

Socheolas

Limerick Student Journal of Sociology

Volume 5, Issue 1

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September 2013

**University of Limerick
Department of Sociology**

Available at <http://www.ul.ie/sociology/socheolas/vol5/1>

ISSN 2009-3144

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Disgrace Rape Culture Rhetoric in the New South Africa.

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With recent cases, such as those in New Delhi and Steubenville, Ohio making international headlines, rape and rape culture are the focus of a worldwide debate on how much women's rights movements have succeeded in diminishing sexual violence against women. Part of the debate centres on the definition of rape, where a rhetoric of 'legitimate' rape has been adopted by parties associated with patriarchal power. This article argues that such rhetoric performatively constitutes and thereby perpetuates rape culture, not only in the 'third' world but in modern Western states and, that the preservation of the rhetoric of rape culture does not merely perpetuate sexual violence against women, but also the perceived ownership of women's bodies, compulsory heterosexuality and the continuation of binary genders. Using J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (2000), I contend that rape itself is a constitutional force in shaping women's lives and their identities.

Introduction

"Everyone's talking about rape." This is the headline for an article in *The Guardian* by Hadley Freeman (2012) that queries statements made by British MP, George Galloway, and those made by US Republican Representative, Todd Akin, in regard to how they think rape should be categorised. Indeed, it seems that everybody *is* talking about rape, especially in light of recent cases in India, South Africa and the US, but those who seem to be doing much of the talking are white men who enjoy privileged positions in the West, an advantage that both Akin and Galloway certainly experience. Much of the discourse

surrounding rape centres on its definition and Akin's and Galloway's comments, which I shall shortly demonstrate, exemplify this discourse. In its focus on definition, such discourse invalidates sexual assault by resorting to victim-blaming as well as preserving existing cultural structures that exonerate rapists, sanction the violation of women's bodies, construct public spaces as areas in which women must regulate their behaviour, and organise private spaces according to patriarchal control. Those who are talking about rape are doing so in a way that performatively constitutes rape culture.

In their definitions of rape, social actors such as Akin and Galloway try to explain its demarcation from consensual sex and from other forms of gendered and/or sexual violence, and, in so doing, both create and perpetuate a script of rape apology. Rape apology is behaviour that excuses rape on the grounds that the victim is in some way "asking for it" by dressing or acting in a certain way, because the victim is asleep or intoxicated and therefore cannot say "no" or, because women have an innate inability to know what they really want and therefore men must show them what this is. I would like to point out at this juncture that for the purposes of this paper, I will be focussing on male heterosexual rape of women, not out of a wish to exclude other forms of rape, but in order to analyse the patriarchal and hetero-normative rhetoric at work in its organisation. This is also not to say that consensual heterosexual sex does not exist or that there is no solid definition of rape; however, the ways in which rape has been and continues to be defined by commentators like Akin and Galloway means that certain cases of rape are excused because they do not hold with this definition. Because a script of rape apology is consistently present within the discourse of definition, this discourse constitutes rape culture.

To fully grasp the ways in which discourse is a constitutional force that perpetuates rape culture, this paper will examine rape as it is portrayed in JM Coetzee's novel, *Disgrace* (2000), and for this reason, will focus on rape in the context of the 'new' South Africa. The purpose here, however, is not just to problematize the existing gendered violence in South Africa, but to articulate the underlying rhetoric that normalises rape on a national level and to demonstrate that this rhetoric is not only endemic of South Africa but, that it also permeates a Western masculine conceptualisation of both sex and sexual violence. This underlying rhetoric is in fact, as I will establish in this article, the constitutional force that forms rape culture, which is defined as a culture wherein "the act of rape is normative, meaning it is essentially a condoned behavior [sic]" (Roze 2012). In order to explain the way in which rape definition and its surrounding rhetoric cause the existence of rape culture, this paper will be using Judith Butler's application of the linguistic performative to gender theory and her later work on injurious speech to demonstrate the ways in which language is a constitutional force.

