

*Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*

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Volume 5 | Issue 2  
January 2024

**“This is No Time for Being Underwater”:  
Ableism, Rape Culture, and Care Work in *The Nowhere  
Girls***

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<https://iopn.library.illinois.edu/journals/rdyl>

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**Recommended Citation:** Moore, Amber, and Leah Kelley. ““This is No Time for Being Underwater”: Ableism, Rape Culture, and Care Work in *The Nowhere Girls*,” *Research on Diversity in Youth Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2024.

Amy Reed’s young adult (YA) novel *The Nowhere Girls* (2017) tackles intense, important, and intersectional issues including disability, family, girlhood, racism, and rape culture. Scholars celebrate its “empowered female characters” (Colantonio-Yurko, Boehm, and Olmstead 140). Brittany Adams notes how it “disrupts commonplace thinking by questioning the notion that sexual assault and gendered violence is episodic rather than systemic” (5) and Aiyana Altrows commends its focus on community, emphasizing “rape as a political issue rather than a personal one” (7). *The Nowhere Girls* was published in 2017, the same year that Tarana Burke’s 2006 “me too” movement was turned into a hashtag and global resistance representing a turning point for antirape activism began. As such, this story represents a significant contribution that emerged during a politically intense moment. The novel chronicles the efforts of three protagonists: Grace, Rosina, and Erin,<sup>1</sup> who start a feminist uprising to avenge (see Moore in press) the gang-rape and ridicule of former student, Lucy. They respond to a cultural pedagogy of sexual violence where rape culture defines their education (Marshall) by beginning “The Nowhere Girls” group. They hold meetings and a sex strike, share trauma testimonies, write a manifesto, and offer unique emotional labour. In exploring this novel’s representations of the possibilities that emerge from radical care work that resists rape culture and connecting violences, Erin is especially compelling. She loves the ocean and *Star Trek*, sports a shaved head, works in her high school’s office, and is a victim-survivor of sexual violence herself. Erin also identifies as Autistic.<sup>2</sup>

Because Erin is a disabled victim-survivor and an emerging activist, she provides wonderfully complicated care work while she simultaneously confronts ableism and rape culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Grace is neurotypical, straight, and white; Rosina is neurotypical, Mexican, and queer; and Erin is Autistic, straight, and white.

<sup>2</sup> Autism is a disability representing a “constellation” (Lord et al. 2018) of behaviours connected to social communication and sensory-motor abilities.

As we detail in our conceptual framework, “care work” (Piepzna-Samarasinha 2018) emerges from enactions of both disability justice and queer femme emotional labour. In this way, *The Nowhere Girls* includes a powerful counter narrative not typically explored in popular #MeToo discourse. Although all three protagonists offer diverse care as they collectively mobilize anti-rape resistance and enact dynamic solidarity that is both responsive and relational, Erin arguably activates the most radical employment. Her care work is significant because not only are disabled people *and* victim-survivors usually invisibilized, silenced, and denied access to care, but she also shifts conventional understandings about activism, care, creativity, disability, violence, and how these intersect. As such, Erin’s journey especially makes this a novel with critical counter-stories embedded within it. Central among them is that rather than her feeling pressure to change, she instead calls for change in the world while also endeavoring to facilitate such change via her care work.

### **Ableism & Rape Culture**

*The Nowhere Girls* represents a significant contribution to a sub-genre of YA trauma literature — YA sexual assault narratives. This canon includes books such as Laurie Halse Anderson’s classic *Speak* (1999), as well as many others that explore rape and rape culture (e.g. *All The Rage* 2015), as well as intersections with related issues including abduction (e.g. *Living Dead Girl* 2008), drinking culture (e.g. *Trail of Crumbs* 2019), image-based abuse (e.g. *Asking For It* 2015), gang-rape (e.g. *Foul is Fair* 2020), slut-shaming (e.g. *Fault Line* 2013), and self-harm (e.g. *Thirteen Reasons Why* 2007), just to name a few. Such texts significantly represent the ubiquity of these violence(s) and amplify unique embodied and lived experiences; *The Nowhere Girls* is significant precisely because it explores rape culture as inextricably tied to other forms

and legacies of violence such as colonialism, queerphobia, racism, transphobia, and particularly, ableism. To our knowledge, this novel is the only YA sexual assault narrative that tackles both ableism and rape culture in this way. Therefore, a brief discussion of both ableism and rape culture, as well as how they are attended to in YA is warranted before delving into an analysis of how Erin contends with these two distinct but entwined forms of oppression.

