

Retrieved from:
The European Journal of Psychoanalysis
May 28, 2024
<https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/articles/the-voice-in-rape/>

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The Voice in Rape

(everything comes down to the ear you are able to hear me with)[1]

This essay is divided into two parts: “Good Girl”, a short fictional narrative based on an encounter that bears similarities with a psychoanalytical situation, and “Voicing Intrusion”, a reflection on it, in which I explore the relationship between sexual violence and the signifier.

Good Girl

When she called me we had never met before. She wanted to talk. I listened.

“Since the pandemic started I’ve been at home helping my mother look after my grandmother. She’s very ill. I’m 24 and barely do anything for myself. I’ve gained 20 kg and stopped combing my hair. I want to talk about something heavy but I cannot do so without crying.”

She cried.

“Two years ago I went to a university party. I was alone. I was drunk and stayed for too long. I was raped by four men. I can’t pretend that nothing happened. Why did I drink so much? Was I dressed? Was I alone? I still blame myself. After that I broke up with my last boyfriend. It was a troubled relationship. I was trying to forget my ex. But the last time we met he said something during sex that made me want to throw up: ‘You are a good girl,’ he said. After that his smell, the sound of his voice started to annoy me deeply. I felt disgusted.”

“Why is it that what he said made you feel disgusted?” I asked.

“One of the men who raped me also called me a ‘good girl’ during the act.”

“And what is it like to be a good girl?” I asked.

“As a child I spoke a lot and did not make friends easily. I was frequently bullied at school. I felt uncomfortable looking into people’s eyes, but my mother once told me that people who don’t look you in the eye are liars. She forced me to look into her eyes. It feels like the person is looking inside me. At school I couldn’t understand what was being taught and this made me cry. My teacher once told me: “Why would I fail you? I can see you don’t understand.” I felt ashamed, for I didn’t know that I had not understood. My teachers used to say that I’m sweet, quiet and helpful but have my head in the clouds. I don’t know anything.

I'm stupid. People think I'm good but stupid. And slow.

I miss my first boyfriend. It was comfortable to be around him. I felt like I could be myself without having to wear a mask, without being judged. But other people disgust me.”

She paused for a long while.

“When I feel at ease I start to sway. I'm doing this now.”

That was the end of our call.

Voicing Intrusion

The voice in this encounter has stayed with me since it touched my ears. Language is pervaded by the unsayable. Yet, rape, as a public secret,[2] demands silence in a strange way. She did speak about it. I am also speaking about it. But it takes effort to do so. Narrating violence always poses the threat of reproducing it: in order for repetition to be displaced, one has to try and say the unsayable, even if the product of this attempt is the half-said (*mi-dire*).[3] In a state of suspension as to how to address this topic, I have found encouragement in Stefania Pandolfo's invitation to hesitate and “write from incapacity”[4].

In the process of fictionalizing this narrative, I asked myself how much context would be needed and was surprised to realize that very little would suffice. For someone trained in anthropology, this can be a puzzling discovery. As she speaks, the singularity of her narrative intertwines with the generality of the event and of the power structures that overdetermine it. I knew she lived in a mid-sized Brazilian city. We talked in Portuguese. Where did this happen? When exactly? Who was involved? She did not talk about this. I did not ask. Yet, the lack of answers to these specific questions did not affect how her narrative impacted me. This is not to say that context is unimportant. In this case, it made itself present in the language in which we spoke. Context matters because sexual violence is always already political: it reveals the impossibility of clearly distinguishing between the personal and the political as it oscillates between them. This case seems to poignantly reveal this, for violence happened neither in the supposed security of the domestic space nor in the openly public space that is associated with explicitly political sexual violence, such as happens in war rape.

