

BEYOND “THAT’S NOT FUNNY”: READING INTO HOW WE READ A PRISON RAPE JOKE

NADIA KHAYRALLAH



Meme of shoplifting warning, posted on Facebook.

Recently, a friend of mine with an edgy (but hardly extreme) sense of humor showed me this joke, obviously referencing the anal rape of a man in prison. It had been floating around the internet and had gotten almost 17,000 likes on a fairly popular humor page called “Breaking News.” I understood that I was expected to find the joke funny, or at least acceptable, yet I was taken aback by the presentation of sexual violence amidst silly jokes and smiley emoticons.

Upon further reflection, I wasn’t terribly surprised that this meme existed. The internet is full of offensive humor, and prison rape jokes are a staple in this arena (along with other rape jokes and jokes based on race, gender, or sexuality). What did surprise me was the lack of outrage, disapproval, or even questioning of the joke in the commentary attached to it. Most offensive humor generates heated, if intellectually simplistic, online debate; as we see in “The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments,” a compilation and analysis of rape joke debates from various internet forums, rape humor is generally no exception (Kramer). In the 1325 comments on the above photo, however, only 5 showed some objection to the humor, mentioning that it was “trivializing” rape, “not funny,” or “not cool.” None of these

disapproving remarks generated any further response or argument, and the other 99.6% of commenters either expressed amusement, made further jokes on the subject, or tagged friends (“Breaking News”). The disparity in the level of outrage between this joke and other rape jokes suggests that there is a sizable set of people who condone prison rape jokes, even if they believe that rape in general is a serious issue and would even speak out against other kinds of rape jokes. The obvious difference is that this joke relates to prisoners, but how exactly does that fact equate to a complete shift in moral standards? The answer may be more complicated than we think.

Of course, many people might question the need for an in-depth analysis of what is “only” a joke, assuming that a joke is not a real indicator or transmitter of beliefs, and does not warrant serious moral critique. Humor philosopher Robin Tapley calls this defense the “speech problem”: the belief that joking inherently gives the speaker “moral immunity,” regardless of what he or she says (181). Tapley rejects this argument on the premise that particular jokes can spread “socially harmful” beliefs, and therefore should not be told (179, 181). Following the same logic, most of the opposition to rape jokes in popular debates focuses on the harmful effects of telling them, arguing that the creation and repetition of rape jokes perpetuates the notion of actual rape as acceptable or trivial. “That’s not funny” is a frequent—and frequently contested—claim (Kramer). The handful of op-eds and blog posts about prison rape jokes in particular also focus on the unethicity of repeating or laughing at the jokes, pointing out that prison rape is a serious issue that should not be taken lightly.¹

Critics of these jokes are right to point out that they can cause harm, but I am more concerned with an even more significant (and largely neglected) reason to oppose the “speech problem”: jokes can be revealing symptoms of problematic underlying beliefs socially ingrained in those who tell and laugh at them. In fact, in their analysis of “Belief and the Basis of Humor,” the philosophers Hugh LaFollette and Neil Shanks theorize that particular beliefs are essential to the perception of humor: the individual must be able to access different sets of beliefs about the joke’s subject matter and experience a “flickering” between them (333). They use a simple joke as an example: “What is the difference between men and government bonds? Answer: ‘Bonds mature’” (La Follette and Shanks 334). This joke would only be funny to someone who could see some truth in the alternate belief system presented by the joke (that at least some men do not mature), whereas someone fixed to the idea that all men do mature would be unamused (La Follette and Shanks 334).

Under this theory, we can assume that the joke we are examining also requires that we hold a certain set of beliefs, or at least entertain them, in order to perceive it as humorous. Thus, instead of simply insisting that the joke is not funny, it may be more productive to focus on the fact that it is funny to a great number of people, and unpack the socially ingrained beliefs about prisoners, race, class, masculinity, femininity, and sexuality that lead to the perception of prison rape as funny. Given that these beliefs must extend both wide and high—prison rape jokes appear not just in online memes

and pop culture, but also in the speeches of high-ranking politicians of all parties and officials responsible for actual prison policies—this analysis might have a deeper impact than the simple censorship of a joke (Minogue 116).

