

# EXPERIMENTS IN *Democracy*



Aubrey Edwards + Tennessee Watson + Chaley Dimoff  
Nicole Foss + Robby Bishop

## *Experiments in Democracy*

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Front cover: Suzy, *untitled*. The artwork was created during the Youth Justice Institute afterschool program described in Aubrey Edwards' "Youth Voice / Youth Action / Youth Justice." Suzy's artwork is produced again on p. 31, along with writing about the piece.

## Introduction

Scott Henkel & Samantha Vandermeade

We are delighted to launch the first issue of *Experiments in Democracy*, the journal of the Democracy Laboratory. The Democracy Laboratory is a project of the Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research at the University of Wyoming. We are grateful to our friends at the University of Wyoming Libraries for hosting *Experiments in Democracy* on their Open Journal platform, making sure that the journal meets the highest standards of accessibility and scholarly quality.

The Democracy Laboratory seeks to empower students, faculty, and the public using interdisciplinary methods in order to connect our communities and to strengthen the quality of our democracy. Conceived as a dynamic, interdisciplinary, and intergenerational space, the Democracy Lab provides a space where researchers, students, and community members can gather so that they may collectively recognize problems, form collaborative and intergenerational teams, hypothesize and test solutions, design plans to meet shared goals, and produce research projects. From its moment of creation, the Democracy Lab promised to reanimate traditional humanistic sources, methodologies, and theories and then (re)direct them toward developing workable solutions to our grandest challenges and most difficult dilemmas, first among them: how to make liberty and justice for all a fact of life rather than a distant dream.

We draw inspiration and support from the National Endowment for the Humanities' "A More Perfect Union" initiative, the American Academy of Arts & Sciences Commission on the Practice of Democratic Citizenship and its report *Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century*, and from the Grand Challenges Initiative at the University of Wyoming. In the best spirit of the Land Grant University mission, the

Democracy Lab is an incubator where people can discuss, debate, and discover ideas meant to engage our communities, address societal challenges, and improve our collective circumstances.

Each year, the Democracy Lab gathers a cohort of participants, an interdisciplinary and intergenerational team of people committed to the work of improving the quality of democracy and equality in our state, nation, and world. Cohort members receive the opportunity to hone, develop, produce, and publish both individual and collective projects related to research on the quality of democracy, curriculum development, community engagement, or journalism. Cohort members participate in an interdisciplinary curriculum designed to facilitate their individual projects, develop community engagement skills, and become more productively engaged citizens.

The culminating events of the experience are a one-day symposium in which participants share the results of their work with the public, held at the Albany County Public Library, followed by the publication of their work in this journal.

We wish to thank the Democracy Lab's advisory committee, which was composed of University of Wyoming faculty, students, and Wyoming public servants who met to discuss and design the structure, curriculum, and aims of the Democracy Laboratory.

Early conversations between colleagues about the potential of something like a humanities laboratory began in the fall of 2021, and a working group was quickly formed. Through the 2021-2022 academic year, through biweekly meetings and hours of individual and subcommittee labor, a vision for the Democracy Lab began to emerge, one which prioritized interdisciplinary methods—drawn from diverse disciplines such as anthropology, art, cultural studies, geography, history, literature, philosophy, political science, and public administration—and intergenerational mentorship, both of which characterized the Democracy Lab's earliest design and permeate its now-realized programming. It was from these meetings that both the design of the cohort program and its culminating publication emerged. To design the Democracy Lab, we studied many models for community-engaged research and civic engagement, including Leadership Wyoming, the Center for a Vital Community at Sheridan College, and the Highlander Research and Education Center.

Like all work conducted in a laboratory, and in the spirit of exploration to which we were all committed, our labor together was full of trial and error, revision and resubmission, and hypothesis and testing. The Democracy Lab, and this publication, is stronger for it, and so we want to extend our heartfelt thanks to the advisory committee members, who contributed their expertise to make the Democracy Lab possible, and to the lab's facilitators, who guide participants through its curriculum:

*SCOTT HENKEL, PI, director, Wyoming Institute for Humanities Research, departments of English and African American and Diaspora Studies*

*AMY ALBRECHT, director, Center for a Vital Community at Sheridan College*

*STEPHANIE ANDERSON, Head, School of Politics, Public Affairs, and International Studies*

*ADAM BLACKLER, History*

*CATHY CONNOLLY, Gender and Women's Studies, School of Culture Gender, and Social Justice, and member of the Wyoming House of Representatives*

*SARA FLITNER, Flitner Strategies, former mayor of Jackson, WY, and Lead Facilitator of the ENDOW initiative*

*JENNIFER HARMON, Family and Consumer Sciences, College of Agriculture and Natural Resources*

*SHAWN REESE, executive director, Wyoming Humanities Council and former Policy Director to Wyoming Governor Matt Mead*

*JANEL SEELEY, director, Ellbogen Center for Teaching and Learning*

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*RILEY TALAMANTES, UW undergraduate and former ASUW President*

*SAMANTHA VANDERMEADE, Gender and Women's Studies*

*CHEN XU, Wyoming Geographic Information Science Center*

The Democracy Laboratory admitted its first cohort of participants during the 2022-23 academic year. True to its design, the first cohort included University of Wyoming faculty, students, and members of the public—an interdisciplinary and intergenerational mix of people. The participants presented their work in a public symposium held at the Albany County Public Library on 29 April 2023. The essays included in this journal show a broad range of participant interests and research problems. The essays are diverse in terms of both content and methods—this reflects how the lab understands democracy: capacious, complicated, and including a wide array of voices.

Tennessee Watson's essay "Democracy at Work" was inspired by oral-historian Studs Terkel's book *Working*. Watson and her collaborators wanted to talk to ordinary Americans about their working lives and make those conversations available in a unique way: rather than traditional oral histories, the project makes the conversations available as jukebox recordings, each one lasting the amount of time it takes the worker to make a dollar.

In "WyHOMEing: Wyoming's Landscape for the Homeless," Chaley Dimoff shows that homelessness is a very personal and very human experience with many perspectives, emotions, and versions of reality, yet it is one of the most inhuman experiences a person can go through. By telling about work with Family Promise of Albany County, Dimoff makes sure that the stories and experiences of so many individuals, families, and children are heard.

How do we create and provide viable platforms for young people to be visionaries in their own communities and within our democracy? Aubrey Edwards, working with the Youth Justice Institute that she founded, co-creates spaces with young folks where they can discuss issues that affect them in their communities, explore these issues with adults, community leaders, and envision their futures through artmaking. Working alongside young people in an array of capacities for the last 20 years, often making art and always in awe of how they navigate their worlds, Edwards shows how youth advocacy is a practice and that it is a joy to be in service to young people.

Robby Bishop argues that at the heart of many contemporary concerns about increasing partisanship, divisiveness, and animosity is increasing reflexivity about the effects of how knowledge is acquired, developed, and disseminated. In an era of polarization and “post-truth,” he asks: What does it mean to know things well—as a citizen, in a democracy, today?

Nicole Foss and her collaborators ask, “What Does Sexual Assault Have to Do With Democracy?” Foss selected people from her social network who had previously shown interest in advocacy and speaking publicly about their experience as survivors. Each of the interviewees consented to participating and elected to be named as coauthors with their testimony directly transcribed. They argue that the maintenance of democracy and the project of ensuring equal citizenship are ultimately issues of justice.

In closing, we also wish to express our gratitude to Robby Bishop who, in addition to writing one of the essays for this issue, designed the format for *Experiments in Democracy* and worked with Sierra Pandey and Chad Hutchens, digital librarians at the University of Wyoming, to bring the journal to fruition. Thanks to that work, *Experiments in Democracy* meets the highest standards in digital accessibility and access to knowledge; it is also an elegant artifact, a fitting home for ideas about the quality of democracy.

# Democracy at Work

Tennessee Watson

No matter what we do—whether it’s flipping burgers, harvesting crops, or bringing babies into the world—work requires artistry and finesse. After a decade of interviewing people about their jobs and their relationship to work, I can say with certainty that “unskilled labor” is a misnomer. But the phrase’s inaccuracy doesn’t prevent it from carrying significant weight. It has been used to determine which immigrants are eligible for visas to work in the U.S. to rationalize low wages and to limit collective bargaining rights. But why, in a democracy, don’t all people, regardless of their jobs, deserve freedom of movement, freedom from exploitation, and a living wage?

Those are the questions at the heart of *Wage/Working*, a project I started with my collaborator Laura Hadden over a decade ago. We set out to interrogate the relationship between skill and wage, and to make the vast gap between high-income and low-income earners tangible in a new way. We wanted to celebrate workers’ ingenuity while simultaneously questioning the monetary value assigned to certain kinds of labor.

Laura and I met in the Integrated Media Arts MFA program at Hunter College and bonded over our shared background working as public radio reporters. We’d come to graduate school to push our creative practice beyond journalism and documentary into the realm of interactive art and sound installation. We also shared a love for oral history and the transformative power of listening practiced by oral historians like Studs Terkel and radio producers like The Kitchen Sisters. Our goal was to take recorded interviews and turn them into something people could interact with and experience. It was out of those conversations that *Wage/Working* was born.

Before I get into the mechanics of the project, it feels important to note that my interest in the artistry and skill people bring to their jobs was motivated by my years doing public health outreach with migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Every August, for nearly a decade,

I'd go to Maine to help run a mobile clinic during the wild blueberry harvest. Every night of the one-month harvest, I drove a mobile clinic out to the temporary housing where farmworkers lived in rustic cabins alongside the blueberry fields. There we opened the doors to a converted RV and offered basic healthcare. I saw firsthand the wear and tear on farmworkers' bodies. During the day, I returned to the fields to pick up workers who needed follow-up appointments at brick-and-mortar clinics and hospitals where a higher level of care was available than what the mobile clinic could provide. I talked with workers, on those car rides and sitting in clinic waiting rooms, about how they managed to do grueling farm labor day after day.

Wild blueberries, unlike high-bush blueberries, grow close to the ground. Workers bend over and use a heavy metal rake with long tines to harvest hundreds of blueberries at the same time into a plastic bin. Workers must carry the full bins—weighing 25 pounds—to roads surrounding the fields to be loaded onto trucks. They repeat this process hundreds of times each day. On top of being bent over constantly and all the heavy lifting, the workers are exposed to the sun and elements all day. Because workers are paid by the box, there's little incentive to take a break. At the time the rate for a 25-pound box was between \$2.50 and \$3. How could it be that workers were paid 10 cents a pound when a one-pound bag of frozen wild blueberries went for \$10 in the store? Where did the \$9.90 go and how much of it was profit? It felt egregious that blueberry workers weren't paid more, especially after watching them pour so much time and energy into carefully harvesting hundreds and thousands of easily squishable berries.

The tricks and techniques they developed to work longer and more efficiently enhanced their ability to earn money, but it also benefited blueberry producers because it meant that workers were bringing in more fruit. Workers devoted a tremendous amount of time to fine-tuning how they harvested the berries—they customized their rakes, they did stretching routines in the morning to be more limber, they maximized the number of boxes they could carry to the road at one time. Those who had done the blueberry harvest for years were proud to pass those practices on to new workers and yet farmworkers are often labeled unskilled workers.

“Unskilled work is work which needs little or no judgment to do simple duties that can be learned on the job in a short period of time,” according to the U.S. Social Security Administration. “A person does not gain work skills by doing unskilled jobs.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> “§ 404.1568. Skill requirements.”

*TENNESSEE WATSON* a Wyoming-based journalist. She was a 2020 Harvard Nieman Fellow and Abrams Fellow for Local Investigative Journalism. Prior to her full-time career as a journalist, Watson worked as a community-based storytelling facilitator for over a decade. She loves running with her dogs Murray and Freddy, bicycles, dance parties and pineapple on pizza.

What's not skilled about farmworkers' deep knowledge of the land or the systems they develop after years in the fields to make the work more efficient? Watch farmworkers toss full buckets of tomatoes up to workers on trucks or broccoli harvesters bend down to cut the stalk and gracefully turn to toss the vegetable to packers working on a moving piece of farm equipment. It's a skillful dance and witnessing that inspired me to talk to all kinds of workers, especially those labeled unskilled, for *Wage/Working*.

Our project's name was inspired by oral-historian Studs Terkel's book *Working*. Like Terkel, we wanted to talk to ordinary Americans about their working lives, but with a twist that would draw attention to wage disparity. Rather than publish those interviews as oral histories in a book or play them on the radio, *Wage/Working* only makes those conversations available to the public as recordings that play from a jukebox, and as excerpts that are edited to the time it takes the worker to make a dollar.

Why a jukebox? Because there's an understood convention that to hear a song, one must pay. That allowed us to advertise "pay a dollar to hear a dollar's worth of a worker's time" on the jukebox.



FIGURE 1. Shannon Nacey selects a worker's story to play on the *Wage/Working* jukebox on display August 2015 at Old Stone House in Brooklyn, NY.

Like an artist's music featured in a jukebox, each worker we interview gets an album with a portrait—akin to album cover art—and a list of tracks. Instead of songs, excerpts from the interview are titled based on a short phrase the worker said.

For example, the track “Not gonna dance for you” comes from a server in a deli describing how he doesn't like the idea of performing “kindness” in the hopes of making bigger tips.

Why edit the stories to the length of time it takes a worker to earn a dollar? Because the varied duration of the tracks communicates wage disparity without the workers explicitly disclosing how much they make. The inverse relationship between time and wage means the workers who earn the least get to talk the longest. A lawyer featured in an early iteration of the project had 20-second tracks while it took the artisan cheesemaker 13 minutes to make a dollar. Even if the audience doesn't listen to all 13 minutes, it gets the point across that some workers must labor longer to make a dollar.

The other reason we like the jukebox is the way it facilitates a collective experience. The music one person pays for plays aloud for everyone in the space. It's hard to address wage disparity without knowing what we all get paid, a message we hope to communicate by creating a way for people to listen together.

From the Hudson Valley and Brooklyn in New York to Portland, OR and most recently Laramie, WY, people have gathered around the jukebox to hear the stories about work.

Before doing the project in Laramie, our interviews mimicked Terkel's quest to understand what workers glean from their jobs beyond a paycheck.

Work is “about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor; in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying,” Terkel wrote in the introduction to *Working*. “Perhaps immortality, too, is part of the quest. To be remembered was the wish, spoken and unspoken, of the heroes and heroines of this book.”<sup>2</sup>

The creative resilience Terkel documented in *Working* is at the heart of the interviews for *Wage/Working* too. For the most recent iteration of the project in Laramie, WY the focus of those interviews expanded to explore democracy at work. The Greek translation provides my favorite definition—with *dêmos* meaning people and *krátos* meaning power—democracy is people power.

The questions centered around workers' sense of power in the workplace, how workers navigate using their voices, as well as their desire to be able to effect change at work.

The conversations centered around questions like: How do you feel about speaking up at work? How does speaking up benefit or disadvantage you? Do you feel empowered to make change at work?

<sup>2</sup> Terkel, *Working*, xi.

This new focus grew out of my participation in the University of Wyoming Humanities Research Institute Democracy Lab and was a welcomed addition. The inverse relationship between wage and track length was made even more poignant by conversations with people about agency and power on the job.

Workplaces, for the most part, are not democracies. They are hierarchical, and yet the five workers I spoke to in Laramie in 2023 all had different takes on whether they would want to have more power and more say.

One worker felt empowered to make changes but was reluctant to speak up because he wasn't being paid enough to be involved with the business on that level. That worker preferred the simplicity of going to work and focusing on the required tasks, recognizing that improvements would increase profits for the business but would not guarantee increased pay for employees.

Another worker was motivated to make her workplace safer and more efficient, but challenging the status quo came with the risk of losing her job, and as an undocumented person finding another place to work was daunting. She described staying in a job with unsafe conditions, and not speaking up, because doing otherwise threatened her ability to survive.

There was also a worker who saw ways to make a big impact that brought the risk of retaliation, but instead found smaller ways of making change that allowed her to continue doing her work. While larger structural changes in workplace culture were necessary, she felt tackling those things would interfere with her ability to do the parts of her job she loves the most. She didn't rule out making waves in the future, but had decided this moment was not her time to rock the boat.

I plan to continue gathering Wyoming stories for the Wage/Working jukebox in the hopes of catalyzing deeper conversations about worker voice and power.

A sobering reminder of why this matters is the data on workplace fatalities. Workers die on the job in Wyoming at the highest rates nationwide.<sup>3</sup>

Stories can only be heard from the jukebox. Please reach out to bring the jukebox to your community.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "Work Deaths by State." At the time of publication, the most recent data is for the year 2022.

<sup>4</sup> I can be contacted via email at [tennessee.watson@gmail.com](mailto:tennessee.watson@gmail.com).

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# WyHOMEing: Wyoming's Landscape for the Homeless

Chaley Dimoff

Homelessness is an ever-evolving thread woven into the complex fabric of North American culture. Although various threads of homelessness can be seen across nearly every continent and county, the thread of homelessness within the seams of the United States appear to be unique. Homelessness is a very personal and very human experience with many perspectives, emotions, and versions of reality yet it is one of the most inhuman experiences a person can go through. In a country where people are often seen as numbers and statistics, the underlying stories and experiences of so many individuals, families, and children get overlooked and ignored. Homelessness can happen for many reasons, but for those who find themselves in Wyoming trying to overcome it, their stories take on extra significance.

With so many factors involved in how and why someone may experience homelessness, this account will shed some light as to how geographical orientation can impact this journey. From weather to resources, this account will include some personal stories as well as anecdotal evidence from families that have experienced this journey as well as those who serve to advocate for those that are struggling with this wide-spread issue. All stories have been collected with consent and all personally identifying information has been removed.

Ultimately, this account serves to explore homelessness through a sociopolitical lens, analyzing its connection with the democratic principles of equality, justice, and community solidarity. By taking a look into the narratives of displacement, it becomes clear how homelessness serves as a sort of litmus test for the health of democratic governance, highlighting the systemic inequities and societal challenges that underpin housing insecurity. Adding an examination of national and local responses, this paper reveals the complex relationship between homelessness and democracy, underscoring the need for inclusive, participatory approaches to address this pressing social issue.

## **Invisible Citizens: Existential Dilemmas Amidst Displacement**

Everyone has a story about their past, how they got to where they are now, and what they hope for the future. But for some, these stories aren't just about choices—they're about survival. We're not talking about kids moving because of a parent's job or military families relocating for duty. We're talking about families without homes, forced into impossible situations where they have to choose between their present and their future, their health and their home, their way of life and their livelihood.

When we think of homelessness, we often picture someone on a city sidewalk, struggling to get by. It's no wonder people try to avoid that stigma or that life. But for some, being "homeless" means something different. It's about freedom, exploration, finding new places to belong. We might have quotes about home decorating our walls, but for many families, the reality is much harsher. They may have nothing but each other and a few belongings to hold onto when times get tough.

Displacement due to homelessness presents individuals with existential dilemmas that transcend mere material deprivation, challenging the foundational principles of democracy. The paper explores how the marginalization of homeless individuals reflects systemic failures within democratic governance structures, revealing gaps in the protection of fundamental rights and social inclusion. By centering the narratives of displaced individuals, the study underscores the importance of amplifying marginalized voices within democratic decision-making processes to ensure their concerns are addressed.

## **Diverse Faces, Nuanced Realities: Deconstructing Stereotypes**

Despite the prevailing stereotype of homelessness typified by disheveled individuals on street corners, the reality is evolving. Increasingly, homeless and displaced individuals defy conventional expectations, appearing indistinguishable from the broader population with clean attire, well-groomed appearances, and weather-appropriate attire. These individuals have encountered formidable challenges that imperil their sense of home, security, and means of subsistence. Frequently characterized by defensiveness, fear, and pride, they are often disinclined to seek assistance, viewing it as a last resort. The diverse experiences and coping mechanisms of these individuals underscore the complexity of homelessness. It is through their narratives that the profound contrasts within this population become palpable and comprehensible.

*CHALEY DIMOFF is a seasoned communicator, educator, and advocate with nearly two decades of diverse experience across various fields. Her advocacy work is centered on supporting families in need by creating pathways to sustainable independence through community-based initiatives. She believes in the transformative power of working together and leveraging knowledge to drive systemic change.*

Below are three poignant narratives depicting the journeys of families who have been assisted by the Family Promise of Albany County organization. While these accounts mirror the experiences of countless families nationwide, they serve as testaments to the impactful work undertaken by Family Promise in alleviating hardship and facilitating the reintegration of families into stable, everyday lives. Please note: These narratives have been anonymized and modified to safeguard the identities of the families involved. Consent has been obtained to share these narratives in their adapted form. It is important to recognize that while these stories are drawn from real-life experiences, they are representative of the diverse paths traversed by displaced families globally. All names, dates, and specific details have been altered or substituted to preserve the confidentiality and privacy of these families and their narratives.

### *A Mother & Her Daughter*

Winter in Wyoming poses formidable challenges, with its unforgiving winds and relentless snowfall rendering travel treacherous, if not impossible. For those living on the outskirts of bustling towns, enduring such conditions can be especially grueling, particularly for those without access to adequate resources or transportation.

Among these individuals was a family of three residing in a secluded cabin, miles from any main roads or thoroughfares. Isolated and facing dire circumstances, their aspirations for improvement were hindered by the patriarch of the household. Despite being the father, his self-centered behavior marginalized both the mother and their child, prioritizing his own interests and those of his other offspring. However, a glimmer of hope emerged one summer afternoon when a family friend visited the cabin. While the men embarked on an outing to the range, the women and children remained behind. During this visit, the guest brought news of an organization in town offering assistance to families in need—a beacon of hope promising shelter, sustenance, rental and utility support, career guidance, and more.

Several weeks later, the same friend returned to the isolated cabin, offering a lifeline to the mother and her young child. Together, they journeyed into town, where within a matter of weeks, their lives were transformed. Through the support of the organization, the mother and daughter secured a fully furnished apartment, enabling the mother to secure stable remote employment. For the child, this newfound stability meant access to education for the first time, fostering opportunities for socialization and academic growth. In this tale of resilience and redemption, the promise of a brighter future was realized through the compassion and intervention of caring individuals and supportive organizations.

### *Sticking Together*

This story beautifully illustrates the strength and resilience of family bonds, showcasing how this family from the Sunshine State faced adversity head-on, refusing to abandon each other despite the challenges they encountered.

The impact of supply chain disruptions hit hard, particularly for the transportation industry, where the father worked as an over-the-road trucker. Despite the hardships caused by COVID-19, the family made sacrifices, adjusting their lifestyle to make ends meet.

When an opportunity arose for the father to work a seasonal job in another state, the family faced a tough decision. While the father initially planned to move alone to earn money and support the family, the wife's strong desire to keep their family together prevailed. Together, they embarked on a journey to an unfamiliar state, supported by the kindness of friends and a local community organization.

Despite the challenges of adjusting to a new environment, the family persevered, saving up enough money to return home after the seasonal job ended. Their sense of home wasn't just a physical address but the community and support network they had built along the way.

Through it all, the support they received from the local organization proved transformative, enriching their lives and leaving a lasting impact. This story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of family unity and the resilience that can emerge from facing challenges together.

### *Dreams Do Come True*

From the earliest days of school, children are often asked about their aspirations for the future. Some dream of becoming doctors, lawyers, or firefighters, while others have different paths in mind. For one young woman, the desire to be a nurse was ingrained in her from a tender age. Her passion for helping others heal guided her throughout her life.

Life has a way of unfolding unexpectedly, with twists and turns that we never anticipate. Mom found herself in a situation she never imagined—living on the streets of a major city with her teenage daughter, estranged from family and friends. Despite the challenges they faced, they persevered.

During a harsh winter in the rocky mountain region, local organizations provided assistance to homeless individuals and families. It was during this time that Mom realized she wanted a better life for her daughter. With determination and resilience, they worked towards a brighter future.

Their fortunes changed when her daughter received a full academic scholarship to college. This unexpected opportunity brought hope and positivity to their lives, inspiring them to start anew in a new town. With support from a local organization and the college, they secured an apartment and began building a better life.

As her daughter thrived in college, Mom decided to pursue her own dreams of becoming a nurse. With determination and perseverance, she returned to school and earned her degree alongside her daughter. Their journey was a testament to the power of resilience and the pursuit of one's passions.

While her daughter chose to remain in their newfound home, Mom felt drawn back to her hometown. There, she found success in fulfilling her lifelong calling, knowing that her experiences had prepared her to make a difference in the lives of others. Their story is a reminder that even in the face of adversity, hope and determination can lead to a brighter future.

All in all, conventional stereotypes of homelessness perpetuate narratives of social exclusion and individual deficiency, undermining the principles of equality and human dignity inherent in democratic societies. Through a nuanced examination of the diverse experiences within the homeless population, the conclusions serve to challenge the nearly institutionalized portrayals of this group and enlighten the inherent resilience and agency of displaced individuals. By deconstructing stereotypes, these accounts highlight the importance of fostering inclusive public discourse that acknowledges the complex realities of homelessness within democratic societies.

## **National Efforts: Policy Responses and Organizational Initiatives**

These anecdotes serve as poignant reminders of the everyday struggles and triumphs experienced by individuals grappling with displacement and homelessness. Such narratives, though deeply personal, are emblematic of a broader reality faced by countless individuals and families nationwide. Indeed, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), over 650,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness on a single night in 2023.<sup>1</sup> Although HUD is seen as one of the primary sources for this content, most organizations who work with this population directly, refer to the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act as they report numbers that more closely reflect the real-life, real-time impacts of their clients.<sup>2</sup>

Fortunately, there exists a network of national organizations dedicated to addressing the multifaceted challenges of homelessness and providing vital support to those in need. Notable among these are the National Alliance to End Homelessness, U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, National Coalition for the Homeless, National Union of the Homeless, and others. These organizations not only offer direct assistance to individuals and families but also advocate for systemic change and policy reforms at the federal level.

<sup>1</sup> *2023 Annual Homelessness Assessment.*

<sup>2</sup> "McKinney-Vento."

Arguably, the presence and efforts of these initiatives play a crucial role in mitigating the hardships faced by homeless populations. Without their interventions, the number of displaced families, individuals struggling with hunger, and those lacking access to education would likely escalate. Through the collaborative efforts of these national organizations, individuals and families affected by homelessness can find solace in the prospect of a brighter and more stable future.

At the national level, responses to homelessness reflect the commitment of democratic societies to address social inequalities and uphold the rights of all citizens. By analyzing policy interventions and advocacy efforts, the paper evaluates the extent to which democratic governance structures effectively address the systemic factors contributing to homelessness. Overall, this emphasizes the role of civil society organizations and grassroots movements in advocating for policy changes and mobilizing community support, thereby strengthening the democratic fabric of society.

### **Local Resonance: The Case of Laramie, Wyoming**

The pervasiveness of homelessness and displacement is undeniable, as illustrated by the narratives shared above. While the visibility of this issue may vary across different locales, its existence is universal. It is all too common for individuals to acknowledge the problem while remaining disengaged from the plight of those experiencing homelessness or displacement within their own communities. However, even in close-knit communities like Laramie, Wyoming, resources are available to support individuals and families in times of need.

As depicted in the stories we've encountered, the experiences of homeless or displaced individuals and families are diverse and multifaceted. While the narratives highlighted here predominantly focus on families, it is important to recognize that specific organizations cater to the unique needs of single individuals, single mothers, minors, and other vulnerable groups. In Laramie, several such organizations operate within the city limits, including Family Promise, Interfaith, Safe Project, and Unaccompanied Student Initiative, among others.

The collaborative efforts of these organizations underscore a commitment to providing comprehensive support and assistance to individuals navigating the complexities of homelessness or displacement. Recognizing the varied needs of those seeking help, these organizations strive to offer a wide array of resources and points of contact. Whether individuals require one-time financial assistance, ongoing support with basic necessities such as food and shelter, or guidance in accessing career opportunities, the network of organizations in Laramie endeavors to address these needs with compassion and diligence.

Within the local context of Laramie, Wyoming, homelessness assumes unique dimensions shaped by geographical, economic, and social factors inherent to the region. Through a case study approach, it becomes clear how community responses to homelessness reflect the values of democracy, including solidarity, compassion, and civic engagement. All in all,

this underscores the importance of localized approaches that empower communities to address housing insecurity through democratic processes.

## **Conclusion**

Homelessness is not only a social issue but also a democratic concern that tests the inclusivity and responsiveness of governance structures. By examining the experiences of displacement, it is revealed that the systemic inequities that perpetuate homelessness and underscores the imperative for democratic societies to prioritize social justice and community well-being. Through collaborative efforts at national and local levels, democratic governance can play a vital role in addressing homelessness and fostering a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

Ultimately, none of this would not be possible without the countless individuals who dedicate their time, energy, and resources to support those experiencing homelessness or displacement. From the tireless efforts of frontline workers and volunteers to the generous contributions of donors and supporters, it is their collective commitment and compassion that truly make a difference in the lives of vulnerable individuals and families. Their selflessness and dedication exemplify the best of humanity and serve as a beacon of hope for a brighter and more inclusive future. So, to all those who work and volunteer behind the scenes to uplift and empower others, we extend our deepest gratitude. You are indeed making the world a better place, one act of kindness at a time. Thank you!

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# Youth Voice / Youth Action / Youth Justice

Aubrey Edwards

How do we create and provide viable platforms for young people to be visionaries in their own communities and within our democracy? The Youth Justice Institute co-creates spaces with young folks where they can discuss issues that affect them in their communities, explore these issues with adults, community leaders, and envision their futures through art-making.

I have worked alongside young people in an array of capacities for the last 20 years, often making art and always in awe of how they navigate their worlds. Youth advocacy is a realm and practice I have dedicated my life to, and it is a joy to be in service to young people. Young folks are our community members who are not yet old enough to vote, while simultaneously being harmed and impacted by systems and legislation spearheaded by adults and their respective ideologies. Wyoming has one of the highest juvenile incarceration rates in the country, topped by the highest youth suicide rates in the country. Upon moving to Laramie via New Orleans in 2021, I co-founded the Youth Justice Institute (YJI).

Since its inception, YJI has taken three distinct forms: the pilot YJI afterschool program, the YJI partnership with The Partners for Rural Impact Summit, and the YJI summer institute. Each iteration is grounded in amplifying youth thought, voice and action within their communities and beyond. As a model of valuing young folks as artists and thinkers, it is important to note that YJI pays participants an equitable wage for their participation in the program.

## **YJI Afterschool**

Partnering with Laramie High School, the pilot YJI afterschool program met weekly over the course of three months. The theme of the pilot program was “know your rights,” and each week our group of 24 participants welcomed an adult ally and advocate who explored their civil rights with them. These guest engagers included creatives, artists, policy makers, social workers, organizers, and activists. It was through these guest engagers that YJI created partnerships with the UW Restorative Justice Program, Wyoming Equality, and the Defender’s Aid Clinic. Alongside adults, participants learned advocacy tools, mapped crucial resources in their community, learned about their civil rights in and out of school, and made artwork in response to systems that affect them.

Their individual artwork and accompanying writing were published and donated to 10 Wyoming public libraries. The institute's culminating event was a community celebration and art exhibition at the University of Wyoming Art Museum. Six participants took part in a public panel at the event, sharing their visions for their community and encouraging adults to listen to the needs of young people (see addended gallery of their work). As one Youth Justice Institute participant told the audience, “Adults need to listen to us. And what a gift for them to see the world through our eyes and our lens.”

## **YJI and the Partners for Rural Impact Summit**

Through my national network of teaching artists, I reconnected with educators Bob Martin and Carrie Brunk in Owsley County, Kentucky, and Monique Verdin in Southeast Louisiana to partner on an ambitious youth-led project. Partners for Rural Impact—a Kentucky-based organization that supports rural leaders and communities to accelerate educational outcomes—invited Bob to establish a youth cohort spanning over three rural regions to present at their annual conference. Supported by their teaching artists, youth from Wyoming, Kentucky and Louisiana would meet over zoom for three months to build relationships and begin conversations around community envisioning. I selected six exemplary young leaders from the YJI after school pilot program to create the Wyoming cohort. During these three months, the youth participants slowly started to brainstorm what their morning plenary at the conference could be, but understood that the three cohorts would have a mere 36 hours in person together in Charlotte, NC to fully develop the presentation for the conference.

