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Distributed Feminist Rhetorical Agency after a Rape Accusation

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This article examines the rhetorical effects of a rape accusation on the survivor and on the survivor's community of social justice activists. Relying on interviews with the survivor and with the community affected by the allegation, the article analyzes responses to the allegation, articulates how those responses are informed by rape culture, and illustrates how those responses affected the survivor and her rhetorical agency. The article argues that rhetorical agency can be productively distributed across various allies to assist survivors and help restore the rhetorical agency that rape erodes. Establishing sexual assault as a public health issue, the article recommends broad education in rhetorical listening to improve how those entrusted to hear assault stories listen, respond, and, when appropriate, help survivors speak or act.

KEYWORDS: Sexual assault, rhetorical silencing, ethnic studies, rape culture, rhetorical listening

On March 24th, 2011, the documentary film *Precious Knowledge* debuted at the Fox Theatre in Tucson, Arizona. The movie profiled various students and teachers in the Mexican American Studies program then taught in various K-12 public schools there. Mexican American Studies, or MAS, was then at the center of a political and cultural storm in Arizona—local and state politicians, as well as some community members—were calling for it to be shuttered on charges of its being anti-American and anti-white, while

supporters of the program argued that those seeking its end were on a baseless, racist attack focused on denying and eradicating difference. The documentary was to provide easily shareable and lasting evidence of the good work the MAS program was doing, and its screening that March night was attended by hundreds in the community—it was "like a Chican@ prom," according to Desirae[1], one of the young women originally featured in the film (Desirae, personal communication, 17 February 2014).

That night was also the occasion of Desirae's alleged[2] rape by the film's director.

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A bit of background to help readers follow the complicated rhetorical and chronological pathways this article crosses: the documentary *Precious Knowledge* provides the story of and final video and audio records of a handful of classes in the ethnic studies program, MAS, prior to its being shut down in January 2012. A swirl of press around this issue referred to it as a book ban and censorship in the national media, and for five years the program was banned. In 2017, U.S. District Court Judge A. Wallace Tashima found the original state law, ARS 15-112, unconstitutional; his ruling overturned previous rulings in its favor (Smith, 2017; "Court Ruling" 2017). Tashima ruled ARS 15-112 to have been targeted, racist, and discriminatory (Smith, 2017; "Court Ruling" 2017).[3] Those fighting for MAS won this very long fight, but only after significant and varied professional and personal losses and life-altering challenges. Desirae's alleged rape and the fallout from that rape accusation were among these many losses and life-altering challenges.

Desirae's alleged rape occurred within the context of a local movement that gained national attention, although the alleged rape itself did not. As I will describe below, her experience was downplayed, ignored, or denied by various people in her community, even as others supported her and her story. Desirae's rape accusation led to all footage about her presence within the MAS movement as both student and activist being excised from the documentary *Previous Knowledge* before its public release. Desirae's accusation of rape led not only to her being silenced as a victim—to her rhetorical

[1] "Desirae" is a pseudonym.

[2] I use the qualifier "alleged" throughout this piece on the recommendation of colleagues concerned I could otherwise be sued for libel. I want to be clear, however, that I believe Desirae was raped.

[3] While the program is now legally allowed to be taught again, and work is underway to return it to schools (or more accurately, to adapt the curriculum that had replaced it to include more MAS content), it has not regained its previous status.

agency being distributed to the point of being actively taken over by others for a time—but also to her being silenced and rendered invisible as an activist and community member, at least in the film that for many serves as the best (or to some, only) visual and aural documentation of the MAS program prior to 2012.[4] Important to note, too, is that Desirae's dual racial identifications—as Black and as Indigenous, are laminated onto her gender and inseparable from the barriers to rhetorical agency she faced.

Desirae's accusation of rape leads in various material and rhetorical directions, but the threads I most want to pull on are those of rhetorical agency and the rape culture that contributed to her own and others' reactions to the rape. Rhetoricians have provided numerous nuanced articulations of the meaning and significance of agency, arguing that it is contingent upon and connected to materiality and power (Herndl & Licona, 2007); that it is enacted and emerges from embodied processes (Cooper, 2011); and that it is a performance that relies not solely upon the rhetor, but also the capacity of the audience and the interaction between rhetor and audience (Miller, 2007). Karlyn Kohrs Campbell (2005) defines rhetorical agency as "the capacity to act, that is, to have the competence to speak or write in a way that will be recognized or heeded by others in one's community" (p. 3). Carl Herndl and Adela Licona (2007) define agency as "self-conscious action that effects change in the social world" (p. 138). Similarly, Cheryl Glenn (2018) defines rhetorical agency as "the power to take efficacious action" (p. 4). As I argue elsewhere (Hensley Owens, 2015) I see rhetorical agency as somewhat more about possibility than about success, more about an opportunity for change than a successfully enacted change. For me, and for this article, rhetorical agency is the capacity or competence to speak or write in a way that *has the potential* to be recognized or heeded by others in one's community. Feminist rhetorical agency emerges when an agent recognizes the role of gender within a community's networks of power (see Koerber, 2001). When feminist rhetorical agency surfaces across various agents acting or speaking on behalf of another, that agency is distributed, which I argue has potentially ameliorative effects for an assault victim like Desirae, although additional negative outcomes are also possible, as this article will demonstrate.

[4] The research of human subjects undertaken for this article was collected with informed consent and in accordance with the standards and guidelines of both my current and former institutions' IRBs.

This article argues that rape is a public health issue in need of attention from public health scholars. As I detail below, rape victims rarely report and when they do, they are often not believed; as a result, too often rhetorical agency never emerges for victims. Public health scholars and rhetoricians of health and medicine can and must attend to the ways belief and doubt circulate discursively in communities in order to illustrate how layers of meaning-making compound any individual's story and how prior and future accusations are imbricated with and affect belief in any one story. Such work can lead to better understandings of and potentially enhance how rhetorical agency is distributed or emerges for future survivors.

In what follows, I first describe my methodology and research ethics and then provide the rhetorical context for this inquiry and for viewing rape as a public health issue. From there, I review the broader context of sexual assault and the way rape culture preemptively inhibits a female victim's rhetorical agency. I then discuss feminist rhetorical agency in the context of the MAS program, one where specific kinds of knowledge were privileged and where two of my 14 interviewees identified a "toxic masculinity" they felt further contributed to Desirae's silencing. Finally, I analyze the ways Desirae's rhetorical agency was distributed both across time and other agents. Desirae's story deserves to be told—not only as a story of a sexual assault and recovery, which Desirae can and is telling herself, but as an example of the power of distributed rhetorical agency and the need for training in rhetorical listening (Ratcliffe, 2005; Britt, 2018) in the context of rhetorics of health and medicine.

Methodology and Research Ethics

I obtained IRB approval from my institution and traveled from Rhode Island to Tucson, Arizona in 2014 to interview former Mexican American Studies teachers and students for a project analyzing responses to the December 2011 outlawing of the MAS program in the K-12 Tucson Unified School District (TUSD).[5] I identified several potential interviewees in advance, such as former MAS teachers with public involvement and contact information available on school websites. From there I used the snowball method to identify additional former MAS teachers and students to

[5] See Kim Hensley Owens, 2018.

interview. The semi-structured interviews[6] ranged from 45 minutes to two hours and took place in a variety of coffee shops. The interviews all included questions about *Precious Knowledge,* a documentary of the MAS program I'd watched as part of my research. Those questions, along with local Tucson news coverage about MAS (Herreras, 2013) and *malintZINE*[7] posts led me to also ask questions about an accusation that the director[8] of the documentary raped a former MAS student the night of the film's local public debut. The accusation and its connection to the film's use became a flashpoint among those in the MAS community just before and continuing after an Arizona judge ruled that MAS classes violated a state law, ARS 15-112 (Kowal, 2011).

