The Careless Language of Sexual Violence

By Roxane Gay · March 10th, 2011 · therumpus.net

There are crimes and then there are crimes and then there are atrocities. These are, I suppose, matters of scale. I read an article in the New York Times about an eleven-year old girl who was gang raped by eighteen men in Cleveland, Texas. The levels of horror to this story are many, from the victim’s age to what is known about what happened to her, to the number of attackers, to the public response in that town, to how it is being reported. There is video of the attack too, because this is the future. The unspeakable will be televised.

The Times article was entitled, “Vicious Assault Shakes Texas Town,” as if the victim in question was the town itself. James McKinley Jr., the article’s author, focused on how the men’s lives would be changed forever, how the town was being ripped apart, how those poor boys might never be able to return to school. There was discussion of how the eleven-year-old girl, the child, dressed like a twenty-year-old, implying that there is a realm of possibility where a woman can “ask for it” and that it’s somehow understandable that eighteen men would rape a child. There were even questions about the whereabouts of the mother, given, as we all know, that a mother must be with her child at all times or whatever ill may befall the child is clearly the mother’s fault. Strangely, there were no questions about the whereabouts of the father while this rape was taking place.

The overall tone of the article was what a shame it all was, how so many lives were affected by this one terrible event. Little addressed the girl, the child. It was an eleven-year-old girl whose body was ripped apart, not a town. It was an eleven-year-old girl whose life was ripped apart, not the lives of the men who raped her. It is difficult for me to make sense of how anyone could lose sight of that and yet it isn’t.

We live in a culture that is very permissive where rape is concerned. While there are certainly many people who understand rape and the damage of rape, we also live in a time that necessitates the phrase “rape culture.” This phrase denotes a culture where we are inundated, in different ways, by the idea that male aggression and violence toward women is acceptable and often inevitable. As Lynn Higgins and Brenda Silver ask in their book Rape and Representation, “How is it that in spite (or perhaps because) of their erasure, rape and sexual violence have been so ingrained and so rationalized through their representations to appear ‘natural’ and inevitable, to women as men?” It is such an important question, trying to understand how we have come to this. We have also, perhaps, become immune to the horror of rape because we see it so often and discuss it so often, many times without acknowledging or considering the gravity of rape and its effects. We jokingly say things like, “I just took a rape shower,” or “My boss totally just raped me over my request for a raise.” We have appropriated the language of rape for all manner of violations, great and small. It is not a stretch to imagine why James McKinley Jr. is more concerned about the eighteen men than one girl.

The casual way in which we deal with rape may begin and end with television and movies where we are inundated with images of sexual and domestic violence. Can you think of a dramatic television series that has not incorporated some kind of rape storyline? There was a time when these storylines had a certain educational element to them, ala A Very Special Episode. I remember, for example, the episode of Beverly Hills 90210 where Kelly Taylor discussed being date raped at a slumber party, surrounded, tearfully, by her closest friends. For many young women that episode created a space where they could have a conversation about rape as something that did not only happen with strangers. Later in the series, when the show was on its last legs, Kelly would be raped again, this time by a stranger. We watched the familiar trajectory of violation, trauma, disillusion, and finally vindication, seemingly forgetting we had sort of seen this story before.
Every other movie aired on Lifetime or Lifetime Movie Network features some kind of violence against women. The violence is graphic and gratuitous while still being strangely antiseptic where more is implied about the actual act than shown. We consume these representations of violence and do so eagerly. There is a comfort, I suppose, to consuming violence contained in 90-minute segments and muted by commercials for household goods and communicated to us by former television stars with feathered bangs.

While once rape as entertainment fodder may have also included an element of the didactic, such is no longer the case. Rape, these days, is good for ratings. Private Practice, on ABC, recently aired a story arc where Charlotte King, the iron-willed, independent, and sexually adventurous doctor was brutally raped. This happened, of course, just as February sweeps were beginning. The depiction of the assault was as graphic as you might expect from prime time network television. For several episodes we saw the attack and its aftermath, how the once vibrant Charlotte became a shell of herself, how she became sexually frigid, how her body bore witness to the physical damage of rape. Another character on the show, Violet, bravely confessed she too had been raped. The show was widely applauded for its sensitive treatment of a difficult subject.

