

# Why are all rapes not grievable?

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A month after I was raped I am sitting in the waiting room of the Heideveld Thutuleza Care Centre waiting to have an HIV test. On the couch opposite me, there is another womxn.<sup>1</sup> She looks about eighteen. She is Black. In her hand she is holding the care package and the information book that I received when I came in a month ago, a few hours after I was raped. The nurse approaches the two of us in the waiting room. She turns to me, ‘Who are you bringing for an appointment?’ I look at her confused. ‘Who is the patient?’ she asks. ‘I am the patient’. ‘Oh’, she says. She looks surprised. In a context in which the bodies of poor black womxn are repeatedly constructed as the sites of sexual violence the nurse is unable to recognise my white, middle-class body as the site of such violence.

This failure to be recognised is deeply uncomfortable, not least because of its relationality. If I had been a Black womxn, I am sure, I would not have been misrecognised. The discomfort, however, has been instructive for thinking about the mechanisms by which gendered and racialised violences are co-constitutive of each other, or rather, the ways in which current understandings and responses to sexual violation are deeply enmeshed with racialised constructions of personhood.

I want to use my experience in the waiting room as a starting point from which to think about rape, and in particular the ways in which those who have ‘survived’ sexual violence are able to make sense of their experiences within the contemporary context. I am interested in the ways in which certain subjects are constructed as inviolable while others are constructed as deeply violated, and how this impacts on the ways in which individuals themselves, as well as those around them and our broader society, are able to recognise and process the resultant trauma.

In reflecting on the impact of rape, I have found Yvette Abrahams’ (1996) description acutely valuable:

Physical pain aside, the enduring trauma of rape is that, like slavery, it makes a person a thing. It denies human subjectivity. A woman who has been raped is implicated: it has happened and she has to give it a meaning, any meaning that enables her to make sense of its horror, even the possibility that she herself was somehow to blame [. . .] Thus the dehumanisation of rape does not lie in the act alone, nor in the memory of it, but in the trauma which induces the rape victim to deny her own subjectivity. (p. 10)

This process, which Abrahams refers to as the denial of one’s own subjectivity, gestures towards Aimé Césaire’s (2000) notion of ‘thing-ification’. For me, the incident in the waiting room

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exemplifies the ways in which some bodies are regarded as destined to become ‘things’, that is the way in which Black womxn have come to be regarded as ‘always already’ raped (Judge, 2015). Therefore, the actual rapes of Black womxn are neither surprising nor particularly shocking. Pumla Gqola (2015) has referred to this as the unrapability of Black womxn. By this she does not mean that Black womxn are not raped, but rather that they are ‘safe to rape’ or that raping them is not regarded as harm. This ‘unrapability’ is constituted through colonial constructions of race, which thing-ified both Black womxn and men.

Rape is ‘outrageous’ in its transgression of the limits of respectable sexuality. However, notions of what is sexually respectable are intertwined with notions of race, constituted through processes of slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. The outrage of rape, therefore, only becomes worthy of public concern if the raped womxn can ‘plausibly claim respectability in the first place’ (Thornberry, 2016, p. 867). Black womxn, who have been positioned by centuries of racial oppression as not having honour to lose, are therefore ‘unrapable’.

The denial or dismissal of harm that happens to Black people, and particularly Black womxn, embedded in historical structures of racialisation, continues to shape contemporary representations and responses to sexual violence.

One recent example of this is the case of Sinxolo Mafevuka, whose rape and murder only garnered media attention once journalists made a comparison between her case and that of Franziska Blochlinger, who was raped and murdered in Tokai forest (Mzantsi & Adriaanse, 2016). As Sinxolo’s cousin remarked, in relation to the disparity between the two cases, ‘it made us realise that no one cares about us because we are black’ (Dano, Mzantsi, & Adriaanse, 2016).

In a context in which colonial discourses of race continue to dictate whose lives are valuable, like Sinxolo, the womxn sitting across from me in the waiting room represents ‘just another black womxn’. She becomes indistinguishable from the endless stream of Black womxn whose broken bodies are casually splashed across the pages of the media. In their unspectacularity, these rapes become ‘normal’ and these traumas become ‘mundane’.

In relation to the United States, Judith Butler (2004) has written about the ways in which some lives – and here she refers specifically to the lives of Arab people who have been killed by US forces – are ungrievable. She argues that in the United States this ungrievability is shaped by the silence and erasure of these deaths. As Butler says, ‘there are no obituaries [. . .] the obituary functions as the instrument by which grievability is publicly distributed. It is the means by which a life becomes, or fails to become, a publicly grievable life’ (p. 34).

It is definitely the case that many instances of sexual violence perpetrated against both Black and White womxn, particularly those that do not involve extreme physical violence and those perpetrated by partners, family members, and acquaintances rather than strangers, are silenced and therefore are not grievable. However, I would argue that the repeated representation of Black womxn’s bodies as the sites of sexual violence, which constructs this type of violence as inevitable and mundane, also makes these acts of violation ungrievable.

