

Imaging the Faulty Rape Victim

An Autoethnographic Viewing of *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol*

CHELSEA P. BARNETT

Le concept contraire à celui de Jane Doe de « l'ultime victime de viol » a incité l'auteure à évoquer son expérience personnelle ainsi qu'une vidéo produite et auto-publiée par l'artiste Emma Sulkowitz pour parler de sa survivance comme une détestable impasse. Sur le site web: « Ceci n'est pas un viol. » (2015).

I guess rupture would be one way to describe it. A memory. Of something that happened to me four years ago while I was home from university for the holidays. I didn't at first, but over time, I have come to define it as a rape. I never know quite how to begin, but many rape narratives I've read start with the date: January 1st, 2013. I was in the saddest period I'd ever experienced, because my first love had left me in this really terrible way. For some reason, that seems to be the beginning.

I'm wearing this outfit—a black bra under a sheer shirt—and I'm somewhat embarrassed when I run into a friend's mom on the way out for the night. I look slutty.

He's at the party. He knows everyone. He's very attractive. Thick jaw. It starts with an innocent flirtation amongst the swells of binge drinking. A while after the countdown (I don't think we kiss

at midnight, but I can't be sure), it's decided to go back to his place. There are no cabs on the hill; the buses have stopped running. I feel stuck because my lodging is back in town. He has a ski chalet. As we walk, I slip on the snow. More than once. Partially because my shoes have slick soles, but mostly because I've had too much champagne.

We go into this room and he kicks someone out. We start making out. Oh! An important detail is that on our walk I said, "I don't want to sleep with you." I mean, I needed to sleep with him but I didn't want to 'sleep' with him. He said: yeah yeah yeah. We're making out. He starts taking it a bit further; I start letting it go a bit further. He feels me up, and then tries a little more, and I say, "No, I don't want to sleep with you." We go back to making out. And this just happens over and over and over again.

I can feel his erection against me, and part of it's okay, even good. Part of it, though, not so much. He just asks so many times, and I was so drunk and tired that finally I was like: Fine, like, fine, let's have sex.

So, it was happening. And I'd said yes.

Trying to kind of get into it—because what else could I do?—I moaned or something. And then, I heard someone

mockingly moan back. There was someone else in the room. Someone has come in, and I thought: "What the fuck?!" And it snapped me out of it—and, like, I really feel like I didn't consent to having sex with this guy. But I guess I did say yes (he shouldn't have made me say yes). But I know I didn't consent to having someone watch. And I just felt so disgusting. And scared, really scared.

And it was kind of crazy, like the situation had been so bad. And then, I just got up, scrambled into some clothes, and walked away. I sat in the lobby of a random hotel on the hill until the sun was up and the buses were running again. And it was a paradox because I felt like no one had forced me to do anything.¹

In the opening passage of her germinal philosophical memoir on rape, Susan J. Brison explains that the survivor's experience is fraught with paradoxes, and that the trauma of rape causes reality to stop making sense. For Brison, one such paradox is the desire to blame herself for her attack:

I wished I could blame myself for what had happened so that I

would feel less vulnerable, more in control of my life. Those who haven't been sexually violated may have difficulty understanding why women who survive assault often blame themselves... They don't know that it can be less painful to believe that you did something blameworthy than it is to think that you live in a

such, the terms of access to socially recognizable survivorship are so horrific that they are akin to death itself.

There is great fear to call oneself a survivor if the *worst possible* abuse did not happen. Surely my rape was a rupture, but in Brison's sense, I am not sure if I ever quite died. Because I know that only the ultimate rape victim has a chance at justice, for a

By submitting to some form of myth—in my case: wearing a promiscuous outfit, intoxication, consenting to kissing in a shared bed, and even making a performative gesture of sexual consent in the coerced version of yes—the assaulted woman disappoints her socialized femininity, shifting from a “guilty pre-victim” ontology to a guilty post-victimhood

The socially accepted “ultimate rape victim” would prefer to be dead than defiled. This mythical expectation sets the standards that create the near unattainable conditions of culturally acknowledged survivorship, where the act must be very bad (violent, bloodied, forceful) and the victim very good (chaste, privileged, in the *right* place at the wrong time).

world where you can be attacked at any time, in any place, simply because you are a woman. (13)

