To my beloved chosen family
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The agenda of this project is to trace the evolution of American women’s writing in order to rediscover how the experiences of captivity and trauma are—and continue to be—intertwined. I argue that American women’s confessional writing continues to evoke the language of captivity, along with the formal properties of the captivity narrative in order to articulate experiences physical, emotional, and psychological traumas.

My dissertation posits that Mary Rowlandson’s 17th-century captivity narrative and Hannah Webster Foster's 18th-century epistolary novel The Coquette serve as the origin points for American women’s confessional writing. In Rowlandson’s text, captivity signifies traumatic experiences—including physical confinement, identity crises (including acclimation to a captor’s environment), and the difficulties of “restoration” (or returning to one’s once familiar culture). Rowlandson’s rhetoric of captivity continues to be instrumental in discussing the physical and psychological traumas of gender normalizations; contemporary memoirs Christine Jorgensen’s Autobiography and Susanna Kaysen’s Girl, Interrupted transform the medical case study into a captivity narrative—allowing them to be the “experts” of their own experiences. Jorgensen’s text
chronicles her experiences of being “trapped in the wrong body” and how normalizations of gender and sexuality kept her rhetorically captive; and Kaysen’s memoir describes her two years as a youth in a mental institution, primarily as a result of social and gender norms.

Foster’s novel expands the concept of captivity to include normalizations of gender, class, and sexuality; the novel addresses abuse toward women, particularly within the domestic space—and the silences surrounding these abuses. Alice Walker’s novel The Color Purple and Laurie Halse Anderson’s adolescent novel Speak describe the daily lives of protagonists who are sexually, emotionally, and physically abused in their youth. By asserting their own agency and promoting witnessing amongst readers, all of these narrative voices create a witnessing public—similar to what Michael Warner terms a “counterpublic,” a subversive community, amongst readers. And, the afterward provides several scenarios for helping teachers create a witnessing public in their classrooms.
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Captivity and Trauma

Captivity, like trauma, is both an experience and a discourse—and even a narrative form. In my project, I will be concentrating on how experiences of trauma manifest themselves as everyday experiences; I will focus more on social discourses and textual analysis than the psychoanalytic discourses of trauma. Instead of interpreting the texts in terms of psychoanalytical theories, I will be paying more attention to how they engage and (de)construct cultural discourses—such as gender, sexuality, and race. For this reason, my work draws upon theorists like Ann Cvetkovich and Judith Herman, who recognize the trauma that marginalized individual’s experience. In expressing traumatic experiences as captivity, American women writers have privileged fragmented forms, such as diaries and the epistolary novel; consistently evoking these forms helps highlight the visibility of this particular tradition of American women’s confessional writing. I have chosen to pair texts, which may on the surface seem completely dissimilar, in order to highlight consistent and diverse methods of articulating trauma; not only does this strategy contribute to discussions of trauma, it also provides another way of reading popular literary texts by women.

Beginning in the 17th century and lasting until the mid-18th century, published captivity narratives were based on actual women’s experiences served as popular forms of entertainment and information about war-riddled colonial America.1 In fact, the first best-seller in America is a captivity narrative written by the wife of a clergyman: Mary

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1 For a discussion about how the captivity narrative evolved within American print culture, see Jill Lepore’s *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (especially pages 48-68).
White Rowlandson’s *The Sovereignty and Goodness of God: Being a Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson*. Rowlandson’s text focuses on her “removes” as she travels with her captors further into the “wilderness,” which simultaneously distances her from her home and her Puritan identity. Her text acknowledges her growing acclimation to her captor’s environment and even her ability to financially thrive as a seamstress within their culture. While Rowlandson is literally held captive—and returned, or “restored,” to her Puritan society—the words *captivity* and *restoration* also highlight other more abstract tensions that Rowlandson experiences, including those of identity. *Captivity* and *restoration* refer to the struggles Rowlandson faces as her identity, once composed in opposition to Indians,\(^2\) becomes more closely affiliated with them—and, finally, the difficulties in being “restored” to her Puritan culture as a wife of a clergyman whose identity relied on viewing her captors as barbaric. Thus, she depicts her psychological or spiritual “restoration” as more problematic than her physical restoration; although she “returns” to her Puritan community, she no longer views her identity in strict opposition to her captors as she once did. In her text, Rowlandson expresses her inability to forget her captive experiences, thereby refusing to provide readers with a comprehensive restoration narrative; in this way, Rowlandson is psychologically and spiritually haunted by her experiences and memories, although her she has physically returned “home.”

Rowlandson’s text expresses ambivalence about her captivity and “restoration,” clearly not solely as a reflection of her religious devotion, but in order to articulate the inability to integrate her experiences as a former captive and member of Puritan society.

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\(^2\) I use the term “Indians” as it was used during 17\(^{th}\) century America.
In my study, trauma will be defined as an experience and discourse of intense suffering; this suffering can be physical or psychological—but I will most often be discussing it as both physical and psychological. The discourse of captivity is an especially effective avenue to articulate trauma for several reasons. For instance, a captive is typically kidnapped and held hostage by visible and physical barriers (such as wired fences); but, captivity is mostly preserved by a myriad of emotional and psychological threats, fears, and alliances. Captors’ reliance on invisible mechanisms helps them to maintain control over the subject for elongated amounts of time and across territorial boundaries; for this reason, captivity is both a physical state of being as well as a state of consciousness that can continue well after one is separated from one’s captor. The intimate relationship that develops between the captive and captor is one of ambivalence; for this reason, the captive feels both loyal and fearful of the very persons (and even ideologies) that restrain and violate her. Instead of hiding the intricate and contradictory ways that captivity and trauma affects one’s feelings towards others and one’s self, both Rowlandson and Foster explore intentionally placing themselves on the margins on their communities in order to acknowledge the internal conflicts and guilt that trauma survivors feel. Acknowledging these invisible methods of control and captivity is an important step in transforming the way trauma is envisioned. Although the terms “gender” and “trauma” did not exist in Rowlandson’s time period, I believe that they are rhetorically inferred through various methods of form. My aim is to trace the evolution of American women’s writing in order to rediscover how captivity and trauma are—and continue to be—intertwined. I am defining “women’s writing” as texts written by self-identified women; my inclusion of male-to-female
transsexual Christine Jorgensen, who is the focus of chapter three, will initiate the discussion of how this tradition queers even the fundamental category “woman.” In the late 18th century, Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* evokes the captivity narrative and thus continues the tradition that Rowlandson began in early American women’s writing. Foster’s novel, based on a true story, centers around a woman who suffers trauma because of the normalization of gender, class, and domesticity. Ostracized by her “friends” in higher classes who abide by gender expectations of marriage and motherhood, the chief protagonist becomes a matron and is literally forced into the schemes of a misogynist. While most critics do not claim that Eliza is raped, I will show in the next chapter why sufficient evidence exists for such an interpretation. As I will argue, the rapes occur in the protagonist’s mother’s home—solidifying the fact that domestic spaces are political and potentially violent. American women’s confessional writing often transforms the landscape of domesticity into a public and political space; in recognizing the existence of violence within domesticity, along with the act of confessing it, these writers dissolve the invisible the separation between public and private spaces. Although I will not be able to discuss every American woman’s confessional text, I hope to provide a portrait of the span of the tradition. In particular, I will analyze how the modern scientific case study echoes the captivity narrative and has been adapted by contemporary memoirs, such as Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* and Christine Jorgensen’s *Autobiography*. I will also examine how recovery narratives of sexual abuse evoke the discourse of domestic captivity in novels such as Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and young adult novels, such as Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*. The overall implication for such a study is to contribute to gender and trauma studies by
exploring how these discursive experiences can be expressed—providing methods of understanding past and present accounts. My less formal agenda is to provide alternative avenues in which to teach early American women’s literature; I have found that teaching these texts within contemporary frameworks to be highly successful and stimulating for students. Creating a dialogue with the past is both important and necessary to elucidate normalized conceptions that may be otherwise easily overlooked.

In *Bound and Determined*, Christopher Castiglia argues that the captivity narrative eventually integrated itself with other genres—namely early American fiction (which generally includes Indian characters). Castiglia posits that captivity narratives are still prominent and have been adapted into modern romance novels; for instance, he labels Catherine Sedgwick’s 19th Century romance novel *Hope Leslie* as a critical influence the modern-day paperback romance novels. In my dissertation, I will build on this insight and argue that the captivity narrative has also been integrated within novels that are not composed of romance plots. In fact, I will argue that the first novel to integrate and expand the captivity narrative, Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*, deconstructs the typical modern romance plot. The 18th-century epistolary novel belongs to a genre that is referred to as “seduction novels.” Within these novels, the plot and protagonist are generally scripted as such: the protagonist, sometimes through the network of unscrupulous women, is introduced to a socialite who wants nothing else than money and to “seduce” (which I will argue equates to *rape*) the heroine. The protagonist, in varying degrees of complicity depending on the novel, is impregnated by the socialite and finally forced to leave the community, having shamed her parents; the
novels typically end with a diatribe on the loss of virtue in young women whose conduct is not regulated by their parents. If anything, this plot is an anti-romance, in the terms of contemporary ideas of “happily ever after.” *The Coquette* is a tragic tale that does not end “happily ever after” for the protagonist, Eliza. A more modern narrative of the “fallen woman” is Alice Walker’s epistolary novel *The Color Purple*, which is the focus of the latter part of this dissertation; Walker’s text is about a young African-American woman’s evolving identity while she experiences the everyday traumas of sexual abuse (by her father, and then, her husband), poverty, and racial discrimination. While the chief protagonist, Celie, does eventually experience romantic love—and it aids her personal evolution—it is not the sole focus of the novel. Celie, like Eliza, is more concerned with friendship—particularly restoring her relationship with her sister, Nettie. In fact, reducing the novel to one theme is impossible—a common characteristic of this tradition of American women’s confessional writing.

Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse’s work even argues that the captivity narrative, especially Rowlandson’s text, is instrumental in contributing to the origination of the British epistolary novel. Armstrong and Tennenhouse particularly compare Rowlandson’s text with Samuel Richardson’s sentimental novel *Pamela* (1640), a controversial text about a young woman who is separated from her parents as a method for her wealthy suitor to make his sexual advances more successful. Armstrong and Tennenhouse do not include *The Coquette*; however, Foster’s novel, written by a woman, presents more ambivalence about this desire to “return home” that captives—like Rowlandson and Pamela—convey. Eliza, the protagonist in Foster’s novel, does not desire to return home; and, moreover, when she finally does, her tragic
demise is completed. While Rowlandson’s acclimation and “restoration” are ambivalent, Eliza’s “restoration” is decidedly more overtly problematic because Eliza is literally forced outside her own narrative and into the grave. Yet, another genre that may have well been influenced by the captivity narrative, to some degree, is the young adult novel. James Levernier posits that captivity narratives were particularly influential to American children’s literature in the 19th century; as both sources of entertainment—as well as moral and cultural education. In my study, I will analyze how captivity narratives inform contemporary young adult novels, specifically Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*, as a means to contribute to discussions of women’s recovery—and not to solidify cultural norms. *Speak* centers on a teen’s daily experiences at school after being raped by one of her peers; its goal is to validate the suffering and healing of the protagonist—not to teach moral lessons to the readers. Traditionally, the form of captivity narratives has been discussed as evidence that the narratives themselves supported cultural and gender norms. However, a closer look at the interactions between the form and content of captivity narratives reveal that the narratives’ original purposes were not to reinforce cultural hegemony.

Early American women’s captivity narratives, like Rowlandson’s, were literally enclosed with the words of respected men of the colony. For instance, Increase Mather is commonly thought to be the one who wrote the introduction to Rowlandson’s narrative; and in that preface, he lauded the text as devotional and chastised anyone who could not find spiritual edification therein. And Rowlandson’s husband, a respected reverend, includes his sermons at the conclusion of the text itself. This strategy is comparable to the tactics used to validate both the moral uprightness and literary value
of Anne Bradstreet when she published her collection of poetry; the testimonials, written by men, were almost as long as the poem compilation itself. These inclusions by male spectators have often been viewed as an indication of the lack of value assigned to women, their mental and creative abilities, and their other contributions to society. These “framing” mechanisms also illustrate the anxiety toward women writing to a large public. This same anxiety continued within modern women’s writing. For instance, Christine Jorgensen’s autobiography (discussed in the third chapter of my dissertation) is prefaced by Harry Benjamin, a respected sexologist “expert.” Benjamin’s preface operates in surprisingly similar ways as Mather’s preface. While colonial women were indeed thought to be inferior to men, these well respected testimonials of men may be operating within the text in ways that the authors did not anticipate. These inclusions also allowed an unpredicted and unprecedented space to emerge for American women: having received validation and written protection from the most prominent men in their society, they were rhetorically at liberty to discuss anything—including unspeakable traumas, their internal struggles, and even taboo subjects or behaviors. These “taboo subjects” include, in Rowlandson’s case, acclimating to her captors’ environment—even to the point of becoming economically successful. While I am not arguing that these framing mechanisms alone provided women with the platform to discuss anything—including topics of a sexual nature—it certainly did not hurt public opinion.

Another way of interpreting these inclusions by experts is that the male authors are bearing witness of Rowlandson’s text; this would be an extremely subversive reading but is not completely unimaginable because they believe that Rowlandson is divinely inspired and speaking from more than herself. Regardless, Rowlandson’s text,
enclosed with “how-to” instructions for interpreting her narrative, is paradoxically both bound and liberated like the narrator herself. While, certainly, she provides readers with a text that Mather can endorse, she also subtly—and not so subtly—resists the interpretations placed on her. For instance, Rowlandson’s inclusion of biblical passages and religious praise seems to coincide with Mather’s assessment of the devotional nature of her narrative; however, Rowlandson also includes a wealth of personal information that is not devotional—including her captors’ kindnesses, her developed appreciation for her captors’ food, and even her hesitancy to join “thanksgiving” festivities when she returns home. Her hesitancy, expressed publically, hints that she has another (or dual) purpose; and, I will argue that her purpose is to articulate trauma.

Any discussion of trauma is going to face the difficult task of finding ways to speak about the unspeakable. This is not to say that instances of trauma are uncommon; but, rather, trauma is often invisible. Three situations attribute to this: the access granted to trauma is based on one’s access to power (race, class, gender, etc. play a vital role); trauma eludes, if not destroys, language; and individual, as well as cultural, memory of trauma is very difficult to maintain. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry explains that pain is not only difficult to articulate—but it defies traditional forms of communication: “Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it” (4). Because trauma is almost impossible to articulate, it also requires alternative forms of recognition; Ann Cvetkovich writes:

Because trauma can be unspeakable and unrepresentable and because it is marked by forgetting and disassociation, it often seems to leave behind no records at all. Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. (7)
In my project, I argue that contemporary American women writers view the discourse of captivity and the captivity narrative, in general, as particularly adept at communicating individual trauma. By echoing each other, these texts reveal a visible archive of trauma to readers.

Although captives have been (and continue to be) generally gendered female, trauma, however, is a discourse that has historically been available only to men, namely war veterans. As Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings*, trauma is more than a diagnosis—it is a historical discourse, a modern method of legitimating pain. The gender disparity of how trauma is applied is evidence that women’s pain and trauma is ignored and—even sometimes—rendered completely invisible; for this reason, it is especially important to locate and acknowledge marginalized groups’ (in this case, women’s) archives of trauma. Cvetkovich notes that beginning in the 19th-Century, “the term *trauma*, which had previously referred to a physical would, came to be applied to mental or physical distress” (17). Extreme trauma is generally used to describe survivors of historically recognized instances of war and genocide, notably the Holocaust; it is most often discussed in terms of physical—and visible—wounds. In 1980, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) became more publically visible when it appeared in the American Psychiatric Association’s diagnostic manual; the diagnosis was chiefly used in relation to Vietnam veterans, who were mostly men. Today, trauma is defined by intense suffering; and this suffering can be psychological—but it is given more credence if physical or sexual assaults are involved. Most theorists agree that a traumatic experience is one that involves violence and a sense of physical danger; Herman defines trauma as an experience that:
overwhelm[s] the ordinary human adaptations to life. Unlike commonplace misfortunes, traumatic events generally involve threats to life or bodily integrity, or a close personal encounter with violence and death. They confront human beings with the extremities of helplessness and terror, and evoke the responses of catastrophe. (33)

Rowlandson adheres to our contemporary expectations of a trauma survivor because she is a prisoner of war, overtly visible by the gruesome carnage with which the narrative begins. Without any doubt, Rowlandson would be considered to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PSTD) by today's standards.

But PSTD diagnoses may come at a cost for women. As psychologist Dana Becker argues, females who are diagnosed with PSTD or any other psychological diagnosis are automatically assumed to have been sexually assaulted; Becker posits that this is a strategic method of continuing the conflation of female sexuality and psychological instability. This idea is perhaps most evident in the concept of “hysteria,” which translates from Greek as “that which comes from the uterus,” and has been used to describe a wide variety of symptoms (from coughing to depression) as directly related to female sexuality. The view that female sexuality is itself abnormal or more vulnerable than male sexuality, then, enforces the false belief that sexuality is always the originating factor for women’s trauma; while my project discusses the experiences of female sexual abuse, I am not arguing that all female trauma originates because of sexual assaults. Even though Rowlandson confesses to having not been sexually assaulted, not confessing sexual assault may be considered (by some psychologists) to be suspect. Herman writes, “The ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from

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consciousness” (1). So, even some contemporary psychologists might suspicion that trauma survivors, like Rowlandson, are unintentionally mis-remembering in order to preserve a cohesive sense of self; but my project privileges the agency and confessions of survivors, allowing them to be the expert of their own experiences.

In the late 1980s, a few small-scale studies were conducted to prove that there was a high rate of PTSD-symptoms among female survivors of domestic violence, sexual assault, and incest. In the 1990s, Herman helped to revolutionize the ways in which trauma is conceptualized with the publication of Trauma and Recovery. Notably, the text explicitly shows that women’s political, legal, and economic inequalities are connected to domestic and sexual violence against women and children. This ground-breaking text explores the psychological conditions of battered women, comparing them to domestic captives and prisoners of war. Herman focuses on the “domestic captivity of women and children [which] is often unseen” (74). Herman does not shirk away from discussing the taboo subject of rape as an act of violence, versus a sexual act, between married spouses. While spousal rape is now considered a crime in most states, legal hurdles have also been constructed; for instance, spousal rape survivors must typically report within 30 days to one year of the occurrence, while other rape victims have sometimes up to three years to report their assaults. Other hurdles include the law’s refusal to acknowledge sexual assault other than penetration and the requirement of explicit use of force rather than considering lack of consent sufficient.

Cvetkovich succinctly places Herman’s theories on trauma and Judith Butler’s theories on gender in dialogue with each other: “Even though [Judith] Butler doesn’t

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4 For more information concerning these studies that discuss the PTSD symptoms found in rape survivors, see Dana Becker’s Through the Looking Glass, especially pages 73-8, and Herman 28-32.
name it as such, the normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, which is effective precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem” (46). Friedman, in 1963, dubbed the inequality of women the “problem without a name” (qtd. in Herman 28), which reiterates the insidious nature of violence resulting from constructions of gender and sex. In order to highlight the insidious traumas that women experience as a result of gender normalizations and confinement to the domestic sphere, another term has become commonly used. “Domestic captivity” is a relatively new term and has been applied to the physical and/or psychological abuses that predominantly women and children experience in the “home.” While the term is new, the sentiment is not. In The Feminine Mystique, Jewish American journalist Betty Friedan described the suburban home as a “comfortable concentration camp” for women; she claimed that "the women who 'adjust' as housewives, who grow up wanting to be 'just a housewife,' are in as much danger as the millions who walked to their own death in the concentration camps" (1). After the 1963 publication of this feminist classic, Friedan was widely criticized and eventually apologized for the exaggerated analogy; but, her intentions to emphasize the impact of the insidious traumas that are masked by the familiarity and false-safety of “the home” are clear. While Friedan is not speaking about, specifically, the physical abuse toward women in her quote, she is validating the physiological and emotional confinement of normalizations of gender.

Like Cvetkovich’s work, my study focuses on the expressions of affective responses of trauma—the feelings of “helplessness and terror” (Herman 33) that arise from threats of violence, which may or may not be directed at the material body. These threats include, but are not limited to, founded or unfounded fears of physical or sexual
violence. Most psychiatrists would agree that traumatic events create an excess of external stimuli that overloads the brain; unable to “process” or compartmentalize the event, the brain responds with varying combinations of hyperarousal, disassociation, and numbness. I prefer the term “experiences” over “events” because, as I argue, I concentrate on the affective nature of trauma (which does not always include bodily harm). “Events” hint at a chronology of trauma, which I do not think always exists affectively. Especially in the 1980s and 1990s when more women’s stories of rape and incest began to be shared publically, “disassociation” was commonly thought to be the standard reaction and Multiple Personality Disorder was often diagnosed in these women. Although the “split” of personalities is not as routinely assumed in survivors of rape and incest as it was, the same basic rhetoric that someone is “not whole”—or “broken”—is still pervasive. Herman gives great credit to survivors of trauma when she asserts that their minds and affective responses are going into overdrive even as they seem to be immobile and unaffected; however, she ultimately asses that “Psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless” (33). One primary aim of my project is to reclaim the space of trauma and the agency of survivors as nonpathologized—and at no time envision survivors as damaged or broken, even if they feel as if they are. In other words, this allows a survivor to feel helpless while remaining whole—though feeling wholly terrified. In this project, I refuse to engage in the rhetoric of powerlessness, even when survivors are rendered physically immobile or psychologically and emotively stunned. My goal in doing so is to reinforce the importance of affect and identity—both of which are often complex and contradictory—within accounts of trauma.

5 Since 1994, the American Psychiatric Association's DSM-IV has referred to Multiple Personality Disorder as Dissociative Identity Disorder.
Gender continues to influence the rhetoric and representations and captivity and trauma. The representative captive has and continues to be most popularly presented as a white woman, evidenced by the popularity of news stories of young, white girls who are held hostage by religious cults and pedophilic men; one of the most recent to date is Jaycee Lee Dugard. Jaycee was kidnapped at the age of eleven and held captive in a man’s suburban backyard for eighteen years before being found in 2009, bearing two children in the meantime. The enormous media attention given to Jaycee makes it evident that the American public still craves such stories—and will pay to hear them; the same phenomena relates to confessional and romantic literature—it “sells.” My intent is not to dismiss the genuine pain that Dugard and her family feel—but to show how captivity operates as a concept and the effect of gender on trauma discourse. The surroundings in which Jaycee lived were portrayed and described in terms of wilderness and “removed” from any sort of contemporary society. Consider the language in this account in People magazine:

Jaycee and her daughters—who had never been to school or seen a doctor—seemed to have spent much of their lives in a cluster of filthy tents and windowless shacks hidden by trees and tarps in the backyard of Garrido’s home outside Antioch, California. (Tresniowski et al.)

The degree to which Jaycee’s surroundings were not visible by her kidnappers’ neighbors helped, of course, kept her whereabouts secret; however, the wilderness theme is certainly present in descriptions of her surroundings and what we would expect in a captivity narrative. Significantly, too, the article that is quoted above is entitled “Captive No More” and states that Jaycee and her children’s “recovery” (Tresniowski et al.) is constituted by living with her mother and visiting with medical experts. Jaycee’s own silences about her experiences continue to be guarded; but, even within the same
article, other individuals who were kidnapped as children protest to the healing power of
therapy and public sharing of their stories.

The captivity narrative, on one hand, is instrumental in promoting the access to
trauma to women; and, on the other hand, the romanticization of the representative
captive undercuts the significance of trauma within these mainstream narratives and
often shifts the focus to female desire. Consider, for a moment, how many times do we,
as audience members, end up rooting for the captors—or even for the captive and
captor to fall in love—in films? Think about Hannibal Lecter, a much beloved serial killer
protagonist, whom we want to fall in love with a pretty FBI detective—or ‘Beauty’ from
the fable Beauty and the Beast. These romantic and sentimental notions may be
helpful in creating cultural amnesia regarding the traumatic effects of captivity. Perhaps
it is no coincidence that ‘the Beast’ becomes human after he begs for forgiveness and
acquires Beauty’s love. Much like an abuser begging for “one more chance,” the Beast
is miraculously turned into a prince; this occurrence bears a striking resemblance to the
way domestically abused women describe their abusers. Hannibal and ‘The Beast’ are
far removed from the simple rebel figure; they pose, literally, grave dangers to the
female protagonist. Interestingly, as discussed in Chapter 4, the protagonist in Speak
refers to her rapist only as “The Beast” and “It” through the first half of the novel.

The representative captive has generally been a white woman, and captors are
generally depicted as dark skinned and male. Thusly, captivity narratives have often
been interpreted as solidifying cultural normalizations of gender and race. However,
Castiglia argues that captivity narratives engaged early American women readers with a
world outside domestic boundaries and thusly altered their identities by interacting with those whom they set in opposition to their identity:

Above all, I want to suggest that the captivity narratives hold their greatest interest . . . because they refuse to be static texts endorsing essential, unchanging identities and hence fixed social hierarchies of race and gender. Rather, the captivity narratives persistently explore generic and cultural changes, divisions, and differences occasioned by the captives’ cultural crossings. (4)

The degree to which captives identify with their captors is often complex and ambivalent; and this degree varies from text to text—and even within the same text. For instance, Rowlandson views her captors—and even “rescuers”—much more ambivalently; she continually contradicts herself about the kindnesses (or lack thereof) and general superiority of the Puritans over the Indians, and vice versa. At one point, she even muses about God’s protection of “the savages,” who are surviving more effectively in the wilderness than the Puritans in their religious communities. The degree to which a captive identifies with her captor remains a taboo subject even though it is well documented. Herman acknowledges, “Attachment between hostage and captor is the rule rather than the exception. Prolonged confinement while in fear of death and in isolation from the outside world reliably produces a bond of identification between captor and victim” (82). This “attachment” has been labeled “Stockholm syndrome.” The diagnosis was coined after hostages who were held for 131 hours at gun-point in a Swedish bank in 1973; what shocked the public, though, was that several of the hostages bonded with the very thieves that had threatened to take their lives. Shortly after the release of the hostages, a few of them paid for the thieves’ legal defense—and one even had a romantic relationship with one of the culprits. This syndrome has been psychologically applied to survivors of domestic abuse, war, and
incest. Bonding with a captor is a survival mechanism. Therefore, it should not be perceived as a weakness; rather, the identity conflict within narratives of trauma should be analyzed to better understand the experiences of captivity and the difficulties associated with “recovering” an identity prior to captivity.

Although trauma theory continues to evolve, one theme has remained persistent since Freud: loss—the loss of feelings (disassociation with others and one’s self), memory (amnesia), and even identity (sense of self). These internal struggles sometimes result in external losses—the loss of relationships, employment, and even the inability to find joy in life. Indeed, these losses combine to form something akin to a large, gaping hole. It is no coincidence, as has been previously mentioned, that trauma originated in the nineteenth century to describe a physical, visual wound; and even though trauma now is understood to refer to psychic, as well as physical, pain, it is still marked with an overarching premise of loss. Rowlandson’s text includes numerous biblical quotes; and, while they are often seen as signifying her helpless position as a woman, I believe that they are conscientiously inserted in order to demonstrate the inarticulateness of trauma and the narrative voice’s refusal to either confess or remain silent. These biblical passages act as “gaps.” Ultimately, these “gaps” are evidence of the narrative voice’s resistance to being integrated into a restoration narrative and refusal to completely resolve internal conflicts and identifications. And, in Kaysen’s memoir Girl, Interrupted, she inserts photocopies of her doctor’s records to disrupt the presumption that she needs to confess everything to the reader.