Within this context, it seems pertinent that we ask ourselves the following questions, outlined by Butler (2004):

To what extent have [black womxn] fallen outside the ‘human’ as it has been naturalised in its ‘Western’ [colonial] mode?

What are the cultural contours of the human at work here?

How do our cultural frames for thinking the human set limits on the kinds of [violences] that we can avow as [violence]?

If someone is [violated], and that person is not someone, then what and where is the [violation] and how does mourning take place? (p. 32)

Asking these questions makes explicit the precarious position that Black womxn, like the womxn across from me in the waiting room, occupy. These womxn are constructed, within the contemporary neoliberal capitalist democratic context as 'free womxn', entitled to rights over their own bodies and entitled, if these rights are violated, to speak out. But when they come to the clinic, tell those close to them, or go to the police, we see how this access to equality, justice, and even the recognition of their violation as shocking are contingent on them being a particular kind of subject. These womxn are, thus, doubly violated, by the rape and simultaneously by their construction as 'unrapable', 'unharmable', and inevitably thing-ified.

I have spent a significant amount of time reflecting on the way in which Black womxn's subjectivity is constituted by their 'blackness'. Perhaps this is unsurprising given the continued coupling of rape and blackness in media representations of violence. In this context, I have found it far more challenging, not only emotionally but also intellectually, to reflect on how my post-rape subjectivity is constituted by my 'whiteness'. But in writing this, it seemed not only deeply problematic but also incomplete, to reflect only on the relationship between rape and blackness. After all, it is only in relation to the other womxn, the Black womxn, that I, the White womxn, come to be out of place in the waiting room.

In contrast to Black womxn, my presence in the waiting room is spectacular. Unlike the rapes of Black womxn, the rapes of White womxn, and in particular, acts committed by strange (usually Black) men, are represented as horrifying anomalies. These are constructed as 'real rapes'. The remarkability of these cases is reinforced through our prolonged horror in response to them; we bring flowers, we hold silent vigils, we march, we grieve.

The positioning of the rapes of White womxn as outrageous is intertwined with the construction of whiteness as not only racially but also morally and sexually distinct from blackness (Ratele, 2009). This construction of sexuality is rooted in the formation of a colonial empire in South Africa, in particular in demarcating who was 'coloniser' and who was 'colonised', and thereby in establishing the public and personal bounds of race. In this context, as Shefer and Ratele (2011) have argued, 'the potential and actual sexual possession of white women by black men [symbolises] an invasion of the entire white "nation" since it represents black male control over white male possessions and possible destabilisation of white male power' (p. 37).

Therefore, by virtue of my whiteness, as it intersects with my middle-classness and the fact that I was raped by a Black man, my rape becomes recognisable as a 'real' rape and it becomes grievable. People bring flowers to my house, they cry and shake their fists.

But the grievability of my rape simultaneously facilitates a crisis – one that calls into question and destabilises my whiteness – a crisis that is rooted in the colonial construction of whiteness as respectability. The respectability of whiteness, upon which colonialism precariously rests, ruptures when the White womxn is raped by the Black man. As Menzies, a magistrate in the 19th-century cape colony, argued,

there is a very large proportion of virtuous women in this Colony, principally of pure or nearly pure European blood [. . .] many of whom would prefer death to being dishonored – on all of whom the commission of Rape on their person would inflict the most poignant & permanent mental anguish and grief & whom especially if committed by a colored man, it would so degrade in the estimation of their associates, as to drive them from Society and mar all their prospects of happiness in life. (Scully, 1995, p. 347)

In occupying the position as the grievable raped womxn, I must also occupy the position of the fallen White womxn. Therefore, my subjectivity is constituted by both the sexual violation of my

body and the ideological violation of my 'white respectability'. The horror of my rape is reinscribed by the nurse's surprise that I am sitting in the waiting room, that I am violatable.


In thinking about myself and the other womxn in the waiting room, as well as thinking beyond us, I have attempted to interrogate how we are constituted, not only by our rapes but by the way in which our rapes come to have meaning in a context which remains saturated with racist systems of power. The grievability of my rape is only possible in relation to the ungrievability of hers. But in both grievability and ungrievability, our trauma remains unspeakable and unrecognisable. This is one of the ways in which colonialism, and the racialised and gendered notions of personhood which it created, endures. It continues to mark our bodies, and also our psyches.

I wish I had responded to the nurse's failure to recognise me in the waiting room that day. I wish I had said to the nurse that she should be shocked every time someone enters the waiting room. I wish I had said to the womxn sitting across from me that both her rape and mine are unacceptable, outrageous, and grievable. I wish I had told them both that I am full of pain and fury not only because of my own violation but also because of the hundreds of violations that occur every day. I wish I had said that making all lives grievable is fundamental to reconstructing the cultural contours of the human and thereby disrupting the endless stream of violence against those who have been dehumanised.

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## Note

1. I use the term 'womxn' to refer to 'all people who identify as femme, female, women, or trans' (Reddy, 2016, p. 8), to highlight the fluid and diverse way in which gender is constructed and experienced, as well as the way in which the term 'woman' excludes and silences certain identities and experiences.

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