



"It's Only a Penis": Rape, Feminism, and Difference

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Source: *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Spring, 2000), pp. 789-816

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175417>

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### **“It’s Only a Penis”: Rape, Feminism, and Difference**

**I**n 1985 and 1986 I carried out anthropological fieldwork in the Dayak community of Gerai in Indonesian Borneo. One night in September 1985, a man of the village climbed through a window into the freestanding house where a widow lived with her elderly mother, younger (unmarried) sister, and young children. The widow awoke, in darkness, to feel the man inside her mosquito net, gripping her shoulder while he climbed under the blanket that covered her and her youngest child as they slept (her older children slept on mattresses nearby). He was whispering, “be quiet, be quiet!” She responded by sitting up in bed and pushing him violently, so that he stumbled backward, became entangled with her mosquito net, and then, finally free, moved across the floor toward the window. In the meantime, the woman climbed from her bed and pursued him, shouting his name several times as she did so. His hurried exit through the window, with his clothes now in considerable disarray, was accompanied by a stream of abuse from the woman and by excited interrogations from wakened neighbors in adjoining houses.

I awoke the following morning to raucous laughter on the longhouse verandah outside my apartment where a group of elderly women gathered regularly to thresh, winnow, and pound rice. They were recounting this tale loudly, and with enormous enjoyment, to all in the immediate vicinity. As I came out of my door, one was engaged in mimicking the man climbing out the window, sarong falling down, genitals askew. Those others working or lounging near her on the verandah — both men and women — shrieked with laughter.

When told the story, I was shocked and appalled. An unknown man had tried to climb into the bed of a woman in the dead, dark of night? I knew what this was called: attempted rape. The woman had seen the man and recognized him (so had others in the village, wakened by her shouting). I knew what he deserved: the full weight of the law. My own fears

I am grateful to Francis Elliott for a crucial reference, to the editors and referees of *Signs* for their thoughtful comments and suggestions, to Barbara Sullivan for many helpful discussions, and to Barry Hindess for his customary blend of perceptive criticism and encouragement.

[*Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2000, vol. 25, no. 3]

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about being a single woman alone in a strange place, sleeping in a dwelling that could not be secured at night, bubbled to the surface. My feminist sentiments poured out. “How can you laugh?” I asked my women friends; “this is a very bad thing that he has tried to do.” But my outrage simply served to fuel the hilarity. “No, not bad,” said one of the old women (a particular friend of mine), “simply stupid.”

I felt vindicated in my response when, two hours later, the woman herself came onto the verandah to share betel nut and tobacco and to broadcast the story. Her anger was palpable, and she shouted for all to hear her determination to exact a compensation payment from the man. Thinking to obtain information about local women’s responses to rape, I began to question her. Had she been frightened? I asked. Of course she had—Wouldn’t I feel frightened if I awoke in the dark to find an unknown person inside my mosquito net? Wouldn’t I be angry? Why then, I asked, hadn’t she taken the opportunity, while he was entangled in her mosquito net, to kick him hard or to hit him with one of the many wooden implements near at hand? She looked shocked. Why would she do that? she asked—after all, he hadn’t hurt her. No, but he had wanted to, I replied. She looked at me with puzzlement. Not able to find a local word for *rape* in my vocabulary, I scabbled to explain myself: “He was trying to have sex with you,” I said, “although you didn’t want to. He was trying to hurt you.” She looked at me, more with pity than with puzzlement now, although both were mixed in her expression. “Tin [Christine], it’s only a penis,” she said. “How can a penis hurt anyone?”

### **Rape, feminism, and difference**

A central feature of many feminist writings about rape in the past twenty years is their concern to eschew the view of rape as a natural function of male biology and to stress instead its bases in society and culture. It is curious, then, that so much of this work talks of rape in terms that suggest—either implicitly or explicitly—that it is a universal practice. To take only several examples: Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien tell us that “every female from nine months to ninety years is at risk” (1985, 1); Anna Clark argues that “all women know the paralyzing fear of walking down a dark street at night. . . . It seems to be a fact of life that the fear of rape imposes a curfew on our movements” (1987, 1); Catharine MacKinnon claims that “sexuality is central to women’s definition and forced sex is central to sexuality,” so “rape is indigenous, not exceptional, to women’s social condition” (1989b, 172) and “all women live all the time under the shadow of the

threat of sexual abuse" (1989a, 340); Lee Madigan and Nancy Gamble write of "the global terrorism of rape" (1991, 21–22); and Susan Brison asserts that "the fact that all women's lives are restricted by sexual violence is indisputable" (1993, 17). The potted "world histories" of rape—which attempt to trace the practice in a range of different societies against a single historical/evolutionary timeline—found in a number of feminist writings on the topic, further illustrate this universalizing tendency.<sup>1</sup> Just as I, an anthropologist trained to be particularly sensitive to the impact of cultural difference, nevertheless took for granted the occurrence of rape in a social and cultural context that I knew to be profoundly different from my own, so most other feminists also unwittingly assume that the practice occurs in all human societies.<sup>2</sup> This is particularly puzzling given that Peggy Reeves Sanday, for one, long ago demonstrated that while rape occurs widely throughout the world, it is by no means a human universal: some societies can indeed be classified as rape free (1981).

There are two general reasons for this universalization of rape among Western feminists. The first of these has to do with the understanding of the practice as horrific by most women in Western societies. In these settings, rape is seen as "a fate worse than, or tantamount to, death" (S. Marcus 1992, 387): a shattering of identity that, for instance, left one North American survivor feeling "not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive in a totally alien world" (Brison 1993, 10). While any form of violent attack may have severe emotional consequences for its victims, the *sexualization* of violence in rape greatly intensifies those consequences for women in Western societies: "To show power and anger through rape—as opposed to mugging or assault—men are calling on lessons women learn from society, from history and religion, to defile, degrade and shame in addition to inflicting physical pain. Rapists have learned, *as have their victims*, that to rape is to do something worse than to assault" (Gordon and Riger 1989, 45; see also Koss and Harvey 1991). Clearly, the intermeshing of sexuality and personal identity in contemporary Western societies—such that Michel Foucault refers to sex as "that secret which seems to underlie all that we are" (1978, 155)—imbues

<sup>1</sup> For recent examples of such histories, see Madigan and Gamble 1991, 11ff.; McColgan 1996, 12–27.

