The Politics of the Strong Trope: 
Rape and the Feminist Debate in the United States

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ABSTRACT

Taking off from the proliferation of feminist discourse on rape since 1970, this essay examines how American culture talks about sexual violence and explains why, in the latter twentieth century, rape achieved such significance as a trope of power relations. Tracing the evolution of a specifically American rhetoric of rape back to the late eighteenth century, I explore the cultural work that this rhetoric has performed and argue that the representation of rape has been a major force in the cultural construction of sexuality, gender, race, ethnicity, class, and, indeed, national identity. Provoked in part by contemporary feminist criticism, my work also challenges feminist positions on sexual violence by interrogating them as part of the history in which rape has been a convenient and conventional albeit troubling trope for other concerns and conflicts.

The United States as “Rape Culture”? 
The Feminist Debate on Sexual Violence Revisited

Sexual violence has always been a central issue of feminist debate, whether more implicitly, as in the writing and speeches of nineteenth-century reform movement activists, or explicitly, as in today’s rape-crisis discourse. However, if one takes a closer look at the discussions on violence against women that American feminist criticism has generated in the last three decades, one thing becomes blatantly evident: in the context of American feminist criticism after 1970, violence against women seems to figure almost exclusively as rape. While domestic violence was another pressing concern for feminism and sexual violence was recognized as part of a continuum of violence against women,¹ rape has tended to dominate the debates from the late 1960s to the mid-1990s.

Thus, during the final decades of the twentieth century feminist discourse, on the one hand, has reduced a broad spectrum of systematic and systemic violence against women—including various social and economic discriminations—to sexual violence. On the other hand, the dominant feminist debate has also redefined rape as an act of violence, and this redefinition, we need to recall, is indeed a central achievement of US-American feminism. However, the conception of rape as an act of violence—as opposed to a sexual act—also marks the beginning of a development which, to my mind, is not beyond criticism. The redefinition of rape as an act

of violence is an achievement because for too long rape had often been minimized to a mere peccadillo. Separating rape as an expression of violence from intercourse as a sexual act, Susan Brownmiller, among others, objected to the predominant notion that rape is a natural expression of male sexual desire and act of sex and lust. By contrast, classic texts of the debate such as Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics* (1969), Susan Griffin’s essay “Rape, the All-American Crime” (1971) and Brownmiller’s landmark-text *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (1975) see rape as a sexually motivated act, but as a form of oppression, social control, and political power; in fact, as the most significant expression of male dominance and a primary mechanism of male supremacy. Consequently rape as a dominant contemporary feminist issue also emerged in the 1970s because “control over one’s body and sexuality became a major area for concern and activism” at that time.

One crucial effect of this politicized notion of rape was the revision of rape laws in Canada and the U.S. in the early 1970s. These rape laws reforms, instigated by the passage of new rape statutes in Michigan in 1974, addressed both the definition of the crime and the court procedures. By the end of the 1970s, though, the notion of rape as a form of oppression and control was itself subjected to a new critique. Objecting to the separation of sexuality and power, Catharine MacKinnon insisted on the convergence of sexuality, or to be exact, of male sexuality and violence. For her, as for Andrea Dworkin, “acceptable sex, in the legal perspective, can entail a lot of force,” and the use of force or, as she puts it, the “penile invasion of the vagina,” is pivotal to male sexuality. “Rape,” so MacKinnon insists, “is not less sexual for being violent. To the extent that coercion has become integral to male sexuality, rape may even be sexual to the degree that, and because, it is violent.”

“If we separate violence from sexuality,” she argues, “we leave the line between rape and intercourse, sexual harassment and sex roles, pornography and eroticism, right where it is.” In the work of MacKinnon and Dworkin, this line has in fact dissolved: under the given social conditions, Dworkin claims, heterosexual intercourse is always rape. And while pornography, as Robin Morgan famously put it in 1977, is the theory, rape is the practice.

While this so-called radical feminist position was originally quite marginal, it eventually took center stage and fundamentally affected the concept of rape in feminist criticism. Since the early 1980s, rape has been acknowledged as part of a continuum of violence against women that ranges from the inscription of conventional gender roles across misogynist or obscene speech to torture and murder.

