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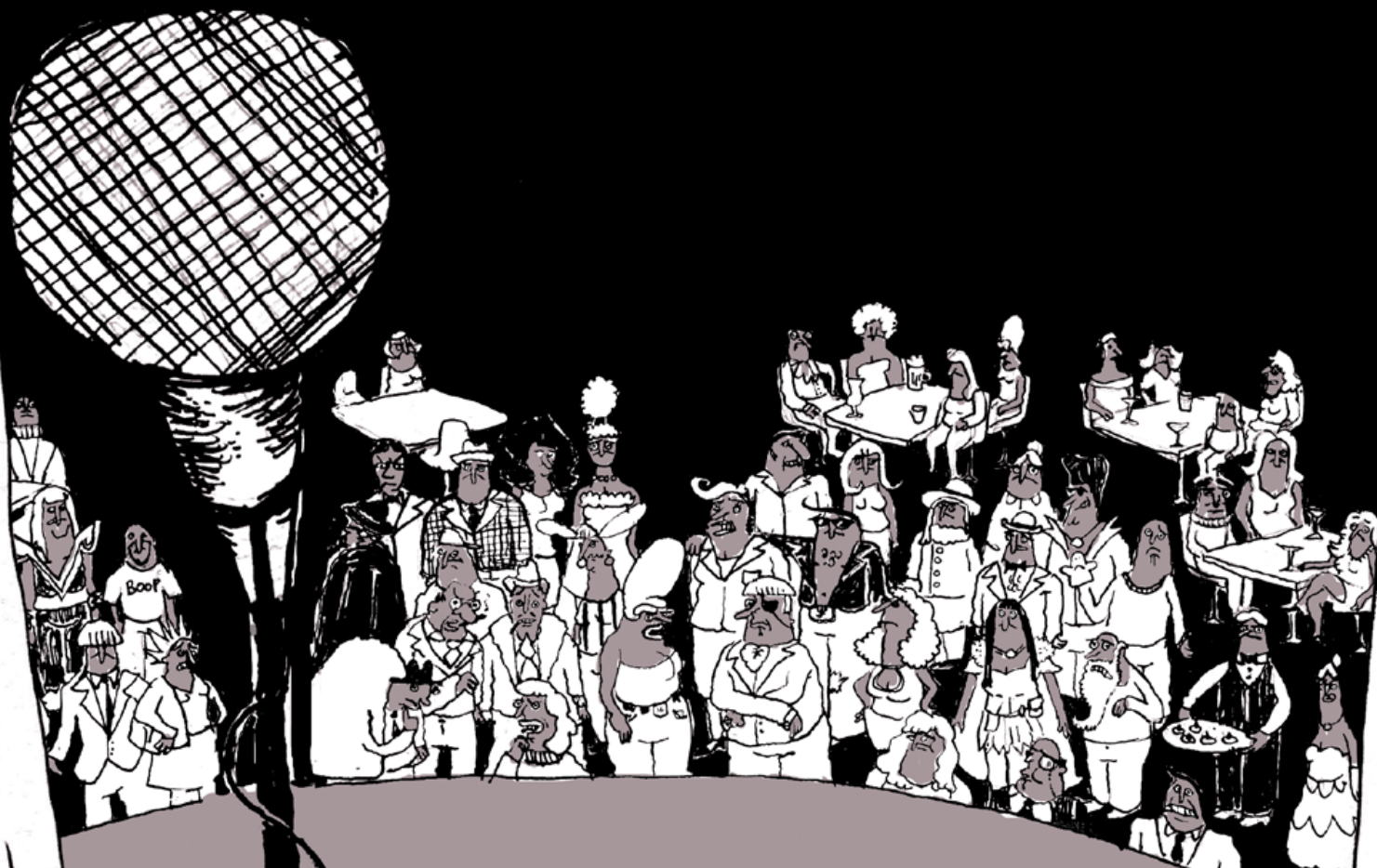
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LAUGHING ST OFF

*What happens when
female comics tell rape jokes?*



by Katherine Leyton | illustrations by Blaire Stapp

“I was dating a guy, and we were going to sleep together, and he said he wasn’t a condom guy—who isn’t a condom guy?!”

Last autumn I sat in a Toronto comedy club and watched my good friend, comedian Alexandra Howell, perform a joke about being sexually assaulted.