Indeed, Brison is unencumbered by fault—the *ultimate rape victim*: she was wearing baggy jeans and a sweatshirt, on a hike in the daylight, sober, married, white, middle-class, bludgeoned from behind by a monstrous stranger, and left to die in a ravine. Coined by fellow rape memoirist Jane Doe,² the socially accepted “ultimate rape victim” would prefer to be dead than defiled. This mythical expectation sets the standards that create the near unattainable conditions of culturally acknowledged survivorship, where the act must be very bad (violent, bloodied, forceful) and the victim very good (chaste, privileged, in the *right* place at the wrong time). However, Brison proposes that those who experience the trauma of rape, do, in fact, die. By describing a phenomena she terms as “outliving oneself” (37)—that is, the feeling of self-annihilation that accompanied her rape—Brison argues that living beyond one's own rape is impossible; rape marks an irreparable rupture in the continuity of one's being. As

long time I felt as though to claim my rape as truth merely served to tarnish purportedly truer sexual assaults as defined by current categorical sanctions. I could not bring myself to dilute the potent atrocity needed for justice, as I was a *faulty rape victim*.

As a relational antonym to the ultimate rape victim, I propose the ‘faulty rape victim’ as one who experiences an assault that diverges in any way from the linear, scripted assumptions produced by rape mythologies. As feminist philosopher Ann J. Cahill bemoans, women are made “somehow accountable for [their] own vulnerability” (819). Accordingly, the socially produced feminine body:

...is the body of the *guilty* pre-victim. In the specific moments and movements of this body are written the defence of the sexual offender: she was somewhere she should not have been, moving her body in ways she should not have, carrying on in a manner so free and easy as to convey an utter abdication of her responsibilities of self-protection and self-surveillance. (821)

at the occurrence of rape. Had I been more attuned to a protective feminine comportment, had my guilt not been so legible in my actions, perhaps I could have been spared such a polite rape. Paradoxically, I covet a more murderous assault, one that would be recognized by the dominant symbolic order³—the hegemony that grants justice. Instead, in a feigned promise to absolve my guilt, I am rendered silent; I must deny that it was a rape at all.

Conversely, as the ultimate rape victim, Brison actually wished that she herself were culpable. Mythical thinking suggests that a mistake on her part could help restore the rationality of cause-and-effect to the assault that produced the eternal affront to her selfhood—her death that she outlived. If only Brison had done something wrong, she could comprehend her execution. Because Brison was still raped despite an embodied ideal of appropriate femininity, she could get justice, but at a cost: her rapist had left her (for) dead. Given the differing experiences of Brison and myself, neither ultimate nor faulty pre-victim rationales offer women respite from the actual experience of

rape. A loathsome double-bind of survivorship arises: death and justice, or life and silence.

As a member of the latter category—the silenced, faulty, guilty post-victim (a string of descriptors that feel much more relatable than the declaration of ‘survivor’)—I combed the cinematic for acknowledgement of what had happened to me, slowly

exact moment in which the transition to abuse occurs. Appearing in hetero-normative linearity, the kissing, undressing, and oral and vaginal sex appear mutual. Suddenly, a strike across the face seems more dubious, and finally, the choking, removal of the condom, and hostile anal penetration is met with Sulkowicz’s cries to stop, while her attacker forcibly

more likely to side with a perpetrator. Sulkowicz’s visual framing offers a cogent critique of the asymmetrical deployment of regulatory modes of control that produced the conditions by which women are expected to self-surveil, ultimately resulting in Sulkowicz’s mandate to share a campus with her rapist.

While the surveillance aesthetic

Universities have been proven to actively conceal occurrences of sexual assault on campus, which reasonably supports the claim that a university’s reputation will benefit from a lower number of proven cases of sexual assault because parents are hesitant to send their children to schools that admit to a known threat of violence.

uncovering solidarity in mediated, corporeal artistic presentations of self-imaged survivorship. Emma Sulkowicz’s *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol* [Trans. *This Is Not A Rape*]⁴—an eight-minute self-published video and accompanying text-based website that complements Sulkowicz’s influential performance project *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*—emboldened me into a project of personal myth making, or perhaps more accurately unmaking. After Columbia University failed to expel Sulkowicz’s rapist, Paul Nungesser, when he sexually assaulted her in her dorm room in 2012,⁴ Sulkowicz carried a mattress to symbolize the burden of the assault on her day-to-day campus life, as a senior arts thesis. The artistic protest was promised only to stop when the university acknowledged her rape. Sulkowicz, instead, graduated before she received justice.

Mirroring the description of her own lived experience, in *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol*, Sulkowicz replays a sexual interaction that begins as consensual, but subsequently fomented into an image of violent assault. The narrative arc is particularly powerful because the viewer is unsure of the

immobilizes her body. As such, the narrative comments on the complexity of consent—specifically, how consenting to one activity does not imply permission for another—which often births the ambiguities that work against survivors in judicial proceedings after an attack.