As a consequence, innumerable cases of sexual harassment and “date rape” as well as prominent incidents such as the Central Park Jogger Rape Case (1989) were covered by the American media during the 80s and 90s. The debate eventually culminated in the claim that the US is a “rape culture” — a claim which mis-

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4 The Michigan law, upon which other states modelled their reform bills, included the following changes: It displaced the distinction between ‘simple’ rape (penetration) and attempted rape by “a ladder of offences, each of which is described as criminal sexual conduct” (Jennifer Temkin, “Women, Rape, and Law Reform,” *Rape*, ed. Sylvia Tomaselli and Roy Porter [Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986] 16-40; 28; cf. also Rosemarie Tong, *Women, Sex, and the Law* [Totowa: Rowman and Allanheld, 1984] 92-93). New charges were applicable to a husband who assaulted his wife when she was living apart from him and either party had filed for divorce or legal separation (Temkin 28). In court, the prosecution no longer had to establish the victim’s resistance (Temkin 28, see also Tong 96-97). Strict rules were instituted governing the use of the victim’s prior sexual history as evidence (Tong 106). Only her sexual history with the defendant himself or the origin of semen, pregnancy, or disease could be introduced (Temkin 28). The changes in subsequent reforms and other jurisdictions included making rapists laws (as opposed to just sodomy laws) applicable to male victims as well (Tong 91 as well as Sue Bessmer, *The Laws of Rape* [New York: Praeger, 1984] 370), reform of rules requiring corroboration (Tong 104), and laws governing cautionary instructions given to juries (Tong 105-06). In some jurisdictions, reforms assimilated rape laws to lawsuits prohibiting assault (Tong 112-13) and to reduce the penalties for rape (Tong 114-15). Cf. also John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in Amer-

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9 According to *The Official Sexually Correct Dictionary and Dating Guide* (New York: Villard, 1995), the term “date rape” was coined in 1982 by Ms. magazine writer Karen Bechhofer. It is a concept that due to the absence of a “dating system” lacks a frame of reference in many European countries, including Germany.

10 The term “rape culture” is used in sociological studies to differentiate so-called “rape-prone” countries (such as the United States) from countries where, according to official records, rape is a relatively rare crime (“rape-free” countries). See Peggy Reeves Sanday’s essay “Rape
leadingly suggests that rape occurs more frequently in a culture that talks about rape excessively than in cultures that deny the occurrence of sexual violence.

This rather comprehensive definition of rape partly resulted, at least in part, from a tendency, dominant in the debate, to diminish and blur the boundaries between acts, on the one hand, and speech acts, on the other. Hate speech and images of violence are violent acts, MacKinnon insists in her book Only Words in 1993, thus putting forth an argument that ushered in not only debatable forms of “sexual correctness” and censorship, but a considerable backlash as well. “Has feminism gone too far?” consequently became the question more and more often voiced by supporters of feminist agendas.

So what had happened? Intent to make people aware of both the degree and the cultural and individual effects of sexual violence, feminist discourse had evolved rape as “the master metaphor, for defining the violation of woman by patriarchy.” Employing a strong trope for an effective politics, however, can work only as long as that trope does not lose its momentum and force. And thus it seems crucial to me that we not only talk about rape, but also reflect about what we talk about when we talk about rape.

Why Talk about the Rhetoric of Rape?

Being a scholar of literary and cultural studies I was not guided in my research by the phenomenon that Susan Estrich called “real rape.” I was not really interested in how many women get raped in the course of their lives, or how this traumatic experience changes or even destroys their sense of self. Nor was I concerned about whether we can really distinguish the United States as a “rape prone country” from so-called “rape free countries,” as some scholars in fact do. My interest was geared toward the discourse of sexual violence or what I came to call “the rhetoric of rape,” a rhetoric which I deem to be historically, in fact, nationally specific. I asked myself why from the 1960s onward American culture in general and American feminist criticism in particular have talked so insistently, if not obsessively, about rape. What cultural work is being achieved by this rhetoric of sexual violence? How has American culture learned to talk about rape? And why has feminism, at a time when it attempted to recover the female body from the debris of cultural constraints and inscriptions, at a time when it meant to liberate a supposedly other, subversive female sexuality from sexual oppression, practised a discourse that tends to resuscitate the female subject in the position of the victim—a discourse, in other words, that to some degree reasserts the very gender differences that nineteenth-century culture had so firmly inscribed.

In order to answer these questions we have to re-trace the cultural function of this “rhetoric of rape” to the late eighteenth century—which is what I will do in the following, at a very accelerated pace. Only in this way, I argue, can we understand why late twentieth-century American feminist criticism and politics have been so preoccupied with matters of sexual violence. And only in this way can I explain why my work on violence has been provoked and inspired by feminist perspectives yet has had to considerably distance itself from these views. After all American feminist criticism itself is part of this historically grown and nationally specific discourse, a discourse which has employed rape as an effective trope for the debate of rather diverse cultural, social, and political conflicts. In fact, a close analysis of the historical trajectory of the discourse of sexual violence makes evident that the trope of rape has only rarely been appropriated for the fight against social hierarchies or political dominance. On the contrary, in the history of the “rhetoric of rape” images and figures of sexual violence have repeatedly served to establish and subsequently stabilize parameters of difference such as gender, race, ethnicity, class, and nation. Late nineteenth-century cultural practices in particular made use of the trope of rape to evolve notions of race and gender which inform our sense of otherness and sexuality to this very day. The American feminist debate of the late twentieth-century, I would claim, further reinforced and cemented these notions of difference. And this is why I think we may as well be happy that the peak of “date rape” debates and “Take Back the Night Marches” is meanwhile behind us.

