Why Did the Rapist Cross the Road?
A Case for the Feminist Rape Joke

by

Nina Marie Gurak
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To all the young people who have cried in the shower and the feminist killjoy comedians who inspired this thesis. Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION:

“Turn Your Scars Into Stars”

I once saw a poster of a child staring at a sea of stars with a caption that read, “Turn your Scars into Stars!” When I saw it, I laughed. That poster, with its emphatic imperative, demanded that trauma be productive; suffering is only valid if something beautiful comes from it. This sentiment has always bothered me. Trauma is not beautiful, and there should not be overwhelming pressure to make so. We expect too much of those who have experienced violence, asking them to be healers, educators, activists. I believe these demands actually enable sexual violence by turning it into an occasion for courageous, even inspirational, self-knowledge, which is why I chose to start my thesis with this discussion. This thesis could easily be read as turning my scars into stars, or a justification of the desire to do so. In fact, I marketed it as such in my law school applications. However, I want to reject this individualizing mindset of trauma as something that happens to one person, through which she must work to make it productive. Instead I hope this thesis can collectivize experiences of trauma to discuss the political issue of sexual violence and the ways in which feminist joking about rape can resist harmful narratives and talk back to rapists and a culture that supports them.

While trauma does not have to be productive, a feminist response to it can be. I will highlight a few survivor-comedians in the third chapter, who use their experiences to tell jokes about the frustrations rape survivors face. However, choosing to do something productive with pain does not make survivor-comedians any better or worse than any other rape survivor. Writing this thesis does not prove
anything about my personal healing; it does not make me “all better.” It makes me a rebel, laughing in the face of those who would deny me my own reckoning with my experience. This thesis was born out of a frustration with a single narrative of feminist organizing that demands seriousness, when I have learned that oftentimes humor is not only healing but the most effective means of communication for feminist messages.

While laughter may be the best medicine, can it heal a broken society that supports and enables rapists? I think it might. When I talk about healing, I am not referring to healing from an individual incident of violence. I am referring instead to a collective healing, a societal healing, whose need stems from centuries of engrained sexism, racism, homophobia, and the ways in which some people feel entitled to other’s bodies. Humor can provide feminists a new strategy to address the ridiculousness of socially constructed narratives of sexual violence, including a particularly vicious comedic discourse on rape—rape jokes. While rape jokes may not be new, twenty-first century rape jokes have taken a new and drastic turn. Throughout this thesis, I will use the term ‘rape joke’ to refer to jokes whose subject matter includes any form of sexual or gender based violence, which can include but is not limited to rape. Can feminists reclaim comedy to fight back against these narratives? Comedy is an effective tool for feminist scholars and activists. It should not be taken lightly, because it is a powerful force and, as I will demonstrate, highly influential. By using comedy to talk back to rapists and societies that enable and support them, feminists take back the power, reclaim comedic speech, and channel the humor and rage to create a larger counter comedic discourse on sexual violence.
In order to make these claims, feminists must first look at comedy critically. By investigating its mechanisms and functions, feminists can better learn how to use comedy as a tool of resistance and part of a larger strategy for change. For the purpose of this thesis, comedy, humor and all its various forms (satire, parody, joke telling, etc.), while lumped under the umbrella of ‘comedy.’ This distinction makes logical sense because all humorous productions operate on similar principles. Communication theorist John C. Meyer (2010) cites Apte when he writes, “Humor is viewed as cognitive experience involving an internal redefining of sociocultural reality and resulting in a mirthful state of mind, of which laughter is a possible external display (p. 311). Comedy requires at the very least a shared cultural reality, on which any joke must be predicated. Humor Theorist D.H. Monro (1963) argues that laughter is the foundation upon which we should build a theoretical understanding of comedy, and details what produces laughter in both humorous and non-humorous forms. He offers chemically or physically induced forms of laughter such as tickling or nitrous oxide as forms of non-humorous laughter. Monro (1963) suggests humorous laughter involves any breach or forbidden breach of the normal order of events, indecency, nonsense, small misfortunes, want of skill or knowledge, and veiled insults (p. 40). The first chapter will examine in more detail the nature of these forms of laughter and the two major theories that explain comedy and humor. I will then examine the role of the comedian and the impact of humor on a cultural discourse of rape. I will end the chapter with an examination of Judith Butler’s *Excitable Speech*, which can teach feminists about the ways in which humor can be successful or fail to further feminist anti-rape movements.
The second chapter is an examination of rape jokes and the ways in which they create and structure rape as an inevitable reality for women. I begin with the example of Daniel Tosh’s rape joke and illustrate the different shapes and forms of rape jokes. It is not enough for feminists to argue that rape jokes are not funny. Rape jokes continue to be successful (get laughs). In order to speak back to rapists, feminist activists must learn how these jokes operate, so that they can produce feminist rape jokes. For this chapter, I selected jokes that felt representative of the various forms of rape jokes. This analysis discusses the patriarchal assumptions at the root of rape jokes that make them funny, which feminists must address when joking about rape.

The third chapter illustrates how and why feminists must joke about rape. Using Sara Ahmed’s ‘feminist killjoy,’ I will demonstrate how feminists can conceptualize feminist killjoy comedians as a counter-narrative to the socially constructed perfect victim. I then give examples of feminist rape jokes and explain, using comedic theory, how these jokes operate and what feminist can learn from them. Joking about rape may be difficult for some, but by highlighting the inaccuracies and cruelty of the rape script and rape culture, feminist killjoy comedians can dismantle harmful cultural misconceptions one laugh at a time and construct a vital feminist comedic discourse on rape.

I will conclude by highlighting the future of joking about rape and the importance of widening the comedic discourse on rape. In the appendix, I have also added a personal essay, titled, “Schrödinger’s Virginity and the Case of the Rape Resistant Hymen,” to illustrate a possible example of written feminist rape jokes.
Comedy is a powerful tool. It has been used to mock feminists for centuries, and it is time we took it back. When we change the narrative, when feminists are the ones who laugh and who make others laugh, we enact a resistance to the patriarchal cultural narrative of sexual violence. Because this cruelty of rape culture is indeed absurd, it is laughable. Ahmed (2010) writes, “the struggle over happiness forms the political horizon in which feminist claims are made” (p. 59). Feminist joking about rape is not turning scars into stars; it is a radically reimagining of the political horizon, where feminist discourse becomes the cultural discourse and rapists are the punch line.
CHAPTER ONE:

Splishin’ and a Splashin’: Comedy’s Mechanisms of Power

So he says if he had a time machine, he would go back and kill Hitler, I love how he thinks he can just kill Hitler. So I thought to myself, that’s a noble purpose for a time machine, but I wouldn’t have killed Hitler, I would have raped him. Because I think that would have stopped him from doing all that shit. If he had been raped by me he never would have done that stuff.

“Should we invade Poland?”

“No I don’t feel good, I’m just going to take a shower”

Low self esteem and you know. –Louis C.K. (Comedy Official, 2015)

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“That’s Antoine Dodson. Instead of crying in the shower for three hours, he fought back. Rape is an awful crime, but the fact is without rape, we wouldn’t have this great video” –Daniel Tosh, in reference to a widely circulated video about rape in a predominantly black community (Malis, et. al. 2011).

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“This show is so dirty, I don’t know whether to hug you or run a shower for you so you can sit there alone crying and clenching your knees.” –Ted Mosby, How I Met Your Mother, referring to Robin’s child acting career, which was implicitly sexual (Kang & Fryman, 2010).

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The jokes above illustrate a sampling of modern rape jokes in America. This chapter will examine the various ways jokes like these are crafted, what makes them funny, and the ways in which they impact our collective understanding of sexual violence. Ultimately, I will illustrate their resistive capacity and their importance to feminist anti-violence work. This chapter will give a basic overview of comedy theory, asking, what makes people laugh and why. I will address the leading theorists in comedy and highlight their relevance for feminist issues, specifically rape jokes and narratives. With a thorough examination of the two leading theories of comedy superiority and incongruity theory, I will address vital questions of laughter and comedy. I will then contextualize this theory within a broader theory of performance by examining the history of comedic license and locating comedic speech in a greater framework of power and popular discourse. I will conclude the chapter with an analysis of comedic speech acts, using Judith Butler’s theory on excitable speech to better understand the tangible effects of comedic speech and begin to unwind the complicated process of reclaiming feminist comedic speech as a resistive strategy for social change.

**Superiority Theory and Social Identity Theory**

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1 It’s always the giggling girl. The captain of the cheer squad, the virgin, the girl who is just ‘one of the guys.’ It’s always the one who shies away from drugs. She’s white of course, and very skinny, like very very skinny. She, and it’s always a she. She doesn’t have a care in the world. Until one night, fade to black and gray, flashes of hands, the sound of a struggle, flickering light. Silence. Commercial break. Next scene. She climbs slowly into the shower cradles her bruised body and as tears cascade down her already drenched face, she sighs in despair. Cue mournful music and a PSA by the National Sexual Assault Hotline.

2 The picture of the American teen rape survivor, as depicted by teen television dramas and after school specials. This is what I have to emulate: a performed victimhood by a 26-year-old actress playing a 16-year-old girl. She doesn’t look anything like me, and yet, I’m attracted to her, to her cleanliness, the magical healing power of the shower, and I don’t really have anything else to do on a Tuesday late afternoon.
Thomas Hobbes, one of the first philosophers on the subject of comedy, gave birth to what is now known as superiority theory, a major strain of comedic philosophy. D.H. Monro (1963) in his book, *The Argument of Laughter*, states that Hobbes argues that jokes elicit laughter when they boost self-esteem through out-group denigration (p. 83). Monro uses superiority theory to explain four of his major types of humorous laughter: veiled insults, small misfortunes, want of skill or knowledge, and to a lesser extent, indecency. Superiority theory most easily explains veiled insults, or more broadly disparagement humor, which psychologists define as, “…remarks that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target” (Ferguson and Ford, 2008, p. 283). Sigmund Freud in *The Joke and the Unconscious* addresses the heart of superiority theory in relation to disparagement humor and insults. He states, “By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable, or comic, we achieve, in a roundabout way, the enjoyment of overcoming him” (Freud, 1905, p. 128). Therefore, according to the principles of superiority theory, something is made humorous when it is the site of overcoming someone or something that previously had authority, including the comedian himself. For example, jokes that make fun of political figures like former President George W. Bush, are humorous because he is someone with tremendous

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3 The Federal Communications Commission takes three tenets into consideration when looking at indecent material:
   1. Whether the description or depiction is explicit or graphic
   2. Whether the material dwells on or repeats at length descriptions or depictions of sexual or excretory organs
   3. Whether the material appears to pander or is used to titillate or shock (Obscene, 2015).

4 Under this definition, pubic hair should be hidden from view and nipples are surely considered indecent. Due to the nature of the shower, nakedness is required, but nudity is taboo, illegal even. Therefore, knees must be positioned to cover nipples and thighs must meet to create an impenetrable
power. However, humor does not always have to poke fun at those in a position of power.

Watching someone slip on a banana peel is inherently funny. Why? Surely this act is painful for the victim, and bananas are not inherently humorous, phallic imagery aside. Many theorists claim that the answer to this question lies within superiority theory, specifically Monro’s categorization of laughter resulting from small misfortunes\(^5\). Superiority theory posits that jokes and situations are humorous and produce laughter when they situate the person laughing as better than the person experiencing the misfortune or joke. Therefore, slipping on a banana peel is funny, because the person slipping on the banana peel has experienced a misfortune, which allows the person viewing the scene to feel superior to that individual (Monro 1963). Monro uses this example and others to illustrate four of his categories of humorous laughter-producing scenarios. He contends that the humor of the joke increases exponentially if the individuals can be seen as the cause of their own misfortune. He gives the following example:

**Scenario one:** Man A, when attempting to place a nail in the wall, hits his thumb instead of the nail.

**Scenario two:** Man B is trying to use a hammer to place a nail in a wall. Before Man B takes a swing, Man A steps in and proclaims that he has superior knowledge of hammers. Man A attempts to place the nail in the wall, but instead hits his thumb.

Monro argues that scenario two produces more laughter, or in Freudian terms, pleasure, because not only is Man B the cause of his own misfortune, but he has also

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\(^5\) I don’t know why I thought this would be a good idea, I think to myself as I slide out of my jeans and t-shirt and toss them on the floor next to my tub. The buttons rattle as they hit the tile. I stumble a little trying to fidget out of my underwear and catch myself on the doorframe.
professed expertise in a field and was proven unsuccessful (Monro, 1963, p.77). In other words, Man A posits himself as superior, when he is not; therefore the experience of inverted superiority amplifies the pleasure of the joke. If the audience feels as if the object of a joke experienced a misfortune, they will laugh, but if the audience feels that the object of a joke caused or contributed to their misfortune, they will laugh harder. It is important to emphasize that the joke must hinge on a small misfortune. If Man A were to become severely injured, the joke would cease to be funny.

Ferguson and Ford, psychologists who study disparagement humor, also synthesize variations of superiority theory that extend beyond an individual to incorporate group dynamics and identity. Vicarious superiority theory, first introduced by Lawrence La Fave, explains that humor produces positive self-esteem enhancement through the disparagement of others. However, self-esteem is inherently linked to social identity, or what La Fave calls identity class markers and the positive portrayal of one’s social group relative to another. Jokes are successfully humorous when they enhance self-esteem by placing a listener’s social group as superior to another social group (Ferguson and Ford, 2008, p. 291). Vicarious superiority theory is further expanded through Zillman and Cantor’s disposition theory, in which they argue that a subject does not have to identify with the in-group, but rather must only have a positive disposition towards that group to find a disparaging joke regarding that group not funny. Ferguson and Ford (2008), however, note, that disposition is context dependent⁶; one day an individual might feel positively toward a group and

⁶ I think to myself, “isn’t this a strange twist?” Yesterday, this was just an ordinary shower and today it becomes a transformational promise of rebirth!
thus find the disparagement of that group unpleasant, while the next day, the same person may be negatively disposed towards the group and find the joke humorous (p. 293). For example, men may find sexist humor abhorrent or hilarious depending on their disposition toward women on any given day.

Ferguson and Ford further develop what they call social identity theory to explain the motivation for creating disparagement humor. Social identity theory suggests that social groups\(^7\), when faced with an identity threat (i.e. a power struggle, threat to social order, etc.) will respond with disparagement humor, which creates a sense of superiority by denigrating another social group. This then creates the need for positive distinctiveness, which situates the social group as superior by affirming the group, which, in turn, produces amusement (Ferguson and Ford, 2008, p. 296). Social identity theory is helpful in understanding tendentious (pointed) jokes and disparagement humor as a threat response. For example, men who create sexist humor may do so as a response to the rise of feminist discourse in order to maintain their power and assert their unique dominance. While traditionally this theory has focused on disparagement humor produced by dominate groups, it is important to recognize the possibility that historically marginalized groups can turn the tables and use disparagement humor to mock those with more power. Such jokes afford marginalized group the opportunity to strike back at those who have historically oppressed them, which cannot only produce amusement, but actually affect social change.

### Incongruity Theory and Irrationality

\(^7\) Google Search: “Does Kelly in 90210 cry in the shower after being raped?” Google tells me no. She must not be one of us.
Monro also details incongruity theory as a major strain of humor theory. Humor as a result of incongruity is omnipresent. When a performative fails and produces something unexpected. When a skilled baker uses a time-tested recipe and it fails to produce phenomenal cookies. Monro (1963) offers the example of climbing a mountain in high heels or puns. All of these events rely on a simple reordering or an unexpected twist. It produces pleasure through its inversion of normal. Incongruous jokes can also do political work by joining to seemingly different ideas together. Monro (1963) argues, “The joke, it may be said, lies wholly in tracing a connection between two dissimilar things: the implications may or may not be present that the two are after all really similar” (p. 66). In other words, joking connects two disparate things and gestures towards similarities. By comparing two seemingly distinct things and drawing connections, comedians are able to speak coded truths to an audience. Another example of incongruity theory is the mention of a social taboo to evoke shock or convey a sense of edginess (Monro 1963, p. 43). Comedians will often employ this strategy when trying to gain access to a crowd or test boundaries. Someone might laugh at jokes that do not logically follow, only to find the joke is actually speaking a truth that is poignant. Comedians can harness this truth through absurdity to demonstrate injustices and call for action or reinforce oppressive hierarchies.