Confession, Witnessing, and Counterpublics

Cvetkovich explores “the cultural memory of trauma as central to the formation of identities and publics” (38) as it relates to a performative archive of lesbian experiences;
my dissertation similarly analyzes a woman’s archive, but concentrates exclusively on confessional writing across the spectrum of sexuality. In order to examine these women’s confessional texts, one must first acknowledge how “confession” is (and has been) defined in terms of women’s experiences. In the U.S., confessionalism is often discussed as a modern, pop-culture phenomenon that is imagined most often in memoirs, television talk shows, and poetry. Confessional writing, regardless of literary form (poetry, novels, etc.), altered once women became more active writers. Elizabeth Gregory argues that as women gained visibility within confessional writing (specifically poetry), confessionalism was gendered ‘private’: “Though the mode [confessional poetry] first appeared in the work of male poets, it is often associated with its female practitioners, and condemned as trivial and self-indulgent” (33). Of course Gregory is referring to the evident appearance of confessional poetry in the 1950s; however, I am not quite sure that the tradition of American confessional poetry does not originate with women. I find it odd that very few teachers or critics deem Anne Bradstreet a confessional poet—even though she certainly is and wrote about her fears of childbirth, romantic love for her husband, and even the fear of her critics devaluing her work as a publishing woman in the 16th century. Bradstreet is an English subject who, much like Rowlandson, discusses internal struggles about personal identity, desire, and fear; how could her work not be considered confessional? The lack of conversation surrounding whether or not Bradstreet should be considered a confessional poet highlights the fact that confessional writing is falsely presumed to be a modern invention at the expense of denying the experiences of those women writers.
One possible reason that a tradition of American women’s confessional writing has been largely ignored is because early confessional writing is generally viewed as a European male enterprise. Michel Foucault’s historical analysis of confession in his first volume of *The History of Sexuality* is certainly the most cited discussion on the topic of confession. Foucault’s theories rely on a European and masculine tradition of the confessional writing that originates with the writings of St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. As Foucault discusses, this Eurocentric masculine tradition of confessionalism privileges particular themes, goals, and voices. In Foucault’s binary model of confession, there are two individuals: the confessor (the person who confesses) and confessant (the person who hears the confession). Typically, sexual desires provide the content of confessions; and the ritual of confession supposedly liberates the confessor by uncovering truth. However, the same dynamics that construct knowledge and power govern confession: “it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault 61-2). These “authority figures” include religious advisors, doctors, attorney, parents, and (of course) psychoanalysts. This “scheme for transforming sex into discourse” (Foucault 20) provided a succinct and effective method to also create modern subjectivities. Foucault argues that “the obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us” (60); rather, we have become caught up in the ruse of this “regulated and polymorphous
incitement to discourse” (Foucault 34). Foucault offers his final verdict: “Western man has become a confessing animal” (59). And, indeed, by the plethora of television talk shows and best-selling “tell all” memoirs, one can see that the impulse to confess has become at least somewhat normalized. The texts, though, that I analyze do not exist solely to confess for the sake of confession alone; rather, the writers confess as a means to claim agency and to create the potential for witnessing. By refusing to confess solely for the sake of confession, these authors resist the linear narrative that demands their confession for a supposed “recovery.”

A couple of theorists, notably Judith Butler and Peter Brooks, have offered alternative interpretations of Foucault’s confessional model in order to validate the agency of the confessor. In Undoing Gender, Judith Butler revises Foucault’s popularized confessor-confessant model to include a third dimension: the bodily act of articulation. This speech act, Butler argues, is not the material desire or deed committed; rather, the act of speaking is another deed that executes what it says. This third component helps create space for performativity, which I argue allows for more agency and strategy on the part of the confessor; conscious recognition of the performativity of confession provides the confessor with more flexibility to reveal the gaps, conflicts, and complexities of experiencing trauma. Butler also re-evaluates Foucault’s earlier theories of confession with his latter essays and lectures; she argues that Foucault, in the end, conceives of the possibility of the act of confession not to include the “authority figure” (that is discussed above) regulating the confession. Butler cites Foucault: “the self is not something that has to be discovered or deciphered as a

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6 For a discussion of the politics of daytime talk shows and for one of the few studies about how viewers make sense of the shows in relation to their own lives, consult Julie Engel Manga’s Talking Trash.
very obscure part of ourselves. The self has, on the contrary, not to be discovered but to be constituted through the force of truth” (qtd. in Butler 163). This revisal is significant because it acknowledges more of the confessor’s subjectivity and agency in creating confessions (and, arguably, “truth”). And, in Troubling Confessions, attorney and literary critic Peter Brooks continues Butler’s revision of Foucault’s confessional model; he suggests that the act of confession imposes guilt—which means that regardless of the content of the confession, guilt is created by the act of confessing. In this manner, Brooks is trying to transfer the guilt from the confessor to the content of the confession. In the texts that I explore, the narrators sometimes struggle with the act of confession—not because of guilt, but because of lack of witnesses.

I believe that American women’s confessional writing neither fully supports nor negates Foucault’s theories. Like both Butler and Brooks, I will present a revision of Foucault’s confessional model; but I am basing my revision on writings not explored by Foucault—American women’s confessional writing. I postulate that confession is not comprised of two participants, but three. And, I also adopt Butler’s interpretation of Foucault’s theories when she argues that the act of confession is separate from the confession itself. My triangular model includes the positionality of ‘witness.’ Witnesses can include anyone—readers, confessor, confessant, and any combination of them. My model is striking because no one, under any circumstances, absorbs power from the confessor; the confessor is recognized as an active agent in constructing his or her confession. Witnesses do, however, have the power to appropriate the confessant’s power if s/he refuses to witnesses; in other words, witnesses provide a buffer between the confessor and (authoritative) confessant if necessary. I believe the power of
witnessing, this third dimension of the confessional model, is apparent even in the texts and traditions that Foucault discusses. For instance, Foucault sites the history of the Catholic confessionalism as existing between the supposed sinner and the priest; yet, what about the ‘witnesses’: deities? In the Anglican faith, of course, confession occurs amidst the congregation—rendering the witnesses visible; so, witnessing is a traditional component of confession. A modern visible manifestation of this witnessing public can sometimes be seen on talk shows; the crowd, listening and eagerly encouraging women to leave their abusive boyfriends. While the talk show host can create an environment that is prone to making the confessor a spectacle, this cannot exist without the aid of the audience members who refuse to act as witnesses.\[7\] The existence of witnesses is powerful because it complicates the power structure of both the act of confession and the confessional model. While the witness may exist in the masculine tradition of confession, it is most visible—and active—in the tradition of women’s confessional writing that I explore.

In their pivotal text *Testimony*, Shosanna Felman and Dori Laub make a distinction between testimony and confession; they argue that testimony is a performative method that transfers what cannot be processed via memory or understand into language. According to Felman and Laub, testimony implies a relation to history and personal responsibility, which they do not find in Foucault’s theories of confession (with the framework of guilt and restoration). In the texts that I explore, I argue that responsibility is given primarily to the personal, the confessor—and then to the collective witnesses. However, Felman’s and Laub’s goals in helping revise the way

\[7\] See Sujata Moorti’s “Cathartic Confessions or Emancipatory Texts? Rape narratives on *The Oprah Winfrey Show*” for a discussion on how specific examples from the Oprah show helped create the environment where a witnessing public is possible.
their students encounter history, art, and literature; so, their goals are similar to mine in that the focus is on witnessing. Confession, in my analysis, does not impede investigations into how discourses of shame, guilt, and/or difference are constructed; but, I think that “confession” does connotatively imply the guilt that survivors feel—not because witnesses subject them to it—but perhaps because of “survivor’s guilt” (which is in itself traumatic).

In my dissertation, I will argue that American women’s confessional writing fosters a group of witnesses that is comparable to a “counterpublic,” which is complete with its own space, community, and discourse. In *Publics and Counterpublics*, Michael Warner coins and explains *counterpublics* as defined “by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment” (63):

> some publics are defined by their tension with a larger public. Their participants are marked off from persons or citizens in general. Discussions within such a public is understood to contravene the rules obtaining in the world at large, being structured by alternative dispositions or protocols, making different assumptions about what can be said or what goes without saying. This kind of public is, in effect, a counterpublic: it maintains at some level, conscious or not, an awareness of its subordinate status. (56)

Warner cites examples, such as gay and women’s cultures, as being counterpublics. For example, counterpublics are historically acknowledged in the feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s where women gathered in order to tell the truths of their lives and create public awareness about issues affecting women. Elizabeth Wilson writes, “Women seized on the confessional genre as a way of giving consciousness-raising a more permanent form. In this writing, women expressed their ‘radical otherness’ and ‘made strange’ the familiar world by reason of their angle of vision” (28). But how do “subversive” communities differ from “counterpublics”? I believe that two of
the most significant differences exist in the level of visibility to the “larger public” and also the level of shared language and expectations. It has been my experience that these people (including myself) want to talk about the personal and global implications of the confessions; the counterpublic must battle must battle the impulse to shift the focus from the confessor to the host or themselves. The counterpublic that I am discussing exists for the sole reason to perform the act of witnessing, promote witnessing, and even participate in the act of confession with appropriate (e.g. not at times that may thwart someone else’s attempt to confess). As many of the discussions within this project will reveal, witnessing within counterpublics also includes impassioned exchanges.⁸ Witnessing does not attempt to contain or appropriate emotions or reactions, which is why a counterpublic must be conscientiously striving toward self- and communal validation and support. Cvetkovich posits, “Witnessing is fraught with ambivalence rather than fulfilling the melodramatic fantasy that the trauma survivor will finally tell all and receive the solace of being heard by a willing and supportive listener” (22). Cvetkovich argues that one must acknowledge “the burdens, the everydayness, and also the humor of witnessing” (22); and, in doing so, we claim the experiences of trauma as well as difficulties in articulating trauma. The complicated tasks of witnessing and confessing must be acknowledged in order to prevent reinforcing the fantasy of a false “recovery” for the confessor—and even the witnesses who may later become confessors.

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⁸ This is particularly important theme in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple*, discussed in Chapter 4.
A Queer Endeavor

Since the 1980s, feminist literary critics have striven to validate the worth of women’s texts, specifically texts by colonial American women writers; however, rarely are American women’s writings discussed as a (somewhat) cohesive tradition. In 2009, Elaine Showalter published A Jury of Her Peers: American Women Writers from Anne Bradstreet to Annie Proulx, where she takes on the monumental task of “tell[ing] the story of American women’s writing with a beginning, middle, and end” (xv). Showalter argues that this particular tradition originates from social and literary circumstances, versus biological ones: “the female tradition in American literature is not the result of biology, anatomy, or psychology. It comes from women’s relation to the literary marketplace and from literary influence rather than essential sexual difference” (xv). My project, like Showalter’s, does not argue that traditions of American women’s writing are essentialist, neither in relation to the author or the audience who can relate to the texts; this project, however, focuses on a distinct tradition within American women’s writing: confessionalism. American women’s confessional writing, I argue, does not originate solely “from women’s relation to the literary marketplace” (Showalter xv)—though I agree with Showalter that American women’s literature, in general, emerges with political and public aims. Rather, I will argue that the American women’s confessional writing emerges as a method to create a counterpublic, whose focus is to witness confessions of trauma—and validate the confessor’s agency.

Like Showalter, I am not arguing that the tradition of American women’s literature that I trace is held firmly together by the authors’ gender differences (xv). I struggled
with the adjectives “feminist,” “woman-centric,” and “womanist”\(^9\) and never could completely resolve myself to any of them. I believe that this project hearkens to feminism’s emphasis on social change while evoking the spirit of personal woman-love inherent in Walker’s womanism; but, this project also queers the binaries of gender and sex. And, the counterpublics do not restrict membership to only those who identify as woman. In other words, all are welcome to witness—as long as they abide by the requirements of witnessing, validating and supporting. American women’s confessional writing challenges views of confessionalism, trauma, genre and virtually every general category—from constructions of gender and sex to adult and young adult or child. American women’s confessional writing also queers another category fundamental to its label: “woman.” This is perhaps most clearly evident in discursive debates surrounding Christine Jorgensen, a male-to-female transsexual celebrity in the 1950s. Within this study, and within the parameters of witnessing, I do not consider Jorgensen to be male—because she does not identify as such. For me to refer to her as anything other than “a woman” would not be witnessing—or acknowledging the genuine internal and physical pain that she endured in order to be perceived as a woman. Paradoxically, though, Jorgensen’s inclusion queers the category of “woman” because it alters the biological and physiological normalizations that define that very category.

I have always believed that my dissertation—like the texts that it analyzes—is quintessentially queer. Castiglia does not overtly claim that captivity narratives are queer; however, essentially, he argues that they are critiquing (the process of) normalization, which is a queer enterprise. The term “queer” troubles both definition

\(^9\) For Alice Walker’s definition of “womanism,” see In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens, xii. This topic will also be discussed further in Chapter 4 of this project.
and conceptualization of normative concepts; and my project does not attempt to make
queer more normative and less queer, as it would be. In *Tendencies*, Eve Kosofsky
Sedgwick discusses the significance of keeping “queer” troubling, undefined, resistant:

> Queer is a continuing moment, movement, motive—recurrent, eddying, *troublant*. The word ‘queer’ itself means *across*—it comes from the Indo-European root *twerkw*, which also yields the German *quer* (transverse), Latin *torquere* (to twist), English *athwart*…*queer*…is…multiply transitive. The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange. (xii)

Thus, an attempt to contain or normalize “queer” would be defeating its purpose for
existence. Some of the protagonists, like those in Walker’s *The Color Purple*, display
traditionally queer (lesbian) desire. But Queer encompasses more than sexuality—it
provides a lens with which to engage the world through. I believe that by participating in
a counterpublic, both protagonists and readers are able to come to a queer
understanding of self—or at least are able to be “read” through a queer lens. In *Fear of
a Queer Planet*, Michael Warner writes:

> Every person who comes to a queer self-understanding knows in one way or another that her stigmatization is connected with gender, the family, notions of individual freedom, the state, public speech, consumption and desire, nature and culture, maturation, truth and trust, censorship, intimate life and social display, terror and violence, health care, and deep cultural norms about the bearing of the body. Being queer means fighting about these issues all the time, locally and piecemeal but always with consequences. (xiii)

This self-awareness of personal and political issues, belonging to one’s self and others,
is the purpose of the witnessing counterpublic. Just as struggle does not end for the
confessor after the confessional act, neither does it end for the witnesses.

The next chapter, “The Wild(er)ness of Domesticity: Confessing Trauma in Mary
Rowlandson’s Captivity Narrative and Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*,”
examines pivotal influences of American women’s published confessional writing,
namely Mary Rowlandson’s narrative and Hannah Webster Foster’s novel. Rowlandson’s narrative is organized in “removes” as she travels with her captors—further into the “wilderness,” which simultaneously distances her from her home and becomes her home. The main protagonist in *The Coquette*, Eliza, is held captive in her mother’s home while she cares for her dying father and fiancé; when Eliza tries to socialize with her high-class female “friends,” she is once again regulated to the home—where I will argue that a socialite rapes her. The novel, more explicitly than Rowlandson’s text, addresses domestic abuse toward women. Instead of articulating trauma through biblical verses, like Rowlandson, Foster’s protagonist uses textual silence—which transforms the typical separation between silence and the act of confession. Foster’s *The Coquette* also revises the way in which silence operates within the act of confession—and makes a firm distinction between being silenced and choosing silence.

“Queering the Case Study: Christine Jorgensen’s *Autobiography* and Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*” discusses how Rowlandson’s rhetoric of captivity continues to be instrumental in the re-imagination of confessional science; contemporary memoirists Christine Jorgensen and Susanna Kaysen transform the medical case study into a captivity narrative. Jorgensen’s text chronicles her experiences of being “trapped in the wrong body” and being forced to travel outside the boarders of the U.S. in order to receive sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) during the 1950s. Through discussing her experiences after her SRS, she also shows how normalizations of gender and sexuality keep her rhetorically captive. Scrutinized by the public, denied the legal choice to marry, and exploited by doctors, Jorgensen wrote her own memoir and resists a simple
reading of her life as a case study or medical anomaly. Kaysen’s memoir depicts her two years as a youth in McLean, a private mental institution, during the 1960s; although one cause of her institutionalization is an attempted suicide, her memoir shows that she is contained at McLean primarily for other reasons—including her rebelliousness toward normalizations of gender and class. Kaysen also explicitly interrogates her psychological diagnosis and illustrates the impossibilities of unproblematic “recovery” while Jorgensen embraces the concept of “restoration” so that she may be “read” by others as a woman.

“Everyday Trauma in Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak*” focuses on two modern fictional texts that use some of the same strategies as *The Coquette* to articulate domestic captivity. Walker’s and Anderson’s novels describe the daily lives of protagonists who are sexually, emotionally, and physically abused in their youth. The novels resist providing sensationalized accounts of the protagonists’ rapes and, instead, confess the everyday experiences of trauma. Like Rowlandson, Celie (the protagonist in Walker’s novel) encounters several shifts in her identity as she becomes aware of her heritage, her family’s history, and her own sense of gender, sexuality, and spirituality. Melinda, the protagonist in *Speak*, is likewise struggling to find her identity—while confronting the effects of rape. Closely allied with Foster’s form, these texts—to different degrees—are written in epistolary format. And, like Foster’s novel, these texts focus on how public ideologies and private spaces overlap—namely how normalizations of gender, sexuality, and even age contribute to the existence of domestic captivity. Walker’s text explicitly reveals the parallel between global colonization, abuse against women and lower-classes, and
racial discrimination. While both protagonists confess their experiences to readers and other witnesses within the texts, confession is presented as a byproduct—not instigator of healing; and in this way, the two novels subscribe to and complicate modern sexual abuse recovery narratives.

My afterward, “Manifesto for Counterpublic Classrooms,” includes strategies that I have used in order to create a witnessing counterpublic within my classrooms. This section is composed of specific scenarios and difficulties that I have encountered in my attempts to facilitate discussions about gender, race, sexuality, and trauma with diverse groups of students. While my “manifesto” is by no means a definitive discussion on pedagogy and trauma, I do hope that it will contribute to the ongoing discussions among teachers.
CHAPTER 2
THE WILD(ER)NESS OF DOMESTICITY: CONFESSIONING TRAUMA IN MARY ROWLANDSON’S CAPTIVITY NARRATIVE AND HANNAH WEBSTER FOSTER’S THE COQUETTE

Mary Rowlandson’s *The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* is the second known publication in the Americas by a woman; published in 1682, her narrative sold widely in the Americas and England and underwent four editions in the year 1682 alone. The text chronicles Rowlandson’s experience as a captive, in “removes,” for the approximately three months she lived with Native American groups—particularly the Nipmucs, Narragansetts, and Wampanoags—in 1676. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian notes that Rowlandson had become a “household name” before the publication of her text: “The attack on Lancaster and the fact of Rowlandson’s capture were so well known that the author needed no identification beyond her name” (“Publication and Promotion” 252). So, very much like a contemporary memoir, Rowlandson’s personal voice and descriptions, along with more “objective” information, were what audiences were seeking. Prefaced and concluded with sermon-like rhetoric from well respected clergymen, Rowlandson’s text includes numerous Biblical scripture throughout. Lisa Logan suggests that the inclusion of the preface and sermon from clergymen exists to battle “both imaginative and literal violence against (public) women” (261); thus, she considers those documents as a preemptive rebuttal to readers who might contest a written publication by a woman.

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1 *The Tenth Muse Lately sprung up in America* by Anne Bradstreet was first published in 1650 in England; it was not published in the Americas until 1678, four years after Bradstreet’s death.

2 See Kathryn Zabelle Derounian’s “The Publication, Promotion, and Distribution of Mary Rowlandson’s Indian Captivity Narrative in the Seventeenth Century” for a complete discussion of the advertisements, publications, and revisions of Rowlandson’s text. According to Amy Schranger Lang, to date, at least forty editions have been published.
Scriptures and other male voices, scholars argue, create tension within Rowlandson’s narrative. Derounian posits that Rowlandson includes the scriptures as an attempt to “minimize the symptoms [of trauma] to conform to the Puritan doctrine of providential affliction” (“Puritan Orthodoxy” 83). However, Mitchell Breitwieser interprets the scriptures, not as a rhetorical strategy, but as a rational method for conveying personal mourning. While I do not agree that Rowlandson’s main goal is to assimilate into Puritan society by espousing doctrine (after all, she had already successfully rejoined her society well before the publication of the narrative), I do agree with Derounian that the inclusion of Biblical passages and voices are strategic—but for the purpose of conveying the suffering that Breitwieser highlights. I also believe that the scriptures reveal Rowlandson’s keen understanding of the performativity of confession; she uses those insertions as a method to resist confessing when she does not want to—as well as articulate trauma in her own social codes.

Scholars also note Rowlandson’s contradictory descriptions of her captors. For instance, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Christopher Castiglia point out that Rowlandson is quite aware of her contradictions concerning her experiences with her captors. Castiglia claims that Rowlandson’s agenda is feminist and that female captives “move from defining themselves as sharing identity with white men in opposition to all people of color, to defining themselves as primarily ‘female,’ therefore sharing identity with other women across racial difference, in opposition to all men” (8). While I agree with Castiglia that Rowlandson is intentionally blurring boundaries of race, I think she is doing so in order to keep her marginal position of captive—even after she is “restored”—for two reasons: to emphasize the marginal experiences of captivity and
trauma, and to resist a false recovery narrative. Bryce Traister suggests that Rowlandson clearly resists depicting herself as “recovered” by contradicting Puritan ideology (especially providential affliction) and her own descriptions of her captors; Traister posits that Rowlandson’s narrative “gestures toward a modern—indeed, secular—understanding of the human encounter with pain and trauma” (325). Rebecca Blevins Faery argues that Rowlandson does not contradict herself but rather incorporates two narrative voices—one that is colloquial and one that is religious. The purpose of the colloquial voice, Faery argues, is “to record what Puritan ideology could not contain” (31). I would argue, though, that Rowlandson does not use two narrative voices as much as she embraces the performativity of confession.

While Rowlandson’s memoir is evidently based on her life experiences, Hannah Webster Foster’s epistolary novel *The Coquette* is also based on actual, publicized events; and what is also interesting is that the texts were both successfully published over a decade after the events that they record. The sensationalism of their stories, for readers, then had not lost its appeal; in essence Rowlandson and the heroine of *The Coquette* were celebrities well before and well after the first published editions of their texts. Likewise, readers were aware that *The Coquette* is based on a particular woman’s experience: Eliza Whitman, a poet, who had an affair and eventually died shortly after delivering a stillborn baby in 1788.3 News of Whitman was published in newspapers; and, upon the first publication of *The Coquette*, readers noticed the uncanny parallels between Whitman and the fictional Eliza, who shared the same monogram—“Eliza Wharton.” First published anonymously in 1797, the epistolary novel

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3 See Davidson (140-1) for further details on Elizabeth Whitman’s life and death.
was also entitled *The History of Elizabeth Whitman’s; A Novel; Founded on Fact*. Without a named author, and the title’s emphasis on “history” and “fact,” the text was predisposed to appear as a simultaneously “objective” and personal (confessional) account by a mysterious writer. Also, composed mainly of letters written by the protagonist, the text has a level of intimacy that could have only been rivaled by Whitman’s own account. Between 1824 and 1828, the novel was printed eight times. Like Rowlandson’s text, readers were acquainted with the general “plot” of *The Coquette*, but the readers were looking for something more—a personal narrative voice that the general news lacked.

Some criticism surrounding *The Coquette* focuses on the representations of the new republic in relation to England, women’s liberty within the new republic, and female friendships within the novel. For instance, the figure of the “fallen woman” is more historically complex than generally acknowledged; Bontatibus argues, “America, at that point [of the Revolution], was already a fallen woman, not because she was seduced and abandoned by the hope of democracy, but because she expressed filial disobedience in a war for independence” (3). Likewise, Leonard Tennenhouse valorizes the libertine (or rake) figure because it also expresses the republic’s separation from aristocratic ideals to a stronger sense of independence. Critics such as Cathy Davidson and Donna Bontatibus, as others, have viewed Eliza as a critique on the space (and lack of freedom) given to women in the new republic, which theoretically offered freedom to everyone; for instance, Davidson argues that the tragic nature of the novel is not that the heroine made the “wrong” choice—but that she had no marital

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4 See Carla Mulford’s “Introduction” to *The Power of Sympathy and The Coquette* (xlii).
choices to begin with. The subject of female friendships in *The Coquette* has received generous critical attention; many critics, including Elizabeth Dill and Claire C. Pettengill, profess the healing and moral power of female friendship in the novel. Dill writes, “Friendship will heal the wound of Eliza’s loss, and through this sentiment female friendships become the moral compass of the novel” (278). However, my argument builds off of Cathy Davidson’s claims that the novel “challenges the fundamental injustices” (144); however, I will claim that the heroine’s female friends actually encourage these injustices by solidifying gender normalizations and expectations of social class.

Because Rowlandson was a prisoner of war, it seems understandable that she suffers trauma by virtue of her physical captivity; but, the very genre “seduction novels” or “sentimental fiction” does little to indicate the violence that often lies therein. *Seduction* is a word that is both pleasing to the ear and romantic in intonations; however, within these seduction novels, young women were kidnapped, (arguably) raped, made to suffer alone and in poverty, and finally forced to die in childbirth. However, within Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette*, the heroine is not kidnapped; unlike other critics, I will argue that she was forced, by her more economically secure female friends, into seclusion and is finally raped in her mother’s own home. The motives of her friends, as I will explain, originate from the heroine’s homosocial desire that conflicts with their heterosexual domestic and married status. Pairing Mary Rowlandson’s *The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson* and Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* elucidates the interconnectivity of “captivity,” “wilderness,” and “domesticity” as concepts and spaces.
Mary Rowlandson’s Wild(er)nesses

Mary Rowlandson’s The Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson fulfills, in many ways, what modern readers expect from a narrative of trauma—specifically horrific details of war. During Metacom’s War (or King Philip’s War), Indians\(^5\) raided Rowlandson’s village in Lancaster; within the first paragraph, Rowlandson includes graphic imagery of an anonymous villager who is killed: “he begged of them [the Indians] his Life, promising them Money, . . . but they would not hearken to him, but knock’d him on the head, stripped him naked, and split open his Bowels” (31). Gruesome imagery continues in Rowlandson’s narrative as “these murtherous Wretches went on, burning and destroying before them” (Rowlandson 30). The text opens with visualizations of massive amounts of wounded and bloody bodies; and this signals a couple of important points, namely the author’s refusal to spare any the reader any information (thereby validating the truthfulness of the account) and also to contrast Rowlandson’s refusal, at times, in providing the reader to her own corporeal state. She is captured, wounded by a bullet, along with her three children and a few other villagers. Near the beginning of her eleven-week sojourn with the Indians, Rowlandson’s youngest child, injured in the raid, dies in her arms. Being torn violently from her home, struggling for survival in the wilderness, and existing as a prisoner of war are sufficient reasons to label Rowlandson’s experiences traumatic; however, a discussion of her complex identifications with the English and Indians reveals that Rowlandson encounters psychological, as well as physical, trauma.

\(^5\) This epitaph is used as it was in the 17\(^{th}\) through 19\(^{th}\) centuries.
In the beginning of her narrative, Rowlandson’s juxtaposes the wilderness with Englishness; for comfort, she seeks to find any trace of Englishness in the wilderness. She writes:

. . . it was a grievous day of Travel for me. As we went along, I saw a place where English Cattle had been; that was a comfort to me, such as it was. Quickly after that we came to an English path, which so took with me that I thought I could have freely lyen down and died. (Rowlandson 41)

Her joy at seeing a place where English cattle had lain and an old path is even more compelling when she is forced to eat “Indian corn” (Rowlandson 41). Thus, while Rowlandson seeks visual cues of her former identity, she is forced to adapt to her captors for sustenance—literally, for survival. But the boundary separating “Englishness” from “Indian ways” is not as clear as one may assume. The narrative is organized in “removes”—emphasizing Rowlandson’s physical removal from her domestic home; but, in many ways, the boundary between domesticity and wilderness is unclear during colonial America. While we may think of the Indian raid as a clearly defined invasion into the American and domestic sphere, Rowlandson’s “home” was actually in “the wilderness”—both literally and figuratively.6 Rowlandson’s, more than likely, saw the physical formation of her house amidst the strange and foreign land. But that construction did not keep the “wilderness” at bay; the wilderness visibly existed no further than behind the newly erected buildings and threatened to invade them. And, the stableness of towns, which contrasted the natives’ nomadic traditions, made the colonists an easy target for invasions and destructions of those symbols of British

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6 See Amy Kaplan’s “Manifest Domesticity” for a discussion on the interconnectedness of the rhetoric (and practice) of domesticity and colonial expansion.
superiority. Thus, the colonists most likely envisioned their homes—this domestic space—as potentially dangerous areas and subject to unpredictable violence.

