ‘absolute’ categories of moral judgment” (1).

\textsuperscript{34} Thierry Goater traces a brief history of Tess’s censorship, noting that while passages that were previously removed were later reinstated in other editions, “striking gaps or ellipses are left in the narrative […] Thus, the reader has very little access or no access at all to Tess’s conscience at key moments.” In particular, Goater suggests that the narrative treatment of the rape scene is emblematic of these “striking gaps.” Goater writes: “In the censored version published by the Graphic, the scene of the Chase and all the preceding episodes were left out and replaced by a complete ellipsis. In the 1912 version in book form, the episodes are restored but a gap remains nonetheless. A hiatus can be noticed between, on the one hand, the last two sentences in which the narrator proves quite loquacious, steps into his narrative to express his opinion and, on the other hand, the previous lines in which the forbidden act is expressed in the unsaid as it were, in silence (“no answer”, “silence”) and in enhanced blurredness (“obscurity”, “nebulousness”, “blackness”, “darkness”).”
by which an imaginary individual might be ‘faithfully presented’” (2). As I will examine in my analysis of Delible, gaps and ellipses continue to frustrate readers’ expectations and desires for narrative continuity. Unlike Hardy, Stone’s use of silence is not the result of a societal prohibition on indelicate or difficult topics; as such, her decision to deliberately obscure what could otherwise be openly represented—and indeed, what readers might expect to be represented—emerges as a strong narrative choice. While the contexts of 19th-century Victorian morality and the relative liberalism of 21st-century Canadian society could not be further apart, Hardy’s and Stone’s texts nevertheless share in a narrative form that ultimately reveals the fragility of reading practices as well as understandings of violence. While Richardson’s and Hardy’s works indicate a deft use of silence that is related to their authorial desires to complicate presumptions and understandings of how rape is represented, it is important to note that their contemporary counterparts have significantly more choice in their employment of silence.

“An Entirely Credible, Endearing Little Boy”: Narrative Voice in Room

Having been nominated for (and awarded) several prominent national and international literary prizes—including being shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the Governor General’s Award for Fiction, and the Orange Prize—Emma Donoghue’s novel Room certainly does not suffer from a lack of critical attention. While Room was Donoghue’s seventh novel, it arrived with such unanticipated intensity that it drew widespread attention from readers, reviewers, and literary critics alike. Reviewed in popular magazines and on websites (such as People Magazine, O Magazine, and Amazon.ca) as well as having been featured in literary columns in the New York Times and The New Yorker, Room quickly earned “near-universal acclaim” (The
Economist). Yet, Donoghue’s narrative (which was loosely inspired by the Josef Fritzl\(^{35}\) case) was also met with significant criticism for its alleged appropriation of real-life events. Described by The National Post book columnist Mark Medley as her “most successful—and controversial—work yet” (n.p.). Donoghue swiftly responded to these critics, declaring that she was exasperated by those who characterized the novel as exploitative and making it clear that not all novelists borrow from real-life events as a “cheap hook.” Drawing on the historical strengths of her chosen genre (and echoing the arguments of critics such as Schmidt) Donoghue firmly stated that “the idea that fiction is somehow a grubby or dishonest way of writing about these things really irritates me […] Fiction gets to places that other genres don’t” (qtd in Medley, n.p.).

Indeed, a majority of reviews of Room not only praise its deft use of the genre, but also argue that in her engagement with fiction, Donoghue has achieved that rarest of literary accomplishments: originality. Anne Giardini calls the book “an almost macabre and completely accomplished novel” (qtd in Donoghue, Room, i); the citation for the novel’s inclusion as one of the five best fiction titles of 2010 in the New York Times calls it “one of the pure triumphs of recent fiction.” Author Michael Cunningham’s review offers what is perhaps the boldest declaration of Room’s success: he calls it “that rarest of entities, an entirely original work of art. I mean it as the highest possible praise when I tell you that I can’t compare it to any other book. Suffice to say that it’s potent, darkly beautiful, and revelatory” (qtd in Donoghue, Room, i). Like

\(^{35}\) In 2008, it was discovered that Josef Fritzl, an Austrian citizen, had kept his daughter Elisabeth in captivity beneath the family home for 24 years. In addition to imprisonment, Fritzl frequently raped his daughter, resulting in the births of seven children (three of whom Fritzl brought upstairs to be raised as babies that Elisabeth, whom Fritzl told his wife had disappeared to join a religious sect, was said to have abandoned at their doorstep). In 2009, Fritzl was convicted of rape, incest, murder, and enslavement, and was sentenced to life in prison. Fritzl’s case echoes a number of high-publicity cases of captivity in the last decade, including another Austrian case (Natascha Kampusch, held captive for 8 years), that of American Jaycee Dugard (held captive for 18 years), as well as the Cleveland kidnapping by Ariel Castro of three young women held captive together for nearly a decade: Michelle Knight, Gina de Jesus, and Amanda Berry.
Richardson’s *Clarissa*, *Room*’s originality is not solely tied to its exploration of difficult subject matter; after all, tales of captivity and sexual violence are no longer strictly taboo, given their wide circulation in popular culture, particularly on any number of crime procedural shows.

Rather, *Room*’s uniqueness—as well as its narrative and affective strengths—is undoubtedly linked to Donoghue’s decision to narrate the story from the first-person perspective of five-year-old Jack, a boy who has lived the entirety of his life in captivity (in an eleven-by-eleven foot room, no less) with his mother. In interviews, Donoghue acknowledges that her choice of narrative is a way of pushing back against the numerous narrative tropes (including those of narrative voice) that have become part and parcel of how mainstream crime stories are told. When asked by a reader if she had ever even considered including different perspectives in the novel, Donoghue categorically responds that she had not:

*No, Ian, I didn’t. [John Fowles’ *The Collector*] does such a good job of capturing the mindset of a capturer, and also that’s become a banal trope of every second crime novel: the weirdo, fetishistic watcher/stalker/kidnapper/kidnapper of women or children. So I never wanted to give Old Nick that much prominence in my novel; just as Ma does, I chose to keep him at arm’s length, not letting him set the terms of the story. And as for telling it from Ma’s point of view, I can’t imagine how to do that without the novel degenerating into a tearjerker, because at every point Ma knows all the reasons to be sad. Nor did I think any of the experts or other adults (such as Grandma) needed their own narration; I thought I could put their sense of Ma and Jack across through reported dialogue. So no, I held to my conviction that *Room* would either have the virtue of originality through being Jack’s tale, or it shouldn’t be told at all. (qtd in Halford, n.p.)*

Donoghue powerfully articulates the dilemma faced by authors if they choose to dispense with a
third-person omniscient narrator in favour of one that is more intimately connected with a particular character. Often, scenes of assault may only feature two characters in a particular instance of trauma—the victim and the perpetrator—both of whose perspectives understandably come with particular biases, particular strengths, and particular narrative consequences. As Donoghue notes in her refusal to let Old Nick “set the terms of the story,” voicing stories of rape and captivity from the perspective of the perpetrator risks mirroring, in narrative terms, the violent control that perpetrators maintain over their victims’ bodies as well as their subjectivities.

