De-authorizing rape narrators

Stance, taboo and privatizing the public secret

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This chapter examines how reviewers take silence-sustaining or silence-breaking stances toward rape in online reviews of anti-terrorism expert, Jessica Stern's (2010) book, *Denial: A Memoir of Terror*. I analyze how reviewers recontextualize the story of this uncontroversial rape and its narrator. The data consist of 47 reviews, ranging from professional reviewers at major newspapers to 'citizen reviewers' found on commercial bookstores' websites and on readers' blogs. Using stance as my analytic framework (Jaffe 2009), I show how readers align their reviews in ways that either authorize or de-authorize the narrator and her narrative.

Keywords: rape, (de)authorizing, stance, book reviews, Jessica Stern, denial, silence

1. Introduction

Jessica Stern is an anti-terrorism expert. She travels the globe to interview *dangerous men*. In 2001 *Time Magazine* named Stern as one of seven *innovative thinkers* whose work would change the world. She has written two books about her research: *Terror in the Name of God* — which won the *New York Times* Notable Book Award and *The Ultimate Terrorists*. Stern received degrees from Barnard, MIT, and Harvard. At the White House, she served as a staff director of the National Security Council during the Clinton administration. Actress Nicole Kidman plays a character modeled on Stern's White House work in the movie the *Peacemaker*. Her resume is long and varied.

I learned of Stern when she gave a talk at John Jay College, where I am a professor, about her third book, *Denial: A Memoir of Terror* (Ecco Publisher, 2010). In it, she recounts how, in 1973, when she was 15 years old, she and her younger sister, Sara, then 14, were raped at gun point by a stranger who broke into their home. Stern's goal in writing *Denial*, was:

DOI 10.1075/bct.86.02tri

> to help not only the millions of women and men who have been raped or tortured but the soldiers who risk their lives on our behalf, returning with psychic wounds so excruciating that both they and we cannot bear to admit these wounds exist (Stern 2010, xii).

For Stern (2010, xii), "Denial is almost irresistibly seductive, not only for victims who seek to forget the traumatic event but also for those who observe the pain of others and find it easier to ignore or 'forget.'"

At Stern's talk, a colleague suggested that because of Stern's stature, scholarly prominence, and importance as a national security expert, people would (finally) have to take a rape story seriously. With Stern as narrator, she reasoned, readers would not be able to ignore the reality of rape by undermining the victim with issues of credibility (see Frohmann 1991) and victim-blaming ideologies (Matoesian 1993, 1999).

In this chapter, I examine book reviews of Stern's memoir to see what kind of *uptake* it gets. The book review, I argue, serves as one semiotic site for the practice of *silence-sustaining* or *silence-breaking* discourses of rape. As a genre, the book review provides a unique perspective for studying rape narratives in terms of how these accounts of trauma and/or resilience are "taken up" (Austin 1962) by readers and represented to other potential readers. The reviewer takes a position or a stance in his/her review both toward the narrator and the narrative as well as toward his or her own readership. The *book review* genre is both descriptive and evaluative, and ultimately, it functions to prescribe whether there should be future readings. The data and analyses show how reviewers' alignments either authorize or de-authorize Stern as narrator and/or expert and take either silence-sustaining or silence-breaking stances. Silence-breaking stances suggest that the rape narrative is an important site of knowledge, while silence-sustaining stances continue to index rape as a socio-cultural taboo that is too difficult to be heard. Interestingly, as we will see, some reviewers authorize Stern as a narrator, but still manage to erect the taboo against talking about rape.

This analysis is contextualized in a culture and society where rape and sexual assault are underreported crimes (Russell 1982, 1983; Bergen 1996). I have discussed elsewhere (Trinch 2001, 2003) how people negotiate these subjects with a range of linguistic strategies including euphemism, particularly to refer to both the crime itself and to the physical details involved. Following Ullman's (1966) framework of linguistic taboo, the term *rape* — an unpleasant, fear evoking crime involving sexual activity — is itself not only marked as taboo, it may also be loaded with evaluative and judgmental suppositions on the part of women who experience it and among practitioners who attempt to address it (Finkelhor and Yllo 1985; Michael et al. 1994; Wood and Rennie 1994; Lamb 1999a, 1999b; Gavey

1999; Phillips 1999). Linguists have shown how institutionalized discourses mitigate women's meanings of sexual assault by recasting accounts of it in terms more palatable to social standards of sexuality (Ehrlich 1998; Coates et al. 1994) and/or more contextually appropriate ways to discuss it (Trinch 2001, 2003, 2010a).

Stern is a unique narrator. Because of her background and the facts surrounding her rape, her credibility is not at issue. The conventional norms for interrogating *alleged* victims of rape do not adhere (see Ehrlich 2001, 2007a, 2007b, 2012; Matoesian 2001; Mulla 2011). Therefore, Stern's narrative has an opportunity to transcend rape stereotypes and shatter the linguistic norms common in its representation. As an uncontroversial narrator, Stern could reveal truths about rape that get obfuscated when complainant credibility — either due to mundane discrepancies of fact or to sexist notions of a woman's *culturally improper* gender behavior — tends to trump all else.