Because of this often invisible and shifting boundary between domesticity and wilderness, colonists searched for ways—including literacy, food, and religion—to designate themselves superior to native inhabitants. Armstrong and Tennenhouse observe that the act of writing is a crucial way in which colonists assert their superiority over the Natives:

The exemplary captive existed for the early eighteenth-century reader as a kind of epistolary heroine, whose ability to read and write, more than anything else, distinguished her from her Indian captors. Moreover, in later captivity narratives, literacy also distinguished the English individual from men and women of European birth. (204)

Armstrong and Tennhouse argue that captivity narratives provide personal information about colonial America—the act of writing itself is critical in the establishment of English identity. Linguistically, too, as Rowlandson continues on her remove, she begins to incorporate more terms used by her captors. Pauline Turner Strong notes Rowlandson’s sense of familiarity with the native’s terms:

Rowlandson uses quite readily such Algonquian words as wigwam, wampum, squaw, pampoose, sagamore (a local variant of sachem), powwow (ritual shaman), sannup (husband), samp (corn porridge), nux (yes), and matchit (bad). She describes a pre-battle divination ceremony and celebratory feast with an attention to detail that gives her accounts ethnographic value even today. (99)

Strong posits that Rowlandson’s familiarity with those terms may have stemmed from her interactions with Nipmuks, who resided close to her home in Lancaster. So, Rowlandson’s previous interactions with Indians makes her experience as captive more complex because she was not completely unfamiliar with some tribes of Indians; and her sense of curiosity and awe toward their traditions is perhaps not what one would
expect from a captive who professed hate toward all Indians earlier—and especially a woman. Pauline Turner Strong observes that Rowlandson’s struggle for identity was prevalent for colonists:

Anglo-American identity is represented as the product of struggles in and against the wild: struggles of a collective Self surrounded by threatening but enticing wilderness, a Self that seeks to domesticate this wilderness as well as the savagery within itself, and that opposes itself to Others portrayed as savage, bestial, demonic, and seductive.” (1)

This internal conflict, then, is the source of much of Rowlandson’s difficulty in describing her captors because of the desire to present clear boundaries between the domestic and foreign.

Several critics have argued that the purpose of Rowlandson’s text is not to espouse hatred toward her captors or Puritan dogma. Many critics argue that her narrative accomplishes important cultural work—especially in relation to the representation of women. For colonial women, captivity narratives provided a method to communicate personal experiences. Elaine Showalter claims that captivity narratives “described women’s abilities to survive and endure through stoicism and resourcefulness; experimented with personal confession” (14). This personal voice, argue Nancy Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse, influenced 18th century British sentimental fiction. In Bound and Determined, Christopher Castiglia writes that captivity narratives provide the opportunity for “white women . . . [to] demonstrate skills and attitudes of which their home cultures thought them incapable” (4). Indeed, Rowlandson survives harsh conditions and travels in ways that she is unaccustomed; these experiences sharply contrast the expectations placed upon those of her sex, gender, and class. Rebecca Blevins Faery argues that, although contemporary readers expect
racial discrimination (and undoubtedly find it) within captivity narratives, Rowlandson’s narrative voice is more ambivalent about her captors than not:

Again and again, the figure of the white woman captive among Indians that Rowlandson for so long represented or shadowed has been used to create and enforce racial boundaries, to impugn Native people, and to justify a brutal national politics of Indian removal and extermination. And because that figure has historically been called upon to serve ideologies of white dominance, it is important to return to Rowlandson’s text to recover the “colloquial” voice within it that has so often been occluded—the voice of a woman whose experiences allowed her to move from characterizing Indians early in her narrative as indistinguishable and unreadable “black creatures in the night” to seeing them as individuals with names, distinguishing features, characters, and habits and an intricate network of social customs and conventions—to know them, in other words, to be fully human as herself. (78)

Castiglia would agree with Faery, arguing that Rowlandson actually traverses cultural boundaries; and, in doing so, Rowlandson complicates the stereotypical way relationship between colonists and Indians, captors and captives, and even women and men.

Intertextuality and the supporting materials that accompany Rowlandson’s text are instrumental in how readers and critics decipher the purpose of her text. The narrative is introduced by a notable clergyman, generally assumed to be Increase Mather, and concludes with a sermon by her husband (another clergyman). Mather’s introduction, though, is generally interpreted as a visible example of how the text “anticipates the potential for hostility toward the woman writer” (Logan 262). In his preface, Mather defends the authenticity of Rowlandson’s text by arguing that she is an respectable woman who is allowing him to thrust her writing into public view—and only for the edification of others:

7 See Lorrayne Carroll’s “Affecting History” for a discussion on the male authorship of early American women’s writing; Carroll posits that the distinction of “rhetorical drag” (512), or men writing the woman’s experience, is obvious when gender and class normalizations are not challenged.
Though this Gentlewoman’s modesty would not thrust it [the narrative] into the Press, . . . . Some Friends having obtained sight of it, could not be so much affected . . . as to judge it worthy of publick view . . . that God might have his due glory, and others benefit by it as well as herself. (qtd. in Rowlandson 29)

While most critics argue that Mather provides the devotional lens through which to read Rowlandson’s text, I believe that he could also be serving as a witness to Rowlandson’s experiences. Either way, Mather’s endorsement frames Rowlandson’s narrative as personal testimony—and confessional. The Biblical quotations used throughout Rowlandson’s narrative are generally interpreted as being further support that her narrative voice is subjugated by dogma and the masculine voice of Mather. Sometimes, the Biblical quotes, like Mather’s preface, are viewed as Rowlandson’s attempt to integrate herself back into her community—to regain the status she had before being held captive. Kathryn Zabelle Derounian argues:

Immediately after her captivity, Rowlandson suffered from psychological trauma similar to what we now term the “survivor syndrome,” but that she tried to minimize the symptoms to conform to the Puritan doctrine of providential affliction. In writing her captivity account, Rowlandson therefore performed a personal and public service. Articulating her experiences was therapeutic (personal) because she confronted her past journey outside conventional society, yet it was also devotional (public) because she documented her present reentry in it. (“Publication, Promotion” 240)

While Rowlandson’s desire to re-assimilate into her community is most likely accurate, I also believe that the Biblical excerpts augment the narrator’s inability to aptly convey trauma—and the refusal, on some level, to confess some experiences. When devoid of any way to articulate what she is seeing and feeling, Rowlandson uses the power of affect associated with the Biblical references as a communicative tool. For instance, the first inclusion of scripture is when she is captured and exclaims: “O the doleful Sight that
now was to behold at this House!” (33). The instance of “sight” is important; although she attempts to convey the carnage that she witnesses, words are insufficient.

In several scenarios, Biblical verses also are employed as performative means of confession—a way for Rowlandson to resist providing some of the confessions that her audience members might want. And, instead of including theoretical musings or complaints (which she readily includes later), Rowlandson refuses to confess her innermost thoughts; she deflects the readers’ gaze back to themselves. For instance, Rowlandson writes during “The Seventeenth Remove”: “quickly my strength failed, and my spirits were almost gone. Now may I say as David, . . . I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me” (52). She is not allowing the scriptures to replace her voice; rather, she is inserting these Biblical passages, or “gaps,” where utterances of an indefinable experience of trauma would otherwise be. Reading Biblical scriptures within her narrative as visible marks of trauma is quite different than interpreting them as policing her experiences. For instance, on “The Fourth Remove,” Rowlandson writes: “I cannot express to main the affliction that lay upon my spirit; but the Lord helped me at that time to express it to himself. I opened my Bible to read, and the lord brought that precious Scripture to me” (39). The particular scripture that comforts Rowlandson is ironic because it encourages policing of power of affect: “Thus saith the Lord, refrain thy voice from weeping, and thine eyes from tears, for thy work will be rewarded” (qtd. in Rowlandson 39). Mitchell Breitwieser’s interprets Rowlandson’s identification with Biblical passages, like the one above, as a method that “echoes with the tensions of grief [of figures like Job] and thereby establishes an intertextual rather than a didactic
I agree with Breitwieser, who privileges Rowlandson’s agenda to mourn—and, arguably, to confess trauma.

I agree with Bryce Traister, who positions Rowlandson’s narrative as secular and confessional; like Traister, I agree that Rowlandson retains control over her text and depicts “personal suffering [that] stubbornly resists its translation into the Protestant allegory of divinely appointed affliction” (325). At the end of her narrative, Rowlandson references a quote from the book of Psalms: “And I hope I can say in some measure as David did, it was good for me that I have been afflicted” (65). Note how Rowlandson writes that she hopes that she can say—not that she undoubtedly asserts—that she has benefited from the experiences of captivity. Rowlandson refuses to portray her confessional writing as an unequivocal method of healing. The last paragraph of Rowlandson’s narrative is firmly set in the present and after returning to her Puritan society: “Before I knew what affliction meant, I was sometimes ready to wish for it” (65). Here, Rowlandson subtly undercuts Puritan ideology, which professes that personal suffering attests to one’s spiritual fortitude, by comparing it to her experiences—the reality of physical captivity. Rowlandson twice notes “the strange providence of God in preserving the Heathen” (40). Rowlandson’s reactions toward her captors are ambivalent—a combination of fear, loyalty, admiration, and hate. Rowlandson initially describes all Indians as “murderous Wretches” (31) and “black creatures in the night” (33); however, she does eventually acknowledge her friendships among some of her captors. Rowlandson’s initial descriptions of Native Americans are comparable to other white, middle-class colonists and appear throughout her narrative; the portrayals of natives as wild animals make it easy to understand how colonists justified their violence.
against and their desire to convert the native inhabitants. However, in Rowlandson’s narrative, she visibly struggles with depicting her captors as savages and humans—mirroring her own internal struggle to both identify with and in opposition of her captors. At one point she admits that her master is “the best friend that I had…in both cold and hunger” (46). Rowlandson speaks of acclimation to her captor’s environment, not so ironically, by discussing ‘taste’:

> The first week of my being among them I hardly eat any thing; the second week I found my stomach grow very faint for want of something; and yet ‘twas very hard to get down their filthy trash; but the third week (though I could think how formerly my stomach would turn against this or that, and I could starve and die before I could eat such things, yet) they were pleasant and savoury to my taste. (40)

Rowlandson’s regard for her captor’s food is emblematic of how she is forced to cultivate certain desires—for survival—that would have otherwise repulsed her. Rowlandson also notices the changes in her own behavior regarding death: “I cannot take but notice how, at another time, I could not bear to be in the room where any dead person was; but now the case is changed; I must and could lie down by my dead Babe, side by side, all the night after” (36). These dramatic shifts in her behavior, of course, are requirements of survival; but, one might wonder how eagerly she embraces these changes.

I theorize, based on Rowlandson’s acclimation to her captors’ environment, that Rowlandson (to some degree) recognizes the acclimation to her captive environment and embraces it as “another” domestic environment. The only way that she could explain her intense acclimation is to claim forgetfulness; or, maybe, she actually forgets that she is a captive in order to provide herself with a sense of cohesive identity:

> Cannot but remember how many times sitting in their wigwams, and musing on things past, I should suddenly leap up and run out, as if I had been at home,
forgetting where I was, and what my condition was; but when I was without, and saw nothing but wilderness, and woods, and a company of barbarous heathens, my mind quickly returned to me. (Rowlandson 47)

Rowlandson is provided with opportunities to runaway—several times while moving between wigwams to visit her son and also when an Indian couple offers to help her escape. While some may argue that she does not attempt to flee because of her “learned passivity” as a Puritan woman, I think that the reason is that she sees her survival intimately connected with her captors and thusly has built a pseudo-home—a familial relation—that contrasted “the wilderness” that she would be forced to encounter if she ventured away. I do not intend to devalue Rowlandson’s positionality as someone who is held physically captive with threats of violence or imply that this “pseudo-home” was a happy one. My students often point out the fact that Rowlandson may have fared better—or, at least, she may have had more immediate liberties—with the Indians than within Puritan society. This is evident by the fact that Rowlandson even profits within her captor’s society, using her sewing industry to accrue money and food as an independent woman. But, even then, she feels compelled to share her earnings with the Indian who “has taken her into his household. For instance, Rowlandson employs her sewing industry and is rewarded with a knife, which she eagerly gives to her ‘master’ (the head of the wigwam where she lives); “I was not a little glad that I had any thing that they would accept of, and be pleased with” (44). And, indeed, the tension between Rowlandson and her captors does dissipate from time to time; she mentions that particular individuals are “very kind to me” (44) and she recognizes their humanity.

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8 See Rowlandson 61.
9 See Rowlandson 43.
Rowlandson’s interactions with her female captors, specifically her mistress, are generally antagonistic. Rowlandson, around the “Fourth Remove,” is sold to Quinnapin and Weetamoo; significantly, Weetamoo is King Philip’s sister and actually shared leadership with her brother.\textsuperscript{10} While she speaks about the kindnesses of male Indians, she is quick to portray the female Indians as brash, ungrateful women—with social power. Her master, Quinnapin, is often described as her “best friend” (Rowlandson 46); and, King Philip’s kindnesses include soliciting her work as seamstress, offering her tobacco (which she refuses), and even compassionately responding to her tears. Michelle Burham argues that Rowlandson’s dual disgust and jealously at a woman having such power results in the “fierce hostility . . . [toward] the autonomous authority of her Indian mistress” (31). Weetamoo is portrayed as a sort of nemesis. When Rowlandson is captured, her wounds make it difficult for her to travel—especially since she is unaccustomed to traveling in a nomadic fashion; she describes the intentionally cruelty of her mistress: “Being very fait, I asked my Mistress to give me one spoonful of the meal, but she would not give me a taste” (40). Later, Weetamoo indignantly refuses to eat Rowlandson’s cooking because it is served in the same dish with Quinnapin’s; this supports Burham’s earlier claim that Rowlandson may, in fact, be indignant about Weetamoo’s ability to have such a high social status as a woman. Here, it is important to note that the terms “master” and “mistress” were “traditional appellations by which New England servants referred to their employers” (Burham 31). So, Rowlandson configures her relation to her immediate captors, the ones with whom she lives for the majority of her journey, as her employers—not as innately superior. This is important to

\textsuperscript{10} See Burham (30-2).
Rowlandson’s portrayal of herself as being part of a system of exchange and is amplified by her ability to work effectively within this system—both as a worker and an independent contractor.

Rowlandson addresses her own fears of death to the reader; at the very beginning of her narrative, she confesses: “I had often before this said, that if the Indians should come, I should chuse rather to be killed by them than taken alive; but when it came to the trial my mind changed; their glittering Weapons so daunted my spirit” (33). Rowlandson’s emphasis on her own corporeal state illustrates that the narrative is not simply devotional. She does not simply embody the Biblical scripture that closes her narrative: “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord” (qtd. in Rowlandson 65). Tara Fitzpatrick remarks: “On the face of it, hers is the narrative consumed by the imminent prospect of starvation and her search for both literal and spiritual sustenance. If she claimed to have surrendered her spirit to God’s exaction, she was not nearly so compliant about her corporeal fate” (10-11). Indeed, Rowlandson clearly struggles to survive by acclimating to her captor’s environment in various ways.

**Dangerous Domesticity**

*The Coquette* begins with an unexpected sense of exhilaration that defies expectations of a narrative that focuses on trauma. The opening lines are from the protagonist, Eliza, to her best friend (Lucy): “An unusual sensation possesses my breast; a sensation, which I once thought could never pervade it on any occasion whatever. It is pleasure; pleasure, my dear Lucy, on leaving my paternal roof!” (Foster 5). While Eliza’s giddiness seems harmless, her joy at leaving her mother’s house would alarm 18th-century readers. The perils (often involving death) for young women who leave the protection of their parents are the subject of many novels, including
Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* and Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*. Eliza’s reason for wanting to leave home are understandable: she has cared for her ailing father—and then her fiancé, who resembled her father; she is neither married nor bound to the domestic sphere that has held her captive and depressed her spirits for so long. Eliza does succeed in leaving her mother’s home for a while; but, after refusing the advances of another clergyman, Mr. Boyer, I believe that Eliza’s friends isolate her and concentrate on their own households. Returning to her mother’s house, Eliza is lonesome and forced into the company of a reputable rake, Major Sanford. After becoming pregnant with Sanford’s child, Eliza flees to a tavern and dies during childbirth among strangers.

While the general plot of *The Coquette* is similar to other seduction novels, a closer look at its form alone reveals how different it is from its contemporaries. Contemporary critic Leonard Tennenhouse claims, “One cannot overstate the redundancy of these [seduction] novels” (1); but there are, indeed, key differences between Foster’s *The Coquette* and other seduction novels—including William Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy*, arguably the first seduction novel published in colonial America. Foster’s protagonist differs from other seduction novel’s characters because Eliza is passionate and can be read as being pro-active in her own fate.\(^\text{11}\) Furthermore, what remains unusual about *The Coquette* is that an over-bearing moralistic narrator, typical of most novels of this time, is completely absent from the novel. *The Coquette* does not contain a preface or an omniscient narrator, which are typical of sentimental

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\(^{11}\) See Davidson (111) for a comparison between William Brown’s *The Power of Sympathy* and Foster’s *The Coquette*. Also consult Marion Rust, who argues that Charlotte Temple’s (in Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple*) fault is not her desire—but lack thereof (illustrated by the fact that Charlotte collapses at every critical juncture in the narrative).
fiction in the 18th century. For instance, Susanna Rowson’s *Charlotte Temple* (which was published only a few years before Foster’s novel) begins with a preface from the author; and this preface operates much like Mather’s preface in Rowlandson’s text. The moral purpose of the text is made explicit: “for the perusal of the young and thoughtless of the fair sex” (Rowson xlix). And the text continues with a militant narrator who instructs readers how to remain dutiful and virtuous daughters by obeying their parents. This omniscient narrator also serves another purpose: to speak for the heroine after she becomes invisible; but Foster’s text uniquely allows the heroine’s voice to fall explicitly silent. The absence of overbearing voices in Foster’s novel does not instruct the reader what to think or feel; this strategy allows the readers to identify more intimately with the heroine, which is arguably one of the main purposes of the epistolary form.

While Rowlandson’s text blurs the boundary between domesticity and “the foreign,” Foster’s text challenges the supposed tranquility of domesticity—and sympathy, the supposed glue for the diverse new nation. In *The Coquette*, the domestic sphere is presented as an isolating and confining place; from the beginning, Eliza is confined within her mother’s home, caring for two ill men. When she visits with female friends, she is at liberty (literally) to socialize; but, even while among the domestic and social gatherings of her friends, she is labeled a flirt and expectations are placed upon her behavior. After the majority of her female friends marry, Eliza is forced to return to live with her mother—and it is here that her demise is cemented. In “A Mob of Lusty Villagers,” Elizabeth Dill discusses the domestic space as an instigator of seduction, arguing that Eliza’s social death precedes her physical death: “It is *after* Eliza’s return home, however, that her seduction is completed, and it is as a scene for sexuality and
ruin that the home *sustains* rather than subverts the seduction” (258). So, if the
domestic space is dangerous, where is the wilderness—and how does it operate in *The
Coquette*? I would argue that the other fictional characters perceive Eliza as the
epitome of “the foreign.” Since she refuses marriage and motherhood, her friends do
not see any ways to “domesticate” her and they simply forsake her.

Eliza is surrounded by women who are either married or on the verge of marriage
and who want to “repose in safety” (Foster 24), which includes ignoring their single,
lower-class friend. Eliza, on the other hand, wants to travel—to “remove” herself from
her familiar domestic environment into the public environments of her socially mobile
friends. Eliza’s eagerness to participate in society is perceived as a burden to her
friends, who want to revel in their status as wives and mothers; Eliza’s lower class
status presents even more complications. Eliza relies on her female friends for
invitations to social gatherings, recreational outings, and such. She is a “pensioner of
friendship” (Foster 36), forced to depend on her friends for amusements and female
companionship because she does not have the financial resources to reciprocate their
social invitations. Eliza pens the vast majority of letters between female characters
because writing letters is a diversion that is financially available to her. Eliza writes
eight letters before receiving a response from her closest friend Lucy; in that eighth
letter, Eliza acknowledges her fear that her friends are “so weary of my company, as to
wish to dispose of me” (Foster 24) via marriage; she bemoans that “Marriage is the
tomb of friendship. It appears to me a very selfish state” (Foster 24). Indeed, this
rebuke instead of genuine care for Eliza—could be interpreted as the sole motivation for
Lucy’s response. The fact that Lucy writes two short letters, compared with Eliza’s
nineteen, at the beginning of the novel is further evidence that Lucy is not enthusiastic about communicating with her friend.

I believe that contemporaneous readers would have noticed Lucy’s lack of participation because of the cultural emphasis on sympathy for fellow human beings that permeated fiction and political pamphlets; readers would undoubtedly be sympathetic toward Eliza—and maybe not as reprimanding as critics have assumed. In the 18th century, sentimental fiction was the most widely read genre; Davidson speculates that the burgeoning middle class—composed of teachers, doctors, and clerks—effected sales of these books.12 Readers who read Foster’s text were likely to shed tears and have genuine affective responses to plots that may seem too dramatic by modern assessments; readers viewed novels like The Coquette as not being situated within “the realm of fairy tale or escapist fantasy, but in the very bedrock of reality” (Tompkins 127).13 Sentimental fiction provided an avenue for readers to commune over “real” experiences that were difficult, if not impossible, to speak openly about—and to have emotional responses that were considered both logical and often patriotic. Cathy Davidson explains the importance of the novel following the Revolution and notes that the novel “creates its own truth by involving the reader in the process of that creation” (52). For some critics, this exchange of affect between protagonist and reader is considered potentially subversive. In The Politics of Sympathy, Elizabeth Barnes writes, “sympathy is made safe [by sentimental fiction], and readers are encouraged to imagine

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12 For discussions concerning the readership and growing middle class, see Davidson (38-45) and Evans (41-3).

13 Critics such as Jane Tompkins and Cathy Davidson concur that readers emotionally responded to sentimental literature because it mirrored their own experiences—or experiences of those whom they knew. Evidence, such as mass amounts of tattered copies of texts and even the creation of physical gravesites for fictional heroines, attest to this.
a harmonious rather than a disjunctive relationship between their own desires and that which is desired for them by a protective parent” (18). While readers may have been consoled by their personal safety, when comparing their situation with Eliza’s, I want to reiterate Davidson’s and Tompkins’ observations that readers considered these tales to be personal and confessional; undoubtedly, women (especially lower- and middle-class women) knew of other women who suffered like Eliza—or maybe they even had first-hand experience.

Since middle-class women probably related to Eliza better than other readers, they probably acknowledged the specific financial restraints that Eliza experiences. Significantly, Eliza’s socioeconomic situation is precisely what forces her from her higher-class female friends and to return to—and remain in—her mother’s domestic sphere. Lucy’s first letter revolves around the subject of marriage and class, and she encourages Eliza to accept Boyer’s proposal in marriage because “his situation in life is, perhaps, as elevated as you have a right to claim” (Foster 27). Lucy continues, rebuking Eliza for any desire to be more socially mobile, under the guise of friendship: “It is the task of friendship, sometimes to tell disagreeable truths” (Foster 27). Eliza lacks the skills and fortune to acquire safety and happiness within the domestic realm.

Stern argues:

> When Eliza can no longer provide the mirror of compassion for herself, once she loses the capacity to see her dissent from the majority’s tyranny as a valid desire, her interpellation into the ideology of republican fellow feeling becomes complete. Eliza moves from serving as the object of collective scrutiny to playing the victim in a public sacrifice; in the final ironic twist of her unhappy fate, the heroine orchestrates her own violent expulsion from the community. (75)

I partially agree with Stern because I believe that Eliza chooses to make her absence visible through verbal silence; however, I believe that Eliza embraces this
choice only because she is forced into a position with no other options. She fails to foster a female community that is based on genuine sympathy; and, she lacks the financial resources that would allow her to mingle until she found like-minded individuals who share this same common goal. Arguably, Eliza serves as representation of all marginalized persons, especially women who were struggling for visibility in the new nation, which is perhaps why the novel was so popular amongst the emerging middle-class female readers.

Most critics argue that the novel lauds intimate relationships between women; however, a closer examination of the novel reveals that the novel actually interrogates a false sense of sympathy between the female characters. The novel, composed of seventy-four letters, has one major writer: Eliza, who writes approximately twenty-three of those letters to Lucy and a total of thirty letters to general female characters. Pettengill explores the didactic relationships in the female community within The Coquette, “the tightly knit circle of women which supports, encourages, protects and provides for Eliza, even as it scolds and criticizes her” (186). For instance, Pettengill writes about the bonds of friendship, which seem to be virtually unbroken during Eliza’s demise:

Ironically, Eliza’s friends continue busily to communicate with one another for and about Eliza. When she stops writing, her conversations and actions are reported at second hand, passed around from friend to friend. They constantly urge Eliza to write—to rejoin the circle. (198)

However, I disagree with Pettengill; I do not believe that Eliza is her female friends’ sole interest. The fact that her best friend, Lucy, refuses to answer most of her letters is just one piece of evidence. Eliza writes a total of twenty-three letters to Lucy, but Lucy writes a mere seven letters in response. Even Major Sanford’s twelve letters to his
male friend outnumber Lucy’s replies to Eliza. Letter after letter, Eliza implores Lucy to “write soon, and often” (Foster 6), even proclaiming her eternal devotion: “whatever my fate may be, I shall always continue your Eliza Wharton” (Foster 9). But, her female friends simply refuse to reply to her requests. Eliza clearly espouses sympathetic ideals, reaching across boundaries of class; she explicitly and consistently insists that she wants to be “benevolent to all around me, [and] I wish for no other connection than of friendship” (6). And, female friendship is exactly what she is denied—evidenced by the lack of letter-writing from her female companions when she is actively soliciting it.

Ultimately, I believe that Eliza’s friends not only forsake her, but they also sabotage any of her attempts to thwart expectations associated with her gender or class; her friends’ participation in her demise is often ignored because of the sense that most letters are written between women—although Eliza does most of the writing—and also because most critics assume that the female protagonist is merely manipulated by male characters. Tennenhouse claims that protagonists in American seduction tales are only pawns in a game of power among men: “Women in these American stories are the unvarnished medium for carrying on a relationship among men” (9). This theory falters especially in regard to The Coquette because Eliza’s father dies in the beginning of the novel; thus, patriarchal figures are visibly absent. While someone may claim that Eliza’s lack of a father is the reason why she does not survive, homosocial desires and socioeconomics seems like a more valid reason. Likewise, Kristen Comment argues Sanford and Boyer fight over Eliza’s fate; she writes, “Moreover the central romantic rivalry . . . is between two men for the love of Eliza” (64). But, I have claimed that the novel focuses on the boundaries of class status rather than happy, heterosexual unions.
Tennenhouse notes that there is a strict correlation between finances and desire, even for me: “Once his [Sanford’s] economic needs have been met by a well-made marriage, Sanford is free to pursue his sexual desires elsewhere” (12). Because Sanford continues to appear to be wealthy (though he is secretly in debt), he is able to mercenarily marry a wealthy woman; but, Eliza neither has the means nor desires to deceive others concerning her finances in order to capture a financially secure husband.

Lucy’s situation provides readers with an alternative to Eliza’s situation: Lucy’s wealth and marriage provides her with avenues to continue attachments with other females, namely Julia Granby. After Boyer’s final rejection, Eliza realizes that she must marry Sanford in order to be able to circulate in the same circles as Lucy; she writes to Lucy, “I stand in need of the consoling power of friendship” (Foster 100). Acknowledging that she cannot possess Lucy’s friendship as she previously envisioned, Eliza requests a ‘living miniature’—or version—of her in hopes that she may recover from her devastated hopes:

Oh that you were near me, as formally, to share and alleviate my cares! . . . . Such a one, next to yourself, I think Julia Granby to be. With your leave and consent I should esteem it a special favor if she would come and spend a few months with me...If I have not forfeited your friendship, my dear Mrs. Sumner, write to me, and pour its healing balm in the wounded mind of your Eliza Wharton. (Foster 106)

Eliza must rely on Lucy, though, to procure this request. Lucy’s social status affords her the ability to form bonds with young ladies and direct their futures. The ability to share an intimate bond with another woman, then, appears to rely upon wealth—and perhaps the security of marriage. Lucy does consent to parting with Julia and Eliza later refers to Julia as “My Julia” (Foster 108), as if battling for the possession of Julia’s affections. Quite possibly, too, Eliza is trying to capture the adoration of Julia in order to ease the
pain left by Lucy’s unreciprocated love, or Eliza is attempting to spark jealousy within Lucy.