Although I was attempting to interview as many people as I could during my weeklong research trip, my interview with Desirae was essentially a surprise. Several interviewees had suggested I interview her, but none had current contact information for her. Late in my research week, I set up an interview with a former MAS student (from a time before the program went by that name) who was one of the founders of *malintZINE*. A few questions into that interview, that interviewee asked if she could bring someone else in who had also been a MAS student: that person turned out to be Desirae. The other contact seemed protective, allowing access to Desirae only after vetting me herself. She remained as chaperone for the majority of the interview. At the end of our interview Desirae wondered aloud what I would write about her story and how that would manifest as an academic piece.

While my initial research focus was the MAS program and the fallout from its being shut down, my interview with Desirae was so powerful and so starkly different from the other interviews in its focus on her rape that it became impossible to ignore as its own topic. For this article, I obtained separate IRB approval from my current institution for a retrospective study (the IRB's language for a research project that draws on research gathered for a different project), using the interviews conducted in 2014. The IRB

[6] See Appendix for the semi-structured interview questions I asked participants.
[7] *malintZINE* is an anonymous, multi-authored, bilingual blog about the MAS community I describe in more detail near the end of this article.
[8] The man is credited on the film as director, but described by various interviewees as producer—I have left interviewee's terms intact in quotes, but use the terminology from the film credits for my own descriptions.

did not require additional consent for this retroactive study from most participants, but the IRB did require that I use those interviews anonymously. As Gesa E. Kirsch (2005) has explained, "participants can easily reveal intimate details about their lives that they may later regret having shared" (p. 2164). Further, "[p]articipants may forget—or repress—the knowledge that what they are sharing is being recorded and will later be analyzed and published in some form or another" (p. 2164). In keeping with IRB requirements of anonymity, and to keep the focus on a problematic culture rather than on individuals, I eschew even pseudonyms in this article for all participants except Desirae.

The second IRB required additional separate consent from Desirae and required that I not use her real name despite her public openness—in our interview Desirae said she was "getting her [real] name out there" about the alleged assault, and she has given multiple media interviews. Desirae is no "passive victim" (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 261). She selected the name Desirae as her pseudonym for this analysis. I had previously been in touch with Desirae about the possibility of coauthoring this piece, and while she did not want that degree of involvement, she did provide separate specific informed consent for this piece. She also read multiple drafts of this article, and through our correspondence about consent and drafts over email she volunteered additional materials and information. Desirae wrote that she "appreciates the direction" of the piece and "like[s] how the material was handled" (Desirae, personal communication, 9 July 2019).

Although this article is not about my own experience, it seems important to briefly acknowledge my standpoint and influences that relate to the topics in this article. A native Tucsonan who became effectively fluent in Spanish through my K-12 education in TUSD schools, I double-majored in English and Spanish education at the University of Arizona. When I student-taught at Tucson High in fall 1996, the idea(l)s that developed into Mexican American Studies were already in circulation; the program that later came to be known as MAS officially began (in its iteration at the Tucson High site) in 1997. These idea(l)s continue to inform my teaching and scholarly commitments. While I do not claim to write about MAS as an insider, neither do I write as a complete outsider. Similarly, as a woman who in my 20s experienced an incapacitated rape—which I never reported—I write about sexual assault and the ramifications of choosing whether or how to report one with a measure of personal experience. I believe these experiential

connections make my stance compassionate but do not compromise the scholarly integrity of this inquiry. While neither the MAS program nor any of its teachers had anything to do with Desirae's alleged rape, the accusation of sexual violence reverberated through the community, affecting perceptions of MAS and of various people within MAS. In this article, I rely on my interviews with former MAS teachers and students, including Desirae, to examine the effects of the rape accusation on her rhetorical agency as a woman and as a member of a politico-educational movement. I tease out the ways Desirae's reactions and responses to that alleged rape exemplify expanded notions of distributed feminist rhetorical agency and how that knowledge can help RHM scholars and other health and medicine stakeholders approach sexual assault from a public health perspective. To be beneficial, distributed feminist rhetorical agency depends upon rhetorical listening and points to the possibility and necessity of working to prevent and respond to sexual assault from a rhetorically informed public health perspective.

For the original study, I listened to the interviews cited here multiple times and transcribed them myself, piecing meaning from the blends of coffee shop sounds and mostly English, but also Spanish and ancient Mayan words in the recordings. For this retrospective study, I first re-listened to the interview recordings and re-read the transcripts. I then selected all transcript text that touched upon the film, the assault allegations, and Desirae, and pasted those into a single document, which I repeatedly read. At each reading, I noted and marked common themes. Four themes emerged, which coalesced around interviewees': 1) individual responses to Desirae's accusation, 2) understandings of the MAS community's responses to the accusation; 3) beliefs about the meaning of showing *Precious Knowledge*, and 4) beliefs about whether a rape occurred.

I must be clear that there has been no police report, no legal finding of rape. It is the accusation of rape—Desirae's attempts to describe and name that act and persuade others to accept its truth—and the effects of that accusation that comprise the primary exigence for this article. Because my scholarly interest is in tracing first the thwarting and later the amplification of Desirae's rhetorical agency after the rape accusation, rather than proving a rape occurred or getting the full story of the alleged rape itself as a legal investigator or journalist might, I have not pursued an interview with the alleged rapist or any other representatives of "the other side" of Desirae's story.

A RHETORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON RAPE CULTURE AND RAPE AS A PUBLIC HEALTH ISSUE

Rhetorics of rape and survivor discourses have been explored by various scholars in rhetoric and composition and adjacent fields. Scholars have articulated, for example, how "survivor speech . . . is transgressive" (Alcoff & Gray, 1993, p. 262); how survivor narratives shape public consciousness (Hesford, 1999); how personal writing and memory work can help heal trauma related to sexual assault (Gray-Rosendale, 2013); and how "victimization and agency are falsely dichotomized" (Propen & Schuster, 2017, p. 134). Most recently, rhetorician Stephanie Larson (2018) has explicated a concept of what she calls "visceral counterpublicity" by prominent rape victims Emily Doe and Emma Sulcowicz. Doe's victim impact statement about her assault by Stanford student Brock Turner went viral, and Sulcowicz garnered national attention by carrying her dorm mattress all around campus to protest Columbia University's refusal to recognize her rape by a classmate (p. 123). In Larson's analysis, the two women "use[d] their bodies to argue what happened to them was indeed rape" (p. 123) and together illustrate an expanded "available means for speaking against sexually violent conditions" (p. 124). These particular available means, amplified by the viral possibilities of specific kairotic moments, were not available to Desirae in her responses to her own rape, but her experience and responses nevertheless map with and help to extend Larson's theories. While Larson's analysis illustrates how rhetorical agency can emerge and be enacted in public ways to garner extended public support, the rhetorical choices of various agents—including but not limited to Desirae herself—after Desirae's alleged rape illustrate how feminist rhetorical agency can be both hindered and enhanced by being distributed across various individuals.

This piece explores the emergence of a feminist rhetorical agency through analyzing the language and actions surrounding Desirae's accusation as related to the context of rape culture; I examine how community member's responses to Desirae's story were, to some degree, shaped by the cultural scripts of a pervasive rape culture. Rape culture is "a complex of beliefs that encourage male sexual aggression" (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi), a culture in which "women are blamed for being raped, sexist attitudes prevail, and male sexual privilege goes unquestioned" (Bevacqua, 2000, p. 9). Many of the responses to Desirae's accusation align with these understandings. definitions. As Leigh Gilmore (2017) explains in *Tainted*

Witness, rape culture "designates a pervasive cultural formation that includes the real threats of sexual violence women face alongside the construction of women's sexuality as something that men can control and, specifically, women cannot" (p. 134). Both Desirae's experience and the MAS community's varying responses to her experience are inextricably intertwined with and informed by rape culture.

Desirae's accusation was heard and interpreted not only within the context of rape culture, but also in relation to the precepts taught in the MAS program, interpreted in contradictory ways that affected Desirae's rhetorical agency. At first, that rhetorical agency was distributed to other actors in damaging ways, but ultimately, rhetorical agency was distributed across other actors with healing outcomes. The rhetorical lesson of Desirae's story is, overall, one of rhetorical resilience and renaissance; this story illustrates the ways feminist rhetorical agency can emerge in particular historical or material contexts and how it sometimes relies not on a single agent, but can be distributed across other actors.