<sup>2</sup> There are some exceptions to this. For example, Peggy Sanday's work on rape among the Minangkabau (1986) and within U.S. college fraternities (1990b) emphasizes very much its contextualized character. In fact, Sanday is one of the few feminists who has attempted to formulate a more general theory concerning the conditions under which rape occurs and under which it does not occur (1981; 1986; 1990b, 8).

the practice of rape with particular horror for most victims from those societies, since there it involves a violation of personhood itself.<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, almost one-third of the respondents in Bart and O'Brien's sample of U.S. women subject to rape attempts were more afraid of being raped by their attackers than they were of being murdered and/or mutilated by them (1985, 52–53) — an extraordinarily large number given that American women are reported to fear murder more than any other crime (Gordon and Riger 1989, 2).<sup>4</sup> Rape is the second most feared crime among women in America, a situation that is no doubt exacerbated by the frequency with which it occurs there.<sup>5</sup> Margaret Gordon and Stephanie Riger (1989) have documented at length the way fear of rape — “the female fear” or “this special fear,” as they call it — pervades the lives and shapes the actions of American women. So deep is this fear for many Western women

<sup>3</sup> It is clear from the ethnographic record that while for women in many non-Western societies the experience of rape is similar to that of most Western women, this is not the case in all societies. Material from, e.g., Mehinaku (Gregor 1990) and some Papua New Guinea societies suggests that rape takes on rather different meanings and significances in these settings and, in particular, that rape is not everywhere experienced by women victims in the deeply traumatic terms taken for granted by most Western feminist writers on the topic. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that, even within specific Western contexts, rape can mean rather different things to different people: Bourque 1989, for instance, has shown that within a single community in southern California, definitions of rape vary enormously, both between men and women and between different women. It is important to point out in this context that to acknowledge the social and cultural variability of the meaning of rape is not to deny its horror or invalidate its trauma for most women victims in the West. The work of such disparate thinkers as Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu has demonstrated that bodily (including emotional) responses are largely socially constituted; the fact that they are therefore not universally shared renders them no less real for those who experience them. Iris Marion Young's classic account (1990) of how Western women's oppression is lived in their bodily experience, for instance, makes very clear the connection between social institutions and practices and the bodily/emotional responses of individuals.

<sup>4</sup> Twenty-nine women out of ninety-two were more afraid of being raped by their attackers than of being murdered and/or mutilated by them. Forty-seven women were more afraid of being murdered and/or mutilated, and sixteen were unclear on this point (Bart and O'Brien 1985, 53). Bart and O'Brien suggest that women who are more afraid of being raped than of being murdered and/or mutilated are more likely to avoid rape when attacked by a potential rapist.

<sup>5</sup> Madigan and Gamble state that an estimated 15 to 40 percent of women (presumably of American women) are “victims of attempted or completed rapes during their lifetimes” (1991, 4; see also Russell 1984; Bart and O'Brien 1985, 129–30; Kilpatrick et al. 1987; Koss and Harvey 1991, 22–29). Koss and Harvey cite a study showing that one in 3.6 American college women has been subject to rape or attempted rape in her lifetime (1991, 24). While the frequency rates are lower in most other Western countries, they are nonetheless high; McColgan, e.g., refers to a 1982 study in London that found that one woman in every six had been raped and a further one in five had been subject to attempted rape (1996, 94).

that they anticipate the possibility of rape everywhere: rape comes to be understood simply as part of the “natural” human condition. Susan Griffin puts it eloquently: “I have never been free of the fear of rape. From a very early age I, like most women, have thought of rape as part of my natural environment—something to be feared and prayed against like fire and lightning. I never asked why men raped; I simply thought it one of the many mysteries of human nature” (1986, 3). Since feminists are, undoubtedly, as subject to this fear as any other Western women, our tendency to universalize rape is almost overwhelming.

In addition, because within Western feminist discourse rape is depicted as a shockingly barbaric practice—“illuminat[ing] gendered relations of power in their rawest, most brutal forms” (Dubinsky 1993, 8)—there is a tendency to view it as atavistic. Because the practice is widespread in “civilized” Western countries, it is assumed to pervade all other societies as well, since these latter are understood as located closer to the savagery end of the evolutionary ladder. This relates very closely to what Chandra Mohanty has described as “the third world difference”: “that stable ahistorical something” that, in many feminist accounts, oppresses the women of Third World countries in addition to their oppression by men (1991, 53). Under this logic, practices deemed oppressive to women that are not commonly found in the West, such as clitoridectomy and *sati*, are explained as resulting from the barbarism of Third World peoples, while oppressive practices that are common in the West, such as rape, are explained in universalistic terms.<sup>6</sup> The related tendency within Western iconography to sexualize black female bodies (see Gilman 1985) means that rape is readily assumed to be a characteristic of “other”—especially black—societies. In fact, the link between this racist iconography and the frequency with which white men rape black women in countries like the United States should lead us to be extremely wary of this kind of assumption. Feminists cannot sidestep this problem by claiming that apparently universalizing statements about rape are meant to refer to Western societies only, since the assumption that

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen Barry’s recent book on prostitution provides a good example of this kind of approach. Without providing any historical or ethnographic evidence whatsoever, she claims that in “pre-industrial and feudal societies” (the first of four progressive historical “stages of sexual exploitation”), “women’s reduction to sex is a fact of their status as the property of their husbands. Under such conditions women are governed by marital relations of power through the exploitation of their unpaid labor in the home, their reproduction, and their sexuality. . . . Men may sexually exploit their wives, take concubines, and buy prostitutes with impunity as the privilege of male domination that services their promiscuity. By contrast, as women are sexual property of men, any sexual act outside of their marriage, including rape and forced prostitution, is usually considered infidelity and the victims are severely punished” (Barry 1995, 51).

unmarked statements should automatically be read in this way is itself suggestive of a form of racism. This is a point to which Western feminists, of all people, should be particularly sensitive, having ourselves been engaged in a protracted battle to fracture universalizing masculinist discourses.

A second, equally deep-seated reason for the feminist tendency to universalize rape stems from Western feminism's emphasis on difference between men and women and from its consequent linking of rape and difference. Two types of difference are involved here. The first of these is difference in social status and power; thus rape is linked quite explicitly, in contemporary feminist accounts, to patriarchal social forms. Indeed, this focus on rape as stemming from difference in social position is what distinguishes feminist from other kinds of accounts of rape (see Ellis 1989, 10). In this view, inequality between men and women is linked to men's desire to possess, subjugate, and control women, with rape constituting a central means by which the freedom of women is limited and their continued submission to men ensured. For this reason, rape has assumed a significant role within many feminist narratives, with Carole Pateman's account of the social contract as based on an originary rape of a woman by a man providing perhaps the best-known example (1988). Since many feminists continue to believe that patriarchy is universal—or, at the very least, to feel deeply ambivalent on this point—there is a tendency among us to believe that rape, too, is universal.<sup>7</sup>

However, the view of women as everywhere oppressed by men has been extensively critiqued within the anthropological literature. A number of anthropologists have argued that in some societies, while men and women may perform different roles and occupy different spaces, they are nevertheless equal in value, status, and power.<sup>8</sup> In addition, Marilyn Strathern, for one, has pointed out that notions such as “inequality” and “domination” cannot necessarily be applied in societies with very different conceptions of agency and personhood: “To argue that what happens to women qua women is a function of what happens to men qua men is not to postulate that women's concerns are relative to or subsumed by those of men but that neither can be understood without comprehending the relationship between them” (1988, 34; see also Strathern 1987). As Strathern sees it, the Western tendency to distinguish between subject and object makes it impossible for Westerners to recognize that in some societies (in this case,

<sup>7</sup> Among “radical” feminists such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon this belief reaches its most extreme version, in which all sexual intercourse between a man and a woman is viewed as akin to rape (Dworkin 1987; MacKinnon 1989a, 1989b).