However, as Laura Tanner observes, readers might find themselves usefully unsettled when they are “located in discomfiting proximity to the violator, pressured toward a subject position that he or she finds repugnant and frightening” (10). Recalling the problems faced by first-person narratives of trauma in the genre of life-writing, voicing stories from the perspective of the victim risks inciting a form of affective appropriation of a particular subject position, causing the reader to either over-identify or mis-identify with a character’s experience of violence. Yet, as Tanner argues, this choice may also productively affect readers who are otherwise reluctant to engage with depictions of the suffering body; by pushing a reader into “a position of discomfiting proximity to the victim’s vulnerable body” (10), narratives may be able to “collapse the distance between a disembodied reader and a victim defined by embodiment” (10). No matter which narrative choice is made, authors such as Donoghue are taking significant risks. They must consider questions about the perceived credibility of a narrator, as well as the ways in which either a perpetrator’s violent control or a victim’s traumatized experience might simply be viewed with the same gaze: one that sees sexualized and gendered violence as both easy and pleasurable to consume.
Gesturing to the work of feminist film theorists Laura Mulvey and Teresa de Lauretis, Tanner argues notions of the gaze are crucial to understanding how and why works of literature that depict sexualized and gendered violence often tread so closely upon the problematic territory of the visual spectacle. Tanner writes that

frequently, in an attempt to reveal the body in all its material specificity, literary representations of violence appropriate the conventions of film, either relying upon a highly visual mode of narration or undermining the distancing conventions of reading to direct the reader’s gaze upon a scene in a manner similar to the enforced perspective of the camera’s frame. (12)

In suggesting that works of literature can problematically appropriate visual techniques in order to convey experiences of violence, Tanner is not suggesting that one form of storytelling is preferable over the other. As she makes clear, “the conventions of neither reading nor viewing are in and of themselves more appropriate to the representation of violence; both can be manipulated and appropriated to obscure the implications of bodily violation” (12). As for Laura Mulvey, she similarly advocates not for the outright dispensation of a particular form, but rather, a conscious re-engagement with narrative forms, calling not for a reconstructed new pleasure […] nor of intellectualized unpleasure, but to make way for a total negation of the ease and plenitude of the narrative fiction film. The alternative is the thrill that comes from leaving the past behind without rejecting it, transcending outworn or oppressive forms, or daring to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive of a new language of desire. (835)

In the following close reading of Donoghue’s novel, I argue that she takes up both Tanner and Mulvey’s calls to action, and does so by foregrounding Jack’s narrative voice. By
highlighting Jack’s perspective, Donoghue offers a critique of the fraught positions of both witness and victim, unsettles her readers by making the act of textual interpretation significantly more complicated, and ultimately, subverts readers’ expectations of narrative and visual pleasure.

In scanning the numerous reviews of Donoghue’s novel, I notice a number of citations that not only discuss the *uniqueness* of her young narrator, but also his credibility. Anita Shreve writes that Jack is an “entirely credible, endearing little boy” (qtd in Donoghue, *Room*, i), and Stephen Amidon declares that Jack’s narration “gives the novel its startling authenticity” (n.p.). While such statements may seem to be innocuous commentaries on the effects of Donoghue’s thorough creation of Jack’s voice, discussions of the credibility of a child narrator intersect with a number of crucially important discourses around the believability of assault victims more generally.

While Jack’s narration of events is fictional, it bears the legacy of a complex relationship between individual acts of disclosure and the authorities (legal, cultural, social) that designate stories of assault or abuse as either verifiable fact or as fiction. In an attempt to combat the long history of disbelieving assault claims (particularly those made by women), contemporary anti-violence campaigns are focusing their attention on the need to believe and validate a victim’s

36 In an interview with *The New Yorker*, Donoghue describes the process by which she created Jack’s voice. She explains: “I didn’t draft Jack’s thoughts in Adult and then translate them into Kid, because no adult would have those thoughts in that order. Writing in Kid from the start (once I had figured out exactly what peculiar dialect of age-five-but-hyper-educated Kid he would start) was what helped me invent not only what thoughts would occur to Jack but what their zigzag sequence of association would be” (Halford, n.p.). Central to Donoghue’s process was also the creation of a dictionary of Jack’s particular vocabulary and verbal mannerisms: “Just as in previous novels I put together a mini-dictionary of how people spoke in 1788 or 1864, this time I made myself a dictionary of my son’s kid-English, then narrowed it down to some classic errors and grammatical oddities that would not seriously confuse readers” (“Writing Room: Why and How,” n.p.).
story. End Violence Against Women International (EVAWI) recently launched a campaign entitled “Start By Believing”; the Association of Alberta Sexual Assault Services created a similar program, entitled the “I Believe You” initiative; and when Canadian actress Lucy DeCoutere came forth with allegations of abuse at the hands of former CBC radio host Jian Ghomeshi in the fall of 2014, the hashtag #IBelieveLucy rapidly trended on Twitter. Yet, as advocates, lawyers, and front-line workers know well, the spectres of false allegations and even the unreliability of traumatic memory continue to haunt the field of anti-violence work, perhaps no more so than when it comes to allegations of child sexual abuse.

While Jack is not directly abused in the novel—since Ma goes to great lengths to shield him from Old Nick—there is no doubt that after he and Ma escape from Room, doctors and interviewers alike imply that his experiences, his memory, and his perception all have been deeply (read: negatively) affected by the conditions of his upbringing. In “After,” when Ma and Jack are being evaluated and treated in the hospital, Dr. Clay tells Ma that Jack is “like a newborn in many ways, despite his remarkably accelerated literacy and numeracy […] as well as immune issues, there are likely to be challenges in the area of, let’s see, social adjustment, obviously, sensory modulation—filtering and sorting all the stimuli barraging him—plus difficulties with special perception” (182). Just a page later in the scene, Donoghue features an interaction between Jack and Dr. Clay that, in my reading, toes the line between an accurate depiction of rightful concerns on the part of mental health professionals and a criticism of the techniques of persuasive questioning of children that led to several high-profile cases of false allegations.