Rape is an act of sexual violence and rhetorical silencing. As rights advocate Lynn Hecht Schafran (1996) elucidates in the *American Journal of Public Health,* while the majority of rapes leave no physical evidence of that violence, the "hidden violence" (p. 16) of rape and sexual assault and "the profound consequences of these crimes make them a major public health issue" (p. 15). Those consequences can include symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder and often involve self-blame and self-medication. They may also involve a protracted emotional and rhetorical reckoning, as victims do not always immediately recognize that what they experienced was an assault, or as, if/when they do, the people they tell may not believe them. As a recent example, Dr. Christine Blasey Ford's experience with reporting Judge Brett Kavanaugh for assault resulted not only in her being disbelieved by large swaths of the U.S. population, but actively discredited in countless articles, memes, and news stories. The quantity of death threats Blasey Ford received after coming forward was such that even after Kavanaugh was confirmed to the U.S. Supreme Court, she could not safely return to her home (Palmer, 2018). Linda Alcoff and Laura Gray (1993) invoked Michel Foucault's claim that for assault survivors, a group to which both authors belong, "bringing things into the realm of discourse . . . is not always a progressive or liberatory strategy; indeed, it can contribute to our own subordination" (p. 260). The repercussions of a survivor engaging an "agentive space" (Herndl & Licona, 2007, p. 143) by reporting an assault are often higher than those

of staying silent. As Gilmore (2017) put it: "storytelling can backfire" (p. 137). Victims can be disbelieved, shamed, threatened, and more—as Desirae knows well, and as Blasey Ford's experience readily illustrates.

Beyond the external effects of reporting are more internal, emotional ones. As psychologist Courtney E. Ahrens (2006) elaborated: "Speaking out about the assault may [. . .] have detrimental consequences for rape survivors as they are subjected to further trauma" (p. 264). Silence, then, is often the most self-preserving rhetorical option for survivors of sexual assault. Silence is common and can achieve both protective and rhetorical effects. Further, as Cheryl Glenn (2004) showed, silence cannot be equated with passivity or with a lack of rhetorical skill. While silence can be productively employed in service of various rhetorical purposes and is a valid choice for many victims in the context of sexual assault, speaking out nevertheless has potential to spark types of action silence does not.

J. Blake Scott, Judy Z. Segal, and Lisa Keränen (2013) maintained that "rhetoricians of health and medicine should continue to carve out an expansive focus on the exigencies, functions, and impacts of health-related discourse; attend to the movement, surrounding networks, and ecologies of this discourse; and work with other scholars/researchers, both inside and outside disciplinary rhetorical studies, toward a variety of goals." Responding in part to their call, this article examines the ecology of the aftermath of one assault—one instance of the broad public health threat such assaults in the aggregate represent—in order to explicate how rhetorical agency can be both thwarted and buttressed by being distributed across a variety of actors beyond a single agent. Rhetorical agency is at the heart of studies of RHM because of its focus on questions about whose voices are raised and whether and how those voices are listened to—not only in the moments of a medical or health event, but throughout the aftereffects of a medical or health event as well.

Rape is a health event that is both personal and political; it affects the individual and is connected to broader imbalances of power. It is also, by virtue of its connections to both mental and physical health—specifically, to pathologies of fear and shame as well as to physical pain and potential pregnancy and/or disease—undeniably a public health issue. Women[9] who

[9] The focus of this piece is a woman who was allegedly raped, and the majority of rapes are perpetrated against women, but it is important to also acknowledge that men and people with nonbinary gender identities can also be rape victims.

have been raped are forever affected by it. But women who have not been raped are not unaffected; rape is an omnipresent fear for many women, and can inform their uses of space, their interactions with others, the way they use their bodies, the way they dress. A former staff member at a rape crisis center wrote that as a man, he struggled to understand the "impact of the threat of rape on women's lives" (Orton, 2005, p. 244). He eventually came to understand that while "[e]xperiencing sexual violence is a debilitating experience . . . *so is living with the threat of it over a lifetime*" [emphasis added] (Orton, 2005, p. 244). I argue that because sexual assault's effects reach not only those directly affected (victims, survivors, perpetrators, and those with professional or personal connections to the victims, survivors, and perpetrators) but also those perpetually positioned or acting as potential victims, rape must be considered a public health crisis. Rhetoricians of health and medicine are well situated to provide other rhetoricians and medical and health stakeholders with information and suggestions about how to use rhetorical knowledge to better address sexual assault as a public health issue.

Some readers may see rape as more of a legal issue than a public health issue, and some may not understand Desirae's choice not to report the crime or pursue vindication of her story through the court system.[10] However, her choice is not uncommon. As the #metoo and #whyIdidntreport movements have brought into the national conversation, the vast majority of rapes are not reported to the police (Yung, 2013, pp. 1206–7). Based on data collected from police departments for the year 2007, for example, the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) includes three rape cases per 10,000 women (Kilpatrick and McCauley, 2009, p. 4). For the same year, the Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey (NCVS)—which collects information anonymously and is therefore considered a more accurate portrayal of crime than the UCR—uncovers six times as many: 18 rape cases per 10,000 women (Kilpatrick and McCauley, 2009, p. 10). In other words, the data suggest that for every six women who experience rape, one report makes its way into police files. Further, as I'll elaborate below, evidence indicates that even reported rapes don't always make it into police files (Yung, 2015, Krakauer, 2015).

Desirae offered an explanation for not reporting that is inextricable from her role as a member of the MAS community. She "was being investigated

[10] As the daughter of a police officer, I readily recognize this stance, but it misses larger issues that reveal the logic of not reporting.

by TPD [Tucson Police Department] at the time for that takeover [she and others had taken over a schoolboard meeting to protest a planned vote to remove MAS classes as an option to fulfill core graduation requirements[11]]" (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 19, 2014). Her first reason for not reporting, then, was that she was in legal trouble for actions related to MAS. She went on to explain that even if she had reported, she knew:

> it probably wouldn't even get to court, you know, like the way that rape is handled in this country. It is absolutely Neanderthal. It is the one crime where it is the victim rather than the perpetrator [who] is put on trial. I'd be ripped alive, there'd be no justice for me. . . . My race, my gender, my sexuality, and my politics would be used against me. There'd be no hope for me in a court of law. (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014)

Desirae called into question whether she—a woman who identifies as Indigenous, Black, and queer, and whose political protests had been both vocal and physical—could find fair treatment in the justice system. She said, "Just looking at the statistics, like out of every one hundred perpetrators only three are charged. It just was not the way to go" (Desirae, 2014).

Desirae's statistical beliefs resonate with the findings of various scholars and writers. In his groundbreaking and deeply researched *Missoula,* Jon Krakauer (2015) put it succinctly: "When an individual is raped in this country, more than 90 percent of the time the rapist gets away with the crime" (p. 110). Beyond the general unlikelihood of a report bearing fruit, Desirae's positionality and intersecting identities legitimately further decreased that likelihood. As Gilmore (2017) argued, "race, gender, and sexuality align with citizenship to produce sinking doubt and to permit legitimate violence against persons whose identities can be freighted" (p. 6). Similarly, Sara McKinnon (2016) described the "discursive fixing" of gender and sexuality by judges who seem unable to read gender or sexuality beyond problematic binaries and equally unwilling or unable to read them together as identifications whose effects might intersect and amplify one another (p. 84). If the compelling arguments made by Gilmore (2017) and McKinnon (2016) based on their specific research contexts map to the context of

[11] For a brief description of the takeover, see Alexis Huicochea (2011).

judicial sexual assault proceedings, Desirae's intersecting multiracial and nonbinary sexuality identifications would be illegible in that legal context. In addition to recognizing that her various intersecting identities would negatively affect the reception of any official report she might make, Desirae didn't report for another, more stark reason. She explained, "I was in shock; I couldn't advocate for myself" (personal communication).