<sup>8</sup> Leacock 1978 and Bell 1983 are well-known examples. Sanday 1990a and Marcus 1992 are more recent examples, on Minangkabau and Turkish society, respectively.

Melanesian ones) a person (whether male or female) is, at the same time, both subject and object. Feminist distinctions between male subjects and female objects—and corresponding notions of asymmetry—thus do not make sense in these contexts (Strathern 1988). Viewed in this light, feminist claims concerning the universality of rape begin to look even more problematic.<sup>9</sup>

But there is a second type of difference between men and women that also, albeit largely implicitly, underlies the assumption that rape is universal, and it is the linkage between this type of difference and the treatment of rape in feminist accounts with which I am largely concerned in this article. I refer to the assumption by most Western feminists writing on rape that men and women have different bodies and, more specifically, different genitalia: that they are, in other words, differently sexed. Furthermore, it is taken for granted in most feminist accounts that these differences render the former biologically, or “naturally,” capable of penetrating and therefore brutalizing the latter and render the latter “naturally” able to be brutalized. While this assumption was quite explicit in earlier feminist accounts of rape—in particular, in Susan Brownmiller’s (1975) argument that men rape primarily because they are biologically equipped with the “tools” (penises) to do so—it is largely implicit in more recent feminist work, where the concern is to eschew biological explanations and to stress instead the social bases of rape.<sup>10</sup> Rape of women by men is thus assumed to be universal because the same “biological” bodily differences between men and women are believed to exist everywhere.

Unfortunately, the assumption that preexisting bodily difference between men and women underlies rape has blinded feminists writing on the subject to the ways the practice of rape itself creates and inscribes such difference. This seems particularly true in contemporary Western societies

<sup>9</sup> MacKinnon suggests, for instance, that Khalka Mongol men’s assertion (as quoted by Sanday) that “our women never resist” evokes a society in which sex can be equated with rape (1989a, 322). This suggestion clearly assumes that the individuated “subject” of Western experience is found also among the Khalka Mongol, such that the observer can separate out the “autonomous” interests of husband and wife and thus describe sexual relations between them in the familiar Western terms of “consent” and “resistance.” While any categorization of Khalka Mongol society as “rape free” cannot be based simply on male claims of this type, categorization of it as “rape prone” purely on this basis is equally absurd, since it assumes that these kinds of male claims serve the same function here as they often do in the United States: namely, to legitimate male objectification of women. Work such as Strathern’s throws into question precisely this kind of assumption.

<sup>10</sup> Some contemporary feminist accounts, however, are more explicit in their adoption of this kind of position. Aileen McColgan, e.g., states that most rapists “are not armed with . . . anything other than their fists, their penises and their superior strength” (1996, 9).

where the relationship between rape and bodily/genital dimorphism appears to be an extremely intimate one. Judith Butler (1990, 1993) has argued (following Foucault 1978) that the Western emphasis on sexual difference is a product of the heterosexualization of desire within Western societies over the past few centuries, which “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female’” (1990, 17).<sup>11</sup> The practice of rape in Western contexts can only properly be understood with reference to this heterosexual matrix, to the division of humankind into two distinct—and in many respects opposed—types of body (and hence types of person).<sup>12</sup> While it is certainly the case that rape is linked in contemporary Western societies to disparities of power and status between men and women, it is the particular discursive form that those disparities take—their elaboration in terms of the discourse of sex—that gives rape its particular meaning and power in these contexts.

Sharon Marcus has already argued convincingly that the act of rape “feminizes” women in Western settings, so that “the entire female body comes to be symbolized by the vagina, itself conceived of as a delicate, perhaps inevitably damaged and pained inner space” (1992, 398). I would argue further that the *practice* of rape in these settings—both its possibility and its actualization—not only feminizes women but masculinizes men as well.<sup>13</sup> This masculinizing character of rape is very clear in, for instance, Sanday’s ethnography of fraternity gang rape in North American universities (1990b) and, in particular, in material on rape among male prison inmates. In the eyes of these rapists the act of rape marks them as “real men” and marks their victims as not men, that is, as feminine.<sup>14</sup> In this iconography, the “masculine” body (along with the “masculine” psyche), is

<sup>11</sup> See Laqueur 1990 for a historical account of this process.

<sup>12</sup> On the equation of body and person within Western (especially feminist) thought, see Moore 1994.

<sup>13</sup> See Plaza 1980: “[Rape] is very sexual in the sense that [it] is frequently a sexual activity, but especially in the sense that it opposes men and women: it is *social sexing* which is latent in rape. . . . Rape is sexual essentially because it rests on the very social difference between the sexes” (31).

<sup>14</sup> The material on male prison inmates is particularly revealing in this respect. As an article by Stephen Donaldson, a former prisoner and the president of the U.S. advocacy group Stop Prisoner Rape, makes clear, “hooking up” with another prisoner is the best way for a prisoner to avoid sexual assaults, particularly gang rapes. Hooking up involves entering a sexual liaison with a senior partner (“jockey,” “man,” “pitcher,” “daddy”) in exchange for protection. In this arrangement, the rules are clear: the junior partner gives up his autonomy and comes under the authority of the senior partner; he is often expected by the senior partner “to be as feminine in appearance and behaviour as possible,” including shaving his legs, growing long hair,

viewed as hard, penetrative, and aggressive, in contrast to the soft, vulnerable, and violable “feminine” sexuality and psyche. Rape both reproduces and marks the pronounced sexual polarity found in these societies.

Western understandings of gender difference have almost invariably started from the presumption of a presocial bodily difference between men and women (“male” and “female”) that is then somehow acted on by society to produce gender. In particular, the possession of either male genitals or female genitals is understood by most Westerners to be not only the primary marker of gender identity but, indeed, the underlying cause of that identity. Most feminist models of gender, while wishing to draw attention to the socially constructed character of difference, have nevertheless assumed—however reluctantly—that gender ultimately relates “back” to sex, that is, to the differences between “male” and “female” bodies. Yet this assumption is problematic in light of both feminist challenges to the notion that “sex” is given (and therefore universal) (Butler 1990, 1993) and historical research suggesting that dimorphic “sexing” of bodies is a relatively recent phenomenon in West European history (Trumbach 1989, 1993; Laqueur 1990; van der Meer 1993). This kind of model is especially problematic for using with cross-cultural material, such as that described below.<sup>15</sup>

I seek to do two things in this article. First, in providing an account of a community in which rape does not occur, I aim to give the lie to the widespread assumption that rape is universal and thus to invite Western feminists to interrogate the basis of our own tendency to take its universality for granted.<sup>16</sup> The fundamental question is this: Why does a woman of Gerai see a penis as lacking the power to harm her, while I, a white Australian/New Zealand woman, am so ready to see it as having the capacity to defile, to humiliate, to subjugate and, ultimately, to destroy me?