Few critics discuss Eliza’s possible desires because most consider her—like many other heroines in seduction novels—to be a characture of a woman and completely passive in their fate. *In the Plight of Feeling*, Julia Stern affords Eliza subjectivity when she argues that Eliza’s rebellious desires and marginal position are the reason for her eventual tragic circumstances; but Stern assumes that Eliza’s desires are heterosexual and her object of affection is Sanford. Eliza’s desires, I believe, are singularly homosocial. While others are enjoying the felicity of Lucy’s marriage, Eliza explains her uncharacteristic silence and depressed spirits to Boyer: “She [Lucy] has conferred upon another that affection which I wished to engross. My love was too fervent to admit a rival” (Foster 70). Lucy’s nuptials, then, shatter Eliza’s last hopes for being forever united with her beloved friend. After almost all of her friends are married, she returns to her mother’s home—where she is “seduced.” Indeed, the withdrawal of female companionship is what induces Eliza to “embraced [sic] with avidity the consoling power of friendship, ensnaringly offered by my [her] seducer [Sanford]” (Foster 143). Eliza’s letters are sparser and grow more frantic until her final letter, which is imbued with clarity and resolve—and perhaps, relief. Davidson interprets Eliza’s silence at the end of the novel to be emblematic of her victimization and lack of freedom—symptoms of having no agency; Davidson writes that Eliza cannot escape her fate, that she only exists: “Eliza [is] faced not with a freedom of choice but an absence of suitors . . . . Eliza naively sought to exercise her freedom only to learn that she had none” (146). Other critics, also, argue that Eliza’s lack of suitors is her downfall.
Elizabeth Maddock Dillon argues that Eliza is tragically fated, reinforcing the lack of rights allotted to women; Dillon argues that Eliza “fatal misunderstands this social space as open rather than closed, as productive and creative rather than dedicated to procuring a temporal narrative (path) linking private to public and gendering her body through heterosexual marriage” (187). The argument that Eliza seeks a heterosexual marriage, I believe, is ignoring her genuine desires to be a part of a female community—and her resistance to both marriage and motherhood.

I firmly believe that Eliza’s pregnancy is the result of force by both her female friends and Sanford, evident by her lack of interest in heterosexual unions and Sanford’s malicious intentions, which are not readily discussed among critics. While I agree that Eliza is deceived concerning Sanford’s intentions, her other friends do not seem to worry as much about his philandering reputation—or she would not have made his acquaintance at all. Initially, Sanford brags about his malicious agenda to “avenge my sex” (Foster 18) by making Eliza suffer; however, after meeting Eliza, he decides that he will attempt “not to abuse her credulity and good nature, if I can help it” (Foster 23). Sanford’s concentration on his own desires and pleasure at the expense of Eliza’s well being is evident; but, even more disturbing is his refusal to allow anyone else to marry her. Sanford claims, “Though I cannot possess her wholly myself, I will not tamely see her the property of another” (Foster 35). Once Eliza disappears from town, he admits that his deception was “too well planned . . . and deeply laid for anyone to escape who had the least warmth in her constitution, of affection in her heart” (Foster 158); and, after her death, is plagued by the guilt of being her “murderer” (Foster 164). By his own admittance, his actions are violated Eliza; while most critics have not argued
that Sanford rapes Eliza, I believe that his violent intentions are enough to consider the possibility.

Only once does Eliza mourn her situation, and that is after Boyer sees her in Sanford’s company and withdraws his marriage proposal and companionship. Eliza is depressed by her friends’ absences and any possibility of entering public society like her other female friends; she finally cries that these experiences “have broken my spirits and rendered me unfit for society” (Foster 98). When Eliza informs Lucy about Boyer’s removal of affections, Lucy rejoinders: “Your truly romantic letter came safe to hand. Indeed, my dear, it would make a very pretty figure in a novel. A bleeding heart, slighted love, and all the *et ceteras* of romance, inter into the composition!” (Foster 107).

I have argued that the beginning of the novel shows Lucy’s lack of sympathy toward Eliza; and this later example is further evidence that Lucy feels superior to Eliza—that she has the power to perhaps predict and script Eliza’s fate. Stern discusses seduction novels as sites where women’s voices and beings can become gothic; and she also hints that the female community within the novel is not as cohesive as other critics assume. Stern claims that “the heroine proves more valuable to her peers as a fetishized copse than she has an animated and exuberant friend” (75).14 Eliza’s “friends” benefit from her death in a couple of ways: they preserve a semblance of unity among women—dismissing their own heterosexual, high-class status as privileges—and they are seemingly more “republican” or sympathetic by having befriended someone of Eliza’s past and circumstances.

14 For a further discussion on how “wounds” or “sacrifices” are created within communities to present a false sense of cohesion, see Mark Seltzer’s “Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere.”
Eliza finds solace in one option: death. Rebuking Major Sanford—and forgiving him—before leaving town in shame, Eliza tells him: “in the grave there is no remembrance!” (Foster 160). Here, I would argue, Eliza is referring to her desire to forget all of the traumas that she has experienced. I claim that by embracing her own fate, she is acknowledging others’ participation in her demise. In one of the final letters, Julia informs Lucy “of [Eliza] deserting her mother’s house and protection, and of wandering and dying among strangers, is a most distressing reflection to her friends” (Foster 162). The fact that Eliza chooses to flee from her home and friends is a testament to the violence that originated in domestic spaces. The female characters, including Eliza’s mother, had the power to refuse Sanford from their company—but they did not. Rather, they created the situation that allowed Sanford to prey upon Eliza; if they had not been so concerned about their own appearances within society, they would have openly rejected Sanford’s company—because they completely recognized him as a rake. In the end, when Eliza flees Sanford, she is also fleeing her female friends who have helped create dangerous domestic spaces.

Resisting False Restoration

Both narrative voices acknowledge their status of being haunted by their traumatic experiences; in doing so, they challenge the notion that their written confessions exist solely as a means of healing or alleviating guilt. The narrative voices refuse to perfectly integrate back into their community, in the capacity that they occupied before the trauma. Rowlandson is eventually returned to her colony for a ransom; but she waits over a decade to publish her account. This time lapse is perhaps indicative of Rowlandson’s futile attempt to forget her traumatic experiences—and thus an attempt to “remove” them from her consciousness. At the conclusion of
Rowlandson’s narrative, she mentions the restlessness that she experiences at night while everyone else is asleep: “Oh the wonderful power of God that mine eyes have seen, affording matter enough for my thoughts to run in, and when others are sleeping mine eyes are weeping” (Rowlandson 65). Traister interprets this as evidence of her “imperfect” (324) restoration. Customary of how trauma is described, Rowlandson expresses her experiences in terms of hyperarousal: “I have seen the extreme vanity of this world; one hour I have been in health and wealth, wanting nothing; but the next hour in sickness, and wounds, and death, having nothing but sorrow and affliction” (Rowlandson 65). The exposure to such “extreme vanity of this world” (Rowlandson 65) has left Rowlandson with the power of knowledge that she wanted in order to prove herself spiritually worthy: “Before I knew what affliction meant I was ready sometimes to wish for it . . . . Affliction I wanted, and Affliction I had, full measure, (I thought) pressed down and running over” (65). Rowlandson does not wish for affliction but rather strives to calm herself against the anxieties of “present and smaller troubles” (Rowlandson 65) by remembering the horror of what she has witnessed and experienced as a captive; but, she is ultimately unable to forget or contain her experiences and memories. She cannot return to her former life unaffected; rather her memories and the residue of her experiences haunt her. Rowlandson’s text, in the end, neither dwells on the power of healing nor finding a justifiable cause for her experiences.

Like Rowlandson, Eliza experiences insomnia; however, her restlessness at night is often attributed to her consensual and enjoyable sexual liaisons with her seducer, Major Sanford. Yet, I would argue that Eliza is bemoaning her tragic state—whether or not she is in the company of Major Sanford. And, what if Eliza did have
consensual sex after Sanford raped her? Does that negate the violence? No, rather, I believe it would further support the theory that domesticity, captivity, and trauma are intrinsically interwoven. The readiness of critics to ascertain Eliza is having—and, more importantly, perhaps *enjoying*—sexual relations with Major Sanford highlights the resistance toward legitimizing a homosocial female community based on sympathy.

After her death, her female friends proclaim their dead friend as “happy” (Foster 169). In *An Archive of Feelings*, Ann Cvetkovich argues that trauma can be exploited as “wound” to heal in the name of unity; while Cvetkovich discusses this unity in terms of patriotism, I think her theory is apt here—in relation to the normalization of gender, desire, and class. At the end of the novel, as all of Eliza’s “friends” surround her tomb, I have the eerie feeling that they all played their parts in putting there. Like a blemish, Eliza had not married and continued with her flirty ways toward men—but all the while only wanting the company of her economically secure female friends. She needed to be erased—for a seamless appearance of unity. In other words, to make the category “woman” uniform as a high-class married woman—not a single, flirtatious lower-class woman—Eliza simply *cannot exist*. Thus, the very act of writing, in Eliza’s case, becomes crucial—as in Rowlandson’s narrative; writing the letters are a method of asserting agency and creating evidence where there would have been none. Pettengill writes, “After she ‘falls,’ they consider her redeemed, because of the penitence she

15 See Cvetkovich 15-17.

16 In *Critical Fictions: Sentiment and the American Market, 1780-1870*, Joseph Fitchenberg argues that the language of sympathy emerges in order to counter the language of “humanity”, which “is the virtue of a woman” (John Smith, qtd. in Fitchenberg 74). According to Fitchenberg, “Sympathy was the ability to moderate feeling, to control one’s responses as to achieve the precise balance, the perfect pitch, that would secure social concord” (74). This “social concord”, of course, particularly involved economics and the exchange of commodities; Fitchenberg observes that the language of commercialism found itself in the very discourse of sympathy: “exchanging feeling is itself a market mechanism” (78).
reveals in her confessions . . . . Most important, in the eyes of Julia, are the ‘scraps of writing’ Eliza leaves behind at her death” (198). Had Eliza not written those “scraps of writing,” the evidence of her life would have been utterly “removed.” Instead, though, she is able to leave a legacy of sorts: her letters, which are evidence of her existence.

Both Rowlandson and Eliza anticipate a witnessing public; so, near the end, the narrative voices attempt to balance their confessional voices with their refusal to confess—and make accessible—their bodies. As a wife of a well respected minister, and a later a widow, her chastity and allegiance to Puritan ideals are important to her status within her community. For instance she acknowledges the curiosity about her sexual behaviors while captive:

I have been in the midst of those…that feared neither God, nor man, nor the devil…sleeping all sorts together, and not one of them ever offered me the least abuse of unchastity to me, in word or action. Though some are ready to say I speak it for my own credit; but I speak it in the presence of God, and to His Glory. (Rowlandson 61)

Rowlandson does not explain why she was left ‘undefiled’ by those she names barbaric and demonic. She does not claim that her own visible virtues deterred her captors from hurting her; rather, she attests that supernatural power helped to protect her. And, also, here she simultaneously makes her corporeal body visible—but not accessible to the extent of the wounded bodies that the narrative begins with. One motivation for this confession is, of course, so that she can more easily integrate herself back into the folds of her community. *Rowlandson anticipates the rejoinder of those who “are ready to say I speak it for my own credit” (Rowlandson 61) and responds as a witness to her*

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17 Most scholarship as well as captivity narratives attest to the lack of sexual violence encountered when held hostage by Native Americans. For a discussion on how Native Americans and Europeans viewed the possibility of owning or stealing another’s sexuality, see John D’Emilio’s and Estelle B. Freedman’s *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (especially pages 8-10).
experiences: “but I speak it in the presence of God, and to His Glory” (Rowlandson 61). She embraces her responsibility to a higher power in order to avoid those who would potentially accuse her; but, she claims her own personal sufferings and confessions. Likewise, Eliza “removes” her body from the end of the text; she physically disappears and leaves her mother’s house. She fears what her friends will think of her after she is dead; in her last letter entreats her friends to “bury my crimes in the grave with me, and to preserve the remembrance of my former virtues” (Foster 156). Eliza witnesses and endures her own demise but pleads that her friends not think and think ill of her.

In the end, both Rowlandson and Eliza accept that they are marginalized and resist being incorporated into a false recovery narrative. Rowlandson accomplishes this through contradicting herself throughout her narrative in relation to her identification with the English and Indians; and Eliza embraces silence as a means to make her presence known—after unsuccessfully trying to communicate with her friends throughout the entire novel. Some critics, like Jill Lepore, believe that Rowlandson believed in the healing power of written confession: “Mary Rowlandson wrote her way out of captivity and back into the Christian, English fold, freeing herself from memories of life among savages” (148). This, as I have argued, is not the case; Rowlandson clearly presents herself as traumatized through her inability to forget her experiences of captivity, and throughout her narrative by emphasizing fragmented sense of self and contradictions concerning her captors. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg argues that Rowlandson, “suffering and authoritative, inscribed a self-contradictory subject . . . . Rowlandson’s subjectivity, fused with demonic Indians, continually divides, multiplies, and fragments” (487). This simultaneous “multiplication” and “fragmentation” of identity can be interpreted as
symptoms of trauma. Likewise, Eliza wishes for the erasure of her memories—actively seeking the peace of the grave. Eliza requests that her friends remember only her positive qualities—not her reputation as a coquette; this request reveals Eliza’s own awareness that her identity is performative and fragmented.

Rowlandson’s and Foster’s texts reveal the interconnectedness of domestic and public spaces and violence. In locating the wild(er)ness within their own cultures and selves, they embrace their own marginalization as “foreign” and trauma survivors. Discussing domestic spaces as captive spaces—or, at least the impetus for a captive consciousness—is a theme of contemporary American women’s writing. Analyzing captivity narratives as trauma narratives illuminates the personal voice and conflicts with social normalizations that may have been previously overlooked, especially within early American women’s writing. Searching for narrative contradictions and identity conflicts, uses of intertextuality and form, and silences are just a few ways to revise the way we read early American women’s texts as dogmatic or merely devotional. Moreover, analyzing captivity narratives as trauma narratives helps readers locate consistent and divergent methods of articulating trauma within American women’s writing—from colonial times until the present. The implications, of course, are to locate new (and old) ways of articulating trauma. Privileging the confessional voice in early American women’s writing is important to validating the experiences of these writers—and the witnessing publics that emerged to do so.
I'm just a girl, living in captivity
Your rule of thumb
Makes me worry some
--“Just a Girl,” No Doubt

No Doubt’s song “I’m Just a Girl” was released in 1995 and is still one of pop-singer Gwen Stefani’s memorable hits. The song is a scathing feminist response to gender normalizations. The song begins with the demand to “Take this pink ribbon off my eyes” because she’s “had it up to here” with all the assumptions—like mental and physical inferiority—of being “just a girl.” This song does not criticize being a female, but the construction of femininity that renders women incapable of so much. This song drastically contrasts earlier light-hearted songs like “I Enjoy Being a Girl” in Richard Rodgers’ and Oscar Hammerstein’s *The Flower Drum Song* (1961), which is later sung by Peggy Lee and Doris Day, where the prototype of femininity equates to being delightfully and constantly overwhelmed by flattery: “When men say I’m sweet as candy . . . It goes to my head like brandy.” These constructions are confining, and as Stefani sings, like “living in captivity.” “Captivity” is an apt word to describe having one’s identity and behavior pre-scripted; in a very real sense, it can seem like “looking out” at everyone else, who seems (or is) “free.” But, like any other situation of captivity, elements of danger are possible, if not probable. Not conforming to gendered behaviors can result in verbal harassment and physical violence from on-lookers by doing something as simple as walking down the street; normalizations of gender have also been cemented with legal repercussions, including incarceration within jails or mental institutions—and should make us all “worry some,” like Stefani.
In this chapter, I will argue that modern memoirists sometimes evoke the language and discourse of captivity to articulate the trauma that results from the normalizations of gender, sex, sexuality, and mental health. I will analyze Christine Jorgensen’s *A Personal Autobiography* and Susanna Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted* to explore the rhetorical captivity of medical discourse—specifically of being diagnosed by the medical community as having a mental illness (regardless of whether the existence of mental illness is substantiated or agreed to exist) as a result of existing outside of gender normalizations. In fact, Dianne Middlebrook writes in her review of *Girl, Interrupted*, one of the pivotal texts in this chapter: “Preoccupation with confinement in a pink-and-white body is one of the themes that makes this a girl’s story” (9). I will also address the physical captivity that results in (or apart from) these diagnoses. An unhappy George Jorgensen felt trapped in her body all of her life; in 1952, the ex-GI returned to the United States as Christine after beginning the process of sex-reassignment surgery (SRS) in Denmark. As Jorgensen traveled to Denmark to complete her surgeries over the next few years, the general public and medical community continued to be fascinated with the private (and anatomical) details of Jorgensen’s life. She did not publish her autobiography until the 1970s, but it was eagerly welcomed by the public. Susanna Kaysen, an unhappy teenager in the 1960s, also felt trapped—by the expectations of her affluent parents to attend college and/or marry. After attempting suicide by swallowing a bottle of aspirin, Kaysen was committed to McLean, a private mental institution, for two years. Kaysen emerges older, wiser—and with a mental diagnosis that both haunts and perplexes her; one

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1 Throughout this essay, I use the pronoun that reflects the individual’s gender identity at the time of this publication.
might suggest, then, that her captivity ensured her survival but at a cost. Like Jorgensen, Kaysen waited a couple of decades to write about the events that she describes. While Rowlandson uses biblical passages to communicate her trauma and social relations with the readers, Jorgensen and Kaysen use scientific discourse—which they both, to varying degrees, relate to and resist. Both memoirists have different reasons for wanting to resist and/or confirm the medical community; but, each revises the purpose and viability of the scientific “case study” by contributing their own personally authored confessions. For instance, Jorgensen relies on scientific discourse—more than Kaysen—for her own visibility; without the diagnosis of “transsexual,” Jorgensen would not have access to SRS, and arguably (by some), the epithet “woman.”

To date, Elizabeth Marshall has provided the most meticulous literary criticism of Kaysen’s memoir. Marshall explores *Girl, Interrupted* as “a representation of adolescent girlhood that offers a complex commentary on feminine coming-of-age” (117). As she mentions, Mary Pipher’s bestseller *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) helped promote the representation of young girls in crisis; but, as she posits, the public’s enthusiastic embrasure of this image may be problematic because psychological discourse is more gendered than impartial. My arguments seeks to expand Marshall’s claim that Kaysen “rewrites her official case history” (120), challenging the supposed objectivity of scientific discourse by interrogating her diagnosis. I agree with Marshall and Charles E. Rosenberg that Kaysen clearly shows that psychiatric discourse relies on gender normalizations in determining mental illness and in the creation of diagnoses. Paul

\[2\] See, especially Rosenberg, 418.
John Eakin observes that “Girl Interrupted, captures her sense of the cost in arrested identity” (120). While Eakin does not really clarify how or why he views Kaysen’s development as stunted, I agree that her inability to create a subjectively coherent narrative of identity to her doctors is pivotal in their decision to institutionalize her. However, I am not convinced that her identity is arrested while she is in McLean—or even before she enters the institution. In his musings as a teacher, Timothy Dow Adams mentions Kaysen’s Girl, Interrupted as one of the texts that he considers controversial and “disingenuous” (341) because she includes misrepresentations (though he does not divulge what he considers to be fabricated). I think, though, Adam’s critique does not take into account that Kaysen is not attempting to duplicate her medical case study that provides readers with a cohesive narrative (from illness to “recovery”). Rather, as I will argue, Kaysen’s agenda is to confess her traumas and be witnessed.

**Border-Crossing and Captivity**

Ann Cvetkovich claims, “The normalization of sex and gender identities can be seen as a form of insidious trauma, which is effective precisely because it often leaves no sign of a problem” (46). As a result of traversing normalizations of gender and sexualities, Jorgensen and Kaysen are forced to physically relocate at some point; Jorgensen is forced to seek medical help outside of the United States and Kaysen steps outside of her daily life and into an institutional setting. Jorgensen’s and Kaysen’s captivities are physical: Jorgensen, by her own material body and hospitals; and, Kaysen, within the walls of a mental institution and the psychoneuroleptic drugs that she is forced to take. But, Jorgensen and Kaysen are also held captive rhetorically—and their captivities are maintained—by normalizations of gender, sex, sexuality, and mental
health. Their captivities are evident by their inability to destroy discursive captivity, even after they have been “released” by medical experts as “cured.” But, they both do not want to embrace a false sense of recovery that expected of them. By refusing to admit that they have been “cured”—or even that they were ever mentally ill—both Jorgensen and Kaysen challenge the very discourse that requires their “restoration.” Like Rowlandson and Foster, they offer their records and experiences to the reader in order to privilege their traumas and not a false recovery narrative.

Both Jorgensen and Kaysen, from their memoirs, argue that they had a clear sense of their identities as youths; the predicament was, though, that everyone else did not share their evaluation of themselves. In Jorgensen’s situation, she knew and felt that she should be a woman; the dilemma was that she was in a man’s body—and was destined to stay there unless she could find a surgeon to modify it. And in Kaysen’s case, she knew what she did not want to be married or a college student; her parental figures interpreted her problems as lack of ambition or direction, interpreted as deviant and unacceptable by her socially respectable parents. And yet, medical discourse portrayed Jorgensen and Kaysen as unstable and lacking a coherent view of self and identity—a similar portrayal of how trauma survivors are depicted as fragmented versions of themselves—in order to justify medical discourse’s legitimacy and superiority. Medical discourse, particularly psychology, purports to “heal” these internal conflicts; however, while diagnosis seemingly provided the “truth” of the self that was inaccessible to the subject, it also became an integral (if not all-consuming) part of one’s identity and actually impede “healing.” Jorgensen’s and Kaysen’s texts also traverse boundaries of genre. They both incorporate adolescent experiences, but Kaysen’s text
is considered by many to cross into Young Adult literature—even though it was not written for youth, particularly. And, interestingly, in both cases, their deviant sexuality is considered “immature.” Elizabeth Marshall notes the ability of *Girl, Interrupted* to cross genres and readership: “Like *The Bell Jar* (1963), *Girl, Interrupted* exists as a cross-written text that straddles the arbitrary border between young adult and adult literature” (117). The importance of this border-crossing illustrates the impulse to conflate the femininity of adolescent girls and mental instability as well as the arbitrary ways in which female adulthood and childhood are defined.

As adolescents, Jorgensen’s and Kaysen’s gender performances were recognized as existing outside of cultural norms. Rebelling against these norms propelled Jorgensen and Kaysen to cross other borders as well—sometimes national, sometimes intangible, but recognizable nonetheless. Jorgensen, as a young man, was viewed as feminine by his family, peers, and himself. In her autobiography, Jorgensen posits that because she did not have an adequate male role model when she was an adolescent, she was unable to develop masculine characteristics. Jorgensen’s grandmother, mother, and sister influenced her childhood the most because Dad seemed to always be working; thus, she implicitly argues that her non-normative family negatively affected her gender. Jorgensen hints that too much time spent among females (without male interactions) may have caused his gender dysphoria; she mentions her mother’s choice in requiring Dolly, Jorgensen’s older sister, to integrate Jorgensen into all after-school activities: “How much these girlish activities were to contribute to my future problems and the inability to identify myself with the masculine sex, I don’t think I will ever know” (*Autobiography* 5). Jorgensen admits to preferring to
play with girls and their dolls—early as kindergarten—but does not clearly state whether this preference emerged before or after playing more with Dolly. As a teenager, Jorgensen describes her feeling of being an isolated, unhappy young person:

I must have been about sixteen when the acute feelings of loneliness which had been accumulating began to possess me even more. Instead of assimilating into a group as most teenagers did, I felt like an outsider. I didn’t like sports and I wasn’t interested in dating girls, which had become the chief topic of conversation among the boys of my acquaintance. (Autobiography 20)

Jorgensen, unable to find a community, felt like an outcast; and, as the quote demonstrates above, Jorgensen was not interested in gender behaviors that were typically expected of her. This feeling of being a social outsider did not need to be verbally articulated for Jorgensen; she describes overhearing a boy talking about her: “Once I overheard one of them [boys] say, ‘George is such a strange guy.’ At other times, they didn’t have to say it; I could read the thought in their attitudes” (Autobiography 21). Recognizing her inability to perform gender roles, Jorgensen began to learn how to distinguish cues from others who thought him “odd” or “queer”; while some of his peers, no doubt, thought such things, Jorgensen may have felt like she was always under observation because she (herself) realized her own oddities. George Jorgensen’s masculinity was further questioned when unable to secure a combat position in the Army during World War II, instead regulated to the feminine task of writing reports. No doubt, this affected Jorgensen’s feelings of inadequacy and dissimilarity from other men her age.

Like Jorgensen, Kaysen was despondent—about school and her relationships with anyone other than her boyfriends; Kaysen acknowledges in an interview: “I was desperately unhappy, but I’m not sure it’s the same thing [as being crazy]” (qtd. in
Paddock). In Kaysen’s circumstances, it is clear that her inability (and/or refusal) to adhere to gender normalizations partially resulted (or helped keep her in) a mental institution; perceived as rebellious of authorities, she was seen as unstable and a threat to herself. However, she may have seemed unsure of herself or unstable because she was unable to adhere to cultural expectations and was continually invalidated for who she knew herself to be; such an argument would support the idea that normalizations of gender are traumatic. Thus, her “madness” could very likely be the result of the pressure that she felt to conform to (her own or others’) standards—and her inability to do so. Kaysen refused to be the quintessential debutant that her elite family members wished her to be; she dated her high school professor, refused to go to college or marry, and ran away from home. She also swallowed fifty aspirin before leaving her apartment and passing out at a meat counter. Kaysen explains the overdose in psychoanalytic discourse, providing her own interpretation for her motives: “They [the aspirin] were metaphorical. I wanted to get rid of a certain aspect of my character. I was performing a kind of self-abortion with those aspirin. It worked for a while. Then it stopped; but I had no heart to try again” (39). Using the jargon of psychoanalysis and literary theory, Kaysen rationalizes the overdose as a metaphor—much like the doctor (who helps commit her) says that her inclination to pick at her pimple was an indication that she was “picking (or being hard) on herself.” Kaysen’s ability to reveal the absurdity of “expert” observation helps the readers question the overall legitimacy of medical diagnosis.

Kaysen provides another possible reason, apart from her deviation from gender normalizations, for her incarceration: the “strange undertow, a tug from the other world”
in 1967 that fostered a generation that seemed completely foreign to their parents. Kaysen does not explicitly blame her parents for her hospitalization; however, she criticizes their (along with everyone else’s) refusal to acknowledge their own delusions by saying, “Often an entire family is crazy, but since an entire family can’t go into the hospital, one person is designated as crazy and goes inside” (95). The implication is that Kaysen’s parent’s domestic space is possibly not as stable or tranquil as one would assume. One may wonder if Jorgensen could sympathize with Kaysen on the topic of chaotic domesticity since she lived in a non-normative family environment. Kaysen undoubtedly seems insensible to her father, a respected Princeton professor, when she refuses to attend college, has sexual affairs, and attempts suicide. Barbara Schwartz, Kaysen’s social worker, describes her father’s personal (and perhaps professional) reasons for wanting his daughter institutionalized:

Her father had wanted her hospitalized because she was a stubborn child. She didn’t want to go to college. That was anathema to him. He couldn’t tolerate that. After all, he was at the Institute for Advanced Studies at Princeton. So there must be something wrong with her head for her not to want to go to college. (qtd. in Beam 203-4)

McLean, a very expensive and prestigious institution, was home to many famous writers including poets Robert Lowell and Sylvia Plath; so, the institution offered a way for Kaysen to receive “help” and a way for Kaysen’s parents to minimize the tarnish to their reputation.