“I’m going to ask a question,” says Dr. Clay, “but you don’t have to answer it unless you want to. OK?”
I look at him then back at the pictures. Old Nick’s stuck in the numbers and he can’t get out.

“Did this man ever do anything you didn’t like?”

I nod.

“Can you tell me what he did?”

“He cutted off the power so the vegetables went slimy.”

“Right. Did he ever hurt you?”

Ma says, “Don’t—“

Dr. Clay puts his hand up. “Nobody’s doubting your word,” he tells her. “But think of all the nights you were asleep. I wouldn’t be doing my job if I didn’t ask Jack himself, now, would I?” (184)

On the one hand, Dr. Clay, who questions Jack despite Ma’s reassurances that Old Nick did not harm him, perceives him as a credible witness; on the other hand, Jack is seen as a blank slate upon which information (including new, non-traumatic experiences) can be imprinted. In another discussion, Dr. Clay tells Ma that the “very best thing you did was, you got him out early […] At five, they’re still plastic” (209). Jack, who is listening to this interaction, has a telling reaction. Thinking quietly to himself, Jack reasons: “but I’m not plastic, I’m a real boy” (209).

By situating Jack as a “real boy” and not merely “plastic,” Donoghue suggests that readers can and should lend credibility to his viewpoint and not merely dismiss his account of what happened in Room because of his age or because of his inability to know or understand life outside of captivity. Crucially, Donoghue does not offer these insights until much later in the novel, after Jack has already had the opportunity to detail the events of his life, including difficult ones such as the repeated rapes of his mother by Old Nick. As the novel opens, readers
become privy to the ways in which life in captivity has (undeniably) altered Jack’s perspective of the world, including his sense of reality. In a telling passage, Jack has difficulty understanding the relationship between the reality of his own existence and those of the people he sees on television:

Mountains are too big to be real, I saw one in TV that has a woman hanging on it by ropes. Women aren’t real like Ma is, and girls and boys not either. Men aren’t real except Old Nick, and I’m not actually sure if he’s real for real. Maybe half? He brings groceries and Sundaytreat and disappears the trash, but he’s not human like us. He only happens in the night, like bats. Maybe Door makes him up with a beep beep and the air changes. I think Ma doesn’t like to talk about him in case he gets realer. (18)

What stands out for me are the ways in which Jack’s seemingly “uninformed” or “naïve” observations mirror the difficulties of experience and representation that constrain the consumption of many forms of media. Self-reflexively, we as readers know that Jack isn’t real like we are, and that Room isn’t real for real either; however, as fiction that draws inspiration from real-life events, Room is “maybe half,” and it is this double-edged sword of fiction and fact that has the capacity to both lure readers into Donoghue’s novel, as well as to provoke readerly criticisms of appropriation and exploitation. Moreover, Jack’s suggestion that Old Nick is “maybe half” real suggests a form of partial perspective—what Donna Haraway would call a form of “situated knowledge”37—that can and ought to be validated. Jack is fully aware of the

37 Haraway’s framework of situated knowledges resonates not only in terms of the problems of spectacle and the privileging of vision that often arises in cases of sexualized or gendered violence (or, as Mulvey has noted, in terms of the construction of the female body in film and visual culture more generally), but also in terms of the ways in which it opens up space for other forms of knowing; and indeed, for forms of knowing that are more partial and fragmentary. Too often, I believe, we approach children’s knowledge as partial or fragmentary in relationship to adults’ frames of reference; rather, as Donoghue’s novel points out, children’s perspectives constitute nuanced
profound impact that Old Nick has on his mother: even though Jack’s direct knowledge of Old Nick is limited to what “happens in the night,” he nevertheless makes the keen observation of Ma’s reluctance to talk about him “in case he gets realer” (18). Resonating throughout Jack’s description is a strong sense of Old Nick’s malevolence, yet Jack’s perspective refuses to sensationalize or to graphically describe Old Nick’s violence. Even in this early passage, Old Nick is not described as monstrous or foreboding; rather, simply that he is “not human like us.” Jack’s characterization of Old Nick is thus encoded, like so many of Jack’s observations, with a double-meaning: for Jack, Old Nick’s inhumanity is a reflection of his absence from Jack’s visual field (since Ma keeps Jack out of sight in Wardrobe when Old Nick is around); for the reader, he is also not human because of his criminal actions towards both Ma and Jack.

Donoghue’s re-imagining of narrative credibility and partial perspective, as well as her refusal to offer the visual or textual pleasure of sexual assault scenes culminates in one of the most haunting passages of the entire novel: Old Nick’s rape of Ma. While it is already understood that the rapes are a frequent occurrence, Donoghue nevertheless gives her reader insights into how Jack actually perceives these moments of trauma:

Lamp goes off snap, that makes me jump. I don’t mind dark but I don’t like when it surprises me. I lie down under Blanket and I wait.

When Old Nick creaks Bed, I listen and count fives on my fingers, tonight it’s 217 creaks. I always have to count till he makes that gaspy sound and stops. I don’t know what would happen if I didn’t count, because I always do.

What about the nights I’m asleep?

understandings of the world, and often ones that pick up on phenomena or language that adults might otherwise miss.
I don’t know, maybe Ma does the counting.

After the 217 it’s all quiet. (37)

Unlike the descriptions of sexual assault that we often see graphically featured in many novels, Jack’s interpretation of the event requires a significant amount of work on the part of the reader; they are not simply passive consumers of a rape scene, but rather, must make the devastating connection between Jack’s description of Old Nick’s 217 creaks of Bed, his “gasy sound,” and the physical realities of the assault on Ma. While Jack does not understand these details’ relationship to sexual violence, the reader certainly does—if not immediately, then fairly quickly.

Laura Tanner argues that one of the most problematic aspects of literature is the manner in which textuality can cause the reader to “access the fictional world by abandoning the body that anchors him or her to a material universe and [enter] imaginatively into a fictional scene” (9). Furthermore, Tanner cautions that “even as representations of violation invoke and revise the reader’s understanding of the way in which actual violence works, they do so through the manipulation of words, images, and literary forms that often function to efface rather than to unveil the materiality of the victimized body” (9). Strictly speaking, Jack’s description of Ma’s rape is on the surface a form of effacement or silencing of the violence she must endure. From the perspective of the reader, it is anything but: by forcing readers to do an act of textual-to-physical translation from Jack’s literal interpretation of the sounds he hears, the materiality of the victimized body is made visible. Readers must consider how and why they understand what could otherwise be interpreted by a child as the sounds of consensual sex—a creaking bed, the vocalizations of orgasm—as being the sounds of sexual violence. In doing so, the embodied (rather than the legal) line between consensual sex and rape becomes narrowed: Jack’s viewpoint
is no longer simple or uncomplicated, but rather, one that forces readers to acknowledge the complexities of sexual violence, namely that it does not always look (or sound) the way we imagine sexual violence to be.