It speaks to how overlooked this issue is as a topic for serious examination that few academics have published work that focuses specifically on prison rape jokes (though several do address it peripherally in discussions of prison rape or rape jokes in general). One of the few who does is Craig Minogue, a current inmate and an ethics PhD candidate who has published in the *Alternative Law Journal*, a decidedly non-mainstream Australian law journal focused on critiques of the current legal system and human rights reforms. Minogue's article, "Why Don't I Get the Joke – Prison Rape in the Public Discourse," discusses the prevalence of prison rape jokes that suggest that rape is acceptable as an additional punishment or deterrent for criminals (116). Although, like Tapley and others previously discussed, Minogue is primarily focused on problematizing and arguing against the ubiquity of these jokes, he does also make an assumption about the beliefs underlying them: by arguing against the idea of reciprocal morality presented in these jokes, he assumes that this moral belief system is the reason many consider the jokes acceptable (118).

Minogue's critique of the jokes' eye-for-an-eye logic provides solid reasons that prison rape shouldn't be funny, one of them being that sexual violence is not linked to the severity of the crime committed (Sigler qtd. in Minogue 116). I would argue, however, that the disparity between the severity of the crime and the violent "punishment" is often acknowledged in such jokes, revealing that while reciprocal morality may be presented as a surface-level justification, it is not the true basis of the joke's acceptability and humorous effect. For instance, looking at the shoplifting sign, we can certainly see that it represents rape as a reciprocal punishment; in fact, it explicitly frames rape as a deterrent for shoplifters. The fact that it links prison rape to a petty crime, however, rather than something more severe or violent, shows that the joke makes little effort to establish reciprocal morality as a convincing moral justification for itself. This connection between crime and punishment seems like a very weak explanation for the effectiveness of the joke, unless we consider that other beliefs and prejudices stand behind it.

To begin, we must understand common beliefs about prisoners in particular. Since we have established that these beliefs do not necessarily depend on the severity of the crime, we can assume that some of them are directed at the idea of prisoners as a group, rather than any particular criminal act. Prisoners are often the unquestioned targets of jokes because their lives seem distant to most of those who are laughing. LaFollete and Shanks claim that adequate "psychic distance" from the subject matter is needed to experience humor (332-333). Since the ideal audience for this joke is composed of readers who have had no personal contact with inmates, their psychic distance is already sufficient. But many of these readers also feel socially and ideologically separate from prisoners, due in part to demographic distinctions.

It would be impossible to adequately discuss views of prisoners without mentioning race or class. It is no secret that incarceration is a highly race- and class-based phenomenon, particularly since the sharp increase in prison populations in the last thirty years of the twentieth century (Pettit and Western 151). Statistical meta-analysis of men born between 1965 and 1969 estimates that twenty percent of black men, compared to only three percent of white men, had been incarcerated by 1999, and educational levels reveal an even greater disparity: the rate was sixty percent for black men without a high school diploma (Pettit and Western 151). Yet when it comes to popular perceptions of jokes, the imagined makeup of prisons might be more important than the actual demographics. A wealth of statistical research on televised crime reporting has revealed the overrepresentation of African Americans as perpetrators of crime, white people as victims, instances of white people being victimized by people of color, instances of middle-class individuals being victimized by lower-class individuals, and violent “one-on-one” crimes (Williams 73-5, 78; Pollack and Kubrin 62-3; Dorfman and Schiraldi 8-17).

These skewed representations also bleed into our entertainment and cultural narratives. In a piece of historical pop-culture analysis in the journal *Social Justice*, Vicky Munro-Bjorklund argues that the American media has enforced “we/they polarities” regarding images of prisoners—particularly after the 1970s, when prison demographics became increasingly black and the Attica prison riot captured the public attention (Munro-Bjorklund 48). According to Munro-Bjorklund, both films about prisons and popular cop shows have disproportionately emphasized the image of the street criminal—usually black and lower-class, highly dangerous and violent within prison—as the archetypal “bad guy” who contrasts the narrative hero. To maximize this sense of otherness, she claims, such depictions under-represent nonviolent crimes, white-collar crimes, or crimes more likely to be committed by white people, such as drunk driving. Thus, playing on our prejudices of race and class, as well as established “good guy” vs. “bad guy” narrative structures, our culture has projected a singular, unsympathetic face onto the varied set of people within the prison system (Munro-Bjorklund 56-65).²

I would argue that this good guy/bad guy dichotomy is something we project onto the real world almost instinctively, allowing us to conveniently classify people as sympathetic victims or unsympathetic perpetrators. Under this framework, it is impossible to legitimately recognize the inmate as a victim of rape: one cannot be both a perpetrator and a victim, and the inmate has already been typed as the other role. Perhaps that contrast is part of what makes the meme funny—that it requires the reader to flicker between two irreconcilable images, that of the ruthless criminal and the weak, humiliated victim.