How to Create Rape Culture with Words: The Rhetoric of "Legitimate" Rape

As this paper focuses on the kinds of rhetoric that go towards creating rape culture, it would be useful to remind ourselves at this point of the particular comments that were made by Akin and Galloway. Akin's comments on the female reproductive system were that in cases of "legitimate rape," women need not be concerned about bearing the child of a rapist as "the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down" (Akins, qtd. in Williams 2012). Galloway's remarks on the case against WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, were similar to Akin's in that they too expressed this idea of "legitimate rape,"

saying that “[n]ot everybody needs to be asked prior to each insertion” (Galloway, quoted. in Williams 2012). While Akin’s understanding of female anatomy is indicative of American Christian right-wing rhetoric, what brings these two sets of comments together here is their clear misinterpretation of what constitutes rape. According to this rhetoric, rape is only “legitimate” if it is coupled with physical violence, thereby excluding instances of coercion and writing power structures out of the narrative of legitimacy. How, then, does the rhetoric defining “legitimate” rape create rape culture?

In her early works, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory” (1988) and *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), Judith Butler formulates a theory of gender where “identity [is] instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*” (Butler 1988, p.519, her emphasis) and, in so doing, explains the performativity of gender as the creation of identity through repeated acts we consider to be gendered. As such, gendered acts performed over time create one’s identity. Butler was able to conceptualise this particular brand of ontology through a reading of Jacques Derrida’s *Limited Inc* (1988), which, in turn, was a reading of linguist, JL Austin’s, speech act theory in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). In Austin’s work, the performative or illocutionary utterance produces what it describes in its very expression. Included in such utterances is naming, as Butler expounds:

according to his [Austin’s] view of the illocutionary speech act, the name performs itself, and in the course of that performing becomes a thing done; the pronouncement is the act of speech at the same time that it is the speaking of an act. Of such an act, one cannot reasonably ask for a “referent,” since the effect of the act of speech is not to refer to beyond itself, but to perform itself, producing a

strange enactment of linguistic immanence (1997, p. 44, her emphasis).

Using this understanding of the performative utterance to create what it names, one can propose that by defining rape in terms of legitimacy, the speakers who do so constitute rape according to the criteria of legitimacy, which excludes countless instances of sexual violence, including rapes committed in relationships which already have a sexual nature. The Rape Crisis Network Ireland's statistics for 2010, for example, point out that 28% of perpetrators of adult sexual violence were committed by victims' partners (*RCNI Annual Report 2010*, p.7). Using the rhetoric of "legitimate" rape also creates rape culture through the very act of excluding certain cases from this definition, thereby perpetuating rape apologism and its effects upon all women (examples of which are self-blame and self-regulation).

The rhetoric of "legitimate" rape also overlooks the power structures at play in rape culture, which are not necessarily only patriarchal: depending on time and location, power structures that dominate discursive practices are often hybridised forms of authority whose power hinges on race, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, class and age, as well as those gendered forms of control. For example, rape culture is perpetuated by a Western fetishism of Asian women, which defines Asian women as submissive, exotic and hyper-feminine (Wong and Santa Ana 1999, pp.185 - 194). This rhetoric has in turn been used to rationalise a sexual dominance over Queer Asians and Asian Americans, where gay Asian men are fetishized for their supposed submissiveness (Wong and Santa Ana 1999, p.205). Furthermore, the rhetoric of "legitimate" rape justifies, and is also a product of, rape culture, which normalises rape (Roze 2012) and

the sexual subservience of women. If rape is normative behaviour, the discourse that surrounds it perpetuates its justification by performatively constituting rape as normative. The rhetoric of rape culture is furthermore predicated on a dichotomised gender model, where the belief in opposite genders assists the justification of sexual violence. Patricia Rozee (2012) explains that rape culture is

enabled by sex role socialization practices that teach non-overlapping ideas of masculinity and femininity. Boys are expected to be tough, independent, competitive and aggressive. The socialization of sexual aggression in males is complemented by a culture that uses rape as entertainment in film, video and pornography.

