

The playful is political: The metapragmatics of internet rape-joke arguments

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ABSTRACT

Rape jokes are a contentious topic on the internet; arguments over whether “rape is funny” unfold in a diverse range of forums, but they generally take the same predictable form. In this article, I analyze the text of a variety of disputes on American websites over the funniness of rape jokes. I show not only that both sides of these arguments are premised on the same underlying assumptions about the ways that humor and language function, but more importantly that these shared assumptions make it possible for rape humor (and humor more generally) to carry social and political valence—and that in order to understand the significance of the debate over rape jokes, we need to understand the identity work that people are doing when they tell rape jokes, laugh at them, or frown and shake their heads. (Humor, language ideologies, rape, joking)*

INTRODUCTION

Across the vast metaphorical expanse of the internet, a Sisyphean battle is playing out. The battle takes place in countless forums, waged by countless different participants, but each instantiation takes roughly the same shape: someone tells a rape joke. Someone else posts a reprimand, stating that “rape is never funny”. A third person disagrees, asserting that “rape CAN be funny”, and throws in another rape joke for good measure. Soon, it seems that the entire English-speaking internet-browsing world has joined in the argument, as words of opprobrium and comparisons to unsavory figures fly from both sides.

There are a couple of noteworthy aspects to this conflict. First, there is its seeming futility: the same argument unfolds over and over again, each time dying out rather than resolving. No great consensus spreads across the internet as these arguments proliferate; rather, it seems that chaos moves across the landscape, temporarily sucking communities into conflict and then (once people have grown weary) departing just as quickly as it arrived. Why do people continue to engage in such a seemingly fruitless endeavor?

Second, there is the curious nature of the subject of the debate. What does it mean, after all, to say that rape “is never funny”? Surely it is not simply a descriptive statement about whether people find it funny; that these arguments exist in the first place is demonstrable proof that some people find rape jokes funny and others do not. There is an unmistakable moral dimension to these arguments—they are about whether people *SHOULD* find rape jokes funny, not whether they do—and yet they are framed in terms of whether rape jokes are funny at all. As participants engage in postmortem analysis, attempting to explain why certain instances of rape jokes fell flat, they are implicitly allotting blame and praise to real and hypothetical joke-tellers and joke-hearers. What is it about humor (and specifically rape humor) that enables it to carry such moral weight? What is at stake in such arguments, and what do people believe is at stake? What are the implications of finding rape jokes funny or of disavowing amusement? And what assumptions must people be making about how humor functions in order for such an argument to be intelligible and possible in the first place?

In this article, I show that both of these puzzling aspects of internet rape-joke arguments can be explained by exploring the “humor ideologies” that implicitly guide speakers in their production and consumption of humor. I intend “humor ideologies” to be a corollary to “language ideologies” (e.g. Silverstein 1976, 1993, Rosaldo 1982, Duranti 1993, Woolard 1998, Irvine & Gal 2000). Language ideologies, as they “envision and enact ties of language to identity, to aesthetics, to morality, and to epistemology” (Woolard 1998:3), enable specific linguistic interactions to take on broader social meaning. My argument in this article is that humor, too, requires a shared set of beliefs in order to be socially meaningful, and the specific nature of those humor ideologies determines the types of social meaning that humor can take on. And just as metapragmatic speech provides insight into the language ideologies underlying the social significance of language use, “meta-humorous” speech—speech about humor, rather than humorous speech—gives hints to the humor ideologies that enable individual jokes to belong to types, and those types of jokes to be associated with types of people. The result is that telling, laughing at, or disapproving of a rape joke becomes a socially significant act through which one can index one’s identity as a “type” of interlocutor, person, and citizen.

More broadly, I want to expand on previous work that has framed humor as a highly context-dependent phenomenon that cannot be studied independent of the situations in which it occurs (e.g. Apte 1985, Douglas 1975/1991, Seizer 1997, Hay 2000, Holmes 2000, Holmes & Marra 2002). I show that “context” includes not only the immediate conversational surround but also interdiscursive links to other conversations as well as ideologies that implicitly guide speakers in their production and consumption of humor. My overarching argument is that in order to study humor as a social phenomenon, we must understand the ways that single instances of jokes and other forms of humor are tokens of broader genres imbued with cultural value (Agha 2003). One cannot get at the “meaning” of a joke by

looking solely at the form and content of the joke itself, or at the immediate context in which the joke is told; one must also understand how the joke links up to past and imagined future tellings of similar jokes, mediated by humor ideologies that provide a structuring taxonomy of humor and stereotyped joke-tellers.

METHODOLOGY

Data and some notes on rape jokes

The data that I analyze in this article come from hundreds of comments posted on twenty-three different weblogs, online forums, and newsmagazine comment sections. The sample includes three general categories of online content: weblog posts and newsmagazine articles that were written in response to specific instances of rape jokes, reader-posted comments posted in response to those weblog posts and articles, and discussions in online forums that center around either specific instances of rape jokes or the general question of whether rape can be funny. When looking for data, I avoided discussions where there was a consensus in either direction—I specifically wanted disputes, where commenters would be forced to more thoroughly flesh out their arguments in favor of or against rape jokes.

One question to address at the start of this article is: what is a rape joke? Scholars of language and humor have had a difficult enough time defining the term “joke” in general, and current academic dilemmas include whether everything that provokes laughter is humor, whether things that do not provoke laughter can be humor, whether there are clear differences between *wit*, *comedy*, *humor*, and *joking*, and so on (Billig 2005). And if defining “joke” is this difficult, then defining “rape joke” has an added layer of complexity: is a “rape joke” a joke that mentions rape? A joke that describes rape? A joke in which rape is the main plot element? A joke that does not mention rape but implicitly gestures toward it? Are jokes about pedophilia “rape jokes”? Are jokes about statutory rape “rape jokes”?

Because my interest is not in the jokes themselves but in the arguments surrounding the category, I do not consider this ambiguity problematic. I am less interested in how people sort specific jokes into the categories “rape joke” and “not a rape joke,” and more interested in what people do with the categories once they have established them. Describing the study of insults, Irvine (1993:111) writes: “Invoking informant labeling ... is essential if we are not simply to import our own notions of defamatory content and find them everywhere.” Substitute “humorous” for “defamatory” and the same statement applies to studies of humor. I do not attempt to define “rape humor”; I merely follow commenters’ applications of (and disputes over) the label.

Therefore, in this study, “rape humor” includes a wide variety of examples, including: a viral video featuring Will Ferrell in which a group of overzealous environmentalists (the “Green Team”) go to extreme and violent lengths to protect the environment, including gang-raping a woman who pollutes the air by smoking;

a newspaper comic strip in which an elderly man makes fun of his elderly female companion for carrying mace, telling her that she is too old to have to worry; a statement made by comedian Jerry Seinfeld upon the debut of his film *Bee Movie* ("Bees have the only perfect society on Earth. They have no crime, they have no drugs, they have no rape. A little rape, but it's not that bad"); t-shirts with statements like "Stop Rape, Say Yes" written on them; and several traditional scripted jokes with a set-up and a punchline.¹ Though commenters do respond to these specific instantiations of rape humor, these instances are usually a jumping-off point for more general discussions of when, where, and why rape jokes are or are not acceptable.

Using internet data

In recent years, anthropologists have begun to turn to the internet as a source of ethnographic data, but internet data often defy traditional anthropological methods. The anonymity of the internet, for example, poses a challenge for the researcher who wants to know exactly who he or she is studying. Using forum postings and weblog comments from the internet means not knowing the author's demographic background: age, gender, race/ethnicity, geographic origin, and so on. Even if the author makes self-descriptive statements, there is no way to know how truthful or accurate those statements are. Yet this partial anonymity can be liberating for commenter and researcher alike: the commenter can take on whatever socially salient identity he wishes to have, and the researcher can analyze the comments free of any biases that such predetermined categories might invoke.² For the purposes of this research, the externally ascribed categories that people might be assigned to in face-to-face interactions are less important than the ways in which people enact certain social positions and portray themselves as specific "types" of people who think in specific, patterned ways.