Throughout their memoirs, Jorgensen and Kaysen strategically present at least a plausible cohesive self-identity; and, for Jorgensen, the coherence is almost flawless. For neither Jorgensen nor Kaysen, the quandary did not exist in the way Jorgensen and Kaysen see themselves, but in the ways others do; this is quite a rhetorical reversal
from authoritarian medical discourse where the subject is in need of stability and help with self-definition. I argue that Jorgensen’s identity presentation is not entirely flawless because she does concede, at times, to meet the criteria assigned to the medical diagnosis “transsexual.” The term “transsexual” was coined in 1949 by Dr. D.C. Caudwell and has a history of invalidating marginalized genders and sexualities by attempting to “correct” or normalize them; however, German-born, United States citizen, Harry Benjamin made it famous in his 1966 book *The Transsexual Phenomenon*. Benjamin defines transsexuality and transvestism as “symptoms or syndromes of the same underlying psychopathological condition, that of a sex or gender role disorientation and indecision” (25-6). But, Jorgensen, at no time, displays hesitancy or uncertainty in her gender roles, especially after learning that SRS was possible: “I was willing to undergo any risk, that I would rather be a guinea pig in a case that failed than not try at all, to continue living as I had been” (*Autobiography* 102). Jorgensen’s inability survive in a “man’s body” demonstrates the everyday torture that he experienced; but, nowhere does she seem unclear about her self-definition. Jorgensen conscientiously produces a seamless narrative, one that moves smoothly from past to present and refuses any fragments within her identity; her body, she argues, was “the problem”—and it is “fixed.” She strategically presents her physical “restoration” as complete in order to be perceived as a woman—even before completing all of her cosmetic surgeries; because the term “transsexual” reaffirms gender normalizations, Jorgensen cannot risk subscribing to false recovery narratives—even before she has completed her “physical restoration” via scientific means.
Medical discourse is especially adept at providing Jorgensen with an alternate body, identity, and even family in an attempt to normalize her “restoration.” Medical case studies, as well as medical discourse, lend themselves toward objectifying the subject as well as depicting the subjects as childlike. This infantilization helps validate courses of action that are considered “treatment” but could be considered “torture” in any other circumstance. Since transsexuality was first considered to be a medical or biological mistake, doctors and scientists were responsible for attempting to find a cure. In a 1954 journal article, Harry Benjamin describes transsexuals as people who “truly [are] the victims of their genetic constitution, step-children of medical science, often crucified by the ignorance of society and persecuted by antiquated laws and by legal interpretations that completely lack in wisdom and realism” (“Transsexualism and Transvestism” 50). In the previous quote, Benjamin represents doctor and scientists as merciful adoptive fathers to transsexuals, society’s unwanted and abused children; Benjamin was—and continues to be—considered one of the most compassionate allies of transsexuals—but his rhetorical strategy, evident here, reveals his investment in maintaining control and power. The extent to which Jorgensen relied upon—and was made to feel indebted to—the medical personnel that she encountered cannot be taken for granted. In the preface to her autobiography, Jorgensen explicitly acknowledges that is “prominently in his [Harry Benjamin’s] debt” (Autobiography xiv). Benjamin’s success—his papers and research—were largely based on Jorgensen’s case; however, she depreciates her participation in Benjamin’s findings: “If, indeed, I had made any contribution, it must be admitted that at the time of my transition it was purely an unconscious one. To me, it was a matter of survival” (xiv). While Jorgensen confesses

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3 Joanne Meyerowitz’s *How Sex Changed*, discusses the desperate desire for sex-reassignment that
to her desperate desire to escape feeling trapped by her body, she willingly relinquishes
the importance of her contributions to Benjamin's scientific and cultural recognition.

As her endocrinologist and scientific “father,” Benjamin also frames Jorgensen’s
text by providing a preface, validating the worth of Jorgensen’s confessions—much like
Mather does for Rowlandson. The preface by Benjamin and the medical records
highlight the difference between medical jargon and the personal, confessional voice, as
well as implicitly suggesting that the texts can be read with different agendas. In other
words, one can read the text as an “expert” of normalizations (like the doctors) or one
can witness the confessional voice. First published in 1967, Jorgensen’s memoir
echoes Rowlandson’s text because her benefactor—Harry Benjamin—introduced the
text and lauded Jorgensen. While Mather exalted Rowlandson for her contributions to
religious discourse and edification, Benjamin hails Jorgensen’s narrative as significant
to scientific discourse. Benjamin introduces Jorgensen’s autobiography, published over
a decade after she made her first debut in America as “Christine,” as part of her debt to
scientific discourse (and, maybe, to him personally):

Jorgensen’s account is “long overdue,” Benjamin writes, “owed” not only to self,
family, and fellow transsexuals but “to science and the medical profession”; “she
was in duty bound to supplement the technical report made by her Danish
physicians…with her own account of the inner and outer events in her still rather
young life.” In writing her autobiography, the transsexual returns the favor of
authorization, part of a reciprocity between clinician and subject that continues to
take place through the conventions of autobiographical narrative. (Prosser 126)

Readers could infer that Jorgensen’s autobiography was demanded and approved by
Benjamin or that he was bearing witness to Jorgensen’s testimony. Either way,
Benjamin argues that Jorgensen’s text is both medically and socially important; the

 permeates transsexual narratives. One MTF, seeking Benjamin’s help, wrote, “I am extremely confident
and determined…This drive is [so] fierce and demanding that it frightens me” (qtd. in Meyerowitz 143). In
addition, Jan Morris confesses: “I would rather die young than live a long life of falsehood” (46-7).
problem is the emphasis he places on the burden of her confession as a debt—
something owned, perhaps as evidence of his work with her. Thus, Benjamin views
Jorgensen as a child—as well as a pseudo captive—of science.

Midway through her autobiography, Jorgensen includes her confessional letter to
her parents written in 1952 before seeing them as Christine for the first time. This letter
reassures her parents that her chemical and glandular problems have been resolved.
She expresses relief at this biological cause because she writes, “I was afraid of a much
more horrible illness of the mind” (Autobiography 115). She continually reiterates her
superior health and happiness that these procedures have afforded her. Jorgensen
concludes with a final reassurance, trying to help her parents navigate both the
complexities of her identity and transformation:

I have changed, changed very much, as my photos will show, but I want you to
know that I am an extremely happy person and that the real me, not the physical
me, has not changed. I am still the same old “Brud.” But nature made a mistake,
which I have corrected, and I am now your daughter. (Autobiography 115)

Jorgensen’s private letter, later published in her memoir, reassures her parents that she
is the “same person”—and, in fact, happier; the only change, she argues, is her body—
for which she informs her parents how to interpret: she is a woman, their daughter.

Her mind, identity, and gender performance had been correct all along, only her
material body needed to be adjusted to reveal “the truth” for everyone else to see. But
Jorgensen concedes that she has altered so much that they might not recognize her;
this change is so thorough, in fact, that she is now someone else—their daughter.4

4 When the 1950s public found out that Jorgensen had not completed her surgeries (namely had a vagina
surgically constructed), they used this information to destroy her credibility and further find fault in her
story. For instance, several accounts came forth, noting that Jorgensen was not intersexed, as she had
claimed; without biological justification for her transformation, Jorgensen was then thrust out of the closet
as an “illegitimate woman—and perhaps more importantly, an illegitimate man” (Serlin 158). In 1954,
Jorgensen’s letter is very similar to Eliza’s final letter in *The Coquette* where she instructs her friends and family how to remember her; like Eliza, Jorgensen wants to control her own public image. David Serlin argues that the letter was rhetorically savvy as well as informative:

> At first glance, the letter bears an unfa ltering resemblance to what is now called, in popular parlance, a ‘coming out’ letter . . . [but] was more than simply calculated to mitigate the confusion and anxieties produced presumably by her physical appearance. The letter’s goal was to locate and seize the voice of reason and the language of confession: its stylistic conventions, readily expectations, and utterly predictable language would be familiar to any audience, including Jorgensen’s parents. (152-3)

As Serlin argues, Jorgensen’s agenda in the letter is not interrogate medical discourse or respond to skeptics, but asserts her agency—and her authority to describe her identity and body—while trying to be legible to her parents and the general public.

Just as Jorgensen struggles with her body and social perceptions to be visible as a woman, Kaysen must fight to be intelligible as a “normal” female because of her behaviors and gender performance. Within her memoir, Kaysen effectively argues that her diagnosis is based on (and/or at least supported by) the normalizations of gender—held by society and enforced by psychiatry. In fact, Kaysen argues that the very term of her diagnosis, “Borderline Personality Disorder” (BPD), is evidence of her behaviors being interpreted as on the border between “feminine” and “masculine.” In the section “My Diagnosis,” Kaysen engages directly with the gender biases of psychiatry, including the criteria of her own diagnosis of Borderline Personality Disorder (BPD). Even one of Kaysen’s psychiatrists tells her: “It’s [BPD] what they call people whose lifestyles bothers them” (151). Kaysen refuses to embrace the domestic sphere and marriage

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Jorgensen was then forced to “come out of the closet”, again, to tell the mass public that she had—indeed—completed all of her surgeries and was a *real* American woman.
while being unapologetically promiscuous; indeed, Kaysen’s rejection of social norms (like Eliza in The Coquette) places her in a marginal position. In this way, her sexuality, perhaps seen as excessive, is interpreted as more befitting a male than a female. Kaysen postulates that females encounter stricter social expectations than males and, therefore, are more prone to be labeled mentally ill when they do not subscribe to gender normalizations. Instead of agreeing with “experts,” though, Kaysen interrogates their methodology and creates her own case study. Leah White would agree that Kaysen claims her own experiences and subverts the detachment and superiority of medical discourse: “Autobiography can function as a form of discursive resistance against a world that does not want to hear the story of mental illness, and a medical community that depersonalizes the female subject” (3). In this way, Kaysen’s confessional voice dramatically contrasts the voices that appear in the form of medical records.

Feminist studies continue to argue that female sexuality and mental illness are considered to be historically interrelated. In her collection of women’s asylum narratives, Mary Elene Wood observes:

Psychiatry and psychology need to continually be reminded of their own history, of their inheritance of an ideology that first says women are inherently irrational and then proposes to cure them of madness, an ideology that conflates difference with deviance. (170)

Kaysen would most likely agree with Wood that difference, femininity, and madness are often conflated within medical diagnoses and cultural norms. Disturbingly, Wood’s argument continues to be valid. In Through the Looking Glass, therapist Dana Becker notes that, even after forty years from Kaysen’s experiences, BPD is diagnosed more in women—a startling 73.2%. Becker notes that symptoms of BPD include self-mutilation,
described as a method of manipulating others for the sake of attention—not as an outward sign of psychological pain.\textsuperscript{5} Other symptoms of BPD include “promiscuity” and “on the border between so-called masculine and feminine behavior” (Becker xii). Inside and outside of the asylum, Kaysen’s sexuality is presented as particular worry to those who exert control over her: her sexual relations with her boyfriend (inside McLean) and professor (before McLean) are both taboo and reveal the restraints actively placed upon her body and desire. Elizabeth Marshall insightfully argues that the English professor’s authority was completely dismissed so that the blame (and instability) could be firmly planted on Kaysen:

The doctors at McLean gloss over the teacher’s power in relation to his female student, or the possibility of Kaysen’s desire for him . . . . It is not the English teacher who lacks boundaries. Rather, it is Kaysen, who is diagnosed as lacking healthy boundaries. (125)

Thus, Kaysen’s sexuality is perceived only in terms of excess; and though while considered to have an unstable sense of self, she is still held responsible for the unequal distribution of power between her and her teacher. Interestingly enough, she is deemed “recovered” and released from McLean when she decides to marry: “Luckily I got a marriage proposal and they let me out. In 1968, everyone could understand a marriage proposal” (Kaysen 133). By succumbing to others’ expectations and normalizations of gender, Kaysen is then physically freed from captivity at McLean. Kaysen, herself, demonstrates a high-level of self-awareness and does not dispute the existence of her sexuality, which some deem excessive:

My self-image was not unstable. I saw myself, quite correctly, as unfit for the educational and social systems. But my parents and teachers did not share my self-image. Their image of me was unstable, since it was out of kilter with reality

\textsuperscript{5}See Becker 140-142.
and based on their needs and wishes. They did not put much value on my capacities, which were admittedly few, but genuine. I read everything, I wrote constantly, and I had boyfriends by the barrelful. (155)

The problem, then, was not with Kaysen’s perception of herself—but others’ opinions. Her talents, which included attracting boys, were not considered valuable or even acceptable—especially, arguably, if the intent was not marriage. Unlike Eliza, who wishes to exist in a homosocial world, Kaysen’s “excessive” heterosexuality is perceived as non-normative.

Because Jorgensen and Kaysen exist outside of gender norms, they were forced to traverse physical spaces and join alternative communities—at least temporarily. Jorgensen traveled outside of the United States, into Denmark, in order to receive constructive surgeries and hormonal therapy. And Kaysen stepped across the McLean’s threshold—arguably the manifestation what she terms “the parallel universe” to the “normal” world that most people live in—perhaps because she felt like she had no other options. American doctors’ and surgeons’ refusal to perform sex reassignment surgery on those seeking it, coupled with Jorgensen’s high-profile case, encouraged many others like her to make the difficult and expensive trip to Denmark in search of help. A few American doctors did, of course, begin “treating” persons for “gender indecision”; however, as Jane Meyerowitz chronicles in her history of transsexuality, patients experienced difficulty in finding doctors who would commit and then perform sex operations—promises, followed by “cold feet,” were predominant experiences patients experienced with many American physicians. So, individuals seeking sex reassignment surgery became refugees of sorts. In fact, so many persons sought medical assistance in Denmark that the country placed a restriction on other national
visitors seeking sex change operations. Although her surgeries were conducted outside of the United States, Jorgensen was always eager to strategically present herself as unequivocally American. Responding to a reporter about her happiness to be home, Jorgensen replies, “What American woman wouldn’t be” (“Christine Back in U.S. Wearing Mink”).

Kaysen describes crossing (or sitting on the line) between sanity and insanity as living in another world. Kaysen describes the deterioration of her mental health (though she never does decide if she was “crazy” or not) as slipping into an alternate world from the “normal” one that most people live in:

[I]t is easy to slip into a parallel universe. There are so many of them: worlds of the insane, the criminal, the crippled, the dying, perhaps the dead as well. These worlds exist alongside this world and resemble it, but are not in it. . . .In the parallel universe the laws of physics are suspended. . . .Time, too, is different. It may run in circles, flow backward . . . The very arrangement of molecules is different. . . .[A]lthough it is invisible from this side, once you are in it you can easily see the world you came from. (5-6)

Kaysen’s description is much like Scarry’s explanation of trauma as “making and unmaking the world.” Time and physical properties do not follow a consistent pattern, allowing associations that may be seemingly erratic and illogical. This metaphor may apply both to mental illness—and any world of trauma. In the quote above, Kaysen also appropriates psychoanalytic discourse in order to harness the power over describing and diagnosing her own experiences. Much like Jorgensen, who never really confesses to be a “transsexual” in her memoir, Kaysen never confesses to being insane in hers. While they both acknowledge their marginal positionality, particularly that they exist outside of gender normalizations, they do not completely acquiesce to being outside of

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social intelligibility; this strategy, I believe, is so that they do not lose their credibility with the readers.

**Confessional Science and the Case Study**

Jorgensen and Kaysen explicitly reveal that they are writing for a witnessing public, not a group of doctors, and that their purpose is to promote witnessing—not further objectification of themselves or others like them. Private confessions, the subject of case studies, have long been circulated among doctors—but they have also been available to the general public as sensational material. For instance, Sigmund Freud’s published several of his case studies, including one on Dora—who, according to him, suffered from hysteria. From the beginning, Freud defends his decision to publish intimate details of his patient’s sexual life; he says that his intention is not to scandalize sex or sexuality, but to benefit medical discourse—which is responsible for codifying the truth and, therefore, healing many. Freud’s defense or loyalty to a discourse—scientific, instead of religious—parallels Mather’s defense of Rowlandson’s publication. Freud writes, “But in my opinion the physician has taken upon himself duties not only toward the individual patient but towards science as well; and his duties towards science mean ultimately nothing else than his duties toward the many other patients who are suffering or will some day suffer from the same disorder” (2). And, even though Freud presents his motives as “pure,” he admits that other readers may “(revolting though it may seem) choose to read a case history of this kind not as a contribution to the psychopathology of neuroses, but…for their private delectation” (3). Freud, like Benjamin and even Mather, argue that case studies do not exist for public entertainment. Jorgensen would agree that public awareness and education, along with validating her own experiences, are the most important goals of publishing her memoir.
Even before writing her memoir, Jorgensen appeared on numerous radio broadcasts and other interviews; her crusade to make her story visible—in her own words—was welcomed by the general public—and seemed to culminate in her written memoir. Waiting to see his daughter for the first time, Jorgensen’s father said that he was surprised by receiving hundreds of letters from others who asked for Jorgensen’s guidance; Jorgensen’s father is quoted as saying, “Perhaps that was why Chris did it this way, to bring the whole business out in the open so those others could be helped, too. There’s been so much ignorance and misunderstanding for generations” (“Parents Join Ex-GI, Now a Daughter”). Jorgensen writes about her desire to write as a means to connect to the general public and assert her own experiences without the filter of the press or physicians:

What is she really like—personally? It was a question that echoed in my mind. That coupled with the medical contribution of my “case” . . . led me to review the events and people who had contributed so heavily, post positively and negatively, to my whole existence. For the first time in many years, I labored through the thousands of words printed about me in the newspapers, periodicals, journals, and scandal magazines. I tried to regard it all as objectively as possible, and was made aware again that much of the information about the “Christine Jorgensen case” was confusing, often biased, or made sensational and bizarre by the press. (xvi)

In other words, Jorgensen wants to normalize herself for the general public; instead of appearing like an exception or medical anomaly, she wants to be viewed as a “normal” woman—albeit with celebrity status. Jorgensen’s other mission is to promote self-understanding of those who are encountering similar internal struggles that she experienced. Jorgensen writes that she hopes to create “greater understanding of boys and girls who grow up knowing that they will not fit into the pattern of life that is expected of them; of the men and women who struggle to adjust to sex roles unsuited to
them; and the intrepid ones who, like myself, must have drastic steps to remedy what they find intolerable" (xvii). In the above quote, Jorgensen admits that gender and sexual normalizations exist—and that she simultaneously exists on the margins, and within, them. This apparent contradiction illustrates the tension between the experiences and medical diagnosis of transsexuality.

Like Jorgensen, Kaysen attempts to create an intimate—if not familiar—bond with readers. Her desire to have others witness her trauma and pain propels her to share more with the audience than she may have with doctors—such as her history of self-mutilation. Readers can perform a very significant task that some doctors may be unwilling to do: listen, witness, and not discount or diagnosis pain as way to render invisible. Very late in her memoir, Kaysen confesses wrist-banging and writes, “Nobody knew I was doing. I never told anyone, until now” (152). Her ability to withhold this information from her doctors, as well as readers, reveals both her agency and her power over her experiences (versus the doctors who profess to have authority over the diagnoses and treatment of her maladies). Her confession illuminates her sense of inward torture and alienation: “Part of the point [of wrist-banging] was that nobody knew about my suffering. If people knew and admired—or abominated—me, something important would be lost” (Kaysen 153). Quite possibly, Kaysen relied upon her psychological and physical pain as a method of substantiating her identity, which she believed was rooted in rebellion to every norm. To confess her pain, especially to a psychologist, would be—in her mind—like abnegating power to someone who could not appreciate her psychological pain. In *The Suicidal Mind*, Edwin S. Shneidman asserts that self-mutilation, along with suicidal behaviors, should be recognized by psychiatrists
as “psychace [psychological pain which] stems from thwarted or distorted psychological needs” (4). Waiting until the end of the memoir, too, reminds readers who are interrogating the power of psychological trauma that Kaysen was—indeed, even if she was not aware of it at the time—suffering from traumas before entering McLean. The debate becomes is she better now, a question only she (not her doctors) can answer.

From the beginning of *Girl, Interrupted*, Kaysen addresses the reader as “you” and begins a candid discussion about her credibility while assuming a familiarity with the readers. She acknowledges the difficulty in readers’ willingness to believe her over medical experts. Unlike doctors, the audience is unable to prescribe treatments or medicines—so what could Jorgensen or Kaysen possibly want from readers? Maybe, she wants to simply be believed. Kaysen’s purpose in using “you” may be to foster a relationship to a reader, it may also (simultaneously) illustrate another point. This point is best illustrated when consulting a reporter, John Calpinto, who wrote David Reimer’s memoir. In 1967, David Reimer was born in a small town in Canada; but, after a botched circumcision, Reimer’s parents agreed with doctors to raise him as a female. As a teenager, Reimer became the trophy that notable sexologist Dr. John Money used to support his theories (which were later discredited) on the power of nurture over nature in relation to gender and sex. Colapinto remarks on David’s vacillation between “you” and “I”:

I noticed that when David described events that had occurred prior to his fifteenth birthday [when he lived as a female, dictated by his parents and Money], he tended to drop the pronoun *I* from his speech, replacing it with the distancing *you*—almost as if he were speaking about someone else altogether. Which, in a sense, he was.
In a way, Kaysen’s use of “you,” then, could be an indication of her unconscious effort to forget that the experiences described are hers. Or, it could be a conscientious choice that illustrates the fragmented narrative voice that suffers from trauma. While we remain uncertain as to Kaysen’s motivations, the use of pronouns may be an untapped area for the discourse of trauma. Rowlandson’s ambivalent voice expresses her conflict between identifying with her captors and her Puritan society; likewise, Kaysen struggles with identifying between her peers within McLean and “her keepers,” or the medical staff.

While Rowlandson incorporates biblical themes and passages, Jorgensen and Kaysen include—and to different degrees, appropriate—medical discourse as a way to expose the trauma of gender normalizations and medical discourse; this strategy serves the purpose of harnessing the language and validity of science as a method to communicate their own experiences. Historically, medical discourse and gender/sex normalizations have been intertwined. Michel Foucault argues that scientific discursivity began to classify and contain the “truth” of sex in the nineteenth century. Foucault writes, “an improbable thing was then taking shape: a confessional science, a science which relied on the many-sided extortion, and took for its object that was unmentionable but admitted to nonetheless” (64). Envisioning sex as the focal point for “unlimitless dangers” (Foucault 66), it became essential to seek it out, force it into visibility, and medicalize its effects. One of the primary ways in which this “confessional science” operates is through the form of the case study: confessions are extracted (sometimes by force), evaluated, and seemingly recorded for the purpose of other scientists who can appreciate and further evaluate the confessions.
In this way, the confessions—personal motivations, descriptions of self and pain—have often become mere data, recorded and interpreted by others, not the subject. The science of confession became a ritual that was so entrenched in the production of knowledge and power that the subject often lost self-awareness and, arguably, agency, within it; however, Jorgensen and Kaysen appropriate medical discourse in order to claim expertise over their own experiences. Foucault argues that “the scope of the confession [was altered]; it tended no longer to be concerned with what the subject wished to hide, but with what was hidden from himself” (66). Thus, the subject was no longer considered to even be aware of her/his sexuality, which is what she or he wanted to hide or needed to confess; the chief tool of freedom and truth, namely confession, was no longer consciously available to the individual. Medical discourse and language provides one method for articulating trauma, but its use often regulated to the medical expert and not the patient. In the quest to classify and contain sexuality, medical discourse has created a vast language of its own—full of symptoms, diagnostic criteria, and terms that are assumed to be only understood by an “objective expert” and certainly not the patient in most situations. Thus, the actual confessional voice of patients has become reduced to a mirage of truth, fleeting through the course of records and medical histories, prompting continual revisions and re-interpretations from “objective” medical experts; and this has helped to render the confessing subject as explicitly incapable to decipher her own confessions—because she is incapable of the “objectivity” and “expertise” required to investigate, explain, and understand the latent ways that her sexuality may have caused potential neurosis.
Jorgensen’s narrative shows how her own self-awareness is the initiating factor for the changes she undergoes—along with the medical diagnosis imposed upon her. Rallying herself to confess her feelings to a physician years ago, Jorgensen writes, “I cautioned myself, for I didn’t intend to flee from this moment of revealing confession as I had fled so many other moments in my life” (64). Jorgensen was aware that her declaration held the real possibility of being deemed mentally ill; indeed, the first consulted doctor, along with several referred her to physiatrists, but she remained undaunted. Finally locating doctors who were willing to operate, Jorgensen describes months in which she underwent extensive interviews in which experts attempted to “unearth any particular childhood traumas or emotional aberrations” (Autobiography 103) that would explain her desire to change her sex. She encountered the difficult tasks of showing an unwavering need and passion for sex-reassignment surgery without appearing desperate—a sign often looked for as being mentally unstable. Jorgensen fervently claims that her masculine traits were “physical and sexually underdeveloped” (Autobiography 29)—thus partially visible to others. Jorgensen’s narrative was criticized by some for being too personal to be publically confessed. Reflecting a popular perception in 1955, a writer in the gay publication One Magazine criticizes the public nature of Jorgensen’s confessions:

Mlle. Jorgensen has done a thing, which, in my opinion, every so-called ‘intermediate’ [sexual deviant, including transvestites and homosexuals] should. The only thing she should not have done is to advertise a very private matter, therefore ruining her chances to lead a satisfactory life in her new role. (28)

Thus, Jorgensen’s confessions were interpreted, by some, as personal flamboyance—even though they were demanded by others.
Like Jorgensen, Kaysen does not shy away from including intimate details of her life; perhaps the most obvious form sign of her willingness to expose herself to readers is the inclusion of her medical records. In an interview, Kaysen explains her reasoning for including her hospital recorders in her memoir: “because the contrast between their language and my language was interesting. . . .I was interested in making public something that was considered extremely private” (qtd. in Daniel). Thus, Kaysen’s strategic inclusion of the documents contrasts her narrative voice with that of scientific discourse; and she also breaks the cultural taboo of speaking about mental illness. Kaysen readily denies her position as an expert—even on her own past mental health: “People think I'm a psychology expert, but I'm not,” she says. "I'm a writer" (qtd. in Sanchs). Kaysen’s quote illustrates her consciousness of performativity in relation to confession and writing. But like Rowlandson, Kaysen is not concerned with confessing everything or containing her experiences; unlike Jorgensen, critiques of Kaysen involved her confessing “too little” versus “too much.” Andrea Sanchs, reviewer and interviewer for *Time* Magazine, claims that: “She [Kaysen] does not answer nearly as many questions as she raises, including the ultimate one of whether she should have been hospitalized at all.” Throughout her memoir, she refuses to admit to being crazy, or not, as well as defining what ‘craziness’ really is; but, she does critique the ways in which mental illness is determined and diagnosed. Kaysen remarks that “a general taint is useful” (124) because it allows her to feel safe and “normal”; but, she refuses that an absolute, recognizable barrier exists between the constructions of sanity and insanity—even though espousing her ‘sanity’ would provide a less murky way to achieve agency over the doctors that held her physically and discursively captive. In the section entitled
“My Diagnosis,” Kaysen deconstructs her analysis of BPD, directly after including pages directly from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (3rd edition, revised in 1987). Charles E. Rosenberg writes: “She underlines the arbitrariness, the gender stereotypes, and the social control built into the seemingly objective language of clinical description” (418). As discussed in an earlier section, Kaysen interrogates portions of her diagnosis—such as promiscuity—for being age- and gender-biased.

