

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Sabine Sielke: Reading Rape

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2002, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

For COURSE PACK and other PERMISSIONS, refer to entry on previous page. For more information, send e-mail to permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

INTRODUCTION



What We Talk about When We Talk about Rape

READING RAPE is an exploration of representations of rape, of what I have come to call the *rhetoric of rape*, not an analysis of rape as a social fact. Since I do hold, though, that we experience the real by way of its various representations, I want to begin by calling back to mind a prominent case of “real rape.”¹ On April 20, 1989, a twenty-nine-year-old white female jogger—an investment banker, as it turned out, at Salomon Brothers in downtown Manhattan—was found in Central Park, near 102d Street, her clothes torn, her skull crushed, her left eyeball pushed back through its socket, the characteristic surface wrinkles of her brain flattened, her blood reduced by 75 percent, her vagina filled with dirt and twigs: the victim of a beating and gang rape of utmost brutality by six black and Hispanic teenagers. Crucial in this context is not the incident itself. There were thousands of rapes reported that year, some of which lacked nothing in brutality, including one, a week later, “involving the near decapitation of a black woman in Fort Tryon Park” (Didion 255).² What’s more: the sociology of real rape is not my trade. Instead, what is significant for me about the Central Park case is the prominence to which it advanced and the discourse it generated, a rhetoric aptly exemplified by news headlines such as “The Jogger and the Wolf Pack” or “Central Park Horror” (qtd. in Didion 255).

“[C]rimes are universally understood to be news,” Joan Didion writes in “Sentimental Journeys,” her brilliant reading of the case, “to the extent that they offer, however erroneously, a story, a lesson, a high concept” (255–56). The story offered by the Jogger Rape Case is an old and well-established one: rape, we are assured, is an encounter of total strangers in public parks. Accordingly, media coverage did not center upon the (gender) issues involved in the sexual violation but, as Didion emphasizes, interpreted the case as a conflict between two parties clearly distinguished by race, ethnicity, and class: on the one hand, whites, affluent enough to keep the city’s realities at a safe distance, to whom the violation of the young urban professional signified the loss of sacrosanct territory; on the other, African Americans who considered the treatment of the violators as yet another lynching campaign, a kind of rape. The discursive scene of the crime thus draws upon a whole cultural register generated in the course of late-nineteenth-century interracial conflicts and national identity formation. Specifically, it invokes what W. J. Cash in the early 1940s labeled the “Southern rape complex,”³ according to which the presumed sexual

violation of white beauty by black beast figured the “rape” of the South during Reconstruction and legitimized retaliation through lynch violence. At the same time, this complex inflicted a fear of rape that, like the threat of lynching, kept a subordinate group—women just in the process of fighting for suffrage—subjugated (Hall, *Revolt* 153). Cited and recontextualized one century later, this register’s rhetoric frames present conflicts by past interpretations and reinforces “solutions” such as segregation. More than that: since the metonymic drift of the paradigm of rape and lynching, as I will show, has dominated the discourse on sexual violation at and of the borders of race, class, and ethnicity, the “objects” of such violations are left behind in the debris of displacement.

What I mean to suggest by this introductory excursus is that talk about rape does not necessarily denote rape, just as talk about love hardly ever hits its target.⁴ Instead, transposed into discourse, rape turns into a rhetorical device, an insistent figure for other social, political, and economic concerns and conflicts. Fictions of rape belong with the allegorical master narratives Fredric Jameson considers “a persistent dimension of literary and cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension about our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality” (*Political Unconscious* 34). Accordingly, it does not suffice to capitalize on rape, as Leslie Fiedler does, as “an image of true archetypal resonance” (“Pop” 91) or to characterize the “symbolic” dimension of (female) rape fantasies, as does Molly Haskell, as “archetypal rather than individual” (“Rape Fantasy” 92), thereby dehistoricizing rape. Instead, I want to insist that talk about rape has its history, its ideology, and its dominant narratives—narratives that, as I argue, are nationally specific, even if they rely on widely established textual predecessors (such as myths) and patterns (such as the “othering” of sexual violence).