“Anyway, I didn’t really know him that well and I definitely wasn’t willing to sleep with him without a condom. But he was really fucked up that night. He was an alcoholic and a drug addict, and at some point during the night he entered me without a condom on, even though I had clearly said I didn’t want that. I pushed him off and he didn’t fight me. He just rolled over.” Howell’s audience was uncomfortable at this point but starting to laugh, mostly because of Howell’s delivery. “I didn’t feel attacked—I was more pissed off than anything. But I didn’t kick him out of the house. In fact, I went on a date with him again. And thinking back on this I ask myself: How much am I willing to put up with for the sake of a warm body next to me? I guess I’m willing to put up with just a dash of rape.”

I laughed along with the audience, then immediately felt ashamed—my friend’s assault was upsetting, not funny.

I confessed my guilt to Howell afterward. “But I gave you permission to laugh!” she responded. She explained that by telling the joke, she felt she was controlling how people reacted to her experience while simultaneously negotiating her own feelings about the incident. She found it therapeutic. “But [making that] experience part of my routine speaks to the level of trauma I experienced,” she admitted. “If I suffered a sexual assault [that] I personally found more traumatizing, I don’t know if I’d be able to make it part of my comedy routine.”

When Howell told me this, I couldn’t help but wonder how desensitized to sexual assault we have become—to the point where a woman can find experiencing it only moderately traumatizing and an audience can laugh at it.

After all, we live in a culture where two high-school football stars in Steubenville, Ohio, were found guilty of raping a teenage girl and major news outlets responded by lamenting the

loss of the young men's bright futures. America is a country where one in six women will be a victim of rape or attempted rape in her lifetime and only 3 percent of convicted rapists will ever spend a day in jail. Within this cultural context, laughing at a rape joke is not a simple thing. If we have not collectively proven that we fully understand the atrocity of rape, it's worth asking if comedians should be making jokes about it. In the summer of 2012, the popular Comedy Central host Daniel Tosh sparked a tempest of online controversy when he responded to a female heckler during a set at the Laugh Factory by saying it would be funny if she got raped "by like, five guys." After the incident, the feminist backlash via social media effectively caused Tosh to apologize, albeit begrudgingly.

More recently, comedian Sam Morril found himself at the center of an online media storm after feminist journalist Sady Doyle wrote about jokes she'd seen him perform that used raping women and rape victims as the punchline. She quoted statistics about the high incidence of rape in America and asked: "Given these numbers, what's the benefit of presenting yourself to an audience—which is likely to contain some women, and some assault victims—as someone with an interest in raping and hitting women? Even as a joke? Where's your payoff there?"

While male comics are quick to defend their right to tell rape jokes, they rarely have an eloquent explanation as to why, beyond "there are no boundaries in comedy" or "comedians should be able to joke about anything." Dane Cook responded to the Tosh controversy by saying to whomever had been offended by the joke, "It's best for everyone if you just kill yourself."

Every time a guy like Tosh or Morril turns rape into an easy punch line, it gets harder to believe that male comics who perform (or defend) these kinds of jokes don't understand the pervasiveness of rape in America or the devastation it causes. Women comprise 90 percent of rape victims in America—we are, as a group, oppressed by rape.

But when the oppressed joke about their oppression, different rules apply. Amy Schumer, Sarah Silverman, Wanda Sykes, Phoebe Robinson, Nikki Glaser, Lisa Lampanelli, Lena Dunham, Whitney Cummings, and Tina Fey are just a few examples of the female comedians who have performed or written jokes about rape—what compels them?

Some female comics tell jokes that clearly target rape culture, such as one classic skit by veteran comedian Sykes. "Even as little girls we're taught we have something everybody wants—you gotta protect it, you gotta be careful, you gotta cherish it. That's a lot of fucking pressure! I would like a break! You know what would make my life so much easier? Wouldn't it be wonderful if our pussies were *detachable*?" The joke goes on to detail situations where you could leave your "detachable pussy" at home, mainly to avoid the chance of rape.

Likewise, Chicago-based comic Ever Mainard has a long joke that expertly exposes rape culture. The bit details how Mainard, while walking alone one night, came across a man in an alley and suddenly found her mind flooded with the lifetime of warnings she's received. "Never walk alone at night," she yells urgently into the microphone. "If you walk alone at night, you'll get raped! You need a man to survive, unless he's following you at night!" She jokes there should be a game show for women called *Here's Your Rape!*

In a game show–host voice, she goes through the scenarios women have been taught to dread: "Wait a minute—a suspicious van in a dark parking lot next to your car? Wait a second, what's that? Your keys fell? You're fumbling around? *Here's Your Rape!*" The joke allows the audience to feel how frightening and exhausting it is for women to live under the constant threat of rape, while also demonstrating the absurdity of carrying the burden to protect ourselves from it.