All three cohorts arrived on the Friday of the conference and immediately joined each other for a meal. Young folks who had only met on zoom were able to meet each other in person, and connections were quickly formed. The next morning, all cohorts and supporting

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adults grounded themselves in the hotel conference room, where we would spend 13 hours that day developing our presentation. In collaborative artmaking speak, we “got in the room” together. Bob, Monique and I led young folks through envisioning activities, listened to each other's lived experiences, and collaboratively created a framework for our presentation. Grounded in the question, “Is rural a culture or a place?,” we supported young folks as they created songs, skits, and monologues that would convey the challenges and hopes they experience in their communities. We worked to weave these stories together into a 45-minute-long performance that received a five-minute standing ovation at the conference the next day. “They are experts in their own lives,” an educator and conference participant told me, “It’s time adults listen to them.”



*Summit participant Kai after checking in at the conference*



*Summit participant Jasmine giving an on-camera interview*



*Wyoming cohort on stage performing their skit*

## YJI Summer Institute

Summers can be challenging for young folks, away from their structure and social support systems. The YJI summer institute centered community- building and served our community’s queer and queer ally young folks. The continued hostile climate toward LGBTQIA+ community members in our town, and on the Laramie High School campus, was the catalyst for YJI summer institute to focus on serving young folks who have experienced bullying and discrimination at school.

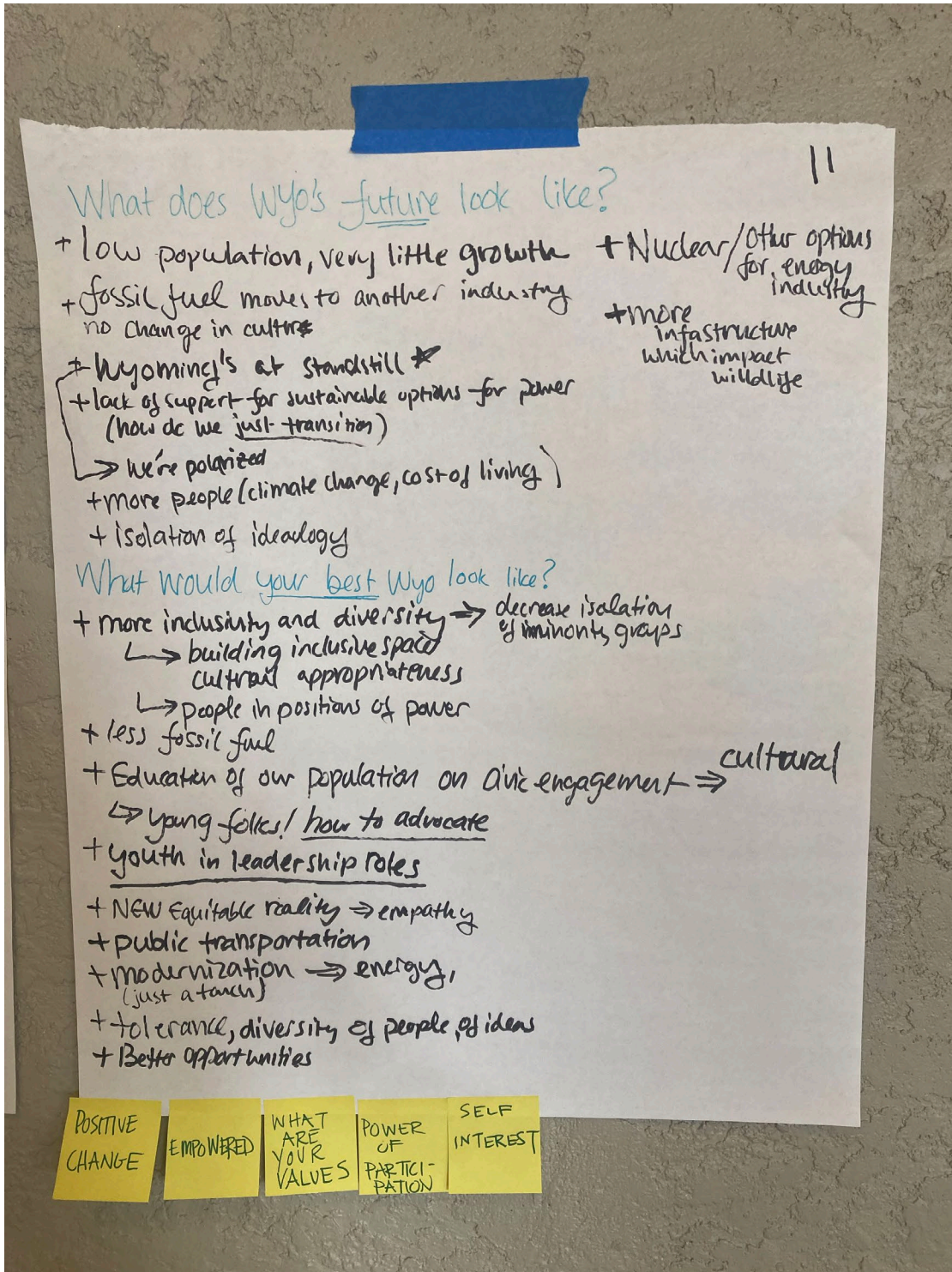
The theme of this institute was “organizing”, and young folks connected with adult community leaders who led workshops on art making as social justice, restorative justice, storytelling as advocacy, and organizing around issues that affects young people. Extending the institute's community organizational partnerships, YJI partnered with the Laramie Public Art Coalition and the Laramie Plains Civic Center. With support from these organizations, participants spent the 9-5 week exploring issues that affect them, while designing a large-scale art installation under the guidance of lead public artist Conor Mullen. They identified two major themes for their piece: celebrating diversity in Laramie by making queer and BIPOC people visible through the work and celebrating the things in their community that bring them joy. We hosted an unveiling event and community celebration at the Civic Center on September 14th, 2023. “I’m not often listened to or heard,” one summer institute participant told me, “It feels really good to be heard.”



*Summer institute participants measuring the space for their art installation*



*Summer institute participants with Restorative Justice facilitator Connor Novotny*



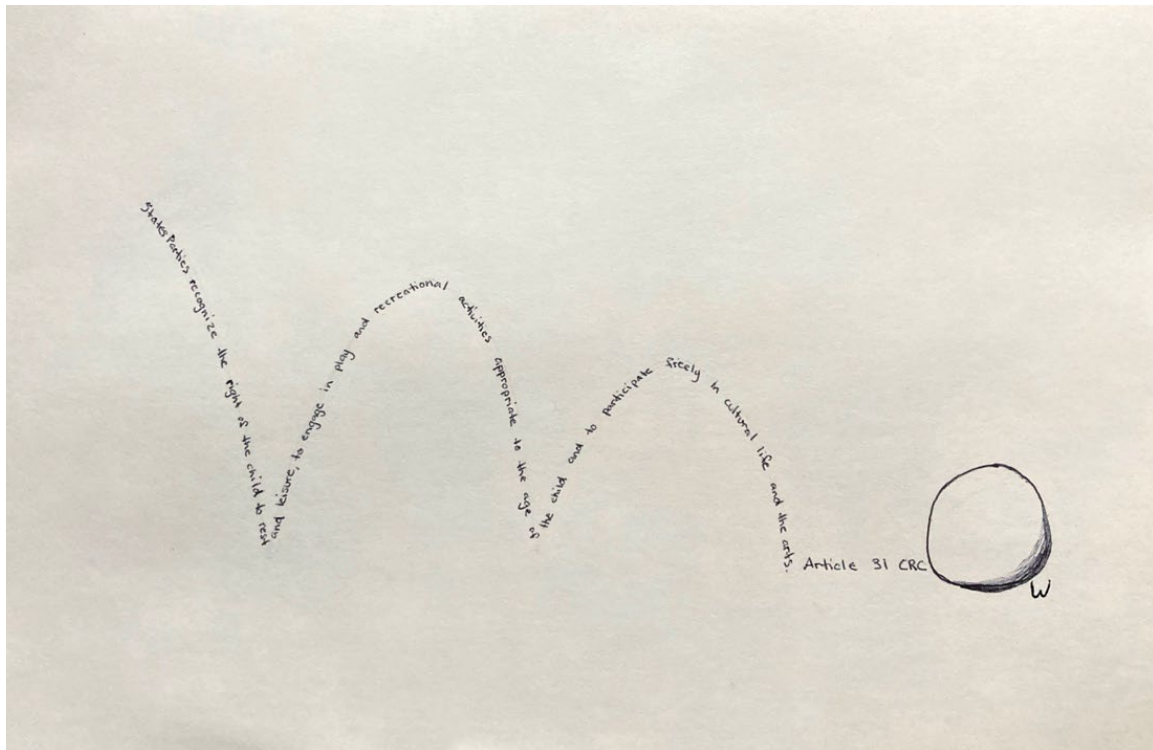
Envisioning activity completed by summer institute participants:  
What would you like to see in your future communities?

## Gallery of Student Art and Writing from YJI Afterschool



Elena, *Viva La Causa!*

This piece is representative of my struggles as a Chicana in the U.S.A and how I've struggled to embrace my identity. As a Chicana I've always felt uncomfortable with my ethnicity, too White to be Mexican, too Mexican to be White. When I was younger, I was embarrassed of my ethnicity, I refused to learn Spanish from my father or grandparents and I've grown to regret it, but I'm learning to embrace my ethnicity and be unashamed of who I am. It is true that I've held the privilege of being white passing, and that my family has never had to work in the fields, but the cause for Hispanic rights goes far beyond the cliché of the Mexican farmworker, the housemaid, or the taco truck. This cause also goes to the Mexican teachers, the Argentinian lawyers, the unemployed Chilean mothers and fathers, and the struggling Hispanic youth. The Hispanic cause is for EVERY Hispanic, everyone, who, for whatever reason, struggles to embrace their Hispanic heritage. To everyone who has felt as though it's a burden to their life, that maybe they were born the wrong way, to everyone who wished they could wash their heritage off as though it was soap to the skin. To quote César Chávez, "Viva la causa!" The cause will live on, we must learn to embrace ourselves, our ethnicity, our people, our struggles. This program has helped me with that. It has helped me learn what my rights are, not only as a minor, but also a Chicana. It has taught me what rights are given to me and how to use my knowledge of my rights to help not only myself but also others. I appreciate how this program has allowed me to express myself through art and other artistic means. Remember, you are not alone, this piece is to every lone hispanic soul.



Emma, untitled

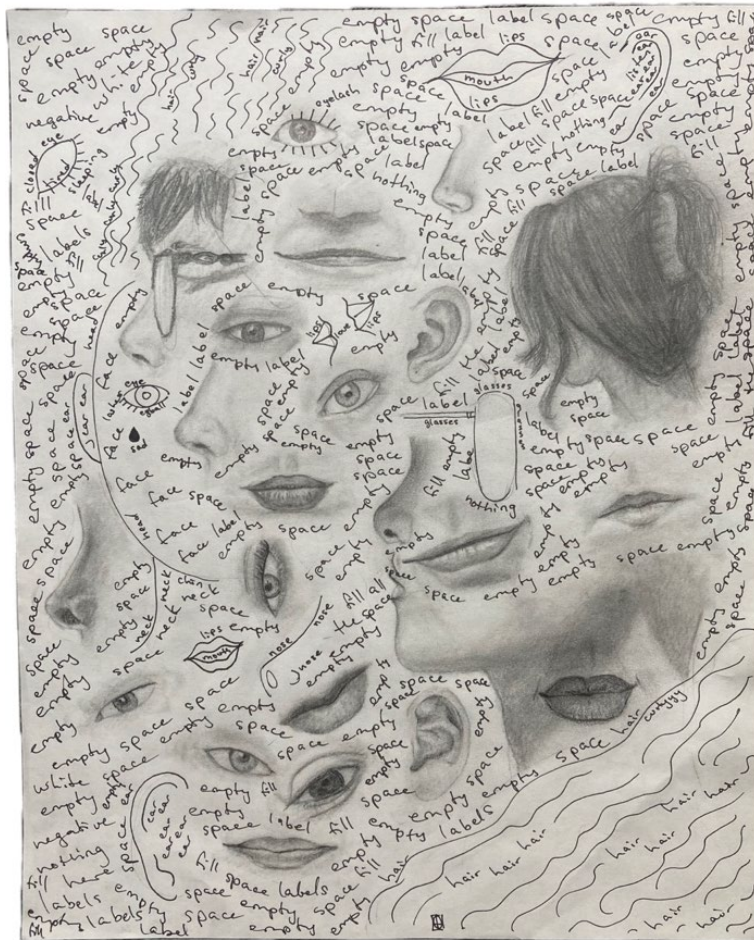
The Convention on the Rights of the Child was an effort by the United Nations to define the rights belonging to children, or more specifically anyone under the age of 18. Article 31 of the treaty lays out a right that seems trivial at first glance, but its importance cannot be understated. This is the right to play. Appropriate recreation is vital to proper social, mental, and physical development, and the 195 countries that have ratified the treaty would agree. However, there is just one country that has not ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child: the United States of America. Failing to ratify the treaty is certainly not the only way the United States has violated the rights of children, including the right to play. An overemphasis on the importance of academics from a young age results in teenagers who are burnt out and struggle to continue their education. Socioeconomic circumstances force kids into the workforce at a young age, where child labor laws are poorly enforced or often nonexistent. Perhaps most heartbreaking, an ineffective juvenile justice system takes kids away from their homes, failing to provide the assistance they need and instead just increasing their chances of reoffending after their release. We cannot just stand by and let children be stripped of their childhoods any longer. It is time to let kids be kids and allow them the right to play.



Rylan, untitled

Young people have the ability to make great changes in the world but there is one issue, our voices are not heard. This drawing represents how youth voices aren't heard, how we are not able to speak our minds, and how we aren't able to get our messages across even though we have so much to say. The voices of youth are some of the most powerful voices we have in society. Since we are so 'young and naive' people tend to disregard our words even though there is so much that we can and should be speaking out about. We have brilliant ideas and we want those ideas to be acknowledged and considered. Instead, our voices are silenced, information isn't brought to our attention and we aren't able to advocate for ourselves. There are so many things that have great impacts on us and the way we get to live our lives, such as government policies. But, just because of our age, there isn't much we can do about it. Young people's voices should be heard and we should be able to advocate for ourselves, we need to make a difference and make these things happen.





Elio, The American Teenager

The American Teenager is an archetype that has existed as long as “teenagers” have been considered their own demographic. It is an addition to the perfect, rose-colored, and so very static concept of the American Dream. By the time one has reached high school, they have often been given the responsibilities of adults, whilst being treated as though they have but the emotional maturity of a child. When, under this pressure, many of even the most dedicated, passionate students turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms and dangerous activities; they are not often given access to the proper resources, but rather are put into systems where too few people care enough to do much than to speed them along to avoid all the extra effort that comes with incarcerated minors. While fortunately, there are programs such as the Youth Justice Institute that are dedicated to the education and spread of advocacy for high school age students; it is still too easy to just box the “troubled” and “gifted” and “average” teens into categories inaccurate and incomplete. The goal of this piece is to represent that push, and how our individuality shows through regardless, through the features of current and former students.



Suzy, untitled

Silence is a powerful tool when chosen, but we don't get that choice. We are the "children." We don't know what "the real world is really like" or the "actual issues in life." After all, we don't pay bills, or go to work, or pay taxes, or deal with complex emotions. But, we do. We pay our car payments if we are lucky enough to afford it. We work AFTER school, AFTER tests, and AFTER the shittiest days, to support ourselves. We still have to file those taxes even though we have no idea how to do that or when. And the emotional life of a teenager? We are constantly overwhelmed by emotions. IF and only if you are lucky, you MAY get support. Maybe from a parent, or more likely, from a friend who is going through the same struggles. That is the mentally and emotionally draining life that is forced upon us. But even still we are "just children?"

Our voices can't be heard until we are 25 and become representatives. And if we want to make some real, lasting political changes, we have to wait until age 35 to become senators or president. Even those of us who do try and stand up, are shoved down with "You're just a child, what do you know?" Well, a lot. We know that the earth is dying, women are losing rights, people may not be able to love who they love, and god forbid you are trans. Then not only do you have to worry about all the responsibility thrown on you, but also the added bigotry and hate. The disdain from men using the bible to strip away your rights to piss in the correct bathroom. Do you hear how stupid that is? Because you are a trans woman, you can't piss in the women's bathroom. And for what? "It's for the sAfTEy of the children." But I thought we were children? The same people forced to use the wrong bathroom are the same

children who would get hurt? No, it's an outdated way of thinking. Our generation and the generations after ours will look at these blatant violations of basic human decency and be ashamed.

Every day children take their lives. And every day the children and people affected are left with "thoughts and prayers." Thanks, but no. We need a little more than that. We need resources to be heard, then we need those who can make changes to listen. We need the voice of children that are the future to be heard.

But no. We are "just kids." We don't know about the "real world" or "real pain." So why should we get a say?

So please help us. Be an advocate for us.

# How to Echo: Knowing Things Well in a Polarized World

Robby Bishop

As disorienting as politics has been in the United States recently, I find myself equally confused by how people talk about these developments. Among the recurring warnings about the perils of partisanship, I hear a new word with ever-increasing frequency: *polarization*. I've heard it used by friends, teachers, journalists, and politicians—sometimes referring to the distance between the platforms of political parties, sometimes to hostility between citizens, sometimes to the development of extreme beliefs. Sometimes they evoke all these things and more. Each time someone uses the term, it is their earnestness that catches my attention. In *The Atlantic*, for example, Yascha Mounk suggests that the United States is caught in a “doom spiral of pernicious polarization” that might lead to civil war.<sup>1</sup> In a country with a long history of intense divisions and a long history of talking about those divisions, what makes the word *polarization* appropriate for our present moment?

In my view, the concept's value has less to do with how it conceptualizes division and more to do with how it directs attention to epistemic issues affecting democracies today. At the heart of many contemporary concerns about increasing partisanship, divisiveness, and animosity is increasing reflexivity about the effects of how knowledge is acquired, developed, and disseminated. “Getting affirmation instead of information has definitely exacerbated polarization,” Katie Couric says in a documentary about the 2020 presidential election.<sup>2</sup> Exemplifying this trend, she criticizes the “millions of bubbles that people live in, where they seek out or are fed information algorithmically, that reinforce their beliefs.” The term *polarization* is rarely used in isolation. As philosopher Robert Talisse points out,

<sup>1</sup> Mounk, “The Doom Spiral.”

<sup>2</sup> *Split Screen*.

“Lamentations over our political divides are commonly accompanied by related warnings concerning political ‘bubbles,’ ‘silos,’ and ‘echo chambers’; these are said to produce ‘intellectual closure,’ ‘groupthink,’ ‘spin,’ ‘derp,’ ‘post-truth,’ and forms of ‘derangement.’”<sup>3</sup> These concepts are purported causes of polarization. They suggest that *where, how, and with whom* we acquire knowledge has social and political effects. They suggest that civic responsibility has epistemic dimensions. Within the confusing, catastrophizing, and sometimes contradictory discourse about polarization, this point is the one that I hope to clarify. What does it mean to know things well—as a citizen, in a democracy, today?

In answering this question, I hope to counter a prevailing trend. Theories which outline contemporary epistemic problems tend to express an overwhelmingly negative view of community, especially like-minded community. They inherit an individualist bias, common in Western philosophy and liberal political theory, which implies that solidarity and objectivity are opposed. As Richard Rorty has argued, knowing things well too often means “detach[ing] oneself from any particular community and look[ing] down on it from a more universal standpoint.”<sup>4</sup> This point is emphasized by feminist epistemologists, such as Naomi Scheman and Lorraine Code, who critique the prevalent “paranoia” about being influenced by others.<sup>5</sup> In discussions about polarization, the ever-expanding vocabulary for describing enclosed epistemic spaces is evidence of such paranoia. Bubbles, chambers, silos, and enclaves are spaces to avoid or to escape—communities to “detach” from.<sup>6</sup> In opposition to views that promote skepticism about solidarity, I will argue for the social and political benefits of like-minded communities and describe the various roles that we can play within them. We do depend on others for knowing things well. To act as we if do not is a delusion. The theory of civic responsibility presented here builds from that recognition.

<sup>3</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 95.

<sup>4</sup> Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity?,” 30.

<sup>5</sup> Scheman, “Though This Be Method”; Code, *Epistemic Responsibility*, 166–72.

<sup>6</sup> While these terms and theories are not the same, the differences—in my view—are minor. Because the critiques are motivated by an individualistic approach to epistemology, they tend to be indiscriminate when evaluating the effects of solidarity and like-minded support. Moreover, the various terms are more often used for lazy finger-pointing than they are to meaningfully discuss civic and epistemic responsibility. I lump them together for this reason. *Filter bubble* does raise a distinct concern about algorithmic filtering, but as Axel Bruns argues in *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, the evidence supporting the concept is lacking. See also Karpf, “The Internet and Engaged Citizenship,” 10–14. When I go on to make use of the term *echo chamber*, it is not because I think the concept itself is especially insightful or prescient. Rather, I see the metaphor of echoing as a productive starting point for conceptualizing *interdependent* epistemic relations—a way to bring the insights of feminist epistemologists to discussions of democracy.

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Although theories of polarization tend to be skeptical of solidarity, they nevertheless present important insights for understanding the relationship between individual knowers, the communities they inhabit, and the wider public sphere. To draw on such insights, I will begin by analyzing the theory developed by Robert Talisse in his book *Overdoing Democracy: Why We Must Put Politics in its Place*. While not every theory of polarization is the same as his, most bear some resemblance. His stance is representative of those that I believe to have potential for articulating a revitalized sense of civic responsibility but which I find limited by their overwhelmingly negative view of like-minded community. After analyzing these limitations, I will set forth an alternative view, drawing on one of the “paranoid” terms I introduced above: *echo chamber*. While frustrated with its pejorative connotation, I think there are intriguing possibilities for reformulating the concept. Communication scholar Amit Pinchevski sees a productive “bivalence” in the term—an ambiguity that is more evident if you focus on the first half of the compound noun. An *echo* might be destructive by reinforcing an exclusionary ideology, but it might also be supportive and nurturing.<sup>7</sup> As prosocial affirmation, echoing can lead people to believe in themselves and to cultivate ideas they share with others. *Good* echo chamber doesn’t have to be an oxymoron. By building on the constructive echoing suggested by Pinchevski, I hope to promote a more balanced view of like-minded community.

I also hope to suggest more nuanced ways of reflecting on what it means to inhabit such a space. Whether echoing is constructive or destructive depends, in large part, on social location. Due to race, class, gender, sexuality, and other factors, some people find their views affirmed more commonly than others. The powerful are echoed prominently and persistently, others much less so. This dynamic affects how people develop and contribute knowledge. Politically, it affects how people participate. In my view, constructive echoing corrects for this inequality. I will elaborate on this possibility by drawing on the work of Gaile Pohlhaus, José Medina, and other philosophers. For Pohlhaus and Medina, echoing is a metaphor which captures the complex act of knowing *together* with others. More specifically, it represents how we support each other in developing and contributing knowledge. I will focus on how such engagement can have socially beneficial effects, emphasizing the interactions that take place between people who have similar experiences (what I will call *survival echoing*) and between those who have different experiences but similar commitments (what I will call *resistance echoing*).

Throughout this essay, I will focus on the epistemic dimensions that I think are a key part of a revitalized conception of civic responsibility. I will not, however, neglect the concern about political divisions. By arguing for the ways that knowing together is supportive of democracy, I also hope to suggest when it’s not. Looking beyond the divisions framed by electoral politics might make the *bad* echo chambers more evident. If polarization is

<sup>7</sup> Pinchevski, *Echo*, 111.

occurring in democratic and anti-democratic directions, rather than only in liberal and conservative ones, we need to think more critically about how we respond. Bipartisanship isn't the obvious answer. When responding to an earlier era of epistemic and political crisis, Richard Rorty argued for being a partisan of solidarity.<sup>8</sup> What about being a partisan of democracy? Might the civic responsibility we need today include such impassioned stance-taking? I will answer in the affirmative, arguing for a *democratic echoing* that amplifies faith in democracy.

## The Polarization Story

When someone uses the word *polarization*, they are telling a story about our current political problems. According to C. Thi Nguyen, the basic contours of this story include the following details: "Our once-peaceful society has been riven into polarized camps. Extremism and political separation are the core problems, and the fix is something like reconnection, intermingling, and friendship across party lines."<sup>9</sup> In *Overdoing Democracy*, Robert Talisse adds depth and clarity to this story by distinguishing between competing uses of the concept. In particular, he distinguishes between *belief polarization* and *political polarization*. The first term describes an epistemic phenomenon, while the second characterizes the state of a divided populace.<sup>10</sup> In Talisse's story, belief polarization causes political polarization; as it becomes more common, the political divides widen.

Since I am interested in the epistemic issues framed by this discourse, I will focus on belief polarization. The theory explains what goes on in the many enclosed spaces—bubbles, chambers, enclaves, and silos—shaping popular imagination. Talisse builds off an intuition that there's a link between corroboration, confidence, and extremism:

Corroboration from others with whom we identify makes us feel good about what we believe. When we feel good about what we believe, we experience a significant boost to our commitment to our overall perspective, we become a more fervent devotee to our point of view, whether it be feminist, conservative, environmentalist, egalitarian, or what have you. In turn, when that intensification happens, we are emboldened in various ways that drive us to shift to more extreme belief contents that we adopt with amplified degrees of confidence. Belief polarization can transform us into something similar to amped-up fans in the wake of a thrilling victory (or a crushing defeat).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?," 24, 29, 33.

<sup>9</sup> Nguyen, "Polarization or Propaganda?"; See also his journal article, "Was It Polarization?"

<sup>10</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 96–98; Nguyen, "Was It Polarization?," 10.

<sup>11</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 114–15; See also Sunstein, *#Republic*, 74.

While becoming an “amped-up” fan might be an exciting experience, it does have social repercussions. Fans don’t like the fans of other teams. Along with the excitement comes an “intensification of negative assessments of opposing groups, their members, and their beliefs.”<sup>12</sup> What starts off as a good feeling among people who hold similar views suddenly becomes a bad attitude towards those who hold different ones. What starts off as confidence within communities suddenly becomes division between them.

Confidence creates division. I summarize the argument too simply, perhaps, to highlight its distinctiveness. Most theories of polarization focus on extremism; Talisse argues for its multiplicity. There are extreme beliefs and extreme behaviors, but there is also an extremism in “degree of belief”—your level of commitment to your perspective.<sup>13</sup> Belief polarization is the process by which this confidence intensifies. Extremism, in this case, is an arrogance that leads to the rejection of different views and to hostility toward those who hold them. Confidence is an ordinary phenomenon. We all know what it means to have it, and what it means to not. But when it comes to extreme confidence, do we have the same ability to assess ourselves?

Talisse argues that we do not, pointing out that when we talk about epistemic issues, “we are usually referring to dysfunction that has beset others.”<sup>14</sup> Just as we blame the opposing party for political problems, we point out cognitive errors in those we disagree with: “We normally do not regard ourselves as in the grip of the polarization dynamic, and we don’t see our political allies as having transformed into more extreme versions of themselves, either. The polarization dynamic appears to us as something that affects other people. We ordinarily cannot recognize it in our own case.” This failure of recognition, in Talisse’s view, is a failure to take responsibility. How we know affects how we relate. If I want to understand how I impact the public sphere (and the divisions forming within it), I must understand my vulnerability to belief polarization. I must understand how my community shapes my convictions. When we ignore the webs of affirmation we’re enmeshed in, it becomes all too easy to criticize others. Talisse argues that belief polarization affects us all, suggesting a collective responsibility for the health of the public sphere.

I agree with this move in principle but not in practice. The theory is limited by the narrative in which it’s set. The story of polarization, Nguyen points out, is a “symmetrical story”—a both-sides phenomenon.<sup>15</sup> Because it’s an argument about a problem happening on both sides of a political divide, Talisse does not distinguish between views a society should hope to develop, maintain, and spread and those it should hope to resist. When he summarizes the research supporting his theory, he cites studies showing that both racists and

<sup>12</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 118.

<sup>13</sup> Talisse, 106–7.

<sup>14</sup> Talisse, 158–59.

<sup>15</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

anti-racists become more committed to their views when they associate with like-minded people. He does the same for chauvinists and feminists.<sup>16</sup> What interests him is *not* the difference in quality between the views of these opposing sides—their very different takes on justice and injustice. Instead, he highlights the fact that “the ideological distance between the two groups expanded.” Because he is so committed to bridging political divides, he fails to distinguish between socially beneficial beliefs and socially harmful ones. The argument equates people struggling for equality with those struggling against it, implying that both sides need to relax their convictions in order to reduce political polarization.

There are a number of ethical and political reasons for rejecting this argument. Given the focus of this essay, however, I will describe the *epistemic* reasons outlined by Nguyen. First, the term *polarization* “conjures an image of a movement toward two (or more) poles of extreme belief,” ignoring the possibility of polarization in the center.<sup>17</sup> While Talisse argues that belief polarization affects everyone, he does not consider the tendency for extreme confidence among those expressing centrist positions. Why, we might ask, are some people so certain that bridge-building and bipartisanship are the solutions to the most pressing political problems? Even more important is the need to call out “toxic centrism,” a term coined by trans YouTuber Natalie Wynn to describe a position that is “distrustful of any strong moral positions,” valuing “dispassionate intellectualism above all else.”<sup>18</sup> She criticizes people who wonder, both to themselves and aloud, “Why are marginalized people so unwilling to have calm, philosophical debates about whether they should have rights?” With better awareness of centrist polarization, we might cut short such questions and encourage more critical ones.

Second, when the shared confidence of a group leads to uniformity in belief, it does not follow that they are behaving irrationally, as a matter of course. Their uniformity might also be “the convergence of clear-sighted people on the truth.”<sup>19</sup> In that case, an increase in confidence is warranted for both the group and the individual knowers. When evaluating extremism, it’s important not to neglect *belief content*. As astronomer David Weinberg has remarked, “the problem with an extraterrestrial conspiracy mailing list isn’t that it’s an echo chamber: it’s that it thinks that there’s a conspiracy by extraterrestrials.”<sup>20</sup> Belief polarization is more likely to have negative effects when shared beliefs are out of touch with reality and not supported by evidence. Negative effects are also more likely when shared beliefs are undemocratic, exclusionary, and contemptuous. For social and political phenomena, it may not be obvious what “convergence on the truth” looks like. That challenge, however, does

<sup>16</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 103.

<sup>17</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

<sup>18</sup> Wynn, “The Witch Trials.” See the discussion around 57:00-59:00.

<sup>19</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

<sup>20</sup> Weinberger, “Is There an Echo?” Quoted in Bruns, *Are Filter Bubbles Real?*, 105.

not mean it's *unclear* when groups promote socially regressive ideals and when they fight for progressive ones. Recognizing our vulnerability to belief polarization doesn't prevent us from making careful, intentional judgments about the types of beliefs supporting democracy.

Finally, not every confident boost leads to arrogance. When a community helps us feel good about what we believe, it might help us discover confidence that we lacked. "The blanket condemnation of like-minded enclaves," Nguyen argues, "arises from a background assumption about appropriate confidence. It imagines that people already have, for the most part, the right level of confidence *before* gathering together in supportive groups, and that the emotional support can only bloat their confidence beyond rationality."<sup>21</sup> In my view, it is this point that most complicates the symmetrical story of polarization—its "bothsidesism." If people enter like-minded communities with varying levels of confidence, the effects of belief polarization will vary. Some people will become arrogant and contemptuous of others. Others will learn to believe in themselves like never before. Theories of polarization express a negative view of community because they focus on the first effect. In contrast, my theory of civic responsibility will express a positive view of community by focusing on the second.

