The scandal of manhood: ‘Baby rape’ and the politicization of sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa

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Abstract
This paper traces the genealogy of sexual violence as a public and political issue in South Africa, from its initial marginalization and minimization during the apartheid era, through to the explosion of anguish and anger which marked the post-apartheid moment, and most dramatically the years 2001 and 2002. Of particular interest is the question of how and why the problem of sexual violence came to be seen as a scandal of manhood, putting male sexuality under critical public scrutiny. The paper argues that the sudden, intense eruption of public anxiety and argument about sexual violence which marked the post-apartheid period had relatively little to do with feminist analysis and politics (influential though this has been in some other respects). Rather, the key to understanding this politicization of sexual violence lies with its resonances with wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of the national subject and the moral community of the country’s fledgling democracy.

Keywords: Masculinity, sexual violence, post-apartheid, gender, male sexuality

Introduction
The demise of apartheid in South Africa produced many surprises, not least the rather dramatic and unexpected politicization of sexuality. Sexuality is always political, in the sense of being saturated with the effects of power. Yet, in ways which are reminiscent of periods of unusually intense social and political change elsewhere in the world, post-apartheid South Africa has experienced extraordinarily intense public controversy, activism and confrontation in respect of sexual issues. More unusually, however, the principal site of concern in the South African case has been the sexual propensities of men rather than women; indeed, the post-apartheid politicization of sexuality has been closely intertwined with a perceived crisis of masculinity. There have been two principal sites of public representation and argument along these lines: HIV/AIDS and sexual violence. This paper deals with the latter.1
Up until the mid-1990s, the issue of sexual violence in South Africa had languished on the margins of public debate and political engagement. Intermittent media foci on rape excited some brief episodes of public concern and interest, but these receded quickly. In the main, sexual violence was shrouded in varying orders of secrecy and silence; and public debate on the matter was scant. By the end of 2001, however, public talk about sexual violence—and rape in particular—was incessant and prominent: a preoccupation of media talk shows, magazine articles, letters to editors, and regularly the topic of documentaries and other forms of social commentary. This media blitz both echoed and orchestrated calls from members of the public to break the silence and bring the dark unspoken secrets of sexual violence into the open. The issue moved rapidly to the epicentre of a political furore. Waves of popular anger brought protest marches to the streets. As various NGOs and community organizations challenged the politicians to take the lead in combating the scourge of rape, government spokespeople scrambled to express their disgust and despair at the unfolding saga of sexual assault. Parliament called for public hearings on child rape and abuse; the deputy President initiated a national convention to plan a mass regeneration campaign; debates about punishment for sexual crimes raged fiercely in parliament and in the media, with many calling vehemently for the reinstatement of the death penalty for rapists; and several vigilante groups took matters into their own hands and dispensed peoples’ justice to suspected perpetrators of rape.

The most vociferous of these outbursts were preoccupied with sexual menace on the part of men, which was typically not diminished by insinuations about any complicity on the part of their female victims. It was often men themselves who led the charge. For example, the South African Men’s Forum, comprising men who had a personal history of sexual violence, insisted that “until you address the issue of men, and the violence they perpetrate in our society, you will not begin to steer society towards moral regeneration”. In a country long accustomed to dismissing sexual violence as either a male prerogative, or an understandable—if unfortunate—response to the sexual temptations or dissidence of women, this anxiety about male sexuality was especially unusual.

This paper traces the genealogy of sexual violence as a contested public and political issue, from its initial marginalization and minimization during the apartheid era, through to the explosion of anguish and anger which marked the post-apartheid moment, and most dramatically the years 2001 and 2002. Of particular interest is the question of how and why the problem of sexual violence came to be seen as a scandal of manhood, putting male sexuality under critical public scrutiny. I argue that the sudden, intense eruption of public anxiety and argument about sexual violence which marked the post-apartheid period, had relatively little to do with feminist analysis and politics (influential though this has been in some other respects). Rather, the key to understanding this politicization of sexual violence lies with its resonances with wider political and ideological anxieties about the manner of the national subject and the moral community of the country’s newly established democracy. This articulation between sexual violence and the idea of the nation, was premised in the first instance, on a discursive reconstitution of the figure of the rapist (from anonymous predator, to father and provider), the figure of the victim (from sexually sullied, to morally pure) and the trauma of the rape (from physical harm, to psychological trauma and damage). The discovery of baby rape—a form of violation previously unheard of in the country (at least within public fora)—played a critical role here. The sexual violation of babies produced a starkly binary opposition of moral good versus evil: the victim of sexual violence was unambiguously innocent, pure and fragile, as against the unmitigated and undiluted brutality of the actions of the perpetrator. This moral polarity in turn became a
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précis of the fledgling South African nation: its newborn good, fragile and unstable in the midst of destructive and predatory forces. In ways which were either tacit or explicit in the public discourse on baby rape, the sexual violation of babies was metaphorically constituted as a moral violation of the new nation. And with the rape of babies then instantiating sexual victimhood more widely, the problem of sexual violence was reconfigured as a symbol of, and mirror upon, the fragile normative foundations of the post-apartheid order as a whole.