Absurdity and incongruity are irrational and as such are humorous. In fact, most comedy can accurately be described as absurd in at least one way. This unique characteristic is precisely what makes comedy successful and such an effective mode

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8 Question: Why did the rape victim cross the road?
Answer: To go home and cry in her shower.
of communication. Freud argues that the success of a joke is its ability to evade rational criticism. He writes, “The thought seeks the guise of a joke because this will commend it to our attention, making it appear more significant and valuable to us, but above all because this costume bribes our critical reason and confuses it” (Freud, 1905, p.127). Absurdity and incongruity help disarm the audience, creating a false sense of security that primes a humorous reaction. In other words, the inherent irrationality of the (successful) joke thwarts all rational criticism and allows audience members to derive pleasure from the joke, while also absorbing the coded intention behind it. Jokes are unusually capable of effective communication, which I will explore in more detail in subsequent sections.

**The Role of the Comedian**

Comedians and humorists occupy a specific space in society, which allows them to communicate messages that would otherwise be considered controversial by exercising comedic license. This ability is linked to a long history of the comedian, which Lawrence Mintz discusses in “Stand up Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation.” Mintz argues that comedians have existed since the beginning of recorded history. He points to a tradition of mocking those deemed ‘defective,’ persons who could use their exclusion from social power as a protection against retaliation when they announce that the emperor has no clothes. He writes, “Traditionally, the comedian is defective⁹ in some way, but his natural weaknesses

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⁹ My first consideration was the cleanliness of sitting in a tub, which due to my stellar housekeeping ineptitude, was most likely covered in germs. Previously, this fact did not concern me, but since I was about to place my bare ass on the tub, I decided that I should give it some thought. I was met with an overwhelming sense of discomfort, as I realized that I could not possibly calculate the number of bacterial microbes on the bottom of my tub. A quick Internet search would prove futile. And I would ultimately choose to sit on the white acrylic bottom.
generate pity and more important, exemption from the expectation of normal behavior” (Mintz, 1985, p. 74). Comedians present as ‘defective,’ or what Mintz will later call the ‘negative exemplar,’ in many ways. They may discuss their issues with addiction, depression, inability to fulfill societally proscribed gender roles, etc. By joking about their ineptitude, comedians give the audience a sense of superiority and a permission to laugh at them\textsuperscript{10}, while also convincing the audience to grant them space to make a critical commentary. Most commercially successful comedians are white, heterosexual, able-bodied men, and use their social power to gain access to comedy, but they are still viewed as different from and marginal to the audience. They are nonetheless given a stage, a microphone, a captive audience (or at least initially primed audience), or an online outlet through which to espouse their views, without fear of retaliation from the audience. These factors allow comedians to speak from a dual position of power and marginality. This dual identity uniquely situates them to either promote subversive ideology or reinforce the status quo.

As Mintz concluded, comedians are given a special permission based on their perceived flaws, which he calls comedic license. While leading theorists shy away from an exact definition of comedic license, its suggested meaning is a form of social capital, which extends power to comedians to speak with a limited impunity, as Mintz

\textsuperscript{10}I proceeded to climb into the tub, but was presented with yet another problem, what temperature should the water be? Should the water be scalding hot, as if to wash off the uncleanness of the act, warm to soothe a broken soul, or cold to wake up to the harsh realities of life? One cannot simply tell the temperature of water through a television screen, so I had to use my best deductive reasoning skills. First and foremost, every scene has at least one dramatic shiver. The politics of shivering are complex webs of sensation and emotion. Shivers are both involuntary and reactionary, and can signify pain, pleasure, or both. In the specific scenes that I am attempting to emulate, the shiver is generally followed by more tears or a defeated lowering of the head, leading me to conclude that this is not a pleasurable shower shiver. The shiver speaks to a masochistic tendency of the shower. It must not be pleasant. It must be a reminder. It must create a type of reparative suffering that brings cleanliness and rebirth. I decide the water must be hot and twist the knobs with my toes to adjust.
(1985) describes, “for deviate behavior and expression” (p. 74). Comedy is an audience-dependent art form. Comedic license guarantees the comedian the platform and the initial attention of an audience, who enters into an unspoken contract of cooperation with the comedian. This contract is a function of a shared understanding of comedy as an art form with certain conventions: the role of the comedian as jester, the significance of a microphone and stage\textsuperscript{11}, movie theater, or television show, etc., and a financial transaction of payment for services (i.e. paying for a ticket to a comedy club, movie, cable, etc.). The transaction does not necessarily have to be monetary. Time can also be used as currency in this exchange. Audiences invest time or money and expect laughter in return. While online content complicates this formula, I argue that comedic license still holds because of its social relevance in other scenarios. For example, watching a humorous video on YouTube is both free and easy to immediately turn off, as there are no social rules about closing computer tabs; in this case, fame is what the comedian seeks and laughter is what the audience demands.

Comedic license is also the historical role of the comedian as jester and in some ways less than the audience. Because of this positionality, the comedian is afforded a certain leeway, a rope with which to hang himself. It is the permission to speak truths, but only within a specific social context. In other words, the comedian must work to extend comedic license beyond the initial permission. The comedian does this by navigating a vast array of social rules. Comedy must not be too subversive or too edgy; it must instead achieve the delicate balance of commentary.

\textsuperscript{11} I probably should have thought about lighting before climbing into the tub. The idea of getting out to adjust the lighting is unappealing. Natural lighting would be best, but since my bathroom does not have an external wall, I am left in mostly darkness.
and humor, absurdity and reality. Comedians must successfully evade rational criticism (Freud, 2003). The audience effectively polices comedic speech. They have the power to decide what is funny, who is commercially successful, and what is circulated as a viral clip on the Internet. They help to regulate the production of sometimes wildly controversial speech. A comedian, for his part, can always claim that he is “just kidding” should the power that be take offense, which lets his comedic claims stand while also protecting him from retaliation.

Comedy is an effective tool of communication. By relaxing the audience and releasing inhibitions, comedians can convey messages with little resistance. John C. Meyer (2000) in “Humor as Double-Edged Sword,” differentiates four key functions of humor in communication: identification, clarification, enforcement, and differentiation. Identification and clarification are used to unite the comedian and the audience while enforcement and differentiation are used to divide (p. 311). Comedians most often employ identification, enforcement and differentiation when using disparagement humor. Comedians use humor to identify with their audience, to create a bond that makes the comedian and the audience part of a social in-group (p. 318). The comedian then uses humor to enforce social norms by offering up those who are in violation of such rules for ridicule (p.320). Comedians then create humor disparaging an out-group, positively differentiating the in-group (the comedian and the audience) from the out-group (p. 322). Comedians can harness what Meyer calls

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12 I’m suddenly remembering a ‘More You Know’ public service announcement about taking shorter showers to protect the environment. In it, Al Roker sings, quite painfully, to emphasize that one should sing shorter songs in the shower to conserve water. I took off my watch before I got in and lost track of time. I wouldn’t want to disappoint Mr. Roker.
‘the double-edged sword’ of humor, that it divides and unites to communicate strong messages about social norms and behaviors.

Comedic license is fundamental to understanding the resistive capacity for comedic speech. Comedians, historically outcast individuals, can claim a critical perspective on social norms and collective beliefs. What makes comedians such successful social commentators is their ability to transgress socially accepted positions not only without judgment, but also with the tacit approval of an audience, their comedic license.

**Humor and its Consequences**

Humor functions through a release of inhibitions and its avoidance of critical response. Comedians may enact, or at the very least approve and normalize, attitudes and behaviors that would otherwise be taboo. Furthermore, comedians, through their use of absurdity and violation of taboo, are effective communicators. This section will examine the ways in which comedians exploit sexist humor and role of comedy in sexual and gender-based violence and harassment. Using Manuela Thomae and Afroditi Pina’s survey of psychological studies on the subject titled, “Sexist Humor and Social Identity: the role of sexist humor in men’s in-group cohesion, sexual harassment, rape proclivity, and victim blame,” I will explore the various ways comedic speech is tied to aggressive behavior. Thomae and Pina start with a survey of social identity theory and ask how sexist humor disparages women and extends patriarchal power, through out-group denigration. Furthermore, they assert that the enjoyment of sexist humor is directly correlated to the degree to which that individual is high in hostile sexism. They argue, “These findings suggest that the perceived
funniness and offensiveness of sexist humor are closely linked to pre-existing attitudes and amplify (‘release’) these attitudes” (Thomae & Pina, 2015, p. 192). Thomae and Pina agree with Ferguson and Ford and Freud, who conceptualize humor as coded hostility. This is especially true for sexist humor. Another study conducted by Kathryn Ryan and Jeanne Kanjorski produced a similar finding amongst college student participants. They assert, “The higher the men in the sample rated the funniness of ten sexist jokes, the higher were their self reported rape-attitudes and relationship aggression” (Thomae & Pina, 2015, p. 197). Those who enjoy sexist humor are more likely to be sexist (and display sexism through sexual aggression) and vice versa. However, this does not mean that sexist humor’s effects are limited to those who are high in hostile sexism.

Thomae and Pina also address the various ways in which those low in hostile sexism are still impacted by sexist humor, and how exposure to sexist humor exacerbates aggressive behaviors in those with high hostile sexism as demonstrated by increases in ‘rape proclivity’ and ‘victim blame,’ two important measures of impact. Thomae and Pina (2015) use Malamuth’s [1981] definition of rape proclivity as ‘the relative likelihood to rape under various conditions that may or may not occur’ (p. 196). Using this definition, they compared many studies that demonstrated a link between rape proclivity and sexist humor. These experiments involved exposing a participant to sexist humor and presenting a judgment-based rape scenario. The scenarios, often coded as either ‘stranger rape’ or ‘acquaintance rape,’ would ask their subjects if they thought a rape victim gave her consent, or if they themselves would have sex with a woman who was clearly intoxicated (Thomae & Pina, 2015). Rape
proclivity is measured using hypothetical scenarios to determine whether an individual would engage in non-consensual sexual intercourse (rape). Thomae and Pina (2015) cite Viki et. al [2007] and report that those researchers, “conclude that the likelihood of acquaintance rape can be amplified following the exposure to sexist jokes” (p. 197). Many other studies corroborate these findings, indicating that those who are already sexist are more likely to experience higher rape proclivity when exposed to sexist humor. Even those low in hostile sexism, once exposed to sexist humor (as opposed to non-sexist humor), were more likely to victim blame, or to find ways a rape victim was culpable for the rape (Thomae and Pina, 2015, p. 198).

Victim blame is demonstrated in various ways including but not limited to criticizing a victim’s clothing or behavior or level of intoxication prior to an assault. Victim blame has significant impacts on how victims access support services and justice. In the same study, those men exposed to the sexist humor were less likely to take rape seriously and assign harsh penalties to offenders (Thomae and Pina, 2015, p. 198). Regardless of whether an individual is high or low in hostile sexism, the individual is likely to be affected by sexist humor, either as a potential rapist or rape enabler or as a potential victim seeking justice. The authors take one final metric into consideration, aversiveness. If participants exhibit high aversiveness to sexist humor (i.e. find it offensive), than the humor will have limited impact on rape proclivity (Thomae and Pina, 2015, p. 197). In short, as long as sexist jokes do not appear offensive, the listener extends the comedic license, and comedians are able to produce measurable effects in men’s rape proclivity and tendency towards victim blame.
Rape proclivity is not the only effect of sexist comedic speech. Humor, particularly sexist humor and rape jokes, contribute to a public discourse about sexual violence that produces broadly insidious effects. Comedy is an institution and as such creates social truths based on the discourse it produces. Comedians are imbued with the power to create a comedic discourse. Foucault, in *Power and Knowledge*, reveals that power is inherently decentralized. It is this very decentralization that gives power to the various institutions that produce a collective understanding of truth. Many institutions such as academia, medical communities, and the media are invested with a power that creates discourses and produces social truths (Foucault, 1980). Comedians exercise power by using comedic license to speak sexist truths that resonate with people; that is, comedians participate in the creation of a sexist discourse about women and rape. Comedy is a multi-million dollar industry, and like any other business, must produce a commodity consumers’ desire.

For example, the rape jokes at the beginning of this chapter can be used to illustrate the power of comedic speech and the ways in which the collective understanding of the individual experience of ‘rape victim’ is shaped by these jokes. Foucault (1980) writes, “One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that’s to say to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework” (p. 117). To understand comedy as a discursive process, we must ask: what are the various ways in which victimhood is spoken into being and specifically characterized? How does comedy contribute to a discourse about rape that is also spoken by the criminal justice system (police, district attorneys, judges, law professors), churches, schools, newspapers and
so on? Jokes contribute to a public discourse on victimhood and help to create a widespread social understanding of raped bodies as ruined and rape survivors as unclean and in need of a shower, damaged, and their personhood fundamentally shattered. By situating rape survivors as desperately striving to wash away their indelible experiences, this discourse of rape creates a public understanding of rape as social death. Rape jokes embellish an understanding of rape and gender relations that is already intimately intertwined in the public consciousness and contributes to a larger conversation about gender and violence.

These jokes position raped bodies as a site of irreparable damage, and redeem themselves through their dismissal of blame. By evoking comedic license, comedians can skirt the responsibility for this discourse, by ‘only joking.’ However, these jokes are spoken into truth through that same license. Foucault (1980) writes,

“Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true” (p.131).

Comedians are afforded a special site of power in history, which allows them to navigate a complex web of discipline to create sometimes-hilarious public performances that make seriously consequential truth-statements about sexual violence. Just because comedians speak from a stage and not necessarily the halls of congress, does not make their speech less politically relevant. In fact, it is their distance from such sites of power that grant them the authority to contribute to the public discourse on truth and produce concrete realities, while avoiding critical objection.
Thomae and Pina make a compelling argument about the effects of sexist humor, and demonstrate its discursive power to discount the violence of rape and increase the denigration of women. We must remember, nonetheless that even if a sexist joke may cause some men to be more likely to rape, the joke is not actually committing the rape, nor is the joke explicitly commanding men to rape. It is completely possible, in fact necessary, that some men hear sexist humor and are not more likely to rape, even if they are not offended by the humor. The studies instead demonstrate the importance of taking comedic speech seriously—not too seriously.

Comedy works through indirection and creates a liminal space between words and actions. To understand how feminists can exploit this liminality, I turn to Judith Butler’s theorizing of performativity in her book, *Excitable Speech*. She elaborates a critique of regulations around hate speech, a counter-intuitive feminist approach that offers a way to think about what’s happening when comedians joke about rape.

**Excitable Speech: Joking as Temporal Possibility**

Butler works through J. L. Austin’s study of so-called illocutionary and perlocutionary speech. Illocutionary speech is performative, in that its saying is also a doing. For example, “I now pronounce you man wife,” when spoken by a licensed minister, in the saying seals the wedlock. Such speech is sovereign, and the speaker is in control of its effects. Performance is in itself a doing. Butler’s analysis of performative speech casts into question this apparently inevitable efficacy. Hers is a reparative approach that seeks out and exploits the gap between statements and their effects.

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13 **Thigh Gap**: noun. “A thigh gap is a space between the inner thighs of some women when standing upright with knees touching. A thigh gap has become an aspect of physical attractiveness that has been associated with fragility and femininity” (Wikipedia). Used in a sentence: *A thigh gap could...*
effects. She states, “As [performative] utterances they work to the extent that they are given the form of a ritual that is repeated in time, and hence maintain a sphere of operation that is not restricted to the moment itself” (Butler, 1997, p. 5). Butler explains speech acts are given ritualized meanings that extend beyond the actual speech act. The speech act carries with it the significations of the uttered words and phrases prior to the initial speech act and the burden of future utterances, by signaling a reinforced meaning to a word or phrase. In this way, a word or phrase lives in the past, present and future simultaneously.