The soap opera General Hospital is currently airing a rape storyline, and the height of that story arc occurred, yes, during sweeps. General Hospital, like most soap operas, incorporates a rape storyline every five years or so when they need an uptick in viewers. Before the current storyline, Emily Quartermaine was raped and before Emily, Elizabeth Webber was raped, and long before Elizabeth Webber, Laura of Luke and Laura was raped by Luke but that rape was okay because Laura ended up marrying Luke so her rape doesn’t really count. Every woman, General Hospital wanted us to believe, loves her rapist. The current rape storyline has a twist. This time the victim is a man, Michael Corinthos Jr., son of Port Charles mob boss Sonny Corinthos, himself no stranger to violence against women. While it is commendable to see the show’s producers trying to address the issue of male rape and prison rape, the subject matter is still handled carelessly, is still a source of titillation, and is still packaged neatly between commercials for cleaning products and baby diapers.

Of course, if we are going to talk about rape and how we are inundated by representations of rape and how, perhaps, we’ve become numb to rape, we have to discuss Law & Order: SVU, which deals, primarily, in all manner of sexual assault against women, children, and once in a great while, men. Each week the violation is more elaborate, more lurid, more unspeakable. When the show first aired, Rosie O’Donnell, I believe, objected quite vocally when one of the stars appeared on her show. O’Donnell said she didn’t understand why such a show was needed. People dismissed her objections and the incident was quickly forgotten. The series is in its 12th season and shows no signs of ending anytime soon. When O’Donnell objected to SVU’s premise, when she dared to suggest that perhaps a show dealing so explicitly with sexual assault was unnecessary, was too much, people treated her like she was the crazy one, the prude censor. I watch SVU religiously, have actually seen every single episode. I am not sure what that says about me.

I am trying to connect my ideas here. Bear with me.

It is rather ironic that only a couple weeks ago, the Times ran an editorial about the War on Women. This topic is, obviously, one that matters to me. I recently wrote an essay about how, as a writer who is also a woman, I increasingly feel that to write is a political act whether I intend it to be or not because we live in a culture where McKinley’s article is permissible and publishable. I am troubled by how we have allowed intellectual distance between violence and the representation of violence. We talk about rape but we don’t talk about rape, not carefully.
We live in a strange and terrible time for women. There are days, like today, where I think it has always been a strange and terrible time to be a woman. It is nothing less than horrifying to realize we live in a culture where the “paper of record” can write an article that comes off as sympathetic to eighteen rapists while encouraging victim blaming. Have we forgotten who an eleven-year-old is? An eleven-year-old is very, very young, and somehow, that amplifies the atrocity, at least for me. I also think, perhaps, people do not understand the trauma of gang rape. While there’s no benefit to creating a hierarchy of rape where one kind of rape is worse than another because rape is, at the end of day, rape, there is something particularly insidious about gang rape, about the idea that a pack of men feed on each other’s frenzy and both individually and collectively believe it is their right to violate a woman’s body in such an unspeakable manner.

Gang rape is a difficult experience to survive physically and emotionally. There is the exposure to unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases, vaginal and anal tearing, fistula and vaginal scar tissue. The reproductive system is often irreparably damaged. Victims of gang rape, in particular, have a higher chance of miscarrying a pregnancy. Psychologically, there are any number of effects including PTSD, anxiety, fear, coping with the social stigma, and coping with shame, and on and on. The actual rape ends but the aftermath can be very far reaching and even more devastating than the rape itself. We rarely discuss these things, though. Instead, we are careless. We allow ourselves that rape can be washed away as neatly as it is on TV and in the movies where the trajectory of victimhood is neatly defined.

I cannot speak universally but given what I know about gang rape, the experience is wholly consuming and a never-ending nightmare. There is little point in pretending otherwise. Perhaps McKinley Jr. is, like so many people today, anesthetized or somehow willfully distanced from such brutal realities. Perhaps it is that despite this inundation of rape imagery, where we are immersed in a rape culture, that not enough victims of gang rape speak out about the toll the experience exacts. Perhaps the right stories are not being told or we’re not writing enough about the topic of rape. Perhaps we are writing too many stories about rape. It is hard to know how such things come to pass.

I am approaching this topic somewhat selfishly. I write about sexual violence a great deal in my fiction. The why of this writerly obsession doesn’t matter but I often wonder why I come back to the same stories over and over. Perhaps it is simply that writing is cheaper than therapy or drugs. When I read articles such as McKinley’s, I start to wonder about my responsibility as a writer. I’m finishing my novel right now. It’s the story of a brutal kidnapping in Haiti and part of the story involves gang rape. Having to write that kind of story requires going to a dark place. At times, I have made myself nauseous with what I’m writing and what I am capable of writing and imagining, my ability to go there.