Reviewers who *authorize* Stern allow her the authority of telling her account in her own voice. They value her as an author with expertise and her book as a source of knowledge. Their reviews refer to what a reader can learn from Stern. And conversely, those reviewers who *de-authorize* Stern diminish her account, her ability to author it and her validity as an expert source on rape. Analogous to Bou-Franch's (2013) analysis of online comments about intimate-partner abuse as sustaining- or challenging-domestic violence, I examine whether and how de-authorizing reviews map onto silence-sustaining stances toward rape.

2. Methodology: The book review genre

To examine these issues, in October 2010, I assembled a corpus of 47 reviews by conducting a keyword search on Google for *Jessica Stern*, *Denial*, and *Review*. I also went to Stern's webpage and found a list of links to reviews. Additionally, I keyed in the names of major U.S. newspapers, such as the *New York Times*, along with Stern's name and the book title. And, reviews were found on Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble's website, and on the blogs of individual *citizen* readers.

After reading each review several times, I highlighted words, phrases, and ideas that resonated with what prior academic work — discussed briefly above and in more detail below — would predict to be the cultural responses to both rape and to women who have been raped. I assessed if, generally speaking, reviewers expressed a positive or negative orientation toward Stern and her memoir (Tannen 1993). By *positive* I mean that reviewers recommended *Denial* and supported the form and content of Stern's representations of rape, trauma, and resilience. By *negative*, I mean that reviewers did not like the book as evidenced by the way they expressed disapproval for its writer or for the way it was written. To aid in my

assessment of reviews as positive or negative, I incorporated the sociolinguistic analytic of stance (Jaffe 2009). Du Bois (2007, 163) defines stance as

> a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means…through which social actors simultaneously evaluate objects, positions, and subjects (themselves and others), and align with the other subjects with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field (as quoted in Jaffe 2009, 5).

Specifically, I examine the reviews with respect to the ways in which readers take up Stern and her story, as well as the manner in which they may or may not ratify her position as a narrator of rape and of post-traumatic stress disorder for potential readers. Sociolinguistic resources such as frames, speech acts, and uptake are used to identify the reviewers' stances toward Stern's account. If Stern wrote her book so that others would read her story, the review genre provides an interesting and unique communicative space through which to assess uptake. Austin suggests that "securing uptake" is part of a complex process of a speaker's making his/her intent known to his/her interlocutors. Blommaert (2005) adds to this understanding of uptake by suggesting that uptake also depends on an interlocutor's ideological lens. By examining reader alignments towards the narrative, one can discern the different ideologies through which interlocutors not only take up Stern's rape narrative, but also whether they recommend or discourage future readings.

3. Findings and discussion

Following the steps outlined above, 23 reviews were counted as positive, while only 14 were considered to be negative. The remaining 10 fell into the hybrid and ambivalent category that authorized Stern as a rape narrator, but cautioned readers to beware (or be aware) of taking up her narrative. In the section that follows, I illustrate what are considered *positive*, *negative*, and *ambivalent* reviews. The positive reviews are noteworthy because they seem to break with conventional ways of talking about rape.

3.1 Positive reviews

Examples 1 and 2 below are considered positive reviews because their focus is on the book as a locus of comprehension. Their favorable framing of the book is projected from the beginning through titles like "Very Powerful" and "Brave", and these reviews strongly suggest that the book explores a topic that is worth apprehending.

(1) Princeton Reader "Very Powerful." Amazon.com, July 5, 2010.
   1. The story line itself is mesmerizing
   2. Writing style and story organization are artful
   3. The basic approach is that of "ground truths" which is based on immersion in exploration of stories as they unfold rather than library search or other people's research.
   4. The narrator goes through an exploration of herself, her past trauma (holocaust (second generation), death of a mother, abandonment by a stepmother and rape all through childhood and early teen age years). However, she doesn't stay in her home to do soul searching, rather she goes to any length to engage in dialogues with many who can help get deeper and understand better. The reader joins the journey, captivated.
   5. A strong message is that exploration with others is powerful anti-shame measure.
   6. The exploration of her relationship with her father is brutally honest and teaches the power of dialogue.
   7. It is tough to put the book down. It makes one hopeful that many will read it and be inspired by the author's insights, courage and knowledge.

In Example 1, the reviewer takes an epistemic stance toward the memoir. That is, this writer performs his/her reading of *Denial* in an academic way and reviews it similarly by providing declarative and unmediated evidence to readers in a list of the book's merits. Presented as an argument bolstered with evidence, and not the reader's opinion, the enumerated list of the memoir's instructional virtues makes for an authoritative stance that commends Stern as *the* authority on knowing and telling her rape story and as the person to reveal new information about rape.

Princeton Reader in Example 1 examines the mechanics and presentation of writing as well as the way the account is organized, researched, and vetted. The reader names the methodology Stern uses for exploration: "immersion" and "ground truths". And these methods are equated to books grounded in positivistic research design and library sources. Notably, the writer does not suggest that any one trauma stands out among the others. The book is described as a story about trauma and an account of how one person dealt with several traumatic experiences. Each of the review's constituent parts is enumerated in didactic fashion, and the overall evaluation of the book is affirming: "It is tough to put the book down. It makes one hopeful that many will read it and be inspired by the author's insights, courage and knowledge." Describing the book as "tough to put down," the reviewer never suggests that the readers will be burdened by Stern's story; the conclusion is that they will be galvanized by it.