In the United States—as anywhere else—these narratives are inextricably intertwined with constructions of sexuality and gender. In fact, as I show in chapter 1, the very discourses that establish gender differences as differences in sexuality also construct female sexuality as victimization. At the same time American rape narratives are overdetermined by a distinct history of racial conflict and a discourse on race that itself tends to overdetermine issues of class.⁵ The “southern obsession with rape,” for that matter, “touched a responsive chord in the nation at large,” as Jacqueline Dowd Hall writes, “rooted” as it was “in the deepest of American communal preoccupations: the conflict between ‘civilization’ and ‘savagery,’ historically acted out in the destruction of the Indians and the subjugation of African slaves” (*Revolt* 147). Therefore just as sexuality is not, as Michel Foucault has argued, a stubborn drive but a dense transfer point for relations of power, narratives of sexual violence ponder not an alien and uncontrollable part of human nature but the power dynamics of a particular culture.

As a consequence, rape narratives relate to real rape incidents in highly mediated ways only. They are first and foremost interpretations, readings of

rape that, as they seem to make sense of socially deviant behavior, oftentimes limit our understanding of sexual violence while producing norms of sexuality in the process. As they have evolved in historically specific contexts, these narratives moreover interrelate with, produce, and subsequently reproduce a cultural symbology that employs sexual deviance for the formation of cultural identities—identities that, figured by way of the sexual, do have a particular resilience. In this way, sexual violence, bodies in pain, and the “unmaking” of worlds, as Elaine Scarry has it, have participated in the making of a world that tends to care little about violated bodies.

Analyzing paradigmatic representations and functions of rape in both canonical and lesser-known American literary texts from the late eighteenth to the late twentieth century, I trace a history of the rhetoric of rape. Consequently, at stake throughout *Reading Rape* is not the question of how literature “respond[s]” to or “record[s]” “a particular historical issue,” this being the question that drives Sandra Gunning’s study *Race, Rape, and Lynching*, for instance (16). Such an approach may “correspond” to the declared function of realist literature yet falters when faced with modernist texts that refigure rape as an inherent systemic violence of cultural sign systems. More significant, though, literature does not *express* its historical conditions; it rather transforms, as Louis Althusser has it, a “determinate given raw material into a determinate product” (qtd. in Storey 111). The determinate given raw material of rape narratives, though, is not necessarily rape. Therefore I attempt to make visible the contexts *within* the texts and to show how our very sense of any historical issue is inseparable from its various cultural representations, representations that are themselves driven by cultural anxieties and desires. My aim is to decipher the ways and the contexts in which American culture talks about rape, what cultural work that rhetoric has been able to achieve over the last two centuries, why some of its lines have come to be dominant, “inescapable” even,⁶ and why rape has gained so much prominence as a figure of power relations in the second half of the twentieth century. Since texts mean just as much by what they leave unsaid as by what they say, by what is absent as by what is present, those texts that explicitly employ rape in turn raise questions about their silences, their absent centers, about what they chose to obscure.

Obviously, my subject was generated by feminist criticism that, during the last three decades, has deployed the term “rape.” At the same time my perspective diverges from and takes issue with feminist antirape discourse, which, as I show, is itself a product of the history I delineate. Feminism of the Dworkin/MacKinnon kind has not only identified all heterosexuality as rape and turned rape into “*the* master metaphor, for defining the violation of woman by patriarchy” (Warren Warner 13). So-called radical feminism also labels the United States a “rape culture”⁷ and thus misleadingly suggests that rape occurs more frequently in a culture that talks about rape excessively than in one that denies its existence. To my mind, though, the term “rape culture” says more about

the prominent status of rape as a central trope within the American cultural imaginary than about the state of real rape. What is more, in its attempt to break the silence on sexual violence, the (feminist) deployment of rape has nurtured its own silences that are as meaningful as the silences with which dominant culture has veiled sexual violence.

In addition, unlike contemporary rape narratives, which are highly self-reflexive, feminist antirape discourse remains quite unconcerned about how it is itself inflected by established representations of rape, about how much its conceptions of sexuality and sexual violence result from and further reinforce and nourish dominant fictions. Convinced that the erasure of evil images leads to a decrease of evil acts, radical feminism displays both a debatable notion of signification and a lack of self-knowledge. By appropriating what I describe as the antebellum precursors to a rhetoric of rape, recent rape-crisis discourse⁸ has revitalized nineteenth-century notions of female sexuality and gender. In this way the anti-rape movement, as Katie Roiphe puts it, has moved to “the front lines of sexual regulation” (*Morning After* 171), bemoaning a crisis that “is not a rape crisis, but a crisis in sexual identity” (27).

