

Rape Culture, Language, and Sexual Terrorism

Honors Thesis

May 1st, 2015

Ayanna D. Spencer

Spelman College

Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy

Dr. Shay Welch

In dedication to every survivor who has felt silenced

“rapists do not invent their rationalizations; they draw for their vocabulary on social myths reflecting ideas they have every reason to believe others will find acceptable” (Lees 1996: xiii)

“Words and images are how people are placed in hierarchies, how social stratification is made to seem inevitable and right, how feelings of inferiority and superiority are engendered, and how indifference to violence against those on the bottom is rationalized and normalized. Social supremacy is made, inside and between people, through making meanings. To unmake it, these meanings and their technologies have to be unmade.” (MacKinnon 1996: 31).

Introduction

Socialization into rape culture begins at a very young age for many girls. We are told to press our legs together when we sit, hide growing bosoms and hips, avoid tight pants, and to not be “fast”. For black girls, being fast means exhibiting signs of sexual prowess or sexual activity at a young age which may include befriending many boys, tight clothing and bright make up, and/or overt expressions of sexuality, etc. It is incredibly negative to be called fast because it is the equivalent of being called whorish at a young age. Teaching young women to mute their sexual appeal to men tells them that unwanted sexual attention and activity is predicated on their actions. From scolding by guardians to victim-blaming in the media, young women are taught that it is their responsibility to prevent sexual assault. During an anti-sexual assault speak out on-campus, I reflected on the way these messages kept me silent for so long. The language used to discipline young women’s actions and expressions of sexuality seems to have an effect on how victims view/understand sexual assault. Concerned about sexual assault victims, I began this project to explore the role of language in rape culture.

While significant work has been done on language and violence, there is little literature on the connection between sexual violence against women and language. Building on Lynne Tirrell's work on genocidal language games, I argue that sexually derogatory language perpetuates and reinforces rape culture, a culture that normalizes and accepts sexual violence. I contend that if language engenders action, then language that reinforces rape culture is a major component in propagating sexual violence. Ultimately, I claim that rape culture language is harmful and a key tool in sexual terrorism.

Rape Culture

Before engaging the role of language in perpetuating rape culture, it is necessary to be clear about my conceptualization of rape culture. As mentioned in the introduction, rape culture is a culture that normalizes and accepts sexual violence. Rape culture is constructed and maintained by numerous rape myths and assumptions that frame legal and social understandings of rape and sexual assault. Consider, for instance, the utmost resistance standard which explains that "if a woman did not resist a man's sexual advances to the utmost, then rape did not occur" (Ehrlich 2001:65). While the statutory requirement of utmost resistance was removed as a criterion for rape in the 1950s and 1960s and replaced by "reasonable resistance", the use of utmost resistance continues to frame legal and non-legal professionals' understanding of rape (Ehrlich 2001: 66). This understanding of rape largely shapes the social discourse about rape because the legal precedent acts as a standard for how we should understand sexual assault. I use social discourse to refer to the everyday language of people in the social sphere. The statutory requirement's impact is evidenced by colloquial phrases and sayings. People often use phrases

such as “it’s really only rape if you resisted” or “put up a fight”; these phrases assume the utmost resistance standard. This myth is founded on the patriarchal understanding of rape and sexual assault that describes rape as a forced/unwanted sexual act(s) with caveats (caveats is used here to reflect the dominant understanding that there are excuses /circumstances that can explain away assault). While this is only one example of a dominant rape myth, there are additional myths and assumptions that rely on the idea that there are excuses for rape.

In addition, to qualify an unwanted sexual encounter as rape, the legal system typically looks for/assumes that the perpetrator is an unknown violent assailant (Martin 1997). The myth of the dark alley rapist, a stranger that lurks in shady places waiting to attack, counters statistical evidence that most assaults are committed by someone the victim knows. This myth adds to the burden of proof the victim is tasked with, in arguing that an encounter is only “real rape” if the assaulter forced the victim to have sex under the guise of physical harm or death. Requiring victims to prove their assaulter was an unwelcomed stranger shifts attention to the crime of assault to the actions/relationships of the victim. Victim-blaming, then, underlines much of the discourse of rape. Victim-blaming refers to the act of assigning responsibility for an attack to the victim, here sexual assault. Legal standards, rape myths, and victim-blaming are all constructed through a patriarchal conceptualization of sexual assault. The patriarchal way we understand, respond to, and talk about rape constructs a culture that normalizes and accepts rape and other forms of sexual violence. This takes many forms from the way rape is described and interrogated in the news, social media, court cases, etc. Hence, this is what many feminist scholars refer to this as rape culture.

Rape culture is simultaneously shaping how we understand and talk about rape and shaped by our cultural construction of what constitutes rape. It is my argument that rape culture

serves an ideological role in framing our speech about rape. I will use “rape culture frame” to refer to the ideological frame that shapes the discourse of rape culture. This conceptualization grows out of Michel Foucault’s work on truth and power (1980). Foucault explain that traditional conceptions of power are too narrow. He claims that society functions in terms of the triangular relationship between the discourse of truth, power, and right, which equally influence one another. Truth refers to the established dominant narrative of reality which justifies/explains exercises of power which are maintained by rules of behavior, or right, which reinforces and perpetuates certain Truths.