Having run an open-mic night for years, Mainard has seen countless male comics tell bad rape jokes purely for shock value, and she wanted to contribute a different kind of rape joke to the dismal landscape. "The response I've had, especially from a lot of my guy friends, is that it changed their perspective," says Mainard. "They've never thought about rape jokes from a woman's perspective."

"I think comedy is the best way to bring up sensitive subjects, when you're doing it intelligently. I feel that comedians really have a tool that most people don't. People let their guard down in comedy; they start laughing at something that may or may not offend them if they were just having a conversation, and because they're laughing about it, they slowly start to think about it."

And then there's the other type of rape joke women tell—the up-for-interpretation, not-sure-why-I'm-laughing, "that's offensive" kind, like the Sarah Silverman quip "I was raped by a doctor...which is so bittersweet for a Jewish girl."

"Whenever I'm watching a movie where they have a hot actor portraying a rapist," begins a joke by Cleveland-born comic Phoebe Robinson, "I think: This girl complains too much, you know? It's not rape if he's hotter than you, okay? Fucking be grateful, all right?"

Robinson, who writes a popular blog called Blaria and is an occasional contributor to *The Huffington Post*, received negative attention for the joke online after it was mentioned in a 2011 *New York Times* article on how female comics were breaking taste taboos with controversial jokes.

When I spoke to Robinson over the phone from her home in New York, she told me her intention was to make fun of Hollywood, not rape. "It was more of a commentary on, like, 'Oh, you're just going to have someone like Brad Pitt portray a rapist, a date rapist?!' You know what I mean? I was making fun of that concept. It wasn't supposed to be like 'Haha, rape!' It was more like, 'Hollywood is ridiculous.'"

Robinson no longer performs the joke. "I'm kind of in the zone where [rape] is not really something I care to talk about right now in a way that I think will be interesting for me and for the listener." While she doesn't outright say it's because it might do harm, she implies it. "I think there's waves of being intrigued by a touchy subject and wanting to tackle it, and then kind of backing off of it because you don't think you can bring anything to it or it just doesn't interest [you] in a way that maybe it did before."

Although Robinson admits some rape jokes may not contribute anything positive to the discussion of rape, she doesn't think they're a problem in themselves.

"I do think there is a rape culture that's very problematic in America, but I don't think saying 'No one make a rape joke' is going to rectify that. A serious discussion needs to

happen—whether it’s about how [rape is] represented in movies and on TV or in real life—and [about] the fact that there’s not really an open dialogue about sexual abuse in this country. I think that’s far more problematic than someone making a joke like I did about hot actors being cast as rapists.”

Robinson is right: America does need to open a dialogue about sexual abuse, but jokes like her Hollywood-rapist bit, which asks the audience to laugh at a rape victim (albeit a fictional one) and suggests rape might actually be pleasant for the victim, provides the perfect opportunity to have that dialogue, and possibly even demonstrates why such a discussion is still necessary.

Not everyone would agree. Like Robinson, shock comic Lisa Lampanelli believes rape jokes aren’t going to do any damage. “If you’re going to see a comedy show, you’re not looking to that comedy for direction on how to conduct your life,” she says. “If you’re doing that, you’ve gotten your signals crossed way before you walk into a show.”

For Lampanelli, who has been dubbed “The Queen of Mean” and is wildly popular for her offensive stand-up routines that employ jokes based on stereotypes about race, gender, and sexual orientation, a comedian’s only responsibility is to make the audience laugh, no matter how offensive the content.

“It’s not like you’re putting out views that people should aspire to. We’re not making speeches. We’re doing jokes. If suddenly I go and decide to do a speaking-engagement series where I expound on the greatness of rape and getting AIDS through unprotected sex, that is a different

Central Park—saying this was proof that exercise is bad. “You never hear about a fat bitch getting raped while sitting at home eating Doritos and watching *One Life to Live*.” Another joke of hers posits that rape is a good excuse for cheating. Lampanelli says these are actually jokes about her own self-esteem—concerns about being lazy and out of shape, for example, or being too much of a coward to admit infidelity.

