Animation, territoires et pratiques socioculturelles
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Animación, territorios y prácticas socioculturales

Démasquer la propagande pour saisir les idéologies
Unmask propaganda to grasp ideologies
Desenmascarar la propaganda para captar las ideologías

Voicing the Unvoiced: Fighting propaganda in Laurie Halse Anderson's Speak

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Le roman Speak de Laurie Halse Anderson examine en profondeur le parcours d'une jeune fille après une agression sexuelle. Il explore les thèmes du traumatisme et de la guérison, tout en critiquant l'impact de diverses formes de propagande sur la protagoniste, Melinda Sordino. Cette analyse examine comment Anderson utilise les politiques scolaires, les dynamiques sociales et la représentation médiatique pour décrire les mécanismes de contrôle et d'influence qui façonnent l'environnement de Melinda et étouffent sa voix. En déconstruisant ces éléments, l'étude révèle l'omniprésence de la propagande et son rôle dans le renforcement des normes et des attentes sociétales.

Mots-clés : propagande, politiques scolaires, dynamiques sociales, mécanismes de contrôle.

Laurie Halse Anderson's novel Speak explores a young girl's journey through the aftermath of sexual assault, delving into themes of trauma and recovery while also critiquing various forms of propaganda and their impact on the protagonist, Melinda Sordino. This analysis examines how Anderson uses school policies, social dynamics, and media representation to portray the mechanisms of control and influence that shape Melinda's environment and suppress her voice. By deconstructing these elements, this study uncovers the pervasive nature of propaganda and its role in reinforcing societal norms and expectations.

Keywords: propaganda, school policies, social dynamics, control mechanisms.

La novela Speak de Laurie Halse Anderson examina en profundidad el camino de una joven después de una agresión sexual. Explora los temas del trauma y la curación, mientras critica el impacto de varias formas de propaganda en la protagonista, Melinda Sordino. Este análisis examina cómo Anderson utiliza las políticas escolares, las dinámicas sociales y la representación mediática para describir los mecanismos de control e influencia que moldean el entorno de Melinda y ahogan su voz. Al desconstruir estos elementos, el estudio revela la omnipresencia de la propaganda y su papel en el fortalecimiento de las normas y expectativas sociales.

Palabras clave : propaganda, políticas escolares, dinámicas sociales, mecanismos de control.

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ISSN : 1923-8541

Introduction

First published in 1999, Laurie Halse Anderson's novel Speak is not only a powerful exploration of trauma, social isolation, and the struggle for self-expression, but also a stunning book that "uses keen observations and vivid imagery to pull readers into the head of an isolated teenager" (*Publishers Weekly*, Starred Review). The story follows Melinda Sordino, a high school freshman who becomes marginalized and rejected after calling the police at a party where she was sexually assaulted. "Told with acute insight, acid wit, and affecting prose" (*Library Journal*), the book takes a "frightening and sobering look at the cruelty and viciousness that pervade much of contemporary high school life" (*Kirkus Reviews*, Pointer Review). While the novel primarily focuses on Melinda's personal trauma and the effects of her silence, it also provides a nuanced critique of how institutional propaganda functions in various settings, mainly the educational system, media, and peer groups. These institutions often work together to silence or manipulate individuals, reinforcing hegemonic structures that prioritize control, image, and social conformity over truth and personal well-being.

In an interview given when being awarded the Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award, Anderson confesses that writing helps her make sense of the world: "A lot of my books started because I was angry about something, like injustice faced by teenagers. When I'm writing about American history, I'm writing about things that I think we should all know about. Here in the United States, we're just now beginning to be honest about our history, which is very bloody and filled with injustice. I write from anger, I write from curiosity, and I write from confusion" (Anderson, "Writing helps me").