Second, by exploring understandings of sex and gender in a community

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using a feminine nickname, and performing work perceived as feminine (laundry, cell cleaning, giving backrubs, etc.) (Donaldson 1996, 17, 20). See also the extract from Jack Abbott’s prison letters in Halperin 1993 (424–25).

<sup>15</sup> Henrietta Moore has pointed out some of the problems with the conventional sex/gender model. These include its assumption that difference lies between bodies (whereas in many societies gender differences are understood to reside within individual bodies) and its stress on the body as the ultimate repository of identity, which relates to the Western belief in the unified, continuous person located in an individual body (a belief that is by no means universal) (Moore 1994, chaps. 1 and 2).

<sup>16</sup> While I am primarily concerned here with the feminist literature (believing that it contains by far the most useful and insightful work on rape), it needs to be noted that many other (nonfeminist) writers also believe rape to be universal. See, e.g., Ellis 1989; Palmer 1989.

that stresses identity, rather than difference, between men and women (including men's and women's bodies), I aim to demonstrate that Western beliefs in the "sexed" character of bodies are not "natural" in basis but, rather, are a component of specifically Western gendering and sexual regimes. And since the practice of rape in Western societies is profoundly linked to these beliefs, I will suggest that it is an inseparable part of such regimes. This is not to say that the practice of rape is always linked to the kind of heterosexual regime found in the West; even the most cursory glance at any list of societies in which the practice occurs indicates that this is not so.<sup>17</sup> But it is to point out that we will be able to understand rape only ever in a purely localized sense, in the context of the local discourses and practices that are both constitutive of and constituted by it. In drawing out the implications of the Gerai stress on identity between men and women for Gerai gender and sexual relations, I hope to point out some of the possible implications of the Western emphasis on gender difference for Western gender and sexual relations — including the practice of rape.

### **Gender, sex, and procreation in Gerai**

Gerai is a Dayak community of some seven hundred people in the Indonesian province of Kalimantan Barat (West Borneo).<sup>18</sup> In the twenty months I spent in the community, I heard of no cases of either sexual assault or attempted sexual assault (and since this is a community in which privacy as we understand it in the West is almost nonexistent — in which surveillance by neighbors is at a very high level [see Helliwell 1996] — I would certainly have heard of any such cases had they occurred). In addition, when I questioned men and women about sexual assault, responses ranged from puzzlement to outright incredulity to horror.

While relations between men and women in Gerai can be classified as

<sup>17</sup> For listings of "rape-prone" societies, see Minturn, Grosse, and Haider 1969; Sanday 1981.

<sup>18</sup> I carried out anthropological fieldwork in Gerai from March 1985 to February 1986 and from June 1986 to January 1987. The fieldwork was funded by an Australian National University Ph.D. scholarship and carried out under the sponsorship of Lembaga Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia. At the time that I was conducting my research a number of phenomena were beginning to have an impact on the community — these had the potential to effect massive changes in the areas of life discussed in this article. These phenomena included the arrival of a Malaysian timber company in the Gerai region and the increasing frequency of visits by Malay, Bugis, Chinese, and Batak timber workers to the community; the arrival of two American fundamentalist Protestant missionary families to live and proselytize in the community; and the establishment of a Catholic primary school in Gerai, resulting in a growing tendency among parents to send their children (both male and female) to attend Catholic secondary school in a large coastal town several days' journey away.

relatively egalitarian in many respects, both men and women nevertheless say that men are “higher” than women (Helliwell 1995, 364). This is especially the case in the context of formal community-wide functions such as village meetings and moots to settle legal disputes. While women are not required to remain silent on such occasions, their voices carry less authority than those of men, and, indeed, legal experts in the community (all men) told me that a woman’s evidence in a moot is worth seven-tenths of a man’s (see also Tsing 1990). In addition, a husband is granted a degree of formal authority over his wife that she does not have over him; thus a wife’s disobedience of her husband is theoretically a punishable offense under *adat*, or local law. I have noted elsewhere that Gerai people stress the ideal of *diri*, literally meaning “standing” or “to stand,” according to which each rice group should take primary responsibility for itself in all spheres of life and make its own decisions on matters concerning its members (Helliwell 1995). It is on the basis of their capacity to stand that rice groups within the community are ranked against one another. The capacity to stand is predicated primarily on the ability to produce rice surpluses: yet, significantly, although men and women work equally at rice-field work, it is only men who occasionally are individually described as standing. As in some other societies in the same region (Ilongot, Wana), Gerai people link men’s higher status to their greater bravery.<sup>19</sup> This greater bravery is demonstrated, they say, by the fact that it is men who *mampat* (cut down the large trees to make a rice field), who burn off the rice field to prepare for planting, and who enter deep primary jungle in search of game and jungle products such as aloe wood — all notoriously dangerous forms of work.

This greater status and authority does not, however, find expression in the practice of rape, as many feminist writings on the subject seem to suggest that it should. This is because the Gerai view of men as “higher” than women, although equated with certain kinds of increased potency vis-à-vis the world at large, does not translate into a conception of that potency as attached to and manifest through the penis — of men’s genitals as able to brutalize women’s genitals.

Shelly Errington has pointed out that a feature of many of the societies of insular Southeast Asia is a stress on sameness, even identity, between men and women (1990, 35, 39), in contrast to the Western stress on difference between the passive “feminine” object and the active, aggressive “masculine” subject.<sup>20</sup> Gerai understandings of gender fit Errington’s

<sup>19</sup> On the Ilongot, see Rosaldo 1980a; on the Wana, see Atkinson 1990.

<sup>20</sup> The Wana, as described by Jane Atkinson (1990), provide an excellent example of a society that emphasizes sameness. Emily Martin points out that the explicit Western opposition between the “natures” of men and women is assumed to occur even at the level of the cell, with biologists commonly speaking of the egg as passive and immobile and the sperm as

model very well. In Gerai, men and women are not understood as fundamentally different types of persons: there is no sense of a dichotomized masculinity and femininity. Rather, men and women are seen to have the same kinds of capacities and proclivities, but with respect to some, men are seen as “more so” and with respect to others, women are seen as “more so.” Men are said to be braver and more knowledgeable about local law (*adat*), while women are said to be more persistent and more enduring. All of these qualities are valued. Crucially, in terms of the central quality of nurturance (perhaps the most valued quality in Gerai), which is very strongly marked as feminine among Westerners, Gerai people see no difference between men and women. As one (female) member of the community put it to me: “We all must nurture because we all need.”<sup>21</sup> The capacity both to nurture and to need, particularly as expressed through the cultivation of rice as a member of a rice group, is central to Gerai conceptions of personhood: rice is the source of life, and its (shared) production humanizes and socializes individuals (Helliwell, forthcoming). Women and men have identical claims to personhood based on their equal contributions to rice production (there is no notion that women are somehow diminished as persons even though they may be seen as less “high”). As in Strathern’s account of Hagen (1988), the perceived mutuality of rice-field work in Gerai renders inoperable any notion of either men or women as autonomous individual subjects.