The shift in focus has further implications. Talisse calls for thinking about epistemic issues in the "first-person"—reflecting on ourselves rather than always pointing to irrationality and extremism in others.<sup>22</sup> I think that cultivating such reflexivity is important. Becoming too attached to our own ideas does affect how we interact with people with different perspectives. We *should* avoid becoming entrenched in our beliefs. But is all that we need to do to act responsibly? Just care about the state of our own minds? By taking a different view of the "confidence boost," I will argue for the need to support each other. If we depend on each other for knowing things well, "we need to do more than simply engage in rational belief formation," Hanna Kiri Gunn argues. "We must also invest in and care for the epistemic agency of others"—that is, their ability to achieve appropriate levels of confidence and their ability to express ideas that matter.<sup>23</sup> Through the metaphor of echoing, I will describe how we can show such care and support. How people are echoed affects how they develop and contribute knowledge. Politically, it affects how they participate. The need for echoing arises because not everyone receives the support they need. In the next section, I elaborate on the implications of *differential* epistemic support, an inequity that responsible citizens can strive to address.

<sup>21</sup> Nguyen, "Polarization or Propaganda?" Emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 158–59.

<sup>23</sup> Gunn, "How Should We Build," 572.

## Asymmetries in Echoing

The problem with the story of polarization is that it universalizes a problem. Because not everyone starts with the same level of confidence in their beliefs, the risk of extreme confidence is not the same. We all have responsibility for how our convictions impact social relations, but the responsibilities are dissimilar. They differ because of an “asymmetry in echoing.”<sup>24</sup> Gaile Pohlhaus employs the metaphor of echoing to discuss the varying degrees of support that people find for their beliefs. The support varies according to social position:

Within a stratified society, one in which some groups are empowered in relation to others who are disempowered, *not all claims echo equally* throughout the social imagination and in public discourse. Nondominantly situated knowers are often under epistemic pressure to recognize, acknowledge, and take seriously dominantly situated knowers’ experiences and the sorts of beliefs that arise from those experiences. However, the reverse is not true.<sup>25</sup>

This view of echoing is different than saying that some voices are “louder” than others (though that is certainly true as well). What is at stake is the ability to achieve solidity in one’s beliefs—to sustain them, to think further with them, and to share them meaningfully with others.

For those in dominant positions, support comes along with an absence of pressure. “Part of what it means to have power in relation to others,” Pohlhaus argues, “is to be able to press upon another without that other being able to press back with equal (or sometimes any) force.”<sup>26</sup> Because of the asymmetry, overconfidence can go unchecked and potentially become extreme, just as Talisse and other theorists of polarization worry. The risk is not the same for those whose views are echoed infrequently. Lack of support comes along with the presence of pressure. They are more likely to be questioned and criticized. To capture this dynamic, Pohlhaus opposes echoing and gaslighting. Some knowers are more likely to be echoed and less likely to be gaslit. Others are more likely to be gaslight and less likely to be echoed.

Because of these asymmetries, some people will be more successful than others at developing knowledge that makes an impact in the world—not because of their intelligence but because of inequities in epistemic environments. Just as unlevel playing fields shape social, economic, and political environments, “unlevel knowing fields” shape epistemic ones.<sup>27</sup> According to Pohlhaus, the unequal distribution of pressure and support arises

<sup>24</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing,” 682.

<sup>25</sup> Pohlhaus, 681. Emphasis added.

<sup>26</sup> Pohlhaus, 682.

<sup>27</sup> Bailey, “The Unlevel Knowing Field,” 62; “On Gaslighting,” 667.

because of a “dialectical relationship between situatedness and interdependence.”<sup>28</sup> We develop knowledge interdependently, but our shared epistemic resources (concepts, theories, stories, etc.) are not always useful for everyone. We also have unique experiences. Because of factors like race, class, gender, and sexuality, we can experience a tension between our lived experience and the shared epistemic resources that shape its meaning. When we experience such tension, we desire to improve the deficient resources and understandings. The problem for nondominant and marginalized knowers is that knowledge is often calibrated to dominant social positions. The experience of tension will be more common, and the task of updating shared understandings will be more difficult. The need for change will be ignored or resisted or repeatedly gaslit, for the very reason that these epistemic resources are useful for those in dominant positions. They can’t spot the deficiencies.

Understanding that a lack of support for one’s beliefs often comes along with unwarranted criticism raises the stakes of epistemic inequities. Gaslighting, Pohlhaus argues, often leads to “epistemic breakdown.”<sup>29</sup> It can “put out of circulation a particular way of understanding the world, one that centers the experience of the one who is gaslit. Specifically, in raising doubts about speakers’ reliability, epistemic gaslighting is oriented at getting knowers to change their beliefs, to stop noticing or testifying to something, with the risk of being deemed incompetent should they refuse to do so.” The political implication should be clear: Gaslighting, whether intentional or unintentional, might convince someone to stop speaking of an injustice or expressing a valuable political goal. We cannot assume that good ideas will stand on their own without support from others. That’s simply not the case if an idea is repeatedly and unwarrantedly criticized.

The problem of unlevel knowing fields ultimately leads to questions about political voice: whether people can meaningfully call attention to issues they find important and whether those efforts can impact society more broadly for the better. The tension between situatedness and interdependence is not just a problem for individuals. When interdependent resources prove insufficient, certain experiences are overlooked or ignored, and knowledge about our social world suffers. When epistemic interactions are structured inequitably, clear understanding is not the norm. Ignorance is maintained when dominant forms of knowing are imposed on everyone and the attempt to make changes is resisted. Inequitable epistemic environments can have a “smothering” effect, preventing good ideas from being shared by undermining the epistemic agency of those who want to share them.<sup>30</sup> When that happens, our social and political ideals will be distorted, lacking the crucial insights of those who understand their deficiencies.

<sup>28</sup> Pohlhaus, “Relational Knowing,” 716, 719–22.

<sup>29</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing” 677.

<sup>30</sup> Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence,” 244.

In contrast, a supportive community can facilitate the development of ideas and foster the epistemic agency of knowers, making it more likely that they will share their insights. A like-minded community can counteract consistent pressure to doubt oneself. “Affirmation is the basis for the creation of counterpublics,” Pinchevski argues when describing the significance of constructive echoing.<sup>31</sup> In the next two sections, I will describe a process that leads to social and political insights being shared more broadly, distinguishing between two forms of constructive echoing: *survival echoing*, which takes place between people who have similar experiences, and *resistance echoing*, which takes place among people who have different experiences but similar commitments. Both concepts offer insights for reimagining civic responsibility and for understanding what it means to know things well in a polarized world.

### Survival Echoing

When someone experiences unwarranted pressure on their ideas, echoing them can have a powerful effect. Gaile Pohlhaus develops the concept *survival echoing* to describe the support that helps people achieve warranted self-trust in the face of consistent pressure to doubt themselves.<sup>32</sup> To highlight the significance of the concept, it’s helpful to focus on the emotional dynamics associated with gaslighting. When a person is gaslit, it is not just a person’s beliefs that are called into question but also—and perhaps even more frequently—their emotional responses. These emotions might be inchoate, not yet connected with specific cognitive content that one would articulate as a solid belief or claim. A good example is anger: It tends to point towards injustice, but when first experienced, it might just be a felt sense that something is wrong, without a clear understanding of exactly what. In this situation, the anger can be easily dismissed; the person experiencing it might be told that they are upset about nothing.

For this reason, María Lugones argues that the anger experienced by marginalized groups is often a second-order anger: a deep frustration with the dominant world of sense in which justified anger about injustice or oppression appears meaningless.<sup>33</sup> For her, supports comes in the form of “emotional echoing,” an attunement with someone else that provides an intimation that there is something worth working to understand.<sup>34</sup> José Medina builds on Lugones’s ideas, arguing that the echoing of difficult emotions “calls upon us to recognize the failures of intelligibility within existing worlds of sense and to engage in the collaborative construction of new worlds of sense.”<sup>35</sup> Such collaboration occurs when people can

<sup>31</sup> Pinchevski, *Echo*, 126.

<sup>32</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing” 682.

<sup>33</sup> Lugones, “Hard-to-Handle Anger,” 104-5, 110-15.

<sup>34</sup> Lugones, 111-12, 115-17.

<sup>35</sup> Medina, “Complex Communication,” 234.

direct their attention away from those in dominant positions who question their views, *toward* those who have had similar experiences and who can affirm them. The direction of this attention is horizontal rather than vertical, according to Pohlhaus. It focuses “one’s epistemic energy toward and in connection with other non-dominantly situated subjects. It rests impediments to agency by withdrawing one’s epistemic energies from those who are dominantly situated and enlisting those energies to enable agencies elsewhere.”<sup>36</sup> Energy can thus be devoted to interpreting an experience, rather than defending its existence or value.

By gathering with similarly-situated others, a person’s experience is more likely to be echoed, allowing an inchoate understanding to be further developed. The confidence boost experienced in like-minded community serves as an invitation to explore new ideas. As Naomi Scheman says of the effect of consciousness-raising groups, it can alter how people set the “parameters of intelligibility” for each other, allowing them to sharpen their perception of what they experience in common.<sup>37</sup> An experience that was previously marked by diffuse emotion or directionless frustration can acquire new meaning with the help of others. Scheman calls this a “political redescription.”<sup>38</sup> People learn to engage with dominant understandings, changing them so that they accord with their own experience. They respond to the previous failures of intelligibility, and by doing so, they also gain insight into how epistemic agency is affected by relations of power.

Through *survival echoing*, people can realize that what doesn’t make sense in one context can make sense in another. It can help them realize that they are simply “speaking from elsewhere.” This phrase from Medina captures both the difficulty and the possibility contained in the struggle of a marginalized knower: “Speaking from elsewhere can be negatively characterized as speaking from a not-yet recognized discursive context and with a not-yet recognizable voice. But it implicitly involves a struggle for recognition; and it can be positively characterized as contributing to the creation of new discursive contexts and opening up spaces for new voices that have not yet been heard yet.”<sup>39</sup> Through this lens, like-minded communities have an important democratic function. As spaces of *survival echoing*, they create contexts where people acquire confidence in their voices, making it more likely that that they use them to spark positive social change.

By offering ways of understanding the epistemic and political value of like-minded community, the concept of *survival echoing* contests individualist assumptions about how people learn to know things well. It also offers an alternative to certain ways of thinking about the public sphere. In her influential essay “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” Nancy Fraser

<sup>36</sup> Pohlhaus, “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 245.

<sup>37</sup> Scheman, “Feeling Our Way,” 102.

<sup>38</sup> Scheman, “Anger,” 25.

<sup>39</sup> Medina, *Speaking from Elsewhere*, 179.

critiques the idea that “a single, overarching public sphere is a positive and desirable state of affairs, whereas the proliferation of a multiplicity of publics represents a departure from, rather than an advance toward, democracy.”<sup>40</sup> This “bourgeois masculinist” way of thinking is common to theorists who worry about enclaves, echo chambers, and ideological silos. They depict like-minded communities as a dangerous withdraw from dominant understandings, ignoring the ways that their ideas are already echoed and their voices facilitated. Furthermore, they neglect the political importance of escaping discursive limitations. A new voice is not just one with a distinctive style; it also has a distinctive content. A view from elsewhere offers a unique take on our social and political practices, offering insights not readily apparent to those who find themselves comfortable within these practices. When the creation of a new discursive space leads to new understandings, it can offer a powerful vision of how to reform our political practices to make them more equitable and just.

When describing the role of counterpublics, Fraser offers a powerful vision for understanding the political significance of *survival echoing*: “Assumptions that were previously exempt from contestation will now have to be publicly argued out. In general, the proliferation of [publics] means a widening of discursive contestation, and that is a good thing in stratified societies.”<sup>41</sup> As an example of an important counterpublic, she highlights 20<sup>th</sup> century feminist movements that “invented new terms for describing social reality, including ‘sexism,’ ‘the double shift,’ sexual harassment,’ and ‘marital, date, and acquaintance rape.’” It shouldn’t be difficult to think of more recent movements, such as #MeToo, #NoDAPL, and Black Lives Matter, that have had a similarly powerful effect on how dominant publics think about social and political realities. That impact should not be underestimated, but I want to offer two caveats to this way of thinking about like-minded community. First, it’s important not to overlook the difficulty of changing dominant understandings. Just because a community of knowers develops invaluable insights does not mean those ideas will get the uptake they deserve. The act of challenging dominant publics is better captured by the concept of *resistance echoing* that I will develop in the next section.

Second, justification for the epistemic value of like-minded community should not be dependent on public impact. The expansion of discursive space is valuable in itself. While *survival echoing* makes it more likely that ideas will be shared publicly, the concept is important because it highlights the positive impact on the knowers within a like-minded community, rather than focusing on the influence it has on those outside it. If a person feels they lack confidence in their beliefs because they are in a nondominant position, they have a responsibility to find people who share their experiences so that they can engage in practices of mutual and reciprocal support. For dominant knowers and those with different experiences, they have a responsibility to respect the discursive space of others—to not feel

<sup>40</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 63, 66.

<sup>41</sup> Fraser, 67.

threatened because they are not involved. Knowing things well, in this case, refers to all knowers acquiring appropriate levels of confidence in their beliefs, especially about their unique experiences of the world.

When new ideas are valued because they help those who are unaware of the issues affecting marginalized knowers, attention is vertically-directed—focused on the relations between differently-situated knowers rather than on the relationships between similarly-situated ones.<sup>42</sup> In boosting confidence and strengthening epistemic agency, *survival echoing* focuses on the transformations that occur, horizontally, among people who share experiences. They may desire to share their ideas with a broader public, but the value of the relationships they form is *not* dependent on taking such action. If they do desire to go public, however, the form of the like-minded community will need to broaden, involving those with different experiences but who share commitments to democracy and to social justice. This type of community is the focus of the next section.

## Resistance Echoing

Through the concept of *survival echoing*, we can see how a like-minded community can help individual knowers thrive. The effects of such support, however, can easily spread beyond the individuals within a group. Pohlhaus suggests an emerging collective power:

When knowers are able to sustain their attention to parts of the experienced world that are under threat of being disregarded through epistemic gaslighting, this collective sustained attention may help to bring that part of the experienced world to others' attention in a way that might not have been possible for an individual alone to do. Moreover, when a group of knowers is able to make sense to one another concerning those parts of the world that structural gaslighting directs them to ignore, then beliefs and claims that arise from those ignored parts of the world can reverberate more widely.<sup>43</sup>

The wider reverberation is what she calls *resistance echoing*. As ideas are echoed by a broader population, they acquire potential to inspire positive social change. More and more people will be talking about them and responding to them. In the move from *survival* to *resistance* echoing, a community makes the argument that its ideas should matter to more people. Fraser calls this process “democratic publicity,” or the effort “to convince others that what in the past was not public in the sense of being a matter of common concern should

<sup>42</sup> Pohlhaus, “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 248.

<sup>43</sup> Pohlhaus, “Gaslighting and Echoing,” 683.

now become so.”<sup>44</sup> The problem is that newly articulated or newly reformulated “matters of common concern” will be echoed by others in highly divergent ways.

Once valuable and potentially liberating ideas leave a space of *survival echoing*, they need support, advocacy, and activism to help keep their meaning alive. A new like-minded community must form, extending beyond that created by *survival echoing*: a coalition of people from diverse standpoints, including allies from dominant ones, working together so that transformative ideas can get the uptake they deserve. *Resistance echoing* is what I call such collaboration. Whereas *survival echoing* is a response to discursive limitations, *resistance echoing* is a response to discursive instability. When Medina discusses echoing, he does so to describe a responsibility for how meanings are carried into new contexts—careful to point out that we can never have full control over our voices.<sup>45</sup> The meaning of what we say is taken out of our hands as soon as we have spoken. Because of this instability, some people will echo others in ways that honor what was said, while others will distort, block, or silence the meaning.<sup>46</sup> Some will use ideas and other epistemic resources for democratic ends, expanding who can participate in discussions of mutual concern, while others will attempt to restrict such participation and seek to maintain epistemic and political inequities.

The political significance of such discursive instability is highlighted by Danielle Allen in *Our Declaration*. In a chapter titled “An Echo,” she discusses how language from the first sentence of the Declaration of Independence was echoed in segregationist laws and policies: “An honest phrase meant to liberate and to establish a principle of equality as entailing freedom from domination (‘separate *and* equal’) was reborn as a deceitful phrase (‘separate *but* equal’) used to subjugate and dominate across generations.”<sup>47</sup> Because of this “vicious little twist,” Allen concludes that the Declaration “provided tools for liberating some and dominating others.” The tools created by communities today are open to the same divergent responses. If an anti-democratic echoing has happened with one of the most well-respected political documents in the United States, it should be easy to imagine that the response to uncoded epistemic resources can be much more powerful and damaging.

Another way to conceptualize this problem is to think of the various forms of ignorance that make people unresponsive, or hostile, to attempts to improve shared social understandings. Resistance is necessary because the ignorance is often willful—a deliberate refusal of the ideas and epistemic resources of others. Kristie Dotson argues that such ignorance leads

<sup>44</sup> Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 71.

<sup>45</sup> Medina, *Speaking from Elsewhere*, 129–144. See also *The Epistemology of Protest*, 120–125.

<sup>46</sup> In his recent work, Medina has outlined the silencing tactics faced by activists. See *The Epistemology of Protest*, 109–20, and “Protest, Silencing, and Epistemic Activism,” a presentation available on YouTube.

<sup>47</sup> Allen, *Our Declaration*, 123–25.

to “contributory injustice.”<sup>48</sup> It occurs when knowers refuse to acquire the knowledge and skills for understanding parts of the world they do not experience, thus blocking the contributions of others. This injustice is inherently a democratic injustice. When epistemic agency is impacted, so too is the political agency to spark positive social change by shifting how debates are framed or directing attention to important issues. Opportunities for democratic publicity are not equal. *Resistance echoing* involves confronting that fact. When a like-minded community grows to include people who share democratic commitments, solidarity can function to ensure that social and political insights get the uptake they deserve, fighting back against silencing, distortion, gaslighting, and other tactics of willful ignorance. The work of changing minds involves more than sharing information, since the problem is more than a lack of awareness.<sup>49</sup>

The challenge involved in confronting people who *refuse to know* demands collaboration. It is important to note, however, that working together is often not enough. Successful resistance to social ignorance can also depend on a careful reorganization of power. Marginalized knowers tend to have better knowledge of deficiencies in dominant understandings and the problems they create, so they should take the lead in reforming them. The like-minded community engaged in *resistance echoing* should become what Kamili Posey calls an “evolving epistemic framework,” where

sympathetic dominant knowers temporarily renounce their epistemic privilege and/or use their privilege to amplify marginalized epistemic resources by way of selective silences or by redirecting dominant resources toward marginalized knowers. Sympathetic dominant knowers serve as epistemic allies by extending social power to marginalized knowers and, by extension, to marginalized epistemologies.<sup>50</sup>

She worries, however, that dominant knowers often limit themselves to acts of “charity,” merely extending credibility to those they might be biased against or occasionally acknowledging a contribution.<sup>51</sup> The solidarity described here is more extensive. Posey argues that

<sup>48</sup> Dotson, “A Cautionary Tale,” 31–32. Her analysis of epistemic oppression is further elaborated in “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression.” See also Alison Bailey’s response in “The Unlevel Knowing Field.”

<sup>49</sup> When discussing #MeToo, Pohlhaus points out the naivete involved in attempting to raise awareness about entrenched social issues: “The turn toward ‘raising awareness’ ignores the possibility that there are systems in place that perpetuate an ability to ignore. Painting those who do nothing to end sexual violence as simply unaware of a problem (one that they need others to bring to their attention), rather than as persons who are enabled by systems of oppression, is a way of mitigating guilt and responsibility for privileges afforded by relations of oppression.” See “Epistemic Agency Under Oppression,” 248–49.

<sup>50</sup> Posey, *Centering Epistemic Injustice*, xxi. See Chapters 4 and 5 for further elaboration of evolving epistemic frameworks.

<sup>51</sup> Posey, 97–99.

it involves “prioritizing the voices of the oppressed on our own terms, and, in an important sense, in our own epistemic language. It is simply not enough to decide when and where marginalized knowers will be heard and when and where we can contribute to the projects of dominant others.”<sup>52</sup> It is one thing to achieve equitable conditions temporarily, such as when diverse parties come to the table to pursue a project of mutual concern. It is another to strive for epistemic equity—and by extension, social justice—on a broader scale. The responsibility involved in *resistance echoing* requires ongoing effort.

While the tactics of *resistance echoing* will vary according to the goals of a social movement, the basic strategy involves exerting consistent pressure on dominant publics, working against their tendency to be too committed to their own perspective. Medina calls this pressure “epistemic friction.”<sup>53</sup> In order for a person’s worldview to be improved, he argues, they need to actively feel the difference between how they think and how someone from a different social position does. They need to actively sit with the discomfort such reflection can cause. Medina argues that the goal of engaging dominant knowers is to create beneficial epistemic friction, or pressure, that might lead to a transformative understanding of social and epistemic problems, as well as complicity in them.<sup>54</sup> A movement of *resistance echoing* can work to achieve this effect by creating intentionally-designed spaces of epistemic friction, where people of diverse standpoints can hear the insights of nondominant knowers. Various forms of art and media can play a role; so too can protest.<sup>55</sup> In each case, *resistance echoing* strives to create opportunities for democratic publicity, inviting people to contemplate unacknowledged and underappreciated matters of common concern. Knowing things well, in this case, happens when shared social understandings are thereby improved.

<sup>52</sup> Posey, 109.

<sup>53</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 18, 48–55, 70–89.

<sup>54</sup> Medina, 220.

<sup>55</sup> The various efforts fall under Medina’s concept of *epistemic activism*: “Epistemic activism refers to the critical activities of denouncing, contesting, and resisting the cognitive-affective attitudes and sensibilities (or insensitivities) that facilitate oppression. Epistemic activism is aimed at breaking silences, giving voice to the victims of injustice, disrupting patterns of social invisibility, and waking people up from their epistemic and political slumbers, that is, from their social blindness, apathy, and insensitivity...A central part of epistemic activism consists in interventions in social perception and the social imagination designed to enable publics to overcome their active ignorance so that they can perceive certain social experiences as unjust suffering for the first time (experiences that were not legible or intelligible for them as *unjust suffering* before), and so that they can look in the eyes at certain subjects as victims of injustice (subjects who were not recognizable or legible to them as *victims* before),” *The Epistemology of Protest*, 62. See 360–4 for discussion of the multiple audiences addressed by such activism.

## Democratic Echoing

Through two different conceptions of echoing, I have argued for the benefits offered by like-minded communities. Among similarly situated knowers, a community can help people develop warranted self-trust, increasing confidence in their beliefs and facilitating the (potentially public) expression of their voices. Among differently situated but similarly committed knowers, a community can work to introduce much-needed social and political insights into the public sphere and have them spread more widely. It can also strive to transform inequitable epistemic environments, changing attitudes that make “survival” necessary in the first place. We depend on each other for knowing the world well, and I hoped to suggest methods for responding democratically to our dependence.

For the social epistemologists that I have drawn on throughout this essay, there is an inseparable relationship between our epistemic relations and our sociopolitical ones. Improving one improves the other. As Medina says, “Epistemic and sociopolitical melioration go hand in hand.”<sup>56</sup> Creating equality among knowers can lead to a better understanding of the problems within a society and a better understanding of how to address them. Without equality, there’s a lack of objectivity and a lack of justice. Along with arguing for civic responsibilities that involve responding to these deficits, I have hoped to strengthen belief in the importance of equitable relations. My argument for the epistemic value of like-minded community is motivated by a broader commitment to democracy and social justice—and by the awareness that not everyone shares that commitment. I conclude, now, by sketching out the need for *democratic echoing*, a responsibility to amplify belief in democracy. To complete my theory of civic responsibility, I return to the topic of political divisions to reflect on how the framing of these divisions can shape our thinking about democracy and democratic citizenship.

The United States has a long history of deep political divisions and a long history of discussing what they mean. Today, among the usual warnings about the perils of partisanship, I hear the word *polarization* used with ever-increasing frequency. It is a specific framing of the problem. Recall C. Thi Nguyen’s summary: “Our once-peaceful society has been riven into polarized camps. Extremism and political separation are the core problems, and the fix is something like reconnection, intermingling, and friendship across party lines.”<sup>57</sup> As a symmetrical story, *polarization* implies that both sides of a political division are contributing to the dynamic that separates them. After observing the Trump presidency, the January 6 attack on the Capitol, the rise in right-wing belligerence in Congress and state legislatures, and ongoing attempts at voter suppression, this characterization of present-day problems might seem inaccurate—or completely out of touch with reality. There are,

<sup>56</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 301.

<sup>57</sup> Nguyen, “Polarization or Propaganda?”

however, other ways of telling the story, ones that point to a one-sided extremism fueling the increase in partisan animosity. For some scholars, the preferred terms for describing contemporary political problems are *propaganda*, *demagoguery*, and *fascism*.<sup>58</sup>

I am sympathetic to these alternative accounts because I worry that the story of polarization, despite its attention to important epistemic issues, directs attention away from pressing problems and limits what democracy and democratic citizenship can mean. In *Overdoing Democracy*, Robert Talisse is fond of referring to a Jane Addams' dictum—"The cure for the ills of Democracy is more Democracy"—in order to dismiss it.<sup>59</sup> In his view, "more democracy" quickly leads to an intensification of conviction and therefore of conflict. When people express their views too much, they come to care too much. They become too committed to their own perspective. Like many others, Talisse is concerned about the effects of ideological entrenchment, arguing that it "directly attacks our capacities to properly enact democratic citizenship, dissolving our abilities to treat our fellow citizens as our political equals."<sup>60</sup> I agree that this phenomenon is a serious problem, but as I have argued previously, Talisse overestimates the tendency for extreme confidence by arguing that everyone is equally complicit. Because the diagnosis is flawed, so too is the proposed solution, thus weakening the call for increased civic responsibility. He proposes a form of "civic friendship" that involves bracketing political views in order to have more meaningful and productive interactions across diverging perspectives.<sup>61</sup> This practice of bridge-building, he argues, is necessary because our private and public lives have become "politically saturated."<sup>62</sup> We talk about politics too much, and because we do so, we gradually increase the contentiousness of our interactions. Good citizens, he implies, practice good dinner table etiquette.

If we take the concern about "political saturation" to be about how frequently we discuss the issues that shape electoral politics, it is a legitimate (but perhaps superficial) concern. However, if it is about our discussions of relations of power, then I would argue that it is completely wrongheaded. As an alternative, I would suggest the view offered by Alison Bailey, when outlining the concept of unlevel knowing fields. For her, it is our epistemic relations that are politically saturated.<sup>63</sup> Relations of power, dominance, and oppression

<sup>58</sup> For a discussion of propaganda, see Benkler, Faris, and Roberts, *Network Propaganda*; for demagoguery, see Roberts-Miller, *Demagoguery and Democracy*; for fascism, see Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism*. For an asymmetrical account focused on epistemology, see Anderson, "Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics."

<sup>59</sup> Talisse, *Overdoing Democracy*, 21, 68, 125–26, 133; for the original context, see Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics*, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Talisse, 123.

<sup>61</sup> Talisse, 131–68.

<sup>62</sup> Talisse, 71–94, 117–27.

<sup>63</sup> Bailey, "The Unlevel Knowing Field," 62, 66.

affect what knowledge is valued and who gets respected as a knower. According to this view, some people may not respect you no matter how friendly you are. “If the other side already believes you to be supporting a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles,” Nguyen says in response to Talisse’s argument for civic friendship, “then it doesn’t seem likely it will matter very much if our kids are in Little League together.”<sup>64</sup> If we work with Bailey’s conception of political saturation, we need to solve the problem by actually addressing it—by talking about it more, not less. We need to point out that blatant disrespect isn’t symmetrical. Nor is it confined to conspiracy theorists.

When people worry, like Talisse does, that polarization affects our ability to treat each other as equals, they ignore that many people have no commitment to equality or to democracy. The American Academy of Arts and Sciences reports that citizens lack faith in each other and are increasingly dissatisfied with how American democracy is working. Even more worrisome, many are open to other forms of government, “including rule by a strong leader or by groups of experts.” This tendency is more pronounced among young voters.<sup>65</sup> These developments, I think, should shift how we perceive the political landscape. Instead of being held captive by the diverging red and blue masses shown in many contemporary graphics and data visualizations,<sup>66</sup> we might need to shift our focus to polarization occurring in democratic and anti-democratic directions. Rather than worrying about whether both sides of a political divide have convictions that are too intense, we might wonder if those who holding anti-democratic views have stronger convictions than those holding democratic ones. Is the openness to other forms of government an effect of one side being more persuasive?

If we hope to live in a society in which everyone is committed to developing equitable relations free of domination, we should confront a political divide by asking how we can influence those who do not share that commitment. Some form of “civic friendship” might be one means of positively influencing others, but it is not the only method. In *Justice by Means of Democracy*, Danielle Allen argues that democratic citizenship involves a “multitasking lifestyle”—the ability to shift between different types of civic engagement and political action.<sup>67</sup> While she attaches great significance to the art of bridging differences, she highlights multiple modes of citizenship (deliberation, activism, and prophetic argument) necessary for promoting equitable relations and supporting democratic governance. The forms of echoing I have developed here outline another model of “multitasking,” ways of addressing epistemic challenges in a stratified society. If what we believe affects how we

<sup>64</sup> Nguyen, “Was It Polarization?,” 20–21.

<sup>65</sup> American Academy of Arts and Sciences, *Our Common Purpose*, 11, 18–19.

<sup>66</sup> For examples, do a Google image search on political polarization.

<sup>67</sup> Allen, *Justice by Means of Democracy*, 201–3, 219–25. For her discussion of bridging, see Chapter 4, 101–28.

relate and how well political processes work, we need to support each other in developing, sharing, and spreading the best ideas. We also need to increase our commitment to them.

Confidence does matter. We need to know when we have too much but also when we have too little. Because how we understand the world is shaped by our social relations—by the pressure and support we encounter—we can be both overconfident and underconfident in our beliefs. Echoing is a way to respond to these tendencies. *Survival echoing* boosts confidence in those who need it, while *resistance echoing* exerts pressure on those who need it. Both are attempts to support democracy by striving for equitable relations among knowers. But these efforts are not enough if people don't believe in democracy in the first place. The growing lack of confidence suggests the need to think carefully about epistemic, discursive, and rhetorical methods for "defending democracy." Even if it is limited by its present form, how can we convince more people that democracy is a goal to work toward, a principle to fight for? How can we echo that faith?<sup>68</sup>

American politics is often disorienting. So too is the way that people talk about it. In response to this confusion, I have argued for knowing things well—taking responsibility for how we support and inhibit each other and thereby engage in collective learning. In this conclusion, I have described an additional responsibility. Knowing things well also involves having a clear grasp of the value of democracy and the ability to articulate it persuasively to others. In addition to understanding the diverse needs of a society and working to address those needs, we are responsible for supporting political beliefs and sentiments. Among the beliefs that we can support is a conviction that democracy is a valuable normative framework and an invaluable political goal. I stand behind the idea that the cure for the problems of democracy is more democracy. That includes *more people* believing in it—confident in its possibilities and effects.

<sup>68</sup> On the importance of "democratic faith," see Dewey, "Creative Democracy," 226–29, and American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 60.

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# **What Does Sexual Assault Have to Do with Democracy?**

## *Testimonies*

Nicole Foss, Autumn Jensen, Megan Landre,  
Rhiannon McLean, & Dakota Metzger

Content warning: This project contains detailed descriptions of sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and the impacts of all of the above on survivors.

### **Section One: Transcripitor's Note**

#### *Exigence*

This project came from lived experience. When our democracy lab cohort was brainstorming our projects, I imagined I might choose something related to information distribution, or perhaps something about the obstacles that rural voters face. What I found was that I could not stop thinking about the ways being a survivor of sexual assault and sexual harassment impacts my ability to participate in democracy. I believe that the maintenance of democracy and the project of ensuring equal citizenship are ultimately issues of justice.

