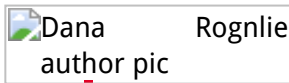


Only Deeds: Twenty Years Later and Still Not Recognizing What It's Like to Be a Woman in Philosophy



[trigger warning]

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Suppose I decide to rape Catharine MacKinnon before reviewing her book.

(Carlin Romano, 1993, *The Nation*)

Suppose I decide to skip Carlin Romano's latest pontification before blogging about him. Because I'm uncertain he understands the difference between being a feminist and being a 'feminist'. Perhaps the better question is, suppose the discipline of philosophy valued the existence and freedom of women in philosophy and in society more broadly over abstract claims of freedom of expression made by privileged men? Despite attending more to style than to content, touting clarity while remaining incoherent, and responding to criticism with name-dropping and *non sequiturs*, Romano is what passes in America (the philosophical!) for a public intellectual. Perhaps I owe it to him, to philosophy, to America, to women, or to myself to attend his talk. But the carelessness with which he wields his privilege is precisely the problem for women in philosophy (and in the home, and in the streets!). Would attending implicitly endorse his ignorance and privilege? Would failing to attend allow him to get away with yet more self-indulgent misogyny? Should I carry a sign? Should I wear a vagina hoodie? Or should I engage in polite, Midwestern chitchat? Should I patiently explain, as I do with students, that sometimes women aren't treated so well? More importantly, why do I have to make these wrenching decisions at all?

One thing is certain: you don't mess with Kitty and get away with it.

Romano is a self-proclaimed sophist and disciple of Isocrates, though one unrecognizable even to Nietzsche. Believe me, his 1993 'review' of Catherine—or as he professionally refers to her, "Kitty"—MacKinnon's book, *Only Words*, only gets worse (or better? I suppose it depends on your point of view... which is sort of the point) from that first sentence above. Ahh, the blind bliss of privilege. Breathe it in. Unless you're a woman. Or gay. Or not all that into rape culture and the societal dominance of men (both of which Romano gleefully denies are endemic to American culture). In that case, you can still breathe it in, but it's less like nosing a fine wine and more like coughing on fumes and second-hand smoke. Nothing's perfect.

Life is short, but I decide to attend anyway. Carlin stands by this provocation twenty years later, claiming he wouldn't write it any differently today. He calls himself a feminist. Though he's so focused on individuals rather than **systems** that, for him, cat-calling seems like an isolated event, instead of the everyday annoyance (threat?) it is. You know, in the way one wonders whether that mildly irritating mosquito-bite will give you West Nile Virus.

(Except that your chances are better with West Nile: one in 150 develop severe symptoms. One in four of my female students have experienced sexual assault.)

The chronicles of C-Money's implicit misogyny are plentiful. He denies the socio-economic power dynamics at play in a sex worker's decision to enter employment. He is emboldened by the outpouring of support of rape victims against MacKinnon's radical views on pornography—as if survivors don't have enough trauma to deal with, they are now used to uplift his woeful **misreading** of a nuanced discussion of the harms of speech acts. ^

He points out that “Kitty’s” ex-husband told him that MacKinnon wasn’t upset by his publicly imagined rape...err...review.

And then, as the feminist he obviously is, he criticizes Martha C. Nussbaum’s manly legalistic writing style—“She’s a sellout! I, like my hero Hugh Hefner, am to be entertained above all else!”

Dance, Martha. **Dance**. Carlin will make it rain for you.

I experience an emotion. Is it shock? Surprise? Disgust? Contempt? Resentment? Sheer admiration for the balls on this guy? Is he just another victim of the **Dunning-Kruger effect**? Does he really believe any of this shit? If there’s anything that can be said for sure about Carl, it’s that he’s memorable. Like the first time you got **Rickrolled**. When your first pet died. Or you accidentally saw your parents having sex. (Hi, Mom!)

This blog post is not an attempt to rehash the sex debates of the 1990s. Nor do I want to add fodder to the continuing pornography debates.

This blog post is about the intersection of our discipline and rape culture.