In Example 2, the reviewer uses a more affective stance in his review of *Denial*, Stern's authority and Stern as an author. He states that Stern's account provides a transformative experience for readers.

(2) John Bowes, "Brave." Amazon.com, August 1, 2010.
Exposing herself in ways authors rarely do, the author forces the reader to evaluate their own ability to handle trauma and family relationships. A look at PTSD that is relevant to our times and has always been with us, even if we didn't know what to call it. Originally I purchased the book for insights into her rapist, I was acquainted with him after his prison years, her handling of trauma became the real story. Very well done.

The reviewer in Example 2 refers to Stern as "the author" and though he uses verbs that signify difficult material, (i.e.; "exposing" and "forces"), this reviewer ultimately evaluates the book as positive for its metamorphic effect: it gave far more than was bargained for. Readers are told that insight into the rapist — the reason he read the book — is actually less interesting than the wisdom gained from knowing how Stern handled trauma.

I show the positive reviews first because (a) they are strong examples of what it means to have someone evaluate work on rape as thoughtful and admirable as opposed to simply shocking and horrifying, and (b) these positive reviews starkly contrast with the negative and hybrid/ambivalent reviews that tend to annul not rape, but rather the act of talking about it. As we will see, the negative reviews incorporate predictable and even culturally appropriate responses to reading rape narratives: horror, empathy, sympathy, and outrage. And while empathetic or sympathetic responses are not antagonistic to Stern, *per se*, they can be stifling to others who have suffered victimization. Furthermore, once compared with the very positive reviews, it becomes clear how such common and culturally appropriate expressions of horror and even some shows of empathy create a discourse of suppression. The positive reviews show a different ideological orientation toward the readers' uptake of information about rape, proving that there are other ways to hear rape disclosures. They illustrate for us how people can talk about rape without falling into the conventional rhetoric that mutes conversation, fosters shame and allows for denial.

3.2 Negative reviews

Reviews with de-authorizing and silence-sustaining stances tend to employ language to evaluate Stern and her narrative negatively. Some can be read as speech acts of discouragement, because they downgrade Stern's ability to communicate new knowledge about rape. Additionally, negative reviews incorporate rape myths

and victim-stereotypes. Several reviewers in this group reject Stern's *right* to speak about her experiences in the way she chooses. And most importantly, most of the negative reviews uphold rape's privileged status as an unspeakable phenomenon.

The three reviews that most blatantly incorporate stereotypes and myths about rape were written by two writers for the *New York Times* and one for the *Washington Post*. All three of these reviews reify the stereotype that women that are raped suffer from a *rape trauma syndrome* that researchers like Haag (1996), Gavey (2005) and McCaughey (1997) claim essentializes women who have been raped as "eternally broken in body and irrevocably damaged psychologically." Marie Arana, for example, writing for *The Washington Post*, begins her review with the following two paragraphs that highlight the mythology that rape ruins a woman forever:

(3) Maria Arana, "Jessica Stern's Denial," Washington Post, August 15, 2010.
If a victim of childhood rape grows up to fear the dark, avoid sex, cower in the streets and shrink from human relationships, it shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, the arc is common enough. Psychiatrists have parsed the ravaging effects of post-traumatic stress in thousands of clinical studies.
But if a victim of that monstrous act grows up to be preternaturally calm, surprisingly courageous — with antennae so acute that she is sought after to elicit sensitive information from ruthless terrorists — that is a remarkable outcome. Psychiatrists have parsed this, too, and they call it post-traumatic growth.

Because not many people speak to terrorists, Stern is remarkable, but she is not alone in this work. Furthermore there are women who are raped who also go on to live productive lives. Arana's characterization of people who are raped as doomed to *a life of being afraid of the dark, unable ever to have sex again* is a common and reductive stereotype. This review is one of the most blatant de-authorizing reviews in the corpus. Rather than reviewing the book, Arana reviews Stern as a victim with pathologizing psychiatric discourse. Stern's authority is handed over to the psychiatric experts, and through them, Arana tells potential readers all about Stern. This review has the potential not only to dissuade readers from taking up *Denial*, but it could also serve as a silence-sustaining discourse as potential readers who have been victimized by sexual violence read the review and note that they do not fit the bill that Arana reports is *expected by the experts*. In other words, this review could have the effect of foreclosing on all women who experience non-stereotypical responses to rape. Moreover, this reviewer and the one in Example 4 de-authorize the author by using material outside the text to evaluate and explain her — not as writer, narrator, or person with a first-hand experience of rape, trauma and resilience — but as victim already explained by psychiatry.

In a similarly de-authorizing stance, one of the two reviews published in *the New York Times* also replaces Stern's authority to speak for herself by quoting Stern's colleague.