Before I re-trace the American rhetoric of rape, though, I need to make a few general remarks. When I distinguish the “rhetoric of rape” from “real rape,” I do not mean to separate appearance from ‘reality,’ nor do I mean to project a bias between supposedly impressionistic perspectives of cultural studies, on the one hand, and the empiricism of the social sciences, on the other. By insisting on a distinction between rape and its rhetoric, I mean to underline that it is the talk about rape, the “putting into discourse” of the phenomenon of sexual violence which produces the particular cultural significance of such violence because it interprets and evaluates rape and even determines, to a certain degree, how such violations

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16 See Sunday.
are to be punished. Therefore it is the proliferation of rape discourse rather than the actual increase of instances of rape that generated the sense that the US is a "rape culture."

At the same time, however, we have to acknowledge that the experience of rape is a phenomenon which—not unlike experiences of sexuality, pain, and death—tends to resist representation. According to narratologist Mieke Bal, rape cannot be visualized not only because "decent" culture would not tolerate such representations of the "act" but because rape makes the victim invisible. It does that literally first—the perpetrator "covers" her—and then figuratively—the rape destroys her self-image, her subjectivity, which is temporarily narcotized, definitely changed and often destroyed. Finally, rape cannot be visualized because the experience is, physically, as well as psychologically, inner. Rape takes place inside. In this sense, rape is by definition imagined; it can exist only as experience and as memory, as image translated into signs, never adequately "objectiveable."

The very fact, though, that the physical experience of rape resists representation also explains why the figure of rape has been so politically effective.

Presuming with Bal that central aspects of rape—such as physical pain and psychic violation—escape representation, yet that rape can be communicated as text only, I argue that the central paradigm of a rhetoric of rape is not simply one of rape and silencing, as feminist criticism suggests, thus insinuating that this silence can be broken; that we can and should read the violence back into the texts. Since silences themselves generate speech, the central paradigm is rather that of rape, silence, and refiguration. By refiguration I mean all forms of mediation by which the actual phenomenon of rape is transformed into discourse and thus necessarily transfigured. If our readings focus on refigurations of rape as well as on rape as refiguration we acknowledge that texts do not simply reflect, but rather stage and dramatize the historical contradictions they are overdetermined by. At best, readings of rape therefore reveal not merely the latent text in what is manifest, and thus produce a text's self-knowledge; they also evolve a new knowledge pertaining to the ideological necessities of a text's silences and deletions.

Refiguration works by way of displacement and substitution. In metonymy, such substitution is based on relation, association, or contingency, which forms syntactical connections along horizontal, temporal lines and has therefore been associated with realism. Metaphor, by contrast, substitutes on the basis of resemblance or analogy, and creates semantic, spatial links along a paradigmatic, vertical line, often suggesting (poetic) truth-value. Due to these asymmetrical, hierarchical, complementary rather than exclusive, rhetorical processes at work, readings of rape cannot be reduced to the study of a motif. Nor would it suffice to recover "the un-speakable aspects of the experience of rape" by foregrounding the "violence of representation," and thus reinstall on the level of rhetoric the violence choked by the story line. Such practice could be applied to any text; it evokes systemic violence, yet tends to ignore the particular cultural functions and the historically specific meanings texts assign to sexuality and sexual violence. Reading rape figuratively, as rhetoric, we can follow the symbolic traces of violation instead, exploring its function within the structure of particular literary texts and larger cultural narratives as well as within the construction of individual and communal identities.

Such correspondences between aesthetics and politics can be probed because literary texts and the formation of cultural identities involve similar processes of refiguration. Like metaphors, identities are structured against difference (of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and age, for instance) and "directed toward the gradual overcoming of difference by identity." Yet even if identity subordinates difference to the demands of likeness, "[I]f I see the like," Paul Ricoeur argues, "is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different." The "logical structure of likeness" is consequently characterized by a "tension between sameness and difference" and constructions of identity require both the assignment and the subordination of difference. The rhetoric of rape is one of many discourse by which such differences are being ascribed, victims and violators othered, set off, while the subject who assigns difference remains unmarked and unlimited in his possibilities.

