‘I Am with You’: A Feminist Oppositional Narrative Analysis of Emily Doe’s Recited Letter to the Defendant

Abstract
This essay enacts a feminist oppositional narrative analysis of the 2016 Stanford rape victim’s letter to the defendant, Brock Turner, as performed in court during his sentencing hearing. The author, Emily Doe, exposes the enthymemes most frequently deployed by perpetrators and enablers of sexual assault, linking them to deeply rooted American patriarchal assumptions regarding consent and sexuality, particularly on college campuses. My analysis reveals three intended audiences: other victims, Brock Turner/the defense, and a third group consisting both of other victims and women everywhere. In light of these audiences, I explore how she forges a rhetorical text that functions as advocacy for the struggle to end the perpetration of rape and sexual assault culture. Ultimately, I argue that Emily Doe’s 2016 letter makes visible and then discredits patriarchal enthymemes in order to combat the pervasiveness of sexual assault in modern American society.

Keywords: Rape and Sexual Assault Culture; Feminist Oppositional Narrative Analysis; College Campuses; Enthymeme; Emily Doe’s Letter to the Defendant
Introduction

In June 2016, *Buzzfeed News* published the letter that the plaintiff (using the alias “Emily Doe”) in the case “People of the State of California vs. Brock Allen Turner” wrote and read to the defendant, Brock Allen Turner, during the sentencing phase of his trial. This letter went viral, circulating quickly and comprehensively throughout all kinds of social media platforms, thereby igniting a national conversation about sexual assault and rape culture on college campuses. When the letter emerged, so too did questions about its potential rhetorical purpose(s) and consequence(s).

Doe’s letter, a story-driven depiction of the events that resulted in this trial, utilizes both traditional and non-traditional narrative techniques in order to convey an overarching theme about the need to interrupt both the current conversation about sexual assault as well as the silence surrounding it from bystanders afraid to join the discussion. Thus, the plaintiff, Emily Doe, utilizes metaphors, identification, and the blocking of enthymemes, along with a mixed tone of both frustration and satire, to invent a safe space for people to begin this dialogue. Throughout this paper, I identify and analyze these techniques in order to examine their rhetorical potency as a means of conveying Doe’s message regarding the urgent need to change the conversation surrounding sexual assault and put an end to rape culture. Ultimately, I argue that Emily Doe’s 2016 letter makes visible and then discredits patriarchal enthymemes in order to combat the pervasiveness of sexual assault in modern American society.

Literature Review

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of discussions about sexual assault and rape generally, but also in particular about campus sexual assault and why it has been so difficult to eliminate rape culture on college campuses. Issues such as a lack of perceived engagement (Li,
Kim, & O’Boyle, 2017), the muting of victims and women in general (Burnett, Mattern, Herakova, Kahl Jr, Tobola & Bornsen, 2009), media influence (Barnett, 2012, Hust, Lei, Ren, Chang, McNab, Marett, & Willoughby, 2013, Li, et. al., 2017, & Turnage, 2009), and issues of agency and victimhood (Grubb & Turner, 2012, Harris & Hanchey, 2014, Picart, 2003, & Zaleski, Gundersen, Baes, Estupinian, & Vergara, 2016), have all been cited as contributing factors to the neglect of enacting real change in this arena. What unites this wide spectrum of analyses is a focus on outlining why women are at a disadvantage when it comes to communicating about sexual assault.

**Scholarship Regarding Sexual Assault Issues: A Communication Perspective**

When discussing sexual assault, it is of foremost importance to understand who is doing the communicating, because “language does not serve all groups equally, since group members do not have an equal share in formulating language” (Burnett, et. al., 2009, p. 469). This insight resonates with Muted Group Theory (MGT), which explains why women have a difficult time communicating about rape and sexual assault. MGT argues that women and other marginalized groups are inherently at a disadvantage compared to white men, because the latter constitute the dominant group in our society. Because of this, “Men . . . not only feel more comfortable and confident in using the dominant communicative system, they also trust institutions more than women do, since institutions are created and named by men” (Burnett, et. al., 2009, p. 469). Accordingly, groups that are outside a society’s inner circle are forced to adhere to the language and norms that the dominant group creates, putting them at a disadvantage when they must communicate with that group in settings, such as court rooms, where they must plead their case (Shugart, 1994, p. 13). These groups are not only at a disadvantage due to their outsider status,
but also because of the sheer complexity of communication in these types of venues, and thus the unique challenges they pose. (Harris, 2018).