To begin with, literature can shift thinking, promote knowledge, and enrich understanding about disabilities (Hughes et al.). As such, disabled representation is increasingly being taken up in YA literature (Curwood; Dunn), which disrupts erasure, silenced narratives, and lacking representation. Centering disabled perspectives can encourage deeper (re)readings about both adolescence and disability (Meyer), especially those of young Autistic characters, because historically they have been "viewed as problems that require a solution rather than a form of diversity to be respected and perhaps even celebrated" (Van Hart 27). Thoughtful representation can disrupt simplistic and/or stereotypical understandings, pushing back against normative discourses. However, attendance to disabled lived experiences also includes wrangling with ableism; for example, many disabled folks are subjected to benevolence and/or paternalism, being "acted upon rather than agents of their own lives" (Dunn 19). Ableism is a dominant oppressive system wherein individuals' value is reduced and placed on bodies and minds based on constructed, normative and therefore restrictive ideas about intelligence and desirability. In our conceptual framework, we especially draw from critical disability and disability justice scholars like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha<sup>3</sup> to understand ableism, particularly in relation to notions such as "cure," "healing," and "recovery."

Just as ableism and other oppressions encompass multiple complexities, rape culture can be slippery, pointing to everything from rape "jokes" to rape itself (Gruber). However, we

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<sup>3</sup> Because Piepzna-Samarasinha uses she/they pronouns (see <https://brownstargirl.org/about/>), we use both.

understand rape culture as a devastating cultural consequence of patriarchy; it is indeed a violent culture where rape is ubiquitous and systemic. We agree that “[w]e live in a culture where the phrase ‘rape culture’ exists because the culture itself exists. This climate is staggering” (Gay, *Bad Feminist* 182). Similar to ableism, rape culture is supported by and intertwined with other dominant, violent systems. To combat it, imaginations must be summoned (Buchwald, Fletcher, and Roth) and this is arguably ongoing in YA. Such stories significantly disrupt literary history because they “map out the constellation of issues that emerge from an examination of women’s stories of sexual abuse and literary canons of male dominance” (Badia 33). Through Erin’s narrative then, *The Nowhere Girls* is another text that disrupts silence existing around sexual violence and further demonstrates how rape culture so often intersects with ableism.

### **Conceptual Framework: Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s Care Work**

We write as a feminist literacy education scholar (Amber) and a disabilities studies in education (DSE) scholar who identifies as Neurodivergent and otherwise disabled (Leah). As such, we fuse these sensibilities in this project. We further employ a specific conceptual lens, drawing from Piepzna-Samarasinha’s ideas about care. Our understandings around care also generally emerge from Noddings’ solidifying of the term “care ethics” in moral education and ethics scholarship, Mullin’s ideas about “ethic of care” that emphasizes the importance of thinking about and seeking to meet the needs of particular people, Boyce Kay and Banet-Weiser’s recognition of the need for care and the recognition of feminist repair<sup>4</sup> as a hope for fulfilling this need, and Jones, Chappell, and Alldred’s urgings to be “care-ful” with sexual disclosures of trauma in education contexts, for example.