The same can be said for joking. The success of a joke is its illocutionary act of producing laughter. A joke, similar to a speech act, can be uttered without efficacy, and produce no such laughter. As previously argued, a number of factors influence a joke’s success, including but not limited to the comedian, the context, the audience, and the content of the joke itself. Jokes exist in a similar historicity as speech acts. A joke can never fully be separated from the historical sum of its parts, nor can it be ignorant of the future implications for the joke. Freud hints at this historicity when he articulates his theory on topical humor. He states, “[some jokes] attain a certain lifespan, in fact a life-history, consisting of a flowing and a decline and ending in complete oblivion” (Freud, 1905, p.118). In short, he argues that humor that relies on shared knowledge, is topical, is funny only in that moment. Of course, as long as the

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inconvenience someone who is trying to crouch in a tub and conform to the FCC standards of decency. I do not have this problem.

14 My friend once told me that if I wanted to cry, I should think of dead puppies. She said it helped her avoid turning in her homework on time. All she had to do was conjure the image of thousands of dead puppies, and she became a puddle of tears. This seemed suspicious. I talked with my other friends at lunch and they all confirmed that conjuring images of dead puppies was a sure way to induce tears. As the hot water scalded my neck, I whispered the mantra to myself in order to manufacture my tears.

15 “Dead puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies”
audience knows the history of the event on which the joke is premised it will continue to be funny into the future. Freud’s theory of comedy rests on the idea that humor is a ‘rediscovery of the familiar.’ He argues that topicality emphasizes a newer history, one that is shared\(^{16}\). He asserts, “[topicality] is a matter of a particular qualification of what is familiar: it has to be fresh, recent, untouched by forgetting” (Freud, 1905, p. 119). The history gives weight to comedic speech, making it funny, and allowing it to perform its illocutionary act successfully. A word without its history, similar to a joke, becomes meaningless or humorless, because words, like jokes, rely on a shared understanding of a history\(^{17}\) imbued in words and phrases. It is in this temporally-dependent space that Butler argues resistance can blossom.

Butler begins her analysis with a dissection of threats, because threats most closely occupy the space between verbal violence and physical violence. Threats promise a violation in the future. She writes, “Implicit in the notion of the threat is that what is spoken into language one might actually do” (Butler, 1997, p. 9). Threats exist in a space that exemplifies the power of linguistic violence\(^{18}\). They are uttered with the full weight of what is to come, and are successful if understood to have illocutionary force; striking fear into the hear of addressee at the moment of utterance so that the threat of violence is already a violent act. That someone should not experience fear in the face of a threat may seem ludicrous\(^{19}\), but that possibility is

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\(^{16}\) “Dead puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies”

\(^{17}\) “Dead puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies”

\(^{18}\) “Dead puppies, dead puppies, dead puppies”

\(^{19}\) Despite my whispered recitation, I could not conjure a successfully upsetting and tear-inducing image. The best I could recollect was the poppy field from The Wizard of Oz and the image of thousands of puppies on a very confused, drug-induced haze. I had not expected this reaction. I wish I had had the foresight to research alternative methods to making one cry. I recall reading somewhere that if I squinted hard enough at a fixed spot, I might be able to cry. I picked a spot on the faucet, locked eyes with my pale contorted reflection and squinted. Suddenly a torrent of burning shower
there in the space between words, the opening between one utterance and the next, that space of iteration, which allows for deviation, error, and political—and comedic—opportunity. No threat of violence is fully and always performative, and threatening words can be hijacked by a comic and turned against the very one who utters the threat.

A sexist joke, while not a direct command to immediately commit violence against women, has been proven to have real harmful effects, including violence against women (Thomae and Pina 2015). Words have power, but that power is contingent on who is speaking them and where they are spoken, and how they are received. The distance between laughter and fear is exactly where the resistive capacity of humor lies. To successfully threaten, one must not only possess the performative authority to create the trembling of fear through uttered threats, but the perlocutionary power to enact the consequences of the threat. Threats create a scripted interaction between the one who threatens, who must hold the authority to intimidate, and the object of the threat, who must feel fear when faced with the threat. Butler recognizes the possibility for changing this script. She asserts, “The threat may well solicit a response, however, that it [the threat] never anticipated, losing is own sovereign sense of expectation in the face of a resistance it advertently (sic) helped to produce” (Butler, 1997, p. 12). Butler states there is an opportunity when the object of the threat does not respond in the way the person making the threat intended, when the illocutionary act does not successfully disable the one addressed with fear. Butler (1997) describes, “The interval between instances of utterance [and their effects] not

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water began flooding into my eyes. Still unable to produce tears, I splashed some water on my cheeks and decided to just fake it.
only makes the repetition and resignification of the utterance possible, but shows how words might, through time, become disjoined from their power to injure and recontextualized in more affirmative modes” (p. 15). What makes this space particularly in the realm of possibility? Butler (1997) argues that all speech has the possibility to produce something other than its seemingly natural and necessary progression of effects (p. 39). If a person threatens and the victim of the threat laughs in response, resistance is enacted.

The same could be said for a comedic performance. When a comedian, who holds the authority to produce laughter, fails to do so, the comedic speech act fails. When a standup tells a joke that bombs, critics give poor movie or television reviews, or the reader puts down the book or essay; the speech is inefficacious. The illocutionary power of the joke is precarious. Humor theorists have fought lengthy battles for recognition in mainstream academia because humor is inherently subjective, meaning it is dependent on its illocutionary success, which is inherently precarious. Jokes can be explained, but audience is key to understanding a joke, again based on a shared historical context of words or phrases that produces a recreation of cultural familiarity. This shared meaning should produce laughter, but it doesn’t always20. That is what makes comedy an equally precarious thing to study. It is only marginally successful. The audience for a rape joke does not have to respond with the laughter that is troubling tied to violence. If fact, because laughter is so precariously situated the joke can bomb, fall flat, and the comic be hoisted by his own petard.

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20 Defeated, I turn off the water and grab a towel. Standing in the tub, I dry myself off and let out an exasperated sigh.
The failure of the locutionary and perlocutionary act is not, however, enough to create a substantive resistive force. Simply not laughing at a rape joke is not enough. Feminists have not been laughing for years, and it has not produced a substantive resistive response. Not laughing is a start, but the comedian is a powerful authority figure in American culture that will not die at the whim of feminist activists and scholars. Instead, feminists must usurp this powerful performance art and reclaim it to send their messages and turn hostilities around\textsuperscript{21}. To talk back to rapists and the societies that enable them and produce an alternative to the conventional rape joke, the feminist rape joke, which will help turn the disparagement humor away from women and onto rapists and the culture that supports them. Feminists can reclaim and shift narratives about rape as social death and discursively widening possibilities for rape survivors.

Comedic speech functions as a successful communication mechanism through its reliance on superiority or incongruity. The comedian’s success in joking is directly dependent on the context and the authority of the speaker. These characteristics coalesce to create the comedic performance. The performance is not to be taken lightly. Many studies have shown the real effects of sexist humor including increased rape proclivity and sexual aggression. However, humor produces a rare window of opportunity to resist sexist humor and turn it around, and to change the script from being laughed at to being the ones producing the laughter. Butler has argued that the gap between speech acts opens this resistive capacity. Feminists must not only refuse

\textsuperscript{21} I laugh to myself at the absurdity of the situation and walk out of the bathroom closing the door behind me. I sit down at my desk and begin my homework for tomorrow, hair still drying in a towel.
laughter in the face of sexist rape and violence humor, but also harness the power of comedic speech and talk back to a society that enables sexism and sexual violence.

There are multiple complications with these theories. How can feminists reclaim an art form that has been wielded as a tool for their oppression? What are feminists to do when they are confronted with speech that walks a line between a joke and a threat? The next chapter will look more closely at rape jokes and how they operate. It will also examine their historical context and the current climate of rape jokes that contextualize anti-rape feminist humor in a larger discursive dialogue of rape and sexual violence.
CHAPTER TWO:

A Rape Victim Walks Into a Comedy Club…Rape Jokes and Their Impact

It was the night of July 6th, 2012. The Laugh Factory, a comedy institution, situated in the heart of Hollywood on the infamous Sunset Strip, was bustling with the anticipation of a new but wildly popular comedian, Daniel Tosh. Tosh, an already successful standup comic, had become even more successful after his Comedy Central television show, Tosh.0, debuted in 2009. Tosh was famous for lampooning Internet sensations, often with humor that would later be described as “off-color” or “offensive.” But tonight, the audience was brimming with excitement for the notorious comedian. The show was going well for Tosh. He started off with his usual mildly vicious bits without resistance from the audience. Then, Tosh began talking about how rape jokes are always funny because rape is hilarious. A female audience member, who was enraged at the suggestion that rape is always hilarious, stood up in the crowded room and yelled, “Actually, rape jokes are never funny!” Tosh, taken aback by the comment, paused for a moment. Ever the professional, he had dealt with hecklers before. He looked up and said to the audience, “Wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by like 5 guys right now? Like right now? What if a bunch of guys just raped her…?” (Cookies For Breakfast, 2012). The audience member, a young woman, ran out of theater as the crowd laughed. The next day a friend of the audience member would pen a blog post that would reverberate around the country. Major news networks picked up the story. Headlines ridiculed Tosh for joking about raping an audience member, feminist bloggers wrote think pieces about his heinous
actions, other commentators were quick to claim free speech, some comedians rushed to defend comedic license and expression. The Onion, a satirical publication, even went so far as to pen an article titled, “Daniel Tosh Chuckles Through Own Violent Rape” (2012). In an unpopular move, Tosh apologized for the joke. An act some would call caving to mob mentality and the death of freedom of comedic expression. It was the joke that inadvertently launched the nation into a dialogue about comedic speech, its importance, and its impact.

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Comedians often joke about difficult subjects, but why are rape jokes especially upsetting? Or rather why was Tosh’s joke so important? Comedians frequently exercise their comedic license to speak with impunity about a variety of touchy topics including rape, but Daniel Tosh’s now notorious joke struck a nerve. What makes rape so special? By evoking rape, comedians can demonstrate their craft, taking something traditionally thought of as dark and serious and making it laughable. Paradoxically, jokes about rape draw their humor from their proximity to tragedy, violation and assault, without having to actually confront these realities. Joking about rape disassociates the hurt and pain from the word, and instead inverts it to mean something else, something funny. As Freud (2003) explains, joking is both a rediscovery of the familiar and if successful, an exercise that evades rational criticism; so rape jokes rely on a cultural script that allows rape to be divorced from tragedy, making it acceptable, excusable or otherwise funny in specific circumstances, due, in part, to who is victimized and why. The cultural scripts that make rape jokes funny are often misconceptions about the reality of sexual violence,
making these jokes especially pernicious because they rely upon and reinforce false ideas about sexual violence.

When cultural critics, comedians, and the general public use the term ‘rape joke’ they often mean a joke dealing with the subject of rape in an offensive or abhorrent manner. These jokes vary in shape and size, but ultimately, they revolve around rape as humorous and rape victims as people to be laughed at because of their victimization. Superiority theory best explains these jokes. In Chapter one, I discussed the various ways in which something is humorous if it produces a feeling of superiority in the audience, or if the audience is made to feel as if the ‘victim’ of the joke is the cause of their own misfortune. Similarly, rape jokes rely on the audience to perceive that the victims of violence brought it upon themselves. Pressures to stay relevant in ever-changing world, perceived threats to free speech, and a desire to seem edgy have propelled rape jokes onto the stage and onto the television, movie, and computer screens of many Americans. This chapter will examine the history of these types of jokes and the various categories of rape jokes, what makes them funny, and the cultural implications of this humor.

A Brief History of Rape (Jokes)

Rape jokes are a significant part of the cultural discourse on rape. Comedians tell them, because they get a laugh. When rape jokes successfully produce laughter, they convey a cultural truth worth studying. Rape jokes point to the various ways in which society has evolved its definition of rape. The first definition of the word rape, noun, in the Oxford English Dictionary, refers directly to property. It reads, “the act of taking something by force; esp. the seizure of property by violent means; robbery,
plundering. Also as a count noun: an instance of this, a robbery, a raid. Now rare (chiefly arch. and literary)” (“Rape,” 2016). This definition conveys the history of rape; it is a property crime, and its linguistic evolution to refer exclusively to sexual assault, is complex and woven into a legal and social history of violence. In *Redefining Rape*, Estelle Freedman examines the definition of rape and the social movements in America that have sought to redefine it. She argues, that it was not until the fifteenth century, that English common law used the term *rape* to refer to ‘the theft of a woman’s virtue’ because this theft constituted a violation of the rights of the male relative or husband (Freedman, 2013, p. 4). Women were defined as the property of men in English common law, until the late nineteenth century. British women were the property of their fathers, until they became the property of their husbands. Similarly, black women in America were the property of their white slave owners or if emancipated, the charge of their husbands. Therefore, a crime against the body of a woman was really a crime against the property of a male. After the colonization of North America and throughout the Jim Crow era, rape was used to perpetuate a fear of black men and justify lynching throughout the South. The rape and sexual abuse of black women at the hands of white men was a tool of white terrorism. The repercussions of this racialized violence are still felt today through racial disparities in sentencing for rape and assault (Freedman, 2013). Freedman offers an explanation for the evolution of the definition of rape. She argues that the foundations of a liberal democracy require, as Locke wrote, the consent of the governed. This political philosophy assumed self-sovereignty, a privilege exclusively extended to white males, making consent in a sexual context and furthermore,
ownership of one’s own body, unattainable for those that were not male or not white, or both (Freedman 2013, p. 7). When the feminist and racial justice movements sought to redefine rape, these movements understood embodiment to mean “our bodies, ourselves.” The slogan makes clear that this feminist understanding conceptualized bodily autonomy as the ownership of one’s body – in other words, a kind of property. No longer owned by men, women own themselves. Today rape and sexual violence make up a range of crimes under current law. These crimes often honor that the assault was a violent violation of another’s body. Rape, therefore, in the legal sense has evolved from exclusively a crime on the property of other’s to a violation of one’s own bodily ownership.

However, this does not completely remove property from the equation and that is the source of the problem. In order to give consent, one must have authority over something or someone. As Patricia Williams (1991) argues, property and consent are bound up in a network of cultural and legal interactions and social inequities that make freedom an ethical ideal that is nearly impossible to attain. Therefore there are certain and clear limitations to what a legal framework can give us. After all, the legal framework has served as a source of violence for many. As previously argued, Freedman (2013) writes extensively about how the legal constructions of rape fed a ‘reign of political terror’ in the South through the lynching of young black men. Similarly, racial disparities in sentencing demonstrate the violent and divisive nature of the carceral state. Rape is a tool of discipline. Its threat is a way by which women are taught to behave, and its legal construction is a tool of discipline against black men. The criminal justice system is a tool of discipline, which by
definition disciplines unfairly. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (2006), an organization led by women of color to combat sexual and state violence, reminds us of these disparities. While the criminal justice system is beginning to take rape seriously, for some women, it still fails a broad section of the community and instead promotes and sustains racism and misogyny.

There are alternatives to the legal definition of rape. In “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention,” Sharon Marcus (1992) uses the term ‘rape script’ to refer to the various ways contemporary American society ‘scripts’ the interaction of rape. She argues that cultural scripts define rape in a way that casts men as always aggressors and women as always passive and already rapeable victims. She asserts that women are taught this through prevention campaigns, which deter female resistance to attacks; despite no evidence to suggest that a woman has a greater chance of harm if she physically resists an assault (Marcus, 1992, p. 393). As more people discuss prison rape and sexual molestation, there is an emerging rape script for men as well. While women are cast as the passive victims, men must fight to the death before being raped, because their victimization reduces their masculinity in a society where this loss constitutes social death (Eigneberg & Baro, 2003). These interactions are scripted based on cultural productions of what rape is and what it looks like. Rape jokes contribute to the discourse on rape that writes the rape script. They perpetuate the false ideas on which they rely, and further script rape as inevitable and its victims as deserving.

