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Rape Jokes: Laugh Till You Cry

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ABSTRACT

Rape “jokes” are disturbing. We almost laugh, we cringe, some of us tear up. This essay deconstructs the psychic action of such material and the way an audience (or community) can find themselves reluctantly identifying with the affable, loquacious sociopath (think Bill Cosby). His victims become nothing more than roadkill, no match for the clever narcissist who never shuts up.

Rape is loss. It deprives the victim of something vital, whose importance is only recognized when it is no longer there. The change is permanent and irreversible. ... I am the worse for having gone through it. It was not a learning experience, a trial by fire, a challenge triumphantly overcome or ... an existential ordeal to be endured. ... It is a death sentence with an indeterminate stay of execution [Raymond M. Douglas, 2016, *On Being Raped*, pp. 80–82].

In 2010, Tosh, the snarky comic with a big following (including a Comedy Central TV show) told a rape joke at a comedy club and was heckled by a feminist blogger, who called out, “Rape is never funny!” Apparently, there was a consensus that night that heckling was a practice punishable by rape (or the threat of rape) because when Tosh retorted, “Wouldn’t it be funny if five guys just got up and raped her right now?” the room erupted in jeers of assent—forcing the blogger to skulk out of the venue, shaken and shamed.

Apparently, a comic’s right-to-joke can include threats and intimidation if they are wrapped in the pretense of a joke. (“What are you doing in a comedy club if you can’t take a joke?”) The collective indignation when a monologue is interrupted suggests that the heckler has violated the joke’s consent agreement: the comic risks speaking his mind to a conditionally appreciative but potentially hostile crowd while the audience risks being offended—or deflated—as it eagerly awaits the punch line. No one refuses the seductive hail of a knock-knock joke, which makes us all complicit in its action, well before we laugh. Serving as a release from the nervous excitement of the dare (“you don’t think I’ll say it, right?”), the laugh squares the circle.

But in rattling the comic and startling the audience, the heckler spoils the game, revealing that, like the Wizard of Oz, the comic is finally nothing more than a needy little man, whose total control of the room has required a collective, single-minded suspension of disbelief. It only takes one dissenter (Killjoy!/Crybaby!) to break the mood. No wonder the group starts to growl—any intimation of rape’s fact picture (Terror/Bodily Injury/Catastrophic Violation) can bring up the house-lights, vaporizing the hostile omnipotence that serves as the crowd’s manic defense.

Rape jokes oscillate somewhere between free speech and hate speech and between the domains of playing and reality, but in whatever register, we now know that their “no harm done” premise turns out to be false. It is tempting but ultimately lazy to argue that such jokes are merely “playing in the discursive,” just as it is wrongheaded to dismiss those who criticize them as “being stuck in ‘the literal.’” Rape jokes may be discursive moves meant to test the limits of political correctness, but this does not make them harmless.

The dismissive defense that it is flat-footed to mistake the signifier (“rape”) for the signified (rape itself) constitutes a misunderstanding of the joke’s performative action. Rape jokes, it turns out, can actually bring into being the mind-set they aim to satirize. In one study, for example, listening to a

rape joke made research subjects more inclined to “harm” confederates and less willing to condemn their prejudicial assertions (Ford, 2015). This may explain why the laugh these jokes incite has a worried aspect—if you don’t laugh, your group can turn on you.

Although laughter fosters social bonding, it turns out that hostile jokes stoke social division. (The butt of the joke is not laughing.) As a consequence, one’s immediate response to a rape joke (a response that is practically immune to self-policing) serves as an unwilling political act. Bursting out laughing; the half-laughing G-R-O-A-N; anxiously, guiltily, or defiantly laughing; tensing up or tearing up; running hot or running cold; all are instantaneous limbic system responses that reveal our truth to others—and to ourselves. Each reaction locates the subject on one or the other side of the joke’s subject/object split, marking the moment of transition from the (un)pleasant surprise of being caught unawares (Gotcha!) to the defiant excitement of the immoral and transgressive and sometimes to the emergence of a freshly minted moral witness (“That is vile!”).

But wherever we land, there is a decent chance that some internal someone will be anxiously laughing. Thinking dynamically, even cringe-laughing at a rape joke, reveals the listener to be a potentially “like subject.” The reluctant chuckle that cannot be suppressed tumbles out of a sequestered, hateful (or self-hating) part that, for the moment, is sadistically enjoying the rapist’s absurd justifications for his sexual assault and perhaps even the idea of the assault itself. (Every one of us had a mother, and every mother has left her mark.)

The action of the joke depends upon whether we can identify, even momentarily, with the agentic, loquacious, sociopathic, comedic speaker—and whether that enthrallment will make it possible to ignore the woman he has left moaning on the floor. (For purposes of the joke, she is nothing more than roadkill, no match for the clever narcissist who never shuts up.) Serving as a vessel for masculinity’s mark, she is there only to be climbed over—whatever it takes to grab a seat with the guys. (The injured/the abject/the Woman? Not Me/Never Me.)