The Department of Philosophy at the University of Oregon (UO) recently invited (read: wasted limited resources bringing) Romano to campus to discuss his most recent book, *America the Philosophical*. You see, we care about pluralism here. For us, that means recognizing that philosophers and other thinkers not working in currently-dominant paradigms deserve a voice in the philosophical conversation. In our commitment to pluralism, our department aspires to recognize the political import of feminist philosophy and the value of women in philosophy to the extent that we embed it into our curriculum, producing scholars who take seriously the oppression of women and other ‘Others’ in our society. Some might scoff at this statement and point to the Summer 2011 blogosphere hullabaloo regarding sexual harassment claims in our department. Such people are callous to the fact that we live in a culture that supports male domination of the kind exhibited not only in our department but in departments across the country (take a hard look in the **mirror** if you disagree). Feminists call this ‘rape culture,’ claiming that everything from our institutions to sexist jokes support and foster the habitual attitude that women are inferior to the extent that male domination is not only common, but expected. It takes seriously the **research** that shows that 1 in 6 women in the U.S. will endure rape or sexual assault (1 in 4 on U.S. college campuses) and that most of these women will know their attackers, only 3% of whom will spend a day in jail.

Rapists are, by and large, utterly unremarkable. They are actually common, ‘**normal**’ people. They are mundane—so much so that their heinous acts comprise a whole subset of **comedy**.

And (unofficial) university **athletic apparel**.

Philosophy is not outside this rape culture. In fact, the only reason the UO sexual harassment issue even reached national attention was that a group of graduate students, myself included, knew that sexual harassment was out of synch with our department’s commitment to changing the climate of philosophy for women and other minority groups (along lines of race, class, age, ability, sexuality, veteran status, etc). We strive to include students, faculty, and community members from diverse backgrounds in our conversation. Beyond Feminist Philosophy, we offer specializations in Philosophy of Race, Native American Philosophy, Disability Studies, and Queer (or as C-Dawg calls it, “Gay”) Philosophy. We have been taught (and teach our own students) to acknowledge and reject rape culture in order to concretely realize the emancipation of women and all those who have borne the label ‘Other.’

No one said enacting cultural change was easy, particularly not when it comes to altering the gender mores of the oldest and most male-dominated profession (in the academy, of course!). One of the most prized norms in our discipline is free expression. But as MacKinnon **so long-sufferingly** argued (and Carlin Danger so glibly ignored), freedom of expression is too often used

as a trump card against the liberation of women. Following in the tradition of J. L. Austin, MacKinnon argues that we do things with words. “I do” in marriage is a tired example. “Saying ‘kill’ to a trained dog” is a fatal act (MacKinnon, *Only Words*, 12). Publishing –in *The Nation* no less – a rape fantasy of a feminist legal scholar who made sexual harassment in the workplace even a ‘thing’ does something. It reproduces the social inequality that makes the rape of women shrug-worthy. As MacKinnon and others argue, social inequality is reproduced by what we do, including what we do in speech. And it’s not simply what we do at an individual level that matters, but that these actions are embedded in institutions and historical memory. Which, btw, was largely built by heterosexual white men in a position of privilege over women.

Freedom of speech is a value. So is bodily integrity. Yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theatre (or “He has a bomb!” while on a plane) is disallowed but screeching, “I raped her” is merely an incisive (if I may be allowed the word) critique. Romano defends the vividness of his rape fantasy by pointing to MacKinnon’s own admittedly, albeit purposively, stomach-turning description of what it’s like to be raped from the survivor’s perspective. She can do it, why can’t he? Indeed, “Suppose I raped her” is ardently defended as a highly regarded mode of hypothetical example, of which Carly-boo thinks MacKinnon would approve.

Now, before anybody goes all *Duck Dynasty* on me, I’m not saying that the First Amendment is a bad thing. Freedom of expression is important. It is important that we be able to gather and say things without fear that we will be jailed (can I get a union shout-out?!). But that doesn’t mean that there shouldn’t be consequences to what we say. Indeed, there are consequences to what we say. And that’s the point. *The Nation* need not have published Romano’s article (can you imagine if he had ‘supposed’ he had lynched a black male philosopher? In 1993? In 2014?), and my beloved department need not have invited him to our campus. His mere presence here is an affront, because it is an implicit affirmation of his work, which is, at best, shoddy scholarship, and, at worst, a horrifying exemplar of the very culture we must decry and fight in our classrooms each and every day. Romano is free to imagine (and get off on) all the rape fantasies he wants, but if our discipline, indeed our society, is genuinely committed to the emancipation of women and other cultural minorities it needs to rethink the way we’ve rigged the game. His freedom to express his views should not trump whether I feel safe in my workplace. Until we take a long hard look at the position of women and other minorities and value this above the vapid misogyny of the Philosophical Romanos of America (don’t even get me started on his American Exceptionalism...), women will remain raped both in the flesh and on the page.

Now, excuse me while I attend to the million other commitments I have as a woman in the academy...

#I’dRatherBeReadingPlato

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