Instead of reproducing a rhetoric of victimization, my own agenda is thus to recontextualize and challenge readings of rape, paying close attention to the relation between rape and representation, to an economy wherein “*rape and its meaning*,” as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick trenchantly puts it, “*circulate in precisely opposite directions*” (*Between Men* 10). In contrast to rape-crisis discourse—which, for the sake of its political agenda, realigns explicit, (porno)graphic representations of rape with acts of real rape—theorists of narrative and visual poetics acknowledge that rape in many ways resists representation. Mieke Bal, for instance, insists that rape

cannot be visualized not only because “decent” culture would not tolerate such representations of the “act” but because rape makes the victim invisible. It does that literally first—the perpetrator “covers” her—and then figuratively—the rape destroys her self-image, her subjectivity, which is temporarily narcotized, definitely changed and often destroyed. Finally, rape cannot be visualized because the experience is, physically, as well as psychologically, *inner*. Rape takes place inside. In this sense, rape is by definition imagined; it can exist only as experience and as memory, as *image* translated into signs, never adequately “objectifiable.” (“Reading” 142)⁹

Presuming with Bal that central aspects of rape—such as physical pain and psychic violation—escape representation, yet that rape can be communicated as text only, I argue that the central paradigm of a rhetoric of rape is not simply one of rape and silencing, as feminist criticism suggests, insinuating that this silence can be broken, that we can and should read the violence back into the texts. Since silences themselves generate speech, the central paradigm

is rather that of rape, silence, and refiguration. If our readings focus on refigurations of rape as well as on rape as refiguration, we acknowledge that texts do not simply reflect but rather stage and dramatize the historical contradictions by which they are overdetermined. At best, readings of rape therefore reveal not merely the latent text in what is manifest, explicit, and thus produce a text's self-knowledge; they will also evolve a new knowledge pertaining to the ideological necessities of a text's silences and deletions.¹⁰

Refiguration works by way of displacement and substitution. In metonymy such substitution is based on relation, association, or contiguity that forms syntactical connections along horizontal, temporal lines and has therefore been associated with realism. Metaphor, by contrast, substitutes on the basis of resemblance or analogy, and creates semantic, spatial links along a paradigmatic, vertical line, often suggesting (poetic) truth-value. Owing to these asymmetrical, hierarchical, complementary rather than exclusory rhetorical processes at work (Barbara Johnson, *World* 155), readings of rape cannot be reduced to the study of a motif. Nor would it suffice to recover "the unspeakable aspects of the experience of rape" (Bal, "Reading" 137) by foregrounding the "violence of representation" (Armstrong and Tennenhouse), and thus reinstalling on the level of rhetoric the violence choked by the story line. Such practice could be applied to any text; it evolves systemic violence yet tends to ignore the particular cultural functions and the historically specific meanings texts assign to sexuality and sexual violence. Reading rape figuratively, as a rhetoric, I follow the symbolic traces of violation instead, exploring its business within the structure of particular literary texts and larger cultural narratives as well as within the construction of individual and communal identities.

Such correspondences between aesthetics and politics can be probed because literary texts and the formation of cultural identities involve similar processes of refiguration. Like metaphors, identities are structured against difference (of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and age, for instance) and "directed toward the gradual overcoming of difference by identity" (Lloyd 257). Yet even if identity subordinates difference to the demands of likeness, "[t]o see the like," Paul Ricoeur argues, "is to see the same in spite of, and through, the different." The "logical structure of likeness" is consequently characterized by a "tension between sameness and difference" (qtd. in Lloyd 256), and constructions of identity require both the assignment and the subordination of difference. The rhetoric of rape is one of many discourses by which such differences are being ascribed, victims and violators othered, set off, while the subject who assigns difference remains unmarked and unlimited in his or her possibilities.¹¹