Honing in, we draw directly from Piepzna-Samarasinha’s thinking around care *work*,

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<sup>4</sup> That is, a “fresh hope; a recovery from despair” (Boyce Kay and Banet-Weiser 607).

which specifically emerges from a disability justice framework. Care work encompasses rejecting capitalist and normative thinking, and rather celebrates unique individuals, recognizing that embodied and lived experiences hold great knowledge. It centers community and solidarity in collective care work and rejects the individualistic idea of charity. It is a kind of "love work" ("Care Work" 21) and "revolution work" (22). Piepzna-Samarasinha also addresses how care work is feminized and invisibilized labour typically done by predominantly disabled Black and Brown queer people. This is why "care webs" are so important—that is, a resilient network of access, shared expertise and resources, and indeed care, where individual tasks are reimagined as a community responsibility "that's maybe even deeply joyful?" (21). Such care work and webs hold possibilities for creating new worlds that amplify access, are responsive to shifting contexts, and stifle ableism.

Piepzna-Samarasinha theorizes care work as care which: is offered without expectation of control, can come from outside of institutions and biological families, rejects abandonment, is joyful, free of abuse, shares access, is sustainable, and is patient, dignified, and respectful. Disentangling from notions like finding "cures," being "healed," and "recovering" from trauma, especially sexual trauma, is of great importance. This thinking is ableist because it reinforces binaries such as "sick or well, fixed or broken" (62). While it is understandable that those who have been sexually violated want happiness and safety, there is no "good survivor" (140) who, through self-work, becomes "all better." Such a survivor doesn't exist and to pretend they do reifies the idea that there are "bad" survivors. Rejecting ableist thinking about victim-survivorhood and its connection to cure narratives informs our analysis of Erin and how she effectively exercises and enacts care and, additionally, is affected by ableism, including internalized ableism.

### **Erin's Care Work in *The Nowhere Girls***

Erin's radical care work is multifaceted and nuanced, and she offers many forms, including: (1) through friendship and family, (2) care for herself, and (3) creative activist care that explicitly supports others oppressed by rape culture.

#### *Erin as Caring Friend & Family Member*

Although Erin "is often confounded by the behavior of humans" (Reed 3), she carefully observes neurotypical people. Erin has "spent her whole childhood studying people, trying to figure out how to be a "normal girl"" (23) and she "had an army full of specialists trying to teach her how to be normal" (91). The predominant ableist expectation of Autistic people is to "pass" as indistinguishable from non-Autistic peers. What frequently results is "masking"—the hiding of Autistic characteristics (Cook, Ogden and Winstone) which Erin does; in her words, "You can always cram the wrong piece into the puzzle hole if you push hard enough and limit your definition of 'fitting'" (91). This demands for accommodation and relationship-making labour to be placed on Neurodivergent people and it is exhausting and shaming. However, Erin navigates all this *and* still offers unique and caring friendships and community work.

A natural starting point for exploring Erin's care work is through her relationship with best friend Rosina. This serves as an important pathway for their coalition work with The Nowhere Girls; after all, friendships can provide opportunities for enacting allyship (Hunt and Holmes). Although the novel commences with new student Grace befriend them, Erin and Rosina were already comfortable with, considerate of, and confident in one another. Early on, Grace observes them contently eating in the cafeteria, "unaware of the world around them," "free," "unencumbered by the whims and weaknesses of other people" (Reed 38), and unified,

taking bites "in tandem" (41). They exercise a feminist ethic of care with and through one another that then extends outward. After welcoming Grace, they lightly banter, gently and comfortably arguing. Erin notices Grace staring at her lunch, packed by her diet-controlling mother and, picking up on Grace's curiosity, Erin explains without being asked. When the conversation turns to victim-survivor Lucy, Erin becomes philosophical. Rosina immediately encourages Erin's "astute" observations and Erin, just as quickly, thanks her. This small vignette demonstrates the larger ways in which their friendship is a reciprocal place of respite, support, and witnessing. Their relationship also highlights Erin's care work: how Erin arguably encourages curiosity, is invitational, gracious, and thoughtful.