To what extent is our participation in democracy contingent upon our basic needs being met? In my experience, the two are inextricably linked. I simply cannot do the hard work of participating in the governance of a community or a society if I am actively experiencing an existential threat.

To give a bit of background, here is an abridged account of my experience that I've shared as part of my work with the WCADVSA's Survivor's Advocacy Council:

I was assaulted in the summer of 2020 after the memorial service of my professor and mentor. The person who assaulted me was the TA who co-taught my class with that professor in the spring of 2020. I looked up to him, I had developed a friendship with him, and he would later be a colleague in my small graduate program.

The night of the memorial, I drank heavily, getting well and truly drunk for the first time in my life. I remember being surprised at how unsteady the ground was and how the sky seemed to be spinning. I couldn't figure out how my professor could possibly be gone. My abuser was there to share in my sorrows and he got closer and closer to me over the course of the night. The night ended at my friend's house with dancing and more drinking. We were all too drunk to drive home, so we decided to stay the night. He and I ended up in the same bed, and after I turned the lights off, he assaulted me. My reaction time was slow. I had developed a crush on him, so I felt confused about whether or not I wanted to be kissing him. I felt conflicted, and I asked him to stop. He told me to stop worrying about it and just enjoy myself. He started kissing me again and I kissed him back, but I kept stopping to voice my concern and reservations. Each time, he brushed it off and kept kissing me, getting on top of me, and trying to take off my clothes.

Even while writing this, I heard his voice in my head saying "that wasn't assault, that was just you making a mistake and refusing to take responsibility for it". I know that's a victim-blaming lie, but it's also the mentality I have to fight against every single day. I didn't report my assault until a year after it happened, because I wasn't able to accept that it was assault until I got out from under his manipulative friendship. I wanted to believe that my autonomy had not been violated. I wanted to believe that I had control over what happened to me, and that nothing this awful could have happened.

He convinced me that I had wanted it, even that I had instigated it, and that the awful sick feeling in my stomach was because I had cheated on my partner at the time. I felt so terrible for what he had convinced me I had done that I broke up with

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*AUTUMN JENSEN's testimony begins on p. 65.*

*MEGAN LANDRE's testimony begins on p. 82.*

*RHIANNON MCLEAN's testimony begins on p. 93.*

*DAKOTA METZGER's testimony begins on p. 120*

my partner, someone I loved very much. At my abuser's urging, I didn't tell my partner what had happened to me that night, only that I wasn't able to be the kind of partner he deserved. I quickly sought therapy, believing that I was fundamentally broken in some way, and that I was sabotaging myself and I couldn't figure out why.

It was through a combination of therapy and distance from our unhealthy friendship that I realized he had manipulated and assaulted me.

I began the reporting process in July of 2021, hoping that I would be able to complete most of the logistical work required before the semester started, but that didn't happen. Instead, I had dozens of meetings throughout that fall, all triggering in their own way, often taking place in the mornings before I taught my class. More than once that semester, I had to hold back tears while teaching because I didn't have any time to recover or process the meetings before stepping into the classroom. I also had to step out of my own classes for fear of crying during a discussion or having a panic attack in front of my colleagues. Each time I felt myself starting to recover and get back on my feet, there was always something to knock me back down, whether it was a meeting, seeing him in a class or on campus, or a delay or complication in the process.

After I reported, I began to feel unsafe in my house. My abuser had a habit of stopping by unannounced when he was running in the neighborhood. I began to panic that he might come over and confront me about reporting. I began to feel like I didn't know him as well as I thought I did, and that I might actually be in danger. Draining my savings, I moved to a new apartment so he would no longer know where I lived.

These days, every time I see someone who even vaguely looks like him, my heart speeds up and I look around for escape routes. Even though it has never been him, I can't shake the feeling that he is going to turn up and hurt me.

I registered with disability services to attempt to arrange accommodations. I hoped I could prevent it from severely limiting my educational experience. The process of getting those accommodations was so frustrating and bureaucratic that I was regularly reduced to tears, wondering if I would fail out before someone decided whose job it is to help me. In the end, the accommodations came too little and too late. I just had to grit my teeth and wait it out. They weren't what got me through the worst of it, I was.

The investigation found him guilty, but the hearing process undermined that. All the hearing officer could see were "two consenting young adults" trying their best in a "confusing situation." While I was a young adult, freshly out of my undergrad, he was not. He was in his 30's, coming back to school for two master's degrees after the start of his career. I also wasn't consenting. No matter who gets appointed to make that determination, I will always be the only expert on that point.

My ability to be the authority about my own experience feels undermined in other ways too. The act of writing this has felt fraught to me. My abuser convinced me that even though he saw promise in me as a poet and a nonfiction writer, he had the superior creative talent. He constantly emphasized his age, wisdom, experience, and worldly nature. He painted me as this young kid who had a lot to learn from him before I could do anything that mattered. Even now, it feels like no matter what I write, it won't be as good as the story he could tell.

This feeling is compounded by the fact that, post-investigation, he has “failed upward.” He got his dream job at a reputable public radio station. This seems like the opposite of justice. He now has more power, and of course I worry that he will use it to take advantage of other women. He has been given a platform, and the fact that he landed there so easily leaves me questioning whether society will always feel that abusers have the more compelling story.

I am still working to disentangle myself from the many different harms that both he and the process of reporting did to me. That thought is one of them. I am forever altered—strong and weak in ways I never wanted to be. I am like a tree, that after being chopped down, grows back. It survived but it's never quite the same, and it loses some of its original vigor.

### *Interview Methods*

The selection process for my interviewees was not unbiased or objective. I selected people from my own social network who had previously shown interest in advocacy and speaking publicly about their experience as a survivor. I chose this selection method because the project needed to be accomplished within a relatively tight timeline. The trust that I had already established in those relationships allowed me to schedule interviews and explain the project efficiently. If I had chosen participants with whom I had no relationship, I would have needed to spend much more time building trust before asking them to engage with me on such a sensitive topic.

Once I identified my interviewees, I checked in with each person individually to make sure they understood their options if they wanted to participate in this project. Everyone had a choice to be anywhere on a spectrum that went from completely anonymous to being named as a coauthor. I told each participant that if they didn't want to be identified, we could have the conversation off the record and I would make a piece of art in response to their testimony. I was also open to other possibilities for what anonymity or partial anonymity could look like. Everyone was given the option to devise the conditions of their participation in the project. Perhaps due to my selection methods (only reaching out to folks who had already been somewhat outspoken) all of my participants elected to be named as coauthors with their testimony directly transcribed.

When I scheduled the interviews, I tried to let the participants have as much control as possible. I deferred to them on location, time, and privacy. Many of the sessions were conducted at my apartment because my participants valued the privacy (I lived alone, unlike many of my participants). Many of the interviews also took place on a couch in order to make sure they were physically comfortable while having a conversation that often involved many emotional risks.

During the interview, I took time before I started recording to review the details of the project with each participant. I held space for any questions they might have developed since our initial discussion and made sure that they understood that they could opt out of the project or change their level of anonymity at any time (up until the point of publication).

After the interview, I made sure to take some time once the recording was over to check in on their emotional state. These debrief sessions were intended to ease the impact of participation on their lives, but as a survivor myself, I am fully aware that there is no way to completely mitigate the potentially triggering effects of retelling your story or answering questions about your assault or harassment. Of course, I cannot really report whether or not the debriefing was successful in its aim, but my impression was that it was appreciated.

I have attempted to mitigate the risks for my participants as much as possible, but I recognize that speaking truth to power always exposes the speaker to the potential for retaliation. I made the decision (which was clearly communicated to each participant) to censor any instance in which an abuser's name was mentioned. This was a difficult decision to make, as I wanted to provide a platform with this project for survivors to tell their truth and feel centered and supported. Ultimately, I decided that this small act of censorship was acceptable because it eliminated a potential distraction/risk and allowed the survivor's words to be the focus. Unfortunately, there is no way to completely eliminate the risk of personal, physical, or legal retaliation. I express my profound gratitude and admiration for each of my coauthors and their willingness to speak out despite that risk.

### *Presentation/Art-Making*

These interviews were wide-ranging and expansive, so when it came time to present at the public symposium, I knew I would have to find a way to distill the conversations without eliminating all of the nuance. I am a firm believer in the power of art to communicate multitudes, so I decided to create found poems from the transcriptions so that I wouldn't lose the power of their stories told through their own words. As a poet, I have been working with found forms for years, and this felt like a natural avenue for artistic representation. After constructing the poems, I sent them to the respective participant for their final approval and any necessary edits. All poems included in this publication have been reviewed and approved by the respective co-authors/interviewees.

There are two testimonies that appear without accompanying poems: these are the interviews that took place after the symposium.

### *Thank You*

Before we get into the interviews/testimonies themselves, I want to take a moment to sincerely thank everyone who was involved with this project at every stage. Thank you to my Democracy Lab cohort (Robby Bishop, Tennessee Watson, Aubrey Edwards, and Chaley Dimoff) for all of your generative feedback and support. (Special thanks to Tennessee Watson, who generously volunteered to conduct my interview.) Thank you also to Scott Henkel and Janel Seeley for all of your planning and dreaming and instruction and organization. It was a pleasure learning with all of you over our year together.

Thank you to my family for your encouragement and ever-present love, no matter how rough things got. I know it was painful to sit with me in the awfulness, but it helped more than I can express. Thank you to my feminist killjoys: Mary Kate Gorman, Solana Ray Quistorff, Greg Ronco and Dalal Bima: without you I never would have made it through. Thank you to Kate Northrop and Olivia Dorell for sitting at the table that I set for poetry—your echoes are in most every poem I write.

Thank you to Robby Bishop, for being a partner in every sense of the word; I am so lucky to be in intellectual company with you.

Last, but certainly not least, thank you to my coauthors for your vulnerability and strength in speaking truth and shining like the light of day upon suffering: Autumn, Dakota, Megan, and Rhiannon. You are an inspiration to us all.

## **Section Two: Testimony**

*Autumn Jensen*

I don't view agency as a gift  
it's a really scary reality to be in a world  
and  
people don't care about what doesn't affect them  
predators target people who've already been victims of certain crimes

I didn't really see a way out of that feeling. It was like you're either going to be numb or  
you're going to be angry

I definitely I think I preferred to be angry because at least there's, like, some energy there

I can't be sad about this because as soon as I let myself be sad about this, it's going to be  
unbearably and overwhelmingly heartbreaking

do I know this person as well as I think I do? Is this like someone who it's safe to share  
your story with?

It's going to be hard to get the people with any power or authority to do anything about  
that. To  
actually take action

It's a tricky spot to be in, but also I believe that people on an individual level,  
and I think also as a collective,  
rise or fall to meet expectations

and  
humans are amazing. And when they're connecting, like actually connecting in person, not  
via the Internet or social media  
that's where real change happens

I'm not exactly sure what that will look like, but if you decrease the degrees of separation  
between everyone, everyone's problems start to matter a little bit more

the world that might be a little big, but I definitely made Laramie a little bit safer than I  
found it

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Nicole: Ok, so the thing that I'm trying to get at here is how being a survivor has changed your feelings or understandings of these concepts. So we're just going to basically go through a list of concepts.

Autumn: OK.

N: So, the first one is agency.

A: Well, what first comes to mind with agency would be that I was always taught that agency was a gift that, like God gave us, when I was being raised.

N: Oh no...

A: Yeah, so, a little scary, scary idea of agency there to instill in someone. But when it feels like you've had your agency taken away, that's a really, it's a really dark and jarring feeling. And you know, when you go through something traumatic, one of the first things that your brain does is it tries to make you feel like you had agency in a situation that you maybe didn't. And that is arguably one of the hardest things to get over and to unravel and accept about the situation. I think about, you know, that's essentially why victim blaming is even a thing, right? Because people hear about horrible things and want to assume that, you know, someone had some sort of say or control that caused that to like happen to them, right? Because otherwise it's a really scary reality to, like, be in a world and be like, "wow, that can be something that's taken away from you in a moment."

N: Right.

A: Yeah. I don't view agency as a gift, but I do see it as something that people don't always have access to in certain moments of their life. And that can be really scary and dark.

N: So just taking that even a step further—do you think that what happened affects your feeling of democratic agency—like your ability to be a democratic agent—in our political system, or in our democracy?

A: Yeah. Because when you go through traumatic experiences, it takes a lot of work to put yourself back together, and a lot of energy and time. And, I mean to be quite frank, like resources and money. And that is energy and time that you were putting into fixing yourself instead of investing in your community, or political systems, or being politically active. And when you realize the sheer scale of, you know, gendered violence and how many people are going through this, that's so much energy that all of these people, mostly women, are having to turn inward and put on themselves versus their communities or, you know, the political

systems that affect them. So I think it does affect your ability to have agency in political systems. Because it takes so much away from you and no one else can do the work in healing. But there's no way around that. It's kind of dark and depressing.

N: But it's real! It's real, and that's what we're trying to get at here, like what does it really do to you in all of these aspects.

A: Because there's the whole like, "Ohh what doesn't kill you, makes you stronger. And you're wiser and stronger. And you go through hard things and you're better for it." But I think that's bullshit. Because you know, more often than not you're going to have permanently altered and damaged issues with your emotions, your brain, and sleep health. I mean it takes something from you. And certainly you learn from those experiences and, you know, that that can give you the ability to empathize with other people or help other people, and that's great. But at the end of the day you had your agency taken away in a moment, and then in a more subtle and long-term way you have that chipped away over time as you have to put yourself back together.

N: Oh, absolutely, yeah. So, the next question surrounds how it's changed the way that you feel able to be heard, included, and cared for by society. How has it affected your relationship with that?

A: I think...hmm. You have to be a lot louder and firm and more adamant than you would think you would have to be about certain things.

I think before I went through some of the things I went through, I just assumed that people would care. And people don't care about what doesn't affect them. Or, you know, caring is sort of a finite resource. Not everyone can care about everything. And it's really hard as a human to care about something that you have no connection to, and a lot of these issues (and you know, gender based violence specifically) has been kept on the down low for so long. It's kind of a taboo topic. It makes people uncomfortable. It's not something that you're supposed to talk about, and because of that, it's just a really vicious cycle.

And so, on one hand, I've had to learn how to be a lot louder than I think I should have to be, and more firm and, you know, draw lines that you wouldn't think would need to be drawn. I've had to say, "This is bad and we need to have a zero tolerance against X."

N: Right.

A: I never thought I would have to do those things. But also, I've had the kind of scary realization that at the same time, you need to talk about these things so that the community that you're in knows what's happening. I think we have an obligation to do that, but you also have to be kind of strategic about how you do that because predators, you know, they can learn from people's stories. And it can also cause you to be a target for people and that was

a scary realization. So I don't know. I'm still figuring out how to balance that. I want my community to know, and I don't want to feel like I have to hide things that have happened to me, because awareness is only a good thing, unless, you know. Awareness in the wrong hands can be dangerous. It's a tricky line.

N: Do you feel like part of that was affected by what happened with your roommate after?

A: Absolutely. Yeah, that was definitely what I was thinking of. But also, I mean, they've done studies, and predators target people who've already been victims of certain crimes; that's real. But yeah, definitely that situation with *name redacted (Autumn's former roommate)* was really scary because that was someone that I trusted. And so many women had shared traumatic stories from their life with this person, and he completely weaponized that for a really long time, to the detriment and hurt and pain of a lot of people.

N: Yeah, that's so scary.

A: And feels really bad. That feels really horrible, yeah. And, you know, you go through something like that and it crosses my mind; there will be a moment where I'm like, "Oh, this would be like a good moment to share this part of my life" or, you know, bring awareness, or share this part of myself with someone. And then immediately after, it crosses my mind. You know, I have the thought, "Well, do I know this person as well as I think I do? Is this someone who it's safe to share your story with?" And so I think it's harder on a personal level, community-wise. There's places and forums where it's safe to share and people should if they can, but it can be a really tricky thing to navigate on a personal level.

N: Yeah.

A: And I don't know. That was a scary experience for me, but I also don't think it was super uncommon. I feel like lots of people have experiences similar to that where they share something like that in an effort to try and make the world a safer place. I remember thinking, "Oh, you know, if I can explain this to someone and they can understand, they'll know why it's so important, especially to men because men will listen to other men. They'll understand why they need to speak up more, or take more action. This will make it real to them."

And when you're sharing stuff like that with your community, it's such a delicate fucking dance. It has to be touching. It has to be meaningful to them. But it can't be too ugly. You know, or people won't listen and accept it.

N: Right. They'll block it out.

A: And the reality is, these are ugly things happening in your community, and victims and survivors don't want to have to present these stories and happenings in a pretty perfect way, just for them to be taken seriously or accepted or realized.

N: Yeah.

A: I mean, I don't know if anyone's really figured out that dance. And as a survivor it feels really...hypocritical isn't the right word, but to do that dance and to consciously try to present things in a way so they're accepted, it feels fake. I would rather be raw and real.

N: Yeah, but it puts you in such a position of risk.

A: Mmhmm! Yeah, well, and then they can turn around and, you know, then you're the crazy girl. The crazy bitch, right? Like if you don't present. I'm like, "Yeah, I should be crazy if I'm presenting this calmly, if people are talking calmly."

N: Yeah, it's actually a little bit crazy.

A: That's actually what's crazy, yeah—the community shit. Because you go through something like that and I think it opens your eyes to what needs to happen in a community. And then there's almost like this obligation, cause you're aware on a really deep and personal level, and yeah, it's really tricky. It's a tricky spot to be in. But also I believe that people, on an individual level, and I think also as a collective, they rise or fall to meet expectations. And, you know, temper your expectations, but I think at the end of the day, we should have high and good expectations of our community to show up. And if we don't, they certainly will not.

N: Yeah, that actually ties perfectly into the next area, which is how the experience has affected your relationship with disillusionment and cynicism. And obviously I think it changes over time, throughout the experience. But if you could walk me through that, can you?

A: Can you clarify, like as a general outlook on life, or...?

N: I think as an experience. Like, as the experience of feeling disillusioned, the experience of feeling cynical. How often, or maybe it's a question of to what degree, maybe it's a question of in what way, etc..?

A: Well, you go through something really traumatic. And part of trauma, I think, would be like a pretty general, sense that you have your reality stripped out from under you and, you know, that can be disillusionment. And also you're going to have like a pretty negative outlook on the world and life because of that. You're going to be cynical. Everything is dark and dreary, at least for me, that was my experience. I was really...it was like I was either

completely numb to my life and everything around me. You know, everything was gray, everything was muted. Or I was just unbelievably angry, and, like, justifiably angry, right?

N: Absolutely.

A: Like, justifiably angry and cynical.

N: Absolutely.

A: Whenever I was in that headspace, I didn't really see a way out of that feeling. It was like you're either going to be numb or you're going to be angry.

N: Right.

A: I don't know which was better. I definitely I think I preferred to be angry because at least there's, like, some energy there and you can get shit done. And I think, yeah, I don't know. I think being cynical and anger can be good and useful. And I think it's easier than being sad.

N: Yeah. Oh man, definitely.

A: And I think that's where the cynicism for me came from, it was like "I can't be sad about this because as soon as I let myself be sad about this, it's going to be unbearably and overwhelmingly heartbreaking." You're sad for yourself, your past self, the future self you thought you were going to get to be, and everyone around you.

Yeah. And now I mean, those feelings and that state of being is somewhere I've been before. So if I feel that creeping in, it's kind of a warning to me. And I think if you've had the experience of being in those emotional or mental spaces, I think you have a new appreciation for not being in them. Since then, I guess I've felt that I've felt all of the horrible and bad and ugly and the extremes of it. But I also feel like I have experienced love and joy and heightened versions of all of those things because of that. And I don't know if I would trade it. I don't know. I've sort of learned that that's part of the grieving process that you go through for yourself. And I've learned to romanticize that a bit personally. And let yourself have it, and then I think those are fine places to be, but you can't stay stagnant. And there's certainly people who think it's cool to be cynical. And I think it's a little bit more vulnerable to move past that and not be cynical.

And even things where it would be—like I think about the fucking police. And alright, I arguably have a pretty cynical outlook on that whole profession. But it's not just cynical, I mean, there's humor there too. Yeah, I don't know. I'm not sure, but I do think that that's sort of the cool girl thing is to hate the world, and be cynical, and be angry. And that's not how I prefer to be. I don't think it's viewed as the cool thing to have hope, or joy, or believe that things can and will get better. That's not really the cool stance to take. And who does it

benefit to stay cynical and angry? It's not like a great space for your body to be in long term and doesn't change anything, and ultimately if you dwell in those states, it's not to your benefit, and certainly not to your communities' either.

N: So what way forward do you see, for yourself, or for society? I mean, do you see a way forward, and if so, what does that look like?

A: You know, you said yourself and society, and I think there's cycles to it. And it's not like one formula or path or routine. I think, as a survivor, immediately after, you have to focus on yourself and you can't invest in bettering anything else. Really, it kind of is a full pause: everyone, everything's kind of got to be there. And then, I think as you start to move through those things, it becomes better for yourself to not just be focusing on your own shit and to look outward a bit, and try and better your environment and your community in whatever way you can. But I think you can't stay there either, right? It's got to be this ebb and flow. And ultimately, I think if you're sort of oscillating between working on those, your potential for what you can do personally will be greater and also the potential good you can do for your community will be greater. If you're just focusing on your community, you're going to max out pretty early as far as how much good you can do. So, I don't know. I think there's got to be cycles to that and I think you can't help anyone else until you've helped yourself. Going forward, I think it's probably got to be a multi-pronged approach. I don't think it can just be grassroots shit, but I don't think it can just be trying to change stuff from the top down.

N: Right.

A: And I think that's up to individuals—where they think they can affect positive change in those areas. I think there's a lot of people out there who really feel like top down, that's where they see the strategy, and that's where they see themselves working, and that's great. And I kind of used to think that's what I wanted to do, but I've sort of switched gears recently.

We all have way more in common than we think. Polarization is at an all-time high, and I think we need more community—wholesome community that's not based in religion or work or school—more neutrally based community that doesn't have strings of hierarchy, power structures, or elitism. Humans are amazing, and when they're connecting, like actually connecting in person, not via the Internet or social media, that is where good ideas come from, and that's where real change happens. If we could decrease the degrees of separation between the people in Laramie alone, I think that would make all of the very real problems that people in this community are facing more personal to everyone, because everyone would have more personal connections to those issues. That's where I want to see the change happen, and that's sort of the path I see forward. I'm not exactly sure what that will look like, but if you decrease the degrees of separation between everyone, everyone's problems start

to matter a little bit more, people are more connected to networking opportunities. I just think it would be for the betterment of everyone, and it would solve a lot of issues. But especially, you know, gender based violence and things of that nature are going to depend on community connections. So that's my plan.

N: Yeah, I love that. And then this one, I feel like it's a little bit out of order, I'll have to figure out where to put it. But how did being in Wyoming affect your experience?

A: It's a really good question. Well, Wyoming's pretty conservative. So there's that. There is that element, and if you're a woman, who has been harmed by a man, it's going to be hard to get the people with any power or authority to do anything about that, to actually take action. That was surprising and then not surprising.

N: Right.

A: You can be the perfect victim (there's no such thing) but you can have, you know, evidence and all of that shit, and it won't make a difference. I also think about Wyoming as far as a mental health landscape. It's pretty rough out here. It's pretty harsh. We have some of the highest suicide rates and depression rates in the nation. And I think about how weather and environment shape culture, mental health, politics. And that's all very real. Wyoming is beautiful, but it's fucking harsh. Like the winter's long, it's dark, it's windy. There aren't a ton of people here because of that. Yeah, not the most welcoming place.

N: They get scared off pretty fast.

A: (laughter) It kind of feels like we shouldn't be here sometimes. Just adjusting to that landscape: it's the extremes. The summers are ideal and so beautiful and then the rest of the year, it's just whiplash. I don't know. I feel like you can see the harshness of the weather and the environment really reflected in the community and some of that's great. Like people are really strong and stubborn. But that's for better or for worse. And you have these wide open, untouched spaces, and there's an element of isolation. That can be really beautiful, but it can also be really unsettling and lonely. It can be a little scary. I think about, you know, it's so easy to get out of town so quickly and there's dark shit that happens on the outskirts of town. And that's real. I mean, I have my own experiences with it, like Rogers Canyon, that's a place where some weird shit's gone down. Think about Matthew Shepherd. Just stuff like that. And that energy is in this place and you see it in the people. But at the same time, I love Wyoming and it's beautiful. You have the mountains, and the wind moves things through, but it also rips through you. And then there's the suicide winds that we get every spring, which happens to be when domestic violence is at all-time high, in February. And we get those winds shortly after that. It's just kind of a rough time for the community. We're at the tail end of winter, so we've been in winter for the longest amount of time, and every year, that's when a lot of shit

goes down. Suicides are really high. Violence is really high. Violence against one's self and other people, just spikes during that time. And you see that reflected in the seasons here.

N: When did what happened to you happen? What time of year was it?

A: It started at the end of December, some of the really bad parts, February. Yeah, it was the second-half of winter that all of that shit went down, yeah. I never really thought about that actually.

N: Do you feel like energetically it's a hard anniversary every year, in terms of that time of year?

A: The body definitely remembers. Yeah, there's definitely certain dates in December and February that are really hard. It gets easier over time, those anniversaries. But I don't know if it will ever completely go away.

N: Yeah, July was so weird and bad for me this year because it was the one year anniversary.

A: That's because that's so real. Yeah, I mean the anniversaries of shit, it's so real. And logically, you're like it, shouldn't be this hard, but it's like out of body...

N: Yeah, it was the one year anniversary of reporting and the two year anniversary of it happening. And I was like, "Wow, we're just hitting it all at once. Great."

A: Yeah, it's going to be, it's going to continue to be, hard. And this June is when my restraining order expires, which really doesn't feel good. I don't like to think about it, and if I'm going to do anything about it, you know, I have to interact with police and that's really hard to want to do. And to rehash it, and you know, it's not a hearing, it's not court, but I'll have to try and make a case as to why I should get an extension and it's going to be hard to do that when he hasn't violated this one or tried to.

N: And you're like, "Yeah, let's just keep it going then, let's just, you know, keep that."

A: But then their whole thing, I've been met with this before because I tried to do that previously and they were like, "Well, that's not really fair." They're like, "You need to think because this limits his civil liberties, like, this limits his freedoms."

N: Yeah, you know what limits my freedom? Being a victim of violence. (laughter)

A: Well, and that's just it. Like think about the Title 9 process and how much shit you go through as a survivor in the name of protecting the freedom of the perpetrator.

N: It's insane. It's in. sane.

A: They will put you through hell!

N: To protect their education...

A: ...and strip you of your liberties, your dignity.

N: Meanwhile, your education is in shreds on the floor. You have not been able to focus on it in months, and they're like, "Well, you really need to think about his access to an education." And I'm like... "For why? Like, what about mine?"

A: Well, and you would think they would be speedy. I'm like, "Fine, let that carry weight, you know? But make it fast. Just make it fast." Like the way they prioritize things and do it, you need to basically expedite every case. I get wanting to get the report and get it going, but I'm like, "Don't fucking start the investigation until you can put all of your time and resources into finishing that."

N: Yeah, and have a fully staffed office—one that adapts when somebody goes on maternity leave. Wild to think about.

A: Because that, like that would be—I don't even know it if it would be my biggest complaint.

N: Several cases ground to a halt when *name redacted (the Title IX investigator)* went on maternity leave. For like months.

A: And that's like, that's not fair to her.

N: No! Absolutely!

A: She should be able to do that and not feel bad.

N: She shouldn't have to be the lynchpin of the entire office.

A: I hope she didn't feel bad or guilty, but like, it would be hard to take maternity leave and know that all of that was going to stop, even if that's what you should be doing. Like that's horrible.

N: It's insane.

A: That's so unfair to her because she's amazing, right? She's great at her job.

N: And she needs to be able to take vacation.

A: She needs to, yeah.

N: All of these people need to be able to leave the office without everything falling apart.

A: I know. It's insane. It's absurd. You know, people don't start that process for themselves. You do it to try and make your campus and your community safer, and it takes so much from you. My poor nervous system.

N: I know, right?

A: It's it feels like a fucking dream. I look back at that time and I'm like, "What was happening? What was I doing?"

N: It's all a blur.

A: It is all a blur and it is the craziest, I've done a lot of crazy shit, but that feels like the craziest thing I've ever done. It felt so intense and I'm really proud of past me. But also I got through it because I had so much support and it not only took so much from me, but my entire support system for so long had to do so much. And that's why that was able to happen.

N: Yeah.

A: And I could not, in good conscience, recommend anyone else to do that. And that feels horrible to say, but it's true.

N: Yeah. If you loved the person, do you think you would tell them not to do it?

A: Most likely. Almost without a doubt. If they had, somehow, just a gold mine of evidence or something... maybe? But even so, the fact that you have to represent yourself in the hearing is... it's...I don't even have words. It is some of the cruelest shit. And it's like one of your earlier questions, having to present your story. Like, here is a moment where you are in a professional hearing, there is an order of operations, this is your chance to tell your story, to try to make the world a safer place, and you have to do it in a way that is not real or raw at all.

N: Right.

A: And it feels like a fucking act and I just remember giving my closing statement and you know, *name redacted (Autumn's lawyer)*, talking to me, being like, "Don't look angry. Don't roll your eyes. Don't grimace." She was like, "You need to cry at some point." I remember thinking at a certain point, my voice needs to crack at these certain points of the story and

you leave your body. It's the weirdest, most dissociative experience. Yeah, it's fucking insane.

N: And you have to do it for your safety, in order to preserve your safety.

A: And in doing that, I know I made the world or, OK, the world that might be a little bit big, but I definitely made Laramie a little bit safer than I found it. But I don't think I'm safer for doing that. I actually think it's quite the opposite. And his family sort of threatened me in the hearing. And in their letters, you know, said they were going to take legal action against me.

N: And you were like, "How? It has to be fake for it to count as slander. You can't actually prosecute me, because he did it."

A: The beautiful dark poetry of it all was his mother being his own undoing in the hearing. That's some dark shit. Ohh man. But I did it.

N: Yeah, you won.

A: I won. I will never forget the moment when I found out that I won. That was beautiful and great, but it doesn't really make up for anything. It doesn't really. I don't feel like a winner.

N: Yeah.

A: I'm actually quite tired.

N: Yeah. And you don't even get anything.

A: I don't get anything. If anything, it's like, "Well, you won, and you put in a bunch of time and energy, and you wrecked your nervous system, and you're probably a little less safe."

N: Yeah, like, "Congratulations! You're the one who was harmed, and we believe you!"

A: You're harmed, and we even believe you. You're welcome.

N: Oh my god. Yeah. What a gift.

A: It's like a slap in the face. I'm like, "Wow. Great. Thank you." In the process, whether legal or Title IX, every step of the way, you're just not believed. Like the baseline assumption is that you have poor motives and you're the one lying. And that alone, it starts to make you feel a little crazy. Well, and I probably am fucking crazy at this point, but—

N: But who wouldn't be?

A: Exactly. It would actually be crazy to be ok. Well, and I just, I look at my case and it's like anything, any of the incidents that make up that case, isolated, would be horrible and should be enough on their own. And the fact that it took that much for him to get a slap on the wrist. He didn't even get expelled, he got suspended for 3 more semesters or something. He had already been suspended for several semesters for almost killing a different student.

N: Why they don't kick him out at that point is beyond me.

A: Yeah. So did I tell you about Rebecca Solnit, the author? She has this book called *Storming the Gates of Paradise: Landscapes for Politics* or something. It's a collection of her essays, and one of the best books I've read in a really long time, but just thinking about your question about how all of this taking place in Wyoming affected things, I think that would be a really interesting read. Also tying it into like the larger democracy landscape.