The Anatomy of a Rape Joke
When I use the term ‘rape joke,’ I am referring broadly to a class of jokes that uses disparagement humor to target rape and sexual violence victims and/or jokes that support the idea that rape and sexual violence are acceptable behaviors based on certain conditions or characteristics of the victim. These jokes are often used to perpetuate factually inaccurate and cruel ideas about sexual violence in American culture. In this section, I will detail the three main types of rape jokes and their various uses and forms, what makes them funny, and why these jokes point to a larger problem with the social discourse on rape.

**Rape as Hilarious**

When internet bloggers, social pundits, or the annoying neighbor next door talk about rape jokes, they are most often referring to jokes in this category. Jokes that fall into this category include jokes that use rape as shock value, jokes that rely on the problematic conflation of sex and rape, and jokes that deem the assault itself humorous. For example, a widely circulated Twitter joke in 2013 reads: “Why are girls so scared of rape? Y’all should feel pride that a guy risked his life in jail just to fuck you” (“This,” 2013). This joke is supposed to be funny because it plays on the familiar, that women fear rape, and points it back at them, making that fear seem irrational because women are interested in male attention; sex is the ultimate form of male attention, and rape is sex. Taking into account these assumptions, it is easy to see how this joke is in some way humorous. The logic follows that if women crave male attention and sex is the greatest form of flattery or male attention and rape is sex, than sex in such a high stakes situation is more flattering. Therefore, girls are silly for being afraid of rape, because, it is exactly what they want.
The problem becomes when the assumptions upon which this type of joke is based are inherently false. The first assumption is that ‘girls are afraid of rape.’ This assumption is true, in part. Some women definitely fear rape and not without good reason. It is estimated that as many as 18% of women in the United States have experienced an attempted or completed sexual assault (Tjaden & Thoennes, 1998). Playing on tropes of danger as sexy, the next assumption is that women desire male attention and that this desire is amplified through the increased personal risk of the man (i.e. risking life in prison). It is true that occasionally some women desire male attention. However, this is a sweeping generalization further strengthened by media advertisements that encourage women to ‘look good for their man’ and to think about how they dress to best attract male attention. It is difficult to generalize that all women would want to constantly compete for male attention. It is certainly not true that it is all women desire, especially above their personal safety. The additional caveat of the joke is that women should be happy that a man was willing to risk his life in jail to give them the attention they so desperately crave. This assumption is false. The joke states that the rapist will go to jail for life, making him appear brave. When in reality rapists will rarely serve time for their crimes (“97 of every 100”). The last assumption is the conflation between rape and ‘fucking’. Here fucking is described as the pinnacle of showing a woman she is desirable, that she is worthy of male attention. In other words, sex is the ultimate form of flattery. If a man wants to have sex with a woman, she should be honored because, after all, she only cares about garnering male attention. However, rape is not sex nor is it ‘fucking’, and it is most certainly not flattery. Rape is about power and control and not about sex at all.
Theorists and evolutionary psychologists argue that rape is a deliberate assault that positions one person as having ultimate control over another person (Barber, 2011). This twitter rape joke becomes funny only for those who believe the joke’s assumptions to be true, which, unfortunately, is a large audience. These types of jokes rely upon misconceptions about rape and affirm them as public truths, which, in turn, are reinforced through joke telling.

These rape jokes are not uncommon nor are they exclusively the purview of straight white men. Comedian Zainab Johnson made a joke with a similar premise when she performed on the television show, Last Comic Standing. She states, “A man could walk in the room and be like, ‘I’m raping everybody except you, Zainab.’ And I’d be like, ‘Well hold up. Why you don’t wanna rape me for?’” (“Last Comic Standing”). Here she turns the joke on herself, while still reinforcing old ideas about the motivations for rape: that women crave male attention and therefore rape is made ridiculous and worthy of laughter.

Rape jokes also utilize rape to demonstrate shock value. Shock value operates by giving the comedian a form of edginess. Rape is used to increase proximity to danger (whether that danger is for the comedian in the story, a specific audience member, or to bring the situation in proximity to danger). In this way, playing with rape is like playing with fire. It is dangerous because there are social consequences for perpetrating rape, but it is also a calculated risk. Comics believe that by exercising the comedic license and knowing that socially rape jokes and oftentimes rape are widely accepted, there will be little to no consequences for telling these jokes. Comedian Sam Morril makes a joke where the use of rape is merely added for shock
value. He jokes, “Hey, I’m attracted to black women. Yeah, I had sex with one once. It was kind of awkward, because the whole time I was fucking her, she kept using the N-word. Yeah the whole time she just kept yelling out, ‘no!’” (Doyle, 2013). Here the joke relies on the assumption that the ‘N-word’ Morrill is referring to is a derogatory term for black people. Instead, he inverts the audience’s expectation and uses it to mean ‘No’. Here rape is tangential to the story. The joke relies on the inversion of the words, but such inversion, and the subsequent laughs could have been successful with another story. Instead, Morrill relies on rape and his proximity to it, as a comedic tool. This rape joke again reinforces the idea that sex and rape are the same thing and also position the rapist as someone to be admired. Morrill is admitting to rape, but is still making the audience laugh, endearing himself to them in a way that protects him from risk. He is not threatened with jail time or with public ridicule, because he has set up a rapport with the audience. He is treated as someone to be respected and appreciated. He is also playing with race here. Morrill, a white man, specifically uses the black woman, and the audience is able to laugh at her pain, because he is cast as the prankster, and she is the deserving victim. Rape as shock value is additionally harmful because it relies on the idea that rape is inherently shocking and surprising. Not only does this refer to rape in the context of the joke, i.e. a rape joke is shocking here and now, but rape itself is shocking or surprising. With such a large segment of the population experiencing sexual violence, it is frustrating to see rape as an isolated and occasional incident instead of the large societal problem that it truly is.

The last type of joke in this category is one that refers to rape as inherently funny or positioning oneself near rape as inherently funny. Sarah Silverman, a Jewish
woman and well-known comedian, makes these jokes often. In this particular joke, she discusses her family history, which her sister was able to trace back to a town in Eastern Europe that was ‘raped and pillaged by Mongolians.’ She declares:

“So I am part Mongolian rapist, and I will be totally honest with you; I love it! I just feel like it gives me street cred or something, you know? And I feel like even back then, even while my great-great-great-grandmother was being raped, even then I think she knew, that this is gonna be funny some day” (Everest, 2006).

Silverman has positioned herself closely to trauma to prove she is edgy and funny but also to laugh at rape. She encourages the audience to find rape funny, because she claims her distant relative would have agreed. The joke operates on absurdity. Surely, this should not be funny, but for Silverman, and subsequently the audience, it is. This rape joke refers back to the idea that women enjoy rape and that they could find humor in the experience itself, removing agency from Silverman’s relative, and positioning the audience as more positively disposed to the joke, making rape something less serious than a violation of a person’s body.

Rape as Social Death

The next type of harmful rape joke treats rape as the single most defining moment in a victim’s life. I call these jokes, ‘rape as social death,’ because they overemphasize the trauma of an assault instead of the person surviving it and use traumatized victims as the punch line of the joke. While rape is certainly a serious event and has devastating consequences, rape is often not the end of someone’s life, nor are the effects of trauma humorous. These jokes can be broken down further into two categories. The first is laughing at the effects of sexual trauma. Comedian Anthony Jeselnik quips, “Before we started dating my girlfriend was involved in an
abusive relationship and she hated to talk about it. In fact, for the first year we were together, I thought she just really hated high-fives” (Jeselnik, 2010). This joke is problematic because it places the trauma at center of the joke. The audience is made to laugh at Jeselnik’s ex-girlfriend, who can be pictured flinching away from a raised hand that could serve as a reminder of a violent assault. Laughing at someone’s reaction to traumatic events is cruel, surely. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a very serious condition that affects many survivors of sexual and relationship violence (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). By making the claim that a survivor’s reaction to trauma is funny, Jeslenik has made the survivor the punch line of the joke. This joke points to a larger comedic trend of mocking people with disabilities. Mintz (1985) argues that comics previously occupied a marginalized social position, which allowed others to ridicule them as ‘defective’, but also gave them the freedom to speak their minds. Here Jeselnik is mocking someone with the symptoms of a stress-induced disability, making her fodder for his jokes because of her disorder. He positions himself and the audience as superior to her for reacting to a trigger reminiscent of her ex-boyfriend’s abuse.

This type of joke can also manifest in mocking the guilt felt and difficulties coming forward after an assault. Comedian Sarah Silverman jokes,

“Needless to say rape, the most heinous crime imaginable, seems it’s a comic’s dream though. Because it seems when you do rape jokes that the material is so dangerous and edgy. And the truth is that it’s the safest area to talk about in comedy, that’s the trick. Because who is going to complain about a rape joke? Rape victims? They don’t even report rape. They are just traditionally not complainers. I mean the worst thing that could happen, and I would feel terrible, is like after a show someone comes up to you is like, ‘Look. I’m a victim of rape. And as a victim of rape, I just want to say I thought that joke was inappropriate and insensitive and totally my fault…”(311sucks1, 2012).
This joke positions rape victims as incapable of standing up and defending themselves. Silverman is gesturing towards Marcus’ rape script, where women are always already rapeable and the passive recipients of violence. It should be noted that Silverman introduces this topic somewhat sarcastically. She ends the segment by saying that ‘rape victims have had it too good for too long’ clearly a satirical statement. However, this joke and the audience receptiveness and laughter indicate that she is intentionally tapping into a truth about rape victims with which the audience is all too familiar: rape victims experience a trauma and do not fight back or speak out, which is based on their own character flaws and weaknesses and a particular kind of femininity that assumes blame for anything that goes wrong. Instead of pointing to a variety of social pressures and issues that affect the ways in which survivors are able to report rape as a crime, she instead chooses to focus on the ways in which rape victims are themselves defective (they do not complain enough) and therefore do not deserve justice but rather deserve to be the punch line of the joke.

If the first type of trauma joke refuses to take sexual trauma seriously enough, the second takes it too seriously, turning rape victims into damaged objects. These jokes suggest that rape victims never go on to do anything good or powerful in the world. Instead they become broken, damaged, and passive, obsessed with their trauma and unable to move past it or cope in any real way. Comedian Louis C.K. highlights this trope in his joke about raping Hitler, used in the first chapter. He asserts,
“So [my friend] says if he had a time machine, he would go back and kill Hitler…So I thought to myself, that’s a noble purpose for a time machine, but I wouldn’t have killed Hitler, I would have raped him. Because I think that would have stopped him from doing all that shit. If he had been raped by me he never would have done that stuff.”

‘Should we invade Poland?’
‘No I don’t feel good, I’m just going to take a shower.’
Low self esteem and you know.” (Comedy Official, 2015).

This joke operates on the idea that an individual who is raped would be so destroyed by the act that they would be incapable of changing the course of world history. By taking rape seriously, this joke cloaks itself in feminist ideology. It recognizes the gravity of the situation and honors that rape can be an incredibly harmful experience. However, the joke here is one of Louis C.K. and his friend trying to stop Hitler from perpetrating the Holocaust. While his friend suggests murder, clearly, the more direct solution to their friendly hypothetical, Louis C.K. suggests raping him because he believes this will be so utterly destructive that Hitler would never be able to even dream of world domination. Hitler’s ultimate demise, crying in the shower, is the punch line because it places the audience in a position superior to that of the rape victim. The audience’s laughter is evidence that his punch line makes logical sense to them. Of course rape victims are so completely damaged by this act that they are unable to cope and thrive in the aftermath of the assault. This logic resonates with the audience because of rape’s history as a crime of property. Raped women are worth less to fathers and husbands. Raped women are damaged goods, which lessens their commercial value. These jokes use these narratives of value to paint the raped body as forever unclean, in need of a shower, unable to accomplish dreams and goals, and therefore worthless.

Deserving Victims
The final category of rape jokes examines the ways in which the victim’s identity, not behavior, makes them somehow at fault or the willing object of an assault and subsequently, a joke. This is different from jokes that emphasize that victims are ‘asking for it.’ These deserving victims are raped in the joke as a form of instituting justice or establishing a standard practice, i.e. rape is this instance is justified based on whose body it is enacted upon. As explored in the first chapter, superiority theory explicates that jokes produce laughter when the audience feels superior to the object of the joke. This feeling of superiority is amplified when the audience can feel that the object of the joke is the cause of their own misfortune. This theory can explain why these jokes are considered humorous. The most common versions of these jokes involve male rape victims, specifically incarcerated men, the rape of enslaved women, and rape and gender-based violence as a form of discipline.

Jokes about slave rape are a variation on the deserving victim joke. Many comedians choose to joke about slavery and historical trauma. However, when comedians make jokes about sexual relationships between enslaved persons and slave owners, they are often portraying enslaved women as deserving or willing victims to sexual battery and rape. Leslie Jones, a contemporary cast member at *Saturday Night Live* and the first black female cast member in seven years, told the following joke on a segment of the program called “Weekend Update.” She states,

“Back in the slave days, my love life would have been way better. Master would have hooked me up with the best brother on the plantation and every nine months I'd be in the corner having a super baby. Every nine months I'd be in the corner just popping them out. Shaq! Kobe! Lebron...I would be the number one slave draft pick. All of the plantations would want me” (Ryan, 2014).
This joke is a self-deprecating one in which Jones invites the audience to laugh at her. Jones positions herself as failing contemporary gendered standards of beauty and resorts to recalling a time when her physical attributes would have been valued. In this scenario, she sees herself as more valuable during slavery because of her presumed ability to produce strong children. Here she does not use the word rape, she does not even allude to it, and that is what makes this joke so problematic. Her boisterous and happy delivery combined with language of ‘hooking up’ erase a history of rape and sexual violence toward enslaved women in America that is too often overlooked in history books and national narratives of slavery. Forced sex with other enslaved people was a tool of slavery to produce more enslaved people and a hard and painful part of American history (Jennings, 1990). Furthermore, rape is not discussed because it seems obvious that this was not rape. The logical conclusion is that it was not rape because Jones would have been an enslaved person, and rape (at least in a legal sense) could not happen in this context, thereby making her a deserving victim and allowing the joke to successfully produce laughter.

Jokes that center on rape and gender-based violence as a means of discipline and correction are another type of deserving victim rape joke. These jokes rely on false ideas about the importance of discipline in relationships between men and women and also operate under the assumption that victims of gender-based violence not only deserve the violence they experienced, but also that this violence is necessary to correct an undesired characteristic or habit. Anthony Jeselnik jokes, “I’m starting to suspect that my new brother-in-law is beating my sister, lately. Like I haven’t seen any bruises or anything. I don’t have any proof, but I went over there for
dinner last weekend, and her cooking has gotten much better” (Jeslnik, 2010). This joke is predicated on the idea that Jeselnik’s sister is better for having experienced the violence; it corrected her poor cooking habits. What makes this joke humorous is the relationship between violence and justification. There is a cultural dictate that says domestic violence is wrong, but in this case it is prescriptive to remedy a fault on the wife’s part. This is funny because it creates a juxtaposition between the known factually and the known cultural script. Jeselnik allows this scenario to be funny because he commands the audience to laugh, the subtext of the comedic performance. He acknowledges his own bad behavior in enjoying the food rather than expressing concern for his sister, setting the stage for the others to laugh at his jokes.