The structural likeness of processes of identity formation and refiguration makes the analysis of literary texts particularly productive in this context. Literary texts translate pain into art, transform the unspeakable into figures of speech whose structure and function both disfigure and bespeak their cultural

work. They tell stories and translate tales of violation into nationally specific cultural symbolologies and conclusive narratives. As such, they both form and interfere with the cultural imaginary. Like news about crimes, they may even offer a lesson, some high concept. Why, however, should literary discourse be the privileged medium for an analysis of the rhetoric of sexual violence—apart from the fact that literary criticism *is* my trade? Literature is central here not so much because, unlike the discourses of the social and natural sciences, it has allowed marginal voices to enter into the conversation on gender, race, and sexuality at an earlier time. Literature may have accommodated “other” perspectives, but their otherness has nonetheless been channeled and limited by the institutional frames in which they appeared. Likewise we no longer share the (formalist) faith in the powers of fiction and its particular aesthetics to represent and level conflicting cultural forces, or assume that literary texts are generically more “telling” than other discourses and thus manage to subvert and crumble cultural hegemonies. In fact, antebellum American literature, for instance, was subjected to generic constraints that tended to reduce rather than expand its thematic range, if compared with other cultural discourse of the time.

I do hold, however, that the analysis of literary texts is particularly revealing for a study focused on the rhetoric of rape, because, on the one hand, (some) literary texts conclusively narrativize and, by way of dispelling contradictions, manage to “naturalize” sexual violence into seemingly consensual views on gender, sexuality, and the world at large. In this way, I hold that—taking my clue from Althusser again—literary (rape) narratives both give answers to the questions they pose and produce “deformed” answers to the historical questions they steer away from. Reading rape thus also involves deciphering “the ‘symptoms’ of a problem struggling to be posed” (Storey 113), such as the problem of sexuality and race, for instance. At the same time, fictional texts, and modernist and post-modernist texts¹² in particular, by way of an insistent intertextuality foreground the historicity of their (rape) rhetoric and thus the constraints as well as the possibilities of the meanings they assign to sexual violence. Echoing and playing upon their literary forerunners, they refigure, re-present, repoliticize, and thus reinterpret previous literary interrogations of rape and sexual violence, and in this way inscribe themselves into a tradition of readings of rape, a tradition they simultaneously remember and interfere with. At the same time we have to acknowledge that the questions we bring to our inquiries into literary texts—such as issues of rape and representation—are motivated, mediated, and framed by our present concerns about identity and difference. Accordingly, the texts, their textuality, temporality, and tradition tell us as much about themselves as about the ways in which we project our selves.

Taking off from the proliferating discourse on rape in contemporary American culture,¹³ *Reading Rape* thus attempts to describe *how American culture*

talks about sexual violence and, more important, *how it has learned to do so* in the course of the last two centuries. My argument follows the American rhetoric of rape through four distinct phases of literary history, stretching from its antebellum precursors (the novel of seduction and the slave narrative) across its postbellum “realist” versions (including realist and naturalist fiction as well as racist romances and their African American “counternarratives”) to modernist inquiries into rape and representation and their post-modernist refigurations. These phases can be separated, as I argue, by paradigm changes that, effected by political, economic, and cultural transformations, have also affected the function of fiction. I consequently use the terms of established literary history not to reaffirm its trajectory. Assembling rather diverse texts under rubrics such as “realist” or “modernist,” I acknowledge, on the one hand, what Ernst Bloch called the synchronicity of the nonsynchronic. On the other, I want to keep in mind that literary texts have at different times used different strategies to legitimize themselves.

As part of an ongoing transformation of the American symbolic system, the rhetoric of rape therefore allows us to reassess the changing function of fictional texts within this cultural development. Most important, though, my analyses of the literary aesthetics and politics of rape underline that the meanings culture assigns to sexual violence evolve from an interplay between constructions of cultural parameters of identity and difference (such as gender, race, and class) and their specific forms of representation. As a consequence, this interplay has generated ideas about gender, race, and class that keep monitoring our perception and interpretation of real rape. Throughout, *Reading Rape* in turn stages dialogues between fiction and its repercussions in radical feminism aimed at putting crucial feminist positions into perspective.

In part guided by the rhetorical drive of contemporary feminist antirape discourse, my readings begin, in chapter 1 (“Seduced and Enslaved: Sexual Violence in Antebellum Literature and Contemporary Feminist Discourse”), at the end of the enlightened eighteenth century. I chose the turn of the nineteenth century as my point of departure because it is a time of paradigmatic changes, changes effected by and themselves effecting new conceptions of race, sexuality, gender, and genre. The reason for addressing the novel of seduction and the slave narrative first is consequently not that this is where American literature begins; rather, this is where American literature begins to take on particular functions. With the emergence of the novel and (African American) autobiography, literary texts cease to be primarily a means of religious edification and self-inspection and come to mediate a cultural imaginary of a different kind.