The words of jury's motivation for awarding Anderson with this prize in 2023 reveal an author who, despite addressing a challenging readership (young adults), makes no concessions to embellishing the reality that surrounds them. Anderson records the most troubling experiences that they might go through with wit, irony, and passion: "In her tightly written novels for young adults, Laurie Halse Anderson gives voice to the search for meaning, identity, and truth, both in the present and the past. Her darkly radiant realism reveals the vital role of time and memory in young people's lives. Pain and anxiety, yearning and love, class and sex are investigated with stylistic precision and dispassionate wit. With tender intensity, Anderson evokes moods and emotions, and never shies from even the hardest things" ("The jury's motivation").

Based on a traumatic event that the author herself went through at an early age (she was 13 years old when she was raped[1]), the novel sparked a controversy from the outset. Since its publication in 1999, it was both a National Book Award finalist and an immediate target for censors. *Speak* has appeared on the American Library Association's list of most challenged books from 1999 to the present, being banned 14 times in the 2022-2023 school year alone, according to PEN America's Index of Banned Books[2] (Tolin, 2023). As the writer explains, many of her books are banned in the United States because "some people feel that children shouldn't read about these hard things. But to try to protect children from the reality of the world makes them vulnerable. As adults, I wish we could take our responsibility to be honest with children" (Anderson, "Writing helps me").

1. In an interview given to Lisa Tolin on November 21, 2023, Laurie Halse Anderson confesses: "I started writing Speak back in 1996, back when my oldest child was almost 13. When I was 13, that's when I was raped. Actually, the book started in a nightmare. I had a bad dream one night about a girl sobbing and it often takes me a little bit to catch up to what my unconscious mind is doing. But I think my unconscious mind was letting me know it was time to work through this. So that's when I began to write Speak, based on that girl in my head who was sobbing, who had a story that she couldn't tell."
2. The list can be accessed at: https://pen.org/book-bans/2023-banned-book-list/

Returning to propaganda, one might question the legitimacy of analyzing this concept in relation to a book categorized as young adult literature. *Wouldn't such an analysis exaggerate or push the topic of propaganda beyond reasonable limits*? The answer should begin by addressing another question: *Are children's books written by children or for children*? The answer is obvious. They are primarily written by adults who have their own ideas about how children or teenagers should behave or act in specific situations, and consequently, they attempt to "persuade them of conceptions of themselves as children that suit adult needs and purposes." (Nodelman, 2004, p. 161) According to this viewpoint, adults aim to conquer and influence young minds into adopting predetermined attitudes. They attempt to instill in children's patterns of acceptable and desirable behavior, ideologies designed by society at the time. Thus, in literature for children and young adults, propaganda is as prevalent as in other literary works.

Propaganda and its mechanisms

According to Jowett and O'Donnell (2012, p.7), propaganda is "the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behavior to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist". This definition emphasizes the intentional and calculated nature of propaganda, distinguishing it from other forms of communication. Its deliberate and systematic approach underscores the careful thought given to the entire process beforehand and the selection of the most effective strategy to promote the desired ideology. Propaganda often relies on emotional appeals, selective facts, and distorted representations of reality to persuade its audience. But what is persuasion, and how does it work? Defined as a "communicative process to influence others" (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012, p. 37), persuasion serves to instill a point of view or desired behavior in the recipient voluntarily. It is the act or power of making someone do or think something or influencing someone's opinions or actions. Consequently, one of the key features of propaganda is its focus on creating a desired outcome, whether that involves garnering support for a specific cause, such as a political one, encouraging consumer behavior, or undermining opposition.

As Pratkanis and Aronson (1992, p. 41) argue, quoting Richard Petty and John Cacioppo's study *Communication and persuasion: central and peripheral routes to attitude change* (1986), there are two routes to persuasion: peripheral and central. In the former case, "a message recipient devotes little attention and effort to processing a communication", while the latter presupposes that the message receptor "engages in a careful and thoughtful consideration of the true merits of the information presented". Both routes can achieve the desired outcome, even if they function differently, but in the case of propaganda, the peripheral route is favored. "In many ways, we are *cognitive misers*", Pratkanis and Aronson (1992, p. 44) claim, "forever trying to conserve our cognitive energy. Given our finite ability to process information, we often adopt the strategies of the peripheral route to simplify complex problems; we mindlessly accept a conclusion or proposition not for any good reason but because it is accompanied by a simplistic persuasion device. Modern propaganda promotes the use of the peripheral route to persuasion and is designed to take advantage of the limited processing capabilities of the cognitive miser".