N: Yeah. I think ultimately, what really hits survivors hard, in terms of their ability to participate in democracy, is that you can't participate in democracy if you're worried about your fundamental day-to-day existence and safety.

A: When every day is fucking hell? Yeah, I mean you're stripped of that. You don't have the peace of mind to take on other things.

N: You need a baseline stability in order to participate in the democratic process.

A: Almost no survivor has that.

N: Yeah, you absolutely lose that the second that violation occurs.

A: Especially when the people you have to turn to do anything or make yourself believed or safe in any legal, meaningful way, like going to the fucking police, they're perpetrators of all of those crimes at a higher rate than the general public. Reporting is hard for a lot of reasons, even just having to talk about what happened, that's really fucking hard. But then you have to talk to: 1. A man, most likely and 2. who is either a perpetrator of that or is friends with and works with perpetrators of those crimes. And they probably won't fucking do anything...

N: And you have to know that, going in.

A: And that alone, I mean...

N: Yeah, that'll fuck you right up.

A: Yeah. That's probably one area where you could say I'm still pretty fucking cynical. It's just that women are the overwhelming majority of survivors, and then men tend to be the overwhelming majority of perpetrators of these crimes. And then that's just blown up even more so when you look at a fucking police force. I mean, I'll send you, I don't think I sent you that work I did: the FBI did studies into all of this. And it's the FBI, they're not exactly trying to make police forces look bad, right? And that's what they found. And they're the ones who are enforcing the laws, and a lot of people view the police as like the enforcers and protectors of democracy at home, right?

N: But are they just another source that's undermining it?

A: Well, I think they are, certainly. Yeah. I mean, they're maintaining the status quo for a certain part of the population. And I think, I mean, we know it's become more of a public topic of conversation, how the police directly affect people of color and the safety in their lives and how they're not there to help them. But like, no one's fucking talking about women and the police. And that's women of all races, classes—women across the board.

N: And of course, it's disproportionately affecting trans women of color at highest rates and then going down from there. But even the women who are theoretically most safe from the police are still victimized at much higher rates than the most safe men.

A: Yes. I mean think about if you are the wife of a police officer, you have a much higher chance of being a victim of domestic abuse than just an everyday woman. And that is insane.

N: That's so frightening.

A: 'Cause you would think you would think that demographic alone would be like, you know, they're like, well, maybe their husband or whatever is like a piece of shit and like a bad cop. But like, he's at least probably good to his family, right? And like, no.

N: LOL no, absolutely not.

A: Like no one's fucking safe. And that kills me, so, I have a lot of I have a lot of hope but, that's one area.

N: Maybe it lies outside of the police force, that hope.

A: Yeah, because I think about, you know, SAFE project, and Dakota, and other people who've been really wonderful and helpful, but they're still having to work within all these really shitty, like, bureaucratic nightmares. And their job is to just try and help people jump through all of the hoops. And that's necessary, but it would be nice if it was like no hoops, or different less shitty hoops to go through.

N: Yeah, it would be nice if you didn't need an entire arsenal of support organizations in order to get you through the reporting process, which should be easy enough that anybody can do it, in order to promote it.

A: But think about, I mean, an academic institution, the community, like in some dark, sinister way, it makes sense as to why the starting point is that it's hard to fucking report and it's designed to be that way, right? Yeah. I don't think that's an accident.

N: Yeah.

A: I don't think it just happens to be like that. And it's dangerous, I think, to view the shitty and difficult parts of the system and the community as, "Oh, this is the default or the norm." You can't, it's not.

N: Right. *Why*—why is it the default? Why is it the norm?

A: People are not naturally horrible, like shitty and oppressive; that is not the natural norm.

N: We need to ask how this happened.

A: Think about the ideas of war and oppression, the narrative that those things are just a natural part of humanity. I think that's where cynicism is dangerous. In some ways, you're accepting and buying into that overarching narrative. And I don't believe that.

N: Right. It's a subtle way of fighting back and pushing back against the patriarchy, against systems of harm against women. Yeah, pushing back with hope.

A: Which feels very... I don't know.

N: Yeah, well, it feels weak in the face of so much danger, but I think ultimately in the long term...

A: Yeah. Definitely going through all of this reshaped my idea and viewpoint on compassion as well.

N: Mmmm. Say more.

A: Because I feel like compassion has a similar connotation and reputation publicly of being the nice, sweet, lesser, less strong thing to do, but you can't really be compassionate to others if you're not compassionate towards yourself, right? I think often about the compassionate choice. I did a lot of thinking about compassion when I thought about my safety going through the Title IX process.

N: Yeah.

A: And I mean, they give perpetrators way too much leeway, but thinking about what would actually be the ideal outcome for this—like what would actually make me and this community safer—and yeah, you know, it was a pipe dream that didn't come to fruition. But if *name redacted, (Autumn's abuser)* could get the help that he needed, if he could be part of men's therapy, if he could be more involved in his community, if he could have an opportunity to work on all of these things, with himself and with others, not only would that be better for him, but that would be better for me too. And that would be the compassionate choice, and I feel like, I don't know, restorative justice, compassionate justice, is better right now. We have a very punishment-oriented idea of justice, and I don't think that ultimately makes anyone safer or better. It certainly doesn't make me feel safer. I think emotionally it feels good, like initially and in the moment it can feel kind of validating. I think ultimately though, that's not the answer. In an ideal world people would have a right to an education and it wouldn't be a privilege, and education would be safe.

N: Right.

A: And when people made mistakes and hurt other people, they would be able to learn and grow and better themselves. Shame is not useful, right? And punishment isn't either. I remember talking to the Dean of Students and I'm like, "This is what I want. This is what would make me feel safer. Like fine, expel him for a little bit or whatever. But I want him to take classes, like Gender and Women's Studies classes. I want him to have to, I don't know, go to therapy, do community service. That's what I would like."

N: Well, and I think definitely the goal is to eventually get to the point where restorative justice can take that on. I feel like restorative justice is so tricky though, because they have to understand and want to repair the harm.

A: And yeah, I don't know how you do that. And also, a community and individuals' immediate need for safety trumps that, but we've got to be bettering the current justice pathways we have now and also trying to develop them with the top down and change them a little bit. But that takes resources and the university has a five year plan for Restorative Justice within the Title IX program. But right now, Laramie as a community doesn't even have the mental health services for survivors, let alone perpetrators right now.

N: Right. We do not have the capacity.

A: Yeah, it's not possible. And that's real. First things first, right? Like you can't do it all at once.

N: Right.

A: It does get easier, less heavy. But it also sucks that it'll always affect you. I mean, like last summer.

N: Yeah.

A: All that shit? What was actually going down on the surface, yeah, that sucked and that hurt, but the much more heartbreaking realization was that I had put so much work into myself and healing and moving past things. I thought I was beyond this, and then to be like, "Oh shit still affects me. I will still be triggered and I'll probably have another meltdown at some point; that will happen." It was another grieving of the person I thought I could be type of thing and it really sucked. I was like, "Fuck, shit still hurts sometimes and it's still going to affect me and the people around me."

N: Yeah.

A: Being a check-box person and wanting to be like, "Alright, went through trauma, check."

N: And you're just like, "Ehhh... dotted line check?"

A: I don't know that it's ever...there's no arrival. I'm like, "Now I just have to be mindful of all this shit that never should have triggered me, but now it's going to."

N: Oh my God. I know.

*Megan Landre*

I felt like they were painting a picture of me that was  
Reckless  
really didn't even seem related

They were asking like questions about, like, my Tinder account or like what we do on  
Tinder and things like that.

I don't really understand how that is related to sexual harassment in the workplace

I got the email  
the news that it was being dismissed  
I couldn't even like read the whole thing  
I don't really ever cry, but I literally like I got in my car and I just was like, so upset that  
like. I had like a little ugly like cry for a second and

the reporting process  
went completely sideways and was kind of a waste of  
time  
a waste of feeling and emotion.  
a waste of optimism

what I learned there is  
If something similar were to happen in the future  
I'm not sure I would seek justice through the system

In that moment when I was like, it was all for nothing. And he's just going to get away with  
it. And they were like well.

You should have just told him off

if this does happen again, which I'm sure it will at some point like,  
Part of me like wants to stand up for myself but I just don't feel like that's going to work  
ever. I don't know.

But I think there is some value in like pursuing it and putting in the work and effort. To  
like try to make a difference

For me, personally, I can only get through this world by having some sort of higher  
purpose

Like everything is stacked against you and your only way to make it through is to be your  
own best advocate

and I've seen the difference that it can make

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Nicole: So we're going to start with how has your experience—and this can be about the incident that I know about or if there are other incidents in your past that have affected your feelings about these, you can also talk about those—but how has your experience affected your feelings about, and relationship with, disillusionment and cynicism?

Megan: Yeah, I feel like going into the whole process of it, like making the decision to actually seek justice, I felt very hopeful and optimistic about that. And then I think, when it actually got to the point of them interviewing me, and asking the questions... some of them that really didn't even seem related. They were asking like questions about my Tinder account or what we do on Tinder and things like that. I'm like, "I don't really understand how that is related to sexual harassment in the workplace." Yeah, the questioning, that's when I think I started to be like, "Oh, this is kind of difficult." I felt like they were painting a picture of me that was, I don't know, not representative of me, and trying to build a case for it kind of felt like building a case for *name redacted (Megan's abuser)*. Like, "Well, she's reckless."

Yeah, and then there's the long period of time where you hear nothing. So that's making you cynical as well. You don't know if it's getting taken care of, or how long it'll be until it is taken care of. So you kind of forget about it, but then you remember that it's kind of getting stale.

And then, when I got the news that it was being dismissed, I was really upset. I was at work and I opened the e-mail, and I couldn't even read the whole thing. I just read snippets of it. And then, I don't really ever cry, but I got in my car and I just was so upset that I had a little ugly cry for a second and then I called my parents because they had been in on it since the very beginning. And I think talking to them, I realized maybe I should go into the reporting process. So they were with me from the beginning of that decision and then updating them that it went completely sideways and was kind of a waste of time, and a waste of feeling and emotion, a waste of optimism. Like, "Oh I think this will work out in my favor" cause for me, I just was like... I had so obviously been wronged by this person.

N: Right, right.

M: But yeah, I got the full report saying that they were going to dismiss it and that he was not in the wrong at all. And then I was just like, "Well, the system just doesn't work at all."

N: Right.

M: I think what I learned there is if something similar were to happen in the future I'm not sure if I would seek justice through the system, basically.

N: Yeah, yeah. So, how has this experience affected your feeling of access to agency? You can ask questions about the questions, if you want.

M: Can you elaborate just a little bit more about agency?

N: Agency... so I'm thinking of agency in this project as basically, your ability to change things in your circumstances or world, your ability to make an impact on the world in which you exist, or the conditions of your world, or your ability to make things happen that you would like to happen. I don't know.

M: I think that makes sense. Again, I'll go back to the day I found out that it had been dismissed. I think my mom told me, which was really disheartening, they really weren't comforting. In that moment when I was like, "It was all for nothing. And he's just going to get away with it.", they (Megan's Parents) were like, "Well, you should have just told him off. You should have just, from the very beginning, said to him "I don't like the way you're speaking to me, and basically fuck off." In the moment, when he was saying these types of things... I'm not a confrontational person. So that just never felt like an option, or appropriate, because we're also in the workplace, essentially. But yeah, they were saying, "You know, you should have just said something to him. You should have just told him off immediately and then he would have stopped and then you could have carried about, you know, your life like usual." So I think this experience, in terms of agency for me, has closed a lot of doors. Maybe my parents are right. Maybe if this does happen again, which I'm sure it will at some point, part of me wants to stand up for myself. But I just don't feel like that's going to work, ever. I don't know. So I feel like maybe, if anything, this experience should have taught me to stand up for myself. But I feel very much the opposite. I'm probably just going to ignore it as much as I can if it ever happens again. I don't know if there even is a way to remove myself from these situations when they're happening because it happened around other people and other people heard these comments and these comments were directed at other people as well. So, even in a group setting, you're not safe. So I don't really know how to remove myself from those situations. But yeah, I just feel, I don't know, stunted sort of, when it comes to taking action and standing up for myself. And maybe it's taught me to just recoil or kind of hide in my shell a little bit. I don't know.

N: Yeah. I mean, I think that that's common for a lot of people, even the people who won their cases. So how has your experience affected you in the realm of feeling heard, included, and cared for by society?

M: Heard, included, and cared for. Hmm. I don't know. This one's really hard to answer actually, because I feel like the system, the reporting system, is so intricate and there's a lot of thought and policy and procedure and all these things that go into it. So it sort of does feel like, with all the constraints, it has a structure and I guess that feels comforting. I guess I just had a lot of faith in that structure and blind trust that, you know, with all these procedures and all these people involved, they're being objective and just looking for the facts. They'll see that this person was so clearly in the wrong, and overstepped really gross boundaries. So when I found out that wasn't the case, that the structure... I think there was a line in my report that said that we, or specifically I guess me, stood in the way of his ability to make friends and to feel comfortable here in this setting, in this environment, in this program. Which is funny because that's taking into consideration how he's being cared for.

So I don't know. I feel like I wasn't cared for or supported really, and instead, the finger was being pointed at me, like, "You're the one that is interfering with people's ability to have community, and basically find happiness here." But yeah, so I felt really guilty. I felt genuinely like I was the person in the wrong. And I was, I don't know, they really made me feel that way, but I thought about if I do have a daughter; what do I tell her if something like this happens to her? I'm going to be like, "Well, yeah, I was in your shoes. And I did everything I thought was necessary. I took all the right steps. It just came back to blow up in my face basically, and it wasn't worth it. It wasn't worth the time or the energy. Or any of it." Yeah, I don't know. Like I said earlier to some of the other questions, I probably won't be pursuing any sort of like systematic justice for myself in the future, just because I don't think it works at all. And I still don't even know how they were able to come to the conclusion that he had done nothing wrong, or I guess that anything he had said, whatever I may have said to him or done in his presence was somehow worse or more damaging than the comments he made about women and their bodies. I don't know if that answers your question...

N: Yeah, it does. Do you still feel really guilty?

M: No, because I try not to think about it. I feel like it's been done for a while. Because he dropped out of the program and physically hasn't been anywhere near me in about a year now. So when he left, it was sort of easier for me, I guess. And knowing that he wasn't here to like. I don't know after the case had been handled that was all so much easier knowing that I wouldn't have to face him because that would have been so embarrassing for me personally, just to be like, "I was trying to get you in trouble because you did something wrong and now I feel like I'm the one in trouble." Yeah, I still feel sort of guilty. I guess it's hard to escape that.

N: Yeah, I mean, I definitely want you to know that I don't think that you did, certainly not more harm than him.

M: Yeah.

N: I know it doesn't always make a huge difference for somebody to say that because you'll have all of these internalized feelings of victim-blaming that are coming at you from all sides, but I do still think it's important to say that I really don't think that that's true.

M: I do feel guilty for dragging these two into it (referring to her two friends and fellow cohort members who were in the adjoining room). Because I thought we stood a chance.

Grace (Megan's friend): Can I talk?

M: Yeah.

G: I don't want you to feel guilty about that.

M: I'm sorry I wasted your time and made you take a side.

G: You did something that I was literally too scared to do after he said so many gross things to me.

M: That's true. It was really gross.

G: I was literally too nervous, and you did it. Bravo to you!

M: Yeah. Thank you.

N: Yeah, I'm sorry it made you feel terrible. I mean, I am glad that you did it.

M: Yeah.

N: Because do you think he would have left? Without that?

M: He was not doing well here, in more ways than this. His reputation was....

G: Abysmal.

M: Abysmal is a good word. He was not making a good name for himself. And I think the culture here compared to New Mexico was just too different, and he had always complained about that, so I think me making the report was probably just the cherry on top of like, "I don't belong there", so,

N: But even if it was only the straw that broke the camel's back, it's still something.

M: Yeah.

N: So, this is the hard one. How, if at all, has this affected your feelings of access to democracy?

M: That's a good question because, I feel like living in Wyoming makes my answer to this question different than if we were anywhere else. Because I feel like the systems here, compared to Illinois, where everything is so liberal and progressive and I don't know, the attitudes are just so different, I think. The legislation process is also very different there. But here it's like, I read the news every day for the state, every day I'm at work anyway.

N: That can be dangerous.

M: Yeah, I don't know. Recently, it was the abortion stuff that's been going on.

N: Which, for context, is that Wyoming has been the first state in America to outlaw medication abortions directly.

M: Yeah. Yeah, knowing that I exist here, and that's the case, is hard. And like also just the fact that you're just supposed to carry on with that is weird, you know. It's so weird to just have your rights taken from you and the next day have to go to work and everyone's like, "So did you do that thing that you were supposed to do?" But yeah, I know that just from what I've heard from other people relating to the reporting process, and just like some of the laws and what Wyoming considers assault or harassment, it doesn't encompass a whole lot. It's a very narrow definition. And so a lot of things that are wrong kind of get labeled as not wrong here.

But, man, I don't know, I feel like after this experience, I feel like I'm less encouraged to participate, which sucks because basically everything that I am doing right now, as an educator, as someone who works in nonprofits and is like constantly trying to participate in our system and have faith in it and make it better... it is kind of hard to know that I'm doing all that work, but it still doesn't apply to me somehow. I'm like, "Oh well, you know, maybe if we do all this work. Or write these grants and do all these things and host all these community events maybe someone will benefit from it, but not me probably." But yeah, you were at the Angela Davis thing, where she was talking about, I think someone asked her about burnout, And they're like, "How do you fight that?" And I think she said that it's so much bigger than just yourself, and that there are other people involved. So even if I don't personally feel optimistic about my rights or freedoms or access to services or resources, I still have, obviously, some faith in this system that we have here in Wyoming. Otherwise, I mean, I could literally be doing anything else. I wouldn't be at a nonprofit, I wouldn't be considering careers in education and writing, helping people communicate their ideas and feelings.

N: So your feeling is basically that you feel unlikely to benefit, but it doesn't make you feel like it's not a good idea to fight for it.

M: Yeah. I'm not totally nihilistic about it, like, "It all means nothing, why even bother?" I think there is some value in pursuing it and putting in the work and effort to try to make a difference, because if you're at least trying to make a difference, that's better than the opposite, which is doing absolutely nothing, or even the opposite of that, which is actively working to make things bad and worse for people. I don't know, I think for me, personally, I can only get through this world by having some sort of higher purpose. Trying to have a purpose is how I get by.

N: And so this all sort of ties into the last two questions, which are about how being in Wyoming has affected your experience, and then also what is the way forward that you see?

M: I think being in Wyoming, it's difficult. It's almost weird to think about that I exist here, because so many people can't even fathom existing in a state like this. Which, I mean, obviously it is a red state, but also the fact that there's so little here—the population is so small. It's just miles and miles of nothingness, and in a lot of ways I feel like it's behind a lot of the rest of the country, just because it's so rural. And yeah, the population is so small, but, I think since I was not born here, and I feel like I am kind of just passing through, I think my method for getting by is kind of just keeping a low profile, keeping my head down. I don't think I voted, this is bad to say, but I don't think I voted for like any local legislation because I didn't feel educated enough to make a decision. But also I wasn't sure how long I was going to stay here. So I didn't want to go into voting for a bunch of people who are going to change or make a difference here when I wasn't actually going to be here because I don't want to have a negative vote. I don't know if that makes sense or not.

N: Like you don't want to sign up for something that other people are going to have to carry out?

M: Yeah, that exactly. Yeah, and now I realize, it's Wyoming, I should have just voted liberal to help it out. But yeah, I don't know. There were probably a few other things I was going through at the time as well. I was just like voting is the last thing on my mind, voting for City Council or, you know, city elections, or even I guess statewide as well. For whatever reason, it didn't seem immediately pressing, which is sad to say.

N: But I think that's the case for a lot of people, and something that goes unacknowledged in conversations about access to, and utilization of, democratic systems is that people have to have their basic needs met in order to be able to have the bandwidth to participate.

M: That is really true. Yeah, and I was obviously not in a good place financially. And I was working two jobs, at least. So yeah, I think that probably played into it as I was like, "I'm too tired, I'm too poor, I don't have the time." Actually, this is really funny. I went with Grace to go vote. And I realized that it wasn't my voting place and they're like you have to go

somewhere else. And I was like, “Well, I don't think I can go to a second location. I barely had time to come here.” But yeah, I think that partly played into why I didn't vote because I didn't even know where I was supposed to go. And I went somewhere, thinking that I could just participate and they were like, you can't do that here. You gotta go somewhere else.

I think now that I'm going to stay for a little bit. Especially since my personal situation will improve after this program, I do want to make more of an effort to participate in democracy here and vote and make sure that my voice is being heard because I don't see myself as just someone who's in and out. Like I think I might stay here for a couple of years so. I don't know, what was the question again?

N: It's OK, it's how being in Wyoming has affected your experience. And I mean I have also felt that. This year was the first year that I voted in Wyoming, and I didn't admit to myself that I lived in Wyoming until after I graduated from my master's program, until I had a full-time benefited job in this state. That was the first year where I was like, “Oh, I guess I live here now”, even though that was the 7th year of me being here.

M: Being a student is like existing in a gray space.

N: Right. And I went home in the summer to Colorado Springs. I voted in Colorado. I had my ballots mailed to me. I just didn't really consider myself a resident of Wyoming until this year. And honestly, it was really hard to figure out who to vote for. It was a lot of work; a lot of the candidates have terrible web pages where it's basically impossible to know whether or not they see me as like a human being or not. I'm over here just trying to figure out, do you care about my basic human rights? And it's very unclear.

M: Yeah.

N: You know what's not unclear? Their position on the 2nd Amendment.

M: Yeah, that's like smack dab in the middle of the workplace.

N: Yeah, they're like, “I have guns.” And I'm like, “That's great. Do you think that I should be able to make my own healthcare decisions or not?” Because that's what I actually care about. I don't actually care about whether or not you go hunting with your son. What I care about is, am I going to be a full person under your leadership, or a half person?

M: I've told you that, I guess during the legislative session that we just held, I made an effort to read about it and keep up with it and, like the child marriage laws that they were hoping to change, or update, I don't even know what the point of it was. Was it supposed to make it easier for 13 year olds to get married, or was it supposed to like...?

N: I think it was supposed to make a child marriage law. I think we are one of the last states in the country with as permissive of rules as we had.

M: So we were, were we trying to like cut back on the child marriage?

N: Yeah, I think we were trying to establish a minimum age.

M: Yeah, that would have been nice. And then everyone was like, “Well, who are we to step in between a godly union” or whatever, but yeah. So that would have never flown in Illinois, people would just be like, “Duh, like they’re children. They’re thirteen years old, they don’t know anything. They shouldn’t be getting married with parents’ permission or anything else.” So I think that is just a really good example of how things are, just mind bogglingly backwards here.

N: So what is the way that you see forward, and you can answer this from your own perspective, or from your perspective on a way forward for society, or both. Just whatever, whatever way forward.

M: I feel like overall I’ve been dealt like a pretty good hand in life. My parents were able to provide me with housing and shelter and security, and I was able to graduate high school and pursue higher education, which already makes me miles and light years ahead of a lot of other people in this country. So I do feel privileged, even though some of my identities would maybe point otherwise, like being a woman and then being mixed race. Those are kind of not so great in this country, but I feel like my access to education has really been a privilege. I don’t know. I feel like I have to put that to use, otherwise it just kind of feels like a waste. I don’t know. I feel like in every job I’ve had, I’ve just had to help make a difference in some capacity. I’ve been working with nonprofits since I was 19, and I’m turning 24 this year, so about five years.

Obviously, being an educator, that’s been really valuable, to see how you can actually make a difference in the lives of students, especially in a place like Wyoming, where, you know, I feel like you already know this. The education system here is different; the ruralness of the state makes a difference. A lot of students have probably had to prioritize family and work over schoolwork and trying to get ahead, and that includes their writing, and their communication skills. So helping young people foster a relationship with writing and helping to grow their voice: I feel like that makes the biggest difference. Because something nobody really tells you when you’re a teenager, or just entering college, is that no one is going to be an advocate for you. You really have to be your own advocate. And as scary as that is, you just have to find a way to use your voice to help you get ahead. And that can be obviously really scary for students to have to like fight for themselves like that, but there really is no other way. You will get trampled on if you can’t find a way to vocalize your opinions, your beliefs and fight for yourself.

So I kind of try to stress how important writing and like verbal communication are as well, how important that is, whether you're, you know, blue or red. And I make that case in my classroom as well. Like, this isn't about like who you voted for. This is the system. Everything is stacked against you, and your only way to make it through is to like be your own best advocate, and part of that is learning how to write. So anyway, I think it goes back to having a purpose, and trying to make a difference, and I've seen the difference that it can make. So once you see one little inkling, it's easy to kind of keep going, even just something that kind of suggests that what you're doing is working. However small it is, it makes it worth it. So that's what gets me through and that's how I keep going.

N: I love that. I do also like ending on that question because it's like it's going to be ok for someone, somewhere.

M: I will say also that being your own best advocate, for me, I thought that was going through the reporting system. Turns out it wasn't, that wasn't good for me, but even my parents said that even though it was a negative experience, I still learned a lot from it. And so now that I've learned from it, I know what I would and wouldn't do again. And that is still, as shitty as it is, valuable to know. So yeah, even when you fail to be your own best advocate, you still learn.

N: Right. Attempting to advocate for yourself is maybe the most important thing.

M: I think so too.

N: Even when the system fails you. Yeah, I hear you saying that it was a really negative experience and I think you know that that was my experience as well. But speaking up was important.

M: Yeah.

N: I think we've talked about this before—that one of your motivations for speaking up was that you saw that there was a cohort of women coming in—

M: Yeah.

N: —To the MA program, and you saw a real and present danger in your community. And you spoke up to try to address it. And at the end of the day, I think it worked, in that that danger is not present in our community anymore. That specific danger, right? Of course, there are radiating other dangers, but I think that what you did was really important.

M: Yeah. I didn't think about it like that. For me it was so obviously just a loss, but the fact that, you know, the new cohort didn't have to...

N: They don't know him.

M: Yeah, they don't know him, they don't have to put up with it. I'm like, "That's cool that no one is saying nasty things to you while you're just trying to be a student and work."

N: Yeah, just trying to work. Just trying to do your job.

M: Yeah.

*Rhiannon McLean*

I didn't deserve what happened to me  
and the way I am now  
is almost entirely shaped because of what happened to me

And I like who I am as a person. But  
Did we ever stand a chance?

In my heart of hearts, I do still feel like I was robbed  
the way I'm viewing myself  
and the way I view myself as a sexual agent is so different

You know, there was one instance  
where I talked to the cops and they told me  
you know, we believe you, but it's going to be really hard for a jury to believe you

they were basically telling me  
we don't want to put you through this

when I work with survivors  
I'm not going to lie to them and tell them that it will get better one day.  
you're going to go through times where it gets better. Being a survivor is now just a day-to-  
day part of my life  
there are going to be days where it's going to hurt

and there's going to be days where it's going to, you know, feel liberating.

And there's going to be days where you don't think about it at all,

but you know it never ends.

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Nicole: The first question is how has your experience affected your feelings about and relationship with, disillusionment and cynicism?

Rhiannon: I feel like it fluctuates, and I feel like that's probably a very common theme when you talk to any survivor or any person who's been through that type of harm. Where, you know, I feel like I have to operate within this framework of "I didn't deserve what happened to me, and the way I am now is almost entirely shaped because of what happened to me."

That moment was a turning point in my life, and then I have to live that way forever, which is really difficult at times to reckon with. Which isn't to say like I'm not proud of who I am. You know what I mean? I have a career working with survivors, and we're working in politics and all of these other things. And I like who I am as a person. But that doesn't change that nagging feeling of, like, who would I be if this hadn't happened to me? And that lack of control over that. Like it doesn't matter; yes, technically I have control over my life now working with survivors. That is a job that I chose, that is a path that I chose. But would I have ever chosen that path? And so that becomes a difficult thing. Am I giving too much power to the people who abused me by giving them credit for the way I've turned out? Or am I just acknowledging the, I mean, perhaps reality that there's nothing I can do to change that and there was nothing I could ever do to change that circumstance, then, that has now led me to this juncture now.

So we talk about cynicism and disillusionment... it fluctuates—where, you know, you have those moments as a survivor of “How amazing is it that I can now do this work and can now stand up for people.” You know, I work in that cross-section of survivor advocacy and politics, so I'm able to actually enter rooms and affect change and that's amazing. And I'm proud of that, and I'm happy I get to do that and I'm happy it happened to me and not someone else. But at what point is there still that feeling of “how much control will you ever actually have?” How important is choice and free will after a certain point? Not to get too metaphysical, but you question all of that. And as that pertains to cynicism, it's hard not to feel cynical and hard not to feel like, “Well, you know, who cares what I do?” Because at the end of the day, my agency was stripped from me so young and I have to just live with that, I have to live like that, forever.

And you know, I've said this to you before in, in other conversations, that the best people I know are survivors, but I never want to meet another one.

N: I know.

R: And that's how it feels! You know? We met because of that experience that we have shared and that's amazing and I'm happy about that, but how sad that that is the reason that we met and there's nothing we can really do to change that. So that's very cynical and it does nag at me sometimes. But, you know, I'm a happy person. I'm happy with my life, but that feeling that I have really no idea of how things would be different if it hadn't happened is probably the most nihilistic part of my day-to-day line of thinking.

N: Yeah, yeah. No, I know exactly what you mean. Just when you see the statistics, when you come to understand the percentage of the population, of femme people in the world who have experienced this like...

R: I think it's close to 100%.

N: I think so, right?

R: I think that's it, like teaching consent and being in those spaces and realizing how many people, maybe they weren't raped, or maybe they weren't beaten up by their boyfriend, but they had a hookup that wouldn't take no for an answer. If you see sexual violence the way you should, where it's like from 0 being nothing to, you know, 10 being full on sexual assault, all of that in between, I would say that a lot of almost every woman and every femme-presenting person has experienced that, and a large percentage of men have as well. Did we ever stand a chance? That's the part that I think nags at me. Sorry, I didn't mean to cut you off.

N: No, no, you're good. The next question is how has this experience affected your feeling of access to agency?

R: Oh awfully.

N: Yeah.

R: Awfully. You know, my first my first assault, which I always hate opening any sentence with because everyone knows what that means, right? My first assault happened when I was very young. I was 12 and it was by an adult, and I'm now older than the person who assaulted me was and that's the weirdest feeling to go through and so very, very young. Almost as soon as it happened, I think before I'd even processed that it was rape, you know, because it was not consensual by any means, there was still that... that thing... having lost my ability to lose my virginity the way I want to. That was what killed me. And so I do still consider morally losing my virginity to be when I was fifteen with a boyfriend. But, in my heart of hearts, I do still feel like I was robbed of that opportunity to understand what sex felt like, and what it should feel like.

And of course I went through what many survivors experience when, especially when assaulted when they're young: hyper sexuality for years and years. Losing the agency to think of sex and be a sexual citizen the way I want to be was so difficult. Even now, I have internalized a great deal of that, trying to unlearn that sex is supposed to be for me, and that's not how I felt my whole life. I felt like this is something that I'm expected to do. So that even just with sexual agency, it was huge, a huge disruption. Again, doing violence prevention work, I teach and preach all of this stuff to other people, but when I'm sitting here alone, or talking to one of my girlfriends, the way I'm viewing myself and the way I view myself as a sexual agent is so different. And then that's permeated into so much. You know, there was a work conflict recently that went to HR levels, very normal stuff, and it was because one of my coworkers had reported that on my behalf. And I felt even if it was the right thing, and it was very validating to hear that the concerns that I had were worth reporting the upwards,

the feeling of not having control was so scary. And it remains so scary, and that's why I've never reported. I'll say that now, and we can start from that framework.

N: Yeah.

R: There was one instance with an ex-boyfriend where I talked to the cops and they told me, "You know, we believe you, but it's going to be really hard for a jury to believe you." That experience was so interesting because on one hand I was grateful they told me that, because they were basically telling me, "We don't want to put you through this. You are going to lose control of this so fast."