These ideas are by no means new: Butler spent much of her early career determining the linguistic processes that go into forming gendered identities¹, while feminist writers such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon² have long since deliberated on the gendered violence inherent in pornography. What I am suggesting, however, is that these existing identity structures or “socialization practices” form a major part of the discourse that constructs rape culture.

Gendered identity structures and the language surrounding their existence form a part of this rhetoric, in that they first excuse perpetrators by virtue of the fact that they are (mostly) men, which, according to this rhetoric, means that they are naturally incapable of staving off their rapacious urges or that they have inherited the right to possess women as they see fit in a patriarchal system of ownership. As MacKinnon explains, some feminists see rape “as an expression

¹ See *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (1993)

² See, for example, *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Hearings* (1997)

of male sexuality, the social imperatives of which define as well as threaten all women” (1997, p.44), where male sexuality is understood to be inherently violent and non-consensual. Secondly, these structures also blame victims by virtue of the fact that they are (mostly) women, which, according to this rhetoric, means they are objects that exist to be used according to male desire, or, by pointing out that they must have in some way asked for it: “[t]o woman is attributed both the cause of man’s initiative and the denial of his satisfaction” (MacKinnon 1997, p.45). In addition to this, these structures are often difficult to isolate in individual cases, as they merge with and overlap further identity structures which must be negotiated within their own political systems, including race, ethnicity, class, religion, age and sexuality. Coetzee’s novel, which I shall now begin examining, illustrates the intersectionality of the racial, gendered and sexual politics that come together to constitute rape culture in the ‘new’ South Africa.

Disgrace: The Rhetoric of Rape Culture and Ownership in the ‘New’ South Africa

Helen Moffett’s (2006) study of rape in the ‘new’ South Africa uses JM Coetzee’s novel, *Disgrace* (2000), in order to read the ways in which rape is defined on a national level. Moffett’s findings are that rape is often seen by South Africans as a black male crime committed against white women (2006, p.135). For a country that is not at war, South Africa has one of the most appalling statistics for rape worldwide³, with figures that seem only to be getting worse. In her paper, Moffett recounts a narrative related by a South African taxi-driver who describes in a televised interview the way in which he

³ See www.rape.co.za for the latest statistics, but bear in mind that many rapes go unreported in South Africa for various reasons.

and his friends go “cruising” in their free time to find women to “gang-bang” (2006, pp.137-138). When told that what he was doing was raping women, the surprised individual responded with

“But these women, they force us to rape them!” He followed this astonished disavowal of male agency by explaining that he and his friends picked only those women who ‘asked for it’. When asked to define what this meant, he said, ‘It’s only the cheeky ones –the ones that walk around like they own the place, and look you in the eye” (Moffett 2006, p.138).

This is a blatant example of what happens to women who treat public spaces as areas in which they should be free to negotiate their own sovereignty. Moffett (2006, p.138) explains that

“when women visibly demonstrate a degree of autonomy or self-worth that men find unacceptable, they are perceived as sufficiently subversive and threatening as to compel men to ‘discipline’ them through sexual violence. What is more, if rape is believed to be deserved –if a woman is simply being ‘corrected’, or ‘taught a lesson’, it is somehow not considered to be a criminal activity.

The rhetoric that supports and perpetuates this behaviour, where only women who are “cheeky” or “deserve” this kind of treatment are targeted, is contingent on the same gendered identity structures that have existed for centuries to maintain patriarchal control over women, their bodies and their activities: this is the rhetoric that forms rape culture.

South Africa is certainly not on its own when it comes to understanding the discourse that constitutes and maintains rape culture, as the examples with which I opened this paper make evident. That Galloway and Akin were capable of making these statements in the first place means that they both move in circles where there exists an ethos that vindicates rape and the rhetoric that

supports it. It is not simply that the *entire* United Kingdom and the *entire* United States (or even the whole of South Africa) are cultural institutions that support rape, in the same way that neither country can be said to demonstrate a homogenous religion or ethnicity; rather, rape culture exists as part of the broader social interactions between heterogeneous groups that negotiate gendered identities in varying ways. However, because of its unprecedented statistics and history of institutional racism and sexism, South Africa's socio-political landscape arguably negotiates with rape culture on much more of a daily basis than that of the UK and US. That South Africa's current president, Jacob Zuma, was himself tried and acquitted of rape speaks volumes in regard to the ways in which rape culture has saturated every level of South African society. Part of the reason why rape culture and, more specifically, rape has reached such endemic levels in South Africa is because it is so intricately tied up with issues of race.