The highly related we/them dichotomy is also crucial to the joke’s relationship with the reader and its humor effect. The sign actually refers to the reader as a potential imprisoned victim (it’s “your” buttocks), which could be perceived as offensive or

intimidating, except that the comparison is meant to seem so far-fetched that it's funny. The imagined raped prisoner is so unlike the reader in terms of race, class, and position on the moral dichotomy—or at least in terms of some of these identifiers—that the comparison seems inherently absurd. It requires the reader to “flicker” between two contrasting images of the self: the familiar one, and an almost inconceivable alternative that involves projecting a distant Other onto the reader's own body. This is not to say that a reader who is black or lower-class cannot laugh at the joke; perhaps readers who are more at risk of being equated with the unsympathetic prisoner-victim may feel even more compelled to laugh, in order to establish that there is a distance between themselves and the Other.

Still, the sign's effect comes not just from the target's marginal identity, but also from his position in the violence, which brings us to yet another set of problematic beliefs. We cannot overlook the fact that this humor focuses on the “butthole.” The aspect of rape that the reader—particularly the male reader—is supposed to laugh at and desperately want to avoid is a physical mark of anal penetration. (Other medical or psychological effects of rape are not part of the joke; I imagine that a sign that read, “This is your brain with PTSD . . . don't shoplift” would not be perceived as quite so funny.)

Jokes about anal sex between men, both consensual and not, have historically been used in several cultures to attack the masculinity, and therefore social power, of less dominant groups (Davies). While the social shaming at the core of these jokes is not unrelated to homophobia and the stigma of same-sex activity, it is also deeply connected to the idea of “masculine dominance” as it relates to specific sexual roles: In these jokes there is a dominant party who penetrates and a loser who gets penetrated. Often the victim is the physically weaker party, a servant like the king's jester, the performer of traditionally female tasks such as a cook or laundryman, or belongs to a subordinate ethnic minority such as a Chinese, French Canadian, (Red) Indian, or Chukchi. Thus the direction of sexual domination in the jokes follows patterns of social domination.

The dichotomy of penetrator and penetrated is most stark in jokes set in prisons in which the use of force determines who will play the dominant role of the master and who will be humiliated by being effeminized. (Davies 162)

Clearly, the paradigm described here is very gendered, even as it relates to all-male settings. On one side of the dichotomy is maleness, equated with penetrating, dominating, winning, and socially powerful identities. On the other is femaleness, equated with being penetrated, victimhood, losing, and socially disadvantaged identities. By using images of anal penetration to link a socially stigmatized group with femininity, these jokes translate other forms of prejudice into the language of misogyny.

Thus, we can understand the joke's basis in gendered beliefs by looking at it through the lens of “rape culture” discourse, which emerged from academic feminism

and now serves as the basis for popular activism. A commonly cited online definition of rape culture from Marshall University's Women's Center defines it as "an environment in which rape is prevalent and in which sexual violence against women is normalized and excused in the media and popular culture," but we can clearly see how these same concepts apply to the rape of male prisoners ("Rape Culture"). For instance, the idea of "blaming the victim," usually used to describe the practice of holding female victims responsible for their rapes because of their sexual expression or behavior, applies in multiple ways to the discussion of prison rape jokes—most obviously, to the fact that we literally use an inmate's crime to blame him for being raped. But victim-blaming is also related to the sexual shame attached to rape victims under the belief that "only promiscuous women get raped" (Marshall University). In a "rape culture," getting raped is attached to feminine sexual desire, which is considered inherently transgressive and deserving of violence—perhaps even more so when it is ascribed to a man. In this paradigm, the act of rape both imposes the image of feminine promiscuity on the victim and allows us to assume that it was there from the beginning. We assume that rape is degrading for the prisoner in the joke because we attach the sexual acts committed against him to his sexuality, linking him to both homosexuality and womanhood, traditional sites for further violence and a "step down" from "masculine dominance."

Thus, whether we realize it or not, the joke on the sign is a multilayered translation between different prejudices. The racial and socioeconomic Other is contained in the despised image of the inmate, who is punished and humiliated through associations with homosexuality and femininity, which are viewed as both the target and the result of sexual violence. In a way, this seemingly stupid joke is somewhat brilliant in that it manages to implicitly incorporate prejudices toward several groups without making them the explicit target. This joke is not explicitly about a woman, a gay man, or a lower-class black person, which is convenient: targeting these groups overtly is much less socially acceptable, and might actually seem immoral to the teller or reader. In fact, it technically doesn't even reference an actual prisoner—just an imagined, potential one. But it is upon this imagined prisoner, this alternate, worst-case version of the self, that we project the image of the sexual Other, which is what we most fear becoming. So maybe we laugh at this image because we need an easy, indefensible target for our prejudices. And maybe we laugh to enforce and display our psychic distance from this image, to assure ourselves and others that this is not our reality.