Medical discourse can validate the normalizations of gender and sex, as previously discussed; but, captivity is physically reinforced in Kaysen’s situation. Kaysen describes the physical space of McLean as a captive space, “a womb” (122) where “you can’t go anywhere” (122). The metaphor of the womb aptly demonstrates the attempt to make the mental institution into a domestic sphere, with its connotations of safety, nourishment, and structure that supposedly replaces the unhealthy home life (particularly with parents) that may have instigated or augmented the original madness. Therefore the asylum is structured to be a ‘functional’ and isolated familial environment that attempts to submerge patients in a childlike state and thus ‘properly’ (re)domesticate or (re)habilitate them. Transferred from one domestic sphere (the asylum) to another (the home), Kaysen is thought of to no longer be a threat to herself or others. Throughout her memoir, Kaysen discusses the limited mobility within McLean, including the “checks” made routinely by nurses to ensure notification of the patients’ whereabouts and activities. In addition, drugs were used as a form of mobile inhibition. In Mad in America, Robert Whitaker chronicles the treatment of mental illness, citing examples where doctors and nurses used drugs to force patients into infantile states in order to make the patients more ‘manageable.’ Curiously enough,
Nazi doctors used neuroleptics, like Thorazine, during World War II to torture and quiet dissidents and captives. While the Nazi’s political motivations and use of neuroleptics for mind control were shunned, the use of drugs to perform mind control on the mentally ill are considered “medically sound treatment [that is not] an extraordinary circumstance warranting an unsanctioned intrusion on the integrity of a human being” (Judge Joseph Tauro qtd. in R. Whitaker 218). Using these neuroleptic drugs like Thorazine and Chlorpromazine has the added benefits of reducing the staff’s workload as well as providing the appearance of patient ‘recovery’; but, from the patients’ points of view, these drugs are seen as a form of punishment and trauma. Janet Gotkin, at a 1975 Senate hearing said, “These drugs are used not to heal or help, but to torture and control. It is that simple (qtd. in R. Whitaker 177). Kaysen comments that the drugs were used solely for the staff: “Once we were on it, it was hard to get off. A bit like heroine, except it was the staff who got addicted to our taking it” (87). Resident nurses would comment that the patient was “doing so well” (87) when medicated with neuroleptics; but Kaysen says, “That was because those things [drugs] knocked the heart out of us” (87). Neuroleptics have the added benefits, for the staff, of validating the patients’ sense of insanity and reliance on their keepers. So, although these medications were capable of providing a false semblance of recovery, they were most often used to enforce the patients’ physical and psychological captivity.

Drugs like Thorazine had the added benefits of causing psychological trauma because they have the ability to make even a mentally healthy person feel “insane”; but, for someone like Kaysen who somewhat struggles with reality, the drugs could have the negative effect of validating illusions or feelings of insanity. After an episode of
paranoia about being lied to, particularly about her hand containing bones, Kaysen attempts to peel back her skin to see for herself. Following this act, Kaysen is sedated with Thorazine and, for the first and only time, overtly acknowledges that she is indeed mentally ill. Kaysen writes about her relief: “It was comforting . . . [that] now I was safe, now I was really crazy, and nobody could take me out of there” (104). The sedation of Kaysen’s senses finally gives credibility to what others, particularly the medical staff at McLean and her family, have been telling her—her fear is recognized: she is crazy. The relief accompanied by such a revelation may seem perplexing; but Kaysen’s is finally provided a cohesive view of her identity as insane and no logical need to fight against it anymore. The actual effects, however, of neuroleptics may have been partially responsible for Kaysen’s feelings. Robert Whitaker writes that high doses of Thorazine produce “a chemical lobotomy” (176) along with a feeling of disassociation with one’s body, emotions, and surroundings:

For people so tranquilized, this clamping down on the limbic system often translates into an internal landscape in which they [the patients] feel emotionally cut off from the world. People on neuroleptics complain of feeling like “zombies,” their emotions all “wrapped up.” In a very real sense, they can no longer emotionally experience themselves. (163)

Earlier in her attendance at McLean, Kaysen writes, “I wasn’t convinced that I was crazy, though I feared I was” (159); but after the use of neuroleptics, coupled with being lumped with patients with varying types and degrees of mental illness, Kaysen began to question her initial assessment of her sanity.

Within this critique, I do not want to leave the impression that medical discourse or medicine, in general, is inhumane or unhelpful to Jorgensen and Kaysen. Both Jorgensen and Kaysen admit to needing intervention, while at the same time denying
any abnormalcy. The reason for this delicate balance is because to confess abnormalcy—especially in terms of mental health—would make the author's credibility suspect. Jorgensen distances herself from any indication of mental illness by displaying an unequivocal lack of homosexual desire; in fact, one of the ways that she is convinced that she is indeed transsexual is when she is repulsed by even the mentioning of homosexuality. Jorgensen never was a strict supporter of gay rights; in fact, she attempted to distance herself from homosexuals in her youth. In her autobiography, Jorgensen writes that she realized early in her life (in male form) that she “could never give myself totally to love and affection for another man” (Autobiography 33) because of the social ostracism and religious approbations of homosexuality. Indeed, Jorgensen later mentions being propositioned by a gay male and being forced to leave the situation because of a physical reaction of disgust. While some compassionate doctors agreed that someone could modify her/his body in order to be perceived as the opposite sex, the goal of sex-reassigment surgery was specifically not for sexual gratification. Even Benjamin believed that a person never “truly” can change one’s sex:

Medically, or rather endocrinologically, we are reminded that no “female” can ever result from the operation but merely a castrated (or mutilated) male, with artificially created sex organs resembling those of a female and, if successfully created, allowing normal penovaginal sex relations. (Transsexual Phenomenon 125)

Benjamin’s marveling at the determination of male-to-female transsexuals rests on the fact they would prefer to be a “mutilated” man versus a biologically ‘incomplete’ woman. This sentiment—that transsexuals are little more than performing in ‘drag’—was echoed by other doctors, whose guidance the American public was taught to follow: “The patient

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7 In Sex Changes: Transgender Politics, Patrick Califia suggests that the rejection of anatomy for sexual pleasure is pivotal for the transsexual narrative (see especially page 58).
will be able to move about freely among other persons without anyone suspecting that this is not a normal young woman but a male transvestite whose highest wishes have been fulfilled by the assistance of the medical profession and by society” (“Christine’s Doctors Tell of Operations”). The ultimate goal of sex-reassignment surgery, in Benjamin’s longer quote above, seems to be heteronormative sexual intercourse; while sexual relations is a specific form of social interaction, the expectation of culturally approved sex cannot be overlooked. Jorgensen distances herself from any indication of mental illness by displaying an unequivocal lack of homosexual desire and close affiliation with her doctors—or captors.

The tension between captive and captor is more pronounced in Kaysen’s text than Jorgensen’s; and this is obvious in various parts of the narrative—but especially one. In the section “Do You Believe Him or Me,” Kaysen actively engages the audience members with their dilemma of authenticating the author or the clinicians. Kaysen presents documents, challenging the time frame that the doctor spent diagnosing her—before sending her to McLean. The doctor’s records affirm that he spent a couple of hours with her before institutionalizing her; however, she believes that she spoke with him only twenty minutes. After an elaborate back-and-forth relay of information, Kaysen assesses the doctor’s interview lasted no more than thirty minutes; and she writes, “I won’t quibble over ten minutes. Now you believe me” (72). Understandably, then, Kaysen’s relationship with her diagnosis is more overtly ambivalent than Jorgensen’s. Kaysen admits to “having a problem with patterns” (40) and the fact that “reality was getting too dense” (41); yet, she precedes these observations with speculating on the possibility that everyone else shared her experiences but were not “dropping the act”
(41). In the end, Kaysen confesses, “I had to admit, though, that I knew I wasn’t mad . . . . All my integrity seemed to lie in saying No. So the opportunity to be incarcerated was just too good to resist. It was the very big No—the biggest No this side of suicide” (42). And, besides, she reasoned, “I wasn’t mad and that they wouldn’t keep me there, locked up in a loony bin” (42). Kaysen’s self-assurance, though, briefly wavers in her narrative—only to resurface.

Jorgensen and Kaysen portray medical discourse as an ultimately insufficient method of articulating trauma when used to contain individual suffering. But unlike Rowlandson, neither Jorgensen nor Kaysen includes descriptions of physical pain or trauma by medical personnel. In this way, the doctors and nurses are even more ambivalent captors, perhaps, than the Indians—in Rowlandson’s account. Jorgensen strategically does not include discussions of pain from surgeries or uncompassionate doctors; by eliminating those discussions, her pain of being “trapped in the wrong body” remains in the forefront. Bernice L Hausman suggests that “by not representing pain, Jorgensen was able to deflect attention away from the actual surgical techniques that made her transformation into a woman possible; to treat them, in other words, as insignificant to the fact of her present existence as a woman” (356). Therefore, the pain and trauma of medical “technologies” is rendered invisible in favor of accentuating the “realness” of subscribing to normalized genders and sexualities. Judith Halberstam aptly argues that “many transsexuals do not want to represent gender artifice; they actually aspire to the real, the natural” (50). Some individuals use “transsexuality” as a medical concept in order to achieve the results that they need in order to become—and
be read as—the “normal” woman or man they desire to be. Halberstam advocates that individuals take the initiative in reclaiming and naming her/his own identities:

Scientific discourses have tended to narrow our ability to imagine sexuality and gender otherwise, and in general the discussions that take place in medical communities about embodiment and desire may be way behind those on e-mail list, in support groups, and in sex clubs. Accordingly, we should take over the prerogative of naming our experiences. (53)

Here, Halberstam offers a seemingly easy solution: allow individuals the agency to create labels, dispose of them, contradict them, or simply say that they do not care. In this way, individuals have the power over the naming and expectations of their identities and experiences—especially marginal ones.

Within the science of confession, specifically case studies, patients often feel forced to offer confessions that are expected and predictable. In Jorgensen’s case, she knew that she could not afford to admit to ever wavering in her commitment to be “a heterosexual woman”—even though the outcomes of her diagnosis and sexual-reassignment surgery were dangerous and uncertain. And, Kaysen refused to confess her wrist-banging or self-mutilation to her therapists—instead, choosing to take control over her diagnosis while institutionalized. Activist and MTF transsexual Riki Wilchins asks, “What kind of system bids us to make our bodies a problem to be solved, a claim we must defend, or a secret we must publicly confess, again and again” (39). In her memoir, Jorgensen mentions that she served as the focus of her sister’s undergraduate research when she was a small child: “I never read the thesis, but was told I was the subject of it and that she had won considerable acclaim for her work, in analyzing my feminine ways and attributing them partially to the fact that I played with girls so much as a child” (Jorgensen, Autobiography 15). Jorgensen’s memory of her sister using
personal information in order to formulate an argument about gender abnormality is heart-breaking. Although Jorgensen did not read the study, she was clearly aware of the topic and her sister’s argument. While Jorgensen’s memoir exists to educate, it undoubtedly differs from her sister’s study; her memoir focuses on fostering social consciousness through the confessional voice, not by compiling forced confessions by “objective experts.” Both Jorgensen’s and Kaysen’s narratives interrogate the traumatizing effect of case studies; however, I believe that Jorgensen’s narrative is not as explicitly critical of medical discourse precisely because she recognizes that it can afford her—and many others like her—a sometimes preferred normative identity. Judith Butler asserts, “The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity” (31); and, indeed, the words used to describe “gender dysphoria” and “transsexualism” originated within scientific discourse. For Jorgensen, to completely negate medical discourse would be to risk the very possibility of existence and medical intervention.

However, Kaysen embraces her marginal position and absolutely refuses a false recovery narrative. And in doing so, she strategically blurs the boundaries between “insanity” and “sanity,” “masculine” and “feminine,” and “normal” and “abnormal.” Her agenda is to overtly privilege the confessional voice while Jorgensen does so subtly. Kaysen’s and Jorgensen’s memoirs signal departures in American women’s writing because they incorporate actual documents that were written by their captors. While in Rowlandson’s text, literacy served as one claim of superiority, a more specific type of communication is privileged in these memoirs—medical language. Scientific discourse
not only has the power to require particular confessions, which is a form of rhetorical captivity, it also has the power to implement physical forms of captivity. The hospital, in both Jorgensen’s and Kaysen’s circumstances, is a space that parallels as well as complicates domestic spaces; like Rowlandson and Foster, Jorgensen and Kaysen challenge the boundaries between “foreign” and “domestic” by embracing their deviance from gender norms while positing that everyone may be somewhat deviant. Jorgensen and Kaysen provide readers with two somewhat different approaches to navigating the captivity of gender normalizations and medical discourse; though both norms and language are rhetorical, as this chapter explains, they can promote and validate physical violence—especially against marginalized individuals.
Everyday Trauma

In *Autobiography of a Face*, Lucy Grealy\(^1\) writes, “Sometimes the briefest moments capture us, force us to take them in, and demand that we live the rest of our lives in reference to them” (78). Her face distorted by cancer of the jaw, Grealy’s memoir remarks about more than her face—in a way, the memoir is about how she experienced life *through* her face. But, Grealy’s assessment that “moments capture us” and “demand that we live the rest of our lives in reference to them” is also an apt description of living with trauma. Trauma can be ordinary, everyday—there are no fireworks that mark its origination or ending. It is not *always* a linear or fragmented narrative, as the last chapter illustrates; but, it is likened to another world, like Kaysen’s “parallel universe” of the mentally ill. This chapter addresses Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* as confessional narratives of trauma. I argue that the novels themselves are confessional—not that one portion of the text “reveals” rape or other abuse is “*the* confession.” And, yet, these texts do not depict trauma as one event that is contained; in this way, trauma *becomes* (ironically) ordinary—an everyday occurrence. For instance, every day, Celie battles the physical and verbal diatribes of her husband and his children; and this type of abuse is an everyday experience. A former good student and out-going girl, Melinda (in *Speak*) remains silent throughout her first year of high school year; because she is she is kicked, shoved, and physically abused by her peers on a daily basis for calling the cops

\(^1\) Sadly, Grealy died from a heroin overdose in 2002 at the age of 39. Her short piece “Mirrors” appears in *Autobiography of a Face* and has been anthologized in several collections.
at a summer party. Halfway through the novel, readers find out that unbeknownst to anyone—including her best friend, Rachel—she was raped at that party, which is why she called the police.

Most criticism of *The Color Purple* and *Speak* revolve around the protagonists’ personal transformation and recovery from trauma. Critics often concentrate on Celie’s literacy as a reflection of her “recovery” and self-definition; for instance, Daniel W. Ross argues that Celie’s “hollow shell of selfhood” (69) prevents her from speaking with other characters; Lynn Pifer and Tricia Slusser expand his theories, arguing that Celie is able to integrate all of herself—including her sexuality and experiences—only after she semiotically recognizes herself. Similarly, Lauren Berlant argues that Celie is able to be “reborn,” forgetting her past traumas, after she communicates with others. I disagree, however, on the strict correlation between Celie’s literacy or speech acts and her sense of subjectivity or healing. My argument seeks to expand Martha J. Cutter’s claim that the act of writing her story shows “Celie’s movement away from an existence as a victim in a patriarchal plot toward a linguistic and narratological presence as the author/subject of her own story” (163). While I do not wish to devalue the experience of captivity and trauma that Celie experiences, I do not perceive her as broken or developmentally arrested.

Besides literacy, Ross argues that Celie’s selfhood is dependent on finding a maternal figure, which she lacks as a child; after her lover and friend Shug exposes her to a world of self-love and pleasure, Celie is able to initiate stages of development that were stunted as a result of sexual and physical abuse. Without the maternal figure, Charles L. Proudfit suggests, Celie cannot develop her own identity; Proudfit claims that
Celie’s emotional, psychological, and physical states were traumatized, depressed, and arrested. While I agree that family lineage is important to Celie (as an individual), I am not convinced that her subjectivity relies on having a maternal figure or love object. In fact, I believe that Celie’s sexual desire for Shug is evidence of—not the cause—of her sense of self. Celie’s embrasure of sexuality, Ross and Berlant argue, is critical for her “recovery” from physical and sexual abuse, as well as moves her from a passive victim to an active agent. Linda Abbandonato suggests that Celie encounters another hurdle in her quest to assert her self-identity: she is a representative “fallen woman,” much like the protagonist in The Coquette, which is discussed in chapter one. But as Cutter and Abbandonato argue—and as I will argue—The Color Purple revises the narrative plot of the traditional seduction novel, perhaps most predominantly by concluding with a (somewhat) happy protagonist.

Criticism of Speak focuses on Melinda’s silence—sometimes valorizing her silence as a resistance to confession, and sometimes blaming her for it (much like her parents in the novel, ironically). According to Chris McGee and Don Latham, Melinda (like Celie) cannot “recover” from her abuse or achieve a stable sense of self without confessing or speaking about the rape; however, I believe that they discount the fact that Melinda (like Celie) is confessing to the readers and herself. Moreover, I disagree that confessing her rape is Melinda’s sole objective; rather, I believe that Melinda’s goal is to witness her own daily experiences of trauma—and to share them with other witnesses when she is ready. According to Latham, Speak is a queer novel because it presents “a view from the closet” (369); he claims that Melinda, as a result of trauma and social isolation, recognizes the performativity of identity. While I agree with
Latham, I would argue that Melinda actually embraces the performativity of confession as well. And co-authors Jennifer Miskec and Chris McGee discuss Speak as one of the contemporary young adult novels that challenges the medical community’s assumptions about trauma, specifically acts of self-mutilation are always by suicidal individuals. While I agree with Miskec and McGee, my argument concentrates on how the text resists representations of trauma survivors, particularly the requirement of confession for their recovery.

While criticism has focused on the protagonists’ potential to heal by developing her identity, general public reception for both The Color Purple and Speak has been extremely mixed. In 1983, Alice Walker received the Pulitzer Prize for The Color Purple; and while the novel was well received by many, others protested the portrayal of violent African-American men. Walker addresses the criticism that she received for her portrayal of African-American male violence toward women, particularly Mr____’s violence toward Celie. Walker responds, “It is nearly crushing to realize there was an assumption on anyone’s part that black women would not fight injustice except when the foe was white” (qtd. in Davis 31). In the 1980s, several critics, including Patricia Hill Collins, recognized the negative publicity surrounding Walker as a struggle against emerging Black Feminist politics. The violation of African-American women, historically, has been predominantly muted. Within the system of slavery, African-American women’s abuse was “legitimated and therefore condoned” (Collins 158). African-American women’s position within intersections of oppression—including those of race, gender, and sex—makes their situation even more complex. Many feminists agree with

2 For a complete discussion on the reception of Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, see Jacqueline Bebo’s “Sifting through the Controversy: Reading The Color Purple.”
Patricia Hill Collins when she argues that African-American womanhood is problematically defined in terms of being supportive to African-American masculinity, even if that “support” includes remaining silent about abuse. Walker, too, claims that there is a need for a type of feminist thought that incorporates the particular experiences of African-American women; In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens, Walker provides her well known definition of “womanism”:

1) A black feminist of feminist of color . . . . 2) A woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women’s culture . . . . 3) Loves herself. Regardless. 4) Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender. (Gardens xii)

Walker’s womanist politics are clearly evident in The Color Purple—which, I argue, is most concerned with witnessing the experiences of African-American women.

Published in 1999 (over a decade after The Color Purple), Laurie Halse Anderson’s novel Speak also received a mixed reception from the public. In 2009, Anderson received the Margaret A. Edwards Award for her novels, including Speak, for “her significant and lasting contribution to writing for teens” (ALA). But these accolades were followed by criticism. ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom notes that nearly 6,000 young adult books were challenged during the years of 1990-2000; and, Speak is listed of one of the most challenged during this timeframe for its references to self-mutilation and rape. Anderson’s Speak is considered a specific type of young adult novel: a “problem-novel,” which first emerged in the 1970s. In the “problem novel,” “the character grows as s/he faces and resolves one specific problem” (Trites 14). “The problem,” can be described as Melinda’s conflicting desires to forget and to confess the rape that occurred over the summer; but, I would also argue that “the problem” is

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3 See Collins, especially 166-171.
actually “problems.” Melinda’s social, physical, and psychological traumas did not originate directly from not speaking; this is evident by the fact that when she does finally try to tell Rachel, she is not believed. In this way, I believe that Speak complicates “the problem novel,” as a genre, by addressing the normalizations of gender and adolescence (much like Kaysen’s *Girl, Interrupted*—which is certainly not “a problem novel”).

Like Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette*, much of the violence in the novels occurs within the domestic space: Celie is a domestic captive to two various men, and their children; and, Melinda is held captive within the physical and routine confines of school—comparable to Kaysen’s institution. As a young girl, Celie endures repeated physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of her pedophilic step-father (whom she believes to be her biological father) until she is transferred to another abusive man and his children under the guise of marriage. Mr. ___ (her common-law husband), later identified as “Albert,” intensifies his emotional torture of Celie by intercepting letters between Celie and her beloved sister, Nettie. *Speak*, however, shows that one instance of rape can also affect the daily life of the survivor. Melinda is seemingly happy until attending a party before entering high school; intoxicated by alcoholic beverages and the attention from an upper-classman, Melinda is separated from her peers and raped. Her perpetrator holds his hand over Melinda’s mouth, prompting a silence that permeates most of the text. Melinda’s middle-class parents, who communicate with sticky notes on the refrigerator, are both physically and emotionally absent; when she returns from “the party,” neither of her parents are at home—and this signifies their lack of involvement in their daughter’s life. Also like Foster’s novel, *The Color Purple* and
Speak evoke the epistolary format as a means to create intimacy with the readers and articulate trauma. Celie, unlike Eliza, addresses her letters to “God,” an abstract and distant being, through most of the novel; toward the end, though, she writes to Nettie, who also writes her in return. While Anderson’s Speak is not writing in epistolary format, per se, it does share commonalities; for instance, the protagonist, Melinda, does not verbally communicate with the other characters (much like Celie) so her thoughts are recorded in a sort of diary or report-card for the readers and herself. Also, the novel is organized in “quarters,” according to her academic calendar; this “sectioning” of information according to a timeline is similar to how an epistolary novel presents its story. Much of the abuse within The Color Purple occurs within domestic spaces.

Celite addresses her letters to “Dear God,” invoking the ritual of confession that relies on “the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console, and reconcile” (Foucault 61-2). But, Celie is not asking for penance or seeking forgiveness—she is searching for a witness. Indirectly addressing the entries to the readers, “Dear God” serves as method for readers to witness Celie’s trauma. In “Philomela Speaks,” Martha J. Cutter argues, “The ancient story of Philomela has resonated in the imaginations of women writers for several thousand years” (161). This myth, according to Cutter, “intertwines rape, silencing, and the destruction of feminine subjectivity” (161). Cutter also argues that the epistolary form lends itself to being a method of archiving: “Celie subversively

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4 Linda Abbandonato suggests that The Color Purple’s epistolary form “invites us to trace its ancestry all the way to Clarissa” (1106). While I agree that Walker’s text is a “rewriting of canonical male texts” (Abbandonato 1106), I believe that The Color Purple more closely resembles Foster’s The Coquette than any other seduction novel because of Eliza’s quest for self-definition. I would also agree that The Color Purple also resembles Harriet Anne Jacobs’ Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl more than Clarissa because of Jacobs’ enforced domestic captivity and abuse.
reconfigures her audience so that an imagined, rather than actual, person is the receiver of the message, and this allows her to shape her message in such a way that it cannot be erased or silenced” (169). I would argue that this “imagined” person belongs to a specific witnessing public that exists solely to validate the agency of women who confess trauma. Although *Speak* is not written in epistolary format, the text is organized by four school year “Periods.” The text is like a giant report card, which is usually sent home to parents to document a child’s academic progress—but sent directly to the reader instead. The last page of each section designates grades for that quarter; but the grades are not only for academic subjects, but also lists social interactions—such as “attitude” and “plays well with others.” Melinda’s self-given “grades” for social interactions reinforce what the readers are privy to: her thoughts and her turmoil; literally, she is confessing to no one except the reader(s) for the majority of the novel—just like Celie in *The Color Purple*.

Upon first glance, the similarities between Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* may not be obvious; however, they belong to the same modern tradition of American women’s confessional writing that strives to affirm the agency of female trauma survivors and elucidate the existence of everyday trauma. In the 1980s and 1990s, the general public became more aware of sexual abuse toward women and children as a result of feminist efforts that encouraged women to acknowledge their experiences of physical and sexual abuse. Personal narratives of domestic abuse and rape were the topics of popular memoirs, talk shows, made-for-television movies, and media reports. Within this sexual abuse recovery paradigm, female survivors of childhood (or adult) rape and incest were able to recover—and
finally become “whole”—only after they remembered and confessed their abuse; however, as I have been arguing, I do not agree that that trauma (including sexual abuse) always results in fractured or broken subjectivities. Published in 1983, recovery-affirming narratives such as The Color Purple paved the way for contemporary texts such as Speak. Speak pays obvious tribute to sexual abuse recovery narratives by referencing another text that could be considered a “recovery narrative”: Maya Angelou’s autobiography I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which chronicles her experiences as a young African-American girl and survivor of sexual abuse. At Melinda’s school, Angelou’s book(s) and subsequent poster are removed from the library; Melinda places the poster in her hiding place at school—a janitorial closet that she makes a temporary sanctuary from her predator and hostile peers. Angelou, a strong female presence, is a source of encouragement for Melinda when she does physically confront her attacker; and, one cannot help but notice that Angelou’s presence makes the ostensible whiteness of characters more obvious. This, as I will argue later when discussing student responses to the text, may have significant ramifications.

The banning of Angelou’s Walker’s and Anderson’s texts within some public school systems still exists today and reflects on the attempt to ignore abuse directed toward women and children. Silence surrounding domestic abuse is still socially prevalent for several reasons, including the cultural hesitancy (or refusal) to acknowledge the home as a political, potentially violent space and the complexities of the captive-captor relationship. As discussed in the first chapter, domestic violence is often overlooked because the rhetorical relationship between “domestic” and “foreign”
spaces. Consider, for instance, that the majority of Celie’s abuse is considered legal—because many states still do not acknowledge the possibility of spousal rape (and certainly did not during the 1950s 1960s, when Celie was being abused by Mr__). Even today, reports of spousal rape are treated differently than other rape reports—requiring faster reporting time, more evidence, and only acknowledging “penetration” as rape. The intimate (and sometimes familial) relationship between the survivor and perpetrator often further complicates the situation by encouraging the survivor to remain silent and for the perpetrator to remain disguised—if not validated; and these complications facilitate the abusive environment that helps to psychologically and physically secure abused women under the thumb of their abusers. Women and children who are abused develop a consciousness comparable to a captive or prisoner of war, and who may come to feel a mixture of loyalty, fear, and hatred toward her captor. Indeed, Judith Herman describes domestic abuse in terms of confinement: “Captivity, which brings the victim into prolonged contact with the perpetrator, creates a special type of relationship, one of coercive control” (74). Describing physical and sexual abuse as captivity helps to elucidate the often ongoing nature of abuse (and not as isolated events); also, the political connotations of the word captivity help re-envision domestic abuse as a political as well as a personal issue. Herman continues: “the perpetrator becomes the most powerful person in the life of the victim, and the psychology of the victim is shaped by the actions and beliefs of the perpetrator” (75). While I do not believe that an abuser completely erases the survivor’s subjectivity, the intimate relationship (arguably Stockholm Syndrome) can help perpetuate a sense of loyalty and fear toward one’s violator. I want to highlight the ambivalent emotions toward one’s attacker that are
present in Walker’s and Angelou’s texts—and to a lesser degree in Anderson’s.

Angelou’s autobiography begins with an injunction to silence (just as The Color Purple does); her mother’s boyfriend molestes her and threatens her with harming the one person she loves: “If you ever tell anybody what we did, I’ll have to kill [your younger brother] Bailey” (74). After these abuses, Angelou “began to feel lonely for” (75) her abuser because her world “for the first time, it included physical contact” (75), something that her mother did not willingly provide (much like the mothers of Celie and Shug). These complex and contradictory feelings toward captors sometimes adds to the guilt that survivors experience; acknowledging the existence of these emotions is vital to witnessing confessions of trauma, specifically domestic abuse.

Both texts begin when the protagonists are around fourteen years old, arguably adolescent or pre-adolescent, by American cultural and legal standards. But neither Celie nor Melinda defines “adulthood” in relation to age, sexual experience, or a single event; rather, both texts emphasize the importance of self-awareness and self-appreciation—and as a continual process. Adolescence is marked by the quintessential quest for identity—juggling the desires to conform and rebel; while this quest does not simply end once someone reaches a certain age, the evolution of individual identity is understood in terms of the liminal space that adolescence represents. The concepts of “adolescence” and “identity politics” have historically evolved together and are rhetorically interwoven. In Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature, Roberta Seelinger Trites traces the origin of the term “adolescence,” which gained popularity only after the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s
Adolescence in the twentieth-century. The popularity of the concept prompted mass self-help books geared toward parents of teenagers, social organizations for adolescents, the recognition of Young Adult (YA) Literature as its own genre, and mass marketing of YA fiction to teenagers who were gaining power within the American economy. This cultural embrasure of the concept “adolescence” occurred alongside a transformation of existing lexicon: the term “identity” transformed from an objective description to one of personal and political struggle. This desire and political strategy to conceive of one’s self as an emergent rebel against authoritarian institutions (like government, religion, etc.) has become embedded within the rhetoric of “identity politics”; indeed the rhetoric of identity and adolescence have become so intertwined within the American imagination that it is virtually impossible to distinguish them. Medovoi writes, “After the 1960s, the narrative of youth, which subtends ‘identity politics,’ receded from view as identity became principally attached to race, gender, and sexuality” (3). While the discourses of youth, particularly adolescence, in relation to identity may have “receded from view” (Medovoi 3), the connection is still at least implicit; and maybe this is one possible reason why the rhetoric of trauma and recovery is infused with the idea of “growth”—both personal growth and the idea that affliction strengthens one’s sense of self.