Another potential challenge of internet data is its limited and static scope. Each commenter only weighs in once (or occasionally twice or three times), and only provides a sampling of whichever of his/her opinions is relevant at the moment. There is no way of knowing the commenter's position on other issues,³ and no way of further interrogating his/her argument. It is therefore vital to consider these small fragments of text not as individual voices but as instantiations of a genre (cf. Bakhtin 1986); commenters are collaborating to create a mutually intelligible set of discourses about rape humor in which certain "types" of people espouse certain "types" of opinions. Thus, in my analysis I focus on recurring patterns, and I avoid singly-occurring opinions and ways of framing the issue. Although this approach may sacrifice the nuances of individual opinions, it enables me to trace the assumptions that form the framework of the debate, and to see how a variety of people from (presumably) a variety of backgrounds draw upon the same cultural resources to formulate their own viewpoints and make them intelligible to a wider audience.

This last point brings up a third challenge of internet-based ethnography: the indefinite cultural boundaries of the research. What culture or society does this article study? The websites from which I cull my data are all American, run by Americans and read by predominantly American audiences. Yet it seems inaccurate to say that I am studying American culture; the label appears simultaneously too broad and too narrow. Perhaps it would be more accurate to call this an ethnography of internet communities—but these arguments do not only take place online, and even when they do, they draw on and effect social milieus outside of the internet (in “meatspace”, as it is sometimes called online). The internet creates a space for these arguments to take place, and the nature of online interaction may influence the particular shape that the arguments take, but the arguments implicate broad categories that transcend class, age, and geographic location, and they have implications for anyone participating in a culture where these discourses are intelligible.

Suffice it to say that while I will be talking about these ideologies and these arguments as American, I do not intend to claim that the humor ideologies I lay out in this article are specific to Americans; they may well be shared by only some Americans, or by all English speakers, or by Western cultures in general. I am not aware of any research on humor ideologies in non-English-speaking or non-Western cultures, and so I limit the scope of my conclusions to the culture I am most familiar with and the culture that has shaped my own intuitions about humor, which I also bring to bear in my analysis.

I now turn to the data itself, and consider what it can tell us about humor ideologies and the moral world that they help create.

TO LAUGH OR NOT TO LAUGH: HUMOR IDEOLOGIES

The narrated/narrating event distinction

If there is one element of these arguments that stands out, it is the distinction between finding rape funny and finding jokes about rape funny. Although this seems to be the fundamental dividing issue between those who think rape jokes can be funny and those who do not, it is also paradoxically one of the issues on which both sides of the debate show the greatest alignment; we will see two very different opinions premised on identical beliefs about how humor works.

Commenters defending rape jokes hasten to make the distinction between rape being funny and rape jokes being funny, as shown in (1).

- (1) a. Rape isn't funny—but comedic depictions/parodies/satires of rape can be. (echomikeromeo, A2)⁴
- b. It's possible to make a funny joke about burning kittens; it's not possible to make burning a kitten funny. Big difference. (the lerpa, A4)
- c. Of course, laughing is absolutely NOT the same thing as finding the topic matter of the joke funny. (Anonymous, A4)

How is it that one can laugh at a rape joke without laughing at rape? One commenter evokes a use/mention distinction, comparing rape to the word *nigger* (thehersch, A3). Another commenter delves into his own semiotic analysis, concluding that to “think a joke about rape has some equivalency to rape” is to exhibit “a primitive disregard for the difference between signifier and signified” (the lerpa, A4). Indeed, Seizer (1997) demonstrates that the use/mention distinction can be a pivotal one in explaining how unacceptable assertions can be used in acceptable jokes: a Tamil comedian can say something taboo by framing it as stigmatized reported speech, as in “Of course I couldn’t say X!” But a confusion of language does not seem to be the issue with rape jokes; nobody has trouble distinguishing between the utterance of the word *rape* and the act of rape, nor is anyone mistaking object language for metalanguage. (These are not jokes about the word “rape”—they are jokes that involve describing the act of rape in some way. And the act of rape, while certainly heavily imbued with meaning, does not take place on a primarily semiotic level.)

Rather, the distinction being made is one between the joke and the contents of the joke. The framing of a joke, these commenters argue, somehow transforms a disturbing image into a funny one, without changing the image’s inherently disturbing nature. This conceptualization bears a striking resemblance to Jakobson’s (1957) distinction between the narrated event and the speech or “narrating” event. When people laugh at a joke, the argument goes, they are laughing at the narrating event—the way in which the narrated event is framed and the situation in which it is told—rather than the narrated event itself. Just as one can judge the truth value of an instance of reported speech (“John said that the earth is flat”) regardless of the truth value of the reported speech itself, one can laugh at a rape joke without laughing at rape.

But this disjuncture, according to commenters, seems to be contingent on the fictionality of the rape. Commenters who defend rape jokes argue that the jokes can be funny, certainly, but only if they are not about real rapes, and the more outlandish or absurd the better.

- (2) a. See, that was funny. Or at least I thought so. Obviously, when I read actual news stories about rape, my reaction is different. (Gregory, A22)
- b. The thing is, you say “How could raping a baby ever be funny?!” Well, when the fiction depiction looks downright silly, it’s kind of hard not to at least titter a bit. (Bardiel13, A22)
- c. In fact, the absurdity of the violence is what makes it so funny. (echomiker-omeo, A2)

Unreal rape can be easily confined to the narrated event with as little pragmatic spillover as possible. But “real” rape, these comments suggest, is perhaps a bit more difficult to dislocate.

This is precisely the distinction that rape-joke critics seize on as well, but they deploy it in quite a different manner. At first glance it may seem that, for

the commenters opposed to rape jokes, there is no narrating/narrated event distinction.

- (3) a. Joking about rape makes the act of rape a joke. (Kate Ditzler, A7)
- b. If you think it's funny, it's because you think there is something inherently funny about men coercing and forcing women to have sex. You are okay with laughing about sexual violence. (Zuska, A23)

But upon closer examination, we can see that these kinds of claims are leveled specifically at rape jokes, unlike the opposing arguments, which frequently speak more universally about the narrated/narrating event distinction. The lack of generalizing suggests that for rape-joke critics there is something special about rape that confounds the narrating/narrated event distinction. If we look to further elaborations on why rape jokes are not funny, we find discussions of the prevalence and ineffable trauma of rape.

- (4) a. Disgusting and horrible. Rape jokes are not funny, especially not in a country where the rape percentage is as high as a third world country. Pathetic. (Fank, A21)
- b. Do you know that 25% of all women, regardless of class or race, will be sexually assaulted in her lifetime? Is that a laughing matter, guys? (look.a.little.closer, A10)
- c. Rape can and is a debilitating crime perpetrated on another human being for a simple selfish sexual gratification and cause years of pain, self loathing, attempts of suicide, remorse caused by guilt and shame. Rape is a violent act. (PhyllisMs, A3)

This emphasis on statistics and the horrifying, all-encompassing nature of the act suggests that what sets rape apart from other potential joke topics is that something so prevalent and traumatic as rape renders it inescapably realistic. One comment drives this point home particularly well:

- (5) I seriously doubt that if you had read that pedophile who molested children wiped his bloody genitalia on her toys, you would find that funny. (lil bitchiness, A22)

For this commenter, responding to a joke about child rape that someone else had posted, the point is not that the funniness of the joke would change if the story it told were real—the point is that the story could very well be real (hence the framing as “if you read that” it happened rather than “if it happened”).

The two groups of commenters, then, agree that humor has the power, at least in theory, to recontextualize traumatic subjects in ways that dislocate them from the act of telling, and that this power hinges on the unrealistic nature of the narrated event. Where the commenters disagree is the issue of whether rape is particularly “sticky”

due to a profound, inescapable realism.⁵ The two sides share an assumed set of rules about how humor works, but they disagree about how those rules apply specifically to rape.

The two sides also agree that the nature of the narrating event affects the funniness of the joke. Another omnipresent feature of these debates is the recurring reference to “context,” as shown in (6).

- (6) a. Rape, as a general subject, is in NO WAY funny. However, I believe that ANYTHING can be made the punchline of a joke. It’s all in the CONTEXT of it. (Anonymous, A18)
- b. Anything can be made into a joke if done in the proper context. However that’s kind of the key word, isn’t it? Context. (CarsAreScary, A18)
- c. (Title of post: “Context”) I don’t think there’s anything that’s off-limits when it comes to humor, but context is everything. (Melissa McEwan, A12)

This emphasis on context suggests that the actual content of the joke is secondary to the situation in which it is told when it comes to the funniness of a rape joke. But what is “context”? Or, rather, what are the particular aspects of the context that commenters consider relevant? Commenters focus on two general factors that determine whether a specific instantiation (actual or potential) of a rape joke is (or would be) funny: the nature of the joke-teller and the nature of the joke-hearer or audience. I deal with those separately here.