(4) Charles McGrath, "Private Trauma Sheds Light…" *NYTimes*, June 29, 2010.
Benjamin Wittes, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who has been a friend of Ms. Stern's since the late '90s, said he was astonished to learn what happened to her. "If you met some completely dysfunctional person who you could see was wearing the scars of such an experience, then you might not be surprised," he explained. "But that's not Jessie".

These reviewers use others' words to explain Stern. Does her victim-status mark her as unreliable for them? Reviewers in 3 and 4 take de-authorizing stances both by what they say and by how they say it. The stereotype that *normal* raped women should have no future success is present in Review 4, albeit attributed to a colleague. This stance is again silence-sustaining because women who have been raped and who have stories that do not conform to the stereotype (a) might choose to remain silent for fear of not being believed or (b) might not be heard because their interlocutors subscribe to the stereotype (see Trinch 2013).

Unlike his two colleagues who make Stern out to be the exception by giving her superhuman qualities — a raped woman with a life, career, and success — rather than the presumed rule — the raped woman that is forever convalescing, drug addicted, and loveless — the other *NYTimes* writer, Dwight Garner, concludes that Stern is indeed, *damaged*. An excerpt of his review is shown in Example 5. Notice how Garner actually dehumanizes Stern. His review takes the formulaic shape of "she's exactly what we would expect after rape: an angry, man-hater."

(5) a. Dwight Garner. "Violence Expert Visits Her Dark Past." *NYTimes*, June 24, 2010.
About these facts, Ms. Stern is understandably bitter…Ms. Stern's id floats very near the surface. Her anger is barely sublimated and emerges in unexpected and jagged ways, ways that feel authentic but somewhat beyond her control.

And to support his claim, in (5b), Garner offers the following textual evidence from the two pages on which Stern writes about her anger in her monograph of more than 300 pages:

(5) b. Dwight Garner. "Violence Expert Visits Her Dark Past." *NYTimes*, June 24, 2010.
Imagining a meeting with her rapist, she writes: "He will realize that he wronged the universe, and his brain will explode. Also his penis will fall off. I will leave him there, his brain on his plate.'

> About a psychiatrist who evaluated her rapist in prison and described him as "not a sexually dangerous person," she thinks: "I imagine this doctor's penis wilting and shrinking in terror, as small as a bean, and there is some satisfaction in this cruel thought. But wilting is not enough: I want to bloody him. In my mind's eye I swing a bat right at this doctor's learned head, smashing his skull, the skull that contained his bad, addled brain."
> …Reading "Denial" is like ingesting a novel from a particularly damaged Joyce Carol Oates protagonist come to life. Ms. Stern can seem like a potent distillate of every Oates character put to paper.

And in the last paragraph in (5b), we see that Garner, begins the conclusion of his review by using the word "damaged" to describe Stern. Garner reduces Stern to an *id*, a Freudian psychological term referring to a part of the psyche associated with instinctual impulses and primitive needs. Her story of trauma and resilience is made akin to a novel, and prospective readers are told that Stern does not have control of herself, which suggests that is it she, not her rapist, who is dangerous.

There are, however, four other reviews in the corpus that also mention Stern's anger and bitterness. For space purposes, I can include only one in Example 6 below,

(6) Phurba, "Intriguing Tale of Revisiting a Past Crime" June 30, 2010, Barnes & Noble.com
Some of Stern's observations and feelings of anger are blunt and intense, but such feelings show her honesty and respect for the reader who does not want a filtered reality.

Here, the reviewer acknowledges Stern's anger, and with the discourse marker "but" used as contrastive connector arguably acknowledges her transgression (see Schiffrin 1987): she should not be talking about her anger. One of Stern's messages is that rape is wrong and harmful, but it is denial that is damaging. She never states that *she* is damaged or that her life was ruined. Yet, reviewers insist upon and continue to impose a damaged identity. Notice how reviewers do this in Examples 7 and 8:

(7) Joseph D. Policano. "Rape and Retribution," Amazon.com, July 10, 2010.
It is a heartbreaking account of a life never made whole after a terrifying experience as a teenager.

(8) Eclectic/Eccentric, June 22, 2010.
Being raped is a woman's greatest fear and can be the source of a woman's greatest shame. How does a reader critically analyze a story so personal, so damaging, and so removed from her own life?

> This separation between myself and the author was consistently apparent and not just regarding the rape.

Furthermore, Raphael Peterson in (Example 9) says that Stern tries to deal with the trauma that looms over her, but he does so in an underhanded way, as he gives her agency over to the repercussions of the rape:

(9) Raphael Peterson, "Brutal Memories," *The Roanoke Times*, August 29, 2010
> Traumas of this magnitude can tower over a person's life. Stern does her best to implode its foundations with the passion of the forever marked.

A couple of readers de-authorize Stern by suggesting that her prose, method of knowing, and means of writing are flawed. They discuss how Stern could have done a better job writing her memoir. The most notable is, perhaps memoirist Helen Epstein (in two reviews excerpted in Example 11). Epstein and another reviewer, J. J. Weiland, in Example 10, criticize Stern for her resistance to psychology and to the diagnosis of *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder*. Both Epstein and Weiland disparage Stern for ignoring the expertise that science and the humanities have to offer. They even state that she did not cite them or their colleagues.