Prison rape and male rape jokes are another example of the deserving victim joke. Prison rape jokes set up the deserving victim trope in two ways. First the victims of prison rape are both male and criminal, therefore doubly deserving of scorn and ridicule. There are few jokes about male rape, and perhaps this is because it is a sensitive topic or because in popular culture, men cannot be raped. As Eigenberg and Baro (2003) explain in their article on popular depictions of prison rape, “…a ‘real man’ cannot be raped or would fight to the death before he was raped” (p. 65). Clearly men are rape victims. New studies show that men experience sexual victimization at significant rates (Coxwell & King, 2010). So then why in popular culture, specifically, is it not as commonly the subject of jokes as female rape? The explanation could be simple. For women, rape is said to take away their humanity, for men, rape takes away their masculinity and humanity. Jokes about male rape are then higher stakes because the loss of masculinity in a deeply masculinist society is the
loss of power directly tied to manhood. Since most commercially successful comedians are male, joking about male rape seems too close to home. The fragility of masculinity insists on suppressing these jokes, because the threat of rape is felt to be an overwhelming loss of power and control under the patriarchy, just as the act of rape is the ultimate act of power and control. If male rape jokes exist, and they occasionally do, they exist to the extent that they never mention rape. Several comedians, Brent Morin (2015), for example, will use the old joke about a beautiful, young female teacher having a sexual relationship with her underage male student. The joke relies on jealousy, using lines like “I wish that happened to me” to garner audience laughter in agreement. However, these jokes dismiss the reality of statutory rape and more generally female-perpetrated sexual violence. These jokes work because this behavior is never labeled rape. Just as the cultural script remarks that men cannot be raped, it seems impossible to imagine a woman as a sexual aggressor and predator. Instead, it as seen as a fantasy, which lessens the gravity of the situation and makes it humorous.

Molestation jokes make up the bulk of male rape jokes. Most of these jokes point fun at the men who sexually abuse children (and they are always men in the joke) instead of the victims themselves. These jokes have risen in popularity in the aftermath of the Jerry Sandusky scandal at Pennsylvania State University and scandals within the Catholic Church regarding the cover up of sexual abuse perpetrated by priests. These jokes also make fun of famous people accused of sexual abuse, such as Michael Jackson. The jokes are problematic because they create a gender divide where sexual abuse of children is only funny if the victims are male,
and they work because children are seen as helpless and unable to prevent the rape and therefore cannot lose their masculinity, which is directly tied to their resistance. While women and children are deserving of protection, men should be able to defend themselves, therefore, if they experience sexual violence, they are deserving victims. It would be naïve to assume that these jokes target abusers out of a moral sense of right. While that might constitute part of the reason, homosexual undertones of male-on-male pedophilia are rampant within popular understanding of homosexuality. Instead of viewing rape and sexual violence as a power and control issue, separate from sexual desire, many people view male-perpetrated molestation of male children as a sign of homosexual tendencies, and because these deviate from the heterosexual norm, are worthy of ridicule. Therefore it is because of the perpetrator’s perceived sexual orientation that he is sought out as the punch line of the joke and not the victim, who was an innocent victim of his homosexuality.

Prison rape jokes skirt these issues because they present the victims of rape as having brought the assault upon themselves through their criminal behavior and subsequent imprisonment. These victims deserve their punishment (rape) because they are incarcerated for crimes they have committed. They are worthy of public scorn and therefore deserve both the violence they experience and the laughter at their expense. There is little literature on prison rape jokes made by prominent comedians, but perhaps it is troubling that there is a considerable body of work on prison rape jokes made by political officials. The research primarily indicates that inmates are the punch lines of these jokes because they are ‘deserving victims’ due to their criminal history (Minogue, 2011). This is clearly disturbing especially since the rape of
incarcerated people is human rights violation for which the United Nations Committee on Torture has criticized the United States (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2014). The other piece of these jokes, and other popular cultural products on prison rape, is that they portray it as inevitable (Eginberg & Baro, 2003). Many television and movie comedies use these tropes to exploit prison rape for laughter, such as the 2015 Will Ferrell and Kevin Hart film, Get Hard. The film stars Ferrell as James, a white collar criminal facing imprisonment in a notoriously dangerous prison. James hires Darnell, played by Hart, under the racist assumption that since Darnell is black, he has spent time in prison and should be able to prepare him for the experience. The following exchange is taken from the beginning of the movie where Darnell explains his perception of the dangers of prison. Darnell yells:

“*You’re going to San Quentin, there’s a 100% that you’re going to be somebody’s bitch. 10 years of this aggressively pounds hands together. And then by way of explanation:* That’s a big ass black man on your pale white ass.” *Makes aggressive moaning sounds and then begins to imitate James by making voice higher.* “*No I don’t want to anymore. Stop that’s enough.* Too late he tagged the next guy in.” *More aggressive hand clapping at a different pace while James looks on in horror.* (Ferrell, McKay, & Henchy, 2015).

This joke showcases a number of issues with prison rape jokes. While Darnell is explaining his version of prison rape, the camera cuts between his vivid description and James’ horrified face. The joke is that James is afraid of rape and that his supposed ‘softness’ (derived from the title), in other words, his femininity, makes him the perfect target for prison rape and for ridicule. While Darnell is explaining a pretty graphic rape scene, the joke is that James is disturbed. James’ femininity is again highlighted when Darnell mimics James by changing his voice tone to sound more
effeminate when in reality, James’ voice is lower than Darnell’s. Similarly the word ‘bitch,’ denotes the ways in which James would take on the ‘female’ role of rape victim/person who is penetrated during sexual intercourse. This joke relies on an outdated understanding of prison rape, homophobic views of sex, and a conflation between sex and rape. Studies have been inconclusive in showing that prison rape victims share any characteristics or point that more effeminate men are at a higher risk for sexual violence in prison. While gay and transgender populations face unique problems, perceived masculinity is not necessarily a factor in determining risk for prison sexual violence (Eigenberg & Baro, 2013). This joke operates under the popular misconception of a real issue in order to produce laughter. It also relies on homophobia, in that it presupposes that in a sexual relationship between two men that one must be passive, and therefore feminine, contributing further to the erasure of male sexual victimization. In order for James to be violated, he must be made to be feminine, because violation is feminine. After all, a ‘real man’ would not allow himself to be raped. This erasure is what makes the joke funny. By seeing James as effeminate the audience is made to feel superior because of his failed masculinity.

Prison rape jokes can also take the form of justice against perpetrators of sexual violence. This “justice” is exclusive to male perpetrators of sexual abuse. For example, Jared Fogle, the famous Subway spokesman turned most hated pedophile in America, was recently sentenced to 15 years in prison for possession of child pornography and other related charges. In response, the Internet exploded with jokes mocking the celebrity and his “inevitable” experiences with sexual violence. The jokes read as such, “Jared Fogle will be enjoying a different kind of footlong in
prison” (Gauthier, 2015). These jokes operate by leaning on the various ways in which sexual violence in prison is viewed as evitable while also making claims about justice for his crimes. The joke additionally utilizes some elementary word play on the famous Subway sandwich, the footlong, and a penis. While justice and accountability for sexual violence is important, prison rape is not only against local, state, federal, and international law, it is a violation of someone’s dignity. By creating jokes that center perpetrators of sexual violence as victims of rape, comedians make light of rape and create deserving victims, when in reality there is no such thing.

Deserving victim rape jokes are cruel because they rely on false ideas about victimhood and violence to create deserving victims and erase non-female victims. These jokes take serious issues such as slavery, domestic violence, male rape, and prison rape and turn them into jokes that belittle survivors of such horrific experiences and make them the punch line of the joke.

**Daniel Tosh, Linguistic Violence, and Rape Jokes**

Understanding the history and context of rape jokes contextualizes Tosh’s joke and comments at the Laugh Factory. By evoking rape in response to a heckler, Tosh was using rape as a tool of discipline (by heckling Tosh, the audience member “deserved the joke”), which both the legal and comedic tradition have historically evoked to harm women and racial minorities. Social identity theory best explains why rape jokes, like Tosh’s, exist and why they are considered funny. The rise of feminism correlates with the rise of rape jokes and the history of rape as a tool of discipline, can explain rape jokes as a threat response. Utilizing Butler’s logic, feminists have an opportunity to react differently to rape jokes. To not let the
threat/joke perform a successful illocutionary act and illicit fear and silence. Instead feminists can fight back by allowing a reclamation and creation of counter-discourse through feminist rape jokes. By telling his rape joke, Tosh became a part of a disturbing trend of comedians using misconceptions about sexual violence for cheap laughs. Tosh’s comment and the subsequent backlash sparked a much need conversation about rape and comedy and whether or not the two were ever meant to be together. These arguments became so impassioned because they ascribe the power of linguistic violence to the joke, which Butler cautions against. Freud (2003) writes, “A joke with an aggressive tendency transforms the initially indifferent audience into accomplices in hate or scorn, and creates an army of foes for its enemy, where once there was only one” (p. 128). Freud illustrates the persuasive and even militant power of the joke by claiming its ability to resonate with its audience. Comedy, because of its reliance on the familiar and its ability to evade rational criticism, is a very effective tool for communication, through which a comedian can enlist compatriots for her struggle. By creating successful rape jokes comedians are in fact cultivating the very anti-victim sentiment that precludes justice for rape victims in most cases. The jokes do perpetuate the damaging beliefs on which they are predicated, but the question remains, are these jokes violent themselves? Marcus (1992) writes, “While these cultural productions can collude in and perpetuate in definite and complicated ways, the statement that rape is a linguistic fact should not be taken to mean that such linguistic forms rape women” (p. 389). Here the danger lies in ascribing too much power to the words or the joke, so much so that they script women as always the passive victim. Marcus describes this as playing into the rape script. The resistance is
in the reclamation. By breaking the script, telling jokes back to these audiences with a feminist message, feminists can resist, and create laughing allies in anti-rape activism.

Because of its cultural significance comedy is capable of doing real damage, but, as I will explore in chapter three, it is also capable of shifting cultural attitudes. The power of the rape joke is its reliance on cultural ‘facts’. But what if comedians could point fun at those very cultural ‘facts,’ making the punch line of the joke the society that supports these wild misconceptions instead of the victim of sexual violence? The stadiums full of audience members would be forced to confront the reality of surviving sexual violence while still laughing at systemic issues that perpetuate such violence, while feminists created an effective and humorous counter-discourse on sexual violence. This may sound ridiculous, ludicrous even, but it’s happening, and that simple fact is significant: rapists and those who support a culture of sexual violence, not those who are violated, are the punch line of the joke. While it is too soon to know what the impact on the hetero-racist-patriarchy, might be, laughing at the structural relationships that sustain it is surely lots of fun.
CHAPTER THREE:
Talking Back and Punching Up: Feminist Killjoy Comedians

“What I’m proposing is that I’m like a surrogate, but for rape, a surrogate rape victim. Now I don’t want to get too scientific, but you know how a pregnancy surrogate kind of holds a baby for you? Well like a surrogate rape victim, holds the feeling of being raped for you. And you might be like, Nina, why would I want that? And then I would be like why do you binge watch Law and Order: SVU, Cold Case, Dateline, literally every Lifetime Original Movie? How about why is there a Taken 1, 2, and 3? It can’t simply be because everyone loves Liam Neeson. I mean really, we all can agree his voice is pretty annoying. Why do you demand shows have a character survive rape to prove they’re likeable? I’m calling you out Shonda Rimes...Come on! You know you want it. I mean, I can’t blame you, I guess. You want the great escape, the story of triumphant survival. You want that single tear wiped away, look up to the sky, hopeful, roll credits moment...Like last week, I was with my friend and we were talking about sexual violence in the media. And I was like, “yeah, I totally get that. As a rape survivor, sometimes—“

“Wait, what you were raped?!”?

‘Yeah, like I was saying...’

‘Wait but you don’t seem like you were raped’

‘Oh, um, no I definitely was’

‘Well you don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to’ winks aggressively

‘I mean, I don’t mind we can talk about it’
'Well, like only if it’ll help for you, like whatever’s best for your healing'
And then she looks at me with those big ‘asking for it eyes’ and I know I got to give it to her. I know she wants it, I mean just noticing the way she stirred her coffee. Pro tip: girls are always asking for it if they stir counterclockwise. So I just had to give it to her, be the surrogate rape victim. And after it was over, after all the gory details, she shook her head and sighed. She gazed out the window, pained, head in her hands, and you could almost hear the Tori Amos music swelling in the background. Then roughly 25 seconds later she shrugged and giggled, ‘So, have seen lastest episode of Scandal?’ ” –Nina Gurak

**Fighting Perfect Victims and Killing KillJoys**

In her latest book, *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed discusses the history of the ‘feminist killjoy.’ The feminist killjoy defies societally proscribed happiness scripts and kills joy by raising feminist concerns. Ahmed contextualizes the feminist killjoy through the history of women’s emotional labor, the work of making other’s comfortable by performing happiness. As Ahmed (2010) describes it, for women, one’s own happiness is conditional upon others’ happiness because, as phenomenology teaches us, humans are fundamentally relational beings. Women are supposed to gain happiness from making others happy, even if this is not what makes them truly happy. Feminist consciousness makes women aware of this paradoxical relationship between their happiness and the happiness of others and further requires women to rethink their social positionality and emotional labor. I use Hochschild’s definition of emotional labor here to intentionally denote that performing happiness for others is work, often-unpaid and unrecognized work (Hochschild, 2012). Ahmed
(2010) describes the feminist killjoy, as someone who literally kills joy or happiness. By refusing to perform happiness, feminists “kill” not only the ideologically-driven satisfactions a woman might feel when doing that work, but also the happiness of others that her performance produces. Those others, who would rather remain blissfully ignorant of this exploitative emotional labor and the oppressive systems that perpetuate it. For Ahmed, the feminist killjoy is a liberatory figure. She releases women from the imperative of happiness and opens the possibility of revolutionary negativity. I, for one, wholeheartedly embrace the feminist killjoy. Because of her critique, feminists can begin to challenge what is expected of women, specifically emotionally, and begin to move towards social equity. However, I would like to rethink her methods. Can feminist killjoys, kill oppression but nonetheless produce joy and laughter? How can feminist comedians capitalize in a revolutionary way on the emotional labor the patriarchy requires of them, shifting the paradigm of unpaid emotional work into a high profile career and national stardom? By playing on both absurdity and disparagement theory, I argue that a new wave of feminists killjoys, challenge killing joy as a refusal to perform, a refusal to laugh, and a refusal to play, and instead opt for a humorous approach. These killjoys use humor to kill violent and sexist joys and pleasures, and instead produce an emotional economy where they benefit both in capital proceeds and the satisfactions of liberatory labor. This is especially true for feminist comedians on rape. They can be killjoys and still make us laugh, ridiculing the systemic oppression that silences women and survivors of sexual violence. Comedians have been too long derisive of feminist causes, and it is time that rape jokes, so demeaning of survivors and women, be transformed into pointed
and hilarious criticisms by feminist killjoys. Comedy can be radically reimagined to communicate feminist messages and expose the sexist and dehumanizing truth about rape jokes.