NOTES

1. These authors come from several ideological perspectives, ranging from prison reform-minded individuals (Lash; Jefferson), to feminists with concern over rape culture in general (Silman; "Prison Rape Jokes and Rape Culture"), to anti-feminists accusing feminists of hypocritical silence on the issue (Tuthmosis).

2. It is worth mentioning that since the publication of Munro-Bjorklund's article, recent popular television shows such as *White Collar*, *Breaking Bad*, and *Mad Men* have depicted crime committed by white and middle- to upper-class characters, creating an alternative to the traditional archetype of the criminal (who is also not always the indisputable "bad guy"). Still, it is safe to say that this alternative image has not erased the more established, demonized image of the criminal, which remains race- and class-specific.

WORKS CITED

- "Breaking News." Photograph of shoplifting warning sign. Digital image. Facebook. N.p., 24 Mar. 2014. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
- Davies, Christie. *Jokes and Targets*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2011. Ebrary. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
- Dorfman, Lori, and Vincent Schiraldi. "Off Balance: Youth, Race and Crime in the News." *Building Blocks For Youth*. Center for Children's Law and Policy, Apr. 2001. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.
- Jefferson, Cord. "Why Prison Rape Jokes Are Really Not Funny." *GOOD Magazine*. GOOD Worldwide Inc, 22 June 2011. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
- Kramer, Elise. "The Playful Is Political: The Metapragmatics of Internet Rape-Joke Arguments." *Language in Society* 40.2 (2011): 137-68. ProQuest. Web. 10 Apr. 2014.
- LaFollette, Hugh, and Niall Shanks. "Beliefs and the Basis of Humor." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30.4 (1993): 329-39. Hughlafollette.com. Hugh LaFollette. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
- Lash, John. "Sorry, Prison Rape Jokes About Justin Bieber Aren't Funny." *Juvenile Justice Information Exchange*. Center for Sustainable Journalism, 31 Jan. 2014. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.
- Minogue, Craig. "Why Don't I Get the Joke – Prison Rape in the Public Discourse." *Alternative Law Journal* 36.1 (2011): 116-18. Hein Online. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
- Munro-Bjorklund, Vicky. "Popular Cultural Images of Criminals and Prisoners since Attica." *Social Justice* 18.3 (1991): 48-70. JSTOR. Web. 09 Apr. 2014.
- Pettit, B., and B. Western. "Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in U.S. Incarceration." *American Sociological Review* 69.2 (2004): 151-69. JSTOR. Web. 8 Apr. 2014.
- Pollak, Jessica M., and Charis E. Kubrin. "Crime in the News: How Crimes, Offenders and Victims Are Portrayed in the Media." *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* 14.1 (2007): 59-81. University at Albany, State University of New York. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.
- "Prison Rape Jokes and Rape Culture." Web log post. *Shamelessnaveलगazng*. 27 Nov. 2013. Web. 19 Apr. 2014.

- “Rape Culture.” Marshall University. Marshall University Women’s Center. Web. 07 Apr. 2014.
- Silman, Sherrie. “Why Your Justin Bieber Prison Jokes Perpetuate Rape Culture.” Feminspire. 25 Jan. 2014. Web. 21 Apr. 2014.
- Tapley, Robin. “‘Just Joking!’ The Ethics of Humour.” *Yeditepe’de Felsefe* 1.4 (2005): 172-98. Print.
- Tuthmosis. “Rape Jokes About Men Are Okay.” Web log post. *Return of Kings*. 10 July 2013. Web. 19 Apr. 2014.
- Williams, Dianne. *Race, Ethnicity, and Crime: Alternate Perspectives*. New York: Algora, 2012. Academic Complete. Web. 20 Apr. 2014.

NADYA KHAYRALLAH '17CC is majoring in dance and psychology. She is also an active member of Columbia’s extracurricular dance community, a contributor for the *Columbia Spectator’s* Arts and Entertainment section, and an academic tutor for elementary through high school students. Nadia grew up in North Carolina and lived in California for most of high school, but is now undeniably in love with New York City.

.