Additionally, agency represents a central concern among communication scholars studying sexual assault and rape culture (Koelsch, 2014). Koelsch quotes A. J. Marcel, who notes that “agency is tied to responsibility” (2014, p. 12) and then explains that “it is difficult to posit agency on the part of victims without ascribing blame” (p. 12). Since they lack agency, Koelsch (2014) identifies that female victims of sexual assault may begin to feel that they are unable to make decisions about their own lives, based on their helplessness when being assaulted. Accordingly, Grubb and Turner (2012) state that “A large body of literature has examined attributions of rape victims by others and revealed that individuals who have become the victims of crime are often judged by outsiders as being responsible for their own fate” (p. 444). These contradictions between the public and the victim’s assigning of blame contribute to the understanding and identification, or lack thereof, of victimhood in sexual assault cases.

Within the literature, several guidelines and factors are identified as contributors regarding whether victimhood is considered valid or not, including: whether the victim was under the influence of alcohol (Grubb & Turner, 2012, p. 448), their gender/race, if they were “pure” (i.e. virgins) (Harris & Hanchey, 2014, p. 327, Cuklanz, 1994, p.7), and whether they exhibit anger regarding the assault (Picart, 2003, p. 99).

With communicative artifacts such as the text being examined in this paper, which yielded significant success through online media outlets, it is important to examine how the media influences the public’s perception of sexual assault. Li, Kim, and O’Boyle (2017) make use of Agenda Setting Theory to examine how the media’s control over information and the way that it is disseminated and framed to the public has a role in what they think about the issues
being presented. Li, et. al. found that, when exposed to media-produced information about sexual assault, women were more likely to regard sexual assault to be an important issue, feel involved with the issue, and perceive a risk of sexual assault. Therefore, women are at an additional loss in terms of communicating about sexual assault, because even when both men and women are exposed equally to information about sexual assault, women are still more likely to feel invested in those kinds of issues. This is true in spite of the fact that men are the ones who are often communicated to about these issues (Burnett, et. al., 2009, p. 469).

Emily Doe’s recited letter made a significant impact on its readers, with some people describing it as a kind of shining beacon of light for other sexual assault survivors: “I was just blown away. I think she put into words what so many women feel and just totally nailed it” (Dastagir, 2017). Accordingly, it is critical to examine how victims communicate about and frame their own sexual assault, as such use of language can be therapeutic in nature (Botta & Pingre, 1997, p. 205). Additionally, Botta and Pingre note that those who acknowledged their rape were significantly more likely to blame the perpetrator than themselves.

Scholarship Regarding Sexual Assault Issues: A Rhetorical Perspective

Another important body of scholarship concerning how we talk about sexual assault and its perpetrators can be found in the work of rhetoricians. Extant literature argues that perpetrators of sexual assault are not held as accountable as the surrounding scene and factors that may have elicited the assault. Turnage (2009) states, “This attempt to scapegoat the supposedly innocent lacrosse players, of course, was precisely the issue at which the defense balked. The ‘scene,’ in their minds, was polluting the innocent ‘agents’ through these prejudicial, accusatory acts” (p. 147). Here we can see that in the case of the Duke Lacrosse players, the scene and other supposed contributing factors, such as the actions of the survivor, were taken into account. In so
doing, rhetoric sympathetic to the Duke Lacrosse players attempts to reframe the perpetrator and survivor alike as being potentially equally liable for the crime. Additionally, Larson (2018) states that this current frame for the perpetrator as either guilty or totally innocent “erases the bodily experiences of women, even though these bodily experiences are the reason the case came to court in the first place” (p. 4).

Overall, current scholarship examines a lack of engagement, reflection, and/or theorization with issues including sexual assault, agency, the inability of victims to communicate experiences to the dominant group, and the media’s representations of victims and perpetrators. However, more scholarly attention to victims’ own narratives of their assault and how they can disrupt dominant preconceived notions that frame the larger discussion of sexual assault in society offers important contributions to these ongoing scholarly conversations.

**Context**

On January 18, 2015, Brock Allen Turner, then a student athlete at Stanford University, was found by two bystanders to be in the act of assaulting an unconscious and half naked female behind a dumpster on Stanford’s campus. Consequently, in the subsequent case, People of the State of California vs. Brock Allen Turner, he was indicted (in January 2015) on two counts of rape, two counts of felony sexual assault, and one count of attempted rape. These charges were later revised, and Turner was tried instead for three counts of felony sexual assault.