The structural likeness of processes of identity formation and refiguration makes the analysis of literary texts particularly productive in this context. Literary texts translate pain into art, transform the unspeakable into figures of speech whose structure and function both disfigure and bespeak their cultural work. They tell stories and translate tales of violation into nationally specific, cultural significations and conclusive narratives. As such, they both form and interfere with the cultural imaginary. Why, however, should literary discourse be the privileged medium for an analysis of the rhetoric of sexual violence? Unlike the discourses of the social and natural sciences, literature is central here not so much because it has allowed marginal voices to enter into the conversation on gender, race, and sexuality at an earlier time. Literature may have accommodated "other" perspectives, but their otherness has nonetheless been channelled and limited by the institutional frames in which they appeared. Likewise, we no longer share the (formal) faith in the powers of fiction and its particular aesthetics to represent and level conflicting cultural forces, or assume that literary texts are generically more "tell-
ing” than other discourses and thus manage to subvert and crumble cultural hegemonies. In fact, antebellum American literature, for instance, was subjected to generic constraints which tended to reduce rather than expand its thematic range, if compared with other cultural discourse of the time.

However, the analysis of literary texts is particularly revealing for a study focused on the rhetoric of rape, because (some) literary texts conclusively narrativize and, by way of dispelling contradictions, manage to ‘naturalize’ sexual violence into seemingly consensual views on gender, sexuality, and the world at large. In this way, taking my cue from Louis Althusser, I hold that literary (rape) narratives both give answers to the questions they pose and produce ‘deformed’ answers to the historical questions they steer away from. Thus reading rape also involves deciphering “the ‘symptoms’ of a problem struggling to be posed,”28 such as the problem of sexuality and race, for instance. At the same time, fictional texts, and modernist and post-modernist texts27 in particular by way of an consistent intertextuality, foreground the historicity of their (rape) rhetoric and the constraints as well as the possibilities of the meanings they assign to sexual violence. Echoing and playing upon their pretexts, they reify, re-present, re-politicize, and thus re-interpret previous literary interrogations of rape and sexual violence, and in this way inscribe themselves into a tradition of readings of rape, a tradition they simultaneously remember and interfere with. At the same time, we have to acknowledge that the questions we bring to our inquiries of literary texts—such as issues of rape and representation—are motivated, mediated, and framed by our present concerns about identity and difference. Accordingly, the texts, their textuality, temporality, and tradition tell us as much about themselves as about the ways in which we project our selves.

What I am arguing is that in order to fully understand the cultural significance of the appropriation of the rape trope as a means of feminist politics, we need to remember how rape has been represented over time and what cultural functions representations of sexual violence have taken in the course of American cultural history. In examining the literary aesthetics and politics of rape, we become aware that the meanings that culture assigns to sexual violence evolve from an interplay between constructions of cultural parameters of identity and difference (such as gender, race, and class) and their specific forms of representation. As a consequence, this interplay has generated ideas about gender, race, and class which keep monitoring our perception and interpretation of real rape. At the same time in reading the rhetoric of rape, we also reveal the ideologies, cultural anxieties, and contradictions that crystallize in representations of rape—ideologies, anxieties, and contradictions that feminist theory has tended, at least in part, to perpetuate.


29 This change of paradigm has been argued for, instance, by Thomas Laqueur, Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1990).


ideal that itself is fundamental to the rise of the “black rapist” as a central figure in late nineteenth-century American culture.

The transformation of the black body into an icon of deviant sexuality has a long history, going back to the Bible and passing through the slave narrative. In slave narratives authored by (former) female slaves—narratives told by subjects of rape generally conceived as seducers—the threat of rape “surfaces obliquely,” as Saidiya Hartman puts it, “and only as the captive confesses her guilt.”32 While antebellum texts thus cast both white and black femininity in terms of property relations and physical violation, black women, however, were assumed to be immune to such violation, their injuries deemed negligible. Black femaleliness has consequently been engendered “as a condition of unredressed injury.”33

This in fact holds true to this very day, as the infamous “Central Park Jogger Rape Case” poignantly shows. On April 20, 1989, a 29-year-old white female jogger—an investment banker, as it turned out, at Salomon Brothers in downtown Manhattan—was found in Central Park, near 102nd Street, her clothes torn, her skull crushed, her left eyeball pushed back through its socket, the characteristic surface wrinkles of her brain flattened, her blood reduced by 75 percent, her vagina filled with dirt and twigs—the victim of a beating and gang rape of utmost brutality supposedly undertaken by six black and Hispanic teenagers. Now that the actual perpetrator has been arrested, we know that the case was entirely misconceived at the time,34 interpreted in accordance with the familiar narratives that American culture has evolved and keeps repeating. Accordingly, none of the thousands of rapes reported that year, some of which lacked nothing in brutality, including one, a week later, “involving the near decapitation of a black woman in Fort Tryon Park,” could ever register in a similar way.35