As I write any of these stories, I wonder if I am being gratuitous. I want to get it right. How do you get this sort of thing right? How do you write violence authentically without making it exploitative? There are times when I worry I am contributing to the kind of cultural numbness that would allow an article like the one in the Times to be written and published, that allows rape to be such rich fodder for popular culture and entertainment. We cannot separate violence in fiction from violence in the world no matter how hard we try. As Laura Tanner notes in her book Intimate Violence, “the act of reading a representation of violence is defined by the reader’s suspension between the semiotic and the real, between a representation and the material dynamics of violence which it evokes, reflects, or transforms.” She also goes on to say that, “The distance and detachment of a reader who must leave his or her body behind in order to enter imaginatively into the scene of violence make it possible for representations of violence to obscure the material dynamics of bodily violation, erasing not only the victim’s body but his or her pain.” The way we currently represent rape, in books, in newspapers, on television, on the silver screen, often allows us to ignore the material realities of rape, the impact of rape, the meaning of rape.
While I have these concerns, I also feel committed to telling the truth, to saying these violations happen even if hearing such witness contributes to a spectacle of sexual violence. When we’re talking about race or religion or politics, it is often said we need to speak carefully. These are difficult topics where we need to be vigilant not only in what we say but how we express ourselves. That same care, I would suggest, has to be extended to how we write about violence, and sexual violence in particular.

In the *Times* article, the phrase “sexual assault” is used, as is the phrase “the girl had been forced to have sex with several men.” The word “rape” is only used twice and not really in connection with the victim. That is not the careful use of language. Language, in this instance, and far more often than makes sense, is used to buffer our sensibilities from the brutality of rape, from the extraordinary nature of such a crime. Feminist scholars have long called for a rereading of rape. Higgins and Silver note that “the act of rereading rape involves more than listening to silences; it requires restoring rape to the literal, to the body: restoring, that is, the violence—the physical, sexual violation.” I would suggest we need to find new ways, whether in fiction or creative nonfiction or journalism, for not only rereading rape but rewriting rape as well, ways of rewriting that restore the actual violence to these crimes and that make it impossible for men to be excused for committing atrocities and that make it impossible for articles like McKinley’s to be written, to be published, to be considered acceptable.

An eleven-year-old girl was raped by eighteen men. The suspects ranged in age from middle-schoolers to a 27-year-old. There are pictures and videos. Her life will never be the same. The *New York Times*, however, would like you to worry about those boys, who will have to live with this for the rest of their lives. That is not simply the careless language of violence. It is the criminal language of violence.

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**Reporting While Female**

**By SABRINA TAVERNEISE**

Last winter, I reported on a religious festival in Pakistan, attended by thousands of worshipers. There were no women, at least that I could see. As I waded through the crowds, I held my breath, looking behind me every few seconds, warding off gropers, pushing them away with my hands.

Crowds can be a dangerous place for reporters, especially during war or unrest. Just last Friday, colleagues in Bahrain found themselves under fire from a helicopter that seemed to have singled them out as targets.

But women reporters face another set of challenges. We are often harassed in ways that male colleagues are not. This is a hazard of the job that most of us have experienced and few of us talk about.

Last week, CBS News said that its reporter Lara Logan was assaulted by a crowd of men in Cairo. CBS News did not detail the circumstances, but the network’s statement — that she had suffered a “brutal and sustained sexual assault” — said enough. Threatening had turned frightening. The moment when you hold your breath in a crowd did not pass safely for her.

I have worked in Gaza, and a half-dozen countries since the late 1990s, including Lebanon, Pakistan, Turkey and Russia. In none of these places was I dragged off and raped, but I have encountered abuse in many of them. The assaults usually took place in crowds, where I was pinned in place by men.

The risk of something happening is especially high when all the rules have fallen away and society is held together by a sense that anything can happen. This was the case for me in Baghdad in 2003 at the gun market, when a crowd of young men, impoverished and not used to seeing foreigners, first started touching me, and then began ripping at my clothes. A colleague helped me fend them off.

It was a beginner’s mistake. I was wearing pants, baggy and formless, but still looking nothing like any of the women in the area, who all wore abayas, black sheaths completely covering their bodies. That same day I went to an Iraqi clothing shop to stock up on ankle-length jean skirts and shirts that reached to mid-thigh.

Incidents would repeat themselves several times during my years in Iraq, the strangest being with British soldiers in a remote part of the southern province of Maysan. In the spring of 2006, I found myself at the center of an odd parade. A crowd of boys gathered around me, staring, as I walked with several British soldiers and a translator from our tank to their village.