A discourse of truth can also be thought of as an ideology which may be supported by scientific research and/or biblical evidence. The dominant discourse of truth explains and confirms reality (in other words, what we believe to be true about our reality), thus its construction is foundational for the exercise of power. Power relations (who exercises power and who lacks power and furthermore) is predicated, in part, on the justifications provided by the discourse of truth. Hence truth is a powerful agent in how we perceive power relations and how we act/behave within our power constraints. Foucault is thus necessary for exploring the ideological role of rape culture. More than simply the way society views rape, rape culture presents an ideology about rape through which we socially understand rape, sex, sexual assault, women, sexuality, etc. Thus a rape culture frame shapes how we understand rape as a society. As I will explicate later, there is an interrelated relationship between an ideological frame or social context and language. Hence a rape culture frame has a relationship with language that needs further investigation.

One important aspect of the relationship between rape culture and language that is often discussed is consent. The language of consent reveals a number of issues with rape culture.

Many scholars are concerned with defining consent and pointing out the numerous problematic ways we define consent in legal systems. Susan Ehrlich provides excellent research in *Representing Rape* (2001) to document that patriarchal understandings of rape are explicitly written into law and implicitly expressed in the language of the questioning and decisions. Her scholarship, amongst other feminist scholars, highlights that sexual consent is generally conceptualized as tacit consent. John Locke's conceptualization of tacit consent as consent inferred from one's enjoyment of the benefits of a government is seen in the way we legislate and talk about consent to sex acts. Consent is often inferred based on a woman's acceptance or enjoyment of a man's sexual advances. Consider a case Ehrlich explores from a York University disciplinary tribunal on sexual assault. When questioned by the university lawyer about why he continued his sexual advances with the complainant after she voiced she felt she was being taken advantage of to a witness at the site of the assault, Matt responds:

“at that point when she comes back to bed, at that point I wasn't even looking for consent (Ehrlich 2001:125)”

In this case, consent is presented as the fact that the woman returned to a bed which seems to indicate she is enjoying the sexual advances of the male. The attorneys and judicator accepted this act as consent because they saw tacit consent.

Matt's response is not an isolated interpretation of consent; tacit consent is typically accepted in our social discourse about sex. The assumed willingness of a woman is taken as consent to sex based on constructed social indicators. These social indicators include, but are not limited to: the way a woman is dressed, consenting to “leading” sexual engagement, flirting, and minimal resistance. We construct social indicators and myths to attempt to describe what could be construed as enjoying or wanting the sexual assault because such a construction means the

victim consented to the act(s). This creates a number of problems for the way we conceive consent to sexual acts. First, tacit consent makes consent infinite by not establishing a threshold for the extension of consent. In other words, it is unclear at what point one can withdraw consent if their “enjoyment” can be constructed as consent to any act imposed on them. It is similar to saying “if you allowed x to happen, then you wanted x to happen” which is troubling in the context of RCF. One could argue that if someone tacitly consents to one thing that they consent to a myriad of things that “logically flow” from the original consent. As Carolyn Shafer and Marilyn Frye argue in “Rape and Respect” (1977), one cannot give their consent away indefinitely even if they have given general consent at some point. One cannot give up consent indefinitely because as an autonomous person they must retain their right to revoke or change consent. It also assumes that consent is assumed indefinitely until otherwise negated distorting rape and sex. This understanding of consent is very connected to the problematic utmost resistance standard. Recall that assuming that someone consents to sex unless they show resistance is flawed because 1) expressions of non-consent are not limited to physical (or explicitly verbal) resistance and 2) rape is still rape even if one does not resist.

Second, tacit consent allows for subjective interpretation of acts of consent. Extending one act as consent to others is a problem because the parameters for which acts correlate is determined within socially constructed paradigms or frameworks, like patriarchy. To determine what constitutes sufficient correlation of consent, these frameworks organize how we interpret what correlates. This is a problem because the social indicators that we identify as acts that correlate with consent to other acts are constructed through oppressive lens. This is what allows society to create and use harmful rape myths and social indicators as evidence of consent. Here, for example, agreeing to lay in a bed is said to correlate with consent to intercourse because the

rape culture frame shapes our understanding of what social indicators equal to consent to sex.

Sex is thought to follow actions like kissing, touching, drinking. While those activities may precede intercourse in some instances, they do not guarantee that involved parties wish to engage in coitus. They may only consent to kissing, for instance. Hence, the constructed social indicators do not accurately reflect an actor's consent.

There is extensive literature on the wrongfulness and harm of rape based on how we have defined consent. Understanding rape culture requires that we know the conversations on consent and the role of problematic conceptualizations of consent in constructing rape culture. I am most concerned, however, with the way society talks about consent and the linguistic moves that construct/maintain rape culture. Our social discourse about consent tends to infer and affirm tacit consent. As I have indicated, tacit consent is a problematic conceptualization of sexual consent, thus I think language that reinforces the concept is also problematic by extension. I will argue that language that perpetuates and affirms rape culture is harmful, and thus language that affirms tacit consent is very relevant to that discussion. This will become clearer in the next section.

On Language

The previous section alluded to the conceptualization of language I will use for this paper. While traditional approaches to language have explained language as descriptive, I adopt the feminist critique that language is also normative. As Lynne Tirrell indicates, language acts to communicate, constitute, and reinforce "social and material reality" (Tirrell 1997:141). Tirrell argues that without a social context, words and phrases are insignificant. It is only through a structure of norms that language signifies anything. Thus, the social context in which language is constituted is significant to the meaning and use of language. Because it is the case that

language can only be a signifier through a social context, the social context frames what the language signifies. Language, thus, is constructed through and with ideological frameworks, and frames how we talk about, understand, and think about the world. An ideological framework refers to the theoretical scope and boundaries of an ideology. It is the lens, or schema, of the ideology through which we literally “frame” our understanding. Here, the ideological framework is the foundation for the social context through which language is grounded. Thus, language, and our speech acts specifically, will reflect a social context or ideological frame. This means there is a relationship between our social reality and language where language both reflects and reinforces an ideological frame.