(10) J. J. Weiland, "The past is never dead…" July 6, 2010. Amazon.com.
> "Denial" represents a powerful self-revelation of the impact of traumatic events, and their acceptance or non-acceptance by caregivers and loved ones, on emotional functioning later in life.
>
> …
>
> And yet I was dismayed with certain aspects of the work. Granted a memoir is not a scientific treatise and one cannot expect it to be organized as such. Still, Dr. Stern does use references at certain points in the book, but omits references or even crediting of others for insights not uniquely her own. For example, she boldly states a hypothesis of hers that humiliation is the well-spring from which savagery emerges. …A nonacademic writer producing a memoir that included such a revelation might be excused of such omissions, but not one with the credentials and resources of the author. Secondly Dr. Stern repeatedly denigrates work done in the psychological fields by reducing, wholesale, their findings to 'psychobabble'. Indeed, she outright states that her motivation for interviewing a soldier with symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was due to her mistrust of the diagnosis of her own symptoms from a therapist. In this regard, I found her arrogance to be quite similar to that of her father's…
>
> Finally, and most intriguingly, Dr. Stern focuses the bulk of her memoir on her rape and rapist and the investigation surrounding it, and her father's reaction (or lack thereof) to the incident… Such contrasting sources and durations of childhood abuse, and their relative impacts, are discussed

thoroughly by the likes of Dr. Jennifer Freyd with her Betrayal Trauma hypothesis, but there are others as well…"

(11) Helen Epstein, "Interesting and difficult" Amazon.com and World Books Review, August 20, 2010.
…And pursuing the subject of context and reading, there's hardly any reference to prior work on her many themes. Did she read (and take in) Susan Brownmiller's classic book on rape or the many others that followed its publication? Did she study Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* or any of the many studies that…? Any of the large literature on Holocaust survivors and their families that would contextualize her father for her? If so, what helped her understand herself? If she did not read up on any of these subjects, why not?
The inexplicable omission of the vast literature on shame, rape, motherless daughters, Holocaust survivors, and trauma in general is all the more peculiar because Stern introduces herself as a scholar. Is she uninterested in what other people have discovered about trauma? Does she still disavow its relevance to herself? Or is she just sloppy. In a memoir, the reader wants to know.

Epstein even asks why Stern did not read and cite her own book, *Children of the Holocaust: Conversations with Sons and Daughters of Survivors*.

In addition to these scholars' complaints of Stern's lay treatment of the disorder, we find reviewers that have trouble with Stern's attempt to portray consciously and deliberately the way her mind moves because of her PTSD. See Excerpt 12 below:

(12) Dancing Mom, "Therapeutic Diary," Amazon.com, August 7, 2010.
I did not like this book… I expected to be wowed by her insight and experience. Instead I felt like I was reading a teenager's diary which would actually make a lot of sense, since she hasn't opened this compartment since the horrific experience when she was 15. What made it feel like a dairy of a teenager was the constant exploration of personal interpretation, innuendo, and perception. Dr. Stern provides an inner dialogue of her journey from the moment the detective calls her to the publication of her book. This is not necessarily a bad thing. I simply thought it contained irrelevant information along with some gold nuggets. For instance, while talking with any number of people, the conversation is reported verbatim…On the inside, the author is contemplating birds, surfaces and discusses the way the person uses verb tenses. Many of these inner dialogues come to naught.

And another reviewer, shown in Excerpt 13, has similar complaints:

(13) debeehr, "I'm not sure what I expected…" Amazon.com August 28, 2010. I'm not sure what I expected…but this wasn't it. There is no question that what the author went through during the assault was terrible, and that she is to be admired for having surmounted her trauma to lead a successful career, but unfortunately, simply having a terrible experience in one's background doesn't automatically make you a good writer. The book rambles and jumps around in a rather ostentatiously "literary" style. Perhaps the writer was attempting to use the literary style to simulate the effects of trauma and PTSD for the reader; however, it didn't work for me. The rambling, disjointed narrative detracts from the power of the account; the author's exploration of the effects of her ordeal on her psyche, which should have been gripping, instead comes across as facile, almost self-absorbed and/or self-aggrandizing.

Reviewers are entitled to their opinions, but opinions are grounded in the very ideologies about which Blommaert (2005) notes act as filters for uptake. These opinions are created in and constitutive of the same culture of denial that keeps people silent about sexual violence. Those who have been victimized perceive these risks in speaking (Trinch 2007, 2010b). Stern describes herself as having possessed this kind of disdain for victims and ties it to her father's insistence on their family's having a stiff-upper-lip. Processing trauma and its effects were defined by both Stern and her father as *navel gazing*. Some reviewers seem to be saying something similar, though they couch their distaste for the processing that Stern does as a complaint against her prose. In linguistics, when someone's utterance upsets the status quo, analysts have found that those invested in maintaining the status quo use *topic slifts* or complaints about complaints to shift focus by lifting the complaint out of its original context and moving into another where the form and/or content of the complaint itself can be examined (Hirsch 1998; Matoesian 1993; Trinch 2010b). Here, Stern's complaint about her culture which tolerates rape, trauma, and denial is subjected to reviewers who complain that her prose is flawed.

