

# Laughing in Private

## Vanessa Place's Rape Jokes

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"I laughed in private," said psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster, after Vanessa Place performed her *Rape Jokes* on stage in Brooklyn in 2015.<sup>1</sup> I read, Place's book version of the performance, out this past November and called *You Had to Be There: Rape Jokes*, cover to cover, while still in bed, then went back to sleep, not entirely because of its weight or crude violence (for instance: "My wife was raped by a mime. He performed unspeakable acts"). It was more the effectiveness of the book's structure, which made it digestible, so that its readability contradicted its offensiveness (my own impulse to consume pitted, exhaustingly, against any impulse to condemn). The cover is yellow-tan, the serif font inside bigger than usual, a white page placed between each page of text—a needed break that makes continuing easier. No images, special punctuation, or line breaks—except occasional indentations—interrupt the jokes.

Place, a longtime L.A. poet, artist, and criminal defense attorney, took her jokes mainly from crowd-sourced websites, like Reddit's humor page. When she delivers them in person, she keeps inflection to a minimum. The content is conveyed through form, particularly the way she strings one joke into the next. "Rape...it's not a walk in the park" to "Rape...it's a walk in the park" to one that blurs the hypothetical into violent pragmatics: "What's small shiny and makes a woman want to have sex? A penknife."<sup>2</sup> Later, pedophile jokes transition to fair trade jokes, the

slippage between bodies and products intentional but not didactic.

Place's performance-as-book arrives not just at a moment when the culture protecting powerful sexual offenders is notably fracturing, if too slowly, but as we are learning how to work and live while acknowledging the nature and prevalence of such offenses. The understandable, easier tendency, already playing out in certain spheres, is to congratulate one another for weeding out the Harvey Weinsteins and Matt Lauers, then pretend the problem away. The question of "what to erase" in order to keep the status quo intact can too easily overshadow the more generative, and interesting, questions: how to recognize our complicity in abuse, protect those around us from it, share knowledge of offenses and offenders responsibly, puncture the cults of personality that allow single individuals so much impunity.

Late in November 2018, David Edelstein, film critic for *New York Magazine* and WNYC Radio's *Fresh Air*, made a rape joke. The filmmaker Bernardo Bertolucci had died and Edelstein posted on Facebook, "Even grief is better with butter," alongside a still from the anal rape scene in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* (1972). The late star Maria Schneider said a few years before her 2011 death that the butter used as a lubricant in that scene had been a surprise, a scheme cooked up by Marlon Brando and the director—the script included simulated rape, but she had no warning that butter would be used on her body; some of her onscreen anguish was real. After *Fresh Air* fired Edelstein, he said he'd never heard Schneider's account, but how could he miss that the culture industry had collectively stopped laughing at blatantly sexist products of a patriarchal power skew? Laura Kipnis, the feminist critic often critical of feminists, wrote a *Guardian* op-ed about Edelstein, identifying in his firing an unstated rule: "jokes and flubs will be treated as diagnostic instruments, like those personality tests

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1. *The Ontology of the Rape Joke*, with Vanessa Place, Jeff Dolven, Gayle Salamon, and Jamieson Webster, Showroom, Brooklyn, January 22, 2015.

2. Place, *You Had to Be There: Rape Jokes* (Brooklyn: Power House Books, 2018), 22-24.



Vanessa Place (2018).  
Photo: Nicholas Alan Cope.

And the rape crisis center  
doesn't provide alibis.

I was raping a woman  
the other night and she cried:  
“Please, think of my  
children!” Kinky bitch.

There's only two people  
in the world I wouldn't  
have sex with. My mother,  
and one of my sisters.

My wife was raped by a  
mime. He performed  
unspeakable acts.

If I fuck the wife when  
she's asleep, is it rape?  
Oh, and what do I do if the  
husband wakes up?

Rape...it's not a walk in  
the park.

sometimes administered to prospective employees.”<sup>3</sup> She was indeed pinpointing a trend, to terminate rather than interrogate, one that often appears more motivated by damage control than desire for difference.

In her article, Kipnis quoted Place, whose *You Had to Be There* had just arrived in print. Place, Kipnis said, helped her understand how highlighting Edelstein’s offense might make him a proxy for our own cultural guilt (hadn’t many more of us once readily admitted to enjoying *Last Tango’s* transgressions?). Kipnis then argued that it’s “time to stop hiding behind the ‘speak truth to power’ mantra, when women [...] can wreck a guy’s career with a tweet!”<sup>4</sup> Her pat conclusion seemed to suggest that rapists, jokers, and angry victims all equally need to cool down and collect themselves. But Place’s book, by giving gratuitous attention and pages of space to “jokes and flubs,” rejects just this kind of easy equivocating.

Place does not parse the degree of an offense, moralize, or single anyone out for defense or critique. Instead, her project provides a controlled stage to a chorus of uncomfortably familiar (and sometimes very dumb) abusive sentiments. Case in point: “The way my new girlfriend responds to me, I’d almost swear she was conscious.” The jokes’ lack of specificity makes them infectious, like they could morph to fit and then violate in any context, given the chance. The platform Place offers the predatory makes no move toward absolution, for audience, performer, offender, or language; her project is instead a symbolic, over-the-top stand-in for something we haven’t yet figured out how to do in the public arena: let offenses exist, unelided, while we figure out what to do about them.