If we look at patriarchy as a particular ideological frame, then there is a relationship between patriarchy and language. As many feminists have pointed out, language acts as a tool of sexist oppression through sexist semantics, privileging man as the standard for all humans and other androcentric linguistic practices. Epithets like “irrational” and “emotional”, gendered terms like bitch, and reference to a woman employee as “girl”, all serve to reinforce sexism. These are examples of language that attempts to categorize, demean, and reduce women as inferior persons. For instance, in describing all women as irrational and emotional, a speaker affirms the notion that women are not rational thinkers and therefore not full persons – persons are free rational thinkers. Hence, patriarchy plays out in and informs language. It is clear, then, that there is a relationship between patriarchy and language.

Lynne Tirrell (1998) argues in “Language and Power” that language has normative weight to reinforce patriarchal power structures. Language reflects sexist norms and reinforces patriarchy through the construction of normative practices. By referring to a woman employee as “girl”, the speaker demeans the employee in implying the woman is not adult. The inferiority

implied in the reference perpetuates the inferiority of the woman of reference and other women. Other women are assumed here because the reference can, and is, used to refer to other women and is not unique to one woman in particular. Additionally, this speech act is generally initiated to refer to a devalued job i.e. a secretary. Seeing mainly women occupying low wage, unskilled, and devalued jobs, we think the reference accurately reflects women's inferiority and inability to do "adult" jobs. Hence, patriarchy serves as an ideological frame by which language is constructed and produced. This patriarchal language structure, amongst additional intersections of systems of oppression, is the foundation for the rape culture frame. Rape culture, as an outgrowth of patriarchy, is a specific social context through which we make sense of our language, which reflects the violent culture.

Tirrell is particularly concerned about the way(s) in which language works within a system of power and how the two interact. She argues that language exists in a network of power and has power in itself to make negative phenomena acceptable and/or tolerated:

"Understanding these speech acts helps to illuminate important ways that power is enacted through discourse, how speech acts can prepare the way for physical and material acts, and how speech generates permissions for actions hitherto uncounatenanced (Tirrell 2012: 175).

Hence language plays a significant, if not a determining role, in establishing and bolstering social practices and norms. This is important when investigating language in context of systems of oppression because it indicates that language acts as a mechanism/tool of oppression. Power is exercised via discursive practices and thus language is a key component of maintaining systems of power, and often violence. Here, I use the Foucauldian understanding of power as something everyone has but may not utilize. Power in this way is useful because it helps explain that

everyone participates in the normative function of language. We all use language. The ideological justifications for power differentials are embedded in our language without a required conscious acknowledgement of the ideological commitments of our language. Thus, linguistic permissions for oppressive systems are often encoded in our language without intent.

Lynn Tirrell's analysis of the relationship between power and language is helpful to expose way(s) the language of rape culture is more than "just words". Tirrell's "Genocidal Language Games" expands on the idea that language is shaped by social practices and norms and looks at the ways language reinforces social relations and engenders action. The analysis looks at the Rwandan Genocide and the role of hate speech in setting a social climate that facilitated the justification of murder. Building on the concept of "chilling climate", a feminist concept for sexual harassment that creates a degrading social climate, Tirrell shows how derogatory language about Tutsis contributed to an outright dangerous climate. Distinguishing between slurs and casual derogations, like "jerk", Tirrell argues that deeply derogatory terms are harmful because they are tied to systems of oppression. This relationship to systems of oppression are what transforms terms that may hurt or insult into words that are harmful. Significantly, "derogatory terms used in speech acts are action-engendering within a context" (Tirrell 2012: 193). The inferential role of derogatory terms is action-engendering because they are tied to systems of oppression and function within a system power hierarchies that lead to violent acts. Words communicate meaning through the inferences evoked by the words in context. Action follows from derogatory terms based on the inferences that are justified by systems of oppression, in the case of the Rwandan Genocide harmful inferences such as an ethnic group is deserving of death. The network of power hierarchies is intricately connected to which actions are made permissible through derogatory language. Hence, Tirrell provides a strong foundation

for analyzing how the language of rape culture is connected to the harm and violence of rape culture.

Derogatory Language

I am interested in the harm done by terms and phrases that support rape culture. Thus, I need to clarify what makes a term or phrase derogatory in its different uses and contexts based on the inferential role of language. As Lynne Tirrell indicates, deeply derogatory language is distinguished by its relationship to systems of oppression and violence. Words and phrases are derogatory because they invoke inferences that rest on and support systems of oppression. Explicit derogatory language describes words and phrases that directly infer/provoke considerations linked to systems of oppression. In contrast, implicit derogatory language is based on and infers misogynoirist, racist, sexist, transphobic, and other oppressive discourses of Truth understandings and is embedded in the language. Here, the information denoted by language in a speech act relies on and conveys derogatory implications instead of being directly derogatory. This analysis is based on the theory of the inferential role of language. The theory is important to frame the problem(s) created by derogatory terms.