3.3 The caveat reviews

While the negative reviews are de-authorizing and silence-sustaining — especially those that appearing in the national American newspapers — the most interesting reviews are those that subtly uphold the culturally privileged position of rape as public secret. Taussig (1999) claims that public secrets circulate and trade in what is known in culture but not articulated. This third category is complicated. These reviewers, on the one hand, valorize Stern and her project. They believe her and also seem to authorize her as a credible narrator. Rather than complaining about her complaints, they often endorse them. But, on the other hand, these reviewers

suggest that Stern is transgressive. In these writings, Stern is at once an author with something important to say and a person who says things that are beyond the boundaries of acceptability. Thus, these writers present Stern to their readers with a caveat, or a buyer-beware, that indicates that Stern's narrative could do them damage. And so, these reviewers' stances leave readers with a decision to make for themselves as to whether they should read Stern. Therefore, the stance taken in the majority of the reviews in this group both authorizes Stern and simultaneously could allow for the persistence of the silence that surrounds rape. Potential readers are given the *option* either to take up the narrative and ratify it or leave it and remain unaware of the knowledge it contains.

These reviewers' charge to readers to be on guard may stem in fact, precisely from Stern's credibility as a narrator of rape. And, as I will argue, the type of ideology expressed in this third category presents a new danger both to women who are raped and to our ability to broaden understandings of rape.

The discursive processes of the reviewers in this group mirror the explanation Mookherjee gives of Taussig's public secret. Mookherjee (2006, 435) explains:

> Taussig (1999: 7) argues that defacement, achieved by the drama of revelation, produces the sacred. The act of revealing a familiar public secret is transgressive. Hence the knowledge of secrecy of this public secret is made powerful through an active not-knowing … paradoxically, secrecy is actively not known and yet it is disclosed in order to be defaced, revealed … which in turn enables its concealment.

When reviewers write that reading the book was an emotional burden or when they incorporate vocabulary that suggests the book is disturbing, we see them erecting the public secret of rape. They reveal its power through disclosure and then quickly deface it as something that should not be known. The data make clear how reviewers warn readers. Some of the warnings come squarely in the reviews that I considered *negative*. For example, in the blatant *READER BEWARE* group, we get the following cautions:

(14) Epstein on Amazon.com and on World Book Review:
"Denial is a difficult book, uncomfortable to read and even more uncomfortable to review."

Dwight Garner writing for *The New York Times*:
"Denial is a hard book to read, in part because of its subject matter, in part because [of] Ms. Stern's [anger]".

The blogger, Eclectic/Eccentric:
"This is not an easy story to read. There is so much violence, so much terror."

V. Garza Gaby on Amazon.com:
"When reading it, I would have to put it down and take a minute after a particularly hard page or two."

Lit *Chick Blogger:
"This was a difficult read — both the subject matter and Stern's commitment to laying all things bare definitely caused this reader to some moments of discomfort."

Heart2Heart:
"This is a difficult book to read without getting emotionally involved with Jessica's story of her traumatic rape of her and her sister experienced."

Cyraen on Barnes and Noble.com:
"This book was tough to read at times, embarrassing at others, and completely compelling."

Interestingly, blogger, "Take Me Away," confines her *reader beware caveat* to the chapter where the rape occurs by saying, "For those who may be concerned, the chapter in which the author describes the actual rape may be difficult for some to read — especially if they experienced something similar. However, the rest of this was not a difficult read in that manner." Along these lines of demarcating the potential peril Stern's book can do by marking *the dangerous pages* or delineating especially *vulnerable populations*, there are reviewers that say Stern's book should be avoided during the summer:

(15) Joseph D. Policano writes:
"Obviously, *Denial* is not the sort of book one brings to the beach for summer reading."

And blogger, Sophisticated Dorkiness, states:
"Summer just wasn't the time for me to read a book on a topic as difficult as rape, and I suspect some of my impressions were colored by that… [The stories Stern shares about her family and the people she interviews] are not easy to read…"

This signaling of danger to certain people, of certain pages and particular times of the year could be taken up as permission to not know about rape. While they validate the book project, these reviewers also suggest that there are people who need not *know* about sexual violence. The comments that are posted in response to these reviews on the blogs confirm that this is exactly how the caveats in the speech acts of warnings are taken up. Several commentators on the blogs, Jenn's Bookshelves, Reading on a Rainy Day and Lit * Chick pick up on the license reviewers give to readers to avoid reading about rape by saying:

1. That book does sound very disturbing. I do love memoirs, but this one almost feels too personal to me.
2. I don't think I could read this book myself, but I do agree that it probably should be read. Thanks for being part of the tour.
3. I can't even imagine living through something like that, and to be honest, I don't want to read about it either. Too tough, too true.
4. That sounds intense! Maybe something to tackle one day.
5. This sounds like a difficult but worthwhile read — thanks for being part of the tour.
6. Wow, this sounds like a very disturbing story. I cannot imagine living my life like that.
7. Wow, I just heard the author of this book interviewed on NPR yesterday, then I saw it listed somewhere else and now on your blog! It sounds so interesting but so difficult to read. Thanks for the review.
8. I heard of this book elsewhere, but it's going to go on my wish list. I might find it hard to read, though, because of the intensity.
9. This book would be too intense for me, but I've heard some great things about it from other bloggers. Thanks for being part of the tour.