It is worthwhile pointing out that while the rate of rapes committed yearly is most certainly on the increase in South Africa, rapes that took place during the Apartheid era went largely unreported, particularly in those cases where women of colour were the victims (Moffett 2006, p.129). The democratic shift in 1994 and in the twenty years that have followed has seen a paranoid white minority blame the new system for the rise in rape, while the South African government has highlighted the racist implications of this, simultaneously trying to blame Apartheid's legacy for this endemic. Moffett's paper, meanwhile states that "sexual violence is an instrument of gender domination and is rarely driven by a racial agenda" (2006, p.134). She addresses the controversy JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* (2000) sparked by representing the rape of a white woman by three black men, writing that

“luminaries from the President himself [then Thabo Mbeki] to the cream of South Africa’s writers and academics assumed all too readily that any discussion of rape is predicated on a rapist who is always black” (2006, p.135).

Furthermore, Lucy Valerie Graham quotes Jeff Radebe, who was South Africa’s Minister for Public Enterprises during the *Disgrace* controversy, as saying “[i]n this novel JM Coetzee represents as brutally as he can the white people’s perception of the post-apartheid black man” (2003, p.435).

As Graham (2003, p.435) explains, however,

“[t]he ANC’s argument is built on the idea that Coetzee’s novel reflects society, that the views of the white characters in Disgrace may be equated with those of white South Africans in general. Yet the corollary of this reading would mean that the black rapists in Disgrace are representative of most black people in South Africa, which is exactly what the ANC would like to refute”.

This interpretation of the novel also completely disregards the other moments of rape in *Disgrace*, those that are committed by the affluent, educated and privileged *white* protagonist of the novel, David Lurie. That Radebe and Mbeki could neglect to mention Lurie’s serial rape of his student, Melanie Isaacs, is for reasons identical to Akin’s and Galloway’s comprehension of what constitutes rape. This is because first, Lurie’s pursuit of Melanie reads just like any Western poetics concerning love, and, second, while consent is not given by Melanie, neither is it fully denied. Even Lurie himself fails to understand his violation of Melanie in these terms, describing it as “not rape, not quite that, but undesired nevertheless, undesired to the core” (Coetzee 2000, p.25). What is rape but the undesired sexual acts (in whatever form they may take) of one body by another? Here is the latent rhetoric that constitutes and vindicates rape

culture, where the predominant understanding is that it cannot possibly be rape because physical violence was not used against Melanie in the same way that Lurie's daughter, Lucy, is violently attacked during her rape later on in the novel. To say that Lucy's rape is a representation of racist views is to wholly ignore all the other factors at play in the novel's demonstration of sexual violence, most of all the continued rhetoric of the illegitimacy of Melanie's rapes.

As well as this, rape in *Disgrace* also illustrates the inheritance of women as property by one patriarchal group from another (Cooper 2005, p.29). This inheritance is played out by the novel's structure: *Disgrace* is divided into two parts, where the first section is about the loss of power by the novel's white protagonist, while the second section deals with the increasing power of Lucy's black neighbour, Petrus. In terms of form, then, *Disgrace* takes on the same composition as the political landscape of the country in which it is set, by representing the shift of power from Apartheid to the 'new' South Africa. In this shift of power is also a shift of ownership, which includes the perceived ownership of women: Lurie's days as a "Casanova" (Coetzee 2000, p.43) are numbered, because his system of ownership has been passed over to a new patriarchal order (Cooper 2005, p.29). That Lucy agrees to take Petrus up on his offer of marriage (Coetzee 2000, pp. 203-205) demonstrates her eventual acceptance of this new order. However, Lucy's compliance comes at a further price in that her protection is not just dependent upon Petrus' ownership of her body but also upon his ultimate ownership of her farm. Petrus already has two wives and, as they are both black (and probably Xhosa), it can be assumed that each has come with her own 'lobola' (the 'bride price' a groom must pay his wife's family). Taking Lucy as wife is rather a European move for Petrus, as

Lurie will not benefit from the exchange as he would if he were a black parent: instead, Petrus will have profited in both a wife and her dowry –the most precious commodity of all, land.