First, a derogatory term can be determined by the direct expressive commitment of a speaker. The expressive commitment simply refers to the commitment(s) made by the speaker's use of a derogatory term, namely commitments to the harmful inferences of the derogatory term (Tirrell 1999). In addition to the expressive commitment of derogatory language, the derogatoriness of a term or phrase can be determined by its sentential context, not simply its assertion. Whether embedded in an antecedent or consequent, using the derogatory language carries the weight of the harmful/violent inferences when the sentential context supports the derogatory term or phrase. And even when derogatory language is mentioned and not used, it

may still be derogatory based on its sentential context (Tirrell 1999). So then, we have to specify under what conditions, the language of rape culture is harmful. While I will not contend that rape culture language is derogatory, I will argue that rape culture language is harmful because of its derogatory implications.

The Problem of Rape Culture Language

Rape culture is embedded in and instituted through language. I conceive rape culture language (RCL) as the various words, phrases, and other colloquia that constitute a discourse that normalizes rape and blames victims. A discourse of truth that maintains that rape is the victim's fault is constituted by specific language that supports the discourse. Language that contributes to rape culture is both explicit and implicit in everyday speech. Harmful language is often used casually in conversations, jokes, and songs. Hence, rape culture language is pervasive and not easily identified in speech. Commonly used words and phrases of RCL are often overlooked as harmful because of their commonness and pervasiveness. Identifying rape culture language is the first step toward uncovering the harm in speech acts that reinforce rape culture.

Language that supports sexual violence disproportionately targets women as a social group responsible for their assault(s). Thus my focus for RCL is on the harm and violence perpetuated against the various intersections of women through language. Based on the inferential role of language, rape culture language promotes and affirms sexual violence through the dangerous inferences it conveys. Recall that I see rape culture as a violent culture and system that normalizes, promotes, and justifies sexual violence against women. Thus language that supports the rape culture frame is harmful because it is connected to the violence and power imbalance of patriarchy and rape culture.

The relationship between power and language is important to assess the harmfulness of rape culture language. As Catherine MacKinnon argues, patriarchy constitutes a power imbalance through the dominant/submissive gender binary and is thus inherently harmful for women (1989). Women are subjected to violence as a result of their social position. In other words, violence is perpetuated against a woman because she belongs to a dominated social group. Language reinforces gendered violence through reinforcement of the dominant/submissive binary. Lynne Tirrell argues that the gender power imbalance is encoded in language through messages of female inferiority. Hence, rape culture language “establish(es) and reinforce(s) a system of permissions and prohibitions that fuel social hierarchy” through inferences that reinforce the subjugation of women through sexual violence (Tirrell 2012: 175). The justifications and permissions embedded and inferred in these speech acts are a mechanism for normalizing and accepting sexual violence against women.

The language of rape culture is harmful because it suggests violence, subordination, domination, and dehumanization of women. Considering rape culture, I contend that terms and phrases are harmful when they justify sexual assault, blame the victim for the assault, attempt to co-op/distort lack of consent, and promote sexual violence in general. Language that justifies sexual assault is harmful because it affirms violence and unwanted sexual acts by providing false justifications. Justificatory language often suggests that women deserve the violence inflicted on them and thus such language has the effect of promoting sexual violence.

Similarly, language that blames the victim for their assault(s) infers that violence is justified because the victim did something to warrant sexual assault, or did not do something/enough to prevent assault. Victim-blaming rhetoric is also harmful because it shifts the responsibility away from the violent perpetrator to the victim. If we do not see the offender as

culpable of a violation against a person, then we conclude that either no violation was committed or the victim is responsible. In this way, victim-blaming language excuses, dismisses, and silences accounts of sexual violence. In addition, I see language that co-ops/distorts lack of consent as making the same claim. If consent can be fabricated, then no sexual assault occurred. In other words, because consent distinguishes sex and rape, establishing consent or tacit consent nullifies a claim to assault. Thus language that misconstrues silence for consent is harmful because it distorts rape as just sex. Lastly, any language that promotes sexual violence against women is harmful because it perpetuates violence against women. Violence is perpetuated through language in explicit and implicit words and phrases.

First, consider the common line “she was asking for it”. The statement alone, without a social context, simply indicates that a subject, “she”, asked for something, “it”, in the past tense. When someone uses this line, our social context enables us to infer what characterizes the subject and what she was asking for. As Lynne Tirrell argues, it is only through a social context that language becomes a signifier. Patriarchy acts as the social context, here, that gives the phrase additional meaning. “She was asking for it” is generally used to communicate that a woman positioned herself in such a way that made her prone for/to assault and thus implicitly consenting. The type of justified harm ranges from domestic violence to sexual assault and other forms of violence against women.

The myth of the provocative victim explains that victims of sexual assault provoke attack through their behavior and thus are at fault for their assault. This myth is often employed to dismiss accounts of sexual assault, shift responsibility of attacks, and shame women for their behavior. Hence, the speech act “she was asking for it” commits to the harmful justifications the myth suggests. Without explicitly mentioning sexual assault or rape in particular, the phrase

communicates that assault is the logical result of certain socially constructed actions/behaviors. These socially constructed actions/behaviors include, but are not limited to: the way a woman is dressed, consenting to “leading” sexual engagement, flirting, and minimal resistance. If a woman does X or looks like Y or behaves like Z, she wants a (unwanted) sexual response. The phrase, “she was asking for it”, is usually used to respond to an account of sexual assault, or another unwanted sexual encounter, and thus used to evoke the myth as a way to justify violence against the victim/accuser. Using the phrase, in any form it may take, elicits ideas of violence against women as permissible and justified. Similar phrases include: “well look at what she’s wearing”, “how do you expect a man to react”, “you can tell she wanted it”, “she got wasted for a reason”. Thus such speech acts blame the victim for her assault, one of the ways RCL is harmful. The harmful speech act varies for different intersections of women, however.