Even some of the relatively positive reviews that do not incorporate an all-out caveat, still employ language that hints at the book's power to make readers ill-at-ease. The use of certain vocabulary — mostly noun phrases and adjectives — warns readers that the material is both uncommonly seen and upsetting.

Dwight Garner, of *The New York Times*, squarely in the negative category, gets listed here too for his vocabulary use warning of emotional disturbance: "Ms. Stern describes that night [of the rape] in *brutal detail*." It was a night that changed her and taught her a dire lesson: "Shame can be sexually transmitted" (italics mine). Also J. J. Weiland writes, "What unfolds in this narrative is an intriguing and *admittedly harrowing* account of the latter part of Dr. Stern's childhood…" And William Doolittle states as well, "This is a *harrowing tale* of rape…" In these reviews it is the telling itself that is described as being *harrowing* and *brutal*, not the act of rape, *per se*.

Throughout the reviews there are a series of discourse frames that Tannen (1993) argues expose people's cultural expectations. Tannen notes that when speakers or writers evaluate utterances with words like *surprising* or even *personal*, they indicate that there is a cultural expectation for silence on the topic. In this way, the reviewers seem to expect that Stern would suffer quietly, and thus, her speaking catches them unaware. Epstein, for example, states, "Her story is often vivid, *surprisingly candid*…" and Knittingmomof3 says, "Denial is *deeply personal*, raw and profound look at the effects of trauma on an individual…and the damages

stemming from denial…this is the first memoir that is so honestly fresh, raw…". And others suggest that Stern's voice could deprive readers of their composure and frighten them with her truthfulness. For example, Cynthia "Andante Cantible" states, "*Her voice is so unnervingly private* that she's able to share each baby step of healing." The reviewer for the *Providence Journal* writes, "*This startlingly honest memoir* reveals the ways that ordinary people go numb in the face of unbearable truth and the damage to children …" (emphasis mine).

By using such words and phrases, the reviewers reveal their own expectations that rape is and should remain personal, private, and deeply embedded in one's own trauma. In the same vein, these reviewers are saying that in writing about it, Stern catches her reader off-guard, deprives interlocutors of composure, and breaks up the tranquility of their settled state. The revelation of her rape produces shame for them and they pass this information on to their readers in the form of caveats that take on paternalism.

Mookherjee, who did field work in Bangladesh during 1996 and 1997, writes about how the public secret operates on memory and secrecy with respect to rape in a small village there, called Enayetpur. The contexts of Concord, Massachusetts and Enayetpur are very different, yet where rape is concerned, they are oddly similar. The three women raped in Mookherjee's study were victims of wartime rape — where estimates indicate that somewhere between 200,000–400,000 women were raped in the civil war between East and West Pakistan that resulted in the creation of Bangladesh. The three Bangladeshi women in her study were raped in 1971. This is the same year that police in Massachusetts began recording reports of rape committed by Stern's rapist. In all, Stern's rapist raped at least 44 other girls under the age of 19.

In Mookerjee's analysis the public secret operates through scorn to reveal the wartime rapes of the three women at the same time shame operates to conceal the secret. By the 1990s, the women were likened to prostitutes, because strange men had had access to their genitals and because as women who spoke out against rape, they received tangible goods and gifts and intangible benefits such as fame as war heroines. Villagers, for example, say things like these women are "in the business of being naked." Mookherjee (2006: 441) states,

> Some of the younger men in the village have expressed disbelief about whether the women were actually raped. The key paradox here is that these youths reason that someone who has 'truly' been raped would 'attempt to conceal it' (chapa rakhbe) … Local liberation fighters similarly disbelieved the women. To them the yardstick of being authentically raped is based on hiding one's history and masking it through marriage…

So while there exists a national rhetoric of heroism for women raped during the war, in their villages these Bangladeshi women, known as *birangonas*, are shamed for speaking. The local ideology is that those truly raped would not speak about it. Mookherjee analyzes the discourse of a local patriarch named Halim:

> Halim in a Taussigian vein, seems to suggest that 'truth is a revelation which does justice to it' (Taussig 1999: 2), or in other words, that truth is only worth evoking if one can seek justice through it. For the women it is fruitless to reveal the truth of rape, as they cannot punish the rapist. Halim said the idea of *purdah* was to keep things covered *chapa* (hidden, covered), which was not necessarily through the external *burkha* but via the right codes of conduct. The action of the women in talking about the rape, particularly for the purpose of receiving money in exchange, is therefore sinful. The rightful action of the victim, weak and tabooed, is to be quiet, to remain covered and invisible… (441).

No English-language readers blatantly suggest that Stern should remain quiet to be considered a raped woman. Many do, however, suggest they do not like hearing her voice. Some readers seem to regret having *to know* the public secret of rape in the way Stern talks about it. And more telling still, these reviews are over and over again, cautionary notes for potential readers that may discourage uptake and ratification of the rape narrative.