The joke’s narrator (whose cover is that he is sending up “the rapist,” not being him), portrays him, with a creepy trace of affection, as a disturbingly “likable” guy. Rakish, genial, sly, witty, quick-witted, self-mocking—and ultimately self-accepting (nobody’s perfect), the deranged rapist has become a late-night raconteur, riffing on his last-ditch efforts to put the “you-think-you’re better-than-me” victim in her place.

Festering at his loss of relational power (and the implications of that loss for his future prospects in and out of bed), the narrator-as-predator/boyfriend smuggles his phallic vulnerability and explosive rage inside the folds of the joke’s punch line. Delighting in his schtick as an affable, violent misogynist, he is high on the shock appeal of his eye-popping exhibitionism, confident that you, the listener, will discover yourself in that interpellation. (“You can’t believe you laughed at that, right?? ... Gotcha!!)

The jokes “work” because they rely upon our indulgent recognition of masculinity’s retributive vulnerability, an aspect of gender trouble that allows rape to be an optional move in the phallic game. In that win/lose economy, if a man loses his consenting erotic subject, he loses his place in the hierarchy of masculinities, which instantly marks him as a dumped bottom—an Emergency Situation requiring a no-holds-barred response. (“I’m not condoning rape. Unless you have a reason. Like if you want to fuck somebody and they won’t let you—in which case what other option do you have?” [Louis CK].) (But see also Chodorow, 1998, and Corbett, 2009, on masculinity as a “Big/Small, Win/Lose” opposition.)

It is this run-of-the-mill, aggressive reactivity to the sting of female rejection that allows misogyny to be taken as an unremarkable, even witty, brand of hatred. (By contrast, note that we do not joke about the spectacle of lynching, that Holocaust jokes can only be told by the gas chamber’s potential victims, but that rape jokes—some of which are homicidal—can still get a big, nervous laugh.) We are primed to protect masculinity’s brittle veneer because, although it struts cool and enviable, it is held together by matchsticks—always at risk, easily wrecked, violently retaliatory.

This duality is illustrated by the ultimate tedium of the rape joke list we are considering. Reading it becomes an increasingly visceral experience, as our attention shifts from the dark display of the rapist’s brittle wit to the dawning awareness of the victim’s silent devastation. This is where gender makes its claim. As a woman reader, my body began to signal me while I was trying to see if I could

take any dry pleasure in the sadistic joke fest. The feeling, which grew with time, was one of having been shaken up, unsettled to the core, and eventually flattened.

My attempt at passive, amoral enjoyment was genuine, but it slowly darkened into something akin to vicarious traumatization. It was no longer a matter of finding out whether and how the jokes were “funny” but of realizing that in making this our central question, we were leaving the rape victim on the side of the road—again—just so that we could settle down to think, a dubious use of defensive intellectualization that glosses the trauma we are being asked to laugh about.

But the solution is not to give up on the project—that would be timid. If the ultimate answer to hate speech is more speech, the challenge is to find a way to take up the necessary moral witnessing without being merely sanctimonious. We need a comeback that is trenchant and funny in its own right, and the place to find it is back in the comedy clubs, where very funny women—and some men—have laid claim to the form.

Here are Sarah Silverman, Adrienne Truscott, Eve Mainard, and Louis CK taking aim at rape culture—but also at normative femininity. Expect to be rattled.

- “If women don’t drink, wear makeup or dress provocatively, we should be fine ... just like in India or Iran” (Adrienne Truscott).
- “I used to date frat guys, but now I prefer consensual” (Sarah Silverman).
- “I was raped by a doctor, which for a Jewish girl is so bittersweet” (Sarah Silverman).
- “Feminists can’t take a (rape) joke, but comedians can’t take criticism” (Louis CK).
- “I don’t know why it’s so hard to believe women here. In Saudi Arabia it takes 2 women to testify against 1 man. Here you need 25” (Jay Leno on Bill Cosby).
- “How do women still go out with guys, when you consider that there is no greater threat to women than men? We’re the number one threat to women—the number one cause of injury and mayhem to women. You know what our number one threat is? Heart disease” (Louis CK).

But now consider this one: “Who’s going to object to a rape joke? Rape victims? They don’t even report rape. They tend not to be complainers” (Sarah Silverman).

Silverman’s startling “joke,” once an edgy tweak at the habits of good-girl femininity, is now only sickening as the world has taken the measure of Donald Trump’s defiant admissions of sexual assault on the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape. But Silverman was also socially accurate and prescient. Like domestic violence victims, women who have been forcibly coerced into sex or sex practices are often reluctant to press charges because they blame themselves or fear being disbelieved by the criminal justice system. And they are not wrong. Nationally, according to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, for every 1,000 rapes, *only 7* result in a felony conviction (Lopez, 2016).