Rape culture language has different meaning for women of color and black women in particular. When the phrase “she was asking for it” is used, or variations of the phrase, to refer to white women, it assumes that they behaved abnormally and thus their assault is a justified punishment. This is based on the false dichotomy of the good woman versus the bad woman. White femininity is constructed on the notion that women should be pure or untainted and thus must control their sexual drives to be a good woman. Their “inability” to mute expressions of sexuality is said to be the cause of sexual violence, hence the myth of the provocative victim. The construction of the good white woman contrasts that of the sexually deviant black woman, and other women of color (Collins 2005).

As Joy James points out, black women are historically stereotyped as uncivilized sexual beasts (2002). The black woman is hypersexual with uncontrollable sexual urges; she perpetually wants sex. It is from this construction of the black woman’s sexuality that James theorizes about

the unrapeability of black women. Founded in colonial ideology, she argues that black women are seen as unrapeable because they are seen as always wanting and willing to have sex. If someone “rapes” a black woman, they are only fulfilling her desire and thus it was not rape. The black woman cannot perform “proper” womanhood because she is inherently deviant, or a bad woman. Hence, victim blaming for black women is based on characteristics of their person and not particular deviant behavior. They are always “asking for it”; their assaults are nullified with this inherent victim-blaming stereotype. Instead of being burdened with proving their behavior does not justify rape and other forms of sexual violence, black women are burdened with proving they are people and not sexual beasts.

The various ways that rape culture language promotes violence against different intersections of women does not change the harmfulness of the language. Interlocking systems of oppression alter the context and meaning of RCL to affirm violence against different women. Queer women, for example, are also subjected to harmful rape language but it is typically intertwined with homophobia and transphobia. So, phrases like “you just need some dick” and others take on harmful intersecting meaning when referencing queer women. This line is generally used for queer and non-queer women to assert that a woman’s perceived attitude can be fixed by sexual intercourse with a man. When intentionally used for queer women, however, the phrase asserts that homosexuality can be “fixed” with the experience of heterosexual sex. This is harmful to queer women as it attempts to trivialize homosexuality by suggesting it can be reversed. In suggesting a queer woman “just needs some dick”, a speaker asserts the woman’s sexuality identity is negotiable because she cannot know if she is queer without heterosexual sex. This understanding is rooted in the idea that heterosexual relationships are the only legitimate romantic relationship for men and women, thus women want men. The assumed sexual desire for

men is offensively imposed on queer women by the phrase. Furthermore, the line has a different meaning for queer women in context of sexual violence. Some heterosexual men assault queer women under the guise that queer women want and need penetration and thus they are giving queer women what they secretly desire. Historically, forced sex with men is argued as a corrective measure or “cure” for homosexual women. The history of sexual violence against queer women and the continued violence is asserted by the harmful phrase. With the prevalence of street harassment, queer women are subjected to a phrase that reminds them their sexuality is not accepted and their safety is at risk. The differences are important to note to not oversimplify or ignore the ways rape culture language supports sexual violence in varying ways.

In addition, RCL includes language that reduces male culpability for sexual violence against women. This is language that suggests men are not responsible for their acts of sexual aggression, sexual harassment, and/or sexual assault. Such language includes: “c’mon he couldn’t control himself”, “boys will be boys”, “it’s a natural reaction”, “that’s what men do, what do you expect”. The phrases can be used in various contexts, but in relation to sexual violence against women, they affirm and excuse sexual violence by men as natural and provoked. They are implicitly a form of victim-blaming in that such language mitigates men’s responsibility for sexual violence. In suggesting that male sexual aggression and assault is natural, the language asserts that men are not violating women’s bodily autonomy but acting out natural responses. Additionally, this type of RCL relies heavily on the provocative victim myth to establish the female victim as the cause of any wrongful behavior of the male.

Sexually explicit and degrading terms like slut, hoe and thot¹ also promote sexual violence against women for different intersections of women. These degrading terms label

¹ thot: noun, typically used to refer to black women to mean “that hoe over there”.

women as hyper-sexually active and worthy of ridicule and shame for deviant sexual behavior. Slut is typically used as a slur against white women, whereas hoe and thot are more common to refer to black women. The racial distinction seems to be the result of intra group cultural practices, despite the interchangeability of the terms to suggest a woman is hyper sexually active. The terms reduce women to their sexual activity and stereotypes women as always wanting sex because that is their nature as promiscuous women. The terms play on the good woman/bad woman dichotomy by implying whorish women are bad women who are overcome by their sexuality. Similar to Joy James' analysis, stereotyping women as sluts and hoes implies that they always want sex and cannot thus be raped or otherwise sexually violated. It is this flawed understanding that is inferred when people use the terms as a way to dismiss sexual assault charges based on the "character" of the victim. The term may be explicitly used in a speech act, or implicitly embedded in language that attempts to characterize a victim as whorish as a means to imply she wanted the "alleged" rape. For instance, defense attorneys often question victims about their sexual history to construct the victim as slutty and unrapeable. Though only one example of rape culture terms, slut and hoe are commonly used terms to justify sexual violence against "sexually deviant" women.