Ten months after he admitted to harassing five women and said he’d take a step back and “listen for a long time,” comedian Louis C.K. made a rape whistle joke (something about not being “clean as a whistle”),

frustrating women in the audience. Before his fall, his jokes about men-as-predators more often came off as empathetic (“we’re the number one threat of injury and mayhem to women,” he said in one set).<sup>5</sup> But perhaps that was just because we weren’t paying close attention. After comedian Daniel Tosh made that infamous “wouldn’t it be funny if that girl got raped by, like, five guys right now?” joke about a female heckler, C.K. told John Stewart how much he’d learned from the controversy. “[R]ape is something that polices women’s lives,” he said. “That’s part of me now that wasn’t before.” Yet he added, “I can still enjoy a good rape joke.”<sup>6</sup> Unfortunate that the jokes he told when he started forcing his comeback—the rape whistle one, or one about how Parkland survivors would be better off finger fucking than testifying in Congress—didn’t use as fodder his own first-hand experience with sexual predation and its consequences. A well-structured, honest set about posing as a feminist while still chasing all the problematic perks of celebrity male privilege? I’d stay for that, and, likely, laugh harder, because it would be raunchy and revealing in the way only smart comedy can be.

But alas, offenders’ fear of transparency is muddling their eloquence. *Harper’s* and the *New York Review of Books* served as mouthpieces for alleged predators in fall 2018—respectively, John Hockenberry, a public radio personality accused of harassing multiple coworkers, and Jian Ghomeshi, a radio host and musician accused of non-consensually choking female sexual partners. Both penned extremely long personal essays about their relatively short time as social pariahs, the poor quality of the writing among the many problems with allowing them such prominent outlets. Both introduced themselves in passively self-promotional, innocence-emphasizing ways (“Not so long ago, I spoke to hundreds of thousands of listeners across North America every day on a public radio

3. Laura Kipnis, “A Man Lost His Job to a Rape Joke. Are You Cheering?”, *The Guardian*, November 28, 2018.

4. *Ibid.*

5. Louis CK, “Oh, My God,” stand up special on *HBO*, April 13, 2013.

6. Louis CK on “The Daily Show with John Stewart,” *Comedy Central*, July 16, 2012.

show,”<sup>7</sup> wrote Ghomeshi, adding that he makes his most public appearances now at a karaoke bar, where even women who know of his foibles soon realize that he is quite nice). Hockenberry compared himself to Nabokov’s character Lolita—“her innocence lost along with any identity other than sexual,”<sup>8</sup> just like his! Theoretically, open letters from predators could be informative, and maybe these were, in that they showed how eager even publications associated with the liberal elite were to embrace the “let’s move on; we’re better now,” narrative.

Place also had her own “social pariah” moment. She started a Twitter account in 2009 through which she retweeted all of Margaret Mitchell’s *Gone with the Wind*, letting its racism hang out, in order, she said, to tempt the litigious Mitchell estate to sue her. In 2015, six years into the account’s existence, activists and other artists criticized her for repeating a racist text, and using an illustration of Hattie McDaniel as “Mammy” as the profile picture. Her appearance on a panel at The Whitney and a talk at CU Boulder, among others, were cancelled. Place made few excuses for the project and did not demean her critics. Then, weirdly, outrage diffused, allowing her to come back with another project that uses her same old strategy, of repeating the indefensible. “A work of art can feel like a violation,” Place says in the artist statement at the end of *You Had to Be There*,<sup>9</sup> though too often art violates through its failure to acknowledge its own stakes and complicity in an oppressive culture.

In contrast, dark humor from someone who fears, or knows the danger of, those stakes has a different kind of edge: Wanda Sykes joking about a detachable vagina (“some crazy guy jumps out of the bushes, and you say, ‘oh, I left it at home!’”). Comedian Cameron Esposito released her comedy special *Rape Jokes* on her own website in June 2018. There is no joke about the sexual assault she experienced, just a quick

description, but she lyrically pillories the circumstances that allowed, exacerbated, and followed it (her lack of sex education, conservative Catholic college, closeted lesbianism, suspicion of heterosexuals, cultural assumptions about survivors).

Performance artist and comic Adrienne Truscott debuted *Asking for It: A One-Lady Rape About Comedy Starring Her Pussy and Little Else!* in 2013, pre-#MeToo groundswell. She performed nude from the waist down, a joke in itself about what “asking for it” means. An MSNBC anchor interrogated her about this choice—didn’t it invalidate her arguments, distracting audiences from otherwise valid points about sexual objectification? No, answered Truscott, she had structured the performance to take into account about ten minutes of discomfort around her “outfit,” but after that, the nudity became banal, the audience free to engage with other content. “I do not doubt that you are talented,” interrupted the anchor, missing the point.

Place too inures her audience to her project’s salaciousness before bringing it to its conclusion: “People shouldn’t make jokes about rape. It’s funny enough as it is. If you didn’t want to hear a rape joke, why did you come? I’ve got this really funny joke about rape. Actually, nah, you had to be there.”<sup>10</sup> It stings in the end by reminding of both how close and how far the words are to the real thing.

Notorious novelist Norman Mailer once said that giving Diane Arbus a camera was “like putting a grenade in the hand of a baby.”<sup>11</sup> He disliked the photo she’d taken of him, manspreading but looking silly, soft and floppy rather than commanding. He would have preferred to be the romantic, dashing hero, but he wasn’t, and Arbus wasn’t a baby—she was a fully formed artist who, all her personal complications aside, knew how to explode unhelpful pretenses. Her photograph is a little like Place’s book, which is not so much a grenade as a sharp autopsy

7. Jian Ghomeshi, “Reflections from a Hashtag,” *New York Review of Books*, October 11, 2018.

8. John Hockenberry, “Exile,” *Harper’s*, October 2018.

9. Place, 155.

10. Place, 136-138.

11. Patricia Bosworth, *Diane Arbus: A Biography* (W.W. Norton & Company, 1984), 227.





of naked awfulness. It blows nothing up. It just shows what's there.

Place, herself recently labeled problematic, excises and represents the problematic without suggesting any road map out, but perhaps our search for solutions is prematurely distracting us from the nuances and depths of the problem.

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