Another relationship where Erin offers care, or often demonstrates she is *careful*, is with her mother. Her mother considers herself an excellent advocate/expert on Erin and Autism alike, running a blog and taking pride in building community online, but she exerts control in her contribution to the discourse, creating much dysfunction. For example, Erin is honest, which she feels is "more important than being nice" (65). Erin uses honesty to uniquely care for her mother, interacting with integrity rather than merely being agreeable. This also pushes back against mainstream ableist conceptions about Neurodiversity and a perceived lack of empathy. Her navigation of complex relationships is fundamentally different in its honesty and literal communication: Erin is clear, transparent, and forthright. Unfortunately, her mother frequently mistakes this care for rudeness. This is demonstrated early on when Erin's matter-of-fact response makes her mother teary, prompting the guilt-inducing reminder, "empathy, Erin" (30). However, "Erin's emotion chip is not missing" (95) and she is aware of being misunderstood. What Erin does not do, however, is regret her family life altogether even though her parents' relationship is severely damaged; she reveals, "There's no use in wishing her family were



different" (Reed 90) and rather, she self-regulates by walking outside during turbulent family moments. Her reluctance to wish for other circumstances is how Erin rejects the ableist tenet to desire for people and situations to be different than they are; she rejects a "fix." However, despite being sensitive to how she interacts with her mother in particular, there are times when Erin's responses are revealing of ableist attitudes she's internalized. These moments could be mistaken for care or putting others before herself, but her tendency to try to hide her authentic self is often for others' comfort.

### *Erin's Care Work for Herself*

The next way that Erin demonstrates radical care work is deeply personal, as she insists to Rosina in a strained moment, "I can take care of myself" (262), which is certainly true. We steer clear of the term "self-care" as we understand that self-care "has become a giant capitalist thing" (Oluo). Self-care is also often tied up with the commodification of adolescence and preparing young people to become neoliberal citizens (e.g. see O'Donnell). As such, we are deliberate in characterizing Erin's care work that is directed inward *for* herself that in turn aids her in doing community activist work thereafter. We are especially guided here by Piepznar-Samarasinha on how activist work can emerge from caring practices—in their case, being and working from a place of rest. Erin's personal care work includes significant practices that uniquely sustain and serve her, including: ocean knowledge, a robust organizational paradigm, and specific self-presentation strategies.

Erin is passionate about science and has an intense interest in the ocean; her goal is to "be armed with PhDs in both marine biology and engineering" (Reed 5), and Erin often teaches about sea life. She shocks Grace and Rosina with the fact that "otters rape baby seals," pointing out that because they're "cute" people forget "they're wild animals" (68), which may also be

indicative of her rape culture knowledge. Later, she asks her parents, "Did you know there's a group of sea slugs that feed on algae and can retain chloroplasts for their own photosynthetic use?" (168) as a conflict resolution strategy, distracting them during a fight. However, it is also important to address how this form of care for herself—that is, making it so that she is awash in what she loves much of the time, also functions as a shield when she feels overwhelmed.

Specifically, as Moore has argued elsewhere, when Erin feels triggered by her sexual trauma, she listens to whale music or daydreams about the ocean. As such, her watery passion is also a safe escape as she contends with trauma symptoms. Further, as noted, Erin recognizes that her knowledge is also demonstrative of a deeper understanding about human nature and more specifically, about patriarchal systems: "Erin knows none of us are better than animals. We are no more than our biology, our genetic programming. Nature is harsh, cruel, and unsentimental. When you get down to it, boys are predators and girls are prey" (71-72). It is also important to address how such intense interests are often leveraged against Neurodivergent people to encourage neurotypical behaviour and enforce compliance. Overall, Erin's ocean knowledge serves her, providing a caring refuge of escape and a place to connect with others.

Through the support of her therapist, Erin has fostered independence, partly through the design and management of a robust personal organizational paradigm. Autistic young people typically feel comfortable with predictable, stable routines (e.g. Larson), and Erin is supported by repeated daily engagements. Building a schedule and compartmentalizing allows Erin to more effectively move through a world that is not designed for Neurodivergent people; indeed, as Piepzna-Samarasinha argues, "When I think about access, I think about love" (46) and if we understand Erin's routine as a strategy for accessing the world differently, perhaps it too is a kind of self-love. Interestingly, Erin characterizes her routine as "survival" (Reed 27), pointing to its