“[C]imes are universally understood to be news,” Joan Didion writes in “Sentimental Journeys,” her brilliant reading of the case, “to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a high concept.”36 The story offered by the Jogger Rape Case is an old and well established one: rape, we are assured, is an encounter of total strangers in public parks. Accordingly, media coverage did not center upon the (gender) issues involved in the sexual violation, but, as Didion emphasizes, interpreted the case as a conflict between two parties clearly distinguished by race, ethnicity, and class: on the one hand, whites affluent enough to keep the city’s realities at a safe distance, to whom the violation of the young urban professional signified the loss of sacrosanct territory; on the other hand, African Americans who considered the treatment of the violators as yet another lynching campaign, a kind of rape in itself. The discursive scene of the crime thus draws upon a whole cultural register generated in the course of late nineteenth-century interracial conflicts and national identity formation. So how did this register evolve?

While late eighteenth to mid-nineteenth-century pretexts turned the female body into a focal point of meaning production, late nineteenth-century cultural discourse directed its attention toward the previously indistinct male body. The black body, in particular, became a crucial figure in the processes of masculinization and (national) identity formation during the transition of the American nation from Victorianism to modernism, processes which generated what I consider the dominant, overdetermining line within the American rhetoric of rape. The so-called “myth of the black rapist” is central to these processes. According to the logic of the so-called “Southern rape complex,”38 the presumed sexual violation of white beauty by a black beast equaled the ‘rape’ of the South during Reconstruction and legitimized retaliation through Lynch violence and the continuous disempowerment of the black male. Throughout Thomas Nelson Page’s Red Rock (1898),39 for instance, Southern women embody the sacred element of the antebellum South. Likewise, in The Clansman (1905), Thomas Dixon pictures the rape victim Marion Lenoir—“the one human being that everybody had agreed to love,”39 as an icon of common morality and social consensus. Where white women symbolize the South, their alleged violation mutilates the Southern body politic.40 Projecting Marion’s ravishment as “a single tiger-spring,” as “black claws” sinking into a “soft white throat,” Dixon’s rape scenario discloses this symbolic significance. In fact, it literalizes the author’s metaphor for the postbellum South, which likens the conditions under “Negro rule” to “[t]he sight of the Black Hand on Southern people’s throats.”41 The figure of the white woman thus displaces the complex relations between black and white men,42 her sacrifice “on the altar of civilized aggression” legitimizes retaliatory attacks.43

Accordingly—and unlike the African American victim of sexual violation—white rape victims never survive and, like Ovid’s and Rembrandt’s Lucrecia, pre-

33 Hartman 556.
34 In the fall of 2002 the case was reopened, eventually turning over the convictions of five men found guilty in the case, after Matias Reyes, a convicted rapist and murderer, confessed that he had committed the crime and had acted alone.
36 Didion 255-56.
40 Since the Reconstruction régime, as Benn Michaels argues convincingly, was read as an attempt to colonize the South, the politics of white supremacy is fundamentally anti-imperialist. “[S]ubjected to the greatest humiliation of modern times: their slaves were put over them—,” writes Thomas Nelson Page for instance, the aristocratic Southerners “reconquered their section and preserved the civilization of the Anglo-Saxon” (1). Cf. Walter Benn Michaels, “The Souls of White Folk,” Literature and the Body: Essays on Populations and Persons (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1988) 185-209, and “Race into Culture: A Critical Genealogy of Cultural Identity,” Critical Inquiry 18.4 (1992): 655-85.
41 Dixon 304, 276.
43 Dixon 324.
fer suicide to a life with the stain and stigma of contamination. In this way, rape triggers political change: the rise of the KKK, the destruction of what Dixon termed “Negro rule,” and the reinforcement of Anglo-Saxon supremacy and true (white) womanhood. The very blanks and blind spots of antebellum fiction pertaining particularly to the (black) male body and (white) female sexuality thus prepared the ground for a supposedly ‘realist’ literary discourse that established (black-on-white) rape and the specter of the rapist ‘other’ as central tropes of cultural transformation. If one reads Page and Dixon, though, in dialogue with the rhetoric of rape projected by their contemporaries Frank Norris, Frances E.W. Harper, Sutton E. Griggs, Upton Sinclair, Edith Wharton, and William Vaughn Moody, it also becomes evident that this dominant rhetoric of rape is, in fact, the product of highly conflictual and stylistically varied—naturalist and realist as well as sentimental—discourses which conflate matters of race, class, and nationhood with issues of gender and sexuality.