The nature of the joke-teller and the role of intent

Commenters often bring up the identity of the joke-teller in their attempts to explain why a specific rape joke succeeded or fell flat and their proclamations of general rules about when and how rape jokes can be funny. Skill, first and foremost, is vital if the joke is to be funny.

- (7) a. *anything* can be funny. Depends on the talent of those involved. (DavidHW, A2)
- b. (Comment title: “Sure, a rape joke can be funny”) But it’ll take more talented writers than these three hacks to do it. (The Needle, A4)
- c. Some shit, though, just doesn’t lend itself to humor, and if you’re going to make a joke about it, you better be damned good ... (Durian Joe, A4)

Precisely what constitutes comedic skill is not explained; rather, commenters point to famous “experts” who have successfully deployed rape jokes.

- (8) a. Clearly rape can be funny; even Shakespeare uses rape for laughs. (Benzion Chinn, A1)
- b. Is rape off-limits for laughs? Let’s consult the experts ... 1) Monty Python’s Life of Brian ... 2) National Lampoon’s Animal House ... 3) Blazing

- Saddles ... So there you have it. Monty Python, Mel Brooks, and John Landis/Harold Ramis all say rape is fair game. (the lerpa, A4)
- c. The following is from George Carlin's "Parental Advisory Explicit Lyrics" show. ... I'm not trying to disrespect people with real views on the topic at hand I just wanted to present an authority's opinion on whether or not rape can be funny. (DMBfan34, A4)

George Carlin, whose 1990 comedy album *Parental advisory: Explicit lyrics* includes an entire routine asserting that rape can be funny, is by far the most-cited expert among these comments. Sarah Silverman, who has only recently ascended to fame and who is well-known for a scene in the shock-humor documentary *The aristocrats* that culminates in a rape joke, comes in a close second and, being female, lends an additional measure of authoritativeness on the topic of rape jokes.

Silverman's femaleness is a boon because commenters often bring up the joke-teller's gender and experience with rape as central to the joke's humor value, with jokes by women and rape victims described as more likely to be funny, or at least less likely to be offensive.

- (9) a. I got pounded in a local BBS chat room many years ago (pre-Internet) by a humorless feminist when I made a casual rape joke. The ultimate joke was on her, though. I was raped by a stranger when I was a 15-year-old virgin. (Anonymous, A2)
- b. But part of rape jokes is the idea (the temptation) to actually do it. When, for example, a male makes a rape joke about a waitress, it's not only a joke, but also shows the desire (resp. lust) of this male towards the waitress. Yes, part of rape jokes in male groups is that the idea of rape is entertained (though mostly not conducted). (student_b, A23)
- c. So if a woman jokes about rape, it might be funny. If a man jokes about rape, 99% of the time it's not funny. Why? Because of the creeping suspicion that he isn't completely joking—that something about the subject interests him the wrong way. (Xrandadu Hutman, A4)

What is the mechanism by which the joke-teller's personal characteristics like gender and experience with rape come to affect the funniness of a joke? From this last set of quotations, we can see that the personal characteristics of the joke-teller are important as an index of intent—the joker's gender and experience with rape provide insight into his or her potential motivations for telling a rape joke. Just as one should not laugh at "actual" rape, these commenters imply, one should not laugh at a joke that is intended to make light of "actual" rape. Yet how can we know what motivated the joker to tell a rape joke, if the act itself is opaque? The closest we can get, according to these commenters, is a guess informed by the joker's gender and experience with rape. If the joker is a rape

victim or potential rape victim (i.e. woman), then the joke can potentially be sympathetic, subversive, or ironic.

The role that intent plays here reflects a larger tendency in Western societies to emphasize the speaker's intent in communicative acts (Rosaldo 1982, Duranti 1993). But the perceived role of intent in joking is a sort of inversion of the role that intent is thought to play in nonjoking communication. When English-speakers typically think of intent in communication, they focus on the speaker's intent to convey "meaning," or (as Peirce (1960) would say) to produce an INTERPRETANT in the mind of the hearer that effectively mirrors the image in the speaker's mind. The denotational content of the utterance takes center stage. Silverstein describes the way that this emphasis on referentiality often comes at the expense of attending to the pragmatic effects of the utterance:

[T]here is *residual semanticity*, the semantico-referential meaning which a speaker can claim after the fact for potentially highly pragmatically charged speech. Thus the characteristic speaker's denial of speech offensive to the hearer takes the form of 'All I said was ...' with a semantico-referential paraphrase or repetition of the referential content of the original utterance. (Silverstein 1976:47)

With jokes, in contrast, the referential or denotational content is considered largely irrelevant—what people find important are the interactional effects, or what the speaker intends to do IN telling the joke. Jokes are framed as denotationally "empty," purely pragmatic acts. Instead of "All I said was ..." the joker's refrain is "It was only a joke!" Note how the two disclaimers are almost precise inverses of each other: "It was only a joke" means "pay no attention to the semantic/referential content of my utterance, for all I was trying to do was make you laugh".

It might be useful to frame this as a conception of humor as an aesthetic quality (e.g. Cohen 2001), something that exists on a level separate from and interpretable apart from the level of "what is said". As an aesthetic form, joking surely bears some resemblance to other aesthetic forms. Certainly narrative fiction also involves the manipulation of imagined concepts to create an aesthetically pleasing and "felicitous" result, and it is possible for a reader to "get" or "not get" the end result. Visual art, too, involves this same manipulation of imagined concepts, although on a visual level rather than a verbal one.

But joking differs from these other aesthetic practices in significant ways. First, only when it comes to jokes is the idea of "meaning" so often vehemently denied; poems, paintings, photographs, songs, and so on are all seen as having meaning "beneath" the aesthetic surface, and the relationship between the message and the medium is often the focus of appreciation. Second, joking is perhaps the only aesthetic form where felicity (i.e. "getting" it) is seen as an instantaneous process; art appreciation in general is seen as a slow, deliberative process—one savors a painting the way that one would savor a good meal—whereas the person who spends too much time mulling over a joke is accused of ruining it. (It is

often said that the best way to make a funny joke unfunny is to analyze it. My apologies to any rape-joke aficionados reading this article.) Third, joking differs from other art forms in the way that it carries moral valence. Although appreciation of art in general is morally fraught, the connection is mediated by socioeconomic class: understanding fine art indexes education and wealth, which in turn indexes moral rectitude. (We do not say “he does not like the painting because he is depraved”; we say “he does not like the painting because he is uncultured,” which in turn carries obvious moral implications.) Joke appreciation is tied far more directly to morality, as I will demonstrate shortly.

The nature of the audience and the roles of sense of humor and offense

I suggested in the introduction that rape-joke arguments serve as sites where people articulate identities by aligning themselves with and opposing themselves against imagined stereotypes. In line with this theory, commenters devote much of their time to discussions of who does and does not (or can and cannot) laugh at rape jokes and why. In doing so, commenters draw on a shared understanding of what it means, psychologically and socially, to “get” humor.

Commenters often attribute a rape joke’s infelicity to something within the hearer—some personal attribute that prevents him or her from finding the joke funny. As in discussions of the nature of the joke-teller, personal experience with rape figures largely in explanations of why certain people might not find rape jokes funny.

- (10) a. I don’t find the joke particularly offensive, but I also don’t work for a rape crisis center. (bojendyk, A11)
- b. Yeah ... if you hadn’t guessed i’ve been raped so its doubly not funny!!!! (SakuraXxBells, A10)
- c. [N]othing is funny when it affects you personally. ... But I can’t deny that someone who didn’t have the experience COULD find it funny. (Kristofer Straub, A7)

People who have been raped or who have been firsthand witnesses to the horror of rape are said to be less likely to find rape jokes funny, and this guideline is applied not only to rape but to potentially touchy humor in general.

Gender, too, is said to be an important factor in the joke-hearer’s response, with women being less likely to laugh at rape jokes in particular.