Before closing my brief analysis of Room, I want to examine one last scene that lucidly illustrates Donoghue’s clear and clever self-reflexivity when it comes to issues of narrative and genre: the interview scene that takes place between Ma and the “puffy-haired” journalist. Spanning nearly eight pages of text, the interview accomplishes a number of important tasks in the novel’s overarching aim to subvert narrative expectations and to deconstruct the generic norms that often accompany stories of sexualized and gendered violence. Insistent upon accompanying his mother to the interview, Jack sits quietly and observes the scene. As a witness who prioritizes and pays attention to his mother’s discomfort during the interview, he is obviously not a purely objective witness. Yet, the details that he notices in his mother’s reactions to the interviewer, combined with the dialogue that he reports, function to illustrate (were it not already clear to the reader), the ways in which the media’s insistent framing of traumatic narrative is, in many ways, precisely that which creates or compounds an individual’s trauma.

Only mere moments into the interview, after a series of problematic questions and trite statements, the woman with the puffy hair knowingly and deliberately provokes an emotional reaction in Ma by mentioning a stillbirth that she experienced prior to Jack’s birth. Her emotional reaction to the interviewer’s ambush is palpable: “Ma’s hands are shaking, she puts them under her legs” (232). With what appears to be a clear knowledge of her tactics’ effects on Ma, the interviewer nevertheless presses forward, framing her manipulative practices not as a media sales technique, but rather as that which will benefit Ma: “‘Believe me,’ the woman is saying to Ma, ‘we’re just trying to help you tell your story to the world’” (232). The scene continues for several
pages, with Ma’s agitation becoming more and more evident to the reader, as reported through Jack’s observations: at various points, Ma’s “eyes go even tighter” (235), her “voice [gets] loud again” (235), she “nearly snarls” a response (236), and by the end of the interview, her “voice is all hoarse” (237). The last few lines of the scene illustrate the stark contrast between the interviewer’s seeming pleasure and Ma’s profound traumatization through the forced framing of her narrative: “The woman does a little laugh. Ma’s got tears coming down her face, she puts her hands to catch them” (238).

By the end of the scene, it becomes clear that it is not necessarily Ma’s trauma that pushes her to the point of emotional breakdown, but rather, the trauma inherent in the interviewer’s violent attempts to shape, control, and manipulate Ma’s narrative. As Donoghue’s novel makes clear in this scene in particular, it is not only perpetrator or perpetrator narratives that can enact violence against victim’s stories and subjectivities, but also those who have other forms of narrative control and power. In an interview with Bookbrowse.com, Donoghue states that “Jack would have some interesting things to say about our world, as a newcomer to it; the book’s satire of modern mores and media, and interrogations of the nature of reality, grew out of Jack’s perspective rather than being part of my initial plan” (n.p.). I find Donoghue’s words telling, insofar as they reveal her own initial plans or sense of forethought as to how the novel should or ought to be shaped. Like her interviewer character, Donoghue is not exempt from having to confront the limitations of her chosen genre or the assertions of power that come with her position as a novelist, particularly one whose work is so closely associated with real-life cases of captivity and violence.

At the end of the novel, Ma and Jack return to Room to say good-bye. As Jack re-acquaints himself with Room after having experienced Outside, Room no longer comprises the
entirety of his world. Everything is smaller: “Has it got shrunk?” (319). Once-familiar items have disappeared and are recognizable only by their absence: “There’s the mark of Track around Bed. The little hole rubbed in Floor where our feet used to go under Table. I guess this really was Room one time. ‘But not anymore,’ I tell Ma” (320). Ultimately, Jack seems to grasp that in many ways, what happened within its walls can no longer properly be represented, and that trauma creates a kind of aporia, and describes this dilemma using the language of silence or absence: “I look back one more time. It’s like a crater: a hole where something happened” (321). Ending on a distinct note of silence, Room does not necessarily present these gaps or these quieting elements of trauma as negative or destructive. Rather, as in the rest of the ways in which we view the world of Room through Jack’s eyes, certain things experienced by and between Ma and Jack do not require explanation, and are not privy to Old Nick, the interviewer, or even the gaze of the reader: they are, quite simply, some things that happened.

“How does a girl vanish?”: Narrative Absence/Narrating Absence in Delible

“It’s an old game,” says Melora Sprague in the opening pages of Anne Stone’s novel Delible, “a game even dogs can play. I am playing dead and my sister fills my mouth with dirt and broken twigs and tiny rocks” (9). Taking pride in the accuracy with which she simulates death during this childhood game, Melora notes after its completion that “it’s an impressive performance, and my sister looks grim but pleased” (11). The Sprague sisters’ morbid game is riveting to their young classmates, and they too “gasp and beg, me please, me please” (11). “Like Sleeping Beauty,” the young girls wish to “display the still repose of a well-attended corpse” (11). Stone’s careful attention to performative qualities suggests that the girls’ re-enactment is not merely one of play, but rather, one of rehearsal, a possible preparation for a fate that might
attend them: one conferred on them primarily by their gender. While I never played such games with my classmates as a young girl, the rehearsal of my own vulnerability was also never far from my mind during my youth, nor is it now. I was born in the suburbs of Vancouver not long after Clifford Olson’s reign of terror in the early 1980s, and in 1994, when the murders of Ontario schoolgirls Leslie Mahaffy and Kristen French stunned Canadians across the country, I was reminded that no-one is entirely safe from the possibility of the triumvirate of gendered violence: disappearance, rape, and murder. As I grew older, I came to know, unlike Stone’s characters at the beginning of the novel, that when women and girls are found dead in the woods, their mouths full of dirt and twigs, that their corpses are rarely “well-attended.” The senseless unpredictability of such violence made it clear that, as Judith Butler writes, “violence is surely a touch of the worst order, a way a primary human vulnerability to other humans is exposed in its most terrifying way, a way in which we are given over, without control, to the will of others, a way in which life itself can be expunged by the willful action of another” (28-9).