Lucy's body is therefore conflated with land, in a move that is common to English pastoral poetry⁴ and (as a method of deconstructing this admixture) a good deal of Postcolonial literature⁵, which Coetzee's novel epitomises. Lucy's is also not just any land, but farm land, which in South Africa averages at 1,200 hectares for privately-run commercial farms (Gbetibouo and Ringler 2009, p.7). Graham (2003, p.438) points out that

“[t]he farm space is a violently contested boundary in post-apartheid South Africa and, as JM Coetzee demonstrates in White Writing⁶, the South African pastoral, which presents a vision of the ‘husband-farmer’ as custodian of the feminine earth, has been discursively implicated in the colonial appropriation of territory”.

The “husband-farmer” is now no longer embodied by the white coloniser and is instead materialised in the body of Petrus, who will become custodian of both his land and of Lucy's, as well as of Lucy herself. It is also important to note that Lucy's sexuality plays a large part in her eventual domination by Petrus. While Lucy's black neighbours show “contempt for women as owners of property and land” (Graham 2003, pp.438-439), she is also “regarded as ‘unowned’” (Graham 2003, p.439) because she is a lesbian. Lucy has therefore shown a degree of autonomy that is forbidden to her by virtue of her gender: because she is a woman, she can neither own land nor can she have sexual

⁴ See for example “Elegy XIX: To His Mistress Going to Bed” by John Donne.

⁵ Maria Isabel Romero Ruiz mentions this conflation in *Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature* (2012, p. 6)

⁶ *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa* (1988)

relationships with women, as women are property and property is, by definition, something to be owned. By owning land, overseeing it herself and by taking women into her bed, Lucy performs a masculinity that is prohibited by the material reality of her body and, because of this, she is violently gang-raped and forced to seek Petrus' protection.

Lesbianism and Hegemonic Masculinity: The Corrective Rapes of South African Lesbians

Lucy's rape takes place in *Disgrace* because of a male struggle for domination. In order to be viewed as an authority within a patriarchal system, men must display a masculinity that is contingent upon the sexual subordination of women. As a lesbian, Lucy exists outside the system of heterosexual exchange, but because she is a woman, she is forced into a subservience which is at once violent and sexual. In this way, sexual violence committed by men against women is also hetero-normative, while sexual violence against lesbians is doubly oppressive as it not only forces their sexual subordination, but diminishes their right to sexuality without men. In an article written for the BBC, Pumza Fihlani (2011) discusses the increasing phenomenon of lesbian 'corrective' rapes and murders in South Africa, where lesbians are raped, violently attacked and often murdered because of their sexuality. As a tool for 'correction,' rape therefore constitutes these women according to the hetero-normative expectations of the men raping them, taking from them any sense of freedom to choose who they have sex with. Reducing lesbians to 'just women,' however, is not merely for the purpose of showing them 'their place,' but to reinforce the ideology of opposing genders and, by 'correcting' lesbians, hetero-normative rape recasts these women into a submissive, feminine role which is also contingent upon their (re)positioning within the private sphere. The

purpose of hetero-normative rape is therefore not just to reinforce who the women are, but also to reiterate the masculinity of the men committing these rapes.