- (11) You also have to remember that, to a certain extent, women live their lives in fear of rape in a way I’m not sure men can appreciate. ... It’s just an emotional and personal subject for women, even if they aren’t rape victims, because it’s a scenario we often have to envision. (Anonymous, A1)

According to this perspective, women are inherently rapeable,⁶ which leads to a certain blurring between the categories of “rape victim” and “woman.” Women are less likely to laugh at rape jokes for the same reasons that rape victims are less likely to laugh at rape jokes; it is experience with rape that mediates the connection between gender and laughing at rape humor. Men who have experienced sexual violence themselves or (more likely, according to these commenters) know someone who has are also less likely to laugh at rape jokes.

There is also a second explanatory framework, which sees gender as the hinge between experience with rape and failing to laugh at rape jokes. According to this model, it is not that women fail to laugh at rape jokes because they are always already potential rape victims, but rather that rape victims fail to laugh at rape jokes because they are women. Women—and particularly feminists, assumed to be invariably female—are described as congenitally incapable of appreciating rape humor (and indeed, humor in general).

- (12) a. Personally I take Shakespeare, Stanley Kubrick and the Fantasticks as better guides to what is funny than any angry feminist. (Benzion Chinn, A1)
- b. Wait, feminists find things funny? (Anonymous, A3)
- c. An oldie, but a goodie: / Q: How many feminists does it take to change a lightbulb? / A: THAT’S NOT FUNNY! (Splunge, A15)

Moreover, when a specific person objects to a rape joke, he or she is derided by these commenters as excessively or pathetically female.

- (13) a. Shakespeare’s Sister [another commenter] needs to take a Midol. (cordelia525, A4)
- b. “it was a man writing the Chronicle article who found this vein of humor offensive” / Yay, another cuckolded-from-birth girly man, who has no voice of his own, drowned as he is in feminine pablum. / He doesn’t count. (the real me, A23)

In contrast to the experience-central perspective—in which men can object to rape humor because gender is secondary to experience with rape—according to this perspective a man who objects to rape jokes is effectively a woman. But whether gender is mediating experience with rape or experience with rape is mediating gender, the two factors are seen as absolutely central to the audience’s reaction to rape humor.

If we delve a bit further into commenters’ discussion of when and why people might not laugh, we will see that, whereas the personal characteristics of the joke-teller are important as an index of intent, the personal characteristics of the audience are significant because they are thought to index one’s ease of offense, and consequently one’s sense of humor.

This latter phrase—“sense of humor”—is a particularly telling one. The phrase implies that there is something out there called “humor,” and that a person with a

good “sense” of humor is someone who is good at detecting and responding to it.⁷ Compare “he has a good sense of humor” to a phrase like “he has a good sense of direction”; in both cases, the person being described has a particular knack for understanding some external quality, and that knack seems to be intuitive rather than learned. People can have different kinds of senses of humor, and anti-rape-joke commenters often accuse their opponents of having the wrong kind, as in (14).

- (14) a. You need to have quite a morbid sense of humour to find any joke about rape funny, not that it offends me it just doesnt make me laugh. (Magee, A22)
- b. Creeps like Rush Limbaugh specialize in mocking the weak, the poor, the oppressed. Theirs is the humor of sadists and the morally bankrupt. By contrast, the skit in question is the humor of the mentally dull. (DurianJoe, A4)

In contrast, what do people mean when they say that someone lacks a sense of humor?

- (15) a. But then, I’ve been known to laugh at things that are sick and awful and are intended to shock and horrify. My general reaction: mountain, meet mole hill—grow a sense of humor! (privateice, A2)
- b. George Carlin tackled this issue almost 20 years ago. When challenged to find a way to make rape funny, Carlin’s response was the following: / Just imagine Elmer Fudd raping Porky Pig. / If you can do the above without even the slightest chuckle, you need to get your funnybone checked, ASAP. (Big Cheese, A2)
- c. I’m sick of these humorless asses complaining about absolutely everything. That joke is funny. (Matt in the Hat, A11)

Whereas a person without a sense of direction is a person who wanders helplessly and takes wrong turns, a person without a sense of humor is not someone who laughs indiscriminately at things that are not funny—it is a person who does not laugh at all.

This concept of a “sense of humor” presumes that laughter can only follow from correctly (albeit sometimes “morbidly” or “twistedly”) identifying something as funny. As a marker of correctly processing a joke, then, laughter plays an extremely significant role in this model. Previous work examining metapragmatic beliefs about laughter (Wickberg 1998, Smith 2007) has suggested that laughter is seen as an unmediated external indicator of internal state, and therefore as the only appropriate or successful response to a joke. Furthermore, laughter is seen as involuntary and nonpurposive, a simple quirk of human evolution. In *The expression of emotion in man and animals*, Darwin⁸ (1872:93) describes laughter in response to a joke as a cognitive analogue to laughter in response to tickling, and declares both responses “involuntary.” In a more modern instance, a linguistics professor, lecturing a freshman class on the differences between animal communication and human

language, describes vervet monkey calls (which correspond to different predators) and asks, “Are these calls referential? Or do they merely express internal states of the monkey (like laughter)?” In this example, laughter is not only presumed to be involuntary and nonpurposive, it is cited as an exemplary instance of such behavior.

These folk theories of laughter are borne out in arguments over rape jokes. Commenters do not distinguish between finding something funny and laughing at it; “I thought it was funny, but I didn’t laugh” or “I laughed, but I didn’t think it was funny” would be a nonsensical claim. (“I got it, but I didn’t think it was funny” is another matter entirely, as we see shortly.) Commenters write seemingly interchangeably about whether people should find rape jokes funny and whether people should laugh at them.

The assumption that “real” laughter can only result from the perception of independently existing humor puts the burden of explanation on the person who fails to laugh at a joke. The mere fact that someone else laughs or has laughed at the joke is enough to establish its jokehood; there must then be a reason that the person does not laugh, some kind of explanation for why the humor mechanism in his brain failed to function properly—in short, an explanation for his humorlessness. If a sense of humor consists of detecting and responding (via laughter) to humor, then there must be two possible ways that a (properly-executed) joke can fail to elicit laughter from a hearer: detection failure and response failure.

Detection failure occurs when the joke-hearer simply does not “get” the joke. A few commenters seem to frame the debate over whether rape jokes are funny as a problem of detection, because they attempt to resolve the problem by explaining why the jokes are funny.

- (16) a. The funny part here is, here are these “good” environmentalists who go around doing all these heinously evil things—and getting off on it—in the name of some extreme concept of protecting the environment. (private, A3)
- b. I think the comic was just basically the old man getting in a demeaning jab at his wife about her being too old or ugly to be desirable even to a stranger with bad intentions... Kind of like the old joke “Take my wife ... Please” He isn’t wanting an actual incident, but more just trying to push her buttons. In that sense, it’s funny. (Observer, A20)

But by and large, the arguments that take place are not over what the point of the joke is, and the commenters defending rape jokes do not assume that the commenters condemning rape jokes just do not understand them, nor do the commenters condemning rape jokes state that they do not “get” them. Rather, commenters on both sides seem to believe that those objecting to rape jokes understand the jokes perfectly well, and are making a choice (either on a conscious or a subconscious level) not to laugh at them, thus interfering with a natural, limbic process.

- (17) a. People do not in fact run jokes past their political affiliations to decide whether they're funny. We don't need to hold any particular beliefs to find Wanda Sykes amusing, or not. Nor do we need any to evaluate the quality of fratboy rape humor. (Caledonian, A23)⁹
- b. My experience of how humor works is that it's not inherently rational. If you can only decide whether something is funny AFTER passing it through your intellectual filters first, I'd say you don't have much of a sense of humor. (blunderdog, A3)

This is a response failure: the hearer detects the joke and his humor mechanism triggers, but he suppresses his laughter.

Why would someone suppress his laughter in response to a joke? According to these commenters, there is one reason and one reason alone: offense. Note the juxtaposition of sense of humor and offense in these quotations.

- (18) a. Get a clue AND a sense of humor. It's just WORDS, which are only harmful if you make them so. (Anonymous, A18)
- b. Not that sarcasm would be comprehended by the dimwitted literalists who take offense at Funny or Die. (cordelia525, A4)
- c. Whether or not you think these decades-old jokes are funny is beside the point. For all we know, you're a humorless prig. (the lerpa, A4)

"Taking offense" and "making words harmful" are contrasted with "having a sense of humor" and "comprehending sarcasm." The phrase "humorless prig" unites the two concepts in a seamless stereotype.