Desirae recognized the difficulty or impossibility of occupying an agentive space within the judicial system. Desirae's awareness of her precarious legal position as an accuser matches Cory Raeburn Yung's descriptions of various strategies police departments use to dissuade rape victims from pursuing criminal cases, from discouraging victims to shaming victims. Yung argued that the country is experiencing "a crisis of sexual violence that has gone undetected because police departments across the country systematically underreport rape" (p. 1204). Without accurate crime data, citizens are left with a skewed impression of the incidences of rapes in our society, which in turn makes reports and accusations of rape seem less believable than if conventional wisdom and accurate data were better aligned.

The lack of accurate information about what rape is, how often it happens, and who perpetrates it contributes to a culture in which it is difficult for both victims and those who hear victims' stories to properly identify what happened to them as "rape," which further limits their agency, rhetorical and otherwise. As Larson (2018) explained, "everyday public understandings of rape inherit legal frameworks and, as a result, limit the range of experiences with rape that are considered knowable" (p. 126). Victims themselves, also subject to everyday understandings, often may not be sure that what they've experienced was a rape and may not use that word. While Desirae did not report to the police and did not initially use the word "rape," she did tell people in her community what had happened to her. Viewing rape through a public health framework rather than through a legal framework may help the public and victims alike to identify rapes as such more quickly and act accordingly.

Agency distributed through talking circles

After her alleged rape, Desirae shared what had happened with her closest friends and in her community's Indigenous talking circles—circles also attended by some of her former MAS teachers who also identify as Indigenous. Desirae expected agency, understood in the sense of "the possibilities

for a subject to enter into a discourse and effect change," to emerge from her engagement with the talking circle (Herndl & Licona, 2017, p. 135). Talking circles, also known as healing circles,

> are deeply rooted in the traditional practices of Indigenous people. In North America, they are widely used among the First Nations people of Canada and among the many tribes of Native Americans in the US. Healing circles take a variety of forms, but most basically, members sit in a circle to consider a problem or a question. The circle starts with a prayer, usually by the person convening the circle, or by an elder, when an elder is involved. A talking stick is held by the person who speaks (other sacred objects may also be used, including eagle feathers and fans). When that person is finished speaking, the talking stick is passed to the left (clockwise around the circle). Only the person holding the stick may speak. All others remain quiet. The circle is complete when the stick passes around the circle one complete time without anyone speaking out of turn. The [belief is that the] talking circle prevents reactive communication and directly responsive communication, and it fosters deeper listening and reflection in conversation. (Mehl–Madrona & Mainguy, 2014, p. 4)

Initially, Desirae chose to reveal what had occurred with those who shared her cultural identifications in a space she felt was safe. After the initial circle in which she told her story, Desirae was in a car accident, suffered a mental breakdown, and temporarily left Tucson. In her physical absence, outsiders were invited to subsequent talking circles to discuss the problem. Desirae was neither physically, emotionally, nor intellectually available to act on her own behalf at this point, suffering as she was from the fallout of all that had happened to her. During this time, others met in her absence, ostensibly acting as agents on her behalf.

Desirae's understanding of what happened in those circles was that there were "all these agreements, like three of my teachers were involved . . . and the filmmakers were told they're not allowed to be in Tucson anymore, and they [the teachers] said they're done with the movie . . ." (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). At this point, rhetorical agency was distributed, emerging for those within the talking circles rather than for Desirae. When I asked one of the teachers who was involved in the talking circles what had

occurred, the teacher told me the group that met in the circles "dealt with it [the accusation]":

> What happened that day was ugly. It was ugly. We dealt with it as a community, and, ah, there are people saying that it wasn't dealt with and that we're trying to hide from it, but we dealt with it, and Desirae, because she wasn't there the second meeting, she doesn't know. One of the young ladies that was there . . . was supposed to talk to her, but I don't know if that discussion ever took place. But we've dealt with it. You can ask anyone in Tucson. (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 11, 2014)

This teacher believed that the circle acted on Desirae's behalf. This understanding suggests a belief that the rhetorical agency of the circle was an appropriate extension or distribution of Desirae's rhetorical agency, even though this teacher doesn't know whether the decisions the circle made were even relayed to her by "one of the young ladies." (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). The understanding this teacher related was that the teachers and producer, but not the director, could show the film, and that it was important for the teachers to do so: "Of course I support the film. I support the narrative." (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). This view and Desirae's view of what was agreed upon vis-à-vis the showing of *Precious Knowledge* diverge sharply.

Desirae's interpretation of what was agreed upon within the talking circles was that because of what had happened to her, the movie would never be shown by anyone within the Tucson community. She felt that the rhetorical silencing of the movie itself would be a just outcome—for her, that silence would achieve a rhetorical purpose and demonstrate support for her. She believed that showing the movie would mean both enriching and celebrating the perpetrator of the crime against her. She explained, "the teachers agreed [that the movie would not be shown, particularly not by those within the MAS community]" (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). That understanding, however, was not shared by all. Desirae explained that "all of a sudden . . . the film just starts showing up again but I'm cut out. I'm edited out of the movie . . . so it goes to [various Latino International film festivals etc . . .] and my teachers are just participating in panels" (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). The absolute disavowal of the film that she'd thought everyone agreed to at the first circle hadn't come to fruition.

The preliminary "solution" Desirae initially believed in transformed into what she perceived as betrayal when the film continued to be shown, often by her own former MAS teachers, who were traveling the country for a trio of purposes: 1) to tell the story of MAS; 2) to drum up support for the legal defense fund; and 3) to spread the curriculum to other districts and states. Those I interviewed who continued to show the film mentioned that Desirae's own scenes and references to her story had been excised, but to Desirae, her erasure from the film—the rhetorical silencing of her role within MAS—does not make its use any less problematic: "I was originally in the movie. I was in one of the movie posters, but then it was like, 'Let's just cut her out of the movie, and just continue on with it. And that's why there's kind of like a rift between not only me and my teachers, but [within] the entire [MAS] community . . . That's when, like, the entire base of MAS really deteriorated" (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014.)

The responses to Desirae's accusation of rape were always inextricably tied up with efforts to save MAS, to hold on to the last auditory and visual evidence of the success and magic of the courses. Those who showed the film felt they had to in order to be true to the MAS movement. One (2014) explained that it's important to show the film "because it's what happened in our class. And it's the only thing. A book? We can write books. Not everyone writes a book, reads a book. But they'll watch a documentary" (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). Several of those I interviewed seemed to excuse the film's connection to Desirae's experience in part by reminding me that Desirae's own scenes and references to her story had been excised from the film. To some, her erasure from the film seemed to solve the problem, but for Desirae, her erasure from the film exacerbated her challenges in making her accusation heard and proved an additional obstacle to rhetorical agency. Although Desirae and other Indigenous community members I interviewed believed the talking circle in general to be a healing space, a physical and rhetorical space in which to solve problems, the circle in this instance proved more haunting than healing for Desirae.

Feminist rhetorical agency vs. teachers of precious knowledge

One teacher's response to the story Desirae told in the first talking circle speaks to the ways rhetorical agency was at first distributed to people Desirae

trusted in ways that thwarted it. This teacher (2014) told me, "Well, I love Desirae, I was involved from the very beginning, the very beginning, when that happened. It wasn't rape. And she wanted to keep it very quiet" (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). This teacher's understanding of what happened starts and stops with what Desirae was able to convey immediately after it occurred in 2011. This teacher may not be aware that eight out of ten rapes are perpetrated by people the victim knows (National n.d.). This teacher may not be aware that "sexual assault remains the most widely underreported" violent crime and that "victims typically do not seek help after coercive sexual encounters" (Carretta et al., 2013, p. 1501). This teacher may not be aware that the fact that Desirae (2014) didn't immediately define the incident as a rape does not mean it wasn't a rape. Desirae explains that she "didn't even start to use the word rape [until she went to therapy]" (Personal Interview, Feb. 17, 2014). However, she always "knew [she] told him no." Through therapy and the naming of the act, rhetorical agency was again distributed, but this time in a productive way for Desirae.