According to Winfried Fluck such an imaginary is generally a set of meanings that a culture strives to articulate. The fund of images, affects, and desires generated in the process in turn stimulates the individual imagination anew,

thus driving a process of cultural symbology that continuously challenges our sense of reality. The narrative strategies of the early American novel, in particular, created comprehensive, conclusive, and effective illusions tied to constructions of individual and national identity. In this emergent cultural imaginary change was projected by way of the human body, which became a “figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements” (Spillers, “Mama’s Baby” 456). While the late-eighteenth- to mid-nineteenth-century textual precursors turned the (vulnerable) female body into a focal point of meaning production, late-nineteenth-century cultural discourse directed its attention toward the previously indistinct male body. The black body, in particular, became a crucial figure in processes of remasculinization and (national) identity formation during the transition of the American nation from Victorianism to modernism, processes that generated what I consider the dominant, overdetermining line within the American rhetoric of rape.

The very blanks and blind spots of antebellum fiction, pertaining particularly to the (black) male body and (white) female sexuality, thus prepared the ground for a “realist” literary discourse that established (black-on-white) rape and the specter of the rapist “other” as central tropes of cultural transformation. In chapter 2, “The Rise of the (Black) Rapist and the Reconstruction of Difference; or, ‘Realist’ Rape,” I trace this discourse in turn-of-the-century realist, naturalist, and sentimental narratives that echo, epitomize, or respond to the (racist and racializing) diction prevalent at a time when rape, as Frederick Douglass emphasized, turned into a national affair. Reading Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon in dialogue with Frank Norris, Frances E. W. Harper, Sutton E. Griggs, Upton Sinclair, Edith Wharton, and William Vaughn Moody, I show that this dominant rhetoric of rape is in fact the product of highly conflictual and stylistically varied discourses that conflate matters of race, class, and nationhood with issues of gender and sexuality.¹⁴

Partly owing to the overdetermining racial fracture of American culture and society, all the texts I discuss in chapter 3 employ the figure of the racialized “rapist” other and project sexual aggression and aggressive sexuality as interracial or interethnic encounters between different classes. Discriminating violator and victim on the basis of race, class, and ethnicity as well as gender, the “realist” rhetoric of rape thus constitutes a discourse of difference. Dramatizing crucial social, cultural, regional, and national conflicts, this discourse evolved fictions or “myths” about gender, race, and sexuality that have subsequently achieved truth-value and that keep informing feminist perspectives on sexual violence as well. At the same time the “rapist” rhetoric of turn-of-the-century literary texts exposes the anxieties informing processes of identity formation in a time of transition. Most particularly, the “realist” rhetoric of rape monitors reconstructions of gender and sexuality, the threat of which materializes in figures pertaining to the “crisis of homo/heterosexual definition”¹⁵ (as in Norris’s *McTeague* [1899] and Dixon’s *The*

Clansman [1905]) and to redefinitions of the gender divide (as in Page's *Red Rock* [1898], Wharton's *The House of Mirth* [1905], and Moody's *A Sabine Woman* [1906]).

The third chapter, entitled "Rape and the Artifice of Representation: Four Modernist Modes," shifts focus. Modernism translates the figure of rape from primarily cultural into predominantly textual categories, capitalizing on the very artifice of fictional representation that realism means to obscure. In the process modernist fiction diffuses the established meanings of rape to a certain degree and reveals their ideological subtexts without themselves subscribing to particular ideologies. Instead, their textual strategies ranging from ellipsis to mimicry target sexual violence from within its discursive modes. As modernist texts acknowledge rape as a figure and form of representation rather than an event, they also hint that the insights of narrative theory and visual poetics I started out from are themselves insights generated by modernism.