The argument is premised theoretically on a distinction between the politics of sexuality and the politicization of sexuality. The paper takes its cue from the proposition developed in the work of Michel Foucault and others, that the regulation of sexuality has inhered in the production of the modern state and its conditions of citizenship, as much in its colonial permutations (e.g., Stoler 1995), as in Western variants (Foucault 1979, Mosse 1985). Modern sexuality is always, therefore, a political phenomenon: entangled in relations of power, and fashioned in ways which bear the imprints of other vectors of inequality and difference, such as race, class, status and generation. Yet, at certain moments, the regulation of sexuality is unusually politicized, in episodes of intense controversy and confrontation. “Such incidents of rampant unease”, writes Rose, “may be best understood as episodes in a relatively continuous public discourse about sexuality” (Rose 1998: 1198); but their intensity and drama illuminate in unusually vivid ways how the discursive constitution of sexuality is enmeshed within a wider matrix of moral anxiety, social instability and political contestation.

Since the principal interest in this paper lies in how sexual violence is “brought into discourse” (Foucault 1979: 11), the argument is developed largely on a discursive terrain. I am interested in how public knowledge of sexual violence was constituted pre- and post-1994, and how these discursive processes articulated with modes of public protest and political confrontation. However, the focus in this paper is limited to openly public conversations and confrontations about sex and sexuality, in a range of media with large national audiences.

The marginalization of sexual violence under apartheid

Although research on the history of sexual violence in South Africa remains limited, we know enough to establish that there has been a long-standing and serious problem of sexual violence across different races and classes in this society, intertwined with powerful impulses to conceal it socially and marginalize it politically. This social and political diminution of sexual violence was profoundly interconnected with its legal definition, in ways which rendered rape—as the extremity of sexual violence—a problem at the margins of the social order, a symptom of social and moral deviance rather than a more fundamental malaise warranting concerted attention. Before 1994, rape was legally defined as the imposition of unwanted vaginal sex by an adult man upon an adult woman (Ross 1993: 8). This excluded homosexual rape from the scope of the law, as well as sexual violence within marriage.

A tacit hierarchy thus informed the legal conceptualization and adjudication of sexual violence. The censure associated with rape, as the most extreme and reprehensible form of sexual violence, was limited to heterosexual encounters. And even here, the perceived extremity of the violence was inversely proportional to the degree of emotional and sexual intimacy involved. Rape could only occur outside the home; the figure of the rapist was that of the predatory stranger.

The prism of race also had a powerful effect on the apartheid state’s limited sightings of sexual violence. With visions of black sexuality steeped in familiar colonial stereotypes of
the rapacious lust of black men and essential lasciviousness of black women, state institutions were particularly disinterested in the problem of worsening sexual violence within black communities, and police were all the more disinclined to act on reports of such violence when the complainants were black. Recognition that sexual violence was widespread became exactly the basis on which the issue was ignored.6

Sexual violence was also the site of other, more culturally specific, practices of secrecy. Often, the more intimate the setting of the violence, the less the likelihood of its public recognition and acknowledgement. In African communities, if “contemporary research suggests an awkward inter-generational silence on issues of sexuality” (Delius and Glaser 2002: 30) generally, the secrecy attached to sexual violence was that much more forceful, particularly within marriage and the family. The practice of lobola (bridewealth) created a marital contract between families, which structured reciprocal entitlements and obligations. Exposing sexual violence within the marriage—particularly if seriously physical harmful to the woman—jeopardized the contract. Familial interests in keeping the contract in place therefore created powerful incentives to suppress unpalatable exposures, putting intense pressure on women to hide their pain and retreat into silence. Such cultural logics of secrecy were further reinforced by informal economies of sex and sexual transactions. If exposing rape within a relationship or within the home threatened to jeopardize the rapist’s contribution to the woman’s or family’s livelihood, this created often overwhelming material incentives to conceal the violence and accommodate it along with the other burdens of everyday life.

Although all too little is known about the history of child sexual abuse in South Africa, similar impulses to secrecy have been suggested: that in the knowledge that such practices were shameful and offensive, family members were complicit in efforts to conceal them from public exposure—and in the process, in order to minimize the moral and psychological discomfort within the family, to banish the issue from zones of more intimate acknowledgement and intervention as well (Lewis 1997). As Sowetan woman resident Mary Mabaso put it, “if people know a girl was raped, no-one will marry her. And others can come now and rape her because she has been raped before. She will never be safe” (Russell 1991: 12).