The signifiers she employed resonate inflections of gender in the context from which she comes. However, the fact that they can be translated into English rather smoothly points to the generality of the structures within which these signifiers have historically been uttered in both languages. It is beyond the scope of this essay to generalize on the employment of the signifier “good girl” and its translations in different contexts. However, this signifier appears in disturbingly similar ways in English narratives of rape. For instance, in Roxane Gay's account of her experience of being gang raped by her schoolmates in the United States when she was twelve, she describes herself as a “good girl” raised Catholic who had to accept to be called a “slut” at school after being raped.[5] In both English and Portuguese, being simultaneously “good” and a “girl” implies compliance with socially prescribed gendered behavior. One is not simply good: one is a “good girl”—the implication being that what is good behavior for a girl might not be good behavior for a boy.

It is true that as an event, sexual violence is tragically common. Still, something in this narrative, which lies between the personal and the political, the particular and the general, insistently demands to be spoken. This concerns the voice in rape, which in this case directs one's attention both to the perpetrators' claim to “render themselves the unique and relative bearers of the symbolic function”[6] and to the gap between their aspired sovereignty and their inevitable but denied vulnerability as subjects of language. As Alenka Zupančič reminds us, the “libidinal component of power” is ‘generated out of the structure itself, and is symptomatic of its contradictions’[7]; that is, enjoyment is not simply subjective—it is also subjectivizing. Thus, the agent of perversion is not the cause of enjoyment; rather, he makes visible how it structurally

operates. In the narrative above, the repetition of the signifier “good girl” in different scenes points to the power structure in which rape is possible: one in which the law is complicit with the indistinction between coercion and consent because it is blind to how positionality predetermines the extent to which one can express desire. Sexual violence “forces upon a woman the reality of her status in society which is always at odds with her experience as a desiring subject”[8]. In the narrative above, the signifier “good girl” makes visible that the understanding of woman as the object of man’s desire lies at the core of the structure within which rape is possible.

Listening to her narrative was for me a discontinuous experience. Violence produces interruption in one’s body, in one’s speech, in one’s viscera. Repulsion seems to aspire to interruption of a different kind. Is this why she wanted to vomit after she was, once again, called a “good girl”? Language can bear with one’s body a relation of intrusiveness. From this place of suspension, I have been drawn to this signifier, “good girl” (in Portuguese, *boa moça*), which she further associated with sweet (*um doce*), quiet (*quietinha*), kind (*boa*), slow (*devagar*), and stupid (*burra*). These are names for an impossible position, namely, that of the one who does not speak—this is what is literally implied by *quietinha* (“quiet”) in Portuguese, which can also be heard as an injunction to keep quiet in a violent situation that is, from the perspective of the perpetrator, to remain unheard. Sexual violence literalizes the position in the scene that is described by this signifier: that of the “good girl” who does not speak. This literalization is repeated when her former boyfriend cites the same signifier during the sexual act. As she hears it, she wants to vomit. One cannot know why this is the case because she has not said it. Yet, as psychoanalysis challenges the linearity demanded of accounts of rape by the law according to which rape is to be judged,[9] it can open up a space for its victims to speak about the arbitrariness with which one is confronted in experiences of violence.

The inseparability of language and violence shapes the way in which subjects are constituted.[10] Yet, when does this become unbearable? The way in which her narrative touched me reminded me of how I was touched by Frantz Fanon’s “The lived experience of the black man”. [11] In it, he describes how the gaze of others, coupled with the racist names he was called, localized in his body the inevitability of racist interpellation and the lack of place it entails. What are the effects of names on one’s body? How does the narrative of violence affect their inscription on one’s flesh? In her narrative of sexual violence, it is hard to disentangle the violence of naming from the violence of rape. As the voice of the rapist conveys a signifier that offends, revolts, and disgusts her, it partakes in the invasion of her body. The citation of this signifier by her former boyfriend reenacts the impression left by this and other related signifiers on her body throughout her life. These were names she did not want but received in silence. Likewise, rape was something she could not avoid. The scene of rape, in which she is not in a position to utter her opposition, mirrors the other scene she talks about: that of being called names such as *quietinha*, that is, quiet.[12]