As so many young women well know, the numerous attempts to reduce violence through risk management fails to account for the ways in which violence can trump all well-intentioned attempts to stay safe. What generally goes unspoken, of course, is that not all vulnerabilities are created alike. As Butler notes, while we “all live with this particular vulnerability, [it] becomes highly exacerbated under certain social and political conditions” (29). Not all little girls, if they are compelled to rehearse their own deaths, do so in the same way, or with the same sense of urgency or fear: after all, the possibility of such brutality is quite different than its probability. Written in a uniquely Canadian context—in the aftermath of the Robert Pickton trial and during inquiries into police negligence towards survival sex workers and Indigenous women—Delible takes up precisely the question of in whose lives we assume violence will play out to the
inevitable conclusion of murder, and more specifically, the kinds of stories we tell about the lives of those who have not yet been found murdered, but who have gone missing. Yet, Delible refuses to do so merely by rehearsing the stories that readers have perhaps come to expect, and it refuses to reify any inevitability by presuming that the fate of murder has actually befallen her missing protagonist, Melissa Sprague. Rather, Delible employs a series of ambiguities, silences, and elisions in order to call out the very structures and identity categories that are overdetermined by violence: sexual assault, abduction, victims, perpetrators, justice, evidence, trauma, and murder. Ultimately, I argue that Stone’s novel provides a unique theoretical basis from which to contend that silences and negative spaces around violence and murder can be politically productive and nuanced strategies, ones which ultimately reveal which lives (and which deaths) are considered grievable.

Like Donoghue’s novel, Anne Stone’s Delible received critical attention not only for its bold engagement with the ever-timely topic of missing women and girls, but also for its unconventional stylistic approach. Written in the wake of Alice Sebold’s best-selling novel The Lovely Bones (2002), which offered a post-mortem, Heaven’s-eye view of the aftermath of a young girl’s rape and murder (including her brief return to Earth in the body of her best friend, as well as a rather tidy ending in which her rapist and murderer is killed), Stone deliberately seeks to resist readers’ hunger for inside information, revenge, or tidy endings. As reviewer Melora Koepke observes, regarding the literary inheritances of the novel, Stone’s approach “contrasts sharply with other fictional works about missing girls, such as Sebold's The Lovely Bones and Barbara Gowdy's recent novel, Helpless, in which the narrative follows the "disappeared" after she vanishes from her everyday life” (n.p.). Stone’s approach, which Koepke declares to be “brave,” reflects a conscious choice not to “soften or ‘estheticize’” the experience of missing
persons. As Stone declares: “the irrevocability of absence, its duration, its frustration, the way that uncertainty changes the way you see the world—these are all elements I wanted to explore” (qtd in Koepke, n.p.). More than merely reflecting the theme of absence, Stone concerns herself specifically with the narrative problems that disappearances create. As she observes, “the disappeared cannot tell their own stories and so, as cultural and social constructions, representations of missing women gather up a society’s preoccupations, its hopes and longings, fears and hauntings” (“Bearing Partial Witness” 221). Bearing Stone’s observations in mind, my close readings of the text reveal precisely how and why she focuses so deeply on storytelling and narrative as the mechanisms not only by which we discuss those who have gone missing, but also, as a primary way in which people go missing.

As with Hardy’s Tess of the d’Urbervilles, critiques of Delible are telling in their reflection of a fraught engagement with a text that so thoroughly refuses to fulfill many of the narrative expectations that readers of novels that deal with sexualized or gendered violence have come to rely upon. In his review for Quill and Quire, for instance, Robert J. Weirsema argues that while Delible “convincingly evokes the dark and dangerous milieu [that Stone’s] characters inhabit both physically and emotionally,” it unfortunately “doesn’t cohere, [as] the investigation into Melissa’s disappearance lacks substantial narrative urgency and has little impact” (n.p.).

I find Weirsema’s observation fascinating, in no small part because it seems to miss the entire premise of Stone’s work, namely, that there are many girls’ and women’s disappearances which lack judicial or social urgency and thus have little impact on the communities from or in which they have gone missing. Stone, who wrote her novel during the early stages of serial killer Robert Pickton’s trial, is keenly aware of the ways in which such women’s stories seem to achieve a sort of narrative and social plateau. For many women, there is rarely, if ever, a rising
action or event that incites swift legal action or public response, nor is there the denouement of justice, catharsis, or even memorialization for the families and loved ones of many missing or murdered women and girls. Their stories never quite seem to pick up off the ground, and they do not ever seem to land, either. It is not surprising, then, that Stone seeks to mirror these forms of legal and social absence in her chosen literary genre. Rather than following a conventional narrative trajectory—even one that might end in tragedy—Stone opts to convey a slow, painful, quiet plot that never really ends in any sort of resolution whatsoever.

There are several moments throughout the novel where readers might find themselves frustrated by the sort of narrative disappointment that Stone deliberately crafts. One scene in particular, in which the police officers admit that Mel’s disappearance is likely not an isolated incident, stands out as a perfect example of the cold, casual detachment and lack of narrative intensity that readers such as Weirsema mis-identify. As the officers are combing through Mel’s belongings, her friend Val boldly confronts them with the following statement: “There’ve been others” (188). Because it is spoken so quietly that the officers may not quite hear her, Mr. Baxter amplifies Val’s statement, repeating it “loudly” so that it is “impossible to ignore” (188). As a reader, one might expect this moment to constitute a significant turning point in the novel, perhaps a moment in which Mel’s disappearance finally receives the urgency that it requires,

38 In her critical work on representations of missing women, Stone cites the important research of the late Sharon Rosenberg, whose work on violence against women (including analyses of the Montreal Massacre as well as research on Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women) made crucial interventions into discourses of public memory. In particular, Stone cites Rosenberg’s “Distances and Proximities: (Not) Being There” (2007), in which she makes the acute observation that Vancouver’s Marker of Change memorial is haunted by the women who are not memorialized by the benches, whose deaths were “not constituted as a social rupture, a national tragedy, or even something unimaginable” (63). N.B: This essay was featured in a special issue of West Coast Line about representations of missing and murdered women, edited by Anne Stone and Amber Dean.
driving both her case and the novel’s plot forward. However, Stone skillfully undercuts the possibility of an urgent response with the following dialogue:

Officer Singh turned to Baxter.

“How many?” Mr. Baxter demanded.

“Unofficially?”

Mr. Baxter shrugged. For the first time, I was glad Mr. Baxter was nobody’s fool.