Propaganda simplifies complex issues and offers simple solutions to multifaceted problems, often by scapegoating or demonizing someone as a less-than-human enemy (Pratkanis & Aronson, 1992, p. 53). In the specific case of Laurie Halse Anderson's novel, the heroine, Melinda Sordino, becomes the enemy, the misfit, for the mere reason of ruining a party. She's not the victim, as one

might easily think, even if she suffered a trauma (being raped during an end of summer gathering). By not managing to behave like all the other teenagers around her, i.e., drinking, smoking, and willingly accepting the advances of a much older boy, she becomes the outcast. The vilification of the so-called enemy is meant to justify any cruelty she might be subjected to. Moreover, the simplification characteristic of the peripheral route proves crucial for the effectiveness of propaganda as it seeks to appeal to the emotions and pre-existing biases of its audience rather than engage with critical thought or rational discourse.

Propaganda functions through several key mechanisms, including emotional appeal, selective presentation of information, repetition, and the use of authority figures. By tapping into emotions, propagandists can evoke fear, anger, or pride to motivate action. As Benjamin Lee (2025, "Psychological Principles") notes in his book *Propaganda Mechanisms Explained*, "fear appeals are a common and potent tactic in propaganda", as they bypass rational thinking and trigger an instinctual need for security. This emotional manipulation is obvious in Anderson's novel, as the protagonist is terrified by the attitude of those around her who, instead of protecting, helping, and sympathizing with her, blame her and treat her as the odd one out, the outcast. "Rachel and every other person I've known for nine years continue to ignore me. I'm getting bumped a lot in the halls. A few times my books were accidentally ripped from my arms and pitched to the floor. I try not to dwell on it. It has to go away eventually" (Anderson, 1999, p. 14). Anger is another powerful emotion that can be exploited in propaganda. It is used to "demonize opponents and create a sense of 'us versus them'" (Lee, 2025, "Psychological Principles"). By portraying the opposing individual (Melinda Sordino, in our specific case) as evil, corrupt, or dangerous, propagandists can trigger anger and resentment, making it easier to justify hostile actions. Having her books accidentally thrown on the floor or being hit by a lump of potatoes during her first day in the school cafeteria are just simple incidents meant to underline that she was the enemy, the one whom the others could take revenge on, the outcast.

Selective presentation of facts is another critical tool used in propaganda. By presenting only favorable information and omitting or distorting opposing views, propagandists can shape perceptions without directly lying. We see this approach in the novel: by ignoring the events that led to the arrival of the police and the consequential ruin of the party, Melinda's peers purposefully choose to focus only on the outcome, feeling thus entitled to blame the victim and punish her. 'Aren't you the one who called the cops at Kyle Rodgers's party at the end of the summer?' A block of ice freezes our section of the bleachers. Heads snap in my direction with the sound of a hundred paparazzi cameras. I can't feel my fingers. I shake my head. Another girl chimes in. 'My brother got arrested at that party. He got fired because of the arrest. I can't believe you did that. Asshole'" (Anderson, 1999, pp. 27-28).

Repetition is another effective technique in propaganda. As Benjamin Lee (2025, "Techniques of Propaganda") observed, "A message, repeated often enough, becomes familiar, and familiarity breeds acceptance". Repetition ensures that a particular message stays at the forefront of the audience's consciousness, reinforcing the desired narrative. Its effectiveness, however, depends on several factors, such as the simplicity of the message, the frequency of exposure, and the credibility of the source. When in a group of teenagers, you are accused of ruining a party without obvious reasons, the label you get is hard to change. "I am Outcast", the heroine declares from the very beginning (Anderson, 1999, p. 4).

