

# Rethinking Rape

## *Moving Beyond the Social vs. Biological*

By Caterina Girona

A foundational argument that emerged out of the 1970s feminist movement holds that rape is not an act driven by sexual desire but rather purely an act of violence, a tool to control and dominate women (Brownmiller, 1976). In contrast to this social constructionist position there has been a counter argument by evolutionary psychologists laying claim to a biological explanation of rape through human evolution (Thornhill and Palmer, 2000). Such an explanation is heavily critiqued by feminists who express futility at the thought of a natural predisposition to rape, which removes blame from the perpetrator and offers little room for altering the problem. What both of these explanations lack is a comprehensive examination of the way the body and mind are inextricably linked, and thus cannot be used in opposing arguments. While feminist explanations claim that an act of rape is purely a desire to control and an expression of anger, there is no acknowledgement of the corporeal realities that are necessary for such an act of sex and violence to occur. The evolutionary explanation, on the other hand, gives full responsibility to bodily urges that are presumed to be static and universal and does not account for the influence of specific environments. This paper will explore the pitfalls of both of these approaches, their adherence to certain binaries and their unilateral explanations. Through an examination of Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Darwin's theory of natural selection, while taking other

feminist evolutionist perspectives into consideration, this paper will refocus the discussion of rape away from a dualistic nature/nurture debate. By removing this division, we can begin to merge feminist and evolutionist perspectives, and this may allow for a more comprehensive analysis of rape.

For some time I have pursued research questions surrounding issues of rape and sexual violence, a puzzle I've rearranged for years but have yet to fit together. Each question I have tackled has only led to more questions, leaving me with more pieces of the puzzle and no clear image in sight. Until recently I firmly believed in the social constructionist interpretation wielded by my feminist foremothers, but now I've found myself moving further back in time to try to uncover where the body fits into this very bodily act. At first glance it seems obvious that our sexual scripts are shaped by the world around us, and that sexualized violence might be attributed to cultural influence and exposure through popular media. But the manifestation of sexual desire eventually makes its way into our physical bodies and must be acknowledged as such. No matter the extent of socialization, the internalization of this process requires an examination of biology. Even some sociologists, such as Jeremy Freese, Jui-Chung Allen Li, and Lisa D. Wade concede: "If one accepts that human beings are material entities all the way through, then all our thoughts and actions are embodied, imply thoroughly physical processes, and are 'biological' activities in the sense of being part of our ongoing constitution as organisms" (Freese et al, 2003).

This leads to a question that academics have debated for decades: Is the act of rape a violent crime meant to exert control or a sexual act born of desire? The former involves a psychological explanation of rape, the latter a physiological one. This implicit divide, of body and mind, like that of nature/nurture, biology/culture, serves as the gateway through which we may enter into a deeper understanding of rape. This understanding resides not in one or the other, or even in the space in between, but rather in the realization that there is no space in between at all. This paper explores contemporary research that eliminates the nature/nurture divide, and applies this non-binary approach to an analysis of our understanding of rape in humans. I will consider two foundational texts—Susan Brownmiller's *Against Our Will* and Randy Thornhill and Craig Palmer's *A Natural History of Rape*—which establish the existing schools of thought that position rape's origins as either socially constructed or as a product of evolution. I will then use current research that complicates the differences between these two schools in order to construct a space where

we can consider both of these positions not as mutually exclusive but as both relevant and necessary for an updated understanding of rape. Using Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Darwin, and insights from other feminist evolutionists, I will consider the vitality of a feminist understanding of evolution that combines the cultural and the biological.

### **“A Conscious Process of Intimidation”**

Susan Brownmiller's book *Against Our Will: Men Women and Rape*, published in 1974, proposes that rape is predominantly an act of violence, a tactic used by men to control women. It was Thornhill and Palmer who dubbed Brownmiller's social constructionist argument the “social science explanation”; however, it is more commonly considered the feminist position. It would be unfair to suggest that all feminists, in line with Brownmiller, make the claim that rape is purely an act of violence rather than of sex. There is reason for this generalization, however: it runs counter to the feminist project to concede that rape is rooted in an evolutionarily adapted sexual drive. This would make rape seem natural and leave little room to correct the problem.

Feminism has a long history of rejecting the biological in part because the study of biology has been manipulated and used by men in power to justify their dominance. Elizabeth Grosz says in “Darwin and Feminism”:

Feminists may have had good reason to reject the ways in which the *study*, the representations and techniques used to understand bodies and their processes have been undertaken—there is clearly much that is problematic about many of the assumptions, methods and criteria used in some cases of biological analysis, which have been actively, if unconsciously, used by those with various paternalistic, patriarchal, racist and class commitments to rationalize their various positions” (Grosz 1999, 31).\*

In a particular moment in the evolution of feminism this rejection of the biological may well have served a necessary corrective function, but now, after the advances that have been made, it is possible and valuable to take a more nuanced view.