Displayed across four separate feeds in a split-screen format, Sulkowicz’s video depicts the same event from the perspective of video surveillance cameras positioned at different angles. Evoking the aesthetic of security footage provides an institutional critique that draws attention to the power of the university to surveil and regulate its students, especially those living in university housing, and the simultaneous failed promise of surveillance to protect the students that it monitors. Universities have been proven to actively conceal occurrences of sexual assault on campus, which reasonably supports the claim that a university’s reputation will benefit from a lower number of proven cases of sexual assault because parents are hesitant to send their children to schools that admit to a known threat of violence (Yung), suggesting that university litigation regarding sexual assault is

employed in the video’s framing is a harrowing feature, much of the critical work that the piece compels is more didactic than figurative. Hosted on an Internet platform similar to a blog, a lengthy trigger warning accompanies *Ceci N’est Pas Un Viol*. Within this instructive web text—which intends not only to caution, but to question or implicate the viewer’s intention to watch—Sulkowicz echoes the declarative statement present in the title; about the visual content, she writes: “*It’s only a re-enactment if you disregard my words. It’s about you, not him.*” Yet, the scene that ensues seems to belie such claims.

To address the apparent contradiction between image and disclaimer, I offer three interpretations. First, as Sulkowicz explains directly, “[e]verything that takes place in the following video is consensual but may resemble rape.” By virtue of being a consensual performance of a rape, the act imaged in the video is not a rape because a rape must be non-consensual *a priori*. Consensual sex and sexual assault can look exactly the same; all that differs is whether there is a mutual, continuous and communicated commitment to desire negotiated between each party

involved in a given sexual action.

Second, *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol* references in its title Rene Magritte's canonical painting *The Treachery of Images* (1929), which depicts an image of a pipe with "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe*" inscribed below the item. The widely accepted interpretation of the painting develops from Magritte's perceived commentary on the distinction between representation and reality, or between signifier and signified. Accordingly, one can deduce that Sulkowicz's video is not a rape, but a mediation of a rape. Carrie Rentschler suggests that mediation can be tactical for producing evidence in sexual assault cases. Recalling the oft-quoted adage, "*Not only must justice be done; it must also be seen to be done*," she calls attention to the twisted reality that 'trophy photos'—that is, images produced of a sexual assault to commemorate its happening—taken by sexual aggressors and their accomplices, can later act as unanticipated criminal evidence. Disturbing as the trophy images may be, when a woman's word is deemed insufficient, the image of her assault can help support her case. In instances where rape mythologies defeat 'she-said' perspectives, the image can recalibrate normative bias. As Roland Barthes writes, "we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth. The photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance: henceforth the past is as certain as the present" (*Camera Lucida* 87-8). Since there was no attested visual evidence to support Sulkowicz's complaint, she produced her own in the form of a powerful visual counter-narrative to the mythical testimonial used to discredit her assault.

Third, although the imaging in *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol* ostensibly simulates the description of her rape as reported to the university, Sulkowicz cannot label the particular

structure of events as a rape because she was definitively told otherwise by Columbia University's judicial board. Given the discursive force that a university has, its juridical processes can produce 'the Truth' that erases any contesting claims. By visualizing her invalidated experience, Sulkowicz challenges the inherent power structure between the individual and the institution by demanding that the public take a second look. Perhaps *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol* would be more aptly titled *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol?* Since multiple institutions—the education, justice and policing systems as examples—continue to deny the faulty rape victim of an experiential truth, an institution's opinion carries such weight that it can shape how an individual self-ascribes to her own experience. In a foundational study credited for uncovering the epidemic of rape committed by attackers that are known to the victim (i.e. 'acquaintance rape'), Robin Warshaw reveals that "[o]nly 27 percent of the women whose sexual assault met the legal definition of rape thought of themselves as rape victims" (26); reiterating the statistic and paraphrasing sentiments made by her participants, Warshaw named her foundational text *I Never Called It Rape*. Similarly, in an earlier study by Andra Medea and Kathleen Thompson, when women were asked whether they had been raped, many answered, "I don't know" (26). By titling her video *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol*, which uncannily parallels disenfranchised statements common to survivors, Sulkowicz playfully resumes authority over her rape by ironically mimicking the social expectation of unsure sexual assault histories.