Some were as young as 5, some were teenagers. A boy in a lime-green T-shirt darted out and grabbed me hard in the crotch. Then another, and another. A soldier, embarrassed, averted his
eyes. The translator tried ineffectually to shoo them away. The crowd began to chant something in Arabic that I later learned had been a crude remark. When our strange parade reached the village police station, the officers fired their guns in the air to disperse the boys. One of the policemen grinned, offering, in a motion with his gun, to shoot at them.

In my experience, Muslim countries were not the worst places for sexual harassment. My closest calls came in Georgia with soldiers from Russia, a society whose veneer of rules and civility often covers a pattern of violence, often alcohol laced, toward women.

A military unit had allowed me to tag along after its seizure of the Georgian town of Gori. The men were drunk. I was working. It was dark with no electricity in a ransacked government office. One soldier became so aggressive with his advances that I found an empty room and barricaded it closed with a couch.

The following night, I walked into an empty hotel that was still closed from the fighting. A man who said he was a caretaker appeared. He stood close to me, watching as I unpacked my gear. He took a key and locked the lobby door from the inside. I asked him why, and he said he was protecting against looters.

The hotel was otherwise empty, and I began to panic. I told him that I had left something in my car. Please unlock the door, I asked. He opened it, and I left.

On the same reporting trip, I had to hitch a ride back to Tblisi, as the journalists I had driven with had left. A man in his 50s driving a beat-up Soviet-style car filled with peaches offered me a ride. He was talking amiably, when he suddenly told me to take off my shirt.

This seemed like a good time to demand that he let me out. But he refused and pressed, reaching over to me.

I yelled and fought back. He slowed the car, I jumped out.

He stopped and opened his car’s back door. Peaches spilled onto the road. He shouted after me, offering them.
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The Hidden Victims of Wartime Rape

By LARA STemple

Los Angeles

As disturbing new reports of male rape in Congo made clear, wartime sexual violence isn’t limited to women and girls. But in its ongoing effort to eradicate rape during conflict, the United Nations continues to overlook a significant imperative: ending wartime sexual assault of men and boys as well.

Sexual violence against men does occasionally make the news: the photographs of the sexual abuse and humiliation of Iraqi men at the Abu Ghraib prison, for example, stunned the world.

Yet there are thousands of similar cases, less well publicized but well documented by researchers, in places as varied as Chile, Greece and Iran. The United Nations reported that out of 5,000 male concentration camp detainees held near Sarajevo during the Bosnian conflict, 80 percent acknowledged having been abused sexually. In El Salvador, 76 percent of male political prisoners told researchers they had experienced sexual torture.

Rape has long been a way to humiliate, traumatize and silence the enemy. For many of the same reasons that combatants assault women and girls, they also rape men and boys.

Nevertheless, international legal documents routinely reflect the assumption that sexual violence happens only to women and girls. There are dozens of references to “violence against women” — defined to include sexual violence — in United Nations human rights resolutions, treaties and agreements, but most don’t mention sexual violence against men.

Ignoring male rape has a number of consequences. For one, it not only neglects men and boys, it also harms women and girls by reinforcing a viewpoint that equates “female” with “victim,” thus hampering our ability to see women as strong and empowered.

In the same way, silence about male victims reinforces unhealthy expectations about men and their supposed invulnerability. Such hyper-masculine ideals encourage aggressive behavior in men that is dangerous for the women and girls with whom they share their lives.

Sex-specific stereotypes also distort the international community’s response. Women who have suffered rape in conflict have likely endured non-sexual trauma as well. But when they are treated as “rape victims,” their other injuries get minimized.

Conversely, when men have experienced sexual abuse and are treated solely as “torture victims,” we ignore the sexual component of their suffering. Indeed, doctors and emergency aid workers are rarely trained to recognize the physical signs of male rape or to provide counseling to its victims.
Our failure to acknowledge male rape leaves it in the shadows, compounding the humiliation that survivors experience. For instance, the majority of Tamil males in Sri Lanka who were sexually assaulted during that country’s long civil war did not report it to the authorities at the time, later explaining that they were simply too ashamed.

The United Nations has attempted to take wartime rape seriously. In 2000 the Security Council passed Resolution 1325 which, among other things, promotes gender-sensitive training in peacekeeping, encourages hiring more women in peacekeeping roles and calls for better protection of women and girls in conflict zones. This is a crucial undertaking, but the agreement neglects to address sexual violence against men and boys.

At a ceremony last year marking the resolution’s 10th anniversary, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton announced that the United States would develop a plan to accelerate the advancement of its goals, including $44 million for women’s equality initiatives around the world.