Rape culture language is thus harmful in its various manifestations because it promotes sexual violence against women. Rape culture terms and phrases do this when they justify sexual assault, blame the victim for the assault, attempt to co-op/distort non-consent, and promote sexual violence in general. They serve this function by inferring harmful rape myths and justifications that support violence and are intricately linked to the larger system of patriarchy that subordinates women. In this way, rape culture language creates linguistic permissions for sexual violence against women and makes such violence seem reasonably acceptable. RCL does

more than create a chilly climate, a term feminist scholars use for sexual harassment in the workplace. Additionally, it is also not always an explicitly aggressive climate as Lynn Tirrell suggests of the derogatory language of the Rwandan Genocide. But rather, I contend that rape culture language constructs and reinforces a perpetual climate of sexual terror.

I will develop the argument for a climate of sexual terror in the next section, but need to address potential concerns before that discussion. Some might contend that the way I define rape culture language is too broad and that I do not distinguish harmful language and general language well. In other words, some might argue that rape culture language may be problematic, but not necessarily harmful. This argument has been posed by folks that argue that there is not a strong causal relationship between rape culture language and sexual assault. But there are a number of answers to this claim.

First, a direct causal relationship does not have to be established to prove that there is a relationship between language and violence. It is not the case that every instance of rape culture language directly leads to an act of violence. Instead, the language conjures up notions of violence related to the inferences made about a social group. Additionally, language makes acts of violence against members of the social group more palpable as the linguistic permissions serve to justify and make reasonable those acts of violence. If someone is linguistically constructed as less than a person or a punishable person (think the sexually deviant woman), acts of violence against this person are believed permissible. This happens because the justifications are constantly repeated and disseminated through language in multiple spheres, such as the social sphere and legal sphere. Hence, there is a causal relationship between language and violence but a strong direct causal relationship is not necessary to prove rape culture language is harmful.

Second, the causal relationship argument misses the point. Rape culture language works within and constructs a system of violence. As Marilyn Frye (1982) argues, one cannot simply look at one of the barriers of oppression to understand the complex system of barriers that make up oppression. Similarly, looking only at speech acts and resulting sexual violence is an ineffective way of analyzing the relationship between language and sexual violence. Patriarchy and sexual violence does not exist/occur because of language, rather they are complex systems maintained by harmful language that affirms violence against women. In this way, the relationship between language and violence is more than the potential for sexual violence resulting from a speech act. RCL supports potential acts of sexual violence but also provides language for excusing and justifying violence, affirming violent male sexual domination and aggression, negating/distorting women's lived experiences of violence, and generally maintaining a power structure predicated on violence. The various uses of RCL indicates that the relationship between language and violence is about perpetuation of the physical manifestations, support for the continued dismal of gendered violence and dissemination of fear.

Rape Culture Language and Sexual Terrorism

Language has the power to promote and incite violence and reinforce systems of domination, and thus rape culture language has terrifying implications. Language that reinforces the sexual domination of women and rape culture generally, is largely accepted and the norm. As I stressed earlier, the language of rape culture is embedded in much of our everyday colloquia. Using "fuck" to describe sex is a fairly accepted use, though the term implies sex is a ritual of

domination. One either “fucks” or “gets fucked” and thus one person is sexually dominated by the other; this person is typically a woman².

Rape culture language permeates nearly every sphere of a woman’s life. Rape culture language is utilized in media, court cases, everyday conversations, social media, etc. Susan Ehrlich’s *Representing Rape* highlights the harmful rape myths and justifications courts rely on in decision-making and general rhetoric, namely the outdated utmost resistance standard – now reasonable resistance standard. The utmost resistance standard explains that “if a woman did not resist a man’s sexual advances to the utmost, then rape did not occur” (Ehrlich 2001:65). Additionally, the prevalence of rape sloth memes³, rape jokes, and videos of assault and rape fantasies in the social sphere is another indication that rape and sexual violence is normalized in that mocking and viewing rape is considered funny and casual. Hence, women are constantly hearing rape culture language that tells them that rape and other forms of sexual violence are permissible. This creates a climate, or rather reinforces a culture, of sexual terror.

Before I demonstrate the role of rape culture language in constituting and reinforcing sexual terrorism, let me clarify what I mean by sexual terrorism. Sexual terrorism is a culture or climate of fear of sexual violence perpetrated by men that alters/informs women’s ability to freely and safely navigate the world. I think Carole Sheffield provides an excellent definition of sexual terrorism. She claims that “sexual terrorism is the system by which males frighten, and by frightening, dominate and control females...sexual terrorism, then, is violence perpetuated on girls and women simply because they are females” (1995: 409-410). This system operates through the dichotomy of good woman/ bad woman, the production of fear through popular culture, and legitimation and social support for persons who harm women. The normative,

² This assumes heterosexual sex but cross-applies to other sexual partners, where one person is dominated. Sex as cooperative and mutually respectful is not the dominant standard.

cultural, and social levels at which sexual terrorism operates indicates that it is more than a fear of bodily harm. Sexual terrorism is also a theoretical framework for analyzing the ways patriarchy constructs and reinforces the social subordination of women. Additionally, Sheffield argues that sexual terrorism fits the five basic components of terrorism: ideology, propaganda, indiscriminate violence, “voluntary compliance”, and perceptions of victim and oppressor characteristics. Hence, I contend that language plays a crucial role in constituting, reinforcing, and framing sexual terrorism.