Rape may just be a means to an end here, but, like Robinson’s bit, these jokes rely on harmful concepts ingrained in our culture: that women are responsible for protecting themselves from rape, for example, or that rape only happens to certain types of women. If these notions still comprise part of our collective psyche, can jokes like Lampanelli’s and Robinson’s work to subtly reinforce these ideas?



Just as Lampanelli’s jokes about race are problematic because we still live in a racist society, her jokes about rape fall flat politically because of how entrenched we are in rape culture.

context—it’s not supposed to be funny, it’s just some crazy bitch doing a speaking tour. It’s someone trying to influence people in a serious way.”

Lampanelli used to tell a joke where, in mock seriousness, she says she just heard about yet another woman getting raped while jogging in

Lampanelli gives an emphatic no. “I think audiences are smart enough to see if somebody means something real in their material. They don’t go back and see ‘em two or three times if they think, ‘Oh, gosh, that guy really doesn’t like Asians, that guy really does think people should be raped.’ It’s



kind of like dogs—they have a sense of who is good and who is bad. They're not stupid."

This may be comforting logic, but it fails to consider how many of us, men and women, may have internalized messages from the rape culture in which we exist. Rape awareness campaigns still call upon women to protect themselves from attack by limiting their freedom of movement, and some rape victims *will* chastise themselves for being out at night in a particular spot alone. Lampanelli's logic, and her comedy, ignores that. Just as Lampanelli's jokes about race are problematic because we still live in a racist society, her jokes about rape fall flat politically because of how entrenched we are in rape culture.

Whether or not Lampanelli believes the stereotypes she jokes about or not is almost irrelevant. Reveling in—rather than deconstructing—stereotypes discourages the process of rethinking how they are constructed and propagated. In Lampanelli's case, it's up to the audience to critically engage with her Central Park jogger joke—her goal is just to get them to laugh.

And for survivors in the audience who have experienced victim-blaming or been accused of secretly liking their rapes, such a joke might not be so funny. "I forget that people blame rape victims. Because in my mind it's so obviously not their fault that I don't even initially or instinctually remember that that might not be seen," says Georgea Brooks, a comedian who works between Los Angeles and Toronto and has a few jokes that hinge on rape and sexual assault.

How the audience interprets these jokes—or is possibly triggered by them—has become a concern for Brooks. "I think some women comedians think because they're a woman, and because maybe they have been victims of sexual assault, they feel like they can make rape jokes. I think it's

kind of like how black comics sometimes make fun of black people and it's okay because they're black, but the difference is that the audience knows that person's black whereas the audience doesn't necessarily know that I have—or that someone has—suffered sexual assault, and so I do really worry about making people hurt. I don't mean to hurt anyone." Brooks's comparison is problematic, but her point—a comedian's identity matters—is valid. An individual who has experienced a trauma has the right to speak about it however they choose, and just speaking about that trauma is important: We must hear the experiences of the oppressed in order to understand that oppression better.

It is interesting that Brooks, Lampanelli, and Howell have all incorporated jokes about their own sexual assault into their routines. Brooks tells a joke about how in Montreal she was once followed by a man in a car who masturbated as she rode her bike home. She was extremely traumatized by the event, and told me that she went to tell two male friends about it, thinking they'd be incensed and would respond by being protective. "And they weren't. And I thought, well, you know what, that's funny, that's funny that nobody will help me. Nobody is protective of me. And I thought, I guess I can frame this in a funny way that's ironic and that's a joke. And for me that's the only comfort I could get out of the situation."

Brooks admits she often uses comedy to deal with issues she doesn't know how to cope with. Turning this particular experience into a joke helped her feel like she'd conquered the situation. "That guy following me for half an hour while I watched him stroke his dick—it was awful. And it could have really affected me negatively, it could have taken me back a few steps in my life path, potentially. And when I turn it into a joke, I'm like, you will not hold me back, I will use this.... It makes me feel stronger."

Brooks admits this act of turning her sexual assault into a joke may have been selfish, since she had not fully considered the consequences of performing it in front of audience members who may feel triggered by the scenario. Nevertheless, in a rape culture that still teaches women to feel shame and fear about openly discussing sexual assault, the candor and confidence Brooks demonstrates while discussing this experience is refreshing, and provides one model for how women can talk about being victims.