In order to understand the feminist killjoy and her significance, Ahmed first describes her foil, the happy housewife. The happy housewife derives her happiness from the happiness of others. Her role is said to be self-fulfilling, “[The happy housewife’s] duty is to generate happiness by the very act of embracing this image” (Ahmed 2015, p. 53). The character of the happy housewife can extend beyond the domestic realm and into the social discourse of sexual violence. Ahmed’s work gives us a framework to conceptualize this relationship. I will use the term ‘perfect victim,’ to denote a state of emotional labor and socially constructed affect and the ‘feminist killjoy comedian,’ her revolutionary counterpart, to offer a framework with which to conceptualize feminist rape jokes. Academics have previously used the term ‘perfect victim’ to discuss the ways in which a legal discourse structures the experiences of rape survivors (Srikantiah, 2007). However, I will use the term to speak to the cultural discourse on ‘the perfect victim.’ The cultivation of the perfect victim is one in the same with the happy housewife. A perfect victim is seen. She is a wholesome ‘all American’ girl and therefore embodies some inherent identity characteristics, such as a cisgender, white, heterosexual young woman, but also performs a particular affect, if not the affect of happiness, the affect of what I will call ‘fineness,’ passivity and a desire to please, which causes her to become silent in order to placate those around her.
The perfect victim performs two different affects, first before and during the assault and the second after. The first performance is what theorist Sharon Marcus calls, the ‘rape script.’ Marcus argues that society linguistically structures rape and its effects through the stories we tell. She writes, “The language of rape solicits women to position ourselves as endangered, violable, and fearful and invites men to position themselves as legitimately violent and entitled to women’s sexual services” (Marcus, 1992, p. 390). To be a woman, then, is to be by definition always and forever rapeable. To be a woman is to be a victim, first and foremost. She goes on to describe the various ways rape prevention campaigns invoke this notion through scripted passivity that actually does the opposite of preventing rape by creating women as defined by the violence of violation. Women are always already in danger. In most rape prevention campaigns women are taught not to resist and instead to perform passivity (Marcus, 1992, p. 395). This performed passivity is not only what occurs before and during the assault but extends beyond, into the aftermath. The perfect victim, does not cry too much, but is suitably upset about the event. She is broken beyond repair, but also bravely holding it together. As one poet put it, “We’re good victims. We won’t cry too loud or demand attention or ask for trigger warnings” (YouthSpeaks, 2014). This describes the paradox of the perfect victim. She is both irreparably damaged but also seemingly fine because she is required to perform a type of happiness that recognizes her pain is less important than the comfort of those around her. When survivors of sexual violence speak about their experience, they are accused of doing the violence afflicted upon them onto others. Ahmed (2010) describes, “The exposure to violence becomes the origin of violence” (p. 68).
Speaking about experiences violates the script of ‘fineness,’ causing others to experience pain and discomfort, straying from the perfect victim mood. Therefore, the perfect victim must perform fineness in order to protect others from feeling the violence of rape. Performed ‘fineness’ is then the silencing of survivors, placing them in a space where they are defined by both their experience and the silence that surrounds them. Therefore to play into this performed happiness, women must stifle their trauma in order to submit to a patriarchal emotional regime. This is a key similarity between the emotional labor performed by the happy housewife and the perfect victim. The other key similarity between the happy housewife and the perfect victim is that her value is inherently tied to her performance. For the happy housewife, her value in society is tied to her ability to make others happy. For the perfect victim, her worth is contingent on her performed fineness. Using the popular themes of brokenness explored in the first chapter, the notion of the irreparable damage of rape is directly linked to the foundations of rape as a crime of property. These linguistic constructions of victimhood are fraught with contradictions. And that is what the feminist rape joke must draw upon.

If the foil of the happy housewife is the feminist killjoy, than the foil of the perfect victim must be the feminist killjoy comedian. The feminist killjoy derives her power from her radical negativity—radical because in a society that prescripts happiness, negativity is indeed radical (Ahmed, 2010). However, the feminist killjoy comedian derives her power from her radical humor, which is radical because it unapologetically displays trauma, rejects fineness, and produces laughter. The feminist killjoy comedian necessarily flips the rape script and introduces joking as a
revolutionary form of feminist consciousness raising. Marcus (1992) describes, “the grammar of violence defines rape as an act committed against a subject of fear and not against a subject of violence—not, that is against someone whom the would-be rapist assumes would attempt to fight back” (p. 396). If perfect victims are constructed as subjects of fear, than the feminist killjoy comedians must be constructed as subjects of violence, who use the aggression of joking to upend the rape script. Feminist killjoy comedians also combat the notion of personal trauma and move it into a collective space. That is to say that trauma is collective when it is shared on a stage. ‘The personal is political,’ was the second wave feminist mantra. Story sharing, or sharing publicly experiences of sexual violence, makes the personal political. It resists individualizing acts of violence and instead moves towards a collective dialogue on violence, making it a collective rather than a personal problem. Ahmed (2010) writes, “To speak is already a form of defiance, if you are supposed to recede into the background” (p. 61). Story sharing and consciousness raising through joke telling, change the narrative from one of passivity to one of resistance. Speaking about experiences of trauma does not have to be funny, but it can be. The feminist killjoy comedian refuses the passivity and fineness of the perfect victim and instead moves towards a resistance in humor.

The feminist killjoy comedian will highlight the contradiction every rape victim is presented with: suffer the violence and then pretend everything is okay. A successful feminist rape joke will ridicule the rape script to reveal a larger truth about how society discusses rape and sexual violence.

How and Why Feminists Must Joke about Rape
Feminist joking about rape is first and foremost a refusal of the rape script and the various ways in which rape jokes contribute to characterizations of the perfect victim as passive. Feminists must joke about rape as a form of resistance and an effective tool for communicating feminist messages. Joking about rape reclaims a tool of oppression. It is the reclamation of an effective messaging tool that has been used to degrade women and hold feminists up to scorn. Rape jokes are an exercise of patriarchal power, and feminists do not think they are funny, not because feminists are dead serious and unable to take a joke, but because such jokes are made at women’s expense; indeed, at the expense of anyone who is victimized by sexual violence or seen as vulnerable to rape. As Butler (1997) tells us, speech acts, like jokes, can fail. Jokes fail when they do not produce laughter. When a feminist killjoy refuses laughter when it is expected, she makes everybody unhappy. Feminists are derided as humorless because they refuse the emotional labor of being happy to make others happy. Ahmed (2010) writes, “It is not just that feminists might not be happily affected by the objects that are supposed to cause happiness but that their failure to be happy is read as sabotaging the happiness of others” (p. 66). In comedy, this is expressed through coded language describing feminists as ‘being poor sports’ and ‘not having a sense of humor.’ Feminists are supposed to find comedy amusing, and when they find it offensive and harmful instead, it detracts from the happiness of the rest of the audience. While offensive and sexist, these claims indicate that not laughing is not enough. Feminists do not have to laugh at rape jokes. But joking about rape is as necessary, if not more necessary, than refusing to laugh at problematic rape jokes. It shifts the power of feminism from defensive to offensive. Marcus (1992)
writes, “A rapist confronted with a wisecracking, scolding, and bossy woman may lose his grip on his power to rape; a rapist responded to with fear may feel his power consolidated” (p. 396). Comedy can be used to transform the rape script and push back against notions of feminine passivity by resisting and changing it. Feminist joking about rape provides an effective comedic counter-discourse to rape jokes, shifting from passivity to resistance, critiquing rapists instead of rape victims, and holding up a mirror to a deeply destructive dialogue on rape and fighting back.

When feminists decide what is funny, what jokes to tell, exercising comedic license to expose harmful notions about sexual violence, they are fueling a cultural revolution on a territory previously dominated by men. Men produce the most comedy. They decide what it is funny, and it is repeatedly rape jokes, which further perpetuate the rape script and troubling ideas about sexual violence. Feminist comedy changes this power dynamic. Women are creating humor on their own terms. Feminist killjoy comedians do not necessarily have to be women or to have survived rape. Rape survivor is not an identity group. While sexual violence survivors share an experience, it is an issue that affects such a wide range of people, and not only women. Further, comedy is a relational art form. In order for a joke to be successful, the audience must have a shared understanding of the joke’s premise. In the case of rape jokes (feminist or traditional), the joke is predicated on a shared idea (i.e. women by definition are vulnerable and subject to violence, rape victims are broken, etc.). The comedian must exercise comedic license, which the audience will refuse if they do not believe the comedian can claim authentic cultural knowledge of the subject. The comedian can display her authentic claim to this cultural knowledge through how
she understands her identity or through other means. For example, a female comedian joking about women to women will have some level of authentic claim to knowledge with the audience. Similarly, a feminist male comedian, who, earlier in his set demonstrated his feminism, may also have an authentic claim when joking about women to women. Feminist rape jokes do not require a specific gender or experience; instead, they require an authenticity, which must be demonstrated to the audience in order for the joke to be successful.

Feminists must joke about rape in order to create collective comedy and divorce rape from individualized experience. Joking about rape make an individual problem collective and does it in a way that both unites and divides. Meyer (2000) writes, “This paradox in the functions of humor in communication, as alternately a unifier and a divider, allows humor use to delineate social boundaries” (p. 310). Humor’s effectiveness as a communication tool makes it the ideal form of resistance to rape, redrawing social boundaries and definitions of violence. Feminists can be funny, producing revolutionary joy while killing sexist joy. In fact, they must.

**The Anatomy of a Feminist Rape Joke**

While traditional rape jokes rely on superiority theory of comedy to make the audience laugh at rape victims, feminist rape jokes rely on both superiority theory, making the audience feel superior to the rapist or the culture that perpetuates rape, and incongruity theory, or creating a dissonance between what is expected and what occurs by playing on the absurdity of rape culture and the treatment of sexual violence survivors. I will examine three major types of feminist rape jokes, looking specifically at jokes that rely more heavily on superiority theory, which I will
categorize as ‘rapists are hilarious’, jokes that rely more on incongruity theory, which I will label ‘cultural absurdity,’ and jokes which are rooted in personal experience, which I will call ‘story sharing.’ These jokes are certainly feminist, but these comedians may not necessarily fall into that category. That is, a comedian may have a joke that in some way elicits laughter at the absurdities of the rape script, while not sharing the political commitments of feminism. Feminists can learn, however, from the structure of that joke how to laugh at rapists, thereby diminishing their power, and how to send up the expectation of “fineness” that protects others at the expense of the survivor of sexual violence.

**Rapists Are Hilarious**

In this section, I will use the term ‘rapist’ broadly to refer to those who perpetuate violations on the spectrum of sexual violence. This includes people who make ridiculous comments about rape and those who catcall. This broadening of the term rapist is not to conflate rape with verbal violence. Instead, it is a tool to better understand and characterize the ways in which comedians make individuals the punch line of jokes, and the reasoning behind those decisions. In other words, the term rapist will serve as a foil for the victim. While rape jokes often make jokes at the victim’s expense, feminist rape jokes point their humor at another target, which I broadly refer to as the ‘rapist.’ ‘Rapists are hilarious’ jokes use widely held beliefs about the seriousness of rape and contrast them with equally accepted beliefs about the benign nature of rapists or those who make demeaning comments about rape survivors. These comedians use the shared understanding that comments are ‘only joking’ and contrast it to the reality of rape.
I will begin with a joke from famous comedian Dane Cook. Known mostly for his exuberance on stage, Cook is not often recognized for a truly superb joke about people using the word rape flippantly. Instead of taking the joke too far, as I have examined in the rape jokes section that treats rape as social death, he draws out laughter from the audience by making the individual who uses ‘rape’ carelessly the subject of ridicule. He jokes:

“People throw the word rape around too casually. Have you ever played video games online and listened to the way people talk to each other? Like, ‘Oh dude, you just shot me in the back. You raped me!’ I’m pretty sure if I sat down with a woman who had been in that horrific situation and said, ‘Can you describe what that was like, going through this?’ She’s not going to look at me and go, ‘Have you ever played Halo? It’s like getting hit in the face with a gravity hammer by a camper. Have you ever gotten an estimate on your auto-repair and you go to pick up your car and it’s double? It’s just like that.’” (Cook, 2009).

Here Cook is using the superiority theory of humor by making those who use the word rape casually, stripping it of its harsh meaning, look ignorant. While his joke might read like a lesson, his audience laughs heartily at the punch line, because they recognize the absurdity of comparing rape to an injury in a video game. Cook illustrates this absurdity by having a fictional rape victim speak the words. Playing on the absurdity of a rape victim comparing her trauma to a video game causes a laugh, which is amplified because the joke is that some people believe this is not absurd at all. Their lack of knowledge makes them fodder for the audience’s scorn and makes the joke a comedic success.

While the joke may come across as overly preachy to his predominantly young straight white male audience, he cleverly couches it within a larger framework critiquing how interest groups attempt to police people’s speech. He begins this joke
with a critique of Hillary Duff’s public service announcement encouraging young people to stop using the word ‘gay’ derogatorily. He argues, “Sometimes when I find myself in a life conundrum, I think to myself, what the fuck would Hillary Duff do?” (Cook, 2009). Cook knows this is ridiculous and absurd. It is, in effect, calling out the problem of celebrity-endorsed speech. However, he then directly segues into his own endorsement of what people should and shouldn’t do. The difference here is that he relies on comedy to communicate his message. Instead of the command, “do not joke or make light of rape,” he uses his comedic license to better illustrate that same message. So in fact, his critique isn’t of Duff’s message at all, instead it is a critique of her actions, her communication style, which alienates his devoted fans. He then turns the tables to reveal his own agenda in a style that best resonates with his audience.

Jessica Williams, former Daily Show correspondent and comedian, also jokes about men who harass women on the street with a bold and brazen attitude that produces laughter. The beginning of her segment features clips of men discussing why they are the true victims of sexism and anti-sexism rhetoric. Her critical voiceover throughout the segment makes them laughable. “If anything, it’s not the women who are the victims, it’s the men,” she argues, before cutting to a clip of a Fox news correspondent complaining that traditional men are worried about being called a sexist in this ‘overly feminized atmosphere’ (Steele, 2014). Clearly, her sarcasm rings true with the audience causing laughter. Here her juxtaposition of the words with video clips makes the man look ignorant and therefore worthy of ridicule. The rest of the segment is a mix of her comical ‘tips’ for walking down the street,
interviews with women who have been street harassed, and continued cuts of male Fox news correspondents. One such correspondent remarks, “I don’t know that we can restrain boys from being boys…so what do we do excuse it? Because it was certainly provoked.” Williams responds, “Oh right, what makes you think you can just go outside wearing a dress or pants or a red shirt” (Steele, 2014). Williams’ sarcasm merges the documentary-style format with her witty voiceovers to better illustrate the absurdity of the comments made. By highlighting the correspondents’ ridiculous comments, she offers them up as the punch line, making the audience laugh at their silliness.

Adrienne Truscott, in her stand up comedy show, “Asking For It: A One Woman Rape about Comedy Starring her Pussy and Little Else,” lampoons comedians and social commentators including politicians and musicians for joking about rape. Her show is an hour-long stand up routine with additional performance-art-style accouterments. For example, the whole show is performed while she is naked from the waist down (Truscott, 2014). Her nudity is an effective means of communication. She has the power, the comedic license, her stage, her microphone, the audience’s attention, and by most definitions, she is ‘asking for it,’ but no one touches her. Her nudity is a challenge, a case in point, on the absurdity of society’s understanding of sexual violence. She can stand on stage, without harassment; she is in control of her body and any violation of that would not be her fault. She refutes ‘asking for it’ in the best possible way, with her pussy out and a microphone in her hand. She uses her nakedness to draw attention to the absurdity and subsequently the cruelty of comments that make rape the fault of the survivor. She says, “If you don’t
want to get raped, don’t do any of those things. So no makeup, no miniskirts, no booze, no sexy dancing, and you should be pretty much just fine. Like in India and Iran” (Sydney Festival, 2015). Here Truscott ridicules popular beliefs about the causes of sexual violence, by contextualizing it as a global problem. The joke is on people who believe women experience victimization because of their clothing or behavior, holding women to a standard of modesty to protect themselves, which is clearly untrue. By juxtaposing standards of dress with the widely held belief that violence occurs everywhere, even in countries that require modest dress, Truscott offers a sharp criticism: modesty is no protection.

In addition to her jokes, which almost exclusively target those making increasingly misguided comments about sexual violence, Truscott uses acrobatics and projections to convey her feminist anti-rape message. She raises her skirt and allows projections of famous comedians, including Louis C.K. and rap artists to project on her abdomen with her pubic hair acting as their beards or later in the show, as their hair. As the projections speak on her body, they tell rape jokes, sing misogynistic lyrics, and give sexist political speeches (Truscott, 2014). The symbolism is clear. The ways in which society talks about sexual violence frames a narrative of sexual violence. When people in a position of power, for example, comedians, speak about sexual violence it becomes part of the public truth. Instead of giving these cultural icons power in her show, Truscott instead gives them a beard made of her pubic hair, the space to make critical and comedic commentary. She makes them and their speech ridiculous worthy of laughter, sending a clear message that what they say is
wrong, misguided, and ultimately harmful, all in a comical way that produces laughter.