The action-engendering role and discursive role in maintaining power imbalances of rape culture language are crucial to the formative weight RCL holds in constituting, reinforcing, and framing sexual terrorism. This argument is distinct from saying sexual terrorism is simply reflected in language. Rather, I argue language is a powerful mechanism through which sexual terrorism is performed and constituted. Lynne Tirrell’s conception of the relationship between language and power, with Michele Foucault conception of power, is significant to illuminating the role of language to promote/sustain sexual terrorism. Power is exercised via discursive practices and thus language is a key component of maintaining systems of power and violence. This relationship leads to the argument that the inferential role of RCL is action-engendering because it is tied to systems of oppression and functions within a system power hierarchies. Harmful rape culture language, then, acts to support violence against women at an ideological level as well as in practice because it motivates action. Action follows from such terms based on the inferences that are justified by systems of oppression, in this case harmful inferences such as whorish women cannot be/want to be raped.

Using Michel Foucault’s understanding of the relationship between power, right, and truth, it is clear that anyone’s speech acts that affirm rape culture language has the effect of

terrorizing women. This is true because the fear and threat of sexual violence is implied in the harm of the words and phrases, not based on the speaker's intentions or ability to enact physical violence. Hence, women and men alike can participate in the sexual terror elicited by rape culture language. In this way, it is nearly impossible to escape sexual terrorism as embedded and replicated through rape culture language. Rape culture language both reminds women of their susceptibility to sexual violence and justifies such violence. The harmful language establishes linguistic permissions for sexual violence and incites violence as an action-engendering mechanism. Thus rape culture language is a mechanism by which sexual terrorism is constituted and reinforced.

Rape culture language serves to terrorize women and achieves this through discipline. Like Sandra Bartkey's analysis on discipline and beauty, I propose that RCL has the effect of, and is often used to, discipline the sexual expression and sexuality of women (1998). RCL is a way of policing women's bodies through threats of sexual violence for not subscribing to societal norms. The pervasiveness of the language in every sphere of a woman's life guarantees that she is constantly reminded of sexual norms. She hears the way newscasters describe the characteristics and behavior of rape victims and probably has friends that casually question her wardrobe choices. This linguistic policing of women is a mechanism for controlling women and legitimizing women's subordination/submission.

Maintaining the sexual norm of submission to men and repression of sexual desire is justified for the woman's own safety and good. Rape culture language terrorizes and disciplines women in two ways then: (1) the linguistic permissions of derogatory rape culture language are internalized through repetition and their real world confirmations (i.e. rape myths are confirmed as True in practice) and (2) the derogatory speech acts evoke fear of inevitable/inescapable

sexual violence when uttered. This maintains male dominance over women's sexuality, freedom of movement, and sense of safety.

Rape culture language operates on the normative, cultural, and social levels that Sheffield identifies. On the normative level, rape culture language relies on rape myths and justifications that are founded on the patriarchal construction of female sexuality. As I touched on with the terms slut and hoe, the dichotomy of proper sexual repression and submission versus deviant sexual behavior is based on the good woman/ bad woman dichotomy. One should restrict their sexuality to the norm of the "proper" woman if she wishes to save herself from harm because expressions of deviant sexual behavior excuses sexual assault. Derogatory rape culture language that proposes that not performing in accordance with the norm necessarily makes one vulnerable to sexual violence acts social control.

On the cultural level, derogatory rape culture language manifests fear through popular culture. A cultural acceptance and normalcy of rape is all encompassing, thus as the term implies, rape culture infects every aspect of culture. Rape jokes in dining halls, office break-rooms, movies, and songs are common and accepted in the mainstream. Other popular culture mediums like television shows and films use rape scenes for heightened emotional impact, often to justify retributive violence of a protagonist, while also suggesting rape is an ultimate punishment for all women e.g. movies like *Carmen Jones*. This supports perpetrators of sexual violence. Language that shifts responsibility from perpetrators to victims, victim-blaming language, supports perpetrators of sexual violence by saddling the victim with the burden of proof. Most rape myths and justifications provide legitimatization and social support for rapist by excusing their behavior and putting the burden of proof and prevention on victims.

While sexual terrorism is targeted at women, many will argue that language does not incite terror in some women in many instances. This fact suggests the argument that language is not a key component of sexual terrorism but rather simply a by-product. This being the case as speech acts that employ rape culture language do not guarantee a woman will directly feel, or acknowledge, the harm of the language. Sexual terrorism as Sheffield explains it, does not hinge on whether or not women feel terrorized by every instance of fear. It is about the complex system that forms a climate of frightening women into subordination. Thus, for instance, there are women that happily laugh at rape “jokes” and may even tell a few herself and hence not be frightened by RCL. One sees themselves disconnected from the violence perpetuated by the speech act. The raped woman in the joke is someone else to the woman, not her. While a woman may not see herself as the potential victim of rape or see the harm in telling the joke, she is nonetheless still subjected to sexual terrorism and subordination. The one instance or multiple instances of RCL in speech she sees herself separate from is still a part of the interwoven system of sexual terrorism. And the power imbalance and violence maintained by sexual terrorism still affects her qua being a woman.

Additionally, language is more than a by-product of sexual terrorism, but rather an active mechanism for maintaining the system of fear. As explored earlier, power is enacted through language and thus language is powerful in itself to discursively reinforce power hierarchies, make violence more palpable, and even incite violence. In these ways, language plays a major role in maintaining fear and sexual terrorism in general. Furthermore, language plays a unique role in the internalizing process. Part of what makes violence more palpable, is the repetition of affirming harmful rape culture language. Constantly hearing language that normalizes rape and blames victims helps one begin to detach from the act itself, accept the rape myths and

justifications, and understand rape as an inevitable consequence. One internalizes the messages encoded in the language and this has a dual effect. On one side, women internalize the fear of being sexually assaulted through language, and on the other side, they internalize a detachment from the violence through language— that rape happens to bad women who cannot behave. Sexual terrorism, then, is maintained and constituted through language at an internal psychological level. Language is not just a by-product of sexual terrorism, it is a way to police and discipline women.