Owing to modernism's preoccupation with perception and process rather than history and cultural consensus, texts such as Djuna Barnes's *Ryder* (1928), William Faulkner's *Sanctuary* (1931), Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940), and Ann Petry's *The Street* (1946) no longer project rape as a figure of "othering," difference, and social boundaries. Instead, they turn sexual violence into a trope of transgression and border crossing that recognizes the disturbing proximity of figures and phenomena that "realist" rape narratives so obsessively separated—or segregated—from each other. This does not mean that differences dissolve. Rather, modernism questions realism's claims to authority and authenticity. Modernist rape narratives either playfully expose and mime their rhetorical tradition (as Barnes does), or (as does Faulkner) reassess the "realist" rape rhetoric by capitalizing on the representation of rape and blurring the borderlines that realism had managed to implement. As both texts insistently conflate rape and incest, they also dramatize the uncanny subtexts of that rhetoric. Owing to a difference in subject position that impacts on aesthetics, African American modernist fiction at the same time represents rape in its own ways. Wright's protagonist Bigger, so I argue, reenacts the racist/"rapist" projection and rebirths himself in an abortive act of modernist mimicry. Petry's first novel, by contrast, which daringly explores intraracial sexual violence, occupies an in-between position leaning toward post-modernist literary modes. As she challenges the modernist aestheticization of the sexual(ly violated) black female body and exposes the significance of the visual, the cinematic "real" for the late-twentieth-century American cultural imaginary, Petry evolves a black female subject in transition.

In the second half of the twentieth century, American fiction has subsequently retransformed modernist notions of rape and representation into cultural categories. As it projects the aesthetics of rape onto the level of content and theme, post-modernist writing tends to repoliticize and oftentimes literalize the trope of rape, in this way renegotiating the constructions of identity

and difference effected so “successfully” at the turn of the last century. At the same time—and this is crucial to the argument of my final chapter, “Voicing Sexual Violence, Repoliticizing Rape: Post-Modernist Narratives of Sexuality and Power”—post-modern fictions have retained modernist insights into textuality and the processes of meaning formation. In fact all post-modernist refigurings of rape, no matter whether they aspire to verisimilitude or radicalize modernist modes, display and play upon an awareness of their own essentially rhetorical character.

Post-modernist fiction thus only seems to be “about” sexual violence. More often than not, it is preoccupied with the cultural effects of the established rhetoric of rape, with the ways in which the rhetoric of sexual violence informs and structures our perspectives on real rape, and with how “rape myths” and rape as a social fact have become inseparably intertwined. These cultural effects frequently affect subjectivity: novels as incomparable as Chester Himes’s *A Case of Rape* (1963) and Lois Gould’s *A Sea Change* (1977), for instance, expose the impact of commonplace readings of rape on their protagonists’ sense of self. In this way, post-modernist texts dramatize the privileged relation of rape narratives to what Sedgwick calls “our most prized constructs of individual identity, truth, and knowledge” (*Epistemology* 3). They not only insist that, like the discourse of sexuality, the rhetoric of sexual violence has become “a very real historical formation” (Foucault 157). Post-modern fiction also recognizes that now that rape can be spoken, its cultural significance and function are being equivocated and displaced in turn. And while old silences may have been broken, new ones have taken shape in their stead. Rape and its meaning therefore keep circulating in opposite directions. It is no longer the representation of rape that gets displaced and diffused, though, but its signifying power. The ongoing significance of the literary predecessors to which post-modernist rape narratives attest at the same time underlines that, just as rape can exist as experience and memory only, the literary rhetoric of rape evolves in part as the memory of its own history of representation.

This brings me back to the case of real rape I started off with, and to one particular reading it has produced, Didion’s “Sentimental Journeys.” For just as the lynching-campaign interpretation produced by the African American “community” wrongly suggests that no rape has taken place, Didion’s own words (which I have appropriated in my introductory paragraph) re-present the jogger rape case as a kind of lynching. As Didion appropriates images and narratives of decapitation and castration replete with “skull[s] . . . crushed” and “eyeball[s] pushed back through [their] socket[s]” (254), her rhetoric acknowledges that some cultural narratives have indeed become inescapable. She moreover hints that the displacement of rape by lynching bespeaks male anxieties and fears of disempowerment more than it manifests male power.

Most significant, though, Didion's depiction attests to the fact that the rhetoric of rape conduces not to rape but to readings, interpretations, a cultural literacy concerning matters of rape. These readings in turn determine the signifying power of real rape. Accordingly, instead of either censoring or celebrating representations of sexual(ly violent) acts, as some feminist critics urge, I propose that challenging our ways of reading rape may be most productive.