N: Right.

R: So I think when we talk about my relationship with sexuality, my relationship with agency, it all comes back to that one experience and then feeling like I'm never going to have control ever again.

N: Right.

R: So stepping out of little comfort zones, or even doing the right thing at times and knowing that it's going to be out of my hands is difficult. And of course, talking about democracy and being a political figure—voting day hits and it's that feeling again of "I have no control at this point." And that could be liberating at times because it's done. You know, before we started recording, I told you, like when it's done, it's done. But at the end of the day, all of those things interact in very strange ways, in my mind, at least. And all feel interrelated, despite being so separate.

N: Yeah, yeah. It's also interesting to hear your perspective as someone who hasn't reported, because so far both of my interviewees have been people who reported through the University system. And yeah, it's really interesting to hear. I mean, I would say that everybody who's participated in this project (and potentially everyone who will participate in this project) has some unhealed stuff, but I think that it's different depending on whether or not you reported.

R: Ohh yeah.

N: I don't think it's better or worse.

R: No, but it's different.

N: Yeah, the system does traumatize you.

R: It does. I mean, I don't think (and again, that cynicism thing) but it's just being honest when I work with survivors. I'm not going to lie to them and tell them that it will get better one day. You're going to go through times where it gets better: being a survivor is now just a day-to-day part of my life, whereas when it first happened, it was like, "I'm never going to get over this. I'm going to die, like this is the worst thing I've ever been through." And it is, of course.

N: Right.

R: Now, as a grown woman, years later, it's just part of my life. And there are days where it is really bad. Even thinking about what happened, I have struggled with mental health issues ever since, scrubbing myself in the shower like 6 times some days because I'm so disgusted about what happened. And I know that that's a very common thing for survivors as well. No one ever fully heals. Like, I do this work for a living, I deal with the concept of sexual assault on a day-to-day basis. I'm usually completely fine, but there are going to be days where it's going to hurt and there's going to be days where it's going to, you know, feel liberating. And there's going to be days where you don't think about it at all, but you know, it never ends. And that's what sucks. And I'm sure that's what sucks for you too, coming out of your journey recently too. And then interviewing survivors who are all like, "Yeah, I'm still kind of messed up about it."

N: Yeah...and well, my first assault was also in high school. So I don't know. It's so weird. And sometimes you can kind of put it in the past and you can say like, "This thing happened then, and it's over now." But then things happen again, and you're like, "Oh, I thought I was done."

R: We're more likely to be re-traumatized. If you've survived it once, there's a likelihood you're going to survive it again.

N: Well, I think if it's happened to you once and you were able to name it, then you start recognizing it.

R: Yeah, that's powerful.

N: I think a lot of people have been assaulted but they just never got to the point of naming it. So they'll think, maybe until the day they die, that they have never been assaulted. But if presented with the straight-up definition, I think that they would have a change of perspective.

R: Yeah, it's interesting you bring that up. Like I'm 21, so I'm in the phase of my college experience where I'm going out fairly often and I'm having a great time and luckily, doing

this work and teaching education and doing specifically a lot of anti-date-rape work, is a lot of the tangible results I've gotten, which is amazing. Not that work with survivors is non-tangible, you just can't assign a number to that, you know.

I was out at at Lovejoy's, I'll name it, recently. And I was like, groped from behind. But it wasn't just like a butt grab, not that would make it any better. It was a dude trying to touch my vagina. And he was laughing, and I finished my drink and just fucking tried to wail on this guy. Excuse my language. I lost it. And then I was telling my friend, but they're like, "Oh, that happens all the time."

N: UGH!

R: And they weren't, like excusing it. They were just going like, "Oh, that's just like part of going to the bar."

N: You were like, "Are you OK? Is this just what's happening to us? And we're just thinking that it's OK?"

R: Well, and even when I was telling my therapist about it, I said, "Well, you know, I expect that from the Buck, or I expect that from Roxie's" and she was like, "Well, you shouldn't. That's the point."

N: Right. You shouldn't expect it from anywhere.

R: It should not be an expectation for women going out and having fun that this is just going to be what we live with, right? But I think that speaks very clearly to what you were just saying, that as a survivor and as a consent educator, it's a lot easier for that to happen to me and for me to go "What the fuck just happened? That is assault." There's no other title for it. You know what I mean? Women also experience from men, the lower back touch, the infamous like, "let me move past you" lower back touch. That's creepy and gross. But, you know, usually most of us will just move on from it.

N: Right.

R: I had the complete inability to be grabbed at that bar and feel fine afterwards, whereas all of my girlfriends were like, "It's just part of the territory." And that's what sucks.

N: Right, and you're like, "It doesn't completely destabilize you every time it happens?"

R: Yeah, because for me, I stayed out. I kept having fun. But like, I binge drank. And I will fully fess up to the fact that when that happened, I leaned into vices way too heavy. I'm not ashamed of, you know... maybe I'm ashamed of that behavior, but I'm not ashamed of speaking it and saying like, "No, I didn't cope well with it at all." That was a few weeks ago. I was

just out of a bar, got grabbed, and I went home throwing up. I drank more than I think I've ever drank in my life, genuinely out of anger for what had happened.

N: Right.

R: And my friends were shocked by that, because in their experience that's just the way their day-to-day goes. And it may be because they never had the experience that I did. There was no ambiguity in my rape experience, which is on one hand... you know, I obviously I don't give many details very often. That lets people kind of know like... it was the very traditional, what you would see in a movie, rape experience in a lot of ways. It was by someone I know.

N: As most are.

R: As most are. But still very much no ambiguity, which gives me some solace because I can always stop myself, or try to stop myself, from gaslighting myself. You know, we all do it.

N: It's still hard, though.

R: Was it really that bad? You know what I mean? Like, "Maybe...maybe if I hadn't done this" or whatever. We all go through it, even the biggest advocates, we're advocates for everyone but ourselves.

N: Right.

R: But I can usually give myself a little bit of grace, like, "No, if you saw what had happened to you in a movie, you would be horrified." It was so weird. I was watching *Degrassi*—this is, like, totally irrelevant to your project—

N: No, I love it though, keep going.

R: I was watching *Degrassi: Next Generation*. I lived for that show, and they do touch the rape issue very delicately, which I loved. I wasn't expecting it; I had only seen the show as a kid and then there was an episode where one of the character stories was so aligned with what had happened to me. I cried my eyes out, watching her go through that.

And when I told my therapist, like, hey, I kind of had a weird little triggering moment watching *Degrassi*, she went, "If you know that it was wrong that it happened to her, and you can watch a fictional character go through what you went through, and you can cry, why don't you give yourself that grace?" It was such a moment for me, realizing that if you saw other people going through what you have gone through, you would not be okay with it.

N: Yeah.

R: And that applies to exactly what we were just talking about. Just because some of these women who I know, who are getting groped at these bars, take it on the chin and whatever, I'm not okay with it, you know? I mean, I'm not okay even with men, you know, I have guy friends... and that's not to downplay what women go through, it's such a difficult way to broach that conversation. But we're at bars with, you know, my guy friends, and they are just like, way too cool with guys sometimes being too aggressive with them on their shoulders, or girls coming up and kissing them on the cheek and touching their butts. It's like it doesn't matter how much I try to intervene, right? Culturally, we're just kind of taught that we need to just let other people violate our agency and be cool with it. But survivors have seen the worst of where that boundary goes. Not to say getting groped at a bar isn't bad, but if that's (on that scale I was talking about) if that's two or three, and you've been to ten, you're never going to let two or three happen to you or anyone you love ever again. You know?

N: You're just much more aware. Yeah. The next one is sort of tough, and the wording is also not amazing. How has your experience affected you in the realm of feeling heard, included, and cared for by society?

R: So badly. It's so bad. I think #MeToo was a really interesting era for me because for every 10 people who supported the women who were coming out, there was always one or two, who you knew in real life, who would question them. Bill Cosby was a big one. You know, when Bill Cosby's accusers came forward they would say, "Why didn't they say anything at the time?" And I'm sitting there. You know, that whole scandal was happening just years after what I had gone through, just a few years, and I was a teenager and I didn't say anything. At the time, I didn't say anything to anyone.

N: Yeah, yeah.

R: You know my—full disclosure—my father found out two weeks ago that I was raped, for the first time.

N: Wow.

R: This is very, very fresh. So, I went 7 years before telling a single soul. And then of course, maybe we're approaching now 10 years before I'll probably ever tell the full story publicly. So that was hard for me to hear. I'm thinking okay, I'll never be able to come forward now because if I do, they will say I've waited too long. I've waited too long to say anything. That was so difficult. Even if Bill Cosby was eventually arrested, and culturally we understand that he did what he did, and we believed his survivors. The fact that every time there was a new #metoo, there was a different one or two people in my life, in my real person-to-person life. And they would always say, "Well, I'm not obviously not talking about you, you know I believe you." But I'm not different.

N: Yeah, but why do you believe me?

R: Exactly.

N: Do you believe me because you know me? Because you don't wanna jeopardize our relationship?

R: Well, they don't have to look these people in the eyes.

N: Right. Because I'm a real person to you.

R: Yes, yes, and I said that. I think it was funny because I tweeted this when Kanye West was harassing Kim Kardashian online, like harassing her in ways that most of us would view as power-based personal violence. I saw that happening and the only statement I made—you know, I was a pretty big fan of both of them prior to a lot of this stuff, right?—I saw that happen and I just said, “Kanye is not going to see you defend him. Kim's not going to see you drag her.”

N: Right.

R: “But there is a survivor in your life or a mentally ill person in your life who is watching the way you're reacting to this. So by calling him crazy and insane and all of these things, there is someone with bipolar in your life who thinks that if they mess up, you're going to see them that way. There's also a woman who probably has an ex-husband or an ex-boyfriend or a stalker in her life who won't feel like they can come to you anymore. The way we speak about pop culture, as it pertains to violence, matters. There are people in your life who will see it.”

N: Yeah.

R: And so, #metoo was so weird because on one hand it was so amazing to see. Even famous women who you love and look up to, like I love Charmed, and Rose McGowan is now a survivor icon. That was so amazing for me. And then it still kept me quiet for a long time. And then I finally got the courage to start talking about it more through the work that I do, which was amazing. I felt like I couldn't work with survivors if I wasn't ready to tell at least one or two people that this is what happened to me.

And then a few months later, Johnny Depp takes his ex-wife to court and her rape testimony becomes a meme online. “My dog stepped on a bee”: everyone made fun of it. But the concept, she—and I I'm not going to speak on who I believe and who I don't. I think that that there are elements on both ends of that relationship that are problematic, but most importantly, that was an adult man, a way older adult man and a younger woman. The power was there, there was a wealth disparity. In a court of law, he was found, you know,

responsible for raping this woman. And it doesn't matter if she fucking shat in his bed. That needs to be acknowledged, acknowledged and addressed. And I was trying to avoid it. I got off social media, but it got to the point where at work, people in my real life, were saying, "My dog stepped on a bee." And it triggered the fuck out of me. It was awful, because what they were making fun of is, "what does that have to do with your story?" When you're when you're raped, every decision you made, up to the point of that moment, you're thinking about.

When I start my story, when I told it to my therapist for the first time, my rape story starts with my mom buying me eyeliner. What does that have to do with what happened at the end of that night? Nothing. But you're going through every decision you made from the beginning of that day to the night before to 10 years before, everything. You feel like everything led you to that traumatizing moment. And so when she said, "That morning my dog stepped on a bee", that is her version of "that morning my mom bought me eyeliner". And to see that made fun of was horrible for me.

So to kind reel things back in, I guess: my ability to speak and feel heard. We're in a culture that claims that we support women in a different way. You know the bar for Americans is like, we're better than Saudi Arabia like...

N: Yeah, we're definitely different. Are we better? I don't know. Or are we just bad in a different way?

R: Exactly. That's exactly how I feel, like, "It's different, but is it better?" And, yes, there's so many people who support survivors. I think about the events that were a part of Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It's April and we're doing all these events and I see people showing up to these things and really not just showing up, but engaging with it. It's the most amazing thing when I'm hanging out with my friends who are frat boys and they're talking about stuff that they've learned at Sexual Assault Awareness Month.

N: That really reaffirms my belief in our ability to heal, as a society. Like it actually makes me feel teary.

R: Yeah, humans are good. And the other night, I just had such a moment of pause. I was talking to these fraternity men and obviously, you know, there're stereotypes about that. But they were sharing about like, you know, "I was at a bar and then I remembered what I learned at a green dot training and I intervened" and he got punched out for it, he told me that.

N: Oh my god.

R: The guy who was trying creep on this girl punched him out. But he said, "I felt the need to intervene." And that gives me some hope. But the day-to-day, you know, feeling of "am I heard? Am I seen?" It doesn't... I don't know if it will ever get better for me. Culturally, it might. Who knows? Maybe like, culturally it is going to improve, and keeps improving, and

I have hope for it. But that internalized feeling of going through that...and then I think #metoo started in 2016 when it really took off. I was raped in 2014, so almost immediately after that we reached a reckoning as a society with it. But I feel grateful to do the work that I'm doing, and if that changes one or two people's journey, I've been doing it for two years, if I do it for 10 years after this and I've only helped two people, that is two people who feel more seen, who feel more heard, who learned about consent, who didn't get an STI. Whatever it is, you know? I mean it's worth it in the end, but as far as my internal feelings on it? It's hard.

N: Yeah, that's been such an interesting pattern in this testimony: people saying it might get better, but it's not going to get better for me. Do you have any other thoughts on that?

R: Cause it's trauma, you know? What I'm loving about this conversation is that it's political, it's scientific, it's social, it's pop cultural. All of that connects with it. But, you know, I didn't start going to therapy until I was 19 and it took me until I was 21 to tell the full story to my therapist and the reason I did was because of that trial. I felt the need, like, "I'm really fucked up about this and I need to tell someone." I'm at a point, going back to that feeling of almost helplessness, like there was nothing I could have done and nothing I can do now to change it. And I know that I struggle with mental health issues that I would not struggle with at all had it not been for this.

That is the worst part, and that's why I feel like it will never get better for me. And I feel like that's why a lot of people feel the same way. It's just that I feel like my brain chemistry is irrevocably changed. Because, you know, you're a little girl and it happens to you. And even before that, you know, there's other facets of my story. I went through puberty prematurely, so I was sexualized from a very young age. And then the worst of the worst that could have happened to me happened. I had years of being in, I would say deeply, deeply, deeply sketchy sexual situations at a very young age. And it is, I think, fully, that my brain chemistry is different. The way my brain processes my life is different. And so I can logically know everything that I know and I can try to prevent that initial upset that a lot of survivors feel, and I feel like I've done that and I'm very grateful to have done that. But I didn't have a survivor advocate in my community there to help me.

So for me, I don't want to say I'm a lost cause, because I'm doing a lot of good stuff and I acknowledge that. The mental and physical reactions that I still have to my experience will never get better. Culturally, we're going to change the way we view this. We already are: I hear stories all the time of people even realizing after going to some of our programming that they've committed harm and going, "Holy crap. I didn't even know that this was considered this" and those things are important.

The way we're viewing sex, the way we're viewing sexuality, we're viewing gender and gender-based violence is all shifting for the better. And we are going through roadblocks in order to get there. And seeing that is great, but internally, all of it stays with you, even the

times where we weren't as progressive. The words that were said, you know, they stick with you. And I don't think, at least for me, I don't think... I'm never going to feel better about my story. I think that is ultimately what I'm getting at, and I think that's what a lot of other women are getting at. I'm never going to feel good about being a rape survivor.

N: Right.

R: I'll wear it proudly. I'll keep doing what I'm doing. I'll keep speaking about it. But I'm never going to feel good about it. And I hate that I have to be as vulnerable as I am in so many spaces, just to get that basic empathy for survivors. You were talking earlier about like, "Oh, you see me as human, but you don't see them as human." And that's the whole reason I started speaking up to begin with.

I was in meetings about purchasing anti date rape kits, it was like actual budgetary meetings, and statistics started coming up and I was like, "I want you to look me in the eye, and tell me that you don't see what happened to me is bad. Because that's what you're saying, right? You're not talking about some unnamed statistic. You are not talking about some woman in a faraway place. You are not talking about some people in the SAFE Project house. You are talking about women you interact with on a day-to-day basis. You are talking about students that you love, you're talking about your sisters and your moms and the grocery lady down the street and your teachers and everyone. You are talking about every woman you've ever interacted with in some capacity. And I want you to look me in the eye and tell me, a rape survivor, that this isn't a problem.

And that's how it changes hearts and minds, right? But I hate that I have to do that for them to feel empathy.

N: God, I know.

R: I hate that Tarana Burke had to come up with #metoo for the world to have empathy. I hate that Amber Heard had to go through what she went through just to have empathy. We should not have to be screaming and yelling from the top of our lungs the most evil things we've ever been through, just for others to go, "Huh. Maybe they're right." So I'm not going to bite the hand that feeds me. I love the experiences that I have, like those experiences with those frat boys who were so kind to me, and they know what I've been through as well. And they do that generic boy thing of like, "Oh well, if I ever see him, I'm going to kill him", you know? Which, we can talk about the productivity of that as well...but those experiences do fill my cup and make me happy because those experiences don't often have to come with me having to share it all.

I don't know if this is totally relevant to that question, but I feel like it will never get better for me because in order to continue to try to create that cultural empathy, a lot of us

have to retraumatize ourselves. And I say the word retraumatize, I don't think I've ever been untraumatized from it.

N: Right.

R: And that's what's hard. So, I'm happy. I'm not going to complain about #metoo. I'm not going to complain about all of it because it has changed so many hearts and minds and that is beautiful. And those people should be proud of what they've done. I just feel bad for them, that they had to say it the way they did in order for something to be done.

N: Right.

R: Our culture is changing. I feel much safer at the prospect of...you know, for me, I always said, I would not have kids until I was ready to give birth to a boy, because I could not handle the potential of my son committing harm. I don't know if I would even be in a place where I'm untraumatized enough to handle, like, getting into a fight with a teenage boy. You know what I mean? If I'm 40 years old and my 17 year old son calls me a bitch, I don't know how I would react. Now, when I look at the men who are in my life and look at the men who come to Green Dot and violence prevention things and the men who show up for survivors, not just for the credit, like, actually show up to our survivor events. When I look at that, it makes me feel a lot more hope for that potential. But internally, yeah, I don't know if I'll ever feel good. That was really long way of answering your question but...

N: No, I mean, I think it's really valuable. So how, if at all, has this affected your feelings of access to democracy?

R: It's such an interesting question. On the way over here I was kind of thinking about democracy and how this pertains to it. There's a few different facets of it, and it's interesting to be having this conversation as a survivor who's running for public office right now. I've always felt that very hyper-American feeling of like, "This is your duty." The minute my sister turned 18, I dragged her to go get registered to vote. Because it feels like a sense of control, even if we know it isn't. And naturally, I think of, you know, it's hard to have any conversation about being a survivor and democracy without bringing up the Trump years. You know, we saw Angela Davis speak recently and she said his name is like poison in the air. You should not even put it out there, but it's hard to not have that conversation. Seeing him succeed under the circumstances of what he did—to see even just like the poeticism of a rapist winning over a woman. When you were a little girl, you know, not a little girl, I was 15, but being a girl who was already interested in politics and was already, you know, a very involved kid. It always felt like this was something so close to me. And the defeat of a woman getting 3,000,000 more votes than a rapist and that rapist still being considered more valuable was hard as fuck for me. Like, actually so hard for me.

N: Yeah, absolutely.

R: And it has nothing to do with my opinions on Hillary politically, but it has everything to do with even just the imagery of being a young woman and seeing he can grab women by the pussy, be facing charges, he can get #metoo-ed the house down, but when he's up against a woman it doesn't matter.

And then he ran in 2020 against Joe Biden. And everyone flipped their vote. You get another creepy old man who was hurt women up against him, then suddenly, everyone sees what's wrong. But when he was up against a woman who had spoken about being victimized, he's lurking behind her in that debate. I remember watching it when I was a kid and just going, "This is insane that he's able to stand above her and intimidate her like that" because that's that feeling of "It doesn't matter how powerful of a woman you are, they're still always going to view you as a woman."

N: Right.

R: You can be the most qualified woman, you can be the most talented woman. And so when I compare that to my experience of being assaulted, and talk about... I try to avoid ever talking about rape and gendered terms because I don't want to alienate anyone, but it is such a women's experience and integral to the women's experience, that when I'm getting groped at the bar or when I've been sexually assaulted, I have never felt more like a woman. And so then when I look at politics reflecting any of that, if it doesn't matter that you're the former Secretary of State, it doesn't matter how many bills you've passed, how respected you are. It doesn't matter that she was part of the mission to kill Osama Bin fucking Laden. Because of her womanhood, she was seen as less than.

And then the minute they put a man up against Trump, suddenly everyone saw it. Suddenly it was like, "Well, why didn't we think this years ago?" When we have been saying it—that men like that, both Trump and Joe Biden, are dangerous and should not be in these positions, because rape is about power. Domestic violence is about power. Groping, sexual harassment: it is not about attraction, it's not about any of that. So when we talk about politics in that context, it is always going to be about power. And that was so hard in that context to see. And it makes you feel like, as a woman, these systems aren't built for you. It makes you feel like there is no way you're going to be heard. Because I'll show up and vote in every single election, I'm a Political Science major, you know, I do what I got to do. But I know that ultimately it's always going to be choosing the lesser of two evils and that if you want to try to avoid literal fascism, you may as well just vote for the other rapist.

They're always going to be present, and the system is not built for survivors to feel seen and heard, even if pop culture is getting to that point, politics is not. You know? And that is what's strange, in the democratic system of social democracy, I can fucking make a Facebook

post with my rapist's name in it tomorrow and he'd probably get doxed. Like, that's just the reality. And honestly, I'm not going to criticize that.

N: Right.

R: Morally, I think there's nothing wrong with that. But when you look at the systems, if he wanted to run for office, he'd probably still be allowed to and probably still win. So I don't know. My access to being able to vote, and all of that, and still feeling good about it...I'll do it every time because it feels like it's all we got.

N: Right.

R: And I do believe in democracy as an institution, whether it always functions that way...maybe not, but it's a weird mix. I just got back from D.C. and you know, I felt very strongly about, you know, that this is the people's house. Like, "This belongs to me." And I do feel that way, and that's probably the oxymoron of me as a human being, of being so radical in so many facets.

But ultimately I do believe in the American people's ability to change what we want to change. But 2016 was really disruptive to that. And it's relevant to my story because I was raped in 2014, lost my mom in 2015. So instantly my whole world changed at the same time that America's view on the democratic system changed. And both of them are very much linked to individual agency. So I don't know if I have a poetic conclusion to that, but I was watching the adults in my life lose faith in the democratic system. I was watching my teachers say that this has never happened before. 3,000,000 votes, like people were pissed and their view on "does this matter at all?" suddenly came up at the same time where I was reckoning with that thing I was saying earlier: will I ever be able to have control over any of my decisions after this point?

So I don't know if I even have a nice satisfying conclusion to give you to that story, but it coincides perfectly. So I can't talk about my relationship to my rape, and my assault, and democracy, without pointing out that glaring fact staring me right in the face. I was raped, and two years later, Donald Trump became president. And that feels related, in my mind, and in my life story.

N: —and your ability to really conceptualize whether or not the democratic system cares about people like you.

R: Yes.

N: Well, how has being in Wyoming affected your experience?

R: Well, so I was in Illinois when the rape happened. I moved to Wyoming on Election Day 2016. I didn't even make that connection until just now. November 8th, 2016 I moved to Wyoming. I have very complex feelings about it. I love it here. I've been able to make the life I have, doing survivor work, here in Wyoming, so that makes me feel very, very good that this is a vulnerable population. That maybe, you know, in Illinois, there are social workers on every corner that you can go and talk to but in Wyoming we don't have that. So that makes me feel good, and that is part of my survivor story, in my opinion, that the work that I do now is part of that journey.

N: Yeah.

R: But being from another state, all I had ever known about Wyoming was Matthew Shepherd.

N: Yeah.

R: Who is also a rape survivor, an important part of his journey. I was a theater kid, and The Laramie Project—shout out to Cathy Connelly, a main character in that play—The Laramie Project was all I knew. And then I had seen the documentary *Matthew Shepard Was a Friend of Mine*, which includes a huge section, actually, about his assault. And when my dad told me, “We're going to move to Casper.” I was like, shit, that's where Matthew Shepard's from. There's no memorial to him other than a bench here in Laramie. No one says his name, and if you do, it's a dirty word. Even the Shepherd Symposium will not call themselves the Matthew Shepherd Symposium on Social Justice. You add his first name there and you humanize him. It feels like the end of the world for a lot of people. I've been in the room with administrators who get so uncomfortable at the mention of his name. And although we don't know him as a rape survivor and though, you know, what happened to him is so much more brutal than any of us can even imagine.

There's still this feeling by not acknowledging him, it doesn't matter that the rest of the country has passed hate crime laws in his name it doesn't matter that there are memorials—I was in D.C.—there's memorials to him there. And then I come home and I have to look at a bench and realize that it doesn't matter how important you are. Once again, your voice here has to be a very specific linear one or it's not respected. And I feel that heavier in Wyoming because of that Matthew Shepherd experience. I feel it working in in politics here and having to be hyper-vulnerable all the time to get any sense of empathy.

N: Right, right.

R: That is hard. It is hard. And as it relates to my story, it's that feeling at all times that, you know, I might change someone's mind by sharing it, but I also don't know if it'll ever be safe in anyone's hands. I don't know if anyone will even care. Matthew Shepard was tied to a

fence and half of this city does not care. And that colors everything for me. And it all comes back to Matt Shepard for me.

N: Right.

R: It will always, my experience in Wyoming will always come back to him, due to everything about his story, even prior to that murder. He deserved better from this state and we brush it under the rug. So why would I ever think that this state wouldn't do the same thing to me?

And then being a queer woman in politics here, and experiencing everything that I experience, you know? Even running for office here and the newspapers, quoting my (male) running mate instead of me, you know? Being supported in telling my story, but it's still being somewhat impolite to that Wyoming sensibility of don't talk about sex. What is it? Sex, religion and politics, they always say. But it's part of that. It's impolite for me to say... I would say the word rape. Even if the term sexual assault is relevant on an umbrella scale, I'm not gonna call what happened to me sexual assault. It was the crime of rape. And I deserve to call it that. And there are some women who have gone through what I've gone through, who don't use that word. And that's amazing and valid and I love that for them. But Wyoming's live and let live sensibility, which translates to "everyone stay out of each other's way, no one help each other", to the real Christian-y politeness that they have, makes it hard to feel fully like I was able to cope with it properly.

I don't know if that's even Wyoming's fault or if you know, again, I moved in 2016, was raped in 2014, my mom died in 2015. So in that succession of events did I ever have time to deal with this? And then Wyoming was when everything settled down for me. And then, when I was finally ready to open the door, I come out and it's Wyoming. You know what I mean?

N: Yeah, I do.

R: I hope I'm not like rambling, I hope this is easy for you to transcribe, but...

N: No, no, I think that that question has been different for everyone. Because I just think that being a survivor in Wyoming is different, you know?

R: It is.

N: It's not even about whether or not it happened to you here. It's being a person who is honest about what happened to them... I don't know. There's something about Wyoming that does it to you, and you know.

R: But you know what I find beautiful though? To add a cherry on top of this conversation, if we weren't in Wyoming, I don't think we would all know each other.

N: Yeah.

R: I know just about every person who's been open about being a survivor in the entire state. And so I know that if my car breaks down in Riverton, I'll have someone to call. You know what I mean?

N: Yeah.

R: That's the one thing I will say. Because coming from Illinois, which had a lot more people, you know, and we didn't even realize at the time, like we thought we were living in a small town and then Wyoming is just... the entire state's population is the size of the town I'm from, so that was like whoa.

N: Yeah, yeah.

R: There's just such a different sense of individualism versus collectivism, and so I don't know if I would have been able to find this massive sense of community without that. But I have and it's not like we even have to see each other every day or talk often. I can walk past you just in Prexy's and know that that is my sister.

N: Right.

R: And that's what's important. And so to Wyoming's credit, because this is such a small, kind of like polite state, I've been able to create a little bit of a community where if I'm in any city or any town in this state, that I'm safe somewhere. And there's a lot more women in Wyoming, I guarantee almost every single one, who has some story that they're not ready to share yet. But the ones who have, we all know each other and all love each other and always have that. And so maybe that's cheesy, but it's true. It's true. You know, I get messages and emails from people ranging from like, you know, freshmen in college who I've met through the survivor community to women who are senior citizens who told their story for the first time two years ago.

N: Right.

R: And they may not be public with everyone in their lives about it, but those of us who have talked to one another, I don't know if you'd get that somewhere else.

N: So the last question kind of plays into that, and it is what do you see as the way forward for yourself, or for society?

R: I have different answers for both myself and society. Moving forward with society, I think we want to talk about believing women and believing survivors because those aren't always the same thing. But you know the reason we don't believe survivors is because we don't believe women. When women share things, even just as small as, I don't know if you've ever gone through this in academic settings, where you say a fact and someone instantly has to Google it? Like, we just don't believe women when they talk. So how are you going to believe them when they share with you something so heinous? Beginning there: believe women and believe survivors, and believe both when it overlaps. And changing the way we view sex, even, I think is important. Changing the way we view empathy, and those two things overlap so much—the sex and empathy pieces. That's so important. I think society...if we're going to move forward, I'm all for if you want to engage in hook up culture. Do it. But casual sex does not mean casual boundaries. Like, let's view sex as an empathetic experience.

N: Right.

R: Even if you're just doing it casually, even if you're doing it for work, whatever, it is an empathetic experience you're sharing with others. Something that, even if you never see that person again, there is still that one experience that you all shared, and you're going to remember for the rest of your life. Part of that is not viewing sex as a dirty word anymore, right?

N: Right.

R: Like you cannot talk about combating sexual assault without talking about making consensual sex better, as a society as well, because how many experiences do we hear about on a day-to-day basis where both sides feel victimized by an experience because neither one of them were able to have that conversation, you know? Which isn't to excuse harm, but we have a lot of incidents, especially in Wyoming, especially in this college town, where people didn't know that they were committing harm or experiencing it, and so then both sides felt really violated after an encounter.

If we can make sure that everyone is on the same page as a society about what healthy sex is supposed to look like and how empathetic that is supposed to be, then you know that scale we were talking about would look like less of a scale. Every single instance that is outside of that healthy picture would be instantly like “Wait. This isn't the way this is supposed to be.” You know what I mean?

N: Right.

R: We were talking about what are “acceptable” forms of sexual assault and what isn't, but when all sex has been discussed and boundaries have been set, as a society, the way we view this, everything from one to 10 is unacceptable.

N: Reason for discussion, reason for reexamination.

R: Yes. Yeah, and that changes. And you know, I know we heard it a lot with when #metoo was happening, where there were a lot of men saying, “When I was raised, that was a normal way to talk to women and hit on women.” And that's fucked up and awful.

N: Right.

R: I'm not going to tell them, “Oh, well, you know, that's your fault that society did that to you.” Don't dig your heels in when you hear that, and then go, “Well that's how it should remain.”

N: Right.

R: Dig your heels out a little bit, and go, “Wait. We're all learning on this.”

N: Right, right.

R: This is something that is constantly living and changing and breathing and moving. So sex and empathy are the two big ones and empathy, just period. No one should have to tell you their entire life story, and vomit it out to you for you to go like, “Wow, I'm sorry you went through that.” If someone tells you, “I'm a survivor”, you can fill in the blanks yourself. Or when someone tells you rape is bad or domestic abuse is bad, you should just be able to go “Yep”. And if they want to keep sharing with you, they can keep sharing with you. But so often, there's so much labor on us to get that empathy instead of it just being inherently there, which I hate.

N: Right.