More than a year after the assault, Turner was convicted of all three counts of felony sexual assault, a charge potentially resulting in upwards of 14 years in prison. However, presiding judge Aaron Persky sentenced Turner to only six months in jail and three years of probation. As a *Hamilton Spectator* article noted, “The now-former Stanford University student and standout swimmer represents to many the status of white privilege wrongly afforded to well-
off Americans, especially athletes” (“Stanford rape case,” 2016). Another article from USA 
Today argued, “If this case were a singular event, it would be bad enough. But the story of the 
privileged college athlete getting little or no punishment for sexual assault has become a cliché” 
(“Stanford rape sentence,” 2016). After the sentencing hearing concluded, online media outlets 
and social media platforms began circulating the letter that the plaintiff, Emily Doe, read during 
that hearing. As USA Today observed, “The overly lenient sentence might have gotten little 
notice but for the searing and eloquent letter by the 23-year-old victim, who read it aloud in a 
Santa Clara County courtroom” (“Stanford rape sentence,” 2016). This letter, considered as a 
rich rhetorical text, is the focus of this essay.

A Growing Recognition of Trouble on College Campuses

People of the State of California vs. Brock Allen Turner began on March 14, 2016 and 
was decided on March 30, 2016. When the media began to shed light on this case in January 
2015, public outcry emerged in hopes of bringing the defendant to justice. Certain contextual 
factors may have heightened how disturbed the public was about this case. First, the film The 
Hunting Ground had been released on February 27, 2015, which highlights the disparities 
between college rape statistics and the actual number of incidents of sexual assault that occur at 
universities annually. It also displays the victim-blaming, harassment, and marginalization that 
occur when rapes are reported, especially when they are filed against student athletes, and thus 
gives a multifaceted set of insights into why many rapes still go unreported on college campuses. 
A USA Today article about Brock Turner’s case reflected on this broader problem of sexual 
assault reports (or the lack thereof) against student athletes, “In the latest episode, an 
investigation found last month that Baylor University officials discouraged victims from even 
reporting allegations of assault by football players to police” (“Stanford rape sentence,” 2016).
Thus, even articles focusing primarily on the Turner case felt that ongoing allegations being brought up against universities across the country at the time were worth mentioning.

**Method**

In analyzing Emily Doe’s letter to the defendant, I will employ a feminist oppositional narrative analysis. According to Foss, “Feminist criticism involves two basic steps: (1) analysis of the construction of gender in the artifact studied; and (2) exploration of what the artifact suggests about how the patriarchy is constructed and maintained or how it can be challenged and transformed” (cited in Greene & Meyer, 2014, p. 66). In approaching Doe’s letter through the lens of feminist oppositional narrative, I combine Foss’s framework with an examination of how the rhetor (in this case Emily Doe) first makes visible and then blocks enthymemes in order to directly challenge popular public beliefs. This combined feminist-oppositional narrative approach has only been used rarely, such as in a particular analysis of adult education (Kaufmann, 2001). Feminist criticism, more broadly and on its own, has been employed as a method to explore numerous rhetorical artifacts, including the Hunger Games’ character Katniss (Maciulewicz, 2017), Hitchcock’s Marnie (Jacobowitz, 2015), the Bible (Styler, 2007), and ideas of patriarchy and decadence (Gardiner, 2007).

I make use of this feminist oppositional narrative approach because it allows me to thoroughly examine the inner workings of American patriarchy as it manifests itself in contemporary college campus-connected sexual assault and rape cases. In so doing, I am able to analyze one enormously influential component of dominant, even hegemonic, American ideology and how it affects the constructions of both gender and gender roles, as well as its influence on how citizens view and come to understand sexual assault. This feminist oppositional narrative approach does not have one rigid, highly prescribed structure, but is flexible and can be
applied in a variety of ways. By using this method, I also contribute to the growing field of research in feminist oppositional narrative studies. As Kaufmann (2001) states, “Although discourses dealing with equity have been increasing, we still lack research methodologies for countering the depth and breath of social inequities in our society” (p. 5). In addition to supplying the current body of research with fresh and new perspectives, this methodological approach is especially well suited to challenge still-existing social inequities in our society. Olson and Goodnight (1994) explain the benefit of both rhetors utilizing in their advocacy and critics exploring rhetorical texts through an oppositional approach, stating that “oppositional argument functions to block enthymematic associations and so disrupt the taken for granted realm of the uncontested and commonplace” (p. 250).