According to the picture painted by these commenters, humor (or good humor) always deals with emotionally and morally fraught topics.

- (19) a. I doubt you've managed to go your entire life without laughing at least one joke that put a painful situation in a funny light. Comedy is built on tragedy. (CarsAreScary, A18)
- b. Comedy explores uncomfortable subjects. That's what makes it, like, funny. (the lerpa, A4)
- c. However, you simply can't rule something out as being 'out of bounds to comedy' just because it's a sensitive topic. If we did that, the only comic working today would be Sinbad. (David Bishop, A7)

Given that a joke is always going to straddle the line between offensive and funny, the hearer can either fall on the side of finding it uproarious or of finding it upsetting. Which direction a hearer leans depends on where his own personal line is drawn.

In this model, people have thresholds for offense, and each person's threshold is set at a different level. According to those who support rape jokes, people who object to them are simply too easily offended.

- (20) a. Lucky for me, my sensibilities aren't as delicate as yours. When I find something bothersome, I choose to ignore it. (Aaron Green, A20)
- b. For instance, go to the link in my signature and search for "baby f*ck" (unless one is easily offended). (Zeal Ex Nihilo, A22)
- c. I think often people give words to much power. I haven't ever been raped. I don't find much offensive. Well nothing really. (brickhard meat, A19)

For these commenters, there are two types of people: those with sensitive constitutions who overreact to touchy subjects, and those with normal constitutions who are able to laugh at dark topics. By contrast, commenters who condemn rape jokes divide the world into identical extensional groups, but the intensional attributes are different: there are those who are sensitive to the suffering of others, and then there are the morally depraved who laugh at people in pain.

- (21) a. That baby **** thing isnt funny and if you do think its funny you must be quite a twisted individual. (Magee, (22).)
- b. And I'm really very sorry that you find rape jokes funny—it doesn't say anything good about your sense of morality. (Scott Slemmons, A20)
- c. If you think that rape, burning kittens alive, shooting someone in the face, setting people on fire, shooting and killing a wounded Iraqi who is writhing on the ground in pain without a weapon, and such is funny, then you are most likely a psychopath. (rupert_c, A4)

From this perspective, those who object to rape jokes are offended, yes, and rightly so—it is those who are not offended who have a distorted sense of reality. A mature, intelligent, sufficiently empathetic person (for those who laugh at rape jokes are called "immature," "brainless," "lacking empathy," and "uncultured") will be offended upon hearing a rape joke and will be unable to laugh. In fact, a few commenters explicitly suggest that we should use the more easily offended as the proper gauge for what is and what is not appropriate.

- (22) If you're going to make a joke about rape, it's got to be funny to rape victims. Otherwise, it's just sexist swill. (Melissa McEwan, A12/A13)

Though the two perspectives disagree on where the "appropriate" threshold for offense lies, they agree that that threshold is affected across the board by certain characteristics (e.g. gender, sanity) and with regard to specific topics by other characteristics (e.g. experience with rape), and they also agree that when that threshold is exceeded, laughter will not occur.

This conception of offense as causing people to suppress laughter that would otherwise ring freely has consequences for the way the person who does not laugh is perceived as an interlocutor. If the person who does not get a joke is dull or slow-witted, then the person who "gets" a joke but suppresses his laughter is burdened with a far worse epithet: unsociable. For all the talk of laughter as an

unmediated indicator of internal state, it is obvious that laughter is in fact rhetorical (Billig 2005). Laughter is a conversational unit, part of an adjacency pair (e.g. Goffman 1981). It is the second pair-part to a joke's first pair-part, much like an answer responds to a question—but unlike the case of a question and answer, where the second speaker can postpone the answer by introducing a new adjacency pair in the form of a clarifying question, the sole socially appropriate (i.e. cooperative) response to a joke is immediate laughter.¹⁰ It is clear from comments in arguments over rape humor that the person who does not merely fail to laugh but refuses to laugh is violating a sacred social rule by failing to cooperate with his interlocutor. He is failing to celebrate with his interlocutors in the aesthetic delights of humor.¹¹

And if the person not only refuses to laugh but explains why he refuses to laugh, he goes right past unsociable into antisocial territory. After accusing a *Crankshaft* critic of having “delicate sensibilities” (i.e. being too easily offended), one commenter asks:

- (23) What does a guy like you do for fun, anyway? Seems like you would spend all your time critiquing and condemning what others find amusing, leaving no time for your own recreation. (Aaron Green, A20)

For this commenter and others who take his stance, the sort of person who is dissatisfied with merely refusing to laugh—who has to tell other people not to laugh as well—is the sort of person who enjoys ruining other people's fun.

Humor ideologies

I have highlighted several main humor ideologies that undergird arguments about rape humor:

- Laughing at a joke about X is not the same thing as laughing at X, because the narrated event is dislocatable from the narrating event.
 - Corollary: Certain (sufficiently realistic) words or ideas could “leak” from the narrated event into the narrating event and confound this distinction.
- Laughter is an unmediated external indicator of an involuntary internal state of amusement. Laughter is thus an involuntary, limbic response.
- Laughter can only be consciously controlled inasmuch as it can be suppressed, which is only done as a knee-jerk component of an offense reaction.
 - Corollary: Jokes are always premised on potentially offensive concepts.
- Jokes invert the typically primarily denotational quality of language; joking is first and foremost a pragmatic and aesthetic act, and it should only communicate amusement.

These humor ideologies lead to the categorization of reactions to rape humor in socially meaningful ways. In the following sections, I show how these social stereotypes combine with beliefs about what effects words can have in the world, to implicate the (dis)approval of rape jokes in a framework of political and national orientation.

TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL: MORAL
STANCE-TAKING AND POLITICAL
IDENTITY-MAKING

From the discussion of ease of offense, we can begin to see that the act of approving or disapproving of a rape joke is one imbued with moral valence. Laughing at a rape joke, some commenters argue, shows that you are callous and depraved. Failing or refusing to laugh, other commenters argue, shows that you are priggish and sanctimonious. One's response to rape jokes, both of these lines of argument assert, is determined by one's preexisting moral qualities.

But commenters also argue the reverse causal relationship—that discouraging or encouraging rape jokes actively determines one's moral quality, due to the effects that rape jokes have on individuals and societies at large. Telling a rape joke (or laughing at one, or frowning and shaking one's head) is described as a moral act that has direct consequences on the world. On the individual level, commenters who support the telling of rape jokes argue that they serve a therapeutic purpose.

- (24) a. Life can be pretty shitty sometimes, you can either cry about it or you can laugh it off. Humor seems to me to be the healthier option. (Jon, A7)
- b. If something is too taboo and you can't make fun of it, then theres no hope for you to get over it. (imagination soul, A18)
- c. If you can't laugh, you can't examine the pain. It festers. (geegee, A4)

Similar to confession (Foucault 1978), joking about rape is seen as liberating, channeling shame into a more productive psychological response.

On the societal level, commenters argue that rape jokes are a moral imperative because they enable people to talk about something so horrific as rape, rather than letting it fall between the cracks of taboo.

- (25) a. I think humor offers possibility as a way to broach difficult subjects, and rape certainly qualifies as a difficult subject. To that end, I think closing all chance of its use as a constructive tool is short-sighted. I think it is actually quite a good question to ask "When could this be funny, and why, and how can we use that to positive effect?" (Alexis, A23)
- b. We can use humor to face what we fear. If we can laugh, we have put some emotional distance between us and whatever we are laughing at. And when we have that distance, we can often see things more objectively. Then, perhaps, we can change or eliminate that which we fear or loathe. / So, rape shouldn't be a taboo subject for humor. Nor should anything. (Julie-bird, A3)

Joking about rape, these commenters assert, is a way to make rape a matter of public discourse. To discourage rape jokes is to effectively silence discussions of rape, to make rape invisible and seemingly nonexistent.

Commenters who argue against telling rape jokes, in contrast, assert that on the individual level, rape jokes are bad because they can serve as “triggers” for rape victims, causing them to have flashbacks or some other extreme emotional response.