Partly owing to the overdetermining racial fracture of American culture and society, all these authors employ the figure of the racialized ‘rapist’ o/her and project sexual aggression and aggressive sexuality as interracial or interetnic encounters between different classes. Discriminating violator and victim on the basis of race, class, ethnicity as well as gender, the ‘realist’ rhetoric of rape thus constitutes a discourse of difference. Dramatizing crucial social, cultural, sectional, and national conflicts, this discourse evolved fictions or ‘myths’ about gender, race, and sexuality that have subsequently achieved truth value and that keep informing feminist perspectives on sexual violence as well. At the same time, the ‘rapist’ rhetoric of turn-of-the-century literary texts exposes the anxieties informing processes of identity formation in a time of transition. Most particularly, the ‘realist’ rhetoric of rape monitors reconstructions of gender and sexuality, the threat of which materializes in figures relating to the crisis of homo/heterosexual definition (as in Norris’s *McTeague* [1899] and Dixon’s *The Clansman* [1905]) and to redefinitions of the gender divide (as in Page’s *Red Rock*, Wharton’s *The House of Mirth* [1905], and Moody’s *A Sabine Woman* [1906]).

Thus it is important to note the ambiguities informing the stereotypes of both blackness and whiteness produced by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century discourses of sexuality and sexual violence. Just as black masculinity is projected as both hypersexualized and feminized, the image of the black woman oscillates between nymphomaniac and supermorn. Both are thus cast, as Robyn Wiegman puts it, in terms of “extreme corporeality.” At the same time, the complex processes of remasculinization evolving at the end of the nineteenth century also generated the notion of an inherently aggressive white male sexuality and its complement female submission. This model of sexuality finds its first literary manifestation in Frank Norris’s naturalist novel *McTeague* (1899). In fact the passion that McTeague’s wife Trina feels for her brutish husband is triggered by “the absolute final surrender of herself, the irrevocable, ultimate submission” which “merged her individuality into his.” Presenting this dynamic as “the changeless order of things—the man desiring the woman only for what she withholds; the woman worshipping the man for that which she yields up to him,” Norris’s novel turns (hetero-)sexuality into a sadomasochistic power play and itself becomes “probably the first representation of masochism in American literature.”

This polarizing model of white heterosexuality has strongly impacted on gender relations as well as on their critique, most particularly on the feminist critique of sexual violence during the 1960s and 1970s. The same goes for the double-edged fictions of black corporeality. In fact, due to the persistent stereotypes of deviant black sexuality, African American feminist critics—with the exception of Angela Davis and Michele Wallace in the 1970s and bell hooks in the 1980s and 1990s—have tried to restrict the discourses to the so-called black community and have thus remained marginal to the dominant anti-rape movement, whose (implicit or explicit) critique of (black) machismo appears to reinforce the “myth of the black rapist.”

The history of the American “rhetoric of rape” thus not only underlines how closely notions of sexual violence are entangled with the construction of sexualities and difference. This history also foregrounds why after the so-called “sexual revolution” of the 1960s the feminist agenda, set on rescuing the female body from male domination and cultural inscription, worked by way of a rebellion against sexual violence. After all, until that time female sexuality had almost exclusively become an issue when conjoined with, or framed by, incidents of sexual violence. And it is not that women authors did not explore the dimensions of female desire, as Kate Chopin as well as Edith Wharton—in her story “Beatrice Palmato,” for instance—certainly did. Their texts on female sexual desire were simply not allowed to circulate.

At the same time, the feminist fight against sexual violence has also tended to perpetuate those gender, class, and ethnic differences that the nineteenth century so firmly implanted in the American imaginary. As a consequence, critics of feminist rape-crisis-discourse (such as Kathie Roiphe) liked to talk about the “new Victorianism” of radical feminist positions. And indeed, not unlike the Victorian ideal of a supposedly asexual female disposition, the demonization of male sexuality and the reduction of female subjectivity to the position of the victim may open

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45 Wiegman 455.
sheltered spaces for a certain period of time. In the long run, however, this politics has tended to reduce the mobility of women in the United States “I am angry I can’t walk alone at night,” one could read in the mid-1990s on a flyer in the Harvard University gym. Even quaint Harvard Square had supposedly turned into rappers’ territory.