critical value to her wellness. Underlying her adherence to rules, lists, tight scheduling, and search-for-order strategies is a dedication to delayed gratification; indeed, it is "the key to success" (26) and a point of personal pride—she "has become very good at it" (26-27). This quality gives her freedom from much everyday stress and even shame because she has made deliberate choices that best suit her needs and she is unapologetic about it; however, for her activism, she is willing to bend. For example, The Nowhere Girls' meetings interrupt her schedule and after worrying that they will "throw everything into chaos" (112), she relents, agreeing to miss her beloved *Star Trek* to accommodate. However, she carefully protects her survival system, even during antirape work; Erin is firm about when she has to leave the first meeting, noting she is "already six minutes behind schedule" (122). In this way, Erin's boundary-making ensures that she cares both for her general wellness and is possibly a demonstration of her efforts to avoid being triggered—marking that she has reached her capacity for discussing rape culture that day. This connects to how because of Erin's victim-survivor identity, her scheduling and the extent to which she is flexible with it is agentic. After all, rape "is the manifestation of removing choice" (Deer 116). With each seemingly small choice Erin makes to "survive," she reclaims power through this tight control of her daily attention and movement by reducing stress, maintaining a sense of ownership over her life, and committing to her comfort.

Related to Erin's routine is how she cares for herself through self-presentation strategies. She is unfussy about appearances, believing humans generally are "too enamored with themselves" (Reed 4). This greatly frustrates her mother, who indeed tries to interrupt this with new clothes which Erin rejects for being too "scratchy" (22). Sensory experiences are especially significant for Autistic people, who experience a range of sensory differences, and regulating

them can be complicated (Beaney). With this in mind, Erin demonstrates that she accommodates her sensory needs; for example, she takes baths instead of showers because "they feel too stabby on her skin" (4). This attention to comfort and disregarding approval also applies to her shaved hairstyle; Erin is not only thwarting normative beauty standards, but she is again privileging her sensory needs.

Relatedly, Grace also notes Erin's thin privilege. At this point, she is unaware of Erin's victim-survivor status, and wonders why Erin seems to be "trying so hard" to hide her "model's body" (34). Feminist Roxane Gay, who penned a memoir about her gang-rape experience as a young person and subsequent weight gain, writes, "I ate because I thought that if my body became repulsive, I could keep men away" (*Hunger* 13). As such, it is possible that Erin is also masking her body to protect herself in the aftermath of sexual trauma. However, her self-presentation strategies overall gesture towards her self-understanding, which is foundational to developing self-advocacy skill (Kelley) and critical to Erin as a disabled woman. She is clear on what does and does not work for her, what her strengths and struggles are, as well as knowing when to step in and when to avoid, which especially comes into play in the next element of her care work: caring, creative activism.

#### *Erin as Creative Activist Cultivating Dynamic Solidarity*

While disabled people statistically experience higher rates of sexual violence, research lacks adequate knowledge about sexual violence specifically perpetuated against Autistic people (Brown-Lavoie, Vecili, and Weiss). Casper, an older student, assaulted Erin. Erin's testimony is woven in with a thoughtful intertextual discussion about a *Star Trek* episode that mirrors her violent experience. Thus, in a fragmentary nature typical of trauma stories (Whitehead), it is revealed that Casper raped then "rejected" (Reed 93) her, bragging to his friends thereafter.

Further, when Erin's parents learn of it, they press charges but Erin convinces them to drop it. She understands that if they were to move forward, she would face oppression at the intersection of both misogyny and ableism yet again. There is risk that the court would judge her as incompetent to give or deny consent because she is Autistic, "even though she is a sentient being" (94). Erin understands how this could play forward into her own agency and right to self-determination, disempowering her future autonomy. Dissent must be welcomed or the "yes" becomes meaningless (Kelley). While pursuing justice through the legal system is sometimes called the "secondary assault of the trial" (Kaplan 175) because the victim-survivor's innocence is so often "what's *really* on trial" (Elliot 52), Erin understands the process will be compounded. Erin recognizes that this combination of systemic oppression operating in law and order processes might strip her of her dignity and humanity by questioning her competency. She would likely risk being deemed an unreliable witness and subject to victim-blaming. After all, women are too often treated with hostility in judicial processes; there is an "intensity with which women witnesses are vilified" (Gilmore 7) and in Erin's case, she understands that she would be further "tainted" (Gilmore) because of her disability.