It is also important to note that while men’s bravery is linked to a notion of their greater physical strength, it is not equated with aggression—aggression is not valued in most Gerai contexts.<sup>22</sup> As a Gerai man put it to me, the wise man is the one “who fights when he has to, and runs away when he can”; such avoidance of violence does not mark a man as lacking in bravery. This does not mean that in certain contexts male warriorship—the ability to fight and even to take heads—is not valorized; on the con-

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active and aggressive even though recent research indicates that these descriptions are erroneous and that they have led biologists to misunderstand the fertilization process (1991). See also Lloyd 1984 for an excellent account of how (often latent) conceptions of men and women as having opposed characteristics are entrenched in the history of Western philosophical thought.

<sup>21</sup> The nurture-need dynamic (that I elsewhere refer to as the “need-share dynamic”) is central to Gerai sociality. Need for others is expressed through nurturing them; such expression is the primary mark of a “good” as opposed to a “bad” person. See Helliwell (forthcoming) for a detailed discussion.

<sup>22</sup> In this respect, Gerai is very different from, e.g., Australia or the United States, where, as Michelle Rosaldo has pointed out, aggression is linked to success, and women’s constitution as lacking aggression is thus an important element of their subordination (1980b, 416; see also Myers 1988, 600).

trary, the most popular myths in Gerai are those that tell of the legendary warrior hero (and headhunter without peer) Koling. However, Gerai people make a clear distinction between the fantastic world of the heroes of the past and the mundane world in which the present man of Gerai must make his way.<sup>23</sup> While it is recognized that a man will sometimes need to fight—and skill and courage in fighting are valued—aggression and hotheadedness are ridiculed as the hallmarks of a lazy and incompetent man. In fact, physical violence between adults is uncommon in Gerai, and all of the cases that I did witness or hear about were extremely mild.<sup>24</sup> Doubtless the absence of rape in the community is linked to this devaluing of aggression in general. However, unlike a range of other forms of violence (slapping, beating with a fist, beating with an implement, knifing, premeditated killing, etc.), rape is not named as an offense and accorded a set punishment under traditional Gerai law. In addition, unlike these other forms of violence, rape is something that people in the community find almost impossible to comprehend (“How would he be able to do such a thing?” one woman asked when I struggled to explain the concept of a man attempting to put his penis into her against her will). Clearly, then, more is involved in the absence of rape in Gerai than a simple absence of violence in general.

Central to all of the narratives that Gerai people tell about themselves and their community is the notion of a “comfortable life”: the achievement of this kind of life marks the person and the household as being of value and constitutes the norm to which all Gerai people aspire. Significantly, the content of such a life is seen as identical for both men and women: it

<sup>23</sup> The practice of headhunting—seeking out enemies in order to sever their heads, which were then brought back to one’s own village and treated with ritual reverence—was, in the past, widely found among Borneo Dayak groups. Gerai people claim that their not-too-distant ancestors practiced headhunting, but my own sense is that they are more likely to have been the hunted than the hunters. While in many respects Gerai resembles some of the “nonviolent” societies found throughout the region—including the Semai (Dentan 1968, 1978) and Chewong (Howell 1989) of Peninsular Malaysia and the Buid (Gibson 1986) of Mindoro in the Philippines—its celebration of violence in certain specified contexts marks it as rather different from many of them. Howell, for instance, claims that none of the indigenous peoples of Peninsular Malaysia “has any history of warfare, either recorded by the outside world or represented in myths and legends” (1989, 35), while Gibson notes that the Buid language “lacks words expressing a positive evaluation of courage or the reciprocation of violence” (1986, 107–8). Gerai people are, in fact, very similar in this respect to another Borneo Dayak people, the Bidayuh, who also valorize male violence in myth but tend to devalue and avoid it in everyday life and who also have a tradition of headhunting but are likely to have been hunted rather than hunters (Geddes 1957).

<sup>24</sup> See Helliwell 1996, 142–43, for an example of a “violent” altercation between husband and wife.

is marked by the production of bountiful rice harvests each year and the successful raising of a number of healthy children to maturity. The core values and aspirations of men and women are thus identical; of the many life histories that I collected while in the community — all of which are organized around this central image — it is virtually impossible to tell those of men from those of women. Two points are significant in this respect. First, a “comfortable life” is predicated on the notion of a partnership between a man and a woman (a conjugal pair). This is because while men and women are seen to have the same basic skills and capacities, men are seen to be “better” at certain kinds of work and women to be “better” at other kinds. Second, and closely related to this, the Gerai notion of men’s and women’s work does not constitute a rigid division of labor: both men and women say that theoretically women can perform all of the work routinely carried out by men, and men can perform all of the work routinely carried out by women. However, men are much better at men’s work, and women are much better at women’s work. Again, what we have here is a stress on *identity* between men and women at the expense of radical difference.

This stress on identity extends into Gerai bodily and sexual discourses. A number of people (both men and women) assured me that men sometimes menstruate; in addition, menstrual blood is not understood to be polluting, in contrast to how it is seen in many societies that stress more strongly the difference between men and women. While pregnancy and childbirth are spoken of as “women’s work,” many Gerai people claim that under certain circumstances men are also able to carry out this work — but, they say, women are “better” at it and so normally undertake it. In line with this claim, I collected a Gerai myth concerning a lazy woman who was reluctant to take on the work of pregnancy and childbirth. Her husband instead made for himself a lidded container out of bark, wood, and rattan (“like a betel nut container”), which he attached around his waist beneath his loincloth and in which he carried the growing fetus until it was ready to be born. On one occasion when I was watching a group of Gerai men cut up a boar, one, remembering an earlier conversation about the capacity of men to give birth, pointed to a growth in the boar’s body cavity and said with much disapproving shaking of the head: “Look at this. He wants to carry his child. He’s stupid.” In addition, several times I saw fathers push their nipples into the mouths of young children to quieten them; while none of these fathers claimed to be able to produce milk, people nevertheless claimed that some men in the community were able to lactate, a phenomenon also attested to in myth. Men and women are thought to produce the same genital fluid, and this is linked in complex

ways to the capacity of both to menstruate. All of these examples demonstrate the community's stress on bodily identity between men and women.

Furthermore, in Gerai, men's and women's sexual organs are explicitly conceptualized as the same. This sexual identity became particularly clear when I asked several people who had been to school (and hence were used to putting pencil to paper) to draw men's and women's respective organs for me: in all cases, the basic structure and form of each were the same. One informant, endeavoring to convince me of this sameness, likened both to wooden and bark containers for holding valuables (these vary in size but have the same basic conical shape, narrower at the base and wider at the top). In all of these discussions, it was reiterated that the major difference between men's and women's organs is their location: inside the body (women) and outside the body (men).<sup>25</sup> In fact, when I pressed people on this point, they invariably explained that it makes no sense to distinguish between men's and women's genitalia themselves; rather, it is location that distinguishes between penis and vulva.<sup>26</sup>

Heterosexuality constitutes the normative sexual activity in the community and, indeed, I was unable to obtain any information about homosexual practices during my time there. In line with the stress on sameness, sexual intercourse between a man and a woman in Gerai is understood as an equal coming together of fluids, pleasures, and life forces. The same stress also underlies beliefs about conception. Gerai people believe that repeated acts of intercourse between the same two people are necessary for conception, since this "prepares" the womb for pregnancy. The fetus is deemed to be created through the mingling of equal quantities of fluids and forces from both partners. Again, what is seen as important here is not the fusion of two different types of bodies (male and female) as in Western understandings; rather, Gerai people say, it is the similarity of the two bodies that allows procreation to occur. As someone put it to me bluntly: "If they were not the same, how could the fluids blend? It's like coconut oil and water: they can't mix!"