Conclusion

Language is a power tool of systems of oppression and of violence. I have argued that there is a language particular to rape culture which normalizes rape and blames victims of sexual assault for their assault. What I term “rape culture language”, is harmful because it justifies sexual assault, blames the victim for the assault, attempts to co-op/distort non-consent, and promotes sexual violence in general. Rape culture language contributes and reinforces a system of sexual terror that reinscribes women’s subordination and men’s control over women, and disciplines women and their sexuality. In light of these arguments, I hope we will begin to understand the harm and power of language and combat rape culture language.

Bibliography

- Addelson, Kathryn Pyne. *Impure Thoughts: Essays on Philosophy, Feminism, and Ethics*. Temple University Press, 1991.
- Anderson, Irina, and Kathy Doherty. *Accounting for Rape*. London and New York: Routledge, 2008. Print.
- Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression*. New York and London: Routledge, 1990. Print.
- Bartky, Sandra. "Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power" in *The Politics of Women's Bodies*, edited by Rose Weitz, New York: Oxford University Press 1998.
- Beran, Harry. "In Defense of the Consent Theory of Political Obligation and Authority". *Ethics*, 87, no. 3 (1977): 260-271.
- Cahill, Ann. "Foucault, Rape, and the Construction of the Feminine Body." *Hypatia* 15.1 (2000): 43-63
- Code, Lorraine. *What Can She Know: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge*. Cornell University Press, 1991.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York: Routledge, 2004. Print.
- Cudd, Ann E. *Analyzing Oppression*. Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Duran, Jane. "Feminist Epistemology and Social Epistemic". *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture, and Policy* 17.10 (2003): 45-54.
- Duran, Jane. *Toward A Feminist Epistemology*. Savage: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc. 1991. Print.
- Ehrlich, Susan. *Representing Rape*. Routledge. 2001
- Foucault, Michele. "Two Lectures". In *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Colin Gordon, 78-108. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. The Crossing Press, 1983.
- Frye, M., and C. Shafer, 1977, "Rape and Respect", in *Feminism and Philosophy*, M. Vetterling-Braggin, F. Elliston and J. English (eds.), Savage, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, pp. 333-346
- Goodin, Robert E. *Protecting the Vulnerable: A Reanalysis of Our Social Responsibilities*. University of Chicago Press, 1985.
- Grasswick, Heidi E. "Feminist Epistemology as Social Epistemology". *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge, Culture, and Policy* 16.3 (2002): 185-196.
- Hampton, Jean. "Feminist Contractarianism". In *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*. Edited by Louise M. Antony and Charlotte E. Witt, 337-368. Westview Press, 2002.
- James, Joy. *Shadowboxing: Representations of Black Feminist Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan 2002. Print.
- Mackinnon, Catherine. *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*. Harvard University Press, 1987.

- "Sexuality, Pornography, and Method: Pleasure under Patriarchy". *Ethics*, 99, no. 2. (1989): 314-346.
- MacKinnon, Catherine A. *Only Words*. Harvard University Press. 1993
- Martin, Patricia Yancey. "Gender, Accounts, and Rape Processing Work." *Social Problems* 44.4 (1997): 464-482
- Mills, Claudia. "Choice and Circumstances". *Ethics*, 109, no. 1 (1998): 154-165.
- Pakszys, Elbieta. "What and to Whom is Particularism for the Theory of Cognition? On the Feminist Epistemological Destination". *Dialogue and Universalism* 18.4 (2008): 57-60.
- Pineau, Lois. "Date Rape: A Feminist Analysis." *Law and Philosophy* 8.2 (1989): 217-243
- Ryan, Rebecca. "The Sex Right: A Legal History of the Marital Rape Exemption." *Law & Social Inquiry* 20.4 (1995): 941-1001
- Sheffield, Carole. "Sexual Terrorism". In *Women: A Feminist Perspective*. Edited by Jo Freeman, 1-21. McGraw- Hill Humanities, 1994.
- Smiley, Marion. *Moral Responsibility and the Boundaries of Community: Power and Accountability from a Pragmatic Point of View*. The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Tirrell, Lynne (1999). Derogatory Terms: Racism, Sexism and the Inferential Role Theory of Meaning. In Kelly Oliver & Christina Hendricks (eds.), *Language and Liberation: Feminism, Philosophy and Language*,. SUNY Press.
- Tirrell, Lynne (1997). Language and Power. In Alison M. Jaggar & Iris Marion Young (eds.), *A Companion to Feminist Philosophy*,. Blackwell.
- Tirrell, Lynne (2012) Genocidal language games. In: Maitra I, McGowan MK (eds) *Speech and harm: controversies over free speech*. Oxford University Press, Oxford, pp 174–221
- Weeks, Jeffrey. *The Languages of Sexuality*. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.
- Whaley, Rachel Bridges. "The Paradoxical Relationship between Gender Inequality and Rape: Toward a Refined Theory." *Gender and Society* 15.4 (2001): 531-555
- Wylie, Alison. "Doing Philosophy as a Feminist: Longino on the Search for a Feminist Epistemology". *Philosophical Topics*, 25 (2), 345-358. 14. p. Fall 1995