Finally, propaganda often relies on the authority or credibility of the source. People are more likely to accept information from a trusted or respected figure, such as a government official, a celebrity, or an expert. "Humans have a natural tendency to defer to authority figures. We are taught to respect experts and believe that those in positions of power possess superior knowledge and judgement. Propaganda often exploits this tendency by using endorsements from authority figures to lend credibility to a particular message" (Lee, 2025, "Techniques of Propaganda"). By associating an idea with a figure of authority, propagandists can lend legitimacy to their cause, even if the message itself is misleading or false. And this brings us closer to institutional propaganda.

Unlike traditional propaganda, which might be used by any group or individual, institutional propaganda is inherently more powerful due to the authority backing the message. Governments, corporations, and media organizations possess vast resources and influence, enabling them to reach wide audiences and control dominant narratives. Institutional propaganda operates through several mechanisms, including media control, education systems, corporate influence, and governmental power. Each of these mechanisms works to craft a specific narrative that supports the institution's goals, often without overt manipulation, which makes this type of propaganda particularly insidious.

Schools and universities are institutions of socialization that transmit not only knowledge but also values, ideologies, and norms that reinforce the status quo. In his 1971 book *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, Louis Althusser described education as an 'ideological state apparatus', emphasizing its role in reproducing dominant ideologies. As Althusser argues, there is one ideological State apparatus that "certainly has the dominant role, although hardly anyone lends an ear to its music: it is so silent! This is the School. It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most 'vulnerable', [...] it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of 'know-how' wrapped in the ruling ideology [...] or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state" (Althusser, 2001, p. 104).

Even if we start from the 'innocent' idea that school is not meant to be a "vehicle of indoctrination" (Wooddy, 1935, p. 227), and there should be a clear-cut distinction between education and propaganda, the definition that Carroll Wooddy gives to the former complicates the relationship between the two concepts. As Woody states (1935, p. 227), education may be regarded as "the total of all of the postnatal influences that impinge upon the individual, both as they tend to affect his character, his personality, and the development of his unique capacities, and as they form and progressively alter his relations with individuals, groups, and the social order". When one compares the ideas expressed in this definition and propaganda's role in shaping individuals' perceptions, attitudes, and behavior, one cannot claim a lack of common ground between education and propaganda. Even if they work with different age categories, education targets the instruction of children and youth, while propaganda aims at affecting adult behaviour, one cannot assume that "childhood and youth are immune to influences other than those which are truly educational" (Wooddy, 1935, p. 227).

The role of the educational system in institutional propaganda

In Speak, the high school setting serves as the primary backdrop for institutional propaganda. The school environment is rigidly hierarchical and designed to promote order rather than individuality. It prioritizes image over substance, a characteristic of institutional propaganda where the control of

perception is the key. One way this is manifested is through the use of superficial school programs like the cheerleading squad, pep rallies, and themed educational projects such as Merryweather In-School Suspension. These initiatives distract students from meaningful engagement with their emotions and the realities of high school life. The Merryweather mascot controversy is emblematic of how institutional energy is spent on irrelevant matters to preserve the school's image. Instead of addressing the pressing issues of bullying, mental health, or sexual assault, the administration focuses on choosing an appropriate school mascot (Bees, Icebergs, Hilltoppers, or Wombats), which exemplifies the institution's misplaced priorities. "They herd us into an assembly that is supposed to be a "democratic forum" to come up with a new school mascot. Who are we? We can't be the Buccaneers because pirates supported violence and discrimination against women. The kid who suggests the Shoemakers in honor of the old moccasin factory is laughed out of the auditorium. Warriors insults Native Americans. I think Overbearing Eurocentric Patriarchs would be perfect, but I don't suggest it" (Anderson, 1999, p. 49).