This is an important commitment. But the American government should expand its efforts to include the many international programs working with men and boys to challenge entrenched ideas about manhood and to stop the cycle of violence.

The International Criminal Court, nearly all American states and many countries use a sex-neutral definition of sexual assault. The United Nations and the White House must likewise move beyond the shortcomings of Resolution 1325 and commit to ending wartime sexual violence against everyone.

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Sexual Violence Statistics

from RAINN (Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network: rainn.org)

Who are the Victims? Breakdown by Gender and Age

Women

1 out of every 6 American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime (14.8% completed rape; 2.8% attempted rape).¹

17.7 million American women have been victims of attempted or completed rape.¹

9 of every 10 rape victims were female in 2003.²

While about 80% of all victims are white, minorities are somewhat more likely to be attacked.

Lifetime rate of rape /attempted rape for women by race:¹

- All women: 17.6%
- White women: 17.7%
- Black women: 18.8%
- Asian Pacific Islander women: 6.8%
- American Indian/Alaskan women: 34.1%
- Mixed race women: 24.4%

Men

About 3% of American men — or 1 in 33 — have experienced an attempted or completed rape in their lifetime.¹

- In 2003, 1 in every ten rape victims were male.²
- 2.78 million men in the U.S. have been victims of sexual assault or rape.¹

Children

15% of sexual assault and rape victims are under age 12.³

- 29% are age 12-17.
- 44% are under age 18.³
- 80% are under age 30.³
- 12-34 are the highest risk years.
- Girls ages 16-19 are 4 times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.

7% of girls in grades 5-8 and 12% of girls in grades 9-12 said they had been sexually abused.⁴

- 3% of boys grades 5-8 and 5% of boys in grades 9-12 said they had been sexually abused.
In 1995, local child protection service agencies identified 126,000 children who were victims of either substantiated or indicated sexual abuse.5

- Of these, 75% were girls.
- Nearly 30% of child victims were between the age of 4 and 7.

93% of juvenile sexual assault victims know their attacker.6

- 34.2% of attackers were family members.
- 58.7% were acquaintances.
- Only 7% of the perpetrators were strangers to the victim.

Effects of Rape

Victims of sexual assault are:7

3 times more likely to suffer from depression.

6 times more likely to suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder.

13 times more likely to abuse alcohol.

26 times more likely to abuse drugs.

4 times more likely to contemplate suicide.

Pregnancies Resulting from Rape

In 2004-2005, 64,080 women were raped.8 According to medical reports, the incidence of pregnancy for one-time unprotected sexual intercourse is 5%. By applying the pregnancy rate to 64,080 women, RAINN estimates that there were 3,204 pregnancies as a result of rape during that period.

This calculation does not account for the following factors which could lower the actual number of pregnancies:

- Rape, as defined by the NCVS, is forced sexual intercourse. Forced sexual intercourse means vaginal, oral, or anal penetration by offender(s). This category includes incidents where the penetration is from a foreign object such as a bottle. Certain types of rape under this definition cannot cause pregnancy.
- Some victims of rape may be utilizing birth control methods, such as the pill, which will prevent pregnancy.
- Some rapists may wear condoms in an effort to avoid DNA detection.
- Victims of rape may not be able to become pregnant for medical or age-related reasons.
This calculation does not account for the following factors which could raise the actual number of pregnancies:

- Medical estimates of a 5% pregnancy rate are for one-time, unprotected sexual intercourse. Some victimizations may include multiple incidents of intercourse.
- Because of methodology, NCVS does not measure the victimization of Americans age 12 or younger. Rapes of these young people could result in pregnancies not accounted for in RAINN's estimates.

References


How often does sexual assault occur?

In 2007, there were 248,300 victims of rape, attempted rape, or sexual assault.¹ (These figures do not include victims 12 years old or younger.)

Every 2 minutes, someone in the U.S. is sexually assaulted.

Here's the math. According to the U.S. Department of Justice's National Crime Victimization Survey -- the country's largest and most reliable crime study -- there were 248,300 sexual assaults in 2007 (the most recent data available).

There are 525,600 minutes in a non-leap year. That makes 31,536,000 seconds/year. So, 31,536,000 divided by 248,300 comes out to 1 sexual assault every 127 seconds, or about 1 every 2 minutes.

The Unvictims

Sexual assault has fallen by more than 60% in recent years.² Had the 1993 rate held steady, 6.8 million Americans would have been assaulted in the last 13 years.

But, thanks to the decline, the actual number of victims was about 4.2 million. In other words, if not for the historic gains we've made in the last decade, an additional 2,546,420 Americans would have become victims of sexual violence.

References