This feminist oppositional narrative approach works well for the Stanford rape victim’s statement because her letter is constructed to describe the events surrounding her rape as a story. Because the artifact is organized as a narrative, it is first and foremost concerned with how the rhetor constructs, includes, and/or excludes certain ideologies. It is also concerned with the individuals in the story. Furthermore, as Rowland notes, “Stories are not about statistics. They are about the action of the characters (mostly people but sometimes animals and other beings) in relation to other characters and the environment” (2016, p. 126). Because narratives focus on the actions of the characters involved in the stories, it is fitting that this artifact is primarily concerned with the actions of the “antagonist” in the story, Brock Allen Turner. Turner’s actions landed him in court for this trial, and as Doe spoke, he had to listen to her account of these events. This perspective will allow us to better understand how and why the actions that Turner took were judged in opposing ways by members of the public: horrible and worth many years in prison for many, and for others, not terrible or worthy of extensive punishment (or, as Turner’s
father noted, one brief moment’s mistake that should not cost him the rest of his life).

Additionally, using feminist oppositional criticism is particularly fitting, because the blocking of enthymemes is a major feature of this artifact. Since enthymemes are traditionally thought of as beneficial to rhetoric, this artifact is uniquely suited to interpreted through an oppositional approach. By examining the enthymemes that were used as evidence during the trial and that have now been chastised for being irrational, incomplete, and outrageous arguments within the victim’s letter, we can better understand the ideologies that she is advocating for and against.

Rowland outlines the steps that should be taken for this approach. First, the critic should “identify the four formal elements that define all stories: characters, setting, plot, and theme.” Then, the critic explores the degree to which the narrative fulfills core rhetorical functions, and finally, the critic “take[s] the findings of the first two steps and make a coherent argument about the functioning of the particular story” (2016, p. 133-134). In addition to these steps for exploring narrative functions, I will also explore the construction of gender, particularly regarding how her narrative reaffirms and/or challenges existing assumptions about gender roles and performance, as well as identify the present or excluded and challenged enthymemes.

Analysis

“You don’t know me, but you’ve been inside me, and that’s why we’re here today” (Doe, 2016). These are the opening words of the letter that shook individuals across the nation to the core. Emily Doe’s letter recounts the explicit details of the night in question, culminating in her being sexually assaulted while unconscious, as well as the corresponding trial as it had unfolded in the lead up to when this letter was read in court. Though she begins by asking permission to address the defendant directly, I argue that she addresses three difference audiences throughout her letter, which consequently breaks her letter into three distinct sections. However, I first
outline the letter’s narrative elements (including characters, setting, plot, and theme). Three main characters are identified: the protagonist, Emily Doe, and two antagonists, Turner and his attorney. The immediate setting is the courtroom, but her intended setting is the scene of the assault. This intended setting can be inferred textually because, throughout the letter, Doe does not reference being in the courtroom outside of one specific reference: near the end, she notes that her grandma snuck chocolates into the courtroom for her. Indeed, had she not initially requested permission to address the defendant directly, we may not have known that this was even read in a courtroom until the end, when it is explicitly mentioned. The plot of this story is a tale as old as time: man assaults woman who is unconscious yet receives far less than the minimum sentence for his crime. Lastly, the theme is that perpetrators of sexual assault must be held accountable if we are ever to disrupt the “boys will be boys” construct that our patriarchal society has created, fortified, and naturalized.

**Jane Doe’s Letter: Three Audiences, Three Sections**

Doe’s letter is best understood by examining three different audiences that Doe specifically addresses within her letter, and in the process analyzing the feminist oppositional narrative techniques she uses while talking to each audience. This first section encompasses the start of the letter through the 18th paragraph, which begins, “Never mention me voicing consent” (Doe, 2016). The first audience she directly addresses is other victims, wherever they may be. She addresses this audience through identification of some of the shared experiences for victims of sexual assault, but her use of these scenes are not the only indication that Doe is speaking to an audience other than Turner. Within this section, Doe refers to Turner as “he”, rather than “you” (which she uses in the second section), indicating that she is not addressing Turner just yet.
Doe delves into the graphic details leading up to, during, and after the assault had occurred, initially following a traditional, linear narrative structure. Doe describes her decision to attend the party with her sister, what she was wearing, and then suddenly how she woke up on a hospital gurney. From there, she explains, in graphic detail, the procedures she went through:

I had multiple swabs inserted into my vagina and anus, needles for shots, pills, had a Nikon pointed right into my spread legs. I had long, pointed beaks inside me and had my vagina smeared with cold, blue paint to check for abrasions.” (Doe, 2016)

Then, she states plainly, “I stood there examining my body beneath the stream of water and decided, I don’t want my body anymore” (Doe, 2016). These sentiments, as any 21 year old woman can imagine, are what all victims of sexual assault must feel. By recounting them in this first section, Doe creates identification with other victims, since many could presumably relate to these events, while simultaneously identifying herself as a victim, both explicitly and implicitly.

Her explicit claim of victimhood is when she states, “I was asked to sign papers that said ‘Rape Victim’ and I thought something has really happened” (Doe, 2016). This claim is not only overt, but it is also not even her own; the hospital was the agent who originally defined her as a victim. She supports this claim implicitly by using words like “silenced” and “empty,” as well as through the use of repetition. She states,

I tried to push it out of my mind, but it was so heavy I didn’t talk, I didn’t eat, I didn’t sleep, I didn’t interact with anyone. After work, I would drive to a secluded place to scream. I didn’t talk, I didn’t eat, I didn’t sleep, I didn’t interact with anyone, and I became isolated from the ones I loved most. (Doe, 2016)
Here, she identifies the assault as something that drained her of life, forcing her to be an inanimate object that lacked the ability to perform even the most basic functions of a human being.

The second, and largest, section of this letter is addressed to Turner, and makes use of the feminist oppositional narrative functions for the first time. The switch in intended audiences is clearly demarcated, insofar as the references to Turner changes from “he” to “you”. Within this section, Doe utilizes a series of enthymemes that Turner (and his attorney) have used to justify the events of the evening leading up to the assault. Introducing the enthymemes on which their defense rests enables her to block them and expose the highly problematic nature of these arguments, demanding a better argument from him and his attorney for how this happened. She states,

He said he had asked if I wanted to dance. Apparently I said yes. He’d asked if I wanted to go to his dorm, I said yes. Then he asked if he could finger me and I said yes. Most guys don’t ask, can I finger you? Usually there’s a natural progression of things, unfolding consensually, not a Q and A. But apparently I granted full permission. He’s in the clear. Even in his story, I only said a total of three words, yes yes yes, before he had me half naked on the ground. Future reference, if you are confused about whether a girl can consent, see if she can speak an entire sentence. You couldn’t even do that. Just one coherent string of words. Where was the confusion? This is common sense, human decency. (Doe, 2016)

Doe almost pokes fun at Turner here for such an absurd justification, ultimately rejecting his claims as lacking common sense and “human decency”. Doe states several more examples, leading to this exclamation:
I was too drunk to speak English, too drunk to consent way before I was on the ground. I should have never been touched in the first place. Brock stated, “At no time did I see that she was not responding. If at any time I thought she was not responding, I would have stopped immediately.” Here’s the thing; if your plan was to stop only when I became unresponsive, then you still do not understand. You didn’t even stop when I was unconscious anyway! Someone else stopped you. Two guys on bikes noticed I wasn’t moving in the dark and had to tackle you. How did you not notice while on top of me?

(Do, 2016)

She again berates Turner for lacking any common sense or rationality. And, as she rebuts these claims, she continues to construct her own victimhood. As audiences learn that Doe was incoherent, later unconscious, and ultimately saved by two bystanders who happened to be passing by, she garners more and more credibility to support her claim of victimhood because she is exposing her helplessness from start to finish. Additionally, Doe refers back to her original construction of victimhood as occurring when someone is silenced through actions not of their own:

He has done irreversible damage to me and my family during the trial and we have sat silently, listening to him shape the evening. But in the end, his unsupported statements and his attorney’s twisted logic fooled no one. The truth won, the truth spoke for itself.

(Do, 2016)

Not only does Doe return to this familiar construction, she also depicts victims as the individuals on the side of truth, particularly through the statement, “the truth spoke for itself” (Do, 2016). Audiences are invited to view her as on the side of truth because, throughout the trial, she spoke
for herself regarding the experience that was inflicted upon her, whereas Turner was fed scripted stories from his attorney in an attempt to evade being brought to justice.