Even though Brownmiller traces rape all the way back to prehistoric times, she is not interested in thinking of it in evolutionary terms. Her fundamental argument is that males do not use rape as a means of reproduction, but rather as a means to dominate women, and

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\* For a lengthier discussion of feminism's occasional problematic resistance to all things natural and biological see: Grosz (1999, 31-45); Wilson (1999, 7-18); or Sunday and Tobach (1985).

thus rape is a violent tool used to obtain power and control, and not a sexually motivated crime. Rape is a purely human trait, she says. It is *not* found in animals in the wild. She cites Jane Goodall's and Leonard Williams's studies of primates to support this claim.\* This comparison is useful for Brownmiller, as primate mating only occurs during the female estrous cycle—sex is only an option when females are ready to reproduce (Brownmiller 1976, 13). In contrast to animal mating, Brownmiller believes:

Our [human] call to sex is in the *head*... Without a biologically determined mating season, a human male can evince sexual interest in a human female at any time he pleases, and his *psychological* urge is not dependent in the slightest on her biologic readiness or receptivity. What it all boils down to is that the human male *can* rape" (Brownmiller 1976, 13, *emphasis mine*).

This quote shows how distinctly she separates the biological mating of animals with the psychological mating of humans, clearly dividing mind and body, but it does not say where this urge comes from in human males.

Elaine Crovitz, in a review of *Against Our Will*, clarifies that Brownmiller's assertion is that men need rape to affirm their masculinity, while women are reared to be victims in the name of femininity (Crovitz 1977). Thus rape is not connected to a biological urge but to a psychological need. That said, Brownmiller does mention biological differences that give males the *capacity* to rape. For example, much of her argument rests on the physical strength and anatomical makeup of male bodies that affords them the capability and accessibility to women's smaller and differently shaped bodies (Brownmiller 1976, 4). For Brownmiller a biological sexual motivation is not what drives men to rape. Thus her famous closing remarks to the book's introduction boldly states:

Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times. . . . [Rape] is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear (Brownmiller 1976, 14-15).

Brownmiller popularized the rape-as-violence theory in the late 1970s, prompting many academics to do research along the lines she suggested. Most famously, clinical

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\* While Brownmiller cites Williams as explicitly stating that there is no such thing as rape in monkey society, the Goodall anecdote she offers is more vague. In discussing the promiscuity of chimpanzees Goodall proposes that females may take part in mate selection through the avoidance of males they are not interested in. Even in these cases, however, males have been known to get their way after "dogged persistence," i.e. by shaking females out of a tree. Now might we classify that behavior differently if it were in human society? See Jane van Lawick-Goodall. *In The Shadow of Man*. New York: Dell, 1972, 193-194; Leonard Williams. *Man and Monkey*. London: Deutsch, 1967, 157; quoted in (Brownmiller 1976, 3).

psychologist Nicholas Groth in his book *Men Who Rape* argues that rape is not at all a sexually driven act. He defends this position with evidence that many rapists are unable to maintain their erections at the moment of the crime. In addition Groth insists:

careful clinical study of offenders reveals that rape is in fact serving primarily non-sexual needs. It is the sexual expression of power and anger. Forcible sexual assault is motivated more by retaliatory and compensatory motives than by sexual ones. Rape is a pseudosexual act, complex and multidetermined, but addressing issues of hostility (anger) and control (power) more than passion (sexuality) (Groth 1979, 2).

The rape as non-sexual argument brought many improvements in the ways victims of rape were treated in the courts and in society at large. Previously the victims were often blamed for provoking the desires of their attackers. Removing the excuse of male sexual drive from explanations of rape reduced this blaming and helped to alter rape laws. The laws encouraged attorneys to put the victims' sexual pasts on trial, and required that the victims had attempted a physical struggle to try to prevent the rape. In the decade following Brownmiller's book and the social movement that accompanied it, rape laws began changing state-by-state across the nation. In their book *Rape Law Reform*, Spohn and Horney summarize:

The most common changes were (1) redefining rape and replacing the single crime of rape with a series of graded offenses defined by the presence or absence of aggravating conditions; (2) changing the consent standard by eliminating the requirement that the victim physically resist her attacker; (3) eliminating the requirement that the victim's testimony be corroborated; and (4) placing restrictions on the introduction of evidence of the victim's prior sexual conduct" (Spohn and Horney 1992, 21).