The significant difference that separates nineteenth-century Victorian discourse on gender ideals from the arguments of late twentieth-century radical feminism, however, is the fact that women have meanwhile achieved subject status whereas the male subject has undergone a continuous crisis the end of which is nowhere in sight. This crisis which found multiple manifestations in modernist culture also created major disruptions in the rhetoric of sexual violence during the first half of the twentieth century. While racist historical novels as well as realist and naturalist texts seemed to relate conclusive narratives about the contexts and consequences of sexual violence, while they projected the image of a predominantly black (and oftentimes Irish) rapist, thus marking clear differences and borders within American culture, modernist texts highlight the interdependence between rape and representation. Capitalizing on the very artifice of fictional representation that realism means to obscure, modernism translates the figure of rape from primarily cultural into predominantly textual categories. In the process, modernist fiction disseminates the established meanings of rape to a certain degree and reveals their ideological subtexts without subscribing to particular ideologies. Instead their textual strategies, ranging from ellipsis to mimicry, target sexual violence from within its discursive modes. As modernist texts acknowledge rape as a figure and form of representation rather than an event, they also hint that the insights of narrative theory and visual poetics I started with are themselves insights generated by modernism.

Due to modernism’s preoccupation with perception and process rather than history and cultural consensus, texts such as Djuna Barnes’s Ryder (1928), Faulkner’s Sanctuary (1931), Richard Wright’s Native Son (1940), and Ann Petry’s The Street (1946) no longer project rape as a figure of ‘othering,’ difference, and social boundaries.50 Instead they turn sexual violence into a trope of transgression and border crossing which recognizes the disturbing proximity of figures and phenomena that ‘realist’ rape narratives so obsessively separated—or segregated—from each other. This does not mean that differences dissolve. Instead, modernism questions realism’s claims to authority and authenticity. Modernism: rape narratives either playfully expose and mime their rhetorical tradition (as Barnes does), or (as does Faulkner) re-assess the ‘realist’ rape rhetoric by capitalizing on the representation of rape and blurring the borders that realism had managed to implement. As both texts insistently cross-over rape and incest, they also dramatize the uncanny subtexts of that rhetoric. Due to a difference in subject position, which impacts on aesthetics, African American modernist fiction at the same time represents rape in its own ways. Wright’s protagonist Bigger Thomas, for instance, reenacts the racist ‘rapist’ projection and recreates himself in an abortive act of modernist mimicry. Petry’s first novel, by contrast, which daringly explores intraracial sexual violence, occupies an in-between position leaning towards post-modernist literary modes. As she challenges the modernist aestheticization of the sexual(ly violated) black female body and exposes the significance of the visual, the cinematic ‘real’ for the late-twentieth-century American cultural imaginary, Petry projects a black female subject in transition.

Exposing the processes of rhetorical refiguration by which the issue of rape gets metaphorically condensed and metonymically displaced into other cultural contexts (such as political and economic conflicts), modernist texts not only underline how our understanding of rape depends upon the traditions and aesthetics of representations of rape. They also reveal both the ideologies circulated by the rhetoric of rape and the complex subtexts of cultural anxieties and desires that underlie the discourse of sexual violence—without, however, following a particular political agenda.

Challenging the Politics of Strong Tropes

In the second half of the twentieth century, American fiction has subsequently retransformed modernist notions of rape and representation into cultural categories. As it projects the aesthetics of rape onto the level of content and theme, post-modernist writing tends to re-politicize and oftentimes literalize the trope of rape, in this way renegotiating the constructions of identity and difference effected so ‘successfully’ at the turn of the last century. At the same time, post-modernist texts have retained modernist insights into textuality and the processes of meaning formation. In fact all post-modernist re-figurations of rape, no matter whether they aspire to verisimilitude or radicalize modernist modes, display and play upon an awareness of their own essentially rhetorical character.

Post-modernist fiction thus only seems to be ‘about’ sexual violence. More often than not, it is preoccupied with the cultural effects of the established rhetoric of rape, with the ways in which the rhetoric of sexual violence informs and structures our perspectives on real rape, and with how ‘rape myths’ and rape as a social fact have become inseparably intertwined. These cultural effects frequently affect subjectivity: novels as incomparable as Chester Himes’s A Case of Rape (1963) and Lois Gould’s A Sea Change (1977),51 for instance, expose the impact of commonplace readings of rape on their protagonists’ sense of self. In this way, post-modernist texts dramatize the privileged relation of rape narratives to what Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick calls “our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge.”52 They not only insist that, like the discourse of sexuality, the rhetoric of sexual violence has become “a very real historical formation.”53 Post-modern fiction also recognizes that now that rape can be openly addressed,

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its cultural significance and function are being equivocated and displaced in turn. And while old silences may have been ‘broken,’ new ones have taken shape in their stead. Rape and its meaning therefore keep circulating, as Sedgwick aptly phrases it, into opposite directions.\textsuperscript{54} It is no longer the representation of rape that gets displaced and disseminated, though, but its signifying power. The ongoing significance of the pretexts to which post-modernist rape narratives attest at the same time underlines that, just as rape only can exist as experience and memory, the literary rhetoric of rape evolves in part as the memory of its own history of representation.