The second half of the second section makes use of a question and answer (Q&A) style as a rhetorical mechanism for again rebutting enthymemes. This time, though, she undermines the enthymemes that his legal defense employed throughout the trial. Doe poses a series a six statements made by Turner throughout the trial and answers them with her own responses, which are intended to be seen as more logical. For instance, one sample of this oppositional approach is as follows:

You said, I stupidly thought it was okay for me to do what everyone around me was doing, which was drinking. I was wrong. Again, you were not wrong for drinking. Everyone around you was not sexually assaulting me. You were wrong for doing what nobody else was doing, which was pushing your erect dick in your pants against my naked, defenseless body concealed in a dark area, where partygoers could no longer see or protect me, and my own sister could not find me. Sipping fireball is not your crime. Peeling off and discarding my underwear like a candy wrapper to insert your finger into my body, is where you went wrong. Why am I still explaining this. (Doe, 2016)

Doe rejects Turner using the state of being under the influence as a scapegoat to excuse actions, which he repeatedly invokes, as documented within the letter, thus blocking a central enthymemetic set of “common sense” about rape and sexual assault, particularly on college campuses. Moreover, Doe does not use a question mark as the conclusion to her response. Rather, she displays a frustration toward the phenomenon of rape as a whole; she is no longer asking this question directly to Turner, but also outward to the rest of society, which continues to perpetrate and accept this kind of behavior. Additionally, this section’s arrangement is
constructed in a similar fashion to that of a cross examination. She uses evidence presented within the actual trial, but is now performing a mock trial of her own that is more truthful than that which has is supposedly the “real” one, thus making a mockery of the “official” proceedings.

The last piece of evidence Doe offers during this “cross examination” states, “**Lastly you said, I want to show people that one night of drinking can ruin a life.** A life, one life, yours, you forgot about mine” (Doe, 2016). Following this statement, Doe explains that “Your [Turner] damage was concrete; stripped of titles, degrees, enrollment. My damage was internal, unseen, I carry it with me” (Doe, 2016). This statement attempts to simultaneously discredit Turner’s pain resulting from these proceedings while shedding light on her own unseen suffering. In doing so, although perhaps unintentionally, Doe also combats the efforts made to discredit her testimony by emphasizing that although she did not lose a scholarship or the opportunity to get a degree from a prestigious university, she did suffer damages that are not immediately reparable, and perhaps never can be.

Throughout the second section, Doe continually blocks enthymemes on which the defense relies. Enthymemes, since they do not explicitly state all parts of an argument, are commonplace for Turner, because they enable him not to have to disclose the full (and convicting) truth. Even though not fully stated, Doe makes visible the logic of each enthymeme and then individually and collectively blocks them in order to force the whole truth to be revealed. Doe not only attempts to identify each individual claim as lacking logic, but she also frames the entire trial as an enthymeme of sorts, missing a premise that might have explained more clearly how they ended up there:
Had Brock admitted guilt and remorse and offered to settle early on, I would have considered a lighter sentence, respecting his honesty, grateful to be able to move our lives forward. Instead he took the risk of going to trial, added insult to injury and forced me to relive the hurt as details about my personal life and sexual assault were brutally dissected before the public. (Doe, 2016)

Not only does she disprove his claims as illogical and offensive, but she also strives to convict the entire trial as illogical and offensive, observing too that there was a simpler solution available from the start. Again, we know that this section is addressed primarily to Turner because it utilizes “you” when referencing particular instances within the trial or about the assault. However, I argue that this section is exhibits polysemic possibility, or at least strategic ambiguity. Thus, the audience could also be interpreted as men in general, since Doe is attempting to disrupt “business as usual” regarding how modern American society, and men in particular, attempt to frame and explain away sexual assaults.

The third and final section of the letter shifts audiences again, from Turner back to other victims, but also more generally, to women throughout the world. Like all stories, this narrative has a take-home message, two in fact. The first is simple: “I sleep with two bicycles that I drew taped above my bed to remind myself there are heroes in this story” (Doe, 2016). The second is more complex, embedded within her final paragraph:

And finally, to girls everywhere, I am with you. On nights when you feel alone, I am with you. When people doubt you or dismiss you, I am with you. I fought everyday for you. So never stop fighting, I believe you. . . . I hope that by speaking today, you absorbed a small amount of light, a small knowing that you can’t be silenced, a small satisfaction that justice was served, a small assurance that we are getting somewhere, and a big, big
knowing that you are important, unquestionably, you are untouchable, you are beautiful, you are to be valued, respected, undeniably, every minute of every day, you are powerful and nobody can take that away from you. To girls everywhere, I am with you. (Doe, 2016)

This last paragraph is rich with meaning. First, she articulates that, if we are to truly begin to terminate rape culture in America, perpetrators of sexual assault cannot get off scot free and utterly without meaningful consequence. This letter represents an advocacy piece through which others may follow and make themselves better through its guidance. If we, as individuals, communities, or country want to be the model for each other and the world, we cannot continue to enable a culture where systemic rape and sexual assault are commonplace and where the most dubious defenses are accepted in popular public opinion.