“It’s not the first time,” Singh admitted, “a missing girl’s things have been found next to a dumpster. Not the first time a missing girl’s things have been recovered at Islington or Kipling or thereabouts.”

“There’s been five or six. Probably runaways,” Rankin added. “Look, that’s all there is to it. I don’t know that there’s a link.” (188)

The detectives’ conversation is factual but completely detached. While Officer Singh “admits” (perhaps reluctantly) that it is not the first time that a missing girl’s things have been found near the Islington station, and while Detective Rankin adds the detail of the number of girls whose items have been found in similar circumstances, he nevertheless undercuts this clear pattern by suggesting that the girls are merely “runaways,” and that he doesn’t know if there’s a link.

For readers of Stone’s novel—particularly those living in Vancouver, and those who have a familiarity with the Pickton case—one cannot help but think of the failures of both the Vancouver Police Department and the Coquitlam RCMP, both of whom failed to act when hints of evidence that a serial killer was at work first emerged. In a forthcoming book about her involvement with the Pickton case, former VPD detective Lori Shenher describes her experiences as an officer assigned in 1998 to investigate the increasing number of disappearances of women from Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Shenher’s appointment to this
position, one must note, occurred seven years after the inaugural February 14th Women’s Memorial March, and a year after Pickton escaped charges39 of the attempted murder of a sex worker at his Port Coquitlam property. In an excerpt printed in *The Globe and Mail*, Shenher describes her efforts to try and draw a link between the women’s stories, no matter how disparate they seemed:

> Whenever I had a spare moment, I read the files over and over. I sought out the women’s families, social workers, landlords, mental health workers, street nurses, friends, drug dealers, boyfriends, and ex-boyfriends to try to get a sense of their daily lives and activities. There had to be something beyond their lifestyle and neighbourhood that linked them: a place, a person, an activity aside from drug use. But what was the link?

Reading Shenher’s description of her investigative process, I cannot help but think of the techniques of close reading and of categorization that literary critics and readers of literature alike use in their own analyses of narratives. Just as we attempt to identify formal or content-based similarities in order to slot works of literature into a generic category, so too do investigators and witnesses alike attempt to identify the narrative qualities of a woman’s story of assault, of the details of her lifestyle and her behaviours, and the circumstances of her absence in order to decide whether or not her life might fall into the genre of “crime” or simply the nebulous, uncategorizable genre of “disappearance.”

Stone makes this connection explicit in her novel through the character of Claire, a forensic anthropologist who focuses not only on particular items in Mel’s room, but on the

39 While Crown prosecutors ultimately approved the RCMP’s recommendations of charges against Robert Pickton for the March 1997 attack of the sex worker known pseudonymously as “Ms. Anderson,” Crown counsel eventually stayed the charges “over concerns that Anderson, who was addicted to drugs and had missed several meetings with prosecutors, would be an unreliable witness” (Keller, n.p.).
stories behind them. In describing her process to Lora, Claire says “all of those presences and absences […] tell us a story, they construct a narrative. And from that, we can make informed guesses” (277). Referring to the notion of taxonomy (a term which crosses both scientific and literary fields of study), Claire makes clear that there is a system by which missing people’s items are organized; a system that crosses over into how their stories (and the stories of their loved ones and other witnesses) are also organized. Reflecting on my earlier discussions of the slipperiness of the novel and its attempts to resist categorization, it comes as no surprise to me that Stone would employ and play with the genre as a means of elucidating what happens when people (and their stories) slip through the cracks of language, including those of generic categorization.

As Stone makes clear in the novel, the issues of refusing to see patterns in women’s disappearances and of attempting to fill in the narrative gaps in ways that elide judicial responsibility or care (i.e. labeling missing girls as “runaways”) are issues deeply embedded in language itself, in how it circulates, and in its myriad representative failures. Stone repeatedly draws attention to the linguistic qualities of disappearance, making visible their embeddedness in our material and embodied understandings of loss. In portraying Mel and Lora’s mother’s relationship to stories of missing children, Stone reveals the ways in which the narratives of those close to us can become nearly uncontested points of exception. As a mother, Karin thus finds a fraught connection with the “newspaper mothers” that she reads about:

I clip the stories about mothers who know. Know their child is alive. I’ve got a shoebox full of stories. Of women searching for children that vanished years ago. Of women who say they know their children are out there. Of mothers who wait years and years for news.
Wait forever. I read their stories and know, dead to rights, that their children are gone.

When it comes to my own girl, I don’t know a thing. (145)

In this reflection, Karin powerfully reveals the ways in which absence drives narrative and also manages to create what might be seen as the illusion of driving or sustaining biology. This is the promise of Scheherazade and the thousand and one nights of stories that she tells: that storytelling is not merely the preservation or the continuation of language, but also the preservation and the persistence of life itself. Of course, the nightly spectre that haunted Scheherazade—as it haunts the families and loved ones of those who are missing—is the knowledge that when their stories cease, so too do their lives. In too many cases, people’s stories are seen as having foregone conclusions, not worth of a nightly, a weekly, or even a yearly retelling. Like Scheherazade’s nightly storytelling—which can be seen as analogous to the serialized publications of many novels—families are thus required to write further chapters in their loved one’s lives in order to maintain readerly interest. From the creation of photographs with age-progression software to projections about what a missing person might now be doing in their lives were they safely back with their families, these appeals must create a sense of linear progression and duration.

Yet, as Stone also illustrates regarding those whose stories may not be told (or told as easily) it is not merely that families do not want to tell the stories of their loved ones, but also that the trauma of loss makes it difficult—if not at times impossible—to gather the requisite narrative elements in order to compile a compelling story, or one that those unaccustomed to loss will know how to listen to. As Lora learns from Claire, “absence has its own grammar […] when someone disappears, vanishes, say, and there are no witnesses to the moment, people look to what’s left, they organize what’s left” (274-77).
Furthermore, the vast possibilities of the circumstances of someone’s loss (if it is not, say, a clear case of abduction) make it difficult to centre on a particular story and to continue its narrative trajectory. Lora ruminates:

After she was gone, I began to think about the different ways she might have gone.

I didn’t mean to. But it kept happening.