- (26) a. I am not saying murder is unimportant. I am saying the odds of hitting too “close to the knuckle” when saying anything concerning rape is vastly higher than the same with respect to murder. (Elmo, A8)
- b. I’m bothered by the thought of a woman who’s recently been raped, who’s just experienced what may be the worst thing that will ever happen to her, and turns on the telly to watch her favorite comedian and have a much-needed laugh—only to hear him using that horrible, life-changing thing as the butt of a joke. (Melissa McEwan, A14)

Because so many women have been sexually assaulted and so few of them come forward, these commenters argue, the person who tells a rape joke never knows whether he will be dredging up unimaginable grief.

On the societal level, commenters arguing against telling rape jokes assert that jokes about rape normalize and minimize rape, inducing mass numbness and thereby encouraging rape.

- (27) a. Rape is not funny. Jokes about rape are not “black humor”. They are not “tasteless.” They are actively promoting rape. By laughing at it, you’re saying that it’s okay. By laughing at it, you’re giving encouragement to the guys who are actually rapists. (Cara Kulwicki, A9)
- b. (Comment title: “the word inspires the deed”) Thinking and writing about women in these terms makes it easier for the reader to see women in these terms as well. And that makes it easier to treat women with less respect, to abuse women physically and sexually. (Juliebird, A17)
- c. Rape is a violent act. Anyone who can find humor in this perpetrates and encourages rape and is as guilty as one who commits such an act. (PhyllisMs, A3)
- d. I worry that, if we start joking about rape in one context (like prison) or allow it to happen in one situation, then the violence of rape gets devalued in all contexts. It incrementally becomes less and less abhorrent. And it should always be abhorrent. (Nels, A16)

Though these commenters do not explicitly disagree that talking about rape is in general beneficial for rape victims (in fact, Juliebird argues both sides), they assert that, by and large, rape victims are not the ones telling rape jokes, and that rape jokes inspire trivializing laughter rather than therapeutic sympathy.

In addition to looking at the direct moral effects of telling or not telling rape jokes, commenters also look at the indirect effects, contemplating what the kind of society that discourages or encourages rape jokes would (or does) look like.

Both those who argue against rape jokes and those who support them draw on discourses of nationalism, holding “America” up as an ideal and arguing that the opposing viewpoint is un-American, foreign, primitive. But opposing sides of the issue differ in the aspects of American-ness that they highlight. For pro-rape-joke commenters, America represents liberal democracy and its concomitant rights, particularly free speech. To say that people should not joke about rape is, at worst, censorship (see (28)), and at best, an outgrowth of apathetic submission to governmental authority that borders on dystopic (see (29)).

- (28) a. When we start saying what we can and cannot joke about, that’s censorship —generally a bad thing in my book. (lukev, A17)
- b. Yes I love censorship ... Especially when it’s driven by who ever screams the most. (Anonymous, A4)
- (29) a. (Response to article entitled “Is rape off-limits for laughs?”) everything is off limits ... din’t you get the memo. Now back to your machine, citizen. (Anonymous, A4)
- b. See, I grew up in the fifties. Nothing was talked about. Nothing. I long for the sixties. Those were interesting times. People are very depressed and subdued these days. The only rights we did not sign away in the Patriot Act I hear is the right to quarter soldiers. (geeegee, A4)

Either way, its behavior better suited to more primitive people, particularly Islamic fundamentalists.

- (30) a. Now now don’t go all bombhead Mohammed over it (Anonymous, (4).)
- b. Why is the Papua New Guinean tribesman scared of the Polaroid ... ? Why do some Muslims cry for blood when a teddy bear is named Mohammed? Why before the Enlightenment could you get tortured for painting Jesus the wrong way? The same reason you think a joke about rape has some equivalency to rape. (the lerpa, A4)
- c. Finally, dabbling in censorship is so un-patriotic, Especially when the blood of American Troops is soaking into the desert sands of foreign lands for the express purpose of providing oppressed people with the freedom of speech that we should be able to take for granted here in the USA. (FreeRayPist, A18)

Those who take the opposing position, that rape jokes are inappropriate and should be avoided, draw on very similar nationalistic arguments, but the America that they hold up is a very different one: They equate American evolvedness with sympathy and respect for fellow citizens, and they emphasize personal responsibility over individual rights. Rather than focusing on the “free” aspect of “free speech,” these commenters instead focus on the moral obligation to use one’s right to free speech thoughtfully.

- (31) a. Speech. A right, and a responsibility ... just like everything worth anything in this America-thing. (Mel Brennan, A11)
- b. Language is a gift. Words change worlds. We should all use them wisely, and for the betterment of ourselves and our fellow human beings. (Juliebird, A17)

Charged by opponents with being “primitive” and terrorist-like, anti-rape-joke commenters volley the charges back, arguing that the real primitivism is the disregard for rape victims shown by supporters and tellers of rape jokes.

- (32) a. [Joking about rape] persuades readers to see the object of derision as, well, an *object* instead of a human being. When that happens, we all become a little less human, and a little more bestial. (Juliebird, A17)
- b. The fact that we are laughing about it shows just what’s wrong with this society. ... There is another society that treats rape victims with such disdain. It’s called Saudi Arabia. I’d like to think that USA can do better than that. (phoenix_fire999, A3)

One anti-rape-joke commenter depicts a dystopia quite similar to the one previously described, asking:

- (33) Do you want the population to be conditioned and programmed through association of rape and abuse with humor, excitement, thrills and satisfaction with the same techniques that Madison Avenue sells beer, soap, politicians and cars? It is behavior modification and social engineering under the cover of social darwinism and a free market. To what purpose? The worse people feel about themselves and the worse people treat each other the more they will have to rely on buying things to compensate. (rupert_c, A4)

But whereas the earlier commenter blamed the problem on totalitarian governmental control, rupert_c focuses instead on commodity fetishism and alienation. (One might say that Anonymous’s dystopia is the *1984* to rupert_c’s *Brave new world*.)

The disagreement between pro- and anti-rape-joke commenters, then, is framed by commenters as a difference between rights and obligations. Pro-rape-joke commenters emphasize the rights and freedoms entailed by the liberal democracy that is America, and depict telling rape jokes as an exercise of one’s civic duty; anti-rape-joke commenters emphasize the obligations that responsible citizens must face if they want to enjoy the benefits of a liberal democracy, and worry about the ways in which the free market (be it one of commodities or one of words) hides or undermines such obligations.

Thus the debate over rape jokes quickly develops, in many cases, into an argument over free speech.¹² A particularly dramatic example of this metamorphosis is a thread of reader responses to one particular Salon.com *Broadsheet* weblog post. The thread initially consists of a wide variety of readers providing their own

answers to the ostensible question asked by the weblog post's title: "Is rape off-limits for laughs?" After approximately thirty such responses, a commenter named the_lerpa singles out another commenter, DurianJoe, and responds specifically to points made in one of his/her comments. DurianJoe responds back in kind, and soon the two commenters are engaged in a dyadic interaction, while other commenters continue to weigh in on the original question (and a new contingent begins to complain that the video format of the original weblog entry discriminates against the deaf). After about a dozen exchanged messages, DurianJoe and the_lerpa seem to come to the consensus that they will never agree, whereupon DurianJoe vanishes from the thread and does not return. But a third commenter, fetboy, insinuates him/herself into the argument by bringing up the firing of Don Imus. The_lerpa begins to argue with fetboy about whether firing Don Imus was a violation of his right to free speech. At this point the thread has been otherwise deserted, and the last seven comments in the thread consist of the_lerpa and fetboy arguing back and forth about the Imus incident and free speech more generally—the question of whether rape jokes are funny having long been abandoned.

As we can see, commenters posit not only that people's reactions to rape jokes reflect their moral character, but also that people who encourage or discourage rape jokes (by telling them, laughing at them, complaining about them, etc.) are committing moral wrongs or rights. Humor is understood as having many powers: the power to heal, the power to harm, the power to defend oneself from oppression, the power to oppress. Furthermore, we can see that the debate over whether rape jokes are funny shifts almost imperceptibly into a broader debate about the rights and responsibilities of free speech; one's opinion with respect to rape jokes is seen as inextricably linked to one's political orientation and one's American-ness.

THE PLAYFUL IS POLITICAL: FEMINISM, RAPE, AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

These imperceptible shifts from one argument to another suggest a certain level of conflation on the part of the commenters (and, indeed, on the part of anyone who is able to follow the discussion without becoming confused). Underlying these arguments over whether rape jokes are acceptable are arguments over whether political correctness is censorship or compassion. And underlying those arguments, I posit, are arguments over whether women are victims or oppressors; if women are victims, then abstaining from telling jokes that may hurt them is a voluntary act of good will, but if women are in fact the dominant group, then abstaining from telling rape jokes is a compulsory silence, or in other words censorship.