This historical context shows how in a given historical period the social constructionist argument played an essential role in countering the use of biological determinism to justify rape. Perhaps with this context in mind, without judgment, and with a more critical eye, we can return to and re-examine those conclusions today.

### **“A Natural History of Rape”**

Although at first Brownmiller's constructionist argument appealed to many academics as well as to a wider readership, inevitably some took issue with this argument. In a far corner some evolutionary psychologists proposed that rape was an adaptive behavior developed in male humans as a result of natural selection. Thornhill and Palmer's controversial text *A*

*Natural History of Rape: Biological Bases of Sexual Coercion* (ANHR) will here serve as a model of the evolutionary explanation. This text, published in 2000, is fairly contemporary and overtly challenges Brownmiller's "social science explanation." It states that rape is a sexual act, a reproductive strategy that is a product of the evolution of male sexuality.

Thornhill and Palmer base their argument in natural selection, in the Darwinian idea that over a long period of time types of bodies, or bodily features, that are particularly suited to thrive and reproduce in the environments in which they find themselves will grow in number. The beings so constructed will be more fit to survive in these environments and more capable of reproducing successively (Darwin 1951, 80). The theory of natural selection itself is not problematic for feminists. Moore and Travis state, "The general principles of natural selection are not inherently sexist and simply stated propose that individuals vary; some variations are more favorable than others; some of this variation is heritable; differential reproductive successes may occur; and differing gene frequencies may result" (Moore and Travis 2000, 44).

In recent years evolutionary psychologists have used an interpretation of Darwin's theory of natural selection to explain human behaviors that may or may not be the cause of a direct-selection process. (That is, the question is whether the behavior became widespread as a result of natural selection.) The difficulty of proposing direct-selection theories to account for particular behaviors is that even if the causal link is probable, it is difficult to prove in a scientific manner. Consequently, evolutionary psychology has been criticized as the softest of the "soft" sciences (Coyne 2000, 27). Thornhill and Palmer support their claim regarding rape with a vague combination of two hypotheses. Thornhill defines rape as a "specific adaptation" (or a direct-selection). Palmer refers to rape as a "by-product of evolution." In their review of Thornhill and Palmer's book, Coyne and Berry, who express skepticism about the book's claims, explain that Thornhill's hypothesis means that "natural selection explicitly promoted the act" (rape), and Palmer's hypothesis means that "there was no direct selection for rape; rather it is an accidental product of selection for, say, male promiscuity and aggression" (Coyne and Berry 2000, 121). In other words, Thornhill and Palmer are straddling two explanations, and although they are both derived from a particular interpretation of Darwinian theory, the by-product theory has a very different set of implications than the direct-selection theory. Coyne and Berry propose, for example, "playing the piano—an activity unlikely to have been instrumental in the evolution of the

brain—is an evolutionary by-product because it depends on a brain that was itself produced by natural selection” (Coyne and Berry 2000, 121). While the by-product theory is worth exploring, first I would like to delve into the more contentious direct-selection theory.

Thornhill and Palmer argue that evolution has given males, as a means of maximizing the number of offspring they produce, three endowments: physical attractiveness, strength or status, and, for when those don't work, the ability to rape (Koss 2000, 183). The evidence they offer for this thesis comes from Robert Trivers's “parental investment theory” which proposes “in sexually reproducing species males are more indiscriminate when it comes to selecting sexual partners, whereas females are usually the more sexually choosy sex” (Vandermassen 2011, 733). The explanation underlying this theory is that men seek to distribute the maximum amount of sperm to the maximum number of partners, while the biological demands of mothering require that women pick a mate who has good genes and who will protect them during pregnancy and provide for the family during child rearing. This differential approach to sex is the root of an evolutionary explanation of rape, in that it establishes males' sexual proclivity for more and varied sexual partners in order to increase the possibilities of reproduction.

Thornhill and Palmer further support their thesis with evidence from various studies, though a number of academics have stated that these studies were outdated or poorly conducted, and that Thornhill and Palmer have twisted the numbers to fit their argument.\* Be that as it may, Thornhill and Palmer put forward evidence suggesting that most women who are targeted by rapists are of reproductive age, because males' inherent if subconscious desire is to produce offspring through this forced copulation. Thornhill and Palmer also argue that women, too, understand, however subliminally, that rape is all about reproduction. In this regard they suggest that married women, women of reproductive age, and women who experience vaginal penetration during rape are more traumatized by the experience and fight back more readily. Because, the argument goes, such rape threatens to impregnate them and thus interferes with their desire to choose their reproductive partners (Thornhill and Palmer 2000, 85-104).