All that empty space she left behind her, it was too much. It started filling up with stories, the way the wash we’d stumbled on as children collected up all of the summer’s inadvertent rain. (168)

In Delible, this overwhelming multiplicity of stories is also reflected in the polyvocality of the novel: we hear mostly from Mel’s sister Lora, but are also privy to observations from both her mother Karin and her grandmother Celia. Yet, there is also one key voice in the novel—one that is presumed absent, but whose absence actually constitutes an enormous narrative presence: that of Melissa herself. She exists not only in the past, as a person whose prior speech is reported to us by her diaries and by her loved ones, but also in the present. As Claire gently reminds Lora, “It’d be useful if, while she’s gone, we could let your sister speak for herself” (276). Reading this passage, I am reminded of Maggie de Vries’ approach to her sister’s narrative: even in the certainty of her death, de Vries acknowledges the ways in which Sarah is capable of speaking and being heard.

At the end of his review of Delible, Robert J. Weirsema writes that the novel “fails to connect at the emotional level,” and that while “it’s possible that the banality and the emotional distance are deliberate,” one nevertheless “comes away knowing little more of these girls than one would from encountering a fading ‘Have you seen…’ poster following a child’s disappearance” (n.p.). Admittedly, and as observed through both Weirsema and others’ reviews
of the novel, *Delible* is not a work that conjures up the usual literary pathos. Unlike its recent predecessors (Sebold’s *The Lovely Bones* and Gowdy’s *Helpless*), and even unlike Donoghue’s *Room*, there are few techniques that Stone uses to deliberately manipulate her readers into a comfortably compassionate response. Because she eschews the use of the voice of the victim (Sebold) or the voice of an innocent child (Donoghue), Stone cuts off easy access to empathy through narrative voice, which is not to say that she cuts it off entirely. Rather, as is reflected in Weirsema’s review, she seems to make the reader *work* at developing empathic reactions to the characters. For those readers (such as Weirsema) who may, indeed, feel disconnected or feel as though they require more information in order to develop an emotional connection to the characters, I might ask: is this not precisely Stone’s point? In a novel that concerns itself with the abandonment of young women by law enforcement and by society at large—a novel that reflects the discursive demands of appropriately “convincing” and detailed stories before victims are seen as victims—is it not possible that this effect on the reader reflects the empathetic limits that we often run up against when we are exposed to certain stories of violence? This is not to say, of course, that a failure to connect emotionally with Stone’s characters reflects an inability to empathize with the numerous stories of missing and murdered women. However, I am curious what it might reveal about the larger contexts and contingencies of empathy that are so heavily embedded in our relationships to both fictional and non-fictional incidents of violence.

Early in the novel, Mel and Lora’s grandmother, Celia, reflects on her granddaughter’s disappearance, attempting to weave together some sort of narrative that explains the unexplainable. In doing so, she poses a question that is ultimately at the heart of Stone’s novel: “How does a girl vanish?” In crafting a novel that uses the ellipsis, the gap, and the absence in order to describe the reality of disappearance, Stone ultimately contends that there are numerous
ways in which girls vanish. They vanish, as depicted in the novel’s opening scene, when young girls begin to rehearse their own deaths. They vanish because the fictional stories that we tell about them—the ones we sell and consume, on primetime television and in the bestseller aisles at the bookstore—feel like societally self-fulfilled prophecies. As Mel herself observes in her criticism of one of Lora’s stories:

“I’m tired of dead girls […] Girls always die – always – especially in your stories. It’s depressing. It’s like a newspaper, it’s so fucking real. I thought people wrote stories so there could be happy endings, not like real life. I mean, why bother?” (67)

To this, Lora responds that her English teacher argues that “art is like life sometimes. Sometimes it’s even realer than life” (68). No doubt both Mel and Lora are correct, but explicit in Mel’s commentary is a criticism of the very forms of literature—particularly the novel—that see themselves as tasked with newness or novelty, but only ever repeat the same tired tropes and fetishized representations of victimized women. In the end, Mel’s story resists the very predictability her character so profoundly despises. After all, *Delible* is not a story about a dead girl: we never know what actually happens to Mel. Rather, it is about the conditions—social, cultural, legal, material, and linguistic—under which girls can go missing, can be injured, and can be seen or not seen as individuals whose lives and deaths are stories worth telling.

**Conclusion**

Laura Tanner affirms that “the intimacy of the reading experience often allows us to come close to characters and experiences that we might otherwise never encounter; by the same token, reading can force our intimacy by subtly pushing us into imaginative landscapes of violation from which it is difficult to extricate ourselves” (ix). While all forms of literature (even
non-fictional forms such as life-writing) face this dilemma of representation, as the perhaps most popular and widespread form of contemporary literature, the novel faces a unique challenge in balancing the ways in which it offers accessibility to difficult subject matter while also not problematically conflating the boundaries between real violence and fictional violence. As Tanner explains, “in order to reveal rather than obscure the suffering body, literary representations of violence must often work against themselves to subvert their own distancing conventions” (10). Indeed, this is what Room and Delible both accomplish, albeit in different ways, and while still being prone to the problems that give rise to rightful criticisms and questions: why do we need more (or any) novels about women held and children born in captivity? Why do we need more novels about missing girls? When we have so many real-life stories of atrocious acts of gendered and sexual violence, why do we want or need to read fictional ones?

In this chapter, I have argued that Room and Delible reflect a long history of novels that work against themselves—and even in spite of themselves—in order to reveal something very different about how we narrate and understand sexualized and gendered violence. While novels are a genre that require a lengthy and sustained engagement with the reader, Donoghue and Stone do not engage merely by revealing every detail of the action, or by allowing readers to passively consume the narratives as they unravel. Rather, both novels make constructive uses of silence in order to form an innovative mode of reading, thinking, and engaging, not only with the subject matter of rape, assault, disappearance, and captivity, but with the process by which such stories circulate. If the runaway success of these types of novels—Room in particular—and the plethora of backlash against novels or adaptations which reify violence are any indication, then readers and authors alike are keen to find new ways to approach a topic that, more than ever,
needs to be discussed. If, as we know all too well, real-life cases of sexualized and gendered violence are trapped in the intersections between fact and fiction, and between experience and representation, novels (and the authors who write them) are uniquely positioned to take up the questions and tasks that their very existence is built upon.
Conclusion: Silent Reading

words like violence
break the silence
come crashing in
into my little world

— Depeche Mode, “Enjoy the Silence”

What we require is silence;
but what silence requires is that I go on talking

— John Cage, “Lecture on Nothing”

Speaking Silence: A Critical Paradox

In this dissertation, I have argued that numerous works of contemporary Canadian literature and drama use silence as a productive and destabilizing force with which to represent sexualized and gendered violence. By situating these works in conversation with the discourses that seek to make violence audible, my research has sought not only to make sense of how authors and playwrights can make new and dynamic interventions into a field that is already so heavily saturated with representations of violence, but also to re-position silence as the means by which these interventions can be made. In my first chapter, I interrogated histories of censorship in Timothy Findley’s and Beatrice Culleton Mosionier’s works, as a means of foregrounding the historical legacy of silencing into which contemporary artists must situate themselves. In Chapter Two, I turned my attention towards autobiographical works, focusing on the ways in which Maggie de Vries’ memoir elides generic expectations of testimonial discourse, turning away from the graphic re-tellings of violence that are present in so many other memoirs, and turning
instead towards an exploration of kinship and grievable lives. My third chapter examined the complexities of representing sexual violence in the theatre, arguing that Colleen Wagner’s and Marie Clements’ uses of silence interrogate and resist how embodied representations of the physicality of suffering can either fetishize or aestheticize violence. In my final chapter, I explored fiction, arguing that Emma Donoghue and Anne Stone employ silence as a way to defy conventions of narrative voice and of narrative progression in the novel.