Like an adolescent, a trauma survivor is in a liminal position and creating an identity against opposition; a survivor struggles to affirm her identity while the very

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5 See, specifically Trites 8-10.

6 Trites credits Joseph Kett’s *Rites of Passage: Adolescence in America, 1790 to the Present* (New York: Basic, 1997) with these ideas.

7 The rhetoric of adolescence within “identity politics” is discussed in Chapter 2—specifically in relation to Medovio’s theories.
discourse of trauma attempts to erase selfhood. The first line of *The Color Purple* is edited by Celie, reinforcing her own voice’s presence, though wavering: “I am I have always been a good girl” (Walker, *Purple* 1). Lauren Berlant argues that “Celie [is] falling through the cracks of a language she can barely use” (837), existing only in negation to discourse and semiotics; but, as I have argued, I do not agree that literacy directly correlates with subjectivity. Charles Proudfit argues that Celie’s revision from “I am” to “I have always been” reveals her internal struggle toward self-validation and away from self-blame: “the child victim of rape and incest often blames herself for her trauma; or worse still, believes that this bad thing has happened to her because she is bad and therefore deserves it” (17). I agree more with Proudfit, specifically that Celie’s revision or edit is symptomatic of her personal struggle with survivor’s guilt than a result of semiotic negation or lack of sense of self. Likewise, Melinda expresses her struggle toward visibility—but through her work in Art class; like Celie, Melinda remains quiet among other characters. However, Melinda explicitly communicates her marginal position to readers; Melinda remains silent during her first day of high school, she acknowledges her position: “I am Outcast” (Anderson, *Speak* 2). This may be because of Melinda’s relative literacy and familiarity with language. Just because Melinda can communicate her sense of alienation (or any other feeling) more precisely does not necessarily signify her more developed identity; rather, Melinda’s socioeconomic and racial status afford her more opportunities than Celie to become more dexterous with language.

In “Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*,” Daniel W. Ross examines Celie’s quest for selfhood as it relates to modern
psychoanalysis, particularly Jacques Lacan’s “mirror stage.” Ross argues that Celie elides the mirror stage, imperative to the development of the ego and a sense of wholeness, until Shug serves as an “Other” in which to define herself. Ross agrees with Freudian and Lacanian theories when he argues that “Celie’s inability to find a listening audience for herself is another sign of her autism, another result of her arrested development” (74); thus, according to Ross, Celie’s speech acts—prompted by recognizing her own physical body as a result of Shug’s actions—is the indication by which readers can judge her subjectivity. However, I believe that Celie’s letters and silences are also speech acts. Celie and Melinda strive through the entire texts to assert their subjectivity; but, they are also trying to do something even more fundamental: survive. Celie justifies her passivity toward her abusers: “I don’t fight, I stay where I’m told. But I’m alive” (Walker, Purple 21). Patricia Hill Collins warns against assuming that silence is always a passive stance: “Silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women’s consciousness” (108). Indeed, I think that Collins would agree that Celie is being active by preserving her own life, even if that requires retreating inward for a time. I am more inclined to agree with Collins, who writes: “Writing letters to God and forming supportive relationships with other Black women help Celie find her own voice, and her voice enables her to transcend the fear and silence of her childhood” (133). Celie’s self-definition is aided, not controlled, by her interactions with Shug (or any of the other female characters in the novel). To argue that Celie’s identity development relies on anyone—supporters or perpetrators—is to do a great disservice to her as a survivor.
While defining herself, Celie also must face the additional dilemma of tracing her ancestry. Nancy Miller observes, “The arc of becoming through self-knowledge is rooted in but never entirely bound to the stories of our familial past” (543). After Celie learns that her biological father was a respectable man and not the abusive man who raped her as a child, she writes: “But I feels daze. My daddy lynch. My mama crazy. All my little half-brothers and sisters no kin to me. My children not my sister and brother. Pa not pa” (Walker, Purple 177). After finding out that her Pa is not her biological father, but a pedophilic and greedy man, Abbandonato claims that Celie is free to create her own family origin: “Celie is rescued from an identity crisis by Shug, who tells her, ‘Us each other’s people now’; the two women have mothered each other and now elect to be woman-identified women. Implicit here is the escape from patriarchal law” (1111). Abbandonato notes Celie’s lesbian relationship with Shug, but she also emphasizes the power of queer discourse to emphasize the novel’s agenda of validating womanist communities: “the novel is also lesbian in the much broader sense implied by Adrienne Rich’s concept of the ‘lesbian continuum,’ which spans the whole spectrum of women’s friendships and sisterly solidarity” (1108). In this way, one could argue that The Color Purple is about—as well as showing readers how to—foster a witnessing public. Depending on who you ask, this public may be queer, lesbian, humanitarian, African-American, womanist—or a combination of any of the above.

Some critics claim that the meta-narrative of The Color Purple involves criticism of slavery; while that might be the case, I think the text actually highlights the subtle difference between slavery and modern domestic captivity. The strong and proud Sofia in The Color Purple, who is forced to be the white mayor’s maid, talks with the other
women African-American about how she is always “slaving away” (Walker, Purple 102), but her son objects to that word. Sophia responds: “They got me in a little storeroom up under the house, hardly bigger than Odessa’s porch, and just about as warm in the winter time. I’m at they beck and call all night and all day. They won’t let me see my children. They won’t let me see no mens. Well, after five years they let me see you once a year. I’m a slave, she say. What would you call it?” (Walker, Purple 103). Her young son responds, “A captive” (Walker, Purple 103). My goal in differentiating between the two states, captivity and slavery, is not to create a hierarchy of pain or trauma; rather, I think that making this distinction may contribute to discourses on trauma and construction of power. Both captivity and slavery involve confinement and varying degrees of torture, but the means to which this confinement is enforced differs. A captive may be more aware of being kidnapped and has a reason to continually search for an escape route; thus, a captive may have the hope of a reunion to familiarity that a slave may not. For instance, both Celie and Melinda long for a reunion with those who signify a happier time in the past: Celie longs to be reunited with her sister; and Melinda, with her ex-best friend. The importance of recognizing captivity within The Color Purple helps us to acknowledge the different types of domestic captivity—and how constructions of race, class, and even adolescence help to mask its insidious nature.

**Re-imagining the Closet and Purpose(s) of Silences**

Both Celie and Melinda embrace verbal silence; but, they do not remain silent—rather, they write about their daily lives as they live with trauma. Moreover, Melinda finds an abandoned janitor’s closet in the school building that becomes her refuge. In her landmark work Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Sedgwick posits: “‘Closetedness’
itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence” (3). Thus silences, as I have argued, operate as “gaps” and make the invisible (trauma) visible; by writing to the readers and a witnessing public, the protagonists make their verbal silence, that is imperceptible to other characters, evident to themselves—and us. The texts do not present confession as the simple opposite of silence; in fact, the texts highlight two types of silences—one that is forced and one that is chosen. Melinda and Celie are both silenced—hands held over their mouths while they are raped; and this act of being silenced, along with cultural silencing of childhood rape and others’ refusal to witness their pain, affects the protagonists’ choice to remain silent. Speak is, of course, titled so because the main character refuses to speak during the majority of the novel—instead, choosing to confess her thoughts to the readers. Continually, her peers and family try to coerce her to speak—to no avail; she chooses silence because she knows that they will not listen to her. The lack of a witnessing public preempts any desire to share her pain with others. Likewise, Celie remains quiet as she takes abuse from both her stepfather and husband; she thinks that, in so doing, she will be able to survive and wait for Nettie’s return, the only witnessing public she is aware of. The choice of both protagonists to remain silent is pivotal because there is a difference between silence and being silenced: the difference is active choice. Coerced confessions are not empowering since they seek to absorb the agency of the confessor; rather, the confessor chooses silence until she is ready to verbally confess—and chooses to whom she will confess. The responses of others, most often, are what circumvent a confessor’s desire to confess. In an attempt to render themselves invisible to themselves and others, Melinda and Celie choose silence while processing their
emotions and experiences; silence is not simply a signifier of weakness, but the act of silencing is a product of oppression and secondary wounding.

Actively silencing someone is, in itself, violent. The originating point of silence becomes evident midway through Speak: "I open my mouth to breathe, to scream, and his hand covers it. In my head, my voice is as clear as a bell: “NO I DON’T WANT TO!” (Anderson, Speak 135). Melinda gathers up her clothes and leaves the party alone—to arrive home, alone; and, at this point she ceases to feel like a “one-piece talking girl” (Anderson, Speak 97). Martha Cutter agrees with “what many recent feminist critics have argued: that rape is more than just an act of physical or sexual violence: it is an attempt to stamp out or destroy a woman’s agency” (177). In this way, The Color Purple and Speak both are confessional texts about experiences and individuals that do not exist, according to their violators—and all the systems that undercut a woman’s agency. While the protagonists refuse to allow their identities or experiences to be erased, they do not simply depict their rapes in graphic detail, laying them out like a spectacle for public enjoyment. Psychological wounds are not always readily visible, and this may sometimes encourage a survivor’s negation of her/his own pain. After accidently falling asleep on a bus, Melinda finds herself at a hospital; she compares her pain with theirs, saying: “There is nothing wrong with me. These are really sick people” (Anderson, Speak 113). Melinda describes her disorientation as she tries to reconcile her psychological pain and identity as a trauma survivor; she asks herself, “Did he rape my head, too?” (Anderson, Speak 165). Melinda expresses surprise about the fact that her physical trauma has psychological manifestations, but she does not deny that those traumas exist.
Both Celie and Melinda embrace the performative nature of confession—and, by doing so, queer the ritual of confession itself—which is why they both seek a mixture of private and public spaces—along with silences and confessions. Don Latham writes: “Melinda’s archive is both a public and private one—public in the sense that the art teacher and other students in the class witness the creation of the various works throughout the year, and private in the sense that Melinda takes most of these works into her closet at school as a way of making the space her own and reconstructing her identity” (Latham 378). The fact that Melinda uses the closet in “reconstructing her identity” is significant. The symbol of “the closet” is laden with queer associations; someone who is ‘in the closet’ is generically thought to be hiding her/his queer identity. The negative connotations of the closet can seem to mire the process of confessing one’s identities; but, Speak offers another view of the closet. Speak offers a portrayal of the closet as a queer space that can help validate one’s sense of self before verbally confessing one’s identity or trauma. Fleeing the tyrannical Mr. Neck (her Social Studies teacher and P.E. coach), Melinda discovers an abandoned janitor’s closet. Here, she can choose to be silent without the pressures of coerced confessions or further attacks; she says: “This closet is abandoned—it has no purpose, no name. It is the perfect place for me” (Anderson, Speak 26). But, this closet is not a place of mere confinement. Significantly, it is in this closet that Melinda also confronts her attacker for the second time. Following her into the closet, Melinda’s rapist attempts to attack her again; but, this time: “Maya Angelou looks at me. She tells me to make some noise. I open my mouth and take a deep breath” (Anderson, Speak 194). Taking a broken shard from her Maya Angelou poster, she draws upon Angelou’s strength to threaten
her attacker into silence. Angelou’s presence signifies the pivotal need for witnessing; through Angelou’s refusal to remain silenced, Melinda is encouraged to break her silence—and shouts “No” to her attacker, attracting witnesses to the scene. The potential positivity of choosing silence is reinforced when Melinda leaves her closet for someone else who may need it; this emphasizes that chosen silence can be a key stage in healing.

The comparative “closet” in *The Color Purple* is Shug’s bedroom in Mr.__’s house. Like Melinda’s closet, the space is located within a volatile environment; but, the “closet” is devoid of immediate dangers. With Shug, Celie is able to commune with another human being and recognize her own worth and sexuality. Celie does not verbally confess her pain or sexual abuse until half-way through the novel; while the house is devoid of men, Celie and Shug share intimate conversations and physical closeness. Discussing her experiences with her father, Celie is overwhelmed and cries “like it all come back to me” (Walker, *Purple* 112). Reliving her experiences within the arms of the woman she loves, Celie’s pain is finally able to be witnessed. Witnessing does not cure the pain and trauma—but, especially in this instance, it does provide something necessary for healing: love. And one could easily argue that Shug’s love and witnessing help Celie to not only leave Mr.__’s house but also to “talk back” to him before doing so. Celie singularly raises her head and speaks: “You a lowdown dog is what’s wrong, I say. It’s time to leave you and enter into the Creation” (Walker, *Purple* 199). By this, Celie is asserting herself against her attacker and “coming out of the closet”—just like Melinda does. The implications of re-imagining the closet as a potentially liberating space—as long as one moves out of it—accomplishes two
important tasks: erases the stigma of ‘the closet’ and identities associated with it, and also creates the potential for recognizing other spaces—such as homes and schools—as confining (not liberating) spaces.

But, Ann Cvetkovich argues that trauma does not always need to be communicated in language, but also in concrete items: “The memory of trauma is embedded not just in narrative but in material artifacts, which can range from photographs to objects whose relation to trauma might seem arbitrary but for the fact that they are invested with emotional, and even sentimental value” (7-8). For instance, in an effort to communicate trauma and make it visible, both novels use the images of trees. When raped, both protagonists distance themselves from their bodies by focusing on another living organism: a tree. Significantly, Melinda is raped, outside and under a tree at a party before her freshman year in high school. Continuously, Melinda attempts to “rake the leaves out of my throat” (Anderson, Speak 168) but fails; the leaves are actually choking the life out of Melinda, just like the memory of her rape and the continual bullying by her peers after-the-fact. Likewise, Celie, while being beaten by her sexually and physically abusive husband, becomes a tree—silent and still: “It all I can do not to cry. I make myself wood. I say to myself, Celie, you a tree. That’s how come I know trees fear man” (Walker, Purple 22). The heroines focus so intently on the tree that they become the tree—immobile and silent. The tree, then, not only comes to signify the protagonists’ trauma—but also the lens by which they see the world. The representation of trees transforms throughout the texts and comes to signify the healing—but not the erasure of trauma. Like Daphne, who flees Zeus by becoming a tree, Celie and Melinda focus on the image of the tree until they almost embody it; their
goals are to become numb—in order to survive—since running away is impossible. Celie begins to adopt Shug’s view of God as “part of everything” (Walker, *Purple* 195). And, trees—among other elements—become her witnesses; in the last letter, Celie does not write to God or Nettie. She addresses her letter thusly: “Dear God, Dear stars, dear trees, dear sky, dear peoples. Dear Everything. Dear God” (Walker, *Purple* 285). Likewise, drawing and painting trees in Art class, for Melinda, becomes a way of communicating her experiences and emotions.

While the characters are threatened to remain silent, simply speaking is not the solution for two reasons: the limited number of willing witnesses within in the text, and the fact that silence does not inherently oppose confession. Both of the texts begin with either the injunction to remain silent or a silent protagonist. After raping her, Celie’s stepfather threatens her, “You better not never tell nobody but God. It’d kill your mammy” (Walker, *Purple* 1).

Not acknowledging her pain—and forbidding her to confess it to anyone—is creating another wound, and deepening the ones that are already present. Pa practically throws Celie into the arms of her husband, with less dignity than someone would treat an animal, with the following warning: “she tell lies” (Walker, *Purple* 8). This perpetuates her desire to become numb to all the violence and loss that is perpetuated by men in her life; she attempts to survive by “feel[ing] nothing at all” (Walker, *Purple* 42). Others contribute to her secondary wounding by not acknowledging her pain and trauma. The church-folk gawk at her, even though “they think I don’t notice” (Walker, *Purple* 43); having seen her pregnant twice while she was unmarried—and now taking care of another man’s children—undoubtedly caused them

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8 This act of silencing is so closely integrated with her rape that it could be considered an additional primary wound, along with the physical and sexual abuses.
to assume that (and treat her as if) she was enjoying her hedonism, versus being a captive.

Likewise, Melinda chooses to remain silent. When Melinda is asked questions, she does not offer answers because she writes, “Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say” (Anderson, *Speak* 9). Her ex-best-friend, Rachel, does not attempt to find out why she called the cops, and Melinda cannot bring herself to confess to anyone. Rachel’s callousness seems to hurt Melinda the most; she writes, “She [Rachel] doesn’t even bother to find out the truth—what kind of friend is that?” (Anderson, *Speak* 21). When Melinda learns that Rachel is dating her abuser, she attempts to save Rachel from the same fate and confesses; but, Rachel accuses her of being a liar. And, her parents and teachers are not any more supportive. Her parents’ relationship is dissolving and they use Melinda as a point of contention, each blaming each other for her silence and bad grades; she notes, “I am the victim” (Anderson, *Speak* 35) in some kind of performance that exists for the parents’ pleasure. In fact, her parents actively ignore her pain: Melinda’s mother, after seeing her daughter’s scratched wrist, says: “I don’t have time for this” (Anderson, *Speak* 88); and her father jokingly “mentions the need for professional help” (Anderson, *Speak* 74) when Melinda is bleeding profusely from obsessively cutting her lips with her teeth and picking the scabs. At school, she is especially terrorized by one of her teachers, Mr. Neck, who seeks to give her demerits and fail her on virtually any assignment; he tells her, “I knew you were trouble the first time I saw you . . . I can tell what’s going on in a kid’s head just by looking in their eyes” (Anderson, *Speak* 9). In this way, everyone is inscribing their ideas onto both Celie and Melinda while ignoring—and actively attempting to erase—their pain.
Confession, both written and oral, is a vital part to the heroines’ healing process and promoting witnessing. Their confessions are evidence of, not the sole reason for, their growing self-awareness. As Celie and Melinda become more willing to openly acknowledge their agency, they begin to embrace their queer identity as trauma survivors—and eventually embark on healthy relationships with other characters. Melinda’s sarcasm toward her teachers, parents, and peers is evident to the readers—while everyone surrounding her is oblivious to her thoughts, precisely because she remains silent. Even so, the reader is aware that the protagonist is not divulging why she is so miserable—and silent to other characters. These confessions to the readers open up a space where the protagonists can eventually confide in those surrounding them. Diligently working in Art class because she finds validation in her artwork and by her teacher, one of Melinda’s ex-friends accidentally spoils her shirt with markers. This ex-friend, Ivy, apologizes and is sympathetic to Melinda, discussing their ex-friend Rachel’s new snobbery. In front of Ivy, Melinda scrawls on the bathroom wall “Guys to Stay Away from” (Anderson, *Speak* 175) and lists her abuser by name. Her anonymous written confession of being violated elicits other anonymous girls’ confessions of similar assaults by her rapist; when Ivy points out the support of other girls, Melinda says, “I feel like I can fly” (Anderson, *Speak* 186). The physical “chat room” or “blog” on the walls of the bathroom emphasize the significance of community—and witnessing—for healing. And, choosing a locale that is mostly available to her female peers, Melinda intuitively creates a community based the witnessing of confessional writing. This example reveals how confessional writing—with a level of permanency that verbal confessions often do not have—is critical in the development of a witnessing
community. This space also allows Melinda the freedom of not being rejected or secondarily wounded—as she is when she shares her written confession to Rachel, who refuses to believe her. Receiving the validation and support from the bathroom wall is critical in Melinda’s ability to continue confessing, in an effort to eventually break her verbal silence to others.

Some critics have attempted to validate the potential subversive nature of Melinda’s silence; but, this attempt is usually circumvented, ironically, by requiring Melinda’s continual silence. Chris McGee claims that Melinda is empowered by her silence; but, when she confesses, she ‘gives in’ to the pressures to confess and succumbs to the Foucauldian theory that power produces rituals of truth; he writes:

I see great power in Melinda’s silence, her questioning and resistance to power, and her willingness to work through her own traumas in her own way, even though all of this may frustrate readers. For Anderson, however, truth is indeed a thing constantly to be striven for. It is okay not to speak for a little while, Anderson might say, but in the end you should never hide anything from adults. (185)

McGee writes about his students who are aggravated at Melinda’s delayed confession of rape; one male student acknowledges his anger at Melinda: “What makes some people so weak that they cannot [speak]? I just don’t understand” (qtd. in McGee 184). Having taught *Speak* multiple times, I have heard the same reactions from students. But, I would argue that the point is not *when or if* Melinda discusses her rape; to regulate the importance of the novel to Melinda’s confession of rape is a great disservice to the novel’s goal of presenting how one lives with trauma—and how trauma affects every aspect of one’s life. The novel’s focus is not describing the event of a rape, which is evident by two facts: the book delays including the first and only account of it until half-way mark; and the book intentionally preempts another description of it at
the end. The book’s title highlights the importance of the word “speak”; and, McGee argues that Melinda cleverly avoids Foucault’s “incitement to discourse”—until the end. But here is a critical point: we, as readers, never see Melinda verbally confess to another character about her rape or about her pain; she alludes to her rape when writing on the bathroom wall and writing a note to her friend Rachel. When attempting to rape her for the second time, and in her closet, the perpetrator says, “You’re not going to scream. You didn’t scream before. You liked it” (Anderson, *Speak* 194). Finally, though, “a sound explodes from me. ‘NNNOOO!!’” (Anderson, *Speak* 194). Thus, the importance of Melinda “speaking” is to ward off more abuse—not to provide the details of her rape.

**Witnessing and Classroom Counterpublics**

Both protagonists struggle to name their pain, illustrating the inability of language to encompass their experiences of trauma. The word “rape” never appears in *The Color Purple* in reference to Celie’s experiences; yet, it is undeniably present. This is the case in Hannah Foster’s *The Coquette* (1797). The word “rape” is used only three times in *Speak*: the first instance is on a television talk show, where Melinda listens to a survivor’s account and wonders “Was I raped?” (Anderson, *Speak* 164); until she witnesses another’s confession of trauma, she seems unable to relate to the word “rape” to her experiences. Witnessing is an action—one that validates the humanity of the survivor and does not dismiss pain or the reoccurring effects of trauma; but this action can be fraught with ambiguities and missives. Harpo, Albert’s eldest child, becomes frustrated with his independent and brawny wife, Sofia; when Harpo asks for advice, Albert tells him to beat his wife into submission. Celie concurs but later regrets encouraging Harpo to assault his wife; she realizes, unable to sleep, that “I sin against
Sofia spirit” (Walker, *Purple* 39). Not witnessing Sofia’s pain, but rather encouraging it, Celie feels ashamed. Sofia refuses to allow Harpo to beat her, fighting him back; and she becomes enraged when she learns that Celie advised Harpo to assault her. Sofia confronts Celie, confessing that “All my life I had to fight. I had to fight my daddy. I had to fight my brothers. I had to fight my cousins and my uncles . . . . but I never thought I’d have to fight in my own house” (Walker, *Purple* 40). While Celie does not confess her pain to Sofia, she witnesses Sofia’s confession of trauma—along with the strength embodied in Sofia’s struggle and the act of confession, itself. Celie neither dismisses Sofia’s confession of trauma nor attempts to overshadow it with her own trauma; rather, Celie confesses her own weakness in perpetuating violence toward women: “I say it cause I’m a fool, I say. I say it cause I’m jealous of you. I say it cause you do what I can’t” (Walker, *Purple* 40). Although Celie admits to being unable—at least at that moment—to fight, she confesses that she wishes she possessed that strength; and, though she does not begin fighting Albert, witnessing Sofia’s strength and pain encourages her desire to confess her own pain to Shug Avery—and for her eventual departure from her husband’s abusive roof. The instance of Sofia’s confession of trauma reveals the power of witnessing—and being witnessed. Shortly thereafter, Sofia leaves her husband and the hostile environment; and Celie’s pain, though not explicitly confessed to any character yet, surfaces for the reader to witness. This example also reveals the cost of refusing to witness: perpetual violence. Refusing to acknowledge Sofia’s pain, and thus attempt to prevent the violence she experiences, Celie enables the patriarchal violence that plagues her life as well; this action contrasts Celie’s apology and later witnessing of Sofia’s struggle with male violence. Mr.__’s first wife,
Julia, is also evidence for how the lack of witnessing perpetuates violence. Julia, aware that her husband was cheating on her with Shug, had no witnessing public: “And she never told nobody. Plus, she didn’t have nobody to tell” (Walker, *Purple 270*). This lack of witnesses aids Julia’s jealous boyfriend in literally making Julia disappear—by killing her without anyone’s interference.

The protagonists embrace the typical “restoration” narrative to different degrees, but neither text ends in a way that promises complete serenity for the remainder of the characters’ lives. The finale presents Celie and her family “celebrating each other” (Walker, *Purple 287*); but they recognize that doing so does not erase pain and oppression. When asked why family reunions are always on the 4th of July, Harpo responds, “White people busy celebrating they independence from England July 4th,…so most black folks don’t have to work” (Walker, *Purple 287*). Complete emancipation and freedom from traumas and oppressions have not been achieved, and none of the characters suffer from the delusion that they have. Celie closes the novel with a sense of hope: “And us so happy. Matter of fact, I think this the youngest us ever felt” (Walker, *Purple 288*). In this way, readers are reminded that while vast hope exists for the characters, much work is to be done in order to create a world where celebrations like this are more frequent. Berlant argues that Celie is reborn and her trauma is erased after her “ascension to speech” (852); Berlant claims that “she is completely reborn, without bearing witness to the scars left in knowledge and memory” (852). However, Celie’s letters and Melinda’s art project show that both of the protagonists are conscientiously creating archives for present and future witnesses.
Several of my students are bothered by the fact that Albert and Harpo (both characters who abuse their wives and girlfriends) are part of the collective at the end of *The Color Purple*. When introducing Albert to her much beloved sister, Celie introduces him as “my peoples” (*Walker, Purple* 287). Martha Cutter argues that Albert is not regulated to his position as an outsider after he asks for Celie’s forgiveness and forfeits violence: “Once rape has been renounced as an instrument of male domination, once the rapist has been transformed and included in a new social order where he can engage in ‘feminine’ activities and be part of ‘feminine’ language, society can move toward a more equitable relationship between the sexes” (175). Cutter makes a distinction, though, that “the ‘feminine’ […] belongs entirely to neither gender. The ‘feminine’ functions as a language that both men and women can speak, a language that offers the possibility of radical social transformation” (175). While Cutter advocates “the feminine,” I support “witnessing” as an action because it is not associated to or regulated by any gender or sex. In listing the reasons why she no longer hates Albert, Celie says that “when you talk to him now he really listen” (*Walker* 260). Albert, who has learned how to witness, has now become humanized—if not forgiven. Celie’s ability to end the cycle of violence and hatred contrasts Melinda’s final scene with her attacker. Melinda refers to her rapist in terms that are increasingly recognizing his humanity; she begins using the epitaphs “It” and “The Beast” and then changes to “Andy Evans” and finally “Andy Beast.” But the novel ends with Melinda physically retaliating against her attacker; although Celie threatened Albert at one point, she did not hold a broken shard of glass to his throat—and most readers would agree that she certainly would have been justified in doing so.
*Speak* closes as Melinda as she submits her final art project—a drawing of a tree that expresses her experiences of trauma: “It wasn’t my fault. He hurt me. It wasn’t my fault. And I’m not going to let it kill me. I can grow” (Anderson, *Speak* 198). Instead of isolating the tree, as an image or signifier of her trauma, Melinda acknowledges its affect on her. Melinda’s teacher, who has encouraged her to speak all semester, says, “You’ve been through a lot, haven’t you” (Anderson, *Speak* 198). Her words “float up” (Anderson, *Speak* 198), and her act of speaking is overtly visible within the text: “Me: ‘Let me tell you about it’” (Anderson, *Speak* 198). The novel does not conclude with a graphic account of Melinda’s rape. By not ending either *The Color Purple* or *Speak* with a graphic confession of pain, the characters refuse to be integrated into a complete restoration narrative; they lay claim to their own narratives by not indulging in the reader’s fantasy of a complete confession. In fact, a “complete confession” is not possible; for, how could the protagonists even convey (on one final page) what has been written in two hundred? Both Celie’s and Melinda’s confessions, when shared with other characters, are not extravagant. This implicitly challenges the notion that one must confess “all”—or acknowledge all past abuses—before one can be “whole” or “healed.” Rather, both Celie and Melinda keep portions of their experiences to themselves—away from readers and away from the other characters in the novels; Celie and Melinda recognize the futility in trying to divulge everything, even to a witness. Melinda, hushed by the librarian, is forced once again into silence when she is trying to confess to Rachel (who is dating the rapist). Melinda writes on her notebook, eventually confessing: “*I didn’t know what was happening and then he hurt*—I scribble that out—*raped me*” (Anderson, *Speak* 183). The entire interaction lasts no more than a few
paragraphs; so, I find it very difficult to believe that Melinda will confess even more to her male teacher, Mr. Freeman—no matter how “nice” he is.