For Lampanelli, comedy has the same cathartic value. During a writing session for a new Broadway show she's doing about her life with food and men, Lampanelli was reminded of a near-date rape experience she had in college. "I'm a freshman, I'm from a small town in Connecticut, and I'd never had any guy try to force himself on me. I got really lucky that he took no for an answer. [So] yes, this was a painful, horrible thing to happen, but it's generated into a joke about myself—like, 'Wow, how unattractive must I be if my date rapist takes no for an answer?' It makes you feel even worse about yourself. So again it's targeted at myself and people who can relate to the stuff you go through with self-esteem."

Lampanelli may be joking, but the assertion that her date rapist taking no for an answer is some sort of insult is a dangerously harmful message.

"People think we put a lot more thought into jokes than we actually do. If it's fucking funny then it's fucking funny," she says. "I'm not a social commentator, I'm not somebody who sets out to hurt anybody, but I simply don't pander. You know what? If it's funny to make fun of cancer, rape, AIDS, and you get a really good laugh off of it and people are made happy and it takes the piss out of the subject matter, then I just do it."

Laughter does provide momentary relief, and rape and rape culture are certainly things many women deserve relief from, but at what cost does that relief come? Laughing at rape is different than laughing at cancer because we still have not collectively acknowledged the destruction caused by rape—not only on victims but on society as a whole. When Brooks tells the joke about her sexual assault, there is a danger of allowing both herself and the audience to take the incident—and therefore sexual assault in general—less seriously. At the same time, she is highlighting the absurdity of a culture where people feel comfortable laughing at sexual assault, while using it to move on from the experience herself.

Brooks isn't sure herself if the joke ends up doing more harm or more good, but she isn't surprised so many female comics tell jokes about rape.

"I think a lot of female comics talk about [sexual assault] because it happens so much. I think that for a stand-up, [whether you're] male or female, it's so important to be able to talk about everything that's going on and to be able to be comfortable in talking about those things. And I think female stand-ups are just starting to

can without having been through it) how devastating rape is. Unlike male comics, the majority of whom do not have to worry about rape on a regular basis (although men do, of course, suffer rape), women tell jokes from a position in which they are very much aware of their own vulnerability, a fact that automatically changes

When female comics tell rape jokes they are taking control of the narrative about rape—they are, however briefly, no longer victims of rape culture.

feel really comfortable about being themselves and talking about these issues."

Diana Love is a comedian based in Toronto who performs two jokes about rape, one using it as a punch line. When I ask her if she ever worries someone in the audience will misunderstand her intentions and think she is condoning or trivializing rape, she compares that to blaming Marilyn Manson for Columbine.

Last summer, a man was sexually assaulting women in the Toronto neighborhood where Love lived, and the threat of rape was all too real for her. "I felt really unsafe walking down my own street. I had a car pull up to me one time and I just started running. It could have been nothing, but I was scared. But what am I going to do? Not leave my house? Yeah. I feel very strongly about my right to tell rape jokes."

Love's feeling is understandable. When female comics tell rape jokes they are taking control of the narrative about rape—they are, however briefly, no longer victims of rape culture. Of course, not all rape jokes are created equal, and it's problematic when female comedians employ harmful stereotypes about rape as if they were truths, or when they dismiss victims of rape, or rape itself—in these cases they risk empowering themselves by oppressing other women. Nevertheless, their position as individuals in a group that clearly understands how real the threat of rape is adds a layer of complexity to any joke they tell. Every female comic I spoke with understood (as much as one

the nature of the joke. This isn't to say that women cannot tell rape jokes that contribute to rape culture by reinforcing the myths the culture is built on—they can, and do. Such jokes, however, don't just work in a single way. When a woman tells a rape joke—even a "bad" one—it can also be an expression of power, control, and therapy (however fraught with contradiction), and a nebulous offer to women in the audience to momentarily relieve themselves from the burden of rape culture.

At the end of all my interviews for this article I asked each comic if they had a favorite rape joke. Georgea Brooks recounted something her roommate—a fellow comedian—had said one day after they got coffee together. As they were leaving Starbucks, some men leaning on nearby cars began shouting inappropriate, sexual things at them. Back in the car and out of earshot of the guys, Brooks's friend said, as if speaking directly to them: "It's not that I don't want to date you—it's that I don't want to get raped by you."

"That's my favorite rape joke," says Brooks. "Because it was in real life, it wasn't even on stage." 🗨️

Katherine Leyton's poetry and nonfiction have appeared in *Hazlitt*, *The Edinburgh Review*, and *The Globe and Mail*, among others. She is also the founder of the highly unorthodox poetry blog HowPedestrian.ca. She lives in Toronto.