In describing the various functions and iterations of silence in my primary texts, I have had to engage with what is perhaps the most frustrating paradox of my chosen subject; namely, that silence should require so much explanation—in my case, 181 pages worth of analysis. Even as I reviewed the formatting requirements for this dissertation, I was reminded that a seemingly small instance of silence—say, a blank page—must be contextualized and made verbal, lest it be interpreted as an error or an omission. Because blank pages are expressly forbidden to be included in a thesis, I must state (as I have on page 1), that “this page is intentionally left blank,” or, as experimental musician John Cage has eloquently put it, that “I HAVE NOTHING TO SAY AND I AM SAYING IT” (51). The pressing need to discuss silence exists, as rhetorician Cheryl Glenn points out, because “the transformative power of silence is not always obvious […] especially if rhetoric can only be delivered by words” (153). This rhetorical hazard is made all the more evident by the fact that I have chosen to study literary and dramatic texts as my primary objects of analysis, rather than other media, such as film, photography, performance art, or installation art, all of which have the capacity to engage silence outside of the verbal matrix. In Chapter 3, for instance, I briefly alluded to Anishinaabe performance artist Rebecca Belmore’s 2002 piece “Vigil,” in which she uses silent acts such as the nailing of her dress to a power pole and the ripping of rose stems through her teeth in order to demonstrate both the actual and
symbolic violence carried out against Indigenous women’s bodies in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. Of course, non-textual or non-verbal forms of artistic productions are not exempt from the various discourses that impact their creation and reception, because visual languages and gestures are also deeply codified. However, textual forms of cultural and literary production face a distinct enmeshment in a paradox from which it is hard to extricate themselves. Despite these challenges, authors and playwrights should not avoid taking up the transformative possibilities of silence simply because they are potentially hazardous or difficult, nor should readers avoid or not engage with silences in texts simply because they may not necessarily know what those silences are intended to mean.

This is, I argue, where the work of literary criticism comes in, as a mediatory tool that can allow artists the freedom not to have to necessarily explain each instance of silence in their work, as well as to offer readers a series of tools with which to engage literary and dramatic silences. Engaging silence requires not only effort on the part of the artists who employ it, because of how profoundly silence can be misread, but also a concerted effort on the part of critics who facilitate both scholarly and public understandings of these works. After all, in order to dismantle the rhetorical structures that still require silence to depend on speech, “we will need to resist rhetoric as we have learned it in order to transform it, realigning our perceptions of the spoken and unspoken in ways that recognize silence as an integral component in the making and delivery of rhetoric, as persuasion, understanding, invitation, or something else” (Glenn 153). Over the course of this project, I have found myself constantly grappling with both rhetoric and silence as I have learned them: I have worked to disentangle silence from the sorts of binary thinking that merely reinforces hierarchies and power dynamics, and I have struggled with the implications of advocating for silence at a time when speaking out about sexual violence feels so
urgently necessary. Most significantly, I have struggled with the constraints and the mechanisms of literary criticism itself, becoming aware that scrutinizing glances and literary critiques can in and of themselves constitute forms of violence.

In order to dismantle existing assumptions about silence and its role within rhetorical and discursive structures and relationships—and in order to avoid a form of critical violence in my praxis—I, too, have had to re-learn what it means to be silent and to work against my own resistance to silence and its various manifestations. While it is not discernable from this document, my experiences of reading, thinking, and writing were filled with numerous gaps and elisions. There were moments when I had nothing to say for days, weeks, or months at a time, because I was either so confounded or moved by the silences I was studying that I found myself staring blankly at an empty page, unable to write. As I learned to lean into these silences—to learn “not to fear them” but to “love them”, as John Cage would say—it became evident that silence did not always require the sharp edge of objective scholarly analysis, nor did it require the extensive forms of explanation that I thought it would. Rather, silences simply required that I willingly participate in them, and that I experience them, despite the anxieties and questions they produced within me.

In the years that I have conducted the research for this dissertation, I have had the opportunity to discuss sexualized and gendered violence with many people, including in my capacity as an advocate on issues of violence. Over the course of these conversations, I have often been met with a variety of silences: awkward ones; stunned ones; uncertain ones; ones that people rush quickly to fill with another subject; ones that are tinged with fear, shame, or uneasy recollection. I have also had the distinct experience of confronting others with my own personal silences around sexual assault: silences that have prompted questioning, curiosity, confusion, or
even disbelief. In short, I have learned, to borrow from the title of one of Canadian poet Dionne Brand’s poems, that “no language is neutral”—silence included.

What I have also discovered is that what is needed is a way of understanding the types of silences that circulate around and permeate sexualized and gendered violence, rather than a means of eliminating them. While I have previously suggested that literature is not merely mimetic, and that literary study is not equivalent to sociological or psychological study, the insights gained in this dissertation may function as a starting point for us to speak about other silences and to build a framework within which to identify them across various and distinct genres. For instance, as I look towards further avenues for this research, I note the importance of dealing with the large sociocultural silences and taboos that concern perpetrator narratives, which I briefly addressed in my second chapter. While these stories are often silenced for good reason, I am nevertheless curious about what this effect has on our larger ability to understand sexualized and gendered violence as an interpersonal phenomenon, and how perpetrator silences merely reinforce stories of harm as not worth listening to or learning from. I am curious, too, about the ways in which we might move silence past its diagnostic or resistant functions and towards more explicitly positive or recuperative modes.

As I have attempted to show in tracing the contours of silence in various forms of literature and drama, and in tracing their effects, silences offer us important information about how we react to and engage with experiences and narratives that take us to the very edges and limits of language.
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