Amy Schumer, star of the award winning Comedy Central sketch television show, Inside Amy Schumer, is another comedian who utilizes disparagement humor to poke fun at rapists. In her sketch, “Football Town Nights,” Schumer parodies the hit television show, Friday Night Lights, while sharply critiquing the culture of sexual violence in sports. The sketch features Schumer as a supportive wife to the town’s new football coach. The coach enters the locker room and gives the team three rules under his leadership; the final rule is no raping. The locker room goes into uproar:

“But Coach, we play football!”
“It’s my team, my rules. If you don’t like it, don’t let the door rape you on the way out.”
“Can we rape at away games?”
“No”
“What if it’s Halloween and she’s dressed like a sexy cat?”
“Nope”
“What if she thinks it’s rape, but I don’t?”
“Nope”
“A sexy lady bug?”
“No”
“a ghost? What about a sexy owl? A sexy transformer?”

The school bell rings to reveal time has passed. The camera pans to a frustrated locker room with the whiteboard covered in possible scenarios including ‘Dad’s dead?’ and ‘Adopted?’

“What if my mom is the D.A. and won’t prosecute, can I rape?”
“No you cannot”
“What if she’s drunk and has a slight reputation and no one is going to believe her?”
“That ain’t allowed.”
“The girl said yes to me the other day, but it was about something else?”
“No”
“What if the girl said yes, but then she changes her mind out of nowhere, like a crazy person?”
“You gotta stop.”
“NO YOU GOTTA STOP” (Comedy Central, 2015a).
The scene uses the absurdity of a question and answer about rape between a coach and his players to highlight some of the ridiculous ways in which sports culture supports sexual violence. This joke is important because it does not excuse player behavior. Their questions indicate that they clearly understand what rape is and is not and are instead trying to find a way around the rule, much like their real life counterparts. The joke works because the audience recognizes these players as caricatures with some truth. Athletes have been the source of major sexual violence cover-ups from high school to college and professional athletics (McCray, 2015). Schumer uses this absurd scene to ridicule athletic culture, which permits sexual violence implicitly, by explicitly banning it in her fictional world. She also highlights that these actions often occur with the willing consent of the adults involved. By naming that rape will not be tolerated, this new coach has strayed from what previous coaches have done, causing a controversy in the locker room, and emphasizing for the audience that adults often indirectly allow sexual violence to occur. The comedic piece is not only a take down of rape culture in athletics, but also of those directly responsible, such as the coaches and adults in the room.

The sketch goes on to further comment on the ‘idol’ status of athletes, specifically male football players. In the next scene, the coach is on his way home from work when two older women accost him in his neighborhood. They cry, “You’re that coach, who don’t like raping. How are our boys supposed to celebrate when they win or blow off steam when they lose?” (Comedy Central, 2015a). Here Schumer is using comedy to satirize the near god-like status of athletes in communities. These athletes have so much power that they can get away with horrible
things like rape, without community oversight or scrutiny. The joke is that these women are discussing it so openly, therefore it is absurd, but not absurd enough that the truth upon which it relies (that communities rally around male athletes over their victims) is universal, making the joke funny.

The sketch ends by returning to the locker room. The coach is fed up with the athletes’ and community’s obsession with rape. He pontificates, “Football isn’t about rape. It’s about violently dominating anyone that stands between you and what you want. You gotta get yourself into the mindset that you are gods, and you are entitled to this. That other team, they ain’t just gonna lie down and give it you. You have to go out there and take it!” (Comedy Central, 2015a). Here Schumer directly calls out the sexual violence inherent in sports culture. Even the coach, who is nominal against rape, unwittingly describes the game as a metaphor for sexual violence. By drawing these two close together, Schumer uses superiority and incongruity theory to successfully tell a joke with a message. The message society is all too familiar with, but requires humor to be reinforced and acknowledged in order to make any change.

Naming rapists is another form of the ‘rapists are hilarious’ jokes. Hannibal Buress, a famous comedian, launched a major controversy when he first joked about rape allegations against famous comedian, Bill Cosby. He jokes, “He’s like… ‘I can talk down to [black people] because I had a successful sitcom.’ Yeah but you rape women, Bill Cosby, so that kind of brings you down a couple notches” (Eye Sight, 2014). Buress uses his platform to criticize Cosby for condescending to black people by highlighting rape allegations made against Cosby. It is these allegations that make Cosby the object of scorn and worthy of ridicule. He highlights the contradictions of
taking advice from a rapist and recognizes the power in naming it. Naming rapists is important feminist work, and doing it through comedic speech is more effective, subverting the tendency to reject the claim, and couching it in relatable play.

**Cultural Absurdity**

If the first set of jokes target an individual perpetrator or person who perpetuates false ideas about sexual violence, than the second type of jokes makes a larger criticism through absurdity. While superiority theory is still at play in these jokes, they largely rely on incongruity theory to make them funny. They create an absurdity, which translates to humor, and sometimes even a radical feminist reimagining of alternative possibilities. Wanda Sykes, a famous female comedian, uses her stand up special to talk about the pressure to keep herself safe from sexual violence in a society that is increasingly dangerous for women and non-binary people.

In her infamous stand up routine, she makes the suggestion that women should have a ‘detachable pussy’ to keep themselves safe. She declares:

“Even as little girls, we’re taught that we have something that everybody wants and you gotta protect it…and that’s a lot of fucking pressure, and I would like a break. You know what would make my life a lot easier?...Ladies wouldn’t you love it if our pussies were detachable?...Wouldn’t it be great if you could just leave your pussy at home sometimes? Just think of the freedom you would have. You get home from work…and your like, ‘I would like to go for a jog, but it’s getting too dark. Oh I’ll just leave it at home.’ And you go out jogging. And it could be pitch black and you’re just enjoying yourself. And some crazy guy jumps out of the bushes and is like ‘ah!’ and you’re like, ‘uh I left it at home.’” (NosisBlack, 2013).

Sykes uses the joke of detachable pussy to get at the underlying truth of women’s safety. The joke relies on an understanding that going out a night is inherently unsafe for women, a truth many people take for granted. Sykes makes her audience laugh, using the absurdity of a detachable pussy, to speak a truth, that women feel unsafe, so
much so that women would have to remove a part of their anatomy the rapist would value in order to experience some kind of freedom from violence. Clearly, this is absurd and worthy of laughter. The laughter isn’t at women, instead it is at a culture that requires women alter themselves in an incredible way in order to feel safe. Sykes goes on to extend the metaphor to additional scenarios including dates with strangers and going out with friends (NosisBlack, 2013). Each time her audience responds with even more laughter at the absurdity of having to remove one’s pussy in order to be safe and have fun. This joke is older and does contain some outdated ideas about sexual violence, including that sexual assault is about sex, when instead it is about power and control. Not having a pussy, would not stop a sexual assault, as evidenced by male and trans rape survivors. However, her message and example is still pertinent and her delivery is important. She is making a vital and critical statement about women’s safety, directing her anger at a system that requires women to do ridiculous things in order to feel safe. She does not deflect and suggest that women who do not take such precautions are at fault and instead places the onus of the assault on the perpetrator. In her joke, she strips the would-be rapist of his power in the face of her ‘pussylessness.’ By calling attention to the pressure and powerlessness often associated with being a woman, Sykes uses absurdity to elicit laughter and create comedy that targets a society that makes women feel threatened by sexual violence.

Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele are a famous comedy duo. They often use their critically acclaimed sketch comedy show, Key & Peele, to discuss difficult topics. One such topic is rape. Their sketch, “Pirate Chantey,” uses pirates, hyper-masculine and traditionally misogynistic characters, to sing about feminism and
promote an anti-rape agenda, making the audience laugh through absurdity. Peele, dressed as a pirate, sings:

“I once met a lass so fine,
she was drunk on barley wine.
I’d been to sea
for months a three,
I knew I could make her mine.
And the lass was past consent
so it was off with her we went.
We threw her in bed
And rested her head
And left ‘cause that’s what gentlemen do.
A woman has right to a drink or two
Without worrying about what you will do.
We say yo-ho but we don’t say ho
‘Cause ho is disrespectful yo” (Comedy Central, 2015b).

The joke here centers on the contrast and incongruity between the audience’s perception of the pirates singing the song and message of the lyrics. When the song starts, the audience expects the pirates to rape the woman in the song. Instead, they sing a feminist anti-rape message, inverting the perceived order and calling attention to content of song. The lyrics are decidedly feminist, emphasizing consent, but the message is tempered by the humor of the situation. Instead of a lecture, the audience is getting the message couched in the humor of absurdity and the joy produced when feeling superior. Key and Peele produce laughter through the absurdity of the pirate chantey and then by making the audience laugh at the misogynistic history of pirates and their stories. In one of the later verses, they directly call out the use of the word ‘she’ to refer to ships, calling out the implicit sexism of nautical terms (Comedy Central, 2015b). Key and Peele manipulate public perception of pirates, as sexist, to get their audience to listen more intently to the pirates when they are talking about feminism and issues of consent.
Story Sharing

Feminist rape jokes play on what is familiar and use superiority and incongruity to better situate rapists and the culture that supports them instead of their victims as the punch line of the joke. Story sharing feminist rape jokes complicate this formula. Instead of fantastic or fictionalized scenarios, the jokes rely on real life experiences. Still merging incongruity and superiority theory to convey a message, these jokes have the added hurdle of navigating around additional comedic and societal rules. Disclosing oneself as a survivor of sexual violence opens up the survivor-comedian to the proscribed role of perfect victim, to perform fineness. As Munro details, one laughter-producing scenario is experiencing a ‘small misfortune.’ Rape is not a small misfortune, so being raped can be funny (although, I have no example to prove this), but it is not inherently funny, because it is widely considered a serious misfortune. Similar to the example in the first chapter about the man hitting his thumb instead of the nail, joking about rape requires that the survivor-comedian perform fineness and allow the audience to laugh at her trauma on her terms. Jokes that rely on personal experiences after an assault are more easily executed. In these jokes, survivor-comedians need only to perform fineness to the extent that they understand their treatment under the patriarchy is absurd. This invites the audience to laugh with them, when they both recognize this absurdity. Perhaps, this is why feminist rape jokes tend to be visual in nature. It is easier to demonstrate fineness visually than it is to do so in writing. Survivor-comedians may also choose to be self-deprecating, further complicating the understanding that feminist rape jokes should not locate rape survivors as the punch line of the joke. However, survivor-comedians
can still perform feminist rape jokes about personal experience simply by refuting the
narrative of the silent and passive perfect victim. Story sharing with humor can be a
radical reimagining of what it means to be a person surviving the aftermath of an
assault.

Jessie Kahnweiler’s short film, “Meet my Rapist,” features several comedic
interventions discussing rape. The film is somewhat autobiographical, as she
discusses her experience as a rape survivor in a fictionalized environment. The
satirical piece highlights for comedy the absurd ways people in her life treat her after
she discloses she was assaulted. The audience is ultimately left laughing at these
caricatures that the rape script produces. She makes the artistic choice to not allow the
rapist to speak. Instead, he appears in every scene, as a constant reminder, often
someone with whom the rest of the cast interacts, but he does not speak. When they
first run into each other at the farmer’s market, Jessie recognizes him and stops him
from trying to get away. She runs up to him and remarks, “Can I get a ride? Dude, it’s
so crazy running into you. After our unforgettable night on the air mattress, I thought
I was never going to see you again. Dude, can I get a ride? You kind of owe me one.”
(Kahnweiler, 2013). Using subtle facial cues and sarcasm, Kahnweiler situates herself
as superior to the rapist, making him laughable and her actions somewhat absurd and
also worthy of laughter. There is power in her being the one following him, bothering
him, joking with/about him. He does not speak back, but his body language conveys
discomfort, mirroring the audience’s discomfort to the subject matter. However,
Kahnweiler remains in control of the scene and the sketch. Her performance is her
resistance.
Kahnweiler also masterfully crafts a universe that criticizes reactions to trauma. In one scene she goes on a job interview. During the interview she sees her rapist performing annoying and distracting tasks, such as playing with her hair and popping bubble wrap. She tries to focus but gets increasingly frustrated. The interviewer asks:

“It says on your resume, survivor of rape, what is that?”
“Like I got raped, but I don’t have issues about it. I’m like totally still fine. Like I got raped, but I didn’t get raped.”
“That’s good to hear because this office is all about fun”

to the rapist: “Can you stop it? Just stop it!”
“Whoa, no one here wants an angry woman” (Khanweiler, 2013).

In this comical exchange, Kahnweiler captures the often-fraught contradictions of being a survivor of rape. She wants to appear fine, to contradict the stereotype that raped women are forever damaged, while still managing her issues. The joke rests on the absurdity of the situation, her actions and the interviewer’s. Who would put rape survivor on a resume? How can you be raped but not raped? Why is her rapist popping bubble wrap in the corner? By using absurdity, Kahnweiler taps into a pointed commentary about the interviewer. He is laughable. He is disheveled, uncouth, and insensitive. He is making her say ridiculous things, like being raped but not raped. He is the punch line of the joke. He is the problem, the representation of rape culture, which the audience finds worthy of ridicule. While Jessie is certainly a clownish character worthy of some laughter, it is clear that the joke is on the boss, whose awkwardness and insensitivity is laughable.

In the next scene, Jessie confides in her best friend about her rape. Her best friend is quick to respond, “But were you like really raped? Were you drunk? Was he cute? Was he white? Did he talk about your vagina at all through the evening? Was it
full sex or was it just the tip?” (Khanweiler, 2013). Jessie responds hastily that she was in fact raped, to which her friend replies, “Omigod, this is like so intense. It’s just so hard because as your best friend, this like really affects me” (Khanweiler, 2013). Jessie is then forced to comfort her distraught friend ultimately running to get a glass of water for her. This scene relies on incongruity to make its point. The audience would expect that Jessie would be the one receiving comfort after disclosing her experience, and instead her friend is demanding attention and service. The friend’s behavior is clearly ridiculous and laughable, when she makes Jessie shoulder the emotional labor in that situation, making her the true target of the joke.

I began this chapter with an original feminist rape joke. With this joke, I was hoping to highlight a cultural obsession with sexual violence and the ways in which survivors are forced to perform their experiences. By using the term surrogacy, I interrogate a culture, which forces rape survivors to perform both fineness and their trauma when called upon. The joke is funny because it speaks a truth, the emotional labor of survivors and a cultural obsession with violence. By juxtaposing myself as the surrogate rape victim and the audience/friend as wanting and deserving of trauma, I highlight the ways in which survivorship is a forced performance and the absurdity of the claim she was ‘asking for it.’ However, the joke’s true power is in its performance. It is a critique of performance through performance, but the difference is that this is performance on my terms. Taking back the power from those who would deny it to me and making them laughable for their efforts.

Beyond Detachable Pussies: The Future of the Feminist Rape Joke
We have examined the building blocks of the feminist rape joke, the radical affective power of a feminist killjoy comedian who kills joy and produces laughter, and the importance of humor in communication of feminist messages. Feminist rape jokes provide a vital response and intervention to rape culture and jokes. As a way of talking back to a rapist or society, these jokes function as a radical reimagining of story sharing and feminist anti-violence work. Beyond feminist work, feminist comedians and survivor-comedians are capitalizing on their emotional and joy-producing labor. Lucrative movie and television deals, sold out tours, comedy album sales, and Internet downloads prove that this comedy is funny and important. These comedians are flipping the script on unpaid emotional labor and turning it into high-powered careers with a message. Female comedians occupy a specific realm of power in contemporary society. They are paid to produce joy, a radical reimagining of the emotional labor performed by the happy housewife or the perfect victim. That joy is turned into a political statement, valuing emotional labor and refuting sexism and the rape script.

Because the rise of feminist rape jokes is relatively new, there are many possibilities for their future. One such area for further study is joking about the issues facing male, trans, and non-binary victims of sexual violence. These jokes could help shine a light on issues that are often swept under the rug in favor of discussing sexual violence against women. However, I argue that these jokes do not need to be funny, because historically, when these bodies have been violated, it has been deemed hilarious. Therefore a radical feminist rape joke on the subject, does not have to be funny, it can and should be poignant, regardless of the humor. It is important to still
refer to them as jokes, because jokes can be effective regardless of their success (in producing laughter). A joke can communicate a message without laughter, through its failure. By holding up a somber mirror with a humorous lens, these jokes can be an essential tool in dismantling the rape script.