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\* See Vandermassen (2011), Dadlez et al. (2009), Koss (2000), Brownmiller (2000), Zeedyk (2007), and Coyne and Berry (2000) in the bibliography for further elaboration of this point.

Thornhill and Palmer's argument offers much to critique, most notably a conclusion that might be drawn from it: that rape is to some extent justified as it is rooted in human male biology, an urge that is beyond males' capacity to control. Thornhill and Palmer resist any explanations that suggest that social circumstances can influence, contribute to, or deter the drive to rape. They are very clear in their book about this position, stating: "In direct contrast to the social science explanation of rape, the clearest implication of evolutionary theory is that the motivation for rape is a result of the differences between male and female *sexuality*" (Thornhill and Palmer 2000, 171, *emphasis in original*). Although they allow that culture *exists*, they suggest: "The best way to obtain a better understanding of the role of culture in human rape is to approach the subject from the only generally accepted scientific explanation of the behavior of living things: evolution by natural selection" (Thornhill and Palmer 2002, 284). These claims are based on the suggestion that one must position oneself on either side of the nature/nurture divide, and also on an idea of evolution that is notably static. For Thornhill and Palmer evolution is something that happened long ago, during the Pleistocene (the period in which *Homo erectus* evolved). Thus for them the male drive to rape is universal and unchanging.\*

### **"An Integrative Approach"**

While both the evolutionary as well as the social constructionist explanations are problematic for a variety of reasons, my focus in this paper is on how uncompromising they are. Brownmiller so absolutely rejects any biological explanation that she claims no animal species outside of mankind practices rape, without providing sufficient evidence for this claim. (And it should be said that even if some other species engaged in rape this would not logically eliminate the possibility that these species' environments or social relationships played a role in this behavior.) And what purpose does a staunch rejection of all social constructionist arguments serve for Thornhill and Palmer, especially as they are already willing to consider multiple explanations and the by-product explanation among them? Since the latter explanation involves evolution affecting our biology as well as our psychology, and thus our culture, they should concede that rape is integrally connected to our cultural environment. From this perspective there could be an evolutionary explanation for rape

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\* For more information on the debate over human evolution during the Pleistocene see: Bolhuis et al. 2011.

without Thornhill and Palmer's static biological determinism by which male-female sexual relations, rape included, are fixed forever. To analyze this concept further, I turn in particular to Elizabeth Grosz's reading of Darwin, in her book *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* (2004), and I will also discuss the work of some feminist evolutionists.

Grosz uses a particular reading of Darwin's theory to propose that the biological body is not a static entity inscribed by culture. In her book she seeks to explore "how the biological induces the cultural rather than inhibits it, how biological complexity impels the complications and variability of culture itself?" (Grosz 2004, 4). She emphasizes the plasticity of the biological body, and the way that it interacts *with* its environment, rather than only acting upon it, and being acted upon by it. In other words, not only have our bodies changed because of our environments, but, as we evolve, we also contribute to the evolution of those environments. Further, joining ranks with the philosopher Daniel Dennett she proposes, "If the forces of natural selection function as Darwin outlined, then mind itself must be the result of the same relentless processes of weeding, extermination, recombination, and variation that Darwin attributes to bodily existence" (Grosz 2004, 53).

Grosz is interested in the larger goal of collapsing the nature/culture divide through understanding the plasticity of biology and by applying Darwinian theory to the cultural as well as the biological. In this regard it is useful to look at the work of some feminist evolutionists who are specifically interested in mediating between the feminist and evolutionary psychologist positions. While there are seemingly irresolvable differences between the two fields, feminist evolutionists are emphasizing the necessity of an exchange of ideas. Many feminist evolutionists reject the evolutionary psychologists' idea that the evolution of *homo sapiens* is, for all intents and purposes, something that happened in our distant past and that any changes then produced should be considered permanent and universal.\* Further, they suggest that environmental influences must be considered in every case and that evolutionary changes are contingent upon the context from which they emerge. This accords with Grosz's reading of Darwin's theory, which suggests not that the "fittest" survive everywhere and always, but rather that certain variations are most likely to increase in population in certain environments. Stressing the value of flexibility, she writes,

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\* For more on this see Fehr 2012.

“Fitness carries with it the notion of an openness to changing environments; it is not necessarily the best adapted to a fixed and unchanging context” (Grosz 2004, 47).