R: Those are all separate, but interrelated. For me, moving forward, It's always going to be trying to heal those things, you know? With everything I've told you about my story and even my relationship with democracy, it doesn't matter internally how I'm feeling. I have a shitty relationship with democracy and I'm running for public office as I'm talking to you right now. So clearly there is some part of me that still has hope for what that means. And then all of the self-hating bullshit I feel about my own experience doesn't come out when I'm working with survivors.

So I think for me, the pathway forward is also that empathy and believing women and believing survivors. I am a woman. I am a survivor. What I went through, if I saw anyone else going through it, I wouldn't be okay with it. And having empathy for myself. I can't guarantee you that's going to happen. Maybe you'll check in with me, you know, down the line and it'll be great and I'll have figured it out. But it's related. It's still different answers in the sense that that journey is different. It's a case of... I've been, I'm preaching to this group,

but also acknowledging that the way I view my story and myself is still not good. And I think that's very normal.

N: Yeah, I think so too. I think that the internalized victim-blaming is the hardest thing.

R: Because you would never think of anyone that way.

N: Right!

R: And then you feel guilty for thinking that way.

N: And I'm like, "Yeah, the trauma was bad. But, you know, it's worse that I like, gaslight myself about it all the time."

R: Yeah.

N: It is worse. Like it feels worse because it feels like I can't heal from it.

R: I go through moments where I wonder if I made it all up. Even though I know that it happened, I have proof that it happened, and not that that matters, but for myself, that I was with him on that night and that it happened. Other people were there.

N: Right. And you're still like, "Did I imagine all this?"

R: Did I?

N: And then you're like "No... but maybe?" And then you just go back and forth. You're like, "Yeah, but what if I did?"

R: Did we just have bad sex? Like was it just a negative like, you know, did I just lose my virginity and feel weird about it?

N: No.

R: Like, even though I know for a fact like I said no, I did everything right, quote unquote. I did everything the "right way" and it still happened to me. And yet I go through those moments. It's so weird and no one who's not a survivor gets it.

N: Right. Everybody else is like, "Why would you think that if this thing happened to you?" And you're like, "I don't know, it's fucked up!"

R: Like, "Why would you defend your abuser?"

N: I don't know. It's fucked up, but here we are, you know? Like, "I also agree that that was weird, but I don't know what to tell you. It's what happened."

R: In your head, you know, accidentally defending the person who did it to you: I experience that so often. You know as much as I just shat on Joe Biden, he did recently increase the statute of limitations, or get rid of the statute of limitations entirely, on rapes that happened when you were underage, which is amazing for a lot of people. And I went, "I could report now if I wanted to. I could very reasonably do that. But he's got a wife and kids. And I can't ruin his life." It doesn't matter that I think of him every single day of my life that I will never, ever, ever, ever, ever be able to scrub the feeling of him off of me. I was so worried about hurting his kids and making them not have a dad, that I didn't do anything. I still could, you know, which is awesome.

N: Right.

R: Thank you for that, Joe. Well, it was really survivor advocacy that got him to that point. He was definitely not unilateral, but yeah. I was defending him. And I was raped again my freshman year of college, and it was one of those experiences where I don't know if he viewed it as rape. Like, again, the 1st experience was like he unequivocally knew, there was no way of getting around it.

N: He had to have known.

R: Yes. Whereas this other guy just started having sex with me while I was asleep. And I thought, well, maybe I was like half-awake or maybe I had said something or whatever because I knew I was drifting in and out of sleep. But you can tell when someone's not like fully awake.

N: Right.

R: Like we've all woken up our roommates, or like, you know what I mean, if you ask your roommate for a ride and they're still half asleep in bed, you're not going to like, hold them to that, you know?

N: Right.

R: So why would I be held to sex in that same context? And so I defended him hard in my head. I even went home from that and told my close friend, who is now my running mate, I told him, "Hey, you know, I just had a really bad hookup." And I told him what happened. He said, "You were raped." But I was like, "But what if?—" And he was like, "Stop, it does not matter if you were not aware." And I needed that in that moment. But you don't always have that around, right? It's usually just you in your head.

N: Yeah, yeah. I don't know, there is something about having somebody else who knows, right? To sit there and be like, "I don't want to hear any excuses for him. What he did was not okay. You were raped."

When I was reporting, all the time I would be like, "It's not that I want to ruin his life or anything, I just feel like this was a problem and I just feel like he doesn't really understand that it was a problem." People would be like, "He assaulted you. You don't have to apologize for reporting. You don't have to apologize for trying to get him to the point where he can understand that there are consequences to his actions. None of that is reasonable to apologize for. Because if he doesn't understand that what he did was wrong..."

R: He'll do it again.

N: He'll do it again.

R: That's the biggest thing. All the survivors I work with, none of them are in that boat of "Oh I want to ruin his life, I want to send him to jail", right? It's always "I just don't want him to do this to someone else."

N: I just want to be the last person he does this to.

R: Yeah. And you know, I found out I wasn't my rapist's last person. He did it a weekend later and had I reported that day, it wouldn't have happened. And that guilt has eaten away at me. To this day I sit there thinking like, "I was a kid. What was I supposed to do?" And in that moment, you're not thinking about gathering evidence. You know, I was thinking about how the fuck am I gonna tell my mom, you know what I mean? She never found out. I found out after she passed away that she was also a survivor. That was a very beautiful connection that I think I was able to gain with her posthumously. It was the knowledge that she would have been safe to go to, I think that's what's the best part. Like, damn, my mom would have been a safe person to go to. But in that moment I didn't know. I just thought, "I can't tell anyone because then I'm going to be"—you know, I don't know if this is a big Wyoming word, but when a little girl is too promiscuous, she's a bit fast—and I was so scared of being seen as fast. Because I was doing my makeup to go see a boy who was older than me. And I did take a drink, like a couple of drinks of alcohol. It was my first time ever drinking. You know what I mean? I was in that position. I did put myself there (air quotes obviously). So I was like, "Why the fuck would I say anything?" And then I found out, years later, a girl messaged me and said, "Hey, you know, I heard that something had happened with this guy. It happened to me too," and I asked her, "Oh my gosh, when?" It was a week after he did it to me. And that guilt of that's related to this though, of always feeling like—

N: —Yeah but you know it's not your fault? Right?

R: Yeah.

N: But like sometimes you need people to say that. You know it, but it's not your fault he made the decision to rape you. He made the decision rape her, right? He made that decision both times. It's not our responsibility to stop men from raping people. It's their responsibility to stop.

R: To stop raping, or to at least make an effort to learn consent, and what it is.

N: Right.

R: And to learn that they don't have power over everyone else. It's evil. I mean, rape is the most evil crime that I can think of because at least with murder, they don't have to do this every day. Which sounds fucked up, but if he had just killed me, I wouldn't be thinking about this on a day-to-day basis. Because they know that they're going to infect your mind for the rest of time. Yeah, and that's what sucks, because I wish I could tell you, "Don't think that way, it's not your fault..."

N: But it's just what happens to you.

R: But it's just what happens. In my opinion, there's no objective to committing that crime, but to make someone do this for the rest of their life. Because like the guy who raped me didn't even have an orgasm. Like, he didn't even get off. But now, just because he in that moment wanted power over me, the assault was maybe 15 minutes, that 15 minutes has irrevocably changed my life.

N: Right.

R: It would not be worth it for him if it was just about sex. You know what I mean? That's my experience. I know other people have different ones but...yeah, I don't know. Sorry, I shouldn't have said that, that it's worse than murder, but, to be candid and speak to you as another survivor, I'm not saying that they should have killed us, cause obviously, I'm glad you're here and I'm glad I'm here and I'm not suicidal about it.

N: Right.

R: But I am saying that it's hard not to compare it. I have to live with it forever and I almost... on my worst days, I have those moments that I wish you would have just killed me. But on, most days...

N: Most days hopefully not, but.

R: No, of course, but it's still comparatively... and I would never say this to a survivor I was working with. It's very rare that I get interviewed as a survivor, so thank you for this.

N: Yeah, of course.

R: Actually, it's usually me in your position. But that's the way I feel about it. I think it is the most evil thing you can do to another person because of the mental torment they're going to go through forever and that gaslighting and not knowing if you're going to trust yourself, let alone anyone else, ever again.

N: Right. Feeling like you don't know if you could have stopped it like. All of these things.

R: What else could you have done?

N: Or is there a way that I could have been in that situation in a way that didn't make him think that he could do that? All of these things where you're just like—you never, you never feel sure that it wasn't your fault. Even if you know that it wasn't your fault, you just never find peace about it.

R: Never ever. It's hard. It does get better, and I try to assure survivors of that at all times, but...

N: Right.

R: One day this isn't going to eat you up as much as it does. And one day you'll be able to have sex and fall in love and have fun and smile and cry and everything. You're going to be able to do that. But when it first happens, you feel like it's never, ever, ever, ever, ever going to get better. And I'm never going to tell anyone that they're going to heal from it.

N: Right.

R: You cannot experience what we've experienced and feel perfect about that at any point, you know?

N: Right.

R: And the guilt and the self-blaming will never get better. That's the part I don't tell survivors when I'm trying to comfort them.

N: Right. It's not a very comforting thing, but...

R: It's true. And eventually, when we're down the line, like you and I are compared to some of the other stories I work with, we can say to each other like, "That's true, *but*—we're not saying it's the end of the world."

N: Yeah, I mean, I'm still living a fulfilling life. It's just that I'm living a completely different life than I would have been living otherwise.

R: Exactly. And you didn't have much choice. But you have to be happy that you're here and I try to look at it in that way. I never want to meet another survivor again, but God, am I glad that I do every day.

N: Yeah, yeah.

R: God, am I glad that there is someone like me to be there for those people's stories, someone like Dakota. Someone like Michelle..

N: Right.

R: ...Someone like you to be there at each juncture for these people. Because I didn't have that, you know, that's where my not reporting comes in, and to be part of that process for someone else... that is fulfilling and amazing. But I would not have any interest in Title IX, I would have no interest in teaching sex education if it did not happen. You know, if July of 2014 never happened.

N: July is bad month, isn't it? It's also when mine happened.

R: Oh man, yeah.

N: But thank you.

R: Yeah, this was amazing. I always love talking to you.

N: Yeah, it was so good.

*Dakota Metzger*

Nicole: So the first question is, how has this experience affected your feelings about, and relationship with, disillusionment and cynicism?

Dakota: It was a big part of disillusionment with the justice system, not being taken seriously by law enforcement. Certainly back then, I believed that law enforcement was there to protect us and that that's just how it works. If you're sexually assaulted, you tell the police and they do something about it. And so that really changed all of that really, fundamentally. And knowing too, that I had a female officer. It just kind of added to how systemic that is.<sup>1</sup>

N: Right. Yeah, it's tough, that moment when you're like, "Is the justice system for me, for my justice, or is it for white men's justice?" Yeah, that's the real big question. OK. And then how has this experience affected your feelings of access to agency?

D: Like agency over myself, and my own body?

N: Yeah.

D: I mean, that was a power struggle within myself for years, just with different levels of high risk behaviors because they gave me a sense of control... or controlled uncontrol. Like disordered eating was another form of control. And then I had what felt like just a total loss of control over academics and my success, because I was so unable to motivate myself to get out of bed, to do the things that I really needed to do. And so that really felt like a major loss that at the time that I really didn't know how to get over, like, climb over, you know.

N: I'm interested also in how you see it playing out in your work, without going into any specifics, obviously, but just patterns that you've noticed. What is the relationship of folks that you work with to their agency, in the various times that you work with them?

D: I'd say my own experience is pretty common. I have a lot of clients who deal with things like disordered eating, many of whom have it a lot worse than I did, a lot more intense. Same goes with high risk behaviors.

N: Right.

D: I see quite a bit of that. I also see the other side of the coin where folks will turn very inward and isolate themselves. And so it's just a different side of the exact same coin. Some

<sup>1</sup> Dakota Metzger was the SAFE Project Advocate who helped me (Nicole Foss) through my reporting process at the University of Wyoming.

folks will go years without dating again or want anybody to even physically touch them, and others will go through a string of a ton of hookups, which was closer to my own experience. Super common. And it all goes back to control over their own lives and *choosing* when they are intimate with someone or not intimate with someone.

N: Right. Yeah, how did you feel like that coping strategy worked for you? You know? I feel like with survivors, I hear it a lot, and I think that I noticed some of the same patterns for myself as well. Yeah, I'm just kind of wondering what your experience was with that and how it played out for you and how you ended up feeling? And maybe what your journey was through that, and maybe to where you are now?

D: Yeah, I mean, it helped in that any kind of coping mechanism, whether it's healthy or unhealthy, helps at least somewhat, but I was engaging in pretty much exclusively unhealthy coping mechanisms, so that just overall was not helpful. It contributed to that lack of ability to get through school, and so just added that much more time where I was still trying to finish my undergrad.

And that contributes to a source of shame, in failure and not succeeding the way I had always thought I would. And I think that especially the unhealthy coping mechanism of random hookups was just really speaking to that underlying idea that I think many of us have after an experience with sexual assault: that all you are is a body and all you are is a sexual object. And so that was just me leaning into that idea and embodying that.

N: Right. Right. Like saying, "If that's true, then at least I should be in control of the body that I am."

D: Right, and so you just are that body which isn't great. And after a couple of years of that kind of behavior—that came in waves, worse sometimes than other times—I finally started to find some stability and pull away from a lot of those behaviors.

N: And was there anything in particular that helped you find that stability?

D: Therapy, support group, and the timing. I was lucky enough that around the time where I was starting to feel a little more stable and wanted to really get my feet under me (so I was like swearing off any kind of dating, hookups, any of that) that was around the time that I met my now husband, so.

N: (Laughing) So you got lucky, basically.

D: Yes, I got extremely, extremely lucky. And so he was a big contributing part of what helped me move past a lot of that. Especially because the ways in which he treated me from

minute one that I met him was not as a sexual object whatsoever, and with a lot more interest in like my thoughts and ideas and things that I had to say. So, yeah, just extreme luck.

N: So basically hard work and self-development and then good people around you and leaning into that.

D: Yeah, and meeting at that right time. Like, if I had met him a year before, when I was really going through it, I don't think either of us would have had any interest in one another.

N: That's so interesting that it was just right at the right time. Okay, so how has your experience affected you and your feelings of being heard, included, and cared for by society?

D: I think I've been able to find and cultivate those folks that do give a shit by becoming one of those people who can give a shit for other people. So, in some sense, there's community out there.

N: Right, right.

D: I've found people who are more national that I really look up to. One of them, I don't know if you know much about Abby Honold, but her case was up in Minnesota and was pretty heart-wrenching and I followed her on social media. We ended up DM-ing, and she started a Facebook group that's for survivors. And it's a beautiful thing and brings community to people that maybe have literally nowhere else to turn. I know in our community right now we don't have a support group, or at least a regular therapeutic support group.

N: Right, like run by a professional.

D: Yes, run by a psychologist.

N: We have some pretty informal things but they're not necessarily... solidified.

D: Yes. So seeing that there are people building things like that is really great, but just overall, especially being part of this work, you just see how little our systems care and how difficult it is to get justice. And at this point, if I'm being completely honest, I feel very grateful that my case went nowhere. Because watching what it looks like to go through an entire court case and trial, I don't know if I would have been able to do it.

N: God, that sucks.

D: It does. I really think that the women who do it and go that whole way are extremely powerful and it is not lost on me, the gravity of what they're doing and what they're putting themselves through.

N: Do they seem like they feel like they got justice at the end? Say that they win. Do they feel like they got justice?

D: So when it comes to full-on sexual assault court cases, there were only two that I was around for where someone won, one of which... it ended up being turned over on appeal eventually.

N: Oh my god, that's dismal.

D: Yeah, it was pretty awful. At least he served some time in prison; he actually made it like a year into his sentence. So that's more than the majority. It's something.

N: Wow, the lowest bar, but yeah.

D: I don't know, because I wasn't a person who worked really closely with her. But I know that when it was turned over, she was strongly considering going through it again. And that's really saying something because the first time she went to trial, it was a hung jury and she went through a second entire trial. So that meant she was willing to do it a third time. And I think that says a lot about how it made her feel to have him in jail, during that time.

N: Right. That maybe it really gave such a level of safety back to her.

D: Yeah. Yeah. And not to—obviously this is speaking to somebody else's thoughts that I don't really know, but maybe.

N: Right, maybe it was something that was impactful enough.

D: I think on the other one, that was this year, that we had a guilty verdict for (it was on three out of four counts). Potentially, I think maybe we'll know more in a few months because I think there is a lot of fallout after that emotionally. Because there is absolutely zero chance of healing or moving forward from an assault while you're dealing with an ongoing case of any sort, whether it's Title IX or code of conduct or a criminal case.

N: Right.

D: You cannot fully move forward until it's over, no matter what the verdict is. And so I know that it takes time after that for someone to actually start taking those steps, slowly but surely. That person potentially might be speaking at our next fundraiser, so maybe we can get some real answers about how she feels about how that went.

N: Yeah, fingers crossed, we can hear her story.

D: Yeah, I don't know many that have had a win, and even thinking with ones that were Title IX wins, generally they're like "whatever", because it doesn't undo the harm.

N: Right. And what punishments do you even see happening? I guess one of the things I'm really wondering about is, does it make you feel like justice is accessible for survivors?

D: Right. I mean statistically, it's not. Because most people don't even tell a single soul.

N: Right.

D: So like, most people I'm not even meeting. They're not talking to confidential advocates, even. And of those people, not many move forward with reports.

N: Right, because it's a terrible awful process.

D: Yeah, pretty horrible process.

N: It's just the worst.

D: Yes. And so, of the over 100 students that I've worked with at the university, off the top of my head, it's been around maybe 20 who have reported to the university. Many of those students pulled out of their cases before it was complete. They were like, "You know what? I'm not doing this."

N: Like, "Never mind, this is awful."

D: Yes, exactly. And so then I help them with that. Like pulling out and saying, "Hey, let's let them know together and we can just leave this behind." When it comes to going all the way to a hearing, I've had a lot of informal resolutions happen. I should potentially have a couple of hearings coming up soon, but I haven't had a hearing since last summer.

N: So how many students do you think you have been with through the hearing?

D: Four have gone through full hearings.

N: Wow. And so... one of those was me.

D: Yes.

N: So there have only been three other people, other than me.

D: Yes. And half got a finding and half didn't.

N: Wow.

D: And then there were other ones where yeah, there was informal resolution, some with very good results. Like one part of that informal resolution was that that person left the school entirely. So pretty good, not bad. And that happened right before the hearing, like the week of the hearing.

N: It seems like they really knew what was going to happen.

D: I think so.

N: The writing was on the wall.

D: I think so. There have been a few cases where it was close to getting there, right? And then others where stuff happens. People decide they don't want to do it anymore, or I had a case where the perpetrator left the university and because they left they had to just stop the investigation because they no longer have jurisdiction over it and they can't do anything to them. And so if they ever return to the university, then that immediately reopens. They can't, like, fully run away from it, and they can put something on their transcript that says that they left the university in the middle of an investigation.

N: So that only happens if they leave before the investigation is over.

D: I believe so, yes.

N: I wonder why that didn't happen in my case.

D: Yeah, and this was also Process A. So it was federal guideline stuff.

N: Yeah, that's a difference.

D: So that could have something to do with it. I think there's more discretion when it's Process B, because the university isn't beholden to federal stuff. But that case also had multiple victims who were reporting the same person. So there were multiple people involved...

N: That you—were you working with multiple people?

D: I can't confirm or deny, but there were multiple people that reported this person.

N: And so all of them had this unresolved feeling of like, "This perpetrator who had hurt multiple people was just gone," which is some kind of resolution, but speaking as someone whose perpetrator left, it doesn't fix it.

D: No, and none of it really does.

N: That is the worst thing at the core of it all, is that none of it fixes it.

D: Yes. The guilty verdict from earlier this year, sentencing is next month, but the person is facing a lot of time, decades of time. And even that...it's not going to fix what happened.

N: Right. It doesn't actually repair the harm. It can't. Okay, this question is sort of the wild card question, but how, if at all, has this affected your feelings of access to democracy?

D: And that's a hard one. That just makes me think of what our system is built on, like the laws our system is built on, and what changes need to be made at that level. On one hand, seeing that some of the people at the highest seats of power are abusers makes it feel pretty impossible. I can say one of the things that got me to do this work in the first place was a friend of mine whose assault was a month maybe before mine? They were a month apart, and we were in support group together, and are still friends to this day. And she really inspired me because she worked with Tara Muir and all of those folks and went to the legislature. The Coalition (WCADVSA) and every advocacy program had been advocating for a sexual assault specific protection order for years, for many years. Because someone who was sexually assaulted, like someone in either of our cases, would not have had access to a protection order if they wanted one. I mean, you didn't either anyway, but because we weren't a household member. Unless there was stalking or they were considered a household member: in a relationship, or roommates or something like that...

N: Basically, unless you were having to encounter them every day. Unless you lived with them, they were basically like, "Well, why do you need a protection order because you don't live with them."

D: Right, because they just had the domestic violence one and the stalking one and the stalking one is a high bar to hit.

N: Yeah, and we're like, "That is not the only thing that it's for!"

D: Yeah, and so it was a long time of people begging, basically, the legislature to get this. And my friend went and testified, and told her story to the legislature. And that was the year they finally decided to do it. And she was a big part of that.

N: Wow.

D: You could even, you can look up her story. She talked to Wyoming Public Radio about what happened to her here in Laramie. She had one of the scariest versions of what could happen, happen to her, and I think that's a big part of it.

N: Like one of the clearest...

D: Yeah, like a gun was involved kind of situation. And what was really scary on top of that is that the prosecuting attorney at the time told her that he didn't think that he could win the case, and talked her into a plea deal where he pled to stealing the gun that he used in the assault.

N: Woah.

D: Yeah, so even she didn't have access fully to justice in our justice system. That office was notorious for not taking any cases of sexual assault. Our last County Attorney, for all of her many, many, many faults, that was her strength. She would take those cases. And so it was a huge improvement over the last person.

N: Right. This is such a low bar.

D: And so I think she had a particularly powerful story, and it shows the kind of work and activism that a survivor can do. But I think, I do think in hindsight, she had a unique ability to do so based off of what her story was.

N: Right.

D: The fact that she was a young, pretty white woman...

N: It helps, in terms of getting this legislature to listen to you. Which is so heartbreaking but true.

D: Exactly, precisely. Yeah, but it is still something that I remember all the time about the things that we can do.

N: Yeah, yeah.

D: As survivors we can change this world for the better, for us.

N: So, I mean, we've kind of been talking about this, but how has being in Wyoming affected your experience?

D: I mean, it's so hard to say because I go to conferences and talk to people in other places and I see how bad it can be in other places as well. Like at that conference I was at recently, I met a woman who sued the city of Austin for mishandling so many cases. I met women who were falsely arrested for falsely reporting, and this happens all over the place. And so that's the unfortunate scary thing, is that sometimes I think it's just here, and then it's other places too. But I see the way the system is here for victims. And I see the way our legislature

talks about, and treats, and legislates about women—not to gender sexual assault, because it's not a gendered crime necessarily.

N: Right.

D: It's just almost always women and almost always perpetrated by men.

N: Statistically, yeah. I mean, not to make a judgment. Those are the stats.

D: Yeah, even more so on the perpetration side: most men are sexually assaulted by other men.

N: Right.

D: But it's hard, and being in a rural community makes it hard. It means that you are very likely to see your abuser or your rapist around town and know what they're doing and what they're up to. And you know that there's a huge lack of resources, especially for our most marginalized survivors in this community. We have very limited resources to help them.

N: So I can't remember from when I heard your story in the storytelling workshop, but did you encounter your abuser afterward?

D: Yeah, a few times.

N: Because you didn't initially know them.

D: Had no idea who he was, literally friend of a friend of a friend I invited to a party.

N: Right, so tangentially connected through various different circles, but you did not know him.

D: No, and he wasn't a student. I think he was from Cheyenne, and was living in Laramie. I found out a lot of this stuff because I looked him up after things happened.

N: Right.

D: Like I looked at his entire Facebook page—I met another person who he sexually assaulted in my support group, and she did know him and they were friends. So I learned a lot about him there too. And I know that he lived nearby because my roommate's boyfriend saw him walking near our house after it happened. So that made me really scared to leave the house. I saw him at the Buckhorn, not even that long after—like less than a year after. And he followed me around the bar, and I had a major panic attack.

N: Oh, my god, yeah, of course!

D: Yeah, like, because, you know The Buckhorn and, you know the layout. And so I was in that back downstairs room and saw him. And my friends were like, "There he is." And I looked and there he was. And in fact, I made them, after they said, "He's here", I made them point him out to me because that was the first time I *saw him* saw him and I really didn't know what he looked like.

N: Yeah, but they knew.

D: They knew, because they talked with him a lot that night at our party. And so they knew exactly what he looked like. So I was like, "Point him out to me. I want to memorize his face." And I did that, and went upstairs to avoid him, and then he went upstairs. And I went downstairs, and he went downstairs. I went back upstairs and he was up there, and I was trying to be behind tall people, to at least hide, and he kept stepping aside to have a view of me. And that's when I had a panic attack in the bathroom.

N: Of course! Because he's following you around the bar after he's assaulted you!

D: Yes, yeah, then I got home, called my dad, freaking out. He had me call the police and tell them what had happened, and so they offered to do extra patrol around my house.

N: Did that make you feel safer?

D: For the night yeah, especially knowing he knew exactly where I lived.

N: Right.

D: 'Cause I didn't move, because that just seemed too hard.

N: Yeah, it's a logistical nightmare.

D: Yes, yes.

N: As someone who moved after they reported, it's a nightmare.

D: Yes, it's a hard decision to make. I was like, "Oh do I keep sleeping in the same bed in the same room where it happened?" I don't like that.... but like, do—

N: Do I have the energy to move my entire life? Also, no.

D: No, I didn't. So I lived there for over a year after.

N: Yeah, the only way that I was able to move after my assault is that everybody in my life came in and moved everything. This (we were sitting in my apartment) was one of only like 4 or 5 apartments that I looked at, and a friend had lived here and was moving out, so it all came together. I probably only house hunted or apartment hunted for like two weeks, if I had had to do any more than that, I wouldn't have moved because I just had such limited energy. It was the summer...

D: Yeah, that helps.

N: So I had free time, but other than that, there's no way that I would have been able to move.

D: Yeah, and I had really good, a couple of good friends that I lived with, and so they were supports for me, and so I had that.

N: And to move out of that would have been sort of destabilizing.

D: So yeah, that made me feel better for the night, knowing that he couldn't show up at my house, knowing where I live.

N: Right.

D: I saw him one time walking into Walmart. He was holding hands with a girl, which made me so scared for her.

N: Yeah, you're like, "Oh my god, you don't know."

D: I saw him one time when I was walking downtown. It was a summer day, I can't remember if I was walking to the farmers market or Brew Fest or something like that. He lived in one of those—I saw him turn and go into an apartment, which I think he either lived there or it was one of his friends, but it was one of those like shithole side-by-side duplexes that are on like 2nd St., just past downtown, super dilapidated. I know he doesn't live there anymore, cause I've never seen him on that block there, if he ever did live there. But I think of him every time now. As far as I know, he still works in the kitchen at *name redacted (restaurant in Laramie)*. I haven't seen him in a few years, but I know he's still here.

N: Yeah, that sucks. And that's such a Wyoming experience, right? Having to encounter them all the time, having limited grocery stores, having a small downtown, all of these things make it so that their presence can feel inescapable, especially when you have so much fear.

D: 100%, and someone who works in food service could be anywhere that you go, potentially.

N: Right, right. You just never know. Okay, so the last question is a little bit of a tone shift, but what do you see as the way forward for yourself or for society?

D: I mean for myself it's very obvious because I've been doing a lot of that. Advocating for survivors, doing the work that I do has been really healing. Knowing how helpful the campus advocate was for me when I was a student, and knowing too, that I honestly underutilized her, I could have gotten even more, knowing what I know now, but being able to do the same for others is the most healing thing for me personally. But for some people, that is the last thing they would ever want to do. Like doing work where you are living the worst thing that ever happened to you every day in a sense.

N: Right.

D: Some people, it's like, "I want to do something completely different" and that is fine. Certainly finding a way that you can—I don't know, it's finding something that you're good at, and finding something that brings you joy, and then bringing in all those next little things that are bringing joy back into your life. I think one of the best ways for survivors to move forward is to just, once they can pick up the pieces, to live a good life. That's the best thing that they can do. The best revenge, in a sense, is, in spite of everything, to live a good life.

I think as a collective, though, for us folks that want to be involved, the way forward is to never lose touch with current survivors. Because we all have different stories, but we need to be in touch with what the needs are. Because those are ever-changing, and what do we need to change right now?

N: Yeah, not just how can I change everything so that what happened to me doesn't happen again, but also changing things so that what's happening to people right now stops too.

D: Yes.

N: Yeah, so I'm also curious about the people that you work with. Do they—I know that we've talked before about burnout—do they see this work as the way forward? Is it easy to keep remembering that, or is it really hard?

D: Right, I think it's helpful when all of us are able to remind one another what we're doing, and every once in a while we'll get that gratitude from a client that will just fuel us for so long. I've gotten that thank you before from a client that I didn't even feel like I even did that much for her. Like there's some folks that you know, I'll work with a ton and put in tons of hours with. And then there's some folks that I might only ever meet and encounter for, like an hour or so. Or sometimes...this was the person that I only worked with, like a handful of times, and I was checking in on her, and she sent the most wonderful message. And it was a reminder that, you know, sometimes just believing someone and listening to someone is so

radical that you forget that even that alone can be so helpful. I immediately told everybody that I worked with and reminded them that we do good work and saying, “You’re doing this too.”

N: Yeah, it’s happening! We’re doing it!

D: Like, “Please remember.” So doing a lot of that, but inevitably there’s a lot of people that burn out and leave. I think at least a couple of the people on our staff right now are gonna be there for a while. I would have been one of them if it wasn’t for grad school, and my partner’s grad school as well. Because I would have had several more years in me before I would be having to call it quits.

N: And do you see going to grad school for social work, is that the next step in your journey?

D: Yes, because I want to eventually become a licensed clinical social worker. And provide therapy because I’ve seen so many of my clients struggle to find mental health providers—the lack of mental health providers in our town—there are just not enough for the demand. And so I just saw like, yeah, we need more.

N: So you plan to stay in Wyoming?

D: We’ll see. I’ll be in Wyoming, at least for another five years. After that, I don’t know if it would still be Wyoming. It could even be like international, my partner’s job can take us a lot of places and if I make it to the plan that I want, then I could work anywhere from home if I have to.

N: And do you think, I mean, obviously it’s early days to ask this, but do you see yourself working with survivors in your clinical practice?

D: Well, 100%, that would always be my focus. I would want to focus on trauma therapy, things like that. I wouldn’t be a psychologist, so I wouldn’t have that same level as a psychologist does. But I know talking with like Doctor Kilwein, they were able to do a lot of training for one of their colleagues who was an LCSW—enough that they were really confident in that person, more than some of her other differently credentialed colleagues. So, especially given my background, I see myself doing that.

N: Yeah! And the therapist that I had while I was reporting, I think she was an LCSW as well. I think that you have done really great work. I do want to emphasize that especially.

D: Thank you!

N: I think that—it (reporting) is something that initially I was like, “No, I can just muscle through this”, but the truth is that you cannot. It's just too long to do that. It surprised me to hear that you've only had four (cases) go to hearings, and of course, some of those might not be because the survivor wouldn't want to go through with it, but because it stopped at the investigation. I don't want to say because the investigation didn't find anything, because I think that that's maybe erroneously painting the picture that there wasn't anything to find, but rather that it stopped at the investigation level.

D: Right.

N: And so maybe some people would have gone further with it, but, I don't know why it surprises me that only four have gone to hearing. Because it was...it was awful. (The process) was like, no, it was absolutely terrible the whole time. It was retraumatizing, newly traumatizingly terrible.

D: Yep.