As such, part of Erin's radical care work is arguably nested in this refusal to participate in a justice system that would likely only compound her pain. After all, maintaining silence—particularly in certain spaces like courtrooms where it is unlikely to find an adequate witness (Gilmore), can be understood as creative activist work. Protecting her testimony can be understood as resistance, as Erin refuses to participate in a system commonly accepted as a key mechanism for rape victim-survivors to activate in order to "move on." However, sexual trauma is not an experience to be moved on from and perhaps Erin's refusal to continue with charges indicates that she understands this. Piepzna-Samarasinha pushes back against the notion that

trauma (especially sexual trauma) is something that can be neatly managed, to get over, or "stitch up with butterfly bandages" ("Not Over It" 139). Rather, she encourages a different understanding of survivorhood wherein those who have been violated develop unique "survivors' skills" (142); as they say elsewhere, "It's trauma. It's also a resource" ("Not Over It" 183). Connecting this notion back to combating ableism, she writes: "There is a deep parallel between the way being a survivor is seen only as a fault, never as a skill, and the ways ableism views disabled people as individual, tragic health defects" (142). As such, perhaps it is in part due to Erin's survivor skills that she is able to continue to offer creative activism.

Another example of Erin's creative activism is her ability to nimbly bend and manipulate others' ableism, perhaps best seen through Erin's undermining at school—an environment rife with institutional betrayal (Parnitzke Smith and Freyd). As mentioned, Erin works in the office because she doesn't participate in gym due to her sensory discomfort. Erin recognizes it as the forced labour that it is: a capitalist attempt to make her useful. Correcting her mother, she says, "It's not a 'job' [...] They're not paying me" and "In some ways, you and Dad are paying *them*, since public schools are funded by tax dollars" (Reed 25). Further, she asserts that the work was inappropriately assigned because it is mindless, noting that the staff's knowledge about her strict rules adherence is why they allow her access to private and sensitive student information, which is certainly a policy violation. Drawing on Medina's reading of disability in YA novel *The Cay* (1969), Erin's work assignment can be understood as a form of ability profiling wherein any of her actions are assumed to be deficient and so she is not assigned complex tasks. Erin further recognizes that her disability is also being exploited because they rely on her Autistic tendencies for data safety and notes that with this access, "she could do so much damage if she wanted to" (227). In this role, she is routinely subjected to cruel ableism, such as being made a spectacle by

Mrs. Poole, who demoralizes, diminishes, and pathologizes Erin. Principal Slatterly is also ableist, telling Erin: "You have... limitations" (225) and contributes to the local rape culture by trying to identify and punish The Nowhere Girls. Erin eventually understands that using student email data for their collective activism—indeed, "an actual serious crime" (223)—is justified. In fact, the violation is her idea and after voicing it, it is she who names the group, "The Nowhere Girls." Erin progresses from being a strict rule-follower to convincingly lying to and leveraging Principal Slatterly's ableist assumptions that she is incompetent to finding agency in this strategic deception. In this moment, she wonders, "How is it possible she is so in control right now?" (225), feeling "something close to triumphant" (226); she is almost joyful in playing along with Slatterly's condescension. Further, Erin's pride blossoms; in learning of a boy's romantic feelings, she asserts: "I'm not a project. You're never going to change me. I'm never going to be normal. I'm Autistic. I want to stay Autistic" (349). In this way, Erin demonstrates her expectation of both a generous partnership—the opposite of a dynamic produced in rape culture, as well as combatting ableism through this declaration of disabled pride.