While it is unknown how many rapes that take place in South Africa are “corrective,” due to a corrupt police force and the large number of rapes that go unreported, the reason for these attacks becomes quite clear while reading Fihlani’s article. One man interviewed by Fihlani (2011) is quoted as saying that “[w]hen someone is a lesbian, it’s like saying to us men that we are not good enough”. Lesbianism is therefore viewed by many in South African townships as an overt attack on the dominant patriarchal system, as well as an onslaught against male forms of masculinity. RW Connell (1995, p.40) explains that dominant forms of masculinity (“hegemonic masculinity”) are often (but not always) predicated upon the vilification of male homosexuality, where the ideal form of masculinity is seen in binary opposition to being gay. Connell’s analysis, however, is centred on male forms of masculinity and, as a result, the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and lesbianism is left unexplored. According to the logic of ‘corrective’ rape, women are viewed as property and not as sovereign subjects, and therefore, any woman who tries to articulate their autonomy is regarded as expressing masculine behaviour, as only men are deemed to be free agents. Looking at the South African cases (re)presented by Moffett, Fihlani and Coetzee, it seems evident that rape is used not only as a method in which to control women’s movements and demonstrate male ownership of women, but also as a way in which to constitute the masculinity of the men committing the rapes, by feminizing their victims. Connell (1995, p.29) also points out that masculinity is inextricably tied to economic structures, where “manliness” is contingent upon the ability to earn well and provide; in a

country with vast economic inequality such as South Africa, rape seems to be *the* process by which the new patriarchy is demonstrating its authority.

Indeed, if we are to compare Lucy's rape by three economically disadvantaged black men to Melanie's by the white and reasonably affluent David Lurie, it becomes obvious that Lucy is targeted for her sexuality: because she shows a degree of masculinity forbidden to her gender, Lucy is violently forced by the new patriarchal order to assume the femininity expected of her. Cooper (2005, p.31) explains that what this rape does to Lucy is to "put her in her place", which is "the conventional place of wife and mother –albeit in a reshaped system": rape therefore not only constitutes Lucy as subordinate and feminine, but also forces her into the private sphere. This is fundamentally what rape, as a method of gendered violence, does –it forces women back into private spaces and constitutes women as domesticated and as property. What makes this rape significant in the argument against rape culture rhetoric is that it is the only rape in the novel that has been understood to be "legitimate," unlike Melanie's which has been assumed to be a seduction by commentators such as Pamela Cooper (2005), Thabo Mbeki (Moffett 2006, p.135) and Jeff Radebe (Graham 2003, p.435). It is vital to note, however, that Melanie's rape results in the same effects as Lucy's: Melanie is also forced back into the private sphere, as she leaves university (a symbol of the public sphere) and seeks refuge in her father's house in George.

Conclusion: Linking the Rhetoric of "Legitimate" Rape and Hegemonic Masculinity

In order for men to feel manly, it would seem that it is either necessary to take part in violence against women, particularly if those women are displaying a

masculinity deemed inappropriate for their genital reality, or to 'win' the object of their desire through pressure and control, as Lucy's and Melanie's cases demonstrate. In either case, the same rhetoric is used to justify and perpetuate such behaviour, which states that women are not rulers of their bodies and therefore must be 'owned' through sexual mastery and regulated when they step outside this system of ownership. Moreover, if rapes such as Melanie's are not deemed "legitimate," other forms of gendered violence and intimidation such as street and sexual harassment are trivialised and deemed insignificant. The supposed insignificance of gendered violence is perfectly summed up by a witness in the recent Steubenville, Ohio, rape trial, where two high school students were convicted of the rape of a sixteen-year-old girl, saying "It wasn't violent . . . I always pictured it [rape] as forcing yourself on someone" (Westlake, quoted. by Wetzel 2013). This is the rhetoric of rape culture, repeated by a high school student. This rhetoric and the behaviour it supports is enabled and perpetuated by an ideology that states that in order for men to be masculine, rape is their privilege. Rape 'puts women in their place' (the feminine space of the private sphere) but, this form of violence also reiterates their femininity in opposition to men's masculinity, therefore articulating their subordination to men, both physically and ideologically. The rhetoric that rape culture espouses is fundamental to ensuring the perpetuation of patriarchal control, because to lose rape culture means to lose control over women, their bodies and their destinies.

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