Looking at this set of three laminated arguments as the stratifications in a cross-section of discourse, we can reconstruct the slow process by which their meanings must have sedimented. Gavey (2005) describes the feminist awakening to the realities of rape in the 1970s, wherein what had once seemed to be a racist plot to undermine black males suddenly became the central locus of male control over

women. Rape became a pivotal issue—perhaps THE pivotal issue—for second-wave feminism, representing an entire universe of gendered oppression: Susan Brownmiller’s 1975 *Against our will* famously describes rape as “nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which ALL men keep ALL women in a state of fear” (Brownmiller 1975:16, emphasis in original).

Though second-wave feminists certainly sought change through legislative channels, much of their activism was focused on changing public opinion; “raising awareness” was a necessary first step if any real societal change was to take place. This involved changing the ways that Americans thought about rape, convincing them that: (i) it was about power, not sex; (ii) women who were raped had not been “asking for it”, consciously or subconsciously; and, most importantly for our purposes, (iii) rape was a serious scourge of humanity, not a trivial laughing matter. On this third point, at least, their success seems to be mixed. Recalling a poster with a rape joke¹³ that she had seen at her local newsstand in the 1970s, Gavey writes of the effects of second-wave feminism:

The ‘humor’ of this poster could no longer be assumed. The place of such rape jokes would no longer be so public, and it would be widely recognized that slogans such as this would evoke raw emotional responses and political sensitivities that even the most obscene misogynists might recognize the need to curtail. (Gavey 2005:24)

And yet we can look to the internet and see a flurry of arguments about whether rape jokes are funny or acceptable. How do we reconcile these arguments, and the fact that rape jokes continue to be told, with Gavey’s claim that, thanks to second-wave feminism, people now recognize the fact that rape jokes are not funny for everyone? By understanding the newfound social power that rape jokes possess precisely because it is now widely understood that they do not amuse everyone.

Second-wave feminism, along with 1960s/1970s leftism more generally, was met with a backlash that by the early 1990s had coalesced into an anti-political-correctness, pro-free-speech contingent (Faludi 1991, Cameron 1995). Women might have once been less powerful than men, the anti-PC activists argued, but they have claimed their half of the pie and more, and now they are using their power to silence the men (and occasionally women) who dare to speak out against them. Within this framework, it is one’s patriotic duty to fight the oppressive forces of state-sponsored (and particularly academe-sponsored) feminism.

The collapsing of feminist/anti-feminist, PC/anti-PC, and anti-rape-joke/pro-rape-joke arguments suggests that rape jokes have become one of the primary sites where these tensions come to a head. By setting aside “rape jokes” as a salient and unacceptable category, second-wave feminists in effect made those jokes socially meaningful, turning them into both a shibboleth and a weapon.¹⁴ The humor of rape jokes can “no longer be assumed” (Gavey 2005:24), which means that if one tells a rape joke, one is both making a statement about where one falls on the funny/not-funny binary and forcing others to similarly state their

alliances through laughter or disapproval. And one's position on rape jokes immediately indexes one's other political and social allegiances, such that telling a rape joke is an act that conveys far more than the surface meaning of "I thought this was funny, and perhaps you will too." When people tell rape jokes, they do so not because telling rape jokes is the status quo and they are unenlightened, but because telling a rape joke is a particular act with particular social significance.

HOW TO DO THINGS WITH RAPE JOKES: HUMOR IDEOLOGIES AND ORDERS OF INDEXICALITY

Let us return to the questions I posed in the introduction. First, what are the implications of finding rape jokes funny or of disavowing amusement? In the first part of my analysis (*TO LAUGH OR NOT TO LAUGH*), I demonstrated that arguments over rape jokes sort people into social "types" with certain moral, interpersonal, and aesthetic qualities. Drawing on Silverstein's (2003) notion of orders of indexicality, rape jokes act as both first- and second-order indexes. As first-order indexes, rape jokes point to the specific social context, both presupposing and entailing a certain kind of relationship between joke-teller and joke-hearer. As second-order indexes, rape jokes (or their conspicuous absence) assign the teller and (non)appreciator to social categories. From looking at the arguments that are taking place, it appears that this latter aspect is more salient: to tell a rape joke is to do something in the immediate social situation, certainly, but it is also, and more importantly, to position yourself as "the kind of person who tells rape jokes." Exactly what kind of person that is clearly depends on whom you ask.

And we can add another layer to the model. In the second part of my analysis (*TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL*), I demonstrated that rape jokes also act as third-order indexes, sorting these social types into political groups. The kind of person who tells rape jokes (or objects to rape jokes) is a certain kind of citizen and a certain kind of moral subject; (dis)approval of rape jokes is seen as linking up to a constellation of other moral and political stances and behaviors. These layers of indexicality are elided as one's response to rape jokes becomes *ICONIZED*, or naturalized as exhibiting the "inherent nature or essence" of a person (Irvine & Gal 2000:37). Through iconization, one's reaction to rape jokes becomes inextricably tied to one's political views or social grace, because they are all seen as resulting from the same intrinsic personal qualities. Thus, if we compare stereotypes of those who lack a sense of humor with stereotypes of those who "get" the joke but do not laugh, we can see that the "holding in" of laughter is iconized as a general bodily hexis of "holding in"; those who refuse to laugh are "uptight," "priggish," and (to put it in Freudian terms) anal-retentive. Women who hold in laughter are assumed to be feminists, an identity that comes prepackaged with all kinds of stereotypes about sexual and emotional withholding. Meanwhile, those who

laugh at rape jokes have their reactions iconized in precisely the opposite way: they do not hold in enough; they are relaxed, lack self-restraint, lack maturity.¹⁵

Thus far, I have been talking about the ways that the act of (dis)approving of rape jokes is interpreted by people on both sides of the debate. This may paint a somewhat passive and unidirectional view in which people first react to rape jokes, and their reactions are then assigned semiotic significance. I want to emphasize, however, that this is far from the case: people act as well as judge within this indexical framework. People use already socially meaningful rape jokes as a way of enacting and creating identities for themselves, labeling their interlocutors but also themselves in the process. Moreover, people actively seek out these interactions, instigating arguments¹⁶ couched as questions: "Can rape ever be humorous? ... last night I was having an argument with some people I know and I said that rape could be hilarious. They seemed offended by this and started rambling on about how rape is disgusting and whatnot" (Zeal Ex Nihilo, A22). "Why do so many guys think that jokes about rape and/or references to rape are funny? Is it just symbolic of society's inability to handle female sexuality ... ?" (ColleenIs-Back, A5). Commenters use the infinitely directional broadcast medium of the internet to interpellate unknown others into ritual morality plays.

This brings us to question two: what is it about humor that enables it to carry such moral weight? It is precisely the fact that people believe it to carry such moral weight. Because the act of (dis)approving of rape jokes is seen as something a certain type of person does, it is done by certain types of people. The question then becomes: how did rape jokes become endowed with such a meaning? As Inoue (2002) has argued, indexical practices have to be made; they do not arise, fully-formed, out of the ether. Looking at the cast of characters evoked in the arguments over rape jokes, the likely origins of this particular indexical practice are in second-wave feminism and the subsequent anti-political-correctness backlash. The discourses of these two groups are clearly present in current-day arguments over rape jokes, judging by how quickly the arguments metamorphose into descriptions of the horror and oppression of rape on one side and accusations of censorship on the other side.

Yet the centrality of rape to a widely influential and contentious social movement is not quite enough to fully explain how rape HUMOR came to be so powerfully imbued with its specific moral connotations. Humor was and is predisposed, it seems, to take on moral and political valence. This brings us to question three: what assumptions must people be making about how humor functions in order for these arguments to be intelligible and possible in the first place? Rape humor is only able to carry the social and political weight that it does because of the assumptions that people are making about the ways in which humor functions. Metapragmatic function "endows otherwise mere behavior with indexical significance that can be 'read' in relation to conventional norms" (Silverstein 2003:197). When joking is an aesthetic act to the exclusion of communication, then appreciation of it can be a sensory act that requires the right faculties (a "sense of

humor”) rather than an interpretive act that is context-dependent. When individual reactions to specific, contextualized jokes are seen as an index of “sense of humor”—a stable, decontextualizable, involuntary “essence”—then jokes can begin to hold semiotic significance in the macro-social frame. And when that sense of humor is understood as the result and cause of certain personality traits and interpersonal concerns, telling a rape joke—or responding to one—becomes an act imbued with political valence, an act that situates the actor within a larger framework of “types” of people. These humor ideologies give jokes the potential to do identity work; the social and historical context determines what specific identity work can be done by what specific (type of) joke. (Though my discussion in this paper has been limited to rape jokes, I believe that my analysis is applicable to all types of offensive jokes and indeed joking more generally.)