Boa moça, “good girl”, the signifier that touched her ear during the act, qualifies an impossible state of passivity. The idea of sexual passivity resides in the fantasy of touching someone without being touched back.[13] Sexual violence combines this fantasy with the violent attempt at its realization despite the other’s desire. The act of sexual violence, coupled with her naming during the act, is an attempt at fixing her position as that of the one who can only accept. As she is called “good girl”, this position is made equivalent with goodness or kindness. Thus, the difference between consent and coercion is eclipsed by the one who puts himself in the position from which one can state what is good for both. In a structure in which the desire of woman is understood to correspond to the desire of man, reciprocity is imputed beyond consent, that is, one is “caught in a cultural logic that refuses to acknowledge the difference between domination and reciprocity”[14]. Thus, violation can be justified to the extent that her desire is presupposed: woman desires man.

In this structure, her desire is determined by her position as woman: reduced to the function of object a, the object whose function is to be the cause of desire, her subjectivity is “defined ... by vacuity itself, as the cause of the other’s desire”[15]. The supposition that woman’s desire corresponds to man’s desire relegates woman to the position of an object that, as the cause of man’s desire, is to be pursued and taken. Woman’s desire is hence understood to be not only void but also eager to be fulfilled by man’s desire. If attraction is

the absence of disgust, maybe her vomiting signals the point at which she rejects being made fully equivalent with the other's desire in a structure in which goodness implies relinquishing one's desire for the sake of the common good (to be determined by someone else, whose desire stands for it).

The act of naming her "good girl" both enacts and mimes violence. Yet, the drive to name her in this way during this act reveals not only the relationship between language and violence but also the unsurmountable gap between them. For the perpetrator of sexual violence can call her a "good girl", but this is by no means an act of divine creation from which results an utterly compliant subject. In its attempt to mimic description, the performative risks its failure. Maybe sexual violence is one of the insistent manifestations of this failed performance. In the scene in which a woman's desire is supposed to correspond to a man's desire, sexual violence manifests the failure of the performative in that it desperately tries to enact reciprocity through coercion in the face of a woman's non-compliance with what is expected from someone who occupies her position. This is why, as Rosalind Morris reminds us,[16] the vulnerability of the force that wants to make itself visible in rape demands witnesses — in this case, the other men who took part in the act.

The two men who call her "good girl" thereby quote the unstable convention through which they try to fixate her in this place, which is, in her narrative, that of the one who hears but does not speak. The place of the victim and of the perpetrators in the scene is marked by their differential access to language: raped in silence, she stands in metonymic relation to the victims of sexual violence who are unable to articulate it and be heard,[17] whereas those who call her names aspire to the sovereign position of the name giver, that is, the one who creates reality in the act of describing it. By calling her a "good girl", the one who does so not only puts himself in the position of assigning her a quality (good) that is coupled with a gender (girl); he also attempts to annul the violence of his act by partaking in her goodness as he names it: "naming, like a cast of the die, is just one step toward unnamng, a tool to render visible what he has carefully kept invisible in his manipulative blindness"[18]. In this case, rape makes visible the structural violence through which the name giver attempts to assign her an impossible structural position of absolute passivity. In her narrative of the event, the name she is called and the act to which she is forced merge into one another. Although patriarchal violence structures both her being called a "good girl" and her being raped, I do not wish to imply that the two things are the same. Yet, in the flow of her associations, it is hard to disentangle the way in which the citation of this name touched her from the way in which her body was touched by rape.