Teachers in the novel also embody the propagandistic role of the educational system. Mr. Neck, the history teacher, is a notable example. He uses his position of authority to propagate a nationalist agenda, advocating for the idea that America should close its borders to immigrants. "Mr. Neck writes on the board again: "DEBATE: America should have closed her borders in 1900". That strikes a nerve. Several nerves. I can see kids counting backward on their fingers, trying to figure out when their grandparents or great-grandparents were born, when they came to America, if they would have made the Neck Cut. When they figure out, they would have been stuck in a country that hated them, or a place with no schools, or a place with no future, their hands shoot up. They beg to differ with Mr. Neck's learned opinion" (Anderson, 1999, p. 54). The teacher's rigid, biased perspective discourages critical thought and fosters an environment where dissent is not tolerated. When one of the students dares to contradict him, the so-called debate is cancelled: "You watch your mouth, mister. You are talking about my son. I don't want to hear any more from you. That's enough debate – get your books out" (Anderson, 1999, p. 55). The dialogue between the teacher and the student is a clear example of institutional propaganda, where instructors like Mr. Neck perpetuate dogma and promote compliance with their worldview, discouraging students from challenging the status quo. "David: If the class is debating, then each student has the right to say what's on his mind". Mr. Neck: "I decide who talks in here". David: "You opened a debate. You can't close it just because it is not going your way". Mr. Neck: "Watch me. Take your seat, Mr. Petrakis" (Anderson, 1999, p. 56).

On a deeper level, the high school's emphasis on conformity and suppression of individual expression mirrors broader societal structures where institutional power is used to control the narrative. When the student continues to contradict Mr. Neck ("The Constitution does not recognize different classes of citizenship based on time spent living in the country. I am a citizen, with the same rights as your son, or you. As a citizen, and as a student, I am protesting the tone of this lesson as racist, intolerant, and xenophobic" (Anderson, 1999, p. 56), the teacher's reaction is a perfect example of an inflexible, rigid and narrow-minded way of thinking ("Sit your butt in that chair, Petrakis, and watch your mouth! I try to get a debate going in here and you people turn it into a race thing. Sit down or you're going to the principal" (Anderson, 1999, p. 56). Melinda's art class, led by Mr. Freeman (a symbolic name), is a rare exception to this environment. Through art, she is encouraged to express herself and confront her trauma, but even Mr. Freeman struggles with the constraints of the institution, complaining that the school board cut funding for the arts

(Anderson, 1999, p. 97). This shows how even spaces of potential liberation are suffocated by institutional mandates that prioritize control over creativity.

Media as an agent of institutional propaganda

The novel subtly critiques the role of the media as another agent of institutional propaganda. As Jowett and O'Donnell (2012, p. 100) mention, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, the mass media started to assume "the mantle of 'expertise', placing them in a powerful position to act as the channel for all types of persuasive messages, from merely informative advertising to the most blatant forms of propaganda for specific causes". Consequently, the media operates as an extension of societal expectations, often distorting reality to maintain an appearance of order and normality. Throughout Speak, Melinda's internal dialogue frequently reflects a growing awareness of how the media portrays women, power, and social relationships. This institutional pressure is amplified through magazines, television shows, and advertisements that project an idealized version of femininity and success, which Melinda feels alienated from. "I wasted the last weeks of August watching bad cartoons. I didn't go to the mall, the lake, or the pool, or answer the phone. I have entered high school with the wrong hair, the wrong clothes, the wrong attitude. And I don't have anyone to sit with. I am Outcast" (Anderson, 1999, p. 4).