In Enayetpur, the public secret operates on the telling and the teller. What the rape narrator reveals is intimate and private, a fact that shames and dishonors herself and her family. The tellers are made to look like attention-seekers for something that does not mark them culturally as heroines. A virtuous victim-identity in Bangladesh is claimed through silent suffering. Speaking out is crude, debasing to the self, and destabilizing to the social order.

Again, no English-language reviewer expresses contempt for Stern as a stained and inferior person. In contrast to the shamefully uncovered *birangonas*, Stern is construed by her reviewers as the perfect neoliberal rape victim who is entitled to tell her story. A rape victim like Stern is seen as an empowered individual who has the right to decide to speak. But, the public secret persists in the U.S. context as well. It is revealed though, through the interlocutors' right to refuse to hear what gets conceptualized as a private (or privatized) trauma.

4. Conclusions

The autobiographical story of a person who overcomes tragedy to become a productive societal member seems to resonate with these reviewers as a boot-strapping, personal triumph narrative that makes for a truly great tale. But in this way,

we see how rape has become a depoliticized problem. If the reviews are a window into the political climate, they suggest that the *speaking I* and the power of eyewitness testimony to break the silence and to inform the public about experiences that are not only *unspeakable* (Felman and Laub 1992), but also potentially disruptive to the current cultural status quo (Beverley 1993; Briggs 1997; Eades 2008; Sommer 1991), are being overshadowed by notions of interlocutor(hearer/reader)-agency. We find ourselves in a situation where there is at least a tacit belief that while people have the right to have voice, that same *right* to conversation applies on the receiving end as well. And thus, there might not be anyone who wants to hear it. In other words, with the idea of *choice* and *individual's rights to speak* in tow, communication is not being conceptualized as a two-way street. The voice that speaks of trauma can, if interlocutors desire, travel down a one-way street to a dead end. The political configuration of the individual's right to be a speaking subject as in "Can the subaltern speak?" (Spivak 1988), is countered with the interlocutor's individual right to hear what he or she wants.

Rape then is conceptualized as a problem that the individual raped woman alone must overcome by her personal resilience. For most readers in this corpus, knowing about the public secret of rape is just one of the many choices an individual makes. If the story is too intense, disturbing, unnervingly personal, angry, or brutal, then, the individual reader need not bother with the *individual victim* and her personal journey.

The data I examine here support Mardrossian's conclusion that feminists have lost control of the ability to theorize rape as a political issue. She states that the discipline of psychology has managed to individualize the problem in the psyches of each singular woman raped. She complains, too, that contemporary feminist theorists' focus on changing women's psychic and affective orientations further instantiates the hegemonic discourse on victimization and reduces the political to the personal (Mardrossian 2002, 772).

These reviewers write of Jessica Stern as the only victim of this crime. But Stern writes of how at least 44 other young girls were raped by the same man, not during a war, but in three lovely and *peaceful* Massachusetts communities. From 1971–1973, parents, teachers, school administrators, law enforcement officials, medical professionals, religious leaders, and politicians, or in other words, an entire society, denied the reality of rape. And today, in these reviews, that rape is a political and cultural problem is rarely mentioned. Reviewers scrutinize the narrative, critique the telling's merits and then write about how it affects them personally. Then, they warn others that reading such material could harm them. These stances further entrench the idea that rape is a crime that happens to the unfortunate individual woman who needs the fixing. I'll close with some final words from Mardrossian (2002, 772):

> Feminist theory in particular can do a lot to change the depoliticizing course that approaches to rape have taken in the last decade. We need to theorize and reconceptualize the meanings of categories such as "victim" and "experience" rather than merely criticize their use. We need to identify the ways in which women are no longer "silent" but are in fact encouraged to speak (out) through numerous yet nonpoliticized channels controlled by the liberal and bureaucratic state. Indeed, without a concerted effort on the part of both feminist academics and activists to reconceptualize rape, the radical feminist slogan, "break the silence" might soon have no more valence than "keep talking."

As feminist linguists, we might shift our analytic focus from sexual assault disclosure to interlocutor uptake of such disclosures as a first measure in shifting the onus of disclosure/exposure from those victimized to the social responsibility of interlocutors to hear, know about, and act in ways that will not only break the silence that continues to surround rape, but also to act in ways that actually stop rape.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Edward Snajdr, Sameena Mulla, Katie Gentile, and Greg Matoesian for comments about this work that helped me make it clearer. I am especially grateful to Susan Ehrlich for her insightful remarks as a discussant on a panel that she and I organized for the AAAs, where I presented a first iteration of this chapter. I'm indebted to Patricia Bou-Franch for her generosity as a colleague while I was in Spain presenting this work to different audiences and making it ready for publication. I am also grateful for Martin Viola's proofreading of this chapter. Peer-review always makes a piece stronger, and I thank the anonymous reviewers who took the time to critique my argument. And finally, I am thankful to Las Religiosas de la Asunción for providing La Casita where I revised the piece for both presentations and publication.

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Appendix: Data for this study come from the following sources:

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