At that time, the kind of rhetorical agency that emerged through the visceral counterpublicity acts of Emily Doe and Emma Sulcowicz—the kind of agency that could help shift public opinion from an assumption of doubt to a presumption of pain (Larson, 2018)—did not emerge for Desirae. Had she been emotionally or physically ready to enact a visceral counterpublicity then, as Doe and Sulcowicz did, she may have been able to "encourage audiences [her former teachers] to sense sites of harm and trespass" and thereby "assert a level of certainty that rape occurred" (Larson, 2018, p. 128). Had the alleged 2011 assault instead occurred after the #metoo movement, perhaps the solidarity of that kairotic moment could have allowed what Gilmore (2017) calls "affiliative acts of witness" to catalyze a "shift in the cultural dynamics of doubt" (p. xii); but instead doubt prevailed.

While one might argue that a rape victim should not have to use any tactics beyond telling the truth to convince anyone that her assault experience and pain were real, the reality is that many audiences automatically doubt a rape story. While many empathetic listeners automatically believe stories of assault and pain, for others, as Larson (2018)—invoking Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*—writes: "'hearing about pain' may lead some to feel doubt or suspicion" about the truth of that pain (p. 128). Many of the people Desirae first told believed they were supportive of her, yet they did not believe she was raped; they heard her pain but doubted her story. In *Rape*

on the Public Agenda, Maria Bevacqua (2000) explains that such responses were common before the "anti-rape movement" of the late 20th and early 21st century, explaining that "sexist and racist attitudes created an environment in which rape's seriousness was routinely dismissed" and "victims were disbelieved or blamed for bringing their own assaults" (p. 9). It is difficult to see a difference between what Bevacqua describes as typical responses to rape prior to the anti-rape movement and many of the responses to Desirae's some two decades later.

The contrast between one teacher's self-assured "it wasn't rape" comment with Desirae's declarative statement: "I was raped March 24th, 2011" is stark. This teacher did not accept Desirae's description of the events of that evening. This teacher understood Desirae to have been a willing participant in a drunken, adulterous act rather than a victim of a sexual assault. Recall that victim-blaming is elemental to the definition of rape culture. Yet even this teacher felt the incident "violated our trust as a community." Notably, the teacher (2014) did not describe Desirae as a victim, but did describe one woman as such: the wife of the accused rapist—"*She* was a victim" (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014, original [oral] emphasis). This teacher believed the wife of the alleged rapist, who produced the film her husband directed, should be allowed to show the film, while the director should not.

Although my focus in this piece is on the emergence of a specifically feminist rhetorical agency for Desirae after her alleged rape, it is important to note that the varying impressions about permissions for this film—who may show it (not the director, but yes the producer; not the teachers, yes the teachers) what it may show (not Desirae, not most female MAS teachers, yes charismatic male teachers); where it may be shown (nowhere, not in Tucson, yes in Tucson, anywhere); why it may be shown (to help save MAS, to hurt Desirae, to "support a rape," to promote ethnic studies elsewhere)—are indicative of the willingness or resistance of various members of the MAS community to "attribute a particular form of agency" to Desirae and/or to the MAS movement (Miller, 2007, p. 151)—a willingness or resistance enmeshed with rape culture. Individuals within that community had differing aims and beliefs and "agentive capacities" surrounding the use of the film (p. 140).

One former MAS teacher (2014) who used *Precious Knowledge* without apology described Desirae as a "smart young woman," but quickly added caveats to compliments: "[She's] [a]wesome, but her folks threatened us. I

don't like that. I don't believe that, and that doesn't fall into our beliefs either. Anyway, it's just perspectives" (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 15 2014).[12] "It's just perspectives." Whether this "it's just perspectives" comment meant perspectives in the sense of "he said/she said," or whether it meant perspectives about the definition of rape, the implication of either interpretation seems to be that this teacher also did not recognize Desirae's experience as a rape. More importantly, such statements about the situation suggest that the alleged rape's veracity is not as important as the accusation of rape and what that might have meant for Tucson's ethnic studies community and movement. Significant to this teacher was how her family's response could have affected the ethnic studies community and a belief that their response fell outside "our beliefs."

The MAS quest to speak against racism seems, at the broad strokes level, to have not only overshadowed but prevented the movement's ability to consistently support an assault victim. Although to some degree it is ironic that some powerful members of a movement focused on respecting diversity and lifting up the voices of those who traditionally have not had power were unwilling or unable to respect and lift up the voice of a sexual assault survivor who identifies as queer, Black, and Indigenous, these responses to Desirae's accusation reveal the intractability of the broader rape culture and expose the way fear shapes political and personal actions. Desirae's attempts to shine a light on an alleged instance of sexual violence within a social movement—a movement with which she identified strongly—were not intended to damage the movement itself, but the narrative that her accusation posed a threat to the movement illustrates the fear her story inspired in those who had devoted significant time and political and personal energy to MAS. Not all of the members of the MAS movement, which is largely about a fight to uproot systemic inequality and identity-based injustice, could see Desirae's alleged rape as another instance of systemic inequality and identity-based injustice, one they could address together from within the MAS movement. Some movement members instead attempted to discredit or silence Desirae, a political choice that touches upon "relationships

[12] I did not ask for further information about these threats during the interview and attempts to reach the interviewee to clarify were unsuccessful. My best guess about the content of such threats in this context is that they may have threatened to publicize Desirae's rape accusation and some of her former teachers' complicity in her decision not to report it, but that is only speculation.

of power and the ideologies or network of interpretation shaping them" (Melonçon & Scott, 2018, p. iv). While these responses could be interpreted as individual failings, they are in step with rape culture, and particularly with how rape culture enculturates people to see "acquaintance rape" differently from "stranger rape," perceiving the latter as more damaging and more common, when in reality "[m]ore than half of all reported rapes are committed by someone the survivor knows" (Buchwald, Fletcher, & Roth, 2005, p. xi) and the damage is not diminished by the victim already knowing the perpetrator. As Bevacqua (2000) explained (invoking Estrich), acquaintance rape is often understood "as (1) a private crime with no bearing on the public, (2) less serious than stranger rape, (3) somehow involving the contributory fault of the victim, and (4) less frightening than being assaulted by a stranger" (p. 155). While the anti-rape movement Bevacqua historicizes attempted to topple these fallacious beliefs, they remain common. Such common beliefs as these, in combination with a protective attitude toward MAS, make these teachers' responses understandable, if problematic.

Problematic views about the accusation and perceptions of what had happened or should happen as a result, both in general and with regard to how MAS members should or should not use or support the documentary, were not uniform, however. One teacher I interviewed, although explicitly conflicted about the incident and its aftermath told me "the MAS teachers have not done the he said/she said thing." (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). (This perception was notably in contrast to what was conveyed in my interviews with at least two other former MAS teachers.) This teacher felt that the MAS teachers "have supported the young woman whose story is being told." (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb. 12, 2014). This teacher's understanding contrasts with Desirae's understanding and with what various other teachers told me, which illustrates not only how the accusation of rape disrupted and ruptured the community, but also the varying ways individuals acting within a rape culture perceive themselves and others. This teacher believed others in the MAS community shared her lack of judgment about the accusation.

Desirae's trauma was compounded not only by the fractured community resulting from the accusation, but by what she saw as her former teachers' failure to follow through on the concepts held so dear in the MAS classes that had deeply affected who she grew up to be. After she graduated Tucson High in 2007, Desirae immediately became a fulltime social justice activist, work which grew directly out of her experience as an MAS student.

She idolized the teachers who had introduced her to various ancient Mayan concepts. Desirae mentioned "the poem *'In Lak'Ech*,'"[13]—an excerpt from "*Pensamiento Serpentino* [Serpentine Thought]"—a Mayan-inspired bilingual poem by Luís Valdez, which was used in many MAS classes as an opening recitation. *In Lak'Ech,* as a philosophy in which one sees oneself in others and sees other people in the community as inextricably connected with oneself, was adopted by many MAS teachers and students. Desirae (2014) said, "*In Lak'ech*, it's, like, beautiful." She recited some of the first lines: "'*Tu eres mi otro yo* [You are my other me] / If I do harm to you / I do harm to myself . . .'" but then she paused and said, "But now it's just words, because their actions didn't follow suit with that." (Personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014).