Mary Koss, in her response to *A Natural History of Rape*, stresses that something as complex as rape cannot be explained through one-factor theories. She remarks, “The conceptualization of biological influences, not as hardwiring but as potential pathways that are shaped by the environment, can lead to research with practical implications” (Koss 2000, 188). Other feminist evolutionists offer a more active picture of the selection process. Patricia Adair Gowaty is an advocate of breaking down the boundaries that exist between feminists and evolutionary biologists. As regards rape, she suggests that an explanation for this act requires the cooperation of the two subdisciplines. She explains her attempt as it differs from ANHR: “Whereas Thornhill and Palmer focused on traits supposedly fixed in the human psyche during the Pleistocene, my focus is on dynamic selective pressures affecting natural and sexual selection of social behavior and phenotypic evolution in real time, ongoing, even now” (Gowaty 2003, 61). Indeed this fits well with Palmer’s rape as by-product-of-evolution theory.\* As mentioned above, this theory suggests that rape is not a *specific* adaptation, but the result of other changes that have created the conditions for it to occur.

### **The Possibility for Change**

Illuminating the distinction between the direct-selection and by-product theories can help to bring clarity and compromise to this debate. Coyne attempts to write the explanation off because *everything* is a by-product of evolution (Coyne and Berry 2000, 121), but I say we should hover on this fact for the very same reason. Perhaps what we have been missing all along is a theory that accounts for the psychological and cultural *as well as* for the physical impetuses for rape. By understanding that we cannot separate the mind from the body—by recognizing that the brain-mind is both a physical part of our body and the source of our psychology—we can realize that the physical act of rape is intertwined with the psychology behind it and the environment surrounding it. Grosz, critiquing a disembodied feminism, proposes, “Without some reconfigured concept of the biological body, models of subject-inscription, production, or constitution lack material force; paradoxically, they lack

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\* It was on this issue that Thornhill and Palmer’s opinions diverged, with Thornhill insisting on the direct-selection theory, and Palmer wavering towards the by-product theory (Thornhill and Palmer 2000).

corporeality” (Grosz 2004, 4). Until we are able to rethink the body/mind and nature/culture relationships as symbiotic rather than dualistic, we will not properly be able to theorize about the causes of rape in human beings. As Vandermassen writes, paraphrasing Malmuth and Malmuth (1999), “Only through an integrative approach, incorporating knowledge from evolutionary, genetic, developmental, and cultural levels of analysis, will we arrive at a comprehensive examination of why (some) men rape” (Vandermassen 2011, 744). But it is more than an integrative approach, for this “incorporation” of knowledge from all of these realms does not quite do away with the boundaries that separate them. What needs to be recognized is that the evolutionary and the cultural explanations are one and the same. Grosz offers a thorough summary of this concept on a systematic level:

Evolution, if it functions as an explanatory model at all, functions all the way up, from the lowliest species to the most elevated of cultural and intellectual activities. The systematic cohesion of modes of reproduction (forms of repetition) with their resulting mutations which are imperfect or innovative copies (forms of difference) and modes of “natural” selection (systems of differentiation) produces a system, or rather, an asystematic systematicity, that is co-extensive with all of life, life in its detail, life in its political and cultural as well as its natural forms (Grosz 1999, 39).

Feminism was not wrong to fear that embracing the biological *can* be dangerous. History shows us that the walls separating the social and biological schools of thought emerged from a rejection of biological deterministic thinking that sought to justify gender inequality. This paper has considered the historical context in order to show that a feminist position need not be inherently opposed to biological considerations. Revisiting this division reveals that not only is it unnecessary, but also that it hinders the theoretical possibilities available to anyone working from within either school of thought. (Thus this paper is not only about rape but also about the importance of utilizing an interdisciplinary framework for approaching and tackling issues as vast and threatening as rape.)

Fusing a feminist agenda with an evolutionary perspective will help to eliminate the dangers of biological determinism and set a new trajectory for rethinking rape paradigms and solutions. In the same way that Susan Brownmiller thought her work done in the ‘70s would help to eradicate rape, so Thornhill and Palmer also claimed their ultimate goal was to end the heinous act of rape. Although both viewpoints I have explored in this paper make important progress towards identifying the motivation for rape—in human males

specifically—their insistence on either a social or evolutionary explanation leaves gaps in their understanding. If we are to make progress towards unraveling such a critical matter, we must utilize all of the tools necessary to move forward. As I have demonstrated, a particular reading of Darwin’s theory of natural selection can be used to collapse the distinction between mind and body, so that we can see the evolution of the biological directly inducing the evolution of the psychological and cultural. This collapsing is vital in the feminist struggle against rape because it allows for the plasticity of the biological as well as the cultural, and thus opens up the possibility for change.

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