Melinda's observation of how her peers, especially the popular students, emulate these media-driven ideals shows the pervasive influence of these institutional messages. As Jowett and O'Donnell (2012, p. 152) note, "in our society, advertising is institutional propaganda at its most obvious level. It serves as a constant reminder that we are being bombarded with messages intended to bring us to a certain point of view or behavior". Heather, one of Melinda's new friends, for instance, is obsessed with fitting into the social mold promoted by popular culture, constantly working to improve her appearance and social status to meet these external standards. "Heather wags her finger at me. Hanging back is a common mistake most ninth graders make, she says. I shouldn't be intimidated. I have to get involved, become a part of the school. That's what all the popular people do" (Anderson, 1999, p. 23).

Heather's obsession with joining the "Marthas," a clique known for its perfectionism and adherence to trends, illustrates how peer groups and societal pressures reinforce the institutional propaganda spread through the media. The "Marthas" value surface-level achievements, such as clothing brands and event planning, over meaningful emotional or intellectual engagement, reflecting the commodification of identity and relationships. "Heather has found a clan – the Marthas. She is a freshman member on probation. I have no idea how she did it. I suspect money changed hands. This is part of her strategy to make a place for herself at school. I am supposed to be tagging along. But the Marthas! It's an expensive clan to run with; outfits must be coordinated, crisp, and seasonally appropriate. They favor plaid for autumn with matching sweaters in colors named after fruit, like apricot and russet apple. Winter calls for Fair Isle sweaters, lined wool pants, and Christmas hair ornaments. They haven't told her what to buy for spring. I predict skirts with geese and white blouses with embroidered ducks on the collar" (Anderson, 1999, p. 42).

Silence as a tool of institutional control

Silence cannot be reduced to a simple lack of response or the complete absence of sound. As far as Gutiérrez and Arroyo Paniagua (2024, pp. 2-3) are concerned, it is "an integral part of verbal and nonverbal communication," serving a "multifaceted purpose," from fear, aggression, and denial, to empathy, understanding, and respect. A key aspect of institutional propaganda in *Speak* is the manipulation of silence, both as a societal expectation and as a means of control. The novel presents silence as a tool handled by powerful groups to maintain order and suppress dissenting voices.

Melinda's enforced silence, both self-imposed and socially conditioned, is a direct consequence of institutional and social pressures that teach victims of sexual violence to hide their experiences rather than speak out. "It is easier not to say anything. Shut your trap, button your lip, can it. All that crap you hear on TV about communication and expressing feelings is a lie. Nobody really wants to hear what you have to say" (Anderson, 1999, p. 9). Throughout the novel, Melinda is ostracized for disrupting the social order by calling the police during the party where she was raped, an act seen as more socially damaging than the assault itself.

The administration's lack of meaningful intervention in Melinda's suffering shows how institutions often prioritize maintaining appearances over addressing real issues. When Melinda's grades slip and she becomes increasingly withdrawn, the school responds with disciplinary action instead of support. The guidance counselor and the principal hold formal meetings with her parents, but their concern is more about compliance and academic performance than emotional well-being. This further illustrates how the institution uses silence and control to maintain its authority rather than confront uncomfortable truths. "We have a meeting with Principal Principal. Someone has noticed that I've been absent. And that I don't talk. They figure I'm more a head case than a criminal, so they call in the guidance counselor, too. Mother's mouth twitches with words she doesn't want to say in front of strangers. Dad keeps checking his beeper, hoping someone will call. I sip water from a paper cup. If the cup were lead crystal, I would open my mouth and take a bite. Crunch, crunch, swallow. They want me to speak" (Anderson, 1999, p. 113).