While Desirae questioned whether these teachers who seem unsupportive to her actually practice *In Lak'Ech*, one teacher told me that not publicly countering Desirae's criticisms was a way of embodying those values:

> You either walk that *In Lak'ech*, or you don't. And part of *In Lak'ech* is for me, the decision to not throw [down], to not get the counter-narrative out there. I don't want to shine negativity upon people that I know already are fragile . . . they just need to work through their pain. . . . It's more important to me that those people heal, and they've made it very clear that I'm not a part of that. (Former MAS teacher personal interview, Feb 13, 2014)

To this teacher, choosing not to respond to Desirae's accusation is an example of following the true path of MAS, while to Desirae the opposite is true.

Desirae (2014) mentioned another MAS precept, "*Panche Be,* [which means] to get to the root of the truth" (Personal interview). Desirae remembers an MAS teacher telling her, "'Always get to the root of the truth. Ask the really hard questions. Never stop asking questions.'" (Personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). Her sense is that the people who trained her to ask questions to find the truth did not themselves keep asking the questions necessary to get to the root of her truth—the truth of her accusation, of her rape. Where Desirae sees her former teachers failing to live up to the principles at the

[13] "*In Lak'Ech"* is not actually a poem unto itself, although it was often introduced in MAS classes as such. (See Kim Hensley Owens (2018.)

core of MAS, rhetoricians may see a failure of rhetorical listening, or an absence of rhetorical listening.

Compounding that absence of rhetorical listening was an active effort to undermine Desirae and those who brought up any negative issues within the community surrounding gender. One teacher I interviewed described a "whisper campaign" led by those who would cast aspersions on MAS surrounding gender issues—with Desirae's rape accusation at the center. While Desirae was cast in the role of one who could take down the movement with bad publicity, she never stopped believing in the values of MAS. Despite conflict between the values embedded within the recitations she still knows by heart and what she experienced as a betrayal of those beliefs by the teachers she learned them from, she does not consider herself "anti-ethnic studies." Desirae explained that ethnic studies is "still [her] foundation," but feels she "sacrificed a lot for people who wouldn't give [her] the benefit of the doubt."

For Desirae, some teachers' actions and words read as personal betrayals or as individual failings, but the rhetorical-cultural constraints of the broader rape culture are, I would argue, also at issue. In a manner not unlike what Amy Koerber (2018) carefully articulated about the "hundreds of years of 'science'" (p. 186) that back up misogynistic claims about women's bodies, denying the veracity of a rape claim is not so much about the individual making the denial but about the broader rape culture to which the individual is enculturated. I write about these disparate reactions to Desirae's accusation not to vilify any individual, but to illustrate how rape culture readily creates blind spots to women's lived experiences with sexual violence, and further diminishes rhetorical agency after a rape.

Context for the emergence of a feminist rhetorical agency

For Desirae, rhetorical agency next emerged through therapy and through writing about what had happened. She came to see herself explicitly as a rape victim, and also began to realize that while in her community activism and ethnic studies classes, she'd seen herself as a "a Black person or as a Native American person." It was only through therapy and writing after her assault that she realized she had not seen herself "as a Black *woman* or as a Native American *woman* . . ." Her recognition of the gendered nature of her experiences marked a shift in her self-understanding and enabled a specifically feminist rhetorical agency to develop.

As Sara Ahmed (2015) argued, "Feminism is DIY: a form of self-assembly. No wonder feminist work is often about timing: sometimes we are too fragile to do this work; we cannot risk being shattered if we are not ready to put ourselves back together again. To get ready often means being prepared to be undone" (2015, n.p.). While Desirae was not prepared immediately after her alleged experience of rape to report or make fully public her accusation, she confronted the mental health ramifications of the assault and began to recognize the role of her gender in her experiences. The therapy and resultant awareness allowed Desirae to seek acknowledgment and "agency-granting attribution" from others (Miller, 2007, p. 153).

At her therapist's encouragement, Desirae began to acknowledge her own story and to seek that acknowledgment from others by writing the story of her alleged rape as a report she could potentially make to police. She wrote (and wrote, and wrote). She formulated a plan with her writing that she hoped would both protect her and possibly publicize her experience:

> I was gonna sit down with the filmmakers—I have this report, and it got up to 82 pages. From there it becomes a part of the public record, the media get ahold of it, and I really was looking forward to that. I just wanted them to leave town after how much damage they had done . . . and, too, they just didn't feel like they needed to be held accountable. (Desirae, Personal Interview, 17 February 2014)

Desirae's use of writing to come to terms with her assault is not uncommon. Laura Gray-Rosendale's memoir *College Girl* (2013) describes the journals she kept after her own assault. Her book illustrates a decades-long process of using writing for healing. Rachel Haines (2019), one of serial assailant Larry Nassar's gymnast victims, also attributes healing power to writing in her memoir *Abused*. After writing her victim impact statement over and over, Haines reflected, "Looking back, I see how much my speech evolved. I can quite literally see the healing taking place through my writing" (p. 114). Desirae's report, too, began to provide healing. With the heft of her 82-page report and a new plan, Desirae once again believed she could gain acknowledgment of her assault for herself and contribute to real consequences for the accused assailant; she believed in the agentive capacity of her writing.

Before Desirae could follow through with her plan, however, she learned that some close female friends no longer believed she had been raped: "The

day I turned that report in to my therapist was the day when I got this accusation from my friend . . . that it was going around, 'Desirae's lying." (Personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). Faced with this loss of support from those closest to her, she was no longer, in Ahmed's (2010) terms, "prepared to be undone" (p. 591). She felt so alone she considered suicide.

At that time, writing in her journal kept Desirae functioning. Her consistent use of writing, from personal writing in her journal to the writing she later shared or performed, served a cathartic, healing function for her. In our interview (2014) she explained, "My first journal entry was March 30th, 2011 and I have over 16 journals filled, kinda breaking it down, like 'Oh, that was misogyny,' 'That was cultural appropriation.'" (Personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). Desirae explained that she writes not just for herself, but also uses her writing to "bring up social justice issues, specifically gender justice issues . . . and I'm like, I'm not shutting up. . . . I'm not being quiet." (Personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014). Desirae's "I'm not shutting up" statement is part of her attempts to seize control over her story, over her past, present, and future. Enacted here is a dynamic feminist rhetorical agency: through this experience she's discovered herself as a feminist. Desirae illustrates the ways feminist rhetorical agency is more expansive than traditional definitions would suggest—it emerges not only as "a series of assertions over time and space" (Hensley Owens, 2015, p. 2) but also as distributed across numerous other agents and situations. This feminist rhetorical agency is connected to what Elizabeth A. Flynn, Patricia Sotirin, and Ann Brady (2012) call feminist "resilience . . . [as] a relational dynamic, responsive in and to contexts" (p. 8).

A rape is perhaps the ultimate violation of an individual's embodied and rhetorical agency. Desirae makes assertions of control across time as a way to combat her lack of agency during the rape itself and the challenges to rhetorical agency after the rape. First, she couldn't control her story because she didn't fully understand it herself and later, because others either didn't believe her or because they sought her silence, believing her story to be detrimental to the overall MAS cause. Desirae's eventual public responses to her rape and sharing of her healing journey share some features with the "affective tactics" Larson (2018) identifies for Doe and Sulcowicz. Her work at open mics and the like aims to "get her story out there," in her words, and in Larson's, to "inform public deliberation over crimes committed against marginalized bodies in ways that existing legal and institutional codes cannot" (Desirae, personal interview, Feb. 17, 2014; Larson p. 124).

Making public what happened helped her begin to regain control over her story and helped feminist rhetorical agency to emerge.