Finally, given that rape jokes are a tool for doing identity work, we come to the last question: what is at stake in these arguments? Those who argue about the acceptability of telling rape jokes are not merely sparring over what words are sayable; they are arguing about who is able to say certain words. These are arguments about entitlement (Shuman 1993); the commenters described in this article are arguing about who is entitled to talk/joke about rape. But more than that, the commenters are arguing about an even more complex form of entitlement: who is entitled to judge whether other people are entitled to talk/joke about rape. As people sort themselves into social groups through these arguments, they are also staking their own group’s claim to these forms of entitlement.

In the context of rape jokes, questions of entitlement are inextricable from questions of power, dominance, and victimhood. In the third part of my analysis (*THE PLAYFUL IS POLITICAL*), I argued that arguments over rape jokes exist within a framework of more fraught and seemingly irresolvable disputes over whether women are victims or oppressors. In order to be entitled to judge whether other people can joke about rape, it seems, one must not be powerful; when the powerful attempt to influence speech it is censorship, whereas when the weak attempt to influence speech they are (understandably) attempting to effect change in the only way they can. To take a side in the argument over rape jokes is to implicitly make a claim about who is powerful enough to be a censor in the first place. Thus what is ultimately at stake in these arguments is the “right” to claim the mantle of victimhood; commenters battle over this right as they sort the world, including themselves, into iconized villains and heroes.

CONCLUSION

The task that remains is reconciling the two puzzling aspects of internet rape-joke arguments noted at the beginning of the article: their seeming futility and the way that they are framed as descriptive rather than prescriptive. To do this, let us reconsider what people mean when they say that rape “is funny” or “is never funny”. How is this a moral statement cloaked in objective terms?

One way of interpreting the statement is as a claim about the “real,” objective (un)funniness of rape jokes: “people may think rape jokes are funny, but they really aren’t.” This interpretation not only suggests that funniness is an inherent quality of a joke, but also implies an ideal joke-hearer who is able to correctly label things funny or unfunny. If we could find such an individual, this perspective suggests, we could tell him or her jokes and discover once and for all whether they are truly funny. By this logic, stating that “rape jokes are (never) funny” is a way of implicitly claiming a better or more objective understanding of humor and of undermining one’s opponent as just plain incorrect.

But this ideal-hearer framework is an ideological move that obscures the true stakes of the argument. Rather than arguing about what an extant ideal joke-hearer would think about a particular joke, these commenters are jockeying for the position of ideal joke-hearer (and, indeed, ideal person) in the first place. This distinction—between what an ideal hearer would think versus who an ideal hearer might be—may seem like a splitting of analytical hairs, but it draws on more fundamental ideological oppositions that lie at the heart of humor’s peculiar social power. A hypothetical question will help flesh out this opposition: in an ideal, objective world, would everyone agree on what is and is not funny? One possible answer is ‘yes’: everyone would laugh at the same jokes (language barriers notwithstanding), and humor would be a precise science (perhaps Deep Blue would kill at open-mic nights). But another possible answer, one that I lean towards, is ‘no’: in an ideal, objective world, humor would cease to exist. In order to find something funny, one must be able to imagine someone who would not find it funny.¹⁷

Note how, from this perspective, disagreement becomes a necessary component of humor: those who find a joke funny and those who do not are mutually constitutive groups that cannot exist without each other. Through this lens, arguments over rape jokes no longer seem so futile or so chaotic: they are a site where people sort themselves into stereotyped categories by enacting certain identities, and in so doing presuppose and entail the cultural significance of rape jokes. In other words, arguments over rape jokes—and the telling of such jokes in the first place—are a ritual site where identities and beliefs are performed and naturalized under the guise of a debate.

The performative nature of rape jokes and the arguments about them would not be possible without humor ideologies that allow jokes to go beyond individually instantiated pragmatic acts and enable them to carry social and political valence. This in turn enables arguments over rape jokes to stand in for a variety of more fraught, harder-to-articulate arguments about entitlement, victimhood, and power. In order to fully understand the social meaning of rape jokes, and (I propose) of jokes more generally, one must understand the culturally specific ideological framework within which “types” of jokes are associated with “types” of people. Only then can one see that what appears to be an unmediated connection between one’s response to rape jokes and one’s moral and political values is actually an elaborately calibrated network of indexicality—a network that people draw

upon and (re)inscribe every time they tell a rape joke, laugh at one, or raise their voice in protest.

APPENDIX: LIST OF DATA SOURCES

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NOTES

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¹The "Green Team" video can be viewed at <http://www.funnyordie.com/videos/fa1420df1f/green-team-from-will-ferrell-adam-ghost-panther-mckay-and-john-c-reilly> (last accessed 8/13/2010). The comic strip is the 10/24/2007 edition of *Crankschaft* by Tom Batiuk and Chuck Ayers.

²While taking care not to assume, of course, that every commenter is male, white, and middle-class.

³An exception to this is registered commenters on Salon.com; one can view their other "Letters to the Editor," if there are any, and gain a more multifaceted picture of their views.

⁴For efficiency and clarity, I use numbers to refer to data citations (e.g. A1) instead of providing all of the citation information in the body of the article. A list of data citations appears in the appendix.

⁵Irvine (1996:149) describes the "leakage" that can occur between the narrated and narrating events in reported speech, particularly when obscene language is involved. Although "rape" is not understood to be an obscene word per se, it clearly functions like an obscenity for many people, triggering very strong emotional reactions regardless of the context in which the word is being uttered.

⁶See Marcus 1992 and Helliwell 2000 for an academic exploration and critique of this topic.

⁷See Wickberg 1998 for a more detailed analysis and history of the phrase "sense of humor."

⁸Not an American, of course, but certainly a pivotal figure in modern American thought.

⁹Note that although Caldonian seems to be disagreeing with my description of "response failures" here, he is responding to someone who has criticized rape jokes and argued that people who laugh at them must hold certain (despicable) beliefs. Thus there is an implicit normalizing sentiment to Caldonian's

assertion; he or she is implying that the original poster and his ilk are abnormal because they do “run jokes past their political affiliations.” In other words, people who do this exist, but they are dysfunctional (i.e. humorless).

¹⁰See Hay 2001 for a critique of the idea that laughter is, in practice, the only acceptable response to a joke.

¹¹See Cann & Calhoun 2001 for empirical research on the interpersonal characteristics ascribed to people with “above average” or “below average” senses of humor. Cohen (2001) also discusses the role of humor in fostering intimacy, and, particularly in Ch. 2, analyzes how people react when they disagree with someone about whether a joke is funny.

¹²Herring, Johnson, and DiBenedetto (1995) suggest that this recourse to free speech is common in gender-based arguments taking place over the internet. It would make sense that the internet, commonly seen as inherently populist and individualistic, would be a setting in which freedom of speech is a highly valorized and salient presence.

¹³“Confucius says rape impossible: Woman with skirt up run faster than man with pants down” (Gavey 2005:24).

¹⁴This is similar to the ways in which one’s choice of pronouns in gender-neutral situations became socially meaningful after gender neutral language became a feminist project (Silverstein 1985).

¹⁵Bourdieu’s (1991:86–89) discussion of the gendering of *bouche* and *gueule* in French provides a nice example of a very similar iconization in action and suggests ways in which the iconization of humor may be inherently gendered.

¹⁶See Goodwin 1982 for more on “instigating” as a social practice.

¹⁷This is similar, but not identical, to Billig’s (2005) claim that laughter requires the coexistence of “unlaughter.” I take Billig to be arguing that, in order to experience amusement, we must also be able to experience an absence of amusement; my suggestion is that any specific instance of amusement must stand in contrast to a hypothetical other’s lack of amusement at the same stimulus.

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