While the future of feminist rape jokes is yet to be determined, they are definitely here to stay. Feminists and comedians alike have found a market and an audience for these jokes. By reclaiming comedy and fighting back with a stage and a microphone, feminist killjoy comedians are redefining resistance and changing the political horizon on which cultural wars are waged. While telling one feminist rape joke might not change any one person’s cultural perception of rape, their growing prevalence and subsequent popularity could indicate an opportunity for feminist anti-violence activists to create a substantive anti-rape comedic discourse, speaking to the absurdity of a culture that supports rapists and denies justice to survivors.
CONCLUSION:

So, Why Did the Rapist Cross the Road?

So, why did the rapist cross the road? The rape script might tell us that because he is a big strong man, always capable of violence, the rapist crossed the road to rape. The feminist killjoy comedian might say the rapist crossed the road to become fodder for her jokes. I might argue that the rapist crossed the road simply to get to the other side. This is exactly what feminist rape joking gives us: an opportunity to create possibilities outside of the rape script. It offers feminist activists and scholars a chance to script women as powerful people who fight back, instead of as always rapeable, rape survivors as people, of any gender or none at all, who are not always marked by their trauma, and rapists as always ridiculous.

Feminist rape jokes do not exist in a vacuum nor will they change a culture overnight. Instead, they offer a window into people’s lives, a way to change the narrative using one of the most powerful forms of communication, comedy. Feminist rape jokes exist in a world where feminist anti-violence activists are fighting for their rights under Title IX, in the criminal and civil justice systems, and in their own communities. Feminist activists contribute to a wide anti-sexual violence discourse. Through their scholarship, political advocacy, and community organizing, anti-violence activists have produced a counter-discourse to the rape script and the legal and cultural discourse on rape. These jokes can act as a powerful way to supplement this important work, a larger strategy to counter sexist and violent claims in comedy and in the media.
I began this project as a means to justify the way I do anti-violence activism. A dedicated feminist for quite some time, I have often found myself laughing while creating anti-rape campaigns, teaching about consent, or drafting policy recommendations. My fellow activists often met my laughter and joking with derision, stating that I was not taking the work seriously enough. I would find myself defending my work, vehemently arguing that I take this work very seriously. This liminal space of seriousness is not only possible, it is important. To take rape and sexual violence seriously without taking rapists and the culture that supports them seriously. That is what feminist rape joking offers us. It offers us an opportunity to refuse a culture that mistreats survivors and accepts rapists by declaring that culture absurd, laughable, and ridiculous. I refuse to take such a culture seriously. This public refusal is the political claim at stake when feminists joke about rape.

Traditional anti-violence strategies make a similar political statement, that sexual violence and the culture that supports it are unacceptable. Just as feminists take back the night, they should take back the comedy clubs and comedic speech. Comedic speech is a strategic platform for anti-violence activists to have their messages heard and reproduced until they can finally overthrow the dominant sexist discourse.

Comedy also offers unique possibilities for reaching an audience and claiming comedic license. When Jessica Williams or Amy Schumer performs on Comedy Central, they reach an audience that might not read scholarly journals. They can level critiques in a way that academics could not, their jokes making mainstream headlines and launching them into successful careers. Few activists have this kind of cultural
power, but comedy allows access to this audience. Through comedic license, they are able to speak feminist truths about sexual violence without fear.

By examining the mechanisms of comedy, how it operates and functions, feminist scholars and comedians can better use comedy in a strategic way. The rise of the feminist rape joke is symbolic of a feminist community that is tired of the same old strategies and willing and ready to engage in an anti-violence discourse on multiple fronts. Feminist rape jokes are part of a larger movement working to end sexual violence in local communities and across the world. Jokes rely on a shared cultural reality, which the comedian then critiques or alters for laughs. By altering the rape script, feminists can explore new possibilities for a world free of sexual violence.
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Appendix:

Schrödinger’s Virginity and the Case of the Rape-Resistant Hymen

“So, what about you, Nina?” All eyes turn and face me. I purse my lips and suppress a chuckle.

There is an inevitable moment when girls talk about their virginity. It doesn’t matter if they were raised at the altar of Audre Lorde and listened to Tina Fey’s *Bossypants* on audio book eight and a half times. If they were taught about sex from a well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided athletic coach, who had clearly peaked in high school and was over the whole “teaching thing”. Or from a meticulously dissected feminist theories course in a college with a reputation for producing “crunchy Jewish girls.” I happened to have had all of those experiences, and I can safely say that no matter the group, the discussion inevitably lands there: the V word.

I can always tell when a conversation is headed towards virginity. It often starts with some weird reference to a vagina. And there’s always the same cast of characters:

**The Experienced Girl:** This girl likes to pretend that she just discovered her boobs, even though she’s had them since the third grade. She often initiates the conversation and is always on the look out for excuses to bring it up. She either has a hilarious or life-changing story to tell.

**The ‘Take-it-From-me’ Girl:** This girl has been around the block, but isn’t as showy about it as The Experienced One. She uses her story time to warn everyone about the importance of personal hygiene, emotional commitment, condoms, lube, birth control, how to explain what a clitoris is to a totally clueless partner, etc. Her story is often cringe-worthy, occasionally comical and always has a perfectly rehearsed ending that makes it reminiscent of an R-rated Disney Channel Original Movie.
The Is-This-Normal Girl: This girl has questions. She can often be seen focusing intently during ‘take-it-from-me’s story with the intensity of someone trying to practice telekinesis in the hopes of one day beating Ms. Trunchbull. Her regret at not bringing a pen and paper to this social event mirrors that one friend who drove all the way to the party only to realize she left her from-the-box, but still painstakingly baked, brownies on the roof of her car before pulling out of her garage. Her story is often believably vague and peppered with nervous giggles.

I fall into the fourth category, which encompasses several types of people and I fit all of them, but for the purpose of simplicity I will call it ‘The Girl who Lies.’

You made me feel
Yeah, you made me feel
So shiny and new
Like a virgin
Touched for the very first time
Like a virgin
When your heart beats next to mine.

My mom is breaking out her ‘hallelujah arm-clapping dance.’ It involves reaching all the way in front and clapping her hands in a sweeping gesture that simultaneously makes relatives dodge her swinging arms and compels them to come join us on the dance floor. In true Gurak girl form, we are the first of a handful of wedding guests to ‘get this party started.’ Together we are belting out the lyrics, channeling our best Madonna impressions. I go for a deeper more guttural alto, while my mom chooses a lively soprano. In all honesty, I know very little about the pop diva. I was born well after the height of her popularity. She won’t really become personally relevant for a few more years, when she releases a hit single with Justin Timberlake. In fact, the song we’re singing came out exactly a decade before my birth. However, no one in my family can resist a good dance party, so at the ripe young age of 8, I was belting out the words to a song about the joys of virginal maidenhood with my extended family.
This is my first memory of the word virgin. Later that night I would ask my mom what that word meant and she would mumble something under her breath, leading me to believe I probably should not bring it up again. I would sit in my bed and think about what it meant to be a virgin. If it meant that something was shiny and new, did that mean that my new bicycle was a virgin? After I played with it in the mud, would it still be a virgin? Whatever it meant, it seemed like virgins were better. I could definitely agree that a clean bike is better than a dirty bike. I always wondered why Madonna felt like a dirty bike, before meeting this random guy. I wouldn’t understand what she meant for quite some time.

**Group of young women are seated at an empty restaurant. The conversation has reached a lull and the group has become anxious with the need to check their cell phones.**

**Experienced One:** “This blooming onion we ordered at Outback looks just like a vagina! Here’s a fun idea. Let’s talk about how we lost our virginities!

**Group nods enthusiastically**

I’ll go first. This one time, at band camp, I had sex with this guy, who I had been hooking up with in the back closet of the music department. It was so great, until Mr. Smith walked in on us!

**Group breaks out laughing**

**Take-it-From-Me:** Wow! That reminds me of my first time. It was so weird, because I did it with my high school boyfriend, who turned out to be gay. He was a little confused and didn’t really know what he was doing. The next time I had sex, I made sure the guy I was doing it with was well aware of where to put everything.

**Is-This-Normal:** Hmm. Yeah, that’s a good idea. I had sex with my friend in the back of his car, and it wasn’t that great. I just didn’t really know what to do with my hands. It was just so awkward.

**Group collectively cringes**
Experienced One: So, what about you, Nina?

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**Future College Feminist Leaders of America Application for Membership**

Do you have a critical perspective on white feminism?

Yeah, Sure! I think white feminism largely ignores the multiple oppressions women of color, trans woman, and gender nonconforming people face every day. I think it’s unfortunate that the Movement hasn’t effectively dealt with racism in any real way. We, as feminists, need to stand up in solidarity with other movements in order to fully achieve goals of gender equity.

What are your feelings about Kimberley Crenshaw’s analysis of intersectionality? Do we need a more complex metaphor to describe intersectionality?

Kimberley Crenshaw is the best! I first read her essay on intersectionality in a class I took my freshman year. It was totally transformative and really made me think critically about my work and activism.

How many degrees of separation are between you and Judith Butler?

Just one.

How many times did you check the #YesAllWomen feed on twitter?

I don’t have a twitter account, but I checked the feed regularly for at least a month.

Describe your feelings about direct action.

I’m always down for a good protest, as long as it has a clear goal and is part of a strategic campaign.

What is your favorite feminism meme?

Feminist Ryan Gosling is the best, because he is gorgeous and talks about the Hollywood double standard of portraying female sexual pleasure.

When did you lose your virginity?

Um, well, you see that’s a bit complicated, so I think I’d prefer not to answer.

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22 While this application is fictional, it is based off of conversations I have had with peers throughout my time in college.
If you left this question blank, please describe why you are a judgmental prude who hates everyone. Why are you slut shaming me? And why would you ever consider yourself a feminist? Don’t you know that to be liberated, you have to have boatloads of hot, great kinky sex? Or do you own your nonsexuality in a totally bad ass way? We’ve been working on incorporating more asexual folks into our group. Our sisters did not fight the veil of sexist oppression so you could just sit on your ass. Get up and put that vagina to work! And don’t you dare say that you’re saving yourself for marriage that fucked up heteropatriarchical institution. I got it! You think you’re better than us. So what makes you think that? Yeah, so in short please describe in an essay with no more than 4,000 words, what the fuck is wrong with you?

Well, no, of course. It’s not a judgment thing. I just don’t really…I’m not….I don’t…

All eyes turn and face me. I smile and purse my lips.

I never really know what to say about these types of things. As a rape survivor, it never seems appropriate to grin enthusiastically and gush, “Ha! Yeah, it was magical. Right before he raped me, he even locked me in a closet for an hour! Can you believe it?” Or “Yeah, his friends taking turns was by far the best part, but pro-tip: If you really want to please your man, don’t try to scream through the sock shoved in your mouth.” I’ve tried this approach. This approach is aggressive. It normally gets a sympathetic look from everyone around and about four minutes worth of awkward conversation about someone’s aunt, who was sexually harassed at her first job 15 years ago. The conversation will turn to heavy sighs and sad puppy dog eyes, before someone mentions a funny work story. The group will physically shift (just slightly) away from me, and we will continue to discuss the news stories of the day.

Sometimes it seems appropriate to outright lie. I generally try something like, “I lost it to this great guy, who was really cool and we met at this dance, but I had to
leave and he was really into ladies footwear, but not in a creepy way” (but you have
to be careful not to repeat the plot of movies, unless you’re going for ironic). When
lying, it is important to decide whether you are aiming for humorous obvious lie or
subtle deceit. For a humorous obvious lie, I roll my eyes and laugh, “You wouldn’t
know him, because he is in a band and tours in Canada a lot, but one night we did it in
his tour bus.” Or, “This guy, Ron, saved me from a burning building and then we
made love in the back of the ambulance, while the EMTs weren’t looking.” These are
ridiculous scenarios, each just enough over the top to send the subtle message that
I’m not interested in talking, but let’s keep this light and fun. As long as I sell the
extra edge to my voice, I can just get away with the comedic approach.

The hardest to nail is the subtle deceit. This tactic requires measured thought,
an element of truth, and vague enough details that show that you care enough about
the story to remember, but a nonchalant attitude that discourages further inquiry. I
shrug, “My first boyfriend and I had sex in his room, when his parents weren’t home.
It was quick and definitely not mind blowing. I was wearing my favorite pair of
jeans.” This is usually enough vague detail to adequately pass as truth, whatever that
means.

She’s scared but excited. You can tell by the way she smiles and it doesn’t
quite catch her eyes. She pushes her hair back with her fingers. He pulls on her chin
and moves toward her to kiss her but stops right before and whispers something
encouraging against her ready lips. Her breathing hitches. She nods and says she’s
ready. At this point the camera pans to a wider scene, often showing a bed or the back
of a car. He guides her down to the bed and the scene fades to black. The episode goes to commercial break where advertisers try to sell a variety of products including pizza rolls, make up products, clothing, and whatever they advertise to get people to go to Target. When the show returns, the characters are wrapped around each other and carefully covered by a blanket. They look happy, or if it’s a particularly conservative show, somewhat unhappy. The implication being that a lost virginity is somehow a paradigm shifting moment.

YouTube sensation Laci Green, sexpert and vlogger, stretches a dental dam over the end of a toilet paper roll. She snaps a rubber band around the elastic covering to hold it securely in place and winks suggestively at the camera. The word ‘hymen’ flashes across the screen in an extravagant rainbow font. I am an 18-year-old college student, sex educator in training, and I watch in horrified fascination. She looks at the camera as she takes a pink dildo and tries to pierce through the covering with no success. I’m secretly impressed by her aim.

“So let’s talk for a second about this misconception that the hymen covers the whole vagina and needs to be broken. Not only is it outright false. It’s violent. AHHH big bad penis needs to come in and pop your hymen and it’s going to be this big pain fest, and I’m going to take away your virginity. I’m going to take away your flower. Can you see why so many women get so anxious and nervous about the first time?”

I’m surprised. This flies in the face of all of my health classes in high school. While none of them really addressed topic of sexism in understanding virginity myths, I thought they were at least telling us factual information about the hymen. Of course, they said that there were some people, who didn’t have them or tore them falling off a bike or something, but they still seemed integral to virginity, a physical
reminder of purity.

Once, at a pool party, one of my friends told me that she wouldn’t even wear tampons because her mom was so afraid that she would lose her virginity. I told her that I didn’t have to worry about that and dove into the pool.

The following is an excerpt from my journal circa 2012,

Virginity is like Jason from Friday the Thirteenth. I’m the girl in the woods running from him, but I don’t know if I make it out because, like any good formulaic horror movie, it completely depends on whether or not I am still a virgin. So, maybe this is more of a physics analogy, Schrodinger’s virginity, where I am both simultaneously a virgin and not a virgin. It’s probably not at all like Friday the Thirteenth. Either way, it does seem to follow me. I can’t get rid of it. Today my friend was talking to me about her and her boyfriend having sex, and she asked me about how I lost my virginity. I didn’t really know what to say, so I went with the silent shrug. She kept asking me if I was a virgin, and I didn’t really know how to respond. I shook my head no, and she just looked at me demanding more answers. So I told her about my ex-whatever and our 3 year relationship and everything that happened. And she just started crying. She was quite worked up. I patted her gently on the back and assured her that my lost virginity wasn’t the end of the world. I told her it was going to be ok, but she was inconsolable. She just looked up and pulled me into a hug, squeezing me as she said, “Don’t worry. That doesn’t count. Someday, some man will love you.” I rolled my eyes, knowing she couldn’t see.
“Earth to Nina! Come in Nina!” The Experienced One waves her hand in front of my face theatrically.

I blink twice and look around at my friends.

“Are you going to answer the question?”

“Sorry, what?”

“How did you lose it? Where did you swipe your v-card?”

“Well…”