Increasingly repoliticizing and remetaphorizing sexual violence, postmodernist texts—and these include feminist criticism and theory—have thus tended to advance rape as a trope of cultural politics. Over the last three decades this politics has undergone a major transformation, though. Whereas the debate on sexual violence started out as a collective feminist endeavor, the trope of rape developed more and more into the means of an individual identity politics, serving a self-conception or subjectivity based on victimization. This, to my mind, is one reason why the rhetoric of rape has had such a high currency in late twentieth-century American culture. At the same time, this rhetoric illustrates two tendencies within American culture that have evolved from the American 1960s: first, the growing significance of sexuality and corporeality as parameters of subjectivity; secondly, the increasing displacement of political activism by a politics of strong tropes. The current inclination to appropriate and recontextualize terms like genocide and Holocaust, for instance, in the discourse pertaining to AIDS or African American history manifests a tendency within American culture to project identity through parameters of violation and victimization, to redefine—and thereby racialize—subjectivity as survival.\textsuperscript{55}

One effect of the politics of strong tropes is the tendency to override both the ambiguities and the very difference between representation and the real that modernist culture capitalized on. In the case of radical feminism this resulted in what critics of rape-crisis discourse polemically have called an “iron-fisted denial of complexity and ambiguity” or, to be more precise, attempts “to legislate ambivalence out of sex.”\textsuperscript{56} And indeed, dominant rape-crisis discourse has tended to lump together under the label of rape a series of acts such as consensual heterosexual intercourse, consensual sexual violence, acquaintance and stranger rape, as well as verbal coercion and representations of sexual violence—acts which need to be clearly differentiated in order to not belittle actual violence.

However, when the figure of rape was coming of age in the mid-1990s, it was soon enough displaced by a trope that was applicable to even broader contexts. All of a sudden, incest seemed a rampant cultural phenomenon and what Roiphe called America’s “latest literary vogue.”\textsuperscript{58} The proliferation of incest fiction in the mid-1990s not only marks a certain exhaustion of the cultural effect of the rape trope. It also downplays issues of race and does so, significantly enough, by borrowing a trope that has traditionally transported race matters. Whereas 1970s and 1980s African American women’s fiction employed the incest trope in order to represent rape as ‘family affair’ and figure for internalized racism, this new focus on incest steered away from and passed issues of race, class, ethnicity, gender, and age. In a “nation of raped children,” as the African American writer Sapphire puts it,\textsuperscript{59} to be “rapable” no longer defines what a woman is, as MacKinnon claimed; it defines anyone as a victim.

The recent rise to prominence of the incest trope within (American) cultural symbology is part of a larger struggle over signifying power, a struggle that makes increasing use of particularly potent rhetorical figures. The displacement of one strong trope of sexual violence by another, though, at the same time clearly underlines that no trope or discourse will ever be appropriate to render sexual violence adequately. Rather, each trope calls upon its own history of representation and thereby also perpetuates interpretations of sexual violence that, due to their cultural dominance, seem more conclusive than others—even if, as in the case of the Central Park Jogger Rape Case, they turn out to be no more than misreadings. While we can neither undo this history of representation nor do without tropes, we can, however, and have to, account for the complexity of all phenomena of violence. This entails that we acknowledge the fact that the rhetoric of sexual violence is by no means identical with acts of sexual violence, that the dominant effect of this rhetoric is rather to remember and assign cultural significance to certain acts of violence while forgetting and culturally marginalizing others. Moreover, instead of challenging supposedly outrageous—and supposedly realist—representations of rape (such as Bret Easton Ellis’s 1991 novel \textit{American Psycho}\textsuperscript{60}), we may be more politically effective if we challenge our readings of such representations. For rape, of course, is real. Its re-presentation, its translation into signs, images, signposts, posters, and pins, however, is an altogether different matter, closed off by quotation marks from the unparsable experience, the full horror that cannot but remain absent, elsewhere, “never adequately objectifiable.”

At the same time American culture may also want to remember the discourses on sex and desire it has produced, and shift its focus every now and then to the discourse disseminated by so-called “sex-positive feminism.” For unlike the supposedly radical feminist politics of the strong trope, this highly marginalized mode of


\textsuperscript{56} Mary Gaitskill, “On Not Being a Victim,” \textit{Debating Sexual Correctness}, 259-72; 264; 263.


\textsuperscript{59} Quoted in Roiphe, “Incest Scene” 68.

feminism aligns its critique of traditional gender relations with alternative images of sexual desire projected by dissident literary texts, pornography, and performance art. It is about time that these images do effective and successful political work. And yet I have serious doubts that this is a good time for cultural dissidence.