Finally, Erin offers radical care through creative activism through her Nowhere Girls leadership. It already demands difficult emotional labour and especially as a rape victim-survivor, Erin is at risk of being triggered.<sup>5</sup> Even while listening to her whale music, "thoughts still creep in" because of "this Nowhere Girls business" and how "it makes her think about things she's worked so hard to push away, how some strange urge makes her keep showing up for meetings even though they terrify her" (170). She admits it has "quite frankly changed everything" (172), which is a major shift due to her preference for a tightly organized life. In this way, Erin repeatedly sets aside her own comfort and needs, even feeling like she's "falling apart"

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<sup>5</sup> "Triggering" happens when a traumatized person has an experience where they are reminded of the event that harmed them and this can cause trauma symptoms as well as intense distress (Waelde 2012).

(173) for the group's benefit. Eventually, Erin has a panic attack. Despite the difficulty, Erin's leadership presents discursively, from small moments to considerable efforts. For example, she redirects Rosina's attention during a meeting, telling her: "Margot's talking [...] It's time to be quiet" (189). She demonstrates her attentiveness to group dynamics and harmony in noting, "There are thirty-one people" and deems the meeting too crowded, worried conversation will "descend into total chaos." In another moment, in realizing she might have upset Grace, Erin quickly apologizes and then validates her: "I want to encourage you because you are my friend and I care about you" (247).

Erin's radical care work is especially demonstrated when she distinguishes herself as a uniquely skilled anti-rape ally to fellow victim-survivor Cheyenne. This happens after yet another violent experience with a different boy, Eric, who assaults Erin at school. Though Erin breaks free, she is traumatized and stops speaking for two days. Erin then flies into action to offer radical, tangible care, thinking, "This is no time for being underwater" (350). Erin creates information packets on how to best support a victim-survivor for her friends, instructing them to review it (and quizzes them) before visiting Cheyenne. Erin insists and is meticulous in her planning, knowing that "If they don't do this right, they could hurt her, too" (365). Erin is also adamant that they engage in consent-based care: "We have to let her know someone's on her side. Then she can decide what she wants to do" (366). When they arrive, Erin directs the care, reassuring the trio that their care web is solid with: "the triangle is the strongest geometric shape in nature" (370). Even as Erin starts to panic after seeing Cheyenne, she recognizes the trauma on her face and fights the sensation. Soon, after Cheyenne discloses, Erin guides her through a breathing exercise. She then immediately assures Cheyenne that it "wasn't her fault" (375), before using her body to, much like her service dog, lean in physically to offer stabilizing



comfort even as "her nerves are all on fire" because of all "this *caring* [our emphasis], this remembering" (377). Here, Erin resists her survival skill to compartmentalize and disassociate by thought-stopping; she's been gaslit to think of her own experiences as invalid for so long and that is tested here. And so, how she risks this remembering to act as an antirape activist is certainly caring and radical memory work. Next, Erin grabs her yearbook so that Cheyenne can identify her rapists. Once Cheyenne sees them, she decides she wants to report and Erin immediately assures her that they can take her to the police and says that they will "stay as long as [she] need[s]" (379). On the way, at Cheyenne's request, Erin finally discloses her own experience, demonstrating caring reciprocity and vulnerability.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

*The Nowhere Girls* is a sexual assault narrative that includes various embedded significant stories. Just as it weaves the experiences of the three protagonists as well as a handful of other girls' testimonies, it also demonstrates how entwined rape culture is with other violences. Erin's thread in this braided novel particularly provides a necessary glimpse at the complicated ways in which ableism and rape culture are both everywhere as well as so frequently deeply twisted together. Although this is a daunting truth, her radical care work shows one way in which a thread can be pulled from this knot of violence and lead to some unraveling. Erin models care work in dynamic ways, showing how care can be given in relationship with friends and family, through one's self, as well as part of a care web where creative activism can be employed. As such, the notion of care, and particularly Piepzna-Samarasinha's conceptualizations of care work, is a useful analytic frame that provides a lens for interrogating systemic violences such as ableism and rape culture. To conclude, we return a final time to

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Piepzna-Samarasinha’s words, as she writes: “I do not want to be fixed. I want to change the world” (“Care Work” 145). In our imaginings, we think Erin would likely echo this sentiment.

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