When I teach *Speak*, I ask my students—if they do not offer the information themselves—if they were aggravated at the fact that Melinda takes ‘so long’ to say that she was raped. Many of at least admit to understanding why someone would be aggravated. I think this is an important discussion to have about the novel—and it is one that the novel itself encourages. The frustration directed at survivors of trauma for remaining silent reveals cultural ideas about trauma and silence. Wondering why someone does not “pull herself up by her own bootstraps” and just leave an abusive situation is a more subtle form of blaming the victim—as if the survivor perpetuated and facilitated her own abuse. What is not recognized, however, are the psychological effects of trauma, which strives (itself) to erase one’s identity—and, a more taboo topic: the ambivalence that survivors often feel toward their abusers. Students do not, though, ask as often why Celie does not leave her abusive situations earlier; and, I cannot help but be bothered by this. It seems that the students see Celie as completely trapped, while they view Melinda as having outlets to obtain help. The faulty logic that since Melinda can at any point reach out to an adult and be heard is frustrating because even her own parents disparage her obvious self-mutilation. But, I think, too, that the decades of abuse that Celie experiences are very difficult for some students to even imagine. And, this difficulty in ‘imagining’ attests to the lack of practice in witnessing, as well as the difficulty of expressing trauma.

Every semester after I have taught *The Color Purple* and *Speak*, my students have reacted positively. Although they are eager to discuss their reactions to the
novels, I cannot help but notice the subtly different reactions that my students have after reading the texts. After reading *The Color Purple*, my students are generally quiet and thoughtful; while after reading *Speak*, several students take me aside after the class and thank me for making them read a book that helped them understand how important it is to listen to everyone’s confessions. Maybe the difference is because *Speak* is generally taught near the end of the semester; but, I suspect that the reason for their different reactions is the construction of race, the representative white captive, and *The Color Purple*. As I discussed in the first chapter, captives have traditionally been represented as white women; but, as Collins is cited earlier, there is a different relationship between African-American women’s body and domestic violence, especially at the hands of African-American men. In *African Americans and the Culture of Pain*, Debra Walker King argues that Americans have become accustomed to envisioning the black body in pain: “representations of the black body as torn and shamefully abused . . . emphasize that body’s use as a metaphorical figure of pain’s timeless memory” (6). Undoubtedly, Celie’s black body is mercilessly assaulted; Berlant argues that Celie’s body “has taken a beating, [and] it also carries the traces of her violently inscribed history” (852)—from her childhood to adulthood. And, maybe these are the reasons why my students (who are mainly middle-class, though from different races) feel like it is easier to talk about Melinda’s experiences than Celie’s; and I early await their responses this semester when I ask them my questions. I am thankful, though, for texts like *The Color Purple* and *Speak* because they not only promote witnessing, but they also encourage discussions about difficult topics—like obstacles to witnessing.
For the tenth anniversary of *Speak*’s publication, Anderson compiled a poem as a sign of appreciation from all of the positive feedback from readers. The first and last stanzas were written by her; but, the remainder of the poem is taken from the letters that she received from fans of the novel. Formatted like a script, much like how Melinda’s silences are presented as blank spaces or sparse words, the poem illustrates the variety of reactions from readers. Some confess that they are survivors of rape, others that they were not raped but are victims of domestic abuse and cut to reduce the inner pain; and, even one writer, a cheerleader, says that she sat with “that girl” at lunch after reading *Speak* (Anderson, “Listen”). The power of the novel cannot be denied; Anderson has created multiple online discussion spaces for this witnessing public that is fostered by the novel. Fans and survivors upload videos, confessing to this witnessing public—and trying to help it expand. After reading *Speak*, my students invariably inform me that the novel helped them understand the pain of those they knew who were raped and those who were bullied for being “different” during their formative years. I am always surprised at how shy they are in sharing with me this important information; and I am always a bit saddened by their countenance as they speak with me. I often wonder if they, somewhat, expect me to ignore them or not witness what they have to say. While I have advocated, here, that forced confessions are antagonistic to witnessing; yet, the impulse to ask for confessions—especially as a teacher or any authority figure—needs to be continually addressed. In the next chapter, I discuss some personal methods and scenarios that I hope will be helpful for instructors who strive to create a witnessing public in the classroom.
While Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* may appear more dissimilar than similar, pairing them elucidates several important points about women’s confessional writing, trauma, and witnessing. These texts continue to portray the domestic sphere as public and potentially violent; and, significantly, they also show that domestic captivity is an experience that applies to individuals other than white, middle-class adult women. The parallels between Hannah Webster Foster’s *The Coquette* and these two texts reveal the ways in which American women’s confessional writing has adapted and revised the epistolary novel. Reading *The Color Purple* and *Speak* together also highlights something that makes *The Coquette* unusual for its genre and time period: the lack of an omnipresent narrator. Walker’s and Anderson’s protagonists convey their internal, and oftentimes private, thoughts directly with the readers; these monologues also reveal that the protagonists do have a solid sense of self—even while they are struggling with their desires to confess or remain silent. These texts also continue *The Coquette’s* quest to re-imagine silence as a choice and legitimate response to trauma, completely separate from the act of being silenced.

Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Laurie Halse Anderson’s *Speak* are pivotal narratives of trauma because they portray the experiences of trauma as everyday—not isolated events; reimagining traumas as a collection of experiences help to debunk the myth that pain can be detached—by “healing” or “forgetting”—memories of specific incidents. The protagonists are happier at the end of the novels than they are in the beginning, but I believe that their confessions to other characters does not signal “rebirth” from victims to agents—because they always were agents. Rather, I believe

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9 In “To Build a Nation: Black Women Writers, Black Nationalism, and the Violent Reduction of Wholeness,” Amanda J. Davis discusses how Walker portrays violence as blurring the boundaries between public and private within the novel *The Third Life of Grange Copeland.*
that the ending of both novels signifies the writers’ resistance to the representations of a “fallen woman”—who, like Eliza, dies at the conclusion. Instead of the other characters gathering around a gravesite to bemoan the loss of the heroine, the protagonist is able to speak, claim her own experiences, and be witnessed. The act of confessing, as both novels show, is often difficult because of feelings of guilt and fear that the listener will not witness—but interrogate—what is confessed. Validating all of the confessor’s affectual responses, which sometimes are complex and contradictory, is vital to the process of witnessing. Often survivors communicate “socially unacceptable” desires or feelings—like love or loyalty—toward their captors, or even guilt about surviving or contributing to an environment that is abusive (to them and/or their children). The impulse to negate or chastise confessors for these confessions must be fought in order to witness the confessor’s trauma.

As *The Color Purple* shows, too, witnessing is an act that encourages additional witnessing. In other words, often the witness will become a confessor at some point; although this is not required, creating a witnessing environment helps a confessor feel comfortable and validated. For instance, Celie confesses her violent past for the first time to Shug after witnessing Sofia’s history of assault. This incidence is important for several reasons, including emphasizing the potential—but not requirement—for a witness to become a confessor at some point. And, when Celie confesses to Shug, it is critical to note that Shug does not immediately confess her traumas or how her mother’s negatively affected her. Rather, Shug takes the opportunity to witness Celie. The important point here, I believe, is that while a witness may feel compelled to confess during someone else’s confession—that witness should completely fulfill her/his duty as
a witness before requiring the confessor to witness. In other words, I think it is important to remember that life is not a television show: confessors do not need to “talk over” each other; there is enough time for everyone to witness others’ confessions, confess, and bear witness to their own confessions. While trauma and socially acceptable ways of expressing pain or grief often attempt to rob someone of their sense of self-worth, witnessing can help survivors recognize their own power and agency; so it is important to recognize the vital need for witnessing—as well as confessing.
CHAPTER 5
AFTERWARD: MANIFESTO FOR COUNTERPUBLIC CLASSROOMS

In this final portion of my dissertation, I want to present several reflections about, and strategies for, creating counterpublic classrooms. The scenarios that follow do not constitute a pedagogy *per se*; and, I think that these approaches could be applied to teaching a multitude of sensitive topics—even if trauma is not mentioned—including sexuality, race, and abuse toward women. My goal is to share schemes that have been helpful in my classroom and continue the conversations surrounding queer and feminist pedagogy. Ann Cvetkovich writes about the complicated process that survivors must undergo in order to reclaim both confession and silence: “the work of breaking the silence about sexual abuse, like that of coming out, has to be understood as an ongoing process and performance, not as a punctual event” (94). So, witnessing should not be considered an easy or natural act; it requires patience, time, and effort. Witnessing, like confession, is a performance—one that requires finesse and even practice.

**Witnessing Scenarios**

**Scenario I: Just say No to Confession-on-Command and Raiding the Closet**

While my project champions the potential personal and communal benefits of confession and witnessing—it does not do so at the expense of encouraging *forced* confessions. To require confessions would be almost analogous to enforcing silence; the demand of confessions is neither validating nor healing for the confessor (which is the goal of witnessing). The significance of secrecy and disclosure is arguably nowhere more prevalent than in the metaphor of the closet, which was discussed in the last chapter as potentially having some positive (though temporary) attributes. In
Epistemology of the Closet, Eve Sedgwick discusses the closet as a culturally acknowledged metaphor for the tension surrounding confessions of homosexuality: “The closet is the defining structure of gay oppression in this country” (71). While I believe that the closet is representative of forced silence, I think that it can (sometimes) render chosen silence visible; my intent is not to necessarily privilege silence over confession, but to distinguish choosing silence and being silenced. But Sedgwick also argues that the closet is also “not a feature only of the lives of gay people” (Epistemology, 68); according to Sedgwick, even though the closet has come to signify “the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically challenged lines of representation” (Epistemology, 71), these politically charged boundaries are still interwoven within the homo/heterosexual matrix. The “crisis of definition” (Epistemology, 72) that “coming out of the closet” can be especially complex because it may or may not challenge private and/or public self-identifications. For that matter, confessions should not be demanded, otherwise confession will be perceived as a disciplinary and policing action toward marginalized persons. Cvetkovich argues that the silence imposed on abuse survivors may be even harsher than the physical abuse: “Indeed, many narratives by survivors of incest and sexual abuse indicate that the trauma resides as much in secrecy as in the sexual abuse—the burden not to tell creates its own network of psychic wounds that far exceed the event itself” (95). Instead of arguing that physical wounds harm more than psychological ones, I would prefer to highlight the interconnectedness of both. Recognizing the role that different types of specific silences (forced and chosen) play in the confessor’s trauma also helps the understanding of how they might affect the healing process.
Being forced “out” can be as traumatic as why the person is “in the closet” to begin with. While I do not believe that confession automatically liberates, I also do not believe that it automatically strips someone of her or his agency. Elaine Scarry posits that coerced confessions are a part of torture, but they are not in themselves always torturous. Scarry argues:

World, self, and voice are lost, or nearly lost, through the intense pain of torture and not through the confession as is wrongly suggested by its connotations of betrayal. The prisoner’s confession merely objectifies the fact of their being almost lost, makes their invisible absence, or nearly absence, visible to the torturers. (35)

Confessions procured through torture can result in one being further propelled into invisibility and, arguably, trauma. Although the texts that I examined did not involve scenes where a torturer required a confession, one can easily imagine one between Celie and her step-father and/or her husband in The Color Purple, or between Mary Rowlandson and her captors. To envision silence as well as forced confessions as particular speech acts that originate within specific contextual moments helps us appreciate the complexities and ramifications surrounding “coming out.” Believing in the ruse that confession can forever erase the pain of trauma and survivor’s guilt helps fuel the incessant desire to prompt—and often force—confessions. In relation to sexuality and sexual abuse, especially, remaining “silent” or “in the closet” is as shameful as “the secret” that is being ‘hidden.’ This misconception is quite dangerous and illogical. So, instead of feeling liberated by leaving “the closet” in the process of personal evolution, many people are thrust out of it “for their own good” (often by seemingly well-intentioned individuals). But, confession-on-command is not healthy, and neither is forcing
someone “out of the closet.” There are distinct differences between being silenced and choosing silence (as a speech act), as discussed in the previous chapter.

The environmental, contextual, and public surroundings of the confession cannot be ignored; the public space of the classroom offers a complex setting for confessions because the teacher is perceived as the interpreter and expert. I consistently remind myself that my students perceive me as an authoritarian figure, so I consciously try to avoid any semblance of forcing them to confess their experiences. Modeling as a witness, I have found, has been the most effective manner for me to encourage them to witness the narrative voices in the texts that we discuss—and the confessions that their peers share.

**Scenario II: When Aliens Call Home, Answer**

Pain destroys language and defies usual documentation, so why do we persist in thinking that it will be revealed in clear, clean scientific discourse? In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler describes the difference between “meaning” and “truths”; she writes:

> Indeed, it may be that finding meanings is very different from finding truths, and that one way to get to meanings is to suspend the kinds of judgments that might block communication. The confession strikes me as an important moment to consider because not only does it constitute, within the psychoanalytic setting, a communication of what one’s desire or deed has been, but the very speaking constitutes another act, one that within the field of the analytic setting confers a certain reality on the deed, if it is a deed in question, and that also implicates the analyst as listener in the scene of desire. (165)

Butler’s encouragement of confessants to defer interpretation as they listen is important because it allows the confessant to witness the full affect of the confession. Also, the likelihood of being an authoritative confessant is diminished. If the goal is to validate the confessor’s agency and to witness pain, one need not worry about interrogating the speaker—or proving her/him “wrong.” Accuracy, or creating a medical chart, is not the
goal—knowledge that Susanna Kaysen explicitly confronts the readers with in *Girl, Interrupted*. In fact, the ineffable—such as supernatural occurrences—are apt in describing trauma. To explain the unexplainable, confessors use cultural explanations and tools that are available. For instance, Mary Rowlandson uses scriptures as a tool to mark her silence and the silencing aspects of trauma; the biblical verses signify her inability to fully articulate her experiences through her narrative voice—but attempt at communication, nonetheless, through a system that was familiar to her readers.

Other historical texts use the supernatural as a method for articulating trauma, as Janice Knight argues. Knight analyzes demonic possession as a rhetoric, within Early American culture, to articulate trauma; Knight argues that Short, whose family was killed in Indian raids and who suffered as a low-class servant, uses the diagnosis of demonic possession as “interpretive conventions and healing practices necessary to solace, and perhaps even to cure” (40). As a young woman, Short’s family’s village was raided and her town massacred; left alone, she became an orphan and eventual servant to a Puritan household. According to Knight, Short (and others) used stories of demonic possession in order to have her pain validated and to “ease her survivor’s guilt” (58) though a performance of suffering. Reading Short’s narrative as personal and dynamic, struggling to articulate trauma, provides a dynamic way to approach texts that some students may assume to be “boring” because they are historical.

While modern narratives of trauma do not often include demonic possession, confessions of alien abductions appear quite often in films and literature as apt ways to explain the ineffable. In fact, Analyzing supernatural allusions in narratives of trauma might help us better understand the tension between repressed and false memories.
*Mysterious Skin*, directed by Gregg Araki, focuses on two boys who were raped by their pedophilic baseball coach: one of the boys (Neil) is tortured by his memories of the abuse and constantly risks his health and safety by having unprotected sex with men for money; the other (Brian) cannot remember the past and believes that his inability to remember stems from being abducted by aliens. Curiously, Melinda (in *Speak*) also considers the possibility of being abducted by aliens: “I just thought of a great theory that explains everything. When I went that party, I was abducted by aliens. They have created a fake Earth and a fake high school to study me and my reactions” (Anderson 42). Kaysen, undoubtedly, could relate to this feeling of being abducted and objectively dissected and scrutinized while in McLean—which existed as a “parallel universe.”

Melinda’s describes those alternate worlds as “fake” instead of “parallel” (as Kaysen does) because she desperately wants to forget her past—and, arguably, her present—and be invisible. Melinda’s attempt to rationalize what happened to her, the lack of justice, and others’ cruel responses leads her to find supernatural explanations for her experiences.

Does that mean that everyone in my class, when we read *Speak*, should believe in the existence of extra-terrestrial life forms? No, of course not—but we must interrogate why the rhetoric is important, why there is resistance to supernatural rhetoric as a means to articulate trauma. Aliens are “elsewhere,” apart from this earth—just like the experiences of trauma; and, abductees are powerless to stop the abduction or “experiments” that are conducted. “Invasion” and “physical probing,” characteristically used to describe these events, even suggests the violation that may be physical and/or mental, visible and/or non-visible; in this way, the metaphor or rhetoric of abduction is
helpful in articulating the experiences of everyday trauma. Aliens steal, too—they steal
time, memories, and even give only false or painful memories. In *Mysterious Skin*,
Brian looks at a cow with someone else who believes that she was abducted by aliens;
his friend remarks:

Feel that? It's the sex organs. They're gone. The aliens, they experiment on
cattle, because the poor things are so defenseless. Us, on the other hand—they
can't kill us. They just leave behind the hidden memories of what they've done.
Which in a way is almost worse. Notice anything else strange? There's no blood.
They took that, too.

Brian's friend theorizes that only because humans are more resilient than cows are they
able to survive alien abductions; otherwise, the aliens would take their abductees' very
life in the violent aftermath. Brian is also the boy who is asexual and almost childlike,
contrasting the other boy's reckless promiscuousness, and parallels the absence of
sexual desire in Jorgensen's narrative. This portrait of aliens as captors and capable of
eliminating sexuality provides an interesting parallel to Jorgensen's narrative. During
the course of her memoir, she resists confessing about her sexual desires—except to
allude to her repulsion of homosexuality. Jorgensen is, of course, trying to produce a
culturally acceptable narrative of identity to her doctors so that she can receive medical
treatment. Some of the medical community still struggle with the idea that transsexuals
are often sexual beings and deserve the same care and medical technology that other
patients receive.¹⁰

¹⁰ For a discussion on the medical community’s resistance to view transsexuals as sexual, see Pat
Califa’s (especially page 58).
Scenario III: What Doesn’t Kill Us Can Kill Us

Some believe that trauma bestows some kind of eternal spring of strength; personally, I would love to help dispel this dangerous myth—and leftover of Puritan ideology of providential affliction. The first time that I taught *Speak*, one of my students remarked: “Well, it’s like that old saying—‘what doesn’t kill you, makes you stronger.’” Of course, this student looked pleased, having shared this old adage. That day, I was perplexed and worried about my students not taking the novel “seriously” since it is considered YA literature; but, I never expected one of them to insinuate that Melinda’s rape “makes her stronger.” I provided my students with a brief synopsis of Elie Wiesel’s *Night* and then asked them, “Would you say, ‘Well, Elie, it didn’t kill you, man—it just made you stronger’?” They were quiet for a while, and so was I. It seems blasphemous to say something like that to someone who survived the Holocaust concentration camps, but what gives us the impression that we can use that trite phrase to anyone who has suffered any trauma? After that class, years ago, I still have this conversation with students and am anxious to hear what they think; for myself, I believe that the phrase is simply a prop—something to say after someone has shared a confession of trauma. Unable to say anything else, our impulse is to “make light” of the situation—and, that, certainly does not constitute witnessing. So, I do not think that “pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps” mentality aids in witnessing; in fact, I think it helps justify oppressions and abuses as simply “not that bad.”

Scenario IV: Pain Is Not Popcorn

Witnessing is a responsibility, not a source of entertainment. In her discussion about the modern memoir, Nancy Miller argues that readers are almost always willing to
be at least empathic toward memoirists: “autobiographers need readers—particularly to share their loss. That invitation is what makes the reader want to take the autobiographer up on the pact” (545). Embracing positionality as a witness includes empathy and sympathy, but not for ultimate reason of taking more from the confessor. A confession may (often) make the witnesses uncomfortable. The emphasis on witnessing places the burden on the listeners; this is a departure from placing the “burden of proof” or skepticism on the confessor. Witnesses have the power to validate or further injure the confessor; even passive listening is considered hurtful—and antagonistic responses to confessions of trauma are in themselves traumatic. In an interview for Ebony Magazine, Alice Walker said, “I think the most chilling thing to me about the response to The Color Purple was that people said, ‘this doesn’t happen . . . . This is all Alice’s problem” (qtd. in C. Whitaker). Walker’s concern is two-fold: some readers or critics deny the validity of marginal (especially African-American) women’s oppression by refusing to acknowledge its existence or regulating it to the personal, individual domain (instead of the more visible public realm). What ultimately matters is validating the confessor and altering the circumstances and beliefs that help to perpetuate trauma. In the film Transamerica, Bree Osbourne (played by the ‘Desperate Housewife’ Felicity Huffman) reunites with a son whom she never knew existed; but, the son does not know that Bree is a male-to-female transsexual. After finding out that Bree is his ‘biological father’, the son accuses Bree of deception. Bree responds, “Just because a person doesn’t go around blabbing her entire biological history to everyone she meets doesn’t make her a liar.” Intentionally making someone feel guilty for not confessing is just as detrimental as forcing someone to confess. Witnesses cannot
erase the pain of trauma, but they need not cause further pain by doubting (and further wounding) the confessor.

While the goal of witnessing is not to entertain, witnessing can be educational. Oprah Winfrey, whose daytime talk shows in the 1980s and 1990s helped fuel the sexual abuse recovery movement, once said: “Entertainment is the last thing I am looking for. . . . My goal is to try to uplift, encourage and enlighten you in some way. I am looking for the moment that makes you say, ‘Ah ha, I didn’t know that’” (qtd. in Moorti). While I do not believe that the fundamental goal of witnessing is to educate the witnesses, witnessing can become a pedagogical event. In order for this to happen, though, witnesses must be ready to interrogate the rhetoric surrounding even the most ostentatious performances. For instance, when Maury Povich asks the age-old question, “Is it a Boy or a Girl?!,” witnesses have the responsibility to question many ideas, including why some audience members have so much glee pointing and laughing while human beings try to perform their genders and identities upon the stage. Thus, witnesses are responsible for the act of witnessing, regardless of the presentation (or, even, the host’s, author’s, or teacher’s agenda).

**The All-In-One Teacher**

Now, I want to shift my focus to discussing the difficulties that I have experienced in trying to be a witness and, sometimes, confessor. Interestingly, I have found that analyzing the relationships between host, audience, and confessor on daytime talk shows to be very helpful in how I think about the classroom as a witnessing public. In her discussion of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*, Sujata Moorti discusses how Oprah “collapses the categories of host, studio audience, and home audience” (87) through
various methods in the late 1980s. For instance, Oprah uses the pronoun “we,” situates herself among her audience members, and creates intimacy among the viewers by blurring the public/private boundary. Likewise, (as a teacher) I try to become embody three positions: witness, confessor, and student. And, I attempt to do this through several methods, including recognizing and validating everyone’s contribution—most often placing that contribution in dialogue with others’ contributions—and creating an atmosphere that seems less hierarchical and more democratic. In a class full of witnesses, I do not expect everyone to sing “Kumbaya” or for my job as facilitating witness to be easy; witnessing is an intense act and certainly not static—for the students or the teacher. Since witnessing is designed to dismantle unequal distribution of power and to validate the agency of confessors, no one is “head of the class.” Or, are they? I admire bell hooks for promoting “a democratic setting where everyone feels a responsibility to contribute” (Teaching 39). Like her, I try to create a setting that appears democratic: I sit in a circle with my students, witness their confessions and share my own, and communicate in a very accessible manner and language. This type of setting encourages shy students to share (in the capacity of witness and/or confessor); but there are also difficulties. For instance, students often disagree on political matters and their opinions collide in my classroom; and when they do, it is my responsibility to help my students interrogate (for their own selves) normalizations—both their possible cultural origins and consequences. But, I believe that a classroom cannot be truly “democratic.” While I am conscious of the performativity of teaching, I am aware that my students sit in “circles” because I (as their teacher) ask them to. I envision the power structure in the classroom to be like the United States government:
students elect to take my class, put their faith in me as a representative of the institution that is called “Education.”

Although I believe that teaching is performative, I am not arguing that it is a spectacle—or making light of the political implications of radical teaching, like creating a witnessing classroom. Teaching resistance and critical consciousness is dangerous, as some departments are very much aware. Joe Marshall Hardin’s *Opening Spaces* discusses teaching political consciousness and empowering students as a teacher’s (especially an English teacher’s) missions. But, this radical positionality, for a teacher, “may be professionally dangerous for composition scholars and teachers” (Hardin 51).

Like hooks and other critics and teachers, Hardin advocates teaching students to resist the uncritical acceptance of cultural representations and institutional practices by interrogating rhetoric to uncover its motives and values; and . . . [to teach students] to produce text that uses rhetoric and convention to give voice to their own values and positions. (7)

Teaching critical consciousness helps students (and teachers) apply what they learn outside of the classroom, in other environments, and with other discourses. *The Color Purple* begins with a quote from Stevie Wonder’s song “Do Like You,” a song about a boy who becomes the person “who could really boogy best” because of his talent and continual desire to learn from other dancers. As any teacher knows, as time goes along, we develop our own pedagogical niche to reflect our agendas and personalities. I cannot honestly say how much my ability to foster a witnessing space is based on talent, luck, practice, and personality traits. In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks shares her experiences and strategy for what she terms “engaged” or “transgressive” pedagogy. She argues that the main difference between this type of pedagogy and “conventional critical or feminist pedagogy” is that “it emphasizes well-being. This
means that teachers must be actively committed to a process of self-actualization that promotes their own well-being if they are to teach in a manner that empowers students” (15). I can attest to the fact that when I am striving to be the most conscientious witness that I can be, my students seem to have an easier time sharing, discussing, and interrogating their own ideas. But being a witness is not always easy, especially as a teacher (even one who tries to destabilize the power structure somewhat); sometimes my students confess beliefs and experiences that make me uncomfortable and seem too orthodox for my own tastes. Resisting that knee-jerk reaction has been one of my own personal difficulties; and, particular subjects, namely religion, are harder than others to brace myself. One of the reasons that teaching is always intellectually stimulating is that learning is a process that never ends.

My closing, but not least, important point about witnessing is the critical need to search for achievable solutions and possible strategies that help prevent the traumas discussed. Amongst confessions in the classroom, discussions of “what’s wrong” sometimes pervade the conversation and I’m reminded by a quote by hooks: “Critique in and of itself does not lead to change” (Feminism 35). Sometimes it is all too easy and convenient to focus on the problems—to the point of obscuring any hope of positivity. Finding alternatives, asking questions beyond where the discussions typically end, and even recognizing the silences among the class are also vital parts of the act of witnessing.
LIST OF REFERENCES


Cortney Michelle Grubbs began her academic career at the University of Montevallo in Alabama in 1998; and she continued her studies at Valencia Community College in Florida. She completed her B.A. in English at the University of Central Florida in 2002. In 2004, she earned her M.F.A. in poetry from the University of Florida; and, in the Spring of 2010, she earned her Ph.D. from the University of Florida. Her employment experience includes working as a Marketing Assistant for Marketing Consultants since 1996. And she is an enthusiastic teacher who has taught a variety of courses, including those in the following areas: (colonial and contemporary) American literature, women’s literature, composition, technical writing, and poetry writing. Grubbs plans to continue to teach on the college-level and pursue her research interests in women’s confessional literature, queer theory, and pedagogy.