Lastly, it is important that we note the change in meaning of “you” from the beginning of the letter until now. The intended recipient of “you” has changed from Turner in the second section to other victims and girls in general in the final section. This expanded “you” adds to the power of the text because, not only are the audiences that I have identified available as recipients, but its meaning and importance can also be generalized in a broader sense to all other past, present, and possible future perpetrators of sexual assault as well. Ultimately, it can be strategically mobile, capable of being directed toward whoever an individual needs it to be addressed, in order for it to serve as an advocacy piece in the best, most situated way that it can.

Postscript

Post-Sentencing

Much of the controversy surrounding this case escalated after Turner received his sentence. Therefore, we need to understand the public’s reaction to the sentence in order to
understand the full force of this artifact. After Turner’s sentencing to six months in jail and three months of probation, and the viral circulation of the plaintiff’s letter, many expressed outrage, empathy for the plaintiff, Emily Doe, but also hope for the future. As one newspaper noted: “Some good will come out of this horrible situation. Toward the end of her statement, the victim delivered a positive message to women and victims of sexual assault” (Kansas City Star, 2016). This passage suggests some of the effects that this artifact might have had on elements of the general public. It thus seems to have become a beacon of hope for women who may be going through the same or similar circumstances. Additionally, it has also been used as leverage to devise a new and more effective plan of action to combat campus sexual assault from the bottom up, around the country. As Smolens (2016) observed, “A widely read letter from a rape survivor would become part of efforts to combat campus sexual assaults at California State University and the University of California under a proposal by Rep. Susan Davis and several other federal lawmakers.” Such reflections suggest that the letter generated major movement on all levels of public engagement in an effort to create real change. Through all of this, the exigence of the artifact can be seen as well as the post-creation change it has begun to generate. I have provided context surrounding this artifact, both before and after its performance and circulation, because of the relevance I found on both rhetorical bookends. In terms of the context leading up to Emily Doe’s letter/speech in court, one can see why the artifact came about and why the context and audience were already rhetorically primed for its arrival. In examining the new, post-Emily Doe sentencing speech context, one can see why it is worthy of more detailed rhetorical examination, based on the evidence I have presented suggesting some of the prominent effects that it has had on its audience(s).

Discussion
The analysis of this paper yields several benefits for current scholarship. One important contribution that this text makes is that it both is an instance of and also sets the agenda for current and future advocacy. Doe advocates not only for women who are suffering the same fate that she is, and who, too, are frustrated with the lack of understanding from the justice system; it is also an advocacy piece for the change in rape culture habits that must occur in everyday life. Because of this, Doe’s letter has contributed to the formation a new rhetorical/advocacy context, not only in regard to rape and assault occurring on college campuses, but in providing rhetorical resources to women who face these same/similar circumstances. The case against Larry Nassar and the subsequent statement made by Aly Raisman and released by Buzzfeed News, for instance, is evidence of this shift. Additionally, an article titled, “Good Guys Don’t Rape: Gender, Domination, and Mobilizing Rape,” authored by Pascoe and Hollander (2015), examines the effects of men simultaneously claiming they don’t rape, yet continue to perpetrate rape culture habits such that “the same young men can both engage in rape culture and attempt to distance themselves from it” (p. 9). This type of behavior by Turner was documented in the letter. Statements that he made about how he and the plaintiff were “dancing” prior to the incident display Turner’s attempt to mobilize rape as well. He proves that he is both attempting to prove that he did not commit rape, while simultaneously admitting to having engaged in what Pascoe and Hollander (2015) identify as “sexualized dominance ‘play’” (p. 9). By pointing out the fallacies in Turner’s statements about the night leading up to the assault, Doe attempts to highlight these everyday issues for a larger audience who may not realize that they have been participating in the perpetuation of this kind of behavior. It is imperative to acknowledge that, at a macro level, it is easy for us as bystanders to point fingers and ascribe blame, particularly with targets who have so egregiously set themselves up for the strongest versions of criticism like
Brock Turner and his attorneys. That being said, at a micro level, we ourselves may be committing small acts that seem inconsequential, but in fact continue to normalize and perpetuate rape culture. This essay thus attempts to highlight these umbrella explanations and excuses that Turner, and so many others, have used to perpetrate and justify rape and sexual assault. My purpose does not end there, however, as I want to argue, based on Emily Doe’s example, that those in the general public are themselves capable of changing the language regarding sexual assault, which will, in turn, begin to challenge not just sexual assault and rape but the more microscopic patterns of language and action that can ultimately lead to sexual assault.