In his article "Silence: A Politics", Kennan Ferguson identifies different types of silence all of which are present in *Speak*. The first type mentioned is the so-called 'denigrated silence', which, in Ferguson's view, is seen as "the failure of communication, to be silent means to betray the goals and hopes of humanity, to renounce ties with fellow citizens" (2003, p. 50). This silence, seen as a refusal to participate in the life of the community one belongs to, or as a denial of the gift of speech one has been offered, is blamed on the person who has assumed this role. In the case of Anderson's novel, this is how Melinda's parents address their daughter's attitude and lack of communication: "Mother: "You think this is funny? We are talking about your future, your life, Melinda!" (Anderson, 1999, p. 115). But there is also another type of silence, and that is the 'resistant silence' Ferguson (2003, p. 54) associates it with a "basic withdrawal, whether from a conversation or from the business of modern life." In this form, the list of possibilities can range from a simple ceasing of participation to a discovery of self, or a creation of a spatial or temporal retreat. Nevertheless, this silence, in Ferguson's opinion, can serve as both "resistance to any institution that requires verbal participation, "and a means" to protect the self" (2003, pp. 56-57). The dialogue that develops in the principal's office between the representatives of the school and Melinda's parents provides the perfect example of a meaningful withdrawal: "Principal Principal: "We all agree we are here to help. Let's start with these grades. They are not what we expected

from you, Melissa." Dad: "Melinda." Principal Principal: "Melinda. Last year, you were a straight-B student, no behavioral problem, few absences. But the reports I've been getting... well, what can we say?" Mother: "That's the point, she won't say anything! I can't get a word out of her. She's mute". Guidance Counselor: "I think we need to explore the family dynamics at play here". Mother: "She's jerking us around to get attention." Me: [inside my head] Would you listen? Would you believe me? Fat chance" (Anderson, 1999, p. 114).

Peer Groups and the Reinforcement of Institutional Ideologies

The peer group dynamic in *Speak* further reinforces institutional propaganda by emphasizing conformity and punishing non-conformity. According to James E. Foster (1937, p. 247), "propaganda may be regarded as a form of social control, since its objective is the direction of group conduct through the manipulation of stimuli". Cliques like the "Marthas" or the jocks are perfect examples of easily manipulated and institution-controlled groups that exert pressure on individuals to fit into narrowly defined social roles. "To the propagandist", Foster (1937, p. 247) states, "a group is a collection of individuals whom he wishes to influence, and its action is to be measured in terms of individual responses." Melinda Sordino, the main protagonist of Anderson's novel, refuses categorization. As she claims from the very beginning, "I am Outcast" (Anderson, 1999, p. 4). Her isolation is exacerbated by the fact that her peers either do not question or actively enforce these norms that she cannot or does not want to comply with. The social ostracism Melinda faces serves as a form of social conditioning, pressuring her to remain silent about her assault and adhere to the established social order.

Rachel, Melinda's former best friend, embodies the way peer groups reinforce institutional values. She distances herself from Melinda to preserve her own social standing and even begins dating Andy Evans, the very boy who assaulted Melinda, thus reflecting the internalization of societal norms that diminish the importance or ignore issues of sexual violence. "Rachel/Rachelle has lost her mind. She has flipped. She went to the movies with Andy Beast and her exchange friends, and now she follows after him, panting like a bichon frise. […] I want to puke. Rachel/Rachelle is just "Andythis" and "Andythat". Could she be more obvious?" (Anderson, 1999, pp. 148-149). In this way, peer groups function as extensions of the larger institutional framework, perpetuating harmful ideologies through social pressure and exclusion.

Conclusion

Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* offers a powerful critique of institutional propaganda in the educational system, media, and peer groups. Each of these institutions plays a role in controlling the narrative, reinforcing societal norms, and suppressing dissenting voices. Melinda's journey shows the damaging consequences to individuals when institutions force silence and conformity, highlighting in particular how those who are vulnerable are pressured to keep quiet and comply with the status quo. However, by reclaiming her voice and speaking out about her assault, Melinda ultimately challenges the institutional structures that seek to suppress her, offering a powerful message about the importance of self-expression and resistance in the face of oppression. "The tears dissolve the last block of ice in my throat. I feel the frozen stillness melt down through the inside of me, dripping shards of ice that vanish in a puddle of sunlight on the stained floor. Words float up. Me: "Let me tell you about it" (Anderson, 1999, p. 298). She finally found her voice!

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