Veena Das reminds us of how the law judges women who have been raped based on their behavior and reputation.[19] Rape implies lack of consent. But a woman's lack of consent can sometimes be turned into consent based on her previous history or social position. A "good girl" can be raped, whereas a "bad girl", or a slave,[20] cannot. In relation to the #MeToo movement, Nadine Hartmann points to the impossible demand of the law that structures patriarchal violence: that truth shall make possible the avowal of jouissance.[21] "Why did I drink so much? Was I dressed? Was I alone?," she asks. These are the kinds of questions usually asked in court to determine before the law whether or not there was consent. As she asks herself these questions, she puts herself in the place of the law by which she is to be judged. By doing so, her narrative is unable to provide the law with the linearity that it demands. Since the burden of the proof that there was no consent historically rests with women, the distinction between good and bad behavior implicitly emerges. Yet, it is subsequently undone. Her being named "good girl" by the rapist and the uncanny repetition of this act by her former boyfriend reveal the hypocritical nature of this act of naming. For she is called "good" during the very act against which she could not voice her opposition or, maybe, express desire for something else. Through her attributed goodness, the namer tries to make her complicit with the action, as if it were possible to undo violence through forced consent.

After being called "good girl" again by her former boyfriend she wants to vomit, possibly in an attempt to expel from her body *the touch of the words* she was forced to incorporate against her will since she was a child. Yet, vomiting does not put an end to her repulsion. Therefore, she has to speak. The voice is the medium through which language touches one's body from inside and from outside. Jean-Luc Nancy reminds us that the voice, whose materiality has nothing to do with language, is a kind of internal self-touching of the body.[22] When speaking about *moterialité* (*môt*, "word" in French, plus *materialité*, "materiality"), Jacques

Lacan explores how voice, as an object, exceeds the dimension of the signifier.[23] For, since it mediates between language and *jouissance*, it takes part in the subject's embodiment in language as it detaches itself from the body that utters it. As the voice touches one's ear, its materiality resonates into one's body. Bodies are strangely molded by the resonance of voice, this remainder of the signifying chain in the real through which one is given to hear "the remainder of that which has been said but which does not contribute to the effect of signification." [24] It is in the gap between the act of speaking (*énonciation*), in which the voice resounds beyond what it signifies, and what is spoken, (*énoncé*, that is, the content of the statement), that one finds the possibility of displacement. Perhaps this occurs as metonymy exceeds the signifying chain and touches the body.

In "The Object Voice", Mladen Dolar finds it problematic to endow the voice with materiality because "the object never fits the body." [25] Yet, why would it have to fit the body in order to be material? Touching does not necessarily entail fitting. The opposite might be the case. Maybe one can only be touched by that which does not quite fit — the excess of the voice in relation to signification being one such instance. This is what Dolar seems to imply with the idea that one is deferred in the void of presence that arises in the echo of one's voice. [26] That is, one is displaced from oneself, from one's narcissism, as one listens to oneself speak. Maybe, as one speaks of sexual violence, one can displace the violent alienation of desire that it entails through the opaque medium of the voice. Or, at least, this is how I heard her statement that her body was now moving in a different way, in a way that made her feel more comfortable in inhabiting it. The comfort one can find in speaking, and being heard, might have displaced the discomfort of her disgust. Was the disgusting repetition of the signifier replaced by the comfortable repetition of swaying?

I hesitate to affirm this. So let it be a possibility. As she spoke, her voice touched the body of someone else. She articulated this hurtful chain of signifiers in a space in which its association with the narrative of her history of being called names could be displaced. As she spoke, she manipulated the names she was forced to receive. Her words reached the ears of the listener who, as a body that shares with her the language in which symbolization takes place, was also affected by the materiality of her voice and by the reverberations of whatever is beyond meaningfulness. Through her speech, someone else's receptive ears were touched. Was the potential for violence that inheres in language allowed to be displaced through the medium of the listener's body? Did this complicity undo the impossible complicity that was demanded of her, so that her body was able to move otherwise? This is how I am tempted to hear her. But the truth is that one does not know.

I am grateful to Ashwak Hauter, Eylül Iscen, Rachel Aumiller, Maria José de Abreu, Stefania Pandolfo, Rosalind Morris, Tamar Blickstein, Sarath Jakka, Camila Pierobon, Claudia Peppel, Nadine Hartmann, Fernando Castrillon, and Francisco Capoulade for having read previous versions of this essay, provided me with references, or talked to me about it.