This is partially because police and prosecutors are hyperfocused on the risk of *false* rape allegations, a concern that is only slightly more realistic than the Right’s invented risk of voter fraud. Harrowingly, the two have been brought together in the 2016 election by Donald Trump, whose predations, prevarications, and punishments (delivered to those sexual assault victims who spoke out) are far too real to be funny.

It should be no surprise to learn that Trump is hardly alone when it comes to disqualifying accusers, who are often treated as “guilty until proven innocent.” Take, for instance, this conclusion from a British forensic medical examiner who opined in one case that the alleged rapist he interviewed “could not possibly have removed the victim’s tight undergarments from her extremely large body against her will” (Lind, 2015).

Or, even more unsettling, given the current stakes in 2016, consider the sexist rants and threats of Amy Schumer’s head writer, Kurt Metzger, who in 2015 trashed a number of sexual assault accusers in the industry after they’d outed their attacker online (a fellow attention-grabbing misogynist) but did not officially report the crime (Framke, 2016). Disturbingly, Lena Dunham chose to defend Metzger’s free speech prerogatives in her newsletter, *Lenny Letter* (2016), saying, “You think I can’t listen to some short comedy loser say something dumb about rape?” (Apparently Dunham’s comedic speech-is-sacred position valorized listening but not speaking out).

Contrast that to the comedian Eve Mainard, who reclaims the victim's voice (her own) with withering moxy-sarcasm during her stand-up routine. As we have seen, in the standard issue rape joke, the rape victim is nothing more than a thing-lump of no particular interest, not a speaking subject. But in Mainard's world, it is the victim who dominates, whereas "the rapist" is a hapless silent oaf, a predator totally outclassed by his prey. Here *Mainard* is the one who never shuts up, Mainard is the one who owns the discourse.

The monologue begins with this: "The problem is that every woman in her entire life has that one moment when you think, "OK, here's my rape!" Here's a piece of what follows, edited for my purposes. The tone is sardonic deadpan.

You're actually gonna *rape* me?? You're just a goofy looking dude with a faux fur hood—and those cheap ass sunglasses? ... You're not going to kill me—you can't even afford a gun! ... How many years do you want? How many years of prison do you want? Because, yeah—I'm gonna *let* you rape me, I'm gonna *let* you—and when it's done—and when I'm done BAN-DA-GING my hands, when I'm done BAN-DA-GING my ankles—and when I get my hands on that ... *rape kit*?? It's gonna be a whole lot worse for you, a *whole* lot worse! Yeah—I might just "statutory" your ass. You don't think I look 17?? [She makes a little-girl face.] Coz when I'm done? When I'm done ... I'm gonna get you 25 years-to-life, dude. [Long, long pause.] That's what I would have liked to say. In fact, I called my mother.

In this virtuoso display of a "more speech" response, Mainard lets us revel in her manic defense (Terror?/NEVER)—until she jolts us back to her traumatized reality with that emergency call to Mom. Here the comedic and the traumatic run on separate tracks, meeting up only in that sudden, shape-shifting punch line.

Whereas Mainard stops short of riffing on the "this-is-my-rape" rape that followed in her real life, Raymond Douglas, the scholar whose testimony begins this essay, offers up an intimate description of his own rape by a parish priest, when he was a naïve 18-year-old:

With [my] every denial [that I had secretly wanted him] ... his rage grew more ungovernable, his face contorted and his cascade of shouted words so rapid and deafening that I could hardly make them out. I owed him. Who the fuck did I think I was to be treating him like this? ... [For the record] there are few things on this planet more dangerous than an angry rapist who is having difficulty sustaining an erection. ... A sense of panic overtook me ... I emitted cries, undignified ones. ... The experience was overwhelming and bewildering. I felt that if I could have just the shortest of respites, a few pain free moments, I could regain control over what was happening to me. As it was, I was never able to catch up. ... Even my involuntary reactions—yelps, flinches, eventually full throated howls—all seemed to be coming too late. ... The pace, and the pain, were increasing exponentially, leaving me further and further behind, unable to draw a breath [Douglas, 2016, pp. 20–21].

Although these lines have a finality that would make any more words on the topic of rape seem superfluous and trivializing, there is one more piece of testimony that stands as the ultimate rejoinder to the phallic world of the rape joke. It is the prose poem by Patricia Lockwood, titled *Rape Joke*, that was published in 2013. It had over 10,000 likes within hours of being posted on The Awl, a website for writers, and it has been reprinted and written about numerous times in sites like *The New Yorker* and *Slate*. Its mournful, brutal wit lingers on the body, echoing the "indeterminate death sentence" described by Douglas (2016) at the outset of this piece.

Lockwood has found just the right voice (weary and stinging) to "speak the bitterness" necessary to both render—and work—the oftentimes unending trauma of rape. Here the manic and the shattered share the same stage, often the same poetic line—and we are mesmerized.

I shall close the panel by giving Lockwood the last word.

Notes on contributor

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