In order to occupy an agentive space, Desirae had to inhabit the role Ahmed (2010) identified as the feminist killjoy—even before Desirae would have identified herself as a feminist. Ahmed (2010) asked, "Does a feminist kill other people's joy by pointing out moments of sexism?" (p. 582). In the context of Desirae's accusation of rape and the MAS movement, the question could be reformulated as "Does a feminist threaten the success of a social movement by pointing out moments of sexual violence?" Desirae's treatment by her community was entangled with an ongoing fight for the survival of the MAS program in the face of unconstitutional, racially motivated actions by state legislators (Dylan, 2017). Desirae's accusation of rape added to the swirling controversy and threatened some within the movement who, faced with tremendous external challenges, wanted to see only good news coming from within.

Desirae's role can be understood in terms of that Ahmed (2010) describes for the character Sophy in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *E'mile.* In Ahmed's rendering, Sophy can only gain happiness from being good, which pleases her parents. Her parents cannot be happy unless she is good and she cannot be happy unless they are happy, so her happiness is conditional upon approval and goodness (p. 578). As a member of the MAS movement, Desirae can only gain happiness by being good (read: supporting the movement and not publicizing the rape accusation), which pleases her former teachers. But as an alleged rape victim, Desirae can only gain happiness by coming to terms with her experience of rape, which requires working against a conditional happiness script. The happiness script for her as a member of the MAS community stands in the way of her recovery.

For Desirae, this gendered, enculturated happiness script is entangled with an MAS movement some viewed as masculinized.[14] In order for Desirae to heal and move on after the rape—for her to find happiness again—she had to first acknowledge an *un*happiness script and then break out of it. However, her ability to do either was hampered by some within the MAS community whose conditional acceptance limited her recovery and prevented her happiness.

[14] Three of the former MAS students and teachers I interviewed brought up female erasure in the MAS curriculum or in the publicity about the program as problematic.

For some people within the movement, their own "happiness" as part of a collective effort to save MAS depended upon a singular message of "MAS is/does good" and on there being no (additional) public bad news connected with the program,[15] for fear it could taint the public view of the program or the movement. News of Desirae's alleged rape was viewed by some I interviewed as a possible threat to their cause. For some, what happened to Desirae as an individual woman was deemed less significant than what could happen to the collective movement to save or salvage MAS. In this formulation, if Desirae's happiness early on was contingent upon their happiness, which could only be achieved by her silence, then their happiness was contingent upon her unhappiness. Desirae's decision to speak out broke the conditional bonds of those connections.

Distributed feminist agency: The *malintZINE* blog

On 21 December 2012 a group of "radical mujeres [women], some of color and some queer" in Tucson, Arizona launched a blog called *malintZINE*. The stated goal of this feminist activist blog, or online zine, was to "document the experiences, narratives, and knowledge of those who dwell in society's margins" (Estamos). The creators of *malintZINE* were responding to specific issues of gender violence and sexism within the MAS community. Their decision to launch a feminist zine to voice protests draws on a long history of feminist groups creating paper zines. The creators of *malintZINE* accomplish what Gail E. Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan (1998) describe as "harness[ing] e-spaces as sites for feminist power" (p. 195). Through this zine, these self-described "womyn," (see "Womyn," 2015), gave themselves and other women/womyn a space to voice what otherwise might remain silent.

What is most relevant about this blog for this article is the public support offered to Desirae, support that extended and distributed her feminist rhetorical agency, creating a web of agency rather than a single thread. One particularly strong example of this web of agency is in a post entitled "Girl Code, Responsibility, Accountability and In Lak Ech" (2013), which the author begins: "I didn't believe my friend when she was raped." As

[15] While beyond the scope of this article, there were reports of domestic violence by one person connected with MAS around this time, which was another reason some community members may have wanted to prevent further bad publicity. The *malintZINE* blog sought in part to publicize these reports. (See Herreras, Mari.)

mentioned, Desirae's friends were neither uniform nor consistent in believing and supporting her. The author of this *malintZINE* post did not initially believe Desirae, but later changed her mind.

The author writes about the night of the premiere, the night of the alleged assault:

> We all went to a film premiere and then to a local bar for drinks and dancing. He was a creep. He was drunk and sloppy and grabbing on women half his age, he wanted to dance; he wanted to celebrate and be the center of attention. *Women's attention*. . . .
>
> In the next two days I found out something went intolerably wrong, and I didn't know what to think of it all. There were talking circles and whispers and meetings and time moved slowly but it also went quickly. Inescapably slow and quick, so I have a hard time remembering each day. I think for the most part there were young women who never believed her (and still don't), young women who always have, and those of us who thought nothing at all—who wanted to be neutral.
>
> Neutral on rape. (n.p.)

The author's paragraphing here is important: she devoted an entire paragraph to the three-word sentence "Neutral on rape." Her sense of shame and disgrace in not believing her friend is threaded throughout the post but is most palpable in the placement and pacing of these three words. Earlier in the post she described being told by Desirae about that night: "When she said she was raped, she didn't use that language, in those first days she didn't say to me, 'I was raped'" ("Girl code," 2013). Like some of the former MAS teachers, the blog author did not initially perceive a rape that wasn't named as such. She continues:

> Folks around the country would call me as a respectable *mujer* [woman] and ask if they could show the film to raise money, they heard there was controversy and wanted to hear it from me. I would call one of my teacher/mentor from the movement and let them know and usually my answer was "yes– Yes, if I were you I'd show the movie." I'm really struggling now with how sick it all sounds

> because it was all sick. But I was willing to do anything for Ethnic Studies, ANYTHING. I would've then and I will do as much now as long as I'm not negotiating anyone's dignity in the process. ("Girl code," 2013)

The words indicate that the author previously felt that the movement to save MAS was more important than Desirae's experience, but her stance had changed. Still devoted to the movement, she was no longer "negotiating anyone's dignity" to support it. She placed some blame for this on a former teacher:

> I remember when he called me, from Save Ethnic Studies, in a panic. He knew then the power I held so he manipulated me and convinced me she was enemy #1.
>
> **I'm just a man and I have no say in this, but you're trucha**[16] **and if she gets this around, she has eighty some page report on our community. This will destroy us.** ("Girl code," 2013, emphasis in original)

Here the blog author illustrated that she was following a similar script to the one Desirae was initially following—the gendered happiness script where individual challenges can (should) be smoothed over for the sake of others' happiness, in this case those involved with the MAS movement and those who felt that publicity surrounding Desirae's rape would damage the reputation of the movement. The teachers whose investments in the MAS movement overshadowed support for Desirae after the rape accusation may serve as an example of a rhetorical strategy perhaps unconsciously employed to silence victims "for the greater good."

This blog author was not alone in placing blame only on a specific male individual rather than also on a broader cultural problem. While *malintZINE* authors often explicitly blamed male members of the MAS community for various wrongs, from my perspective all participants' actions were at least in part conditioned by the rape culture we all inhabit and by gendered scripts beyond their conscious awareness. I don't believe any teacher actively sought

[16] Because the blog author is anonymous, I can't ask in what sense the teacher she quotes meant "*trucha*" here, but from the context it seems to be "on the ball" or "alert."

to destroy Desirae's reputation; each seems to have been acting in what they believed to be the collective's best interests, but sometimes those actions proved not to be in Desirae's' best interest. This author's story is not the only reference to Desirae's on the blog, but its length and devotion to Desirae illustrate how the blog distributed and extended Desirae's feminist rhetorical agency, supporting her through her recovery not only from the rape, but also from the fallout of her making that accusation public.

Desirae's rhetorical agency with regard to her rape accusation is distributed across other agents from the talking circles through the posts on the *malintZINE* blog. That rhetorical agency, first distributed in ways that impeded her power, but later in ways that supported her regaining power over what had happened, now serves a vocal and recovered Desirae. She speaks through her art, poetry, and academic conference presentations. In a 2018 interview posted on the Facebook page for a group called Binational Encuentro, Desirae (#FeaturedArtist, 2018) explained that she not only speaks for herself but also seeks to speak for others:

> At age 22 I was sexually assaulted and I lost all sense of value in both my words and myself after rape culture quickly followed. It took me years to reharness those words. I had to get comfortable with the very sound of my own voice again. I stored those silent words of mine like seeds in journals I kept over the years and during all my travels; seeds which are now blooming in wild, loud, and unapologetic colors. I hope the story of my recreated words can speak for many of those who lost faith in themselves after trauma. I hope that by sharing this journey it encourages survivors of violence to realize we ourselves are our own vessels of healing and resiliency—and that art and creation are a great way to restore that power once taken. (n.p.)