Notes:

[1] Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies: The Teachings of Nietzsche and the Politics of the Proper Name", *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Avital Ronell & Peggy Kamuf (New York: Schocken Books, 1985), 4.

[2] See Pratiksha Baxi, "Sexual Violence and Its Discontents", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 43, 2014, 139-154.

[3] On the half-said in relation to sexual violence, see Cindy Zeiher and Rosemary Overell, “The Anxiety of #MeToo: A Response to Jean-Claude Milner”, *Penumbra*(a), 1, 2021, 151-164; 155 and Nadine Hartmann, “Telling What We Don’t Know: Confession, Varité, #MeToo”, in this Feature.

[4] Stefania Pandolfo and Basit Kareem Iqbal, “Writing Life No. 18: An Interview with Stefania Pandolfo”, *Somatosphere*, 2022, available at: <http://somatosphere.net/2022/writing-life-stefania-pandolfo-basit-kareem-iqbal.html/>.

[5] See Roxane Gay, *Hunger: a Memoir of (My) Body*, (London: Corsair, 2018), 49.

[6] Rosalind Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable: Political Subjectivity, Violent Crime and the ‘Sexual Thing’ in a South African Mining Community”, *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*, Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (ed.), (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 57-101; 99 note 58.

[7] Alenka Zupančič, “A-sexual Violence and Systemic Enjoyment”, *Penumbra*(a), 1, 2021; 1-20; 13.

[8] See Megan Hirner, ‘Introduction: From Testimony to Desire’, *Penumbra*(a), 1, 2021, 1-4; 3.

[9] See Megan Hirner, “Introduction: From Testimony to Desire”, *Penumbra*(a), 1, 2021, 1-4; 2.

[10] See Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[11] Frantz Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man”, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 89-120.

[12] In *Women & Power: A Manifesto* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017), Mary Beard explores how the relationship between rape and the silencing of women appears in the so-called western classics. Although not subscribing to the idea that there is continuity between the Greco-Roman world and so-called western civilization, she points to the fact that the way in which rhetoric is associated with masculinity by those who understand themselves as ‘western’ goes back to the prescriptions of these sources.

[13] See Rachel Aumiller, “The Crisis of (Not) Touching”, *Women in Philosophy Blog Series, The American Philosophical Association*, August 2020. Available at: <https://blog.apaonline.org/2020/08/26/haptic->

[14] Melissa Wright, “It’s a Hard ‘No’: Feminine Refusal at the Limit of Consent”, *Penumbra(a)*, 1, 2021, 165-183; 170.

[15] Anne Juranville, “The Violence of Women: On *Baise-moi* by Virginie Despentes”, *Penumbra(a)*, 1, 2021, 56-77; 69.

[16] Morris, “The Mute and the Unspeakable”.

[17] For further elaboration on the relation between rape and metonymy, see Morris, *ibid.*

[18] Trinh Minh-Ha and Stanley Gray, “The Plural Void: Barthes and Asia”, *Substance*, 11:3, 1982, 41-50; 49.

[19] Veena Das, “Violence, Gender, and Subjectivity”, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 37, 2008, 283-299; 291-292.

[20] See Saidiya Hartman, “Seduction and the Ruses of Power”, *Callaloo*, 19:2, 1996, 537-560.

[21] Nadine Hartmann, “Telling What We Don’t Know: Confession, *Varité*, #MeToo”, in this Feature.

[22] Jean-Luc Nancy, “Touche-touche”, talk delivered at the ICI Berlin on March 24th, 2021. Available at: <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/jean-luc-nancy-intimacy/>

[23] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book X: Anxiety* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2016), 277.

[24] Rose-Paule Vinciguerra, “L’objet voix”, *La cause freudienne*, 71, 2009, 134-140; 138.

[25] Mladen Dolar, “The Voice Object”, Renata Salecl & Slavoj Žižek (ed.), *Gaze and Voice as Love Objects* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 7-32; 10.

[26] Ibid., 14.

Bio:

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