N: Like you need a team of people to do it.

D: 100%.

N: Like I didn't know I needed a lawyer until I needed a lawyer all of a sudden. I was like, “Oh god, I have to get a lawyer and I'm not going to be able to pay for a lawyer.” The fact that I had a lawyer who could help me for free was really big.

D: Yeah.

N: And also, to even be in a place where I was like, “Oh my god, I need a lawyer now.” Like, “I'm a person who has a lawyer now.”

D: Right.

N: What is happening?

D: Especially as a young person, you're like “What?” I'm 31 years old and I've never had a lawyer in my life.

N: Yeah, you're like everything is... everything is weird. It's a weird experience. I don't suggest being in a circumstance where you need a lawyer (laughing).

D: But at least now I know a lot of them.

N: Yeah, exactly. I don't know, the whole thing was just really quite the experience. And I think that the fact that you are also a survivor makes you uniquely qualified to do the work because I know that you know, right? Like I know that you get where I am and that there isn't like judgment about how I react, what my coping strategies are.

D: Right.

N: And I've heard that also from other people who have worked with SAFE Project—like, it's really essential to feel like somebody knows what you're going through and that you're not losing it. Or if you are losing it, it's only in ways that the process has caused.

D: Yes.

N: It's only in ways that any person would be losing it if they were going through the process.

D: Yeah, as I say to every person: you are having a normal reaction to an abnormal situation.

N: Right, right. You are being put in a crazy circumstance.

D: Not every person I've had as a colleague is a survivor, but everyone I currently have as a colleague is a survivor of some type of interpersonal harm. Though, yeah, we just try to really support each other and not let anything burn you out too much, knowing that there's a lot of differences being made.

N: I think that's a great place to end, actually.

*Nicole Foss*

Tennessee: So I was a little bit curious about process—like before the Democracy Lab, when you first heard about the idea. The pitch from Scott to be a part of it, was there, like an immediate light bulb where you're like ohh!<sup>2</sup>

Nicole: No, actually I didn't apply initially because I was like, “Well, I don't have a thing—I don't know what I would do, like what my research project would be”, and then Robby said he was going to do it.

T: Right.

N: And I was like, “Ok, well, this could be a cool opportunity.”

T: Sure.

N: Both to work with Robby in an academic capacity again, and also to be in in the academic community still, especially with the work that I was about to start. I was like, “Man, it would be good not to be completely distanced from any kind of research project.” Also I know I want to go back for my PhD, for sure, so I was thinking, “Ok, I should be continuing to make progress here in the interim.” And when we started Democracy Lab, I didn't know what I was going to do. We were talking about things, and I still didn't know what I was going to do, and then I realized, sort of a few months in, that this is the topic that I can't stop thinking about. So it probably wasn't going to be very easy for me to do any other topic. So that was the main reason that this intersection happened; because I just realized that this was the area that I was thinking about all the time.

And I wanted the chance to dig into it further and I do think that there is an intersection. Initially, I was kind of worried that there wasn't and that they were two parallel lines, but I think that, like all circumstances that affect people's lives, it affects their ability to participate in what I might think of as like a ‘higher order’ task in their life—like it's not basic food, sustenance, or shelter. It (democracy) is maybe one or two rungs above that, in terms of priorities for a lot of people, or maybe one or two below that, if we're talking about priorities. It is something that could theoretically make the difference, but it's so hard to get it together to do that, to participate in it, to work hard to change policies, change minds, get the message out, all of that, when you just you feel like you've been completely decimated by something.

<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Watson is a fellow member of the inaugural Democracy Lab cohort and has been an outspoken survivor of sexual assault. She is a reporter with WyoFile and graciously agreed to lend her interviewing talents to this project so I could be an interviewee as well.

T: Well, that's a good segue. First question, here we go: how has your experience affected your feelings about, and relationship with, disillusionment and cynicism?

N: Yeah, I definitely use disillusionment and cynicism as a blanket to protect me from what I think hurt most about the process of reporting, which is just realizing that my safety doesn't matter, that the social contract that I believed I had entered into with society, where I participate in society and in return, I get to be a citizen whose safety matters and whose voice is equally relevant to other people's voice, and—who gets to benefit, right? The benefits of being in a society, if you think about the benefits of a society over complete chaos and nobody participating in any projects together—

T: Right.

N: —one of the benefits is supposed to be that you're safer. And the process made me realize that that that benefit that I had taken for granted was not guaranteed, and in fact, it was not a priority.

It made me realize that our society doesn't actually care about women's safety, not in the ways that they say that they do, not in the ways that performatively get elevated. Instead, it's the safety of the people in power that matters. In my case looked like a man, right? But it can also look like a white woman, right? It can look any sort of way, but whoever has more power, their safety is going to be looked after first. So it was just really startling to me, and I think it was so painful to have that promise broken. Because then I just thought, “Well, what's to stop anybody from hurting me at any time?”

T: Right.

N: There's nothing. They're not going to get punished. So what do I even do? How do I even exist in the world? It was just like everything crumbled around me and I was left sitting in the wreckage and thinking, “This wouldn't hurt so much if I didn't think that I mattered before.” And so what followed was a shrinking into myself and saying, “Nobody is going to look out for me, I have to look out for myself. My safety, my autonomy, my agency doesn't matter to the world. It obviously matters to me, but if it matters to me, then I have to fiercely protect it and trust no one and expect nothing—just fight as much as I can to carve out a tiny little place for myself.” And so the cynicism for me was just to stop getting hurt constantly by being let down.

T: What shape does the cynicism take? Like, how does it work?

N: Um, yeah, one shape that it takes is that I expect the absolute least from men. I specifically expect nothing from my perpetrator. I don't ever expect that he is going to wake up one day and say, “Oh, what I did was wrong, I hurt her.”

I don't ever expect that he is going to do the right thing ever again, like in his current workplace, and I'll have to redact all of the small details, but he works at a publicly funded radio station as an editor. And I feel like he's infiltrated this, theoretically, liberal space. He works with people who think that he believes the same thing as them, with people who think that he's on the 'right side of the cause.' And actually, I know that, at the bottom of all of his talk, there's nothing good. So I think it (the cynicism) takes the form of me expecting the least of people.

It also means that I don't believe that it's going to get better for me. It's hard for me to have hope. I remember there was a Democracy Lab meeting where Robby and I were talking afterward. I don't remember what we were talking about, but somehow we got onto the subject of hope. I think I said to him, "I just don't know that I am ready to have hope." Like, "I just don't know that I want to have hope anymore." He was like, "I cannot hear you say that." I could see that it really affected him. He said something like, "You have to go to a therapist, you cannot keep using Democracy Lab as your therapy. Like, it's not working. And also it's not fair." I could see that for him it was big, but to me, and I was like, "Well, of course I can't have hope right now. Are you kidding me? The entire past two years hurt so fucking much because I thought that I might get justice. And every day, when that didn't happen, it was like ripping open the wound anew." And so hope still seems really dangerous to me.

T: Have any of the folks you've interviewed...have any of their perpetrators been held accountable?

N: So in my first interview, Autumn (who has consented to be named): her perpetrator was held accountable through the Title IX process, actually. I don't know what those sanctions looked like. I think he was kicked out of school, but I think that he had... I want to say that he graduated already, like it was something where the punishment was like very ineffective.

T: Sure.

N: But in her situation, he physically abused her. Like, there was domestic violence involved. There was a lot of like 'legitimate' (heavy air quotes on legitimate) violence that happened—that is, what was recognizable to others as violence, so she won her case. It got super messy. It was really hard for her. Other things happened in her life at the same time that didn't then get resolved through any sort of system.

T: I don't know. Like, I mean it's a small sample right? But I was curious if...

N: We're at one out of four?

T: Yeah.

N: We are.

T: Do you have a sense whether access to justice has an impact on relationship to, I don't know, cynicism versus hope?

N: I mean, I think Autumn is more hopeful than I feel, but not like a lot. Because it was still hell on Earth.

T: Sure.

N: The whole process, it was still, like, secondarily traumatizing. And I also I think she's just sort of a cheerful person. Like... I don't know that it... I don't know that it makes a difference.

T: Yeah, it's interesting to, like tease out those nuances, right? So for you, how has this experience impacted your feeling of access to agency?

N: I think it ties in with the disillusionment and cynicism. It really ended up feeling like it doesn't...like what I say doesn't matter. Because I cannot control what happens to me. Yeah, I mean the one of the core realizations I had from this is that you cannot stop people from harming you. You can say no. You can fight back, but ultimately if they decide to hurt you, then you can't stop them. And so it felt like I had a profound loss of agency. That any agency that I thought that I had was really just like, me convincing myself that this little corner I had carved out was safe and that it was not possible for people to infringe upon it, because if they could, then what was the point? What was the point of doing anything to create a life for yourself? You're vulnerable all the time. Every time you leave the house, and even when you're at home, there's no safe place. And you have to trust people even when people who you have trusted have betrayed you.

And so, I don't know. With the system—with reporting—I felt like there was no agency in that process. Like I came to them, and that, I guess, was an agentive act, right? But then after that point, they're like, “Well, if you want us to do anything, you can't be anonymous.” That's one of the things that I feel like is not very clear to people; in the Title IX process, if you want them to pursue it then your abuser has a ‘right to face their accuser.’ And you will be named. And so from that point on, it kind of spins out in this way that discounts any agency you might have. They tell you continuously that you'll have a say in the process, that you can stop at every point we check in with you. Like, yeah, they check in with you. But what you say doesn't really matter. They're still going to move forward with the ways that they had always planned.

T: So you really like lose control to move forward?

N: Yeah, immediately. In a way that's really destabilizing because it's this exceedingly evenly weighted sort of experience: they're like, "You both have good arguments. You both have a right to education, you both, et cetera, et cetera." And I'm like, "Well, we can't both, because if he's in the classroom, that classroom is not safe for me anymore." So you can't have both. What happened was that his right to education superseded mine. He went to the classrooms. I felt very uncomfortable and couldn't go. And when I tried to reclaim some of that agency, (causing things to happen in the world because I made them happen is how I sometimes I think of agency)— I talked to the other members of my cohort. I told them what happened, and then a retaliation case was actually brought up against me for creating an unsafe space for him, which really felt like the icing on the cake. I was like, "I just told other people the truth of what happened, what they decided to do after that was their choice."

T: Yeah, it's not like you signed a non-disclosure agreement.

N: Right, right. And so I don't know. I think that I have to sustain the fiction of agency for myself in order to keep living. But from now on I'm always going to know that it's a fiction.

T: How did you see that impacting the way that you engaged with your community, politics... like what were the reverberations?

N: I think I turned into a little bit of an insufferable person turning my reporting process. I feel like, through no fault of my own, but it did take the forefront of my lived experience for the entire time that I was reporting.

T: What was the span of time?

N: So I reported in July, and I didn't receive the verdict until January.

T: Of what year?

N: Of my second year of my master's program. So that was... I started my masters in 2020, so that must have been 2021.

T: Mm-hmm.

N: And I didn't report until a year after it had happened. Yeah. So, from July to January.

T: Did you notice, like, patterns change? Like your sort of reaction to things that you might have been like, "Oh, I'm gung ho to do this", but now...?

N: Oh, yes, yeah. So, some key things happened, and I felt like everybody needed to know what happened from me, because I didn't know what version of fiction he was going to tell

them. Because he was really charismatic, that was one of the things that made it so hard to realize that what had happened was assault. He was such a skilled manipulator, and he really, like every time I brought up any concern, crafted it into being like, “No, no, no, don't worry about that.” Like, “That's not what happened” or, “Everything is actually fine. You're remembering it different than it happened”, or like, “That's not really what I said” or like “Well, yeah, you were so into me so that's why you acted this way” or something like that. It took me a while to realize that it had even been assault. And then it took me a while after that to report. But I reported because I was scared for the incoming cohort because he was so charming.

So I told everyone, and I felt bad and weird during that time, confronting everybody and being like, “This thing happened to me. I have to tell you about it. Like I need you to hear what I have to say right now”, and I do think that for some people who were survivors themselves, it was really triggering for me to come up to them and be like, “This thing happened to me and I have to... you need to know.” And I felt terribly about that, but I also felt that it would be irresponsible to leave them unaware with him still in our community. So that happened.

I remember going up to Robby at a department-wide party that we had, that my abuser came to as well, which I think was in exceedingly poor taste of him. I remember going up to him (Robby)—I was so frustrated. I was always like, angry or numb or sad during that time, like, I don't remember a lot of happiness from that time and I was just so frustrated that my abuser was there. And Robby was there, and he's such a good listener. And I just went up to him. I didn't know him that well (at that point), and I just started, like, talking, telling him all these things. I'm like, “I can't even believe that he's here. Can you believe that? That's such fucked up thing to do, to come to this party. And he sat at the table where I was sitting and he refused to move.” And I just, like, went up to him and started telling him all of these things, and later I was very embarrassed about that. I was like, “I'm so sorry that I just came up to you and dumped all this information on you.” And he was like, “No, that interaction was actually great because you're one of the only people who really talked to me at that party.” And I was like, “But the way that I talked to you was, like, so about me the whole time.”

And anyway, I turned into that sort of insufferable person, but also in like all of my classes. For example, we watched *Braveheart* in my medieval class and I couldn't even get through 30 minutes of it. So I was like, “This is bullshit. The whole premise of this movie is that people would be so upset about a woman being violated that they would go to war to try to protect her.” And I was like, “That's bullshit. That's bullshit. That's not how it works. It's only that she was the property of one of these men, and so he felt disrespected by that and then he had to go to war.” But I couldn't finish the movie and then I came into class and I was like, “This is bullshit. I can't believe that this is the premise of this whole movie. We

don't actually care about women's safety like that." Like I just lost it all the time, about everything.

I was just... I had no tolerance. I was like, so raw all the time, and in every situation, there seemed to be an echo of it. And I was like, "This is fucked up because of this thing that I've recently learned about society through my own incredibly painful experience with it." I don't know, it just it started feeling like it was everywhere, like it was all around me. And part of that was being an English Master's program: some of the things that we were studying and analyzing were rooted in misogyny and sexism, and some of these fundamental structures of oppression. So, yes, of course it was coming up a lot, but it was coming up all the time in everything.

T: So why do you use the term insufferable?

N: I just think I was not pleasant to be around, like I wasn't even very happy to be around myself. I just felt so trapped in my circumstances and the life that I found myself in. And so, especially for people who only sort of knew me, it was a lot. But my core group of friends, I don't think I was insufferable to them. I think that they understood the level of pain that I was going through, and some of them were also members of my cohort. So that was good because we were just together all the time, really in this core group. And they were there to support me, and there to rant with me, and they didn't care that I said the same thing over and over and over again. Because.... it caused such cognitive dissonance for that thing to be true that I—I just couldn't stop having the same conversation over and over and over again because I never got to the reason why this was happening.

But for people who only sort of knew me, I brought it up all the time, like I would not stop talking about it. And I know that for some people, they found that either really untrustworthy or really like gauche, that I was talking about it all the time when they also knew the person that I had reported. And so I think that I was like this ball of anger. Like I could not stop talking about it and it did feel like I was talking about myself all the time, which I think is what makes me call it insufferable. But I was just like... so angry that I couldn't stop. I just felt like if enough people could see the truth of what was happening then he would have to be held accountable in some real or measurable way.

T: Is there any part of you that could see that as a sort of unfiltered unbridled fire, or that it's actually power that that you weren't thinking downstream to the consequences, but you were just speaking truth to power? And I mean the discomfort that people feel is actually something beyond your control, right?

N: I mean, I think that on my good days that's how I view it. And with the people who really matter to me, I think that that's how they how they viewed it. I do think that it was really... that moment was like a watershed moment where some people understood why I had to do

what I did, and some people couldn't believe what I was doing and it was very alienating to that group of people. I remember *name redacted (a member of the MA cohort)* saying, "I just think that if something like this had happened to me, I wouldn't ever want to talk about it." And after I told her what happened, she said she decided to get to know *name redacted (Nicole's abuser)* better because she was like, "Well, I just couldn't believe it. So I had to get to know him better to see if he really was as manipulative as you said. And I think he's great. And I've become really close friends with him." And I was like, "What the fuck? Ok, that's exactly what you shouldn't have done after I told you that he was an abuser." Like that is some self-sabotaging bullshit.

And I do think that it was difficult for some of my professors who really felt like they couldn't... I mean, they wanted to give me as much support as they could... but they felt like they couldn't come down on any side because we were both their students. And that was, I mean, talk about disillusionment. That was really... to see these people that were supposed to be these radical feminist anti-racists, like fighting for these things. And when it came down to it and it was right here in their backyard they did not stand up.

And there was actually, there was a Restorative Justice circle. Well, I guess it didn't start off as a Restorative Justice circle, but there was a departmental committee for like improving the culture of the department that all three of my closest friends were asked to be on, and I was not. And I was like, "Do you want to hear about how we can improve this department? I have got some ideas. And in fact, I'm the one going through it." And it felt like it was heartbreaking to me, to know that like that committee existed and there were some steps that were trying to be taken and that I was not invited to be a part of that in a department that has been my home for seven years.

T: Yeah. And it sounds like, like when you talk about that, I'm thinking like, "Alright. We can expect that there's gonna be a segment of society that does not come to our defense." You're no fool. You know where you live, you know? But that this imagined community, where people have an ideology of like resistance and anti-oppression—

N: And that these had been my mentors in that work?

T: Yeah, that that's a big blow to be like, "Oh, not even you guys have my back."

N: And whether that was because of some institutional pressure that they couldn't speak out for me, or whether it was because of... the core of something that bothers me in a lot of places, which is that people do this both sides thing where they're like, "Well, there are good arguments on both sides. It's hard to really say what happened." It's not hard to say what happened. I have said what happened. I understand if it was like their career at stake... I just don't know.

T: But it obfuscates the truth of the harm, right?

N: That's right.

T: It's like, "We can talk about both sides of it all day long, except for the fact that there is one person that's harmed." Yeah, so yeah. So let me look at the next question. So how has your experience affected you in the realm of feeling heard included and cared for by society?

N: Yeah. I feel like society does not give a fuck about me. I felt really strongly that his place in society was really carved out and protected. And that my experience was like, "Well, what are you going to do?" One thing that makes that worse, and this is sort of foreshadowing a question that I know is coming later, is that what happened to me is not a crime in the state of Wyoming. Had it happened in Fort Collins, it would be. And that was just like... when my lawyer told me that I was like, "Oh."

T: Justice by geography.

N: Yeah, like "I'm not a full person here." It was never clearer than it was when I was reporting. And that's why I had to go through the Title IX process, because there was no justice waiting for me...

T: Right. You couldn't call the cops...

N: I could call the cops, but they'd be like, "Yeah, man that sucks. But it wasn't illegal. If there was no penetration then we don't know what to tell you." So that, I mean, well, it could have been harassment. But that's not a crime. I mean it's... it's not anything like really punishable. It wouldn't even be grounds for a restraining order.

So I had to have a no-contact order, which is mutual. So it meant that at some point I actually got called in to the Student Conduct Office. Because I was arriving to a class that I had...and I'm compulsively early arriver...so I was there 20 or 30 minutes early. I liked to walk to campus and do some work in the classroom, on campus, instead of staying home, so I arrived early to the classroom and he was TA-ing for a class that took place before my class in that classroom. And one day I wasn't paying attention, I was doing the reading on my phone, on my way to class, like last minute grad student that I was, and I wasn't paying attention. I had my headphones on, and I opened the door to the classroom, saw him, freaked out, closed the door, and left. Then I got called in to say, "You violated the no contact order." And I was like, "I violated the no contact order? That's interesting because he purposefully sat down at the same table that I was sitting at, at a department party and refused to move even when asked." I didn't ask him, but I had a friend he was sitting at the table who was like, "Hey man, find any other place to sit." And he was like, "I want to sit here next to *name redacted (his girlfriend)* so why should I move?" And she was like, "You know why, like, find a new place to sit". He said, "No, I'm good. I'm going to stay here." I was like "and I violated the no contact order? By accidentally walking into the classroom that he was in?"

You can be quite assured I was the one who was harmed most in that encounter and I was upset about it and I left as soon as I could. You can be quite sure I didn't want to stay in that moment.” So there was, there was just a lot of bullshit like that.

I've forgotten which question we're on. Ohh yeah. Feeling heard.

T: Yeah. Included, cared for?

N: No, not included. Like the committee. Not being included on that really made me mad, especially because I've been in this department since my freshman year. This is my home department. And it was just...

T: And that rippled—like I'm sort of curious how that, you know, that's this microcosm but then was that the lens through which you saw most of your interactions in your daily life?

N: Yeah, I mean, I started sorting people that I interacted with into two categories: 1. safe and believes me and understands that what I'm going through is incredibly fucked up and 2. unsafe, unsafe, avoid, don't tell them anything. Talk to them as little as possible.

T: So how does that work in the grocery store? Like going you know to a coffee shop like how did—

N: It...yeah, I actually started getting really overstimulated in the grocery store. I didn't know if it was because of the pandemic and like not having gone as much or if it was because of my skyrocketing anxiety during literally every day.

But I started having to wear over-the-ear headphones and I would avoid going to the store until it would be like a month since I had gone grocery shopping, and then I would go and hate it the whole time, and sometimes almost have a panic attack in the grocery store. And it was just so it was so overstimulating that I was in a panic. I would be dead exhausted after going to the grocery store. I would come home, unload my groceries, and I'd have to, like, take a bath because I was just so anxious and so panicked.

I mean even now. I'll be walking around—thinking about it rippling out into the community—I'll be walking around and I'll see somebody who looks kind of like him, not even that much, but just enough to where I'm like, “Is that him?” and it'll like, send me into a panic and I'll be on high alert for the rest of the day. It'll be really hard to focus at work. And of course I know that this is just what it is like to have PTSD. Which was also like a rough diagnosis to get. So I was like, “Well, yeah, it was bad”. But I never expected to have a chronic disorder now—like is this going to fuck me up forever? And the answer is yes, it absolutely is.

And god, I remember trying to write.... I mean, I'm kind of all over the place in my answer to this question... I remember trying to write my personal statement for a PhD application and it turned into, “If I still want to step foot in an institution of higher education

after the bullshit that I have been through, you'd be fucking lucky to have me.” And I was like, “This is a bad personal statement—this is a bad approach. Even though I feel like it's true, it is not the way to get into a PhD program.” And so—

T: Like, “I must really want to be here?”

N: Yeah, like “I must really want to be here to come in every day like this... it's the thing that matters the most to me.” One of the things that I got so angry about is that I felt like he had stolen my master's experience from me. Because I was so excited to be in a master's program, I was like, “You're going to you're going to pay me to teach, which I've been wanting to do forever and to research whatever the fuck I want and to talk to people about interesting things? You're really going to pay me to do that?” It felt like I had won the lottery, being in a master's program.

And then this reporting bullshit stole all of my energy and all of my time. The meetings were relentless. I would go to the classes that I would teach crying. I often had to cancel class because I had just come out of a reporting meeting and I was a wreck. And I was like, “I'm going to terrify my students if I go to class like this.” I told my students that I was reporting because I had to, because I was like, “You're going to think I'm insane if you don't know what's going on.”

And so yeah, I mean, I was really mad for a long time and I am still pretty angry about the fact that I feel like not only did he steal some of that master's program from me, but he stole the PhD that I should have been in right now. Because I couldn't... I couldn't apply, just couldn't do it. And that was something I had known I had wanted to do for a long, long time. And then I was looking at my life and I was like, “I don't know what to do next year. I don't know what's next. He stole my life plan. He ruined it, by refusing to take any accountability for what he did.” He stole this from me because I've had to fight him (about something we both know happened) for months. I had to get a lawyer. I had to move. He got a nationally recognized Title IX defense lawyer. I don't even want to know how much money he paid— or his mom paid, more likely. And I was like, “Fuck, do I have to get a lawyer?”

T: Guess so.

N: Yeah, the answer was yes. Thank god for The Coalition.

T: So how, if at all, has this affected your feelings of access to democracy?

N: Yeah, horribly. I feel like I've watched news coverage of politicians and like one of my main things is trying to figure out, “Are you a safe person or not?” And so often the answer is no. It's made me feel like the political space is something that is disconnected from the needs of actual people. Because what I needed was access to justice, and what I got was run the fuck over by the system. It made me feel so far away from the people who make the rules

and set up the structures. They are the ones who are supposed to keep people safe and are supposed to give them justice when they're not safe.

I just felt like all of that was incredibly far away from me, and it wasn't what I needed right now, which was help. And I mean, watching Donald Trump say the things that he said when I was already a survivor... all of that... it was, like incredibly painful to see him elected. It was incredibly painful. It still is incredibly painful, to have family members who support him. Yeah, I mean, you start to feel like the people who are advocating for us and us as survivors are such a small segment...of the demos right? Of like the people in our society—that how is it...how is anything ever going to change?

T: But we're so many.

N: I know the fact is that it's so many, but our power feels so small.

T: Why do you think that happens? Like how does such a large segment of the population end up with so little power?

N: I mean, I think that it's because of the way that society makes us feel as survivors. Like I still struggle with this, with the internalized victim-blaming, constantly. I think about, “Oh well, what if I did just make it all up? What if he was right and it wasn't like that? What if it was my fault?”

And I think sometimes I get into this toxic cycle where I think like, “Oh, self-examination is the sign of someone who's doing the work. And it's important not to think that you are this pillar of good and righteousness in all of these things, and you need to be able to examine yourself and you need to be able to be honest when you've done something wrong.” That is not what I'm doing though when I'm going through the internalized victim-blaming. But that is what I can convince myself I'm doing. And so if I'm spending all of my energy on that dumb cycle that I just iterated, I am not spending my energy outward, speaking truth to power. I'm especially not doing that after I was told that the harm done to me does not matter.

T: Yeah, I was curious about where does the force that zaps that agency and that power come from? Is it the sexual violence, or does it lie more in the realm of how society responds to the violence?

N: I mean, I think it's both, but I think it's mostly how society responds to violence. Because if it were just that that person had done wrong to you, well, that's just one person, right? But it's that that person did wrong to you and then everybody else said, “Nope, that's fine.” And when you see this sea of people who do not fucking care about what happened to you, or who don't think it was wrong, then it feels pretty much impossible to do anything after that, and I think that that is one of the most damaging things, just the response to it.

And the victim-blaming that comes at you from all sides, even from people who want to help you. Because it has been internalized so much in all of us that when you're at your lowest point and you need it the most, the people who want to help you cannot give you help without it being tinged with that victim-blaming. And it's so hard for them to unlearn it and for you to unlearn it. And you're doing all of this while you're already in the crisis.

So it just ends up feeling like, "Oh, everything is bad. Like everything is bad from every direction, from even the directions where I know these people love me and want to help me." But they can't do it without replicating some of these systems of harm.

T: That's a convenient side effect for those that would like to maintain the status quo.

N: And I think it is not an accident, right? To completely integrate it into everybody, to do prevention, sexual violence prevention work that starts with, "How can you avoid being raped?" Like it's right in there.

T: You touched on this, but how has being in Wyoming affected your experience?

N: Yeah, it has been terrible. I think part of it is because I feel like our laws are completely backward in this state. And so, again, what happened to me was not a crime in the state of Wyoming. That does not mean that it wasn't absolutely wrong and didn't harm me, right? That seems obvious, but it's worth stating.

And I think thank god for SAFE Project. There are resources here. The general culture here is so much like, "Keep that shit to yourself. I don't need to know about it." Like "You mind your business, I'll mind mine, certainly I don't want to help you." The feeling is very much isolationist and very much like "You deal with your own shit." So I think it was... it was pretty isolating in that way.

It does feel like a dangerous place to be someone who is outspoken—like I did not know who was safe to tell, but I was telling everybody. And that put me at risk in a lot of ways. But I did feel like once you reach a critical mass of people who know what happened, it would be more dangerous for somebody to retaliate against you because other people would know. And I'm not sure that that ended up being true, but that was how I justified it to myself. In part, I was like, "People need to know, first of all, for their own safety, because he's dangerous and I don't think it's immediately clear that he's dangerous when you meet him. And second of all, for my safety, because if something happens to me, I need people to know why."

And that kind of collective, community-oriented action was really the only semblance of justice that I ever got: knowing that he had few friends remaining. And knowing that once people knew what happened, they started taking steps back from him. But not everybody, right? And I think that that is so much more preserved here. I think that so much more space is held for that like, "Well, of course he might have a different opinion of what happened."

I'm like, "There is no both sides of this: one of us is a victim and the other one is the person who hurt the victim."

Like I don't really get the whole, "There's two sides of the story." There's not, really. There's what happened, and the lie that he's telling to cover it up. Which is that I came on to him. And that I was desperate to be liked by him. And that I have this embarrassing schoolgirl crush. So I must have wanted it. Despite the fact that I said, "I don't know if I should be doing this. I feel so conflicted... I have a boyfriend. I like you, but I can't do this right now." I did have a crush on him. That didn't mean that I wanted what happened.

And the next morning, I actually texted my friend, "He had a really hard time hearing my words last night." And in the hearing the lawyer who was the hearing officer said "I don't see any concern over consent in this message." And I was like, "Well, that's funny because I'm the one who wrote it and that is what I was trying to convey in that text message. And actually, not to be nitpicky, but I have, at this point, 2 degrees in English. I'm pretty sure I'm more qualified to do this textual analysis than you are, as the author, and also as a credentialed person in textual analysis." But that was really crazy, hearing somebody say that they knew what you meant in a text more than you did.

T: It's like systematic gaslighting.

N: Yeah, it was pretty infuriating. I was like, "What the fuck?" She said, "Ultimately I don't see anything bad happening. I think, at most, this is two young adults confused about the status of their relationship." I was like, "Well, one of us was young. He was 11 years older than me, so... He was also my TA." And our professor had just died; it was the night of his memorial. Words aside, power dynamic alone. I was so drunk. I expressed reservation. I said no. And he still he powered through. And so I went into it feeling like, "There's no way that they won't understand that this was assault. All three, like you can take it from the power dynamic angle. You can take it from the incapacitated angle, or you can take it from the I said no angle. All of those angles say that it was assault", and in the end they're like, "Oh no, it's just two kids, just two kids confused." And I was like, "This is a man in his 30s. There were not two kids here."

T: And so then if you can watch your words be manipulated to serve whatever narrative, then does that totally destabilize like the idea of...?

N: Yeah, it's completely demoralizing. Like how much can you even speak truth to power, right?

T: Why speak at all? It's like any word could be a liability. It feels like it doesn't matter what you say. This system will twist it to uphold power structures that are already in place. And there's no rhetorical trick that you could use to, like, get back on top of that.

N: Right. And that was one of the other things that I felt when I was in the trial. I was like, “Here's the problem, he's also a skilled rhetorician. He is not the one who is in this PTSD haze where he can't get anything done and he can't focus on anything. He's not scared all the time and sleeping like shit and looking over his shoulder every 5 minutes every time he's walking on campus. He's not the one who's in fight or flight. So of course he's going to write a better statement than I can.” Like how can I even use the right rhetoric in my statement, to make people understand what happened to me? I can't. I'm at a disadvantage here. I'm not at the top of my game, and I was like, “I'm just not going to be able to weave the same narrative arc that he can.”

And I just remember feeling so defeated, thinking I shouldn't have to be worried about this. It shouldn't have to come down to who's the more skilled rhetorician. I'm telling the truth, that should be enough. And it wasn't. And now, I don't feel like I can ever expect it to be, which is what kills me, I think.

One of my interviewees said “it might get better for society, but it's never going to get better for me.” Which sucks so bad, and I agree. All I can hope for is that other people don't have to go through this. I am irrevocably changed by it. I will never be able to have the same trust that I could have had before. I will never be able to be a person without PTSD, I'm never going to be able to be who I might've been.

T: Yeah.

*Experiments in Democracy* publishes the work of participants  
in the Democracy Laboratory, an annual program of



Volume 1 Issue 1 collects the work of  
the 2022-2023 Democracy Laboratory cohort