<sup>25</sup> I have noted elsewhere that the inside-outside distinction is a central one within this culture (Helliwell 1996).

<sup>26</sup> While the Gerai stress on the sameness of men's and women's sexual organs seems, on the face of it, to be very similar to the situation in Renaissance Europe as described by Laqueur 1990, it is profoundly different in at least one respect: in Gerai, women's organs are not seen as emasculated versions of men's—"female penises"—as they were in Renaissance Europe. This is clearly linked to the fact that, in Gerai, as we have already seen, *people* is not synonymous with *men*, and women are not relegated to positions of emasculation or abjection, as was the case in Renaissance Europe.

What needs to be stressed here is that both sexual intercourse and conception are viewed as involving a mingling of similar bodily fluids, forces, and so on, rather than as the penetration of one body by another with a parallel propulsion of substances from one (male) body only into the other, very different (female) one. Nor is there anything in Gerai understandings that equates with the Western notion of conception as involving an aggressive active male cell (the sperm) seeking out and penetrating a passive, immobile female cell (the egg) (Martin 1991). What Gerai accounts of both sexual intercourse and conception stress are tropes of identity, mingling, balance, and reciprocity. In this context it is worth noting that many Gerai people were puzzled by the idea of gender-specific “medicine” to prevent contraception—such as the injectable or oral contraceptives promoted by state-run health clinics in the area. Many believed that, because both partners play the same role in conception, it should not matter whether husband or wife received such medicine (and indeed, I knew of cases where husbands had taken oral contraceptives meant for their wives). This suggests that such contraceptive regimes also serve (like the practice of rape) to reinscribe sex difference between men and women (see also Tsing 1993, 104–20).

When I asked why, if conception is predicated on the mingling of two similar bodies, two men or two women could not also come together to create a child, the response was that a man and a woman “fit” with one another (*sedang*). But while there is some sense of physical compatibility being suggested here, Gerai people were adamant that what is more important in constituting “fit” is the role of each individual’s “life force” (*semongan*) and its intimate connection to particular forms of work. The *semongan* is the spiritual essence or force that animates the person, that gives the person his or her individual life. Without his or her *semongan*, a human being cannot live (this is true of all other elements in the universe as well), and thus when a person dies, the *semongan* is understood to have left the body and journeyed away. In turn, an individual’s *semongan* is centrally linked to the kind of work he or she routinely performs—particularly during the rice-cultivation cycle, which is understood as the source of life itself in Gerai.

While Gerai people stress sameness over difference between men and women, they do, nevertheless, see them as being different in one important respect: their life forces are, they say, oriented differently (“they face different ways,” it was explained to me). This different orientation means that women are “better” at certain kinds of work and men are “better” at other kinds of work—particularly with respect to rice-field work. Gerai people conceive of the work of clearing large trees for a new rice field as

the definitive man's work and regard the work of selecting and storing the rice seed for the following year's planting — which is correlated in fundamental ways with the process of giving birth — as the definitive woman's work. Because women are perceived to lack appropriate skills with respect to the first, and men are perceived to lack appropriate skills with respect to the second, Gerai people say that to be viable a household must contain both adult males and adult females. And since a "comfortable life" is marked by success in production not only of rice but also of children, the truly viable household must contain at least one conjugal pair. The work of both husband and wife is seen as necessary for the adequate nurturance of the child and successful rearing to adulthood (both of which depend on the successful cultivation of rice). Two women or two men would not be able to provide adequately for a child since they would not be able to produce consistently successful rice harvests; while such a household might be able to select seed, clear a rice field, and so grow rice in some rudimentary fashion, its lack of expertise at one of these tasks would render it perennially poor and its children perennially unhealthy, Gerai people say. For this reason, households with adults of only one gender are greatly pitied by Gerai people, and single parents seek to marry or remarry as quickly as they can. It is the mingling of the respective life forces of a man and a woman, then — linked, as they are, to the work skills of each — that primarily enables conception. It is this, Gerai people say, that allows the child's *semongan*' to come into being. Mingling of the parental bodily fluids, in turn, creates the child's bodily substance, but this substance must be animated in some prior sense by a life force, or the child will die.

Gender difference in Gerai, then, is not predicated on the character of one's body, and especially of one's genitalia, as in many Western contexts. Rather, it is understood as constituted in the differential capacity to perform certain kinds of work, a capacity assigned long before one's bodily being takes shape.<sup>27</sup> In this respect it is important to note that Gerai ontology rests on a belief in predestination, in things being as they should (see Helliwell 1995). In this understanding, any individual's *semongan*' is linked in multifarious and unknowable ways to the cosmic order, to the "life" of the universe as a whole. Thus the new fetus is predestined to become someone "fitted" to carry out either men's work or women's work as part of the maintenance of a universal balance. Bodies with the appropriate characteristics — internal or external genitalia, presence or absence of breasts, and so

<sup>27</sup> In this respect Gerai is similar to a number of other peoples in this region (e.g., Wana, Ilongot), for whom difference between men and women is also seen as primarily a matter of the different kinds of work that each performs.

on—then develop in line with this prior destiny. At first sight this may not seem enormously different from Western conceptions of gender, but the difference is in fact profound. While, for Westerners, genitalia, as significant of one's role in the procreative process, are absolutely fundamental in determining one's identity, in Gerai the work that one performs is seen as fundamental, and genitalia, along with other bodily characteristics, are relegated to a kind of secondary, derivative function.

Gerai understandings of gender were made quite clear through circumstances surrounding my own gender classification while in the community. Gerai people remained very uncertain about my gender for some time after I arrived in the community because (as they later told me) "I did not . . . walk like a woman, with arms held out from the body and hips slightly swaying; I was "brave," trekking from village to village through the jungle on my own; I had bony kneecaps; I did not know how to tie a sarong in the appropriate way for women; I could not distinguish different varieties of rice from one another; I did not wear earrings; I had short hair; I was tall" (Helliwell 1993, 260). This was despite the fact that people in the community knew from my first few days with them both that I had breasts (this was obvious when the sarong that I wore clung to my body while I bathed in the river) and that I had a vulva rather than a penis and testicles (this was obvious from my trips to defecate or urinate in the small stream used for that purpose, when literally dozens of people would line the banks to observe whether I performed these functions differently from them). As someone said to me at a later point, "Yes, I saw that you had a vulva, but I thought that Western men might be different."