Due to the relatively recent nature of Emily Doe’s letter, little research has been published about it. One exception is a recent article by Larson (2018), who examines this case in conjunction with another. However, Larson’s focus is on how such texts construct what she terms “visceral counterpublicity,” whereas my focus is on the use of oppositional narrative techniques such as directly blocking dominant patriarchal enythemes. These approaches can be usefully combined to better understand texts like Doe’s, yet each are important for this area of scholarship in identifying different strategies and techniques for confronting rape culture and individuals like Brock Turner who perpetuate it. Beyond the specific work of Larson, this text and my approach for analyzing it is also different and worthy of more scholarly attention, because of how it makes the victim the center, rather than periphery, of the discourse about her: her own statement on the assault and the subsequent trial, and her boldly challenging both the outcome and the strategy of the defense attorneys throughout, which relied on and perpetuated assumptions about rape culture. Furthermore, this paper will be one of the first to employ a feminist oppositional narrative to a text of this kind. The feminist oppositional narrative analysis
is a relatively underused approach in the current body of literature, so this paper encourages further growth for this research trajectory, which has shown (through this analysis) is an approach rich with valuable insights into the way assault is talked about in our society.

Although this paper makes significant contributions to the current body of research, there is additional opportunity for analysis on this text specifically. Doe points out in her letter a piece of information that was listed in an article describing Turner’s arrest which shook her to the core. She states, “And then, at the bottom of the article, after I learned about the graphic details of my own sexual assault, the article listed his swimming times” (Doe, 2016). Turner, who was a scholarship-holding student athlete, was acknowledged as such through his swim times in several articles describing the assault. Because of this intriguing detail, scholars may want to further develop this piece to encompass issues surrounding rape culture, specifically in regard to student athletes and or athletes in general, which would reach far beyond the scope of rape culture on college campuses. In addition to this, scholars also have the opportunity to acknowledge and explore the intersectional issues that arise in regard to sexual assault. Particularly, issues of race were interrogated by those commenting on Brock Turner’s trial, given the relatively lenient sentence he was dealt in comparison to similar cases where the perpetrator was not white.

Conclusion

Returning to the narrative basics of characters, setting, plot, and theme, I conclude that Doe in this letter successfully packages these elements into a compelling story that also advocates. Importantly, Doe is strategically ambiguous at times, in order for major narrative functions to be adapted to fit a variety of experiences and thus be most relatable as an advocacy piece. Through the examination of her narrative techniques, including identification, actual
versus explicitly stated audiences, and the blocking of enthymemes, I argue that she successfully debunks assumptions about rape and rape culture.

This analysis has also examined the broader influences that society’s patriarchal assumptions have on discussions about rape and rape culture in America generally and on college campuses in particular. Issues of who and how victimhood is defined in our society created complex challenges in the plaintiff’s attempt to plead her claim of being the victim of this situation. Additionally, the broad and overarching question of why it is so difficult for women to articulate their experiences to the dominant group in society is powerfully examined by Doe, yet even her extensive reflection and advocacy just scratch the surface of that urgent, ongoing social dialogue. That being said, overall, this letter should be recognized as a significant and timely rhetorical text through which we may better understand the struggles that victims of sexual assault experience in modern America’s patriarchal society and how they are able to make use of rhetorical techniques of advocacy in order to challenge those who would otherwise continue to confine them to the same set of narratives and enthymemes that ensure the indefinite perpetuation of rape and sexual assault culture.
References


As Olson and Goodnight (1994) note, drawing on the insights of Aristotle, “The enthymeme is an argument with one part unspoken or suppressed; the arguer depends on the auditors' ability and willingness to supply the missing portion from shared knowledge, experiences, or assumptions and so complete the argument” (p. 250).