Art and creation are indeed "ways to restore that power once taken," and having one's rhetorical agency distributed across other supportive agents can be an important path to the restoration of power as well. Desirae hopes to provide support for others whose rhetorical agency has been limited or denied as the result of an assault. In the context of trauma and public health rhetorics, Desirae's story illustrates how rhetorical agency can be distributed across other speakers or writers to nourish, bolster, and eventually replenish the individual's rhetorical agency.

The lessons to be drawn from Desirae's experience extend beyond survivors' friends and confidants to the police and medical providers they might also report to and the broader society as well. Apparent in this analysis are the many ways Desirae was silenced, both explicitly and implicitly: she was spoken for in talking circles; she was removed from a film that depicted work that had been critical to her development and identity; she was prevented from reporting by a largely accurate fear that reporting would result in her being shamed rather than believed; she was disbelieved and blamed for the potential effect of her truth on the MAS movement. While Desirae's experience and the constellation of responses to her accusation of rape whereas in some ways particular to her context, the responses of her former teachers and friends also followed fairly predictable cultural scripts: these responses, often of disbelief and doubt, illustrate how the rhetoric surrounding sexual assault too often serves to silence survivors who try to tell their stories and illustrates a broad failure in our culture to listen rhetorically and to treat sexual assault as the public health issue it is.

A rhetorically informed public health approach to sexual assault is one way to begin to shift the culture. Such an approach would include, as Amy Propen and Mary Schuster (2017) have articulated in the context of domestic violence, a focus on risk assessment, prevention, and treatment. In addition to that important list, I would add training in how to listen to and respond to assault disclosures, not only for the many medical and legal professionals who encounter sexual assault reports in the course of their jobs, but also for students. As a high school and college student, I attended several "rape prevention" workshops, but never a workshop that might have prepared me to have a "stance of openness" (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 17) when a friend, colleague, or student disclosed an assault. Specific training in rhetorical listening would have been immensely helpful for the dozens of assault disclosures I've since heard over the course of my life—and while I have had (too much) practice learning to listen well to such disclosures and to guide friends or students to appropriate resources, most people don't have several opportunities to fumble their ways into a "good" response. Because sexual assault victims may initially tell only one person, it is critical that the one person listens well—that she listens rhetorically.

As Elizabeth Britt (2018) has ably shown in the context of her study of legal advocacy, one can "interview and counsel . . . without necessarily

listening," (p. 69), but specific training in Ratcliffe-style rhetorical listening, and specifically in listening in order to make metonymic identifications—to learn to "recogniz[e] associations—rather than commonalities—with another person" can help those listening acknowledge "intersectional identities" and provide a productive listening space (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 74). Ratcliffe provides the example of Roberto, a student listener who "identified with a woman not because she was like him but because she was like his mother"—an association that helped him listen across difference (Ratcliffe, 2005, p. 74). Ratcliffe describes metonymic identification through associations as a way to counter the "privileging of commonality" (p. 67). Learning to make metonymic identifications through difference rather than metaphorical identification through commonalities makes it possible for people to identify with people who occupy multiple different subject positions than they do, and can make it easier to rhetorically listen to someone with a dramatically different set of experiences and identifications. Britt further explains that nonidentification, unlike disidentification, allows the listener to retain a view of the speaker as a person with dignity, rather than being distanced and othered through pity. With appropriate training, even nonidentification can provide a chance for rhetorical listening if the listener is "conscious of the gaps in commonality" (Britt, 2018, p. 76).

That Desirae was able to regain her voice, to "reharness those words," speaks most to her own feminist rhetorical resilience, but it also speaks to the challenge and power of distributed agency. When rhetorical agency was distributed among those who were not prepared to listen rhetorically to Desirae's accusation, agency did not emerge for Desirae; it only emerged again for her after being distributed across those who were prepared to listen rhetorically, such as the therapist who helped her name the alleged rape and the friends who eventually believed and publicly supported her. In the context of sexual assault as a public health issue, Desirae's experience reveals the various points of intersection between rhetorics of health and medicine and critiques of rape culture. It illustrates the challenges of accomplishing rhetorical listening when cultural scripts readily lend themselves to disbelief and doubt, and it points to a need for significant and continuing public health education about what sexual assault is and how its survivors' stories can be empathetically and trustingly received by friends, mentors, police, and communities.

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Appendix: Semi-Structured Interview Questions for Former MAS Teachers or Students

Demographics

1. If you've given me permission to use your name, thank you. If not, let's decide together what pseudonym you'd like me to use for you instead.
2. Forgive me for asking this, but would you mind telling me your age?
3. Where are you from originally, and if you're not from Tucson, where else did you live, and how did you end up in Tucson? How did you come to teaching?
4. How would you describe your ethnicity and/or race?
5. What is your occupation?
6. What is your highest level of education?
7. Would you tell me a bit about your political history, and whether you see that as connected to your take on MAS?

Personal Experience with MAS

1. Maybe we can start with my asking you to tell me the story of your own involvement with MAS? How did you become a part of it, what

did you teach (or take as a student), and what was your experience like throughout its existence?
2. How would you describe the goals of MAS?
3. What would you say were the most positive benefits for students of this program, and/or the most positive benefits for you as a teacher from this program?
4. How would you describe any negative aspects of the program?
5. What books, articles, or websites did you find most critical to your teaching (or learning) in the program? Why?
6. What assignments or methods were you most proud of as a teacher (or most influenced by as a student), and why?
7. Did you take part in any of the protests or public statements about MAS? Could you tell me about that experience?
8. Would you be willing to share any curricular materials with me for my research, or talk me through some of the choices? For example, I noticed in the documentary *Precious Knowledge* that at least some of the classes recited "*In Lak 'Ech*" at the start of each class. What can you tell me about that?
9. *Based on additional research during my research trip and what I learned through initial interviews, I began to ask the following questions in this section of the semi-structured interviews (although in several cases participants offered information that would answer these questions without my asking them as part of their responses to #8).*
   a. For you, and in your teaching (or learning), who does the *In Lak 'Ech* "you are my other me" concept refer to? I guess I'm asking if it's the students and teachers in that circle or classroom, or if it extends to others? I'm also curious about how or whether you thought others outside the classes might interpret the "*In Lak 'Ech"* chant?
   b. Could you tell me a bit about your involvement with the documentary *Precious Knowledge*? How would you describe the film's depiction of MAS and surrounding events?
   c. I've read in *The Tucson Weekly* and in the blog *malintZINE* that a former MAS student alleged a sexual assault in connection with the filming of *Precious Knowledge* that affected the community. I wonder if you could shed any light on that for me? Have you read the coverage in *The Tucson Weekly*, and/or the blog *malintZINE*?

Reflections post-MAS

1. How would you describe the end of MAS? What happened?
2. Why do you think the judge or politicians felt MAS violated ARS 15-112, in any of these areas? Was there anything you wish teachers or students had or hadn't done or said that you think might have changed things somehow?
    1. Promote[d] the overthrow of the United States government.
    2. Promote[d] resentment toward a race or class of people.
    3. [Was] designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group.
    4. Advocate[d] ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.
3. I know there's controversy about the culturally relevant courses that are being implemented that seem in some ways to fill the space where MAS was. What's your perspective on those new courses? Were you involved in their creation? Why or why not?
4. Do you see a chance for MAS to return?
5. If you had it to do all over again, would you teach (or take) MAS again?
6. What are you teaching (or doing) now, and how do you feel about your teaching and your students' (or your own MAS) experiences and learning now compared to before?
7. Is there anything else you'd like to share with me?
8. Is there anyone else I should be sure to interview while I'm in town?
9. Can I contact you by email if I have any additional questions?