My eventual, more definitive classification as a woman occurred largely fortuitously. My initial research proposal focused on the creation of subjectivity and sociality through work and, accordingly, as soon as I arrived in the community, I began accompanying people to work in the rice fields. Once I had negotiated a longhouse apartment of my own in which to live (several weeks after arrival), I also found myself, in concert with all other households in the community, preparing and cooking rice at least twice daily. These activities rapidly led to a quest for information concerning rice itself, particularly concerning the different strains, how they are cultivated, and what they are used for. As I learned to distinguish types of rice and their uses, I became more and more of a woman (as I realized later), since this knowledge—including the magic that goes with it—is understood by Gerai people as foundational to femininity. However, while people eventually took to referring to me as a woman, for many in the community my gender identity remained deeply ambiguous, partly because so many of my characteristics and behaviors were more like those of a man than a woman,

but also, and more importantly, because I never achieved anything approaching the level of knowledge concerning rice-seed selection held by even a girl child in Gerai.

In fact, Gerai people talk of two kinds of work as defining a woman: the selection and storage of rice seed and the bearing of children.<sup>28</sup> But the first of these is viewed as prior, logically as well as chronologically. People are quite clear that in the womb either “someone who can cut down the large trees for a ricefield is made, or someone who can select and store rice.” When I asked if it was not more important whether or not someone could bear a child, it was pointed out to me that many women do not bear children (there is a high rate of infertility in the community), but all women have the knowledge to select and store rice seed. In fact, at the level of the rice group the two activities of “growing” rice and “growing” children are inseparable: a rice group produces rice in order to raise healthy children, and it produces children so that they can in turn produce the rice that will sustain the group once their parents are old and frail (Helliwell, forthcoming). For this reason, any Gerai couple unable to give birth to a child of their own will adopt one, usually from a group related by kinship. The two activities of growing rice and growing children are constantly talked about together, and the same imagery is used to describe the development of a woman’s pregnancy and the development of rice grains on the plant. Indeed, the process of pregnancy and birth is seen as intimately connected to the process of rice selection and storage. As one woman explained to me, “It is because we know how to hold the seed in the storage baskets that we are able to hold it in our wombs.” But just as the cultivation of rice is seen as in some sense prior to the cultivation of children, so it is said that “knowledge about childbirth comes from knowledge about rice seed.”

Gerai, then, lacks the stress on bodily—and especially genital—dimorphism that most feminist accounts of rape assume. Indeed, the reproductive organs themselves are not seen as “sexed.” In a sense it is problematic even to use the English categories *woman* and *man* when writing of this community, since these terms are saturated with assumptions concerning the priority of biological (read, bodily) difference. In the Gerai context, it would be more accurate to deal with the categories of, on the one hand, “those responsible for rice selection and storage” and, on the other, “those responsible for cutting down the large trees to make a ricefield.” There is no discursive space in Gerai for the distinction between an active, aggressive,

<sup>28</sup> In Gerai, pregnancy and birth are seen not as semimystical “natural” processes, as they are for many Westerners, but simply as forms of work, linked very closely to the work of rice production.

penetrating male sexual organ (and sexuality) and a passive, vulnerable, female one. Indeed, sexual intercourse in Gerai is understood by both men and women to stem from mutual “need” on the part of the two partners; without such need, people say, sexual intercourse cannot occur, because the requisite balance is lacking. Since, as I have described at length elsewhere (Helliwell, forthcoming), a relationship of “needing” is always reciprocal (it is almost inconceivable, in Gerai terms, to need someone who does not need you in return, and the consequences of unreciprocated needing are dire for both individual and rice group), the sexual act is understood as preeminently mutual in its character, including in its initiation. The idea of having sex with someone who does not need you to have sex with them—and so the idea of coercing someone into sex—is thus almost unthinkable to Gerai people. In addition, informants asserted that any such action would destroy the individual’s spiritual balance and that of his or her rice group and bring calamity to the group as a whole.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, a Gerai man’s astonished and horrified question “How can a penis be taken into a vagina if a woman doesn’t want it?” has a meaning very different from that of the same statement uttered by a man in the West. In the West, notions of radical difference between men and women—incorporating representations of normative male sexuality as active and aggressive, normative female sexuality as passive and vulnerable, and human relationships (including acts of sexual intercourse) as occurring between independent, potentially hostile, agents—would render such a statement at best naive, at worst misogynist. In Gerai, however, the stress on identity between men and women and on the sexual act as predicated on mutuality validates such a statement as one of straightforward incomprehension (and it should be noted that I heard similar statements from women). In the Gerai context, the penis, or male genitalia in general, is not admired, feared, or envied, nor is the phallus a central signifier in the way postulated by Lacanians. In fact, Gerai people see men’s sexual organs as more vulnerable than women’s for the simple reason that they are outside the body, while women’s are inside. This reflects Gerai understandings of “inside” as representing safety and belonging, while “outside” is a place of strangers and danger, and it is linked to the notion of men as braver than women.<sup>30</sup> In addition, Gerai people say, because the penis is “taken

<sup>29</sup> Sanday 1986 makes a similar point about the absence of rape among the Minangkabau. See Helliwell (forthcoming) for a discussion of the different kinds of bad fate that can afflict a group through the actions of its individual members.

<sup>30</sup> In Gerai, as in nearby Minangkabau (Sanday 1986), vulnerability is respected and valued rather than despised.

into" another body, it is theoretically at greater risk during the sexual act than the vagina. This contrasts, again, quite markedly with Western understandings, where women's sexual organs are constantly depicted as more vulnerable during the sexual act — as liable to be hurt, despoiled, and so on (some men's anxieties about *vagina dentata* notwithstanding). In Gerai a penis is "only a penis": neither a marker of dimorphism between men and women in general nor, in its essence, any different from a vagina.

### Conclusions

The Gerai case suggests that, in some contexts at least, the practice of rape is linked to sexual dimorphism and, indeed, that in these contexts discourses of rape (including the act of rape itself) reinscribe such dimorphism. While the normative sexual practice in Gerai is heterosexual (between men and women), it is not accompanied by a heterosexual regulatory regime in the sense meant by Foucault (1978) in his discussion of the creation of sex as part of the heterosexualization of desire in the West, nor is it part of what Butler terms "the heterosexual matrix" (Butler 1990, 1993). The notion of "heterosexualization" as used by these thinkers refers to far more than the simple establishment of sexual relations between men and women as the normative ideal; it denotes the entire governmental regime that accompanies this normative ideal in Western contexts. Gerai stresses sameness between men and women more than difference, and such difference as occurs is based on the kinds of work people perform. Although this process certainly naturalizes a division between certain kinds of tasks — and the capacity to perform those tasks effectively — clearly, it does not involve sex or sexed bodies in the way Westerners normally understand those terms — as a naturalized difference between bodies (located primarily in the genitals) that translates into two profoundly different types of person. In this context, sexual assault by a man on a woman is almost unthinkable (both by women and by men).