Sulkowicz meanders aimlessly in the denouement of the video. Her rapist has left without resolve. As she drapes a towel around her naked body, I recognize the defeated astonishment that fills the first moments of clarity

after a flawed rape—no plan, no hope for recourse. Although Sulkowicz is a faulty rape victim, the video explodes her assignment in the loathsome double-bind of survivorship: she refuses silence and demands justice. Her radical pledge to reject suppression helps to illuminate the many stories of imperfect rape. When I encounter Sulkowicz's work, as myself an imperfect survivor, I feel a networked solidarity between her rape and my own. While both attacks are systematically beyond reproach, the boldness of representation in Sulkowicz's video procures a vigilante justice—not only for herself, but for all faulty rape victims. Myth is undone in the strength of her intent.

Chelsea P. Barnett is a graduate of the Master's of Media Studies Programme at Concordia University. Her research focuses on sexual violence in visual culture.

Endnotes

¹This passage was derived from an excerpt of a play entitled *The History of Sexuality* written by my colleague and friend Dane Stewart. When I began writing about my rape, I felt transfixed by my memory—the experience seemed fractured, impossible to put into words. In an act of methodological symbiosis and solidarity, Stewart interviewed me about my sexual assault to produce source material for his semi-fictionalized verbatim theatre project, which investigates the ethics of representation. My responses to interview questions were first recast by Stewart to compose a monologue for the play. I, then, rewrote his monologue—to return it to the lived truth of my experience—for this essay. I am very grateful for the immense care and support I have received from Stewart throughout my writing process. As that of Dylan Boyko, Dr. Monika Kin Gagnon, Katie Hill, and

Michelle Macklem.

²Doe is a survivor of the serial attacks committed by Canada's infamous "Balcony Rapist" in the mid-1980s.

³In a compelling and comprehensive evaluation of the semiotics of the myth, Roland Barthes outlines a "second-order semiological system" that serves to naturalize a view that is, in fact, socially produced (*Mythologies* 13). Effective mythical speech purports an intent at the expense of literality, thus conditioning its capacity for the "ideological abuse" (10) that produces *the dominant symbolic order*. When a woman is raped and it is said, "She was wearing a short skirt," I understand what the statement is to signify to me—she is at fault. This message is in no way contained in the utterance, so I am therefore faced with the second-order signification. The second-order signifier is formed with a previous system, that is, a woman wearing a short skirt, which could signify a host of meanings: the weather was hot, mini-skirts were in fashion, or she wished to attract sexual attention, to name a few. A hegemonic cultural distortion serves to determine the latter as the definitive first-order sign that, in a chain of signification, then becomes the signifier in the myth. The desire for sexual attention is naturalized as sexual availability, which is what is ultimately presented as signified. Importantly, myth works because the second-order signifier "does not suppress the meaning, it only impoverishes it, it puts it at a distance, it holds it at one's disposal" (117).

⁴In the official university hearing, Nungesser was found "not responsible" for the rape (Bazonon).

References

Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Geoff Dyer. New York: Hill and Wang, 2010. Print.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*.

Translated by Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972. Print.

Bazonon, Emily. "Have We Learned Anything from the Columbia Rape Case?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 2015. Print.

Brison, Susan J. *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of a Self*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002. Print.

Cahill, Ann J. "A Phenomenology of Fear: The Threat of Rape and Feminine Bodily Comportment." *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*, ed. Alison Bailey and Chris J. Cuomo, Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2008. 810-26. Print.

Doe, Jane. *The Story of Jane Doe: A Book About Rape*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2004. Print.

Medea, Andra, and Kathleen Thompson. *Against Rape*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974. Print.

Rentschler, Carrie. "Feminist Media Activism and the Magnitude of Small

Interventions." Keynote address. *Small Packages: Microsignification in Media and Communications Studies*, Concordia University, Montreal, Quebec, April 15, 2016. Print.

Warshaw, Robin. *I Never Called It Rape: The Ms. Report on Recognizing, Fighting, and Surviving Date and Acquaintance Rape*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988. Print.

Yung, Corey Rayburn. "Concealing Campus Sexual Assault: An Empirical Examination." *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law*, 21.1 (2015): 1-9. Print.

Mediography

Magritte, Rene. *La Trahison des images (Ceci n'est pas une pipe)*. 1929. Painting, oil on canvas.

Sulkowicz, Emma. *Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol*. 2015. Web video. www.cecinestpasunviol.com.

Sulkowicz, Emma. *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*. 2014-5. Performance.

JOANNA M. WESTON

The Missing Women

their red dresses
swing from wires
along the highway

blowing wild
on chaotic winds
screaming

the names
of lost children
no one knows

where they went
or who took them
into death

Joanna M. Weston's middle-reader, *Frame and The McGuire*, was published in 2015; and her poetry collection, *A Bedroom of Searchlights*, was published by Inanna Publications in 2016.