With this background, I return now to the case with which I began this article — and, particularly, to the great differences between my response to this case and that of the Gerai woman concerned. On the basis of my own cultural assumptions concerning the differences — and particularly the different sexual characters — of men and women, I am inclined (as this case showed me) to read any attempt by a man to climb into a woman's bed in the night without her explicit consent as necessarily carrying the threat of sexual coercion and brutalization. This constant threat has been inscribed onto my body as part of the Western cultural process whereby I was

“girded” (to use Butler’s felicitous term [1993, 7]), or created as a gendered being in a context where male and female sexualities are perceived as penetrative and aggressive and as vulnerable and self-protective, respectively. The Gerai woman, in contrast, has no fear of coerced sexual intercourse when awakened in the dark by a man. She has no such fear because in the Gerai context “girling” involves the inscription of sexual sameness, of a belief that women’s sexuality and bodies are no less aggressive and no more vulnerable than men’s.

In fact, in the case in question, the intruding man did expect to have intercourse with the woman.<sup>31</sup> He claimed that the woman had already agreed to this through her acceptance of his initiatory gifts of soap.<sup>32</sup> The woman, however, while privately agreeing that she had accepted such gifts, claimed that no formal agreement had yet been reached. Her anger, then, did not stem from any belief that the man had attempted to sexually coerce her (“How would he be able to do such a thing?”). Because the term “to be quiet” is often used as a euphemism for sexual intercourse in Gerai, she saw the man’s exhortation that she “be quiet” as simply an invitation to engage in sex with him, rather than the implicit threat that I read it to be.<sup>33</sup> Instead, her anger stemmed from her conviction that the correct protocols had not been followed, that the man ought to have spoken with

<sup>31</sup> The man left the community on the night that this event occurred and went to stay for several months at a nearby timber camp. Community consensus—including the view of the woman concerned—was that he left because he was ashamed and distressed, not only as a result of having been sexually rejected by someone with whom he thought he had established a relationship but also because his adulterous behavior had become public, and he wished to avoid an airing of the details in a community moot. Consequently, I was unable to speak to him about the case. However, I did speak to several of his close male kin (including his married son), who put his point of view to me.

<sup>32</sup> The woman in this particular case was considerably younger than the man (in fact, a member of the next generation). In such cases of considerable age disparity between sexual partners, the older partner (whether male or female) is expected to pay a fine in the form of small gifts to the younger partner, both to initiate the liaison and to enable its continuance. Such a fine rectifies any spiritual imbalance that may result from the age imbalance and hence makes it safe for the relationship to proceed. Contrary to standard Western assumptions, older women appear to pay such fines to younger men as often as older men pay them to younger women (although it was very difficult to obtain reliable data on this question, since most such liaisons are adulterous and therefore highly secretive). While not significant in terms of value (women usually receive such things as soap and shampoo, while men receive tobacco or cigarettes), these gifts are crucial in their role of “rebalancing” the relationship. It would be entirely erroneous to subsume this practice under the rubric of “prostitution.”

<sup>33</sup> Because Gerai adults usually sleep surrounded by their children, and with other adults less than a meter or two away (although the latter are usually inside different mosquito nets), sexual intercourse is almost always carried out very quietly.

her rather than taking her acceptance of the soap as an unequivocal expression of assent. She was, as she put it, letting him know that “you have sexual relations together when you talk together. Sexual relations cannot be quiet.”<sup>34</sup>

Yet, this should not be taken to mean that the practice of rape is simply a product of discourse: that brutality toward women is restricted to societies containing particular, dimorphic representations of male and female sexuality and that we simply need to change the discourse in order to eradicate such practices.<sup>35</sup> Nor is it to suggest that a society in which rape is unthinkable is for that reason to be preferred to Western societies. To adopt such a position would be still to view the entire world through a sexualized Western lens. There are, in fact, horrific things that may be done to women in places such as Gerai—things that are no less appalling in their implications for the fact that they do not involve the sexualized brutality of rape. In Gerai, for instance, while a woman does not fear rape, she does fear an enemy’s bewitchment of her rice seed (the core of her gendered identity in this context) and the subsequent failure of the seed to sprout, resulting in hunger and illness for herself and her rice group. In extreme cases, bewitchment of rice seed can lead to malignancy of the growing fetus inside the woman; her subsequent death in childbirth, killed by her own “seed”; and her resultant transformation into a particularly vile kind of demon. Gerai women live constantly with the fear of this bewitchment (much as Western women live with the fear of rape), and even talking of it (always in whispers) reduces them to a state of terror.<sup>36</sup> The fact that this kind of attack can be carried out on a woman by either a woman or a man, and that it strikes not at her alone but at her rice group as a whole, marks it as belonging to a very different gendering regime from that which operates in the West. But it is no less horrific in its implications for that.

In order to understand the practice of rape in countries like Australia

<sup>34</sup> In claiming that “sexual relations cannot be quiet,” the woman was playing on the expression “be quiet” (meaning to have sexual intercourse) to make the point that while adulterous sex may need to be even “quieter” than legitimate sex, it should not be so “quiet” as to preclude dialogue between the two partners. Implicit here is the notion that in the absence of such dialogue, sex will lack the requisite mutuality.

<sup>35</sup> Foucault, e.g., once suggested (in a debate in French reprinted in *La Folie Encerclée* [see Plaza 1980]) that an effective way to deal with rape would be to decriminalize it in order to “desexualize” it. For feminist critiques of his suggestion, see Plaza 1980; de Lauretis 1987; Woodhull 1988.

<sup>36</sup> Men fear a parallel form of bewitchment that causes death while engaged in the definitive “men’s work” of cutting down large trees to make a rice field. Like women’s death in childbirth, this is referred to as an “evil death” (*mati jat*) and is believed to involve the transformation of the man into an evil spirit.

and the United States, then—and so to work effectively for its eradication there—feminists in these countries must begin to relinquish some of our most ingrained presumptions concerning difference between men and women and, particularly, concerning men’s genitalia and sexuality as inherently brutalizing and penetrative and women’s genitalia and sexuality as inherently vulnerable and subject to brutalization. Instead, we must begin to explore the ways rape itself *produces* such experiences of masculinity and femininity and so inscribes sexual difference onto our bodies. In a recent article, Moira Gatens asks of other feminists, “Why concede to the penis the power to push us around, destroy our integrity, ‘scribble on us,’ invade our borders and boundaries, and . . . occupy us in our (always already) conquered ‘privacy?’” (1996, 43). This article echoes her lament. The tendency among many Western feminists writing on rape to accept as a seeming fact of nature the normative Western iconography of sexual difference leads them to reproduce (albeit unwittingly) the very discursive framework of Western rapists themselves, with their talk of “tools” and “holes,” the very discursive framework in which rape is possible and which it reinscribes. For rape imposes difference as much as it is produced by difference. In fact, the highly racialized character of rape in many Western contexts suggests that the practice serves to police not simply sexual boundaries but racial ones as well. This is hardly surprising, given the history of the present “heterosexual matrix” in the West: as Stoler (1989, 1995) has demonstrated, the process of heterosexualization went hand-in-hand with that of colonialism. As a result, in contemporary Western settings sexual othering is inextricably entangled with racial othering. Unfortunately, in universalizing rape, many Western feminists risk naturalizing these othering processes and so contributing to a perpetuation of the very practices they seek to eradicate.

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