In short, therefore, the political and cultural regulation of sexual violence under apartheid was marked by powerful strategies of concealment, banishing the problem to the margins of public discourse and attention—with particular force within the terrains of marriage and family. And these modes of power were predicated discursively on particular renditions of the figure of the perpetrator of sexual violence and the manner of sexual victimhood. The perpetrator was rendered as a deviant stranger, the antithesis of the figure of the father/provider. Indeed, since the father—instantiating adult men who were known to women—was represented as a man who wielded his authority as the protector of women and children, the likelihood of rape was seen to be highest among men who were unknown and anti-social: stray beasts, roaming on the margins of society. Rape was a quintessentially anti-social act, the symptom of brute force and untamed lust, and the rapist was typically a faceless, predatory stranger—without personality or motives other than an inchoate sexual menace.

It followed too, that sexual violence was represented primarily as a crime against a woman’s body. If the rapist was the anti-social brute whose innate lust had got the better of him, then the object of his violence was the sexualized body of the woman. Her individuality, her self, were irrelevant to the act of brutal passion: she was simply an instance of the female physical form. There was little sense of the inner psychic trauma of
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rape—damage which would deepen and worsen the longer it was suppressed and denied. With rape (as the most severe form of sexual violence) rendered as the actions of aberrant and marginal brutes, and its victimization understood as a relatively superficial process of bodily violation, there was little sense that sexual violence constituted any fundamental threat to the moral foundations of the society, or the legitimacy of the practices of male authority which informed it.

The mounting public recognition of, and concern with, the issue of sexual violence was therefore directly dependent, in the first instance, on its discursive reconstitution, which re-imagined the figure of the perpetrator, the victim of sexual violence and the manner of the violation. Slowly at first, and then with sudden and dramatic urgency, the focus of representation shifted from the predations of hostile strangers in dark alleys, to the brutality of the father himself, within the cocoon of familial intimacy. And the imagery of anonymous rape victims, previously typically cast as morally ambiguous women who risked rape by sexual temptation, increasingly gave way to that of sexually naïve and morally pure subjects, psychologically scarred as well as physically violated.

The creation of a public issue

These discursive shifts and their political repercussions—slow and uncertain at first—were initially triggered by feminist mobilization against rape, animated by a critique of the familiar myths of rape which had pervaded the public imagination. The first rape crisis centres were established in 1977 and 1979, with the first national rape crisis conference held in 1980.

Beyond feminist circles, however, it seems that the first stirrings of a wider public debate about rape were felt in 1982, as a consequence of media stories about the trauma of rape, and the secondary victimization suffered by complainants at the hands of the South African Police. This sudden flurry of interest prompted the appointment of an inquiry by the South African Law Commission into “the procedure for the laying of rape charges and the medico-forensic aspects of rape” (SA Law Commission 1985: para 1.1). The Commission’s sensitivity to rape as a source of trauma to the victim marked the beginning of an overtly psychological (rather than purely physical) conceptualization of victimhood, which would ultimately bear directly on the ways in which the horrors of sexual violence were represented and exposed.

At this stage, however, the implications of this conceptual shift were largely invisible. While recognizing that “there is growing public awareness of the frequency of rape”,7 the Commission was nevertheless intent on producing a suitably modest and contained formulation of the extent of the problem, so as to dispel “the impression that something is radically wrong with the social order and with the law and with the process of law relating to rape” (SA Law Commission 1985: para 1.3) Overall, rape was not seen to be a fundamental social problem, and the Commission’s report excited little debate in parliament, nor much media interest.

Popular mobilization beyond the women’s movement—itself rather attenuated—was slow to develop. The conditions producing high levels of sexual violence within the country were deep-rooted and long-established. And, as retrospective readings of the past now reveal, the realities of sexual violence have long been known, not least in poorer communities subject to harsh living conditions. By the late 1970s, rape had taken on particularly insidious forms among township youth, with the advent of jack-rolling (seen as a game of kidnap and rape (Russell 1991: 65) of girls by gangs of youths.) Here, rape had
become “a new style” (Andersson et al. 2000) for the assertion of a brutalizing masculinity. Signs of a “culture of sexual violence” (Russell 1991: 63) were becoming prominent. Yet it was only in February 1990 that the first march against sexual violence in South Africa’s history of South Africa took place. Spearheaded by community leader Mary Mabaso, under the auspices of the Interdenominational Prayer Women’s League, the march took to the streets of Soweto “to show the rapists that we are not happy” (Russell 1991: 63). The protesters were largely, if not all, women. Alarmed at the extent of rape and sexual abuse in Soweto, the organizers mobilized the support of other concerned mothers who “cannot stand this any more, ... worried about the lives and futures of our children”. The rape of teenagers and children was uppermost in their minds. As Mary Mabaso explained, “we asked everyone to make their own placards, and there were lots of different ones. ‘Stop Rape because You are Damaging the Future of the Young Girls’ ... ‘Hands off our Children’. The last one referred particularly to the fathers because of the crisis we have of fathers abusing their own children” (Russell 1991: 70; emphasis added).

Here, for the first time, male sexual propriety and more particularly, that of the father—was publicly called into question. But the power of the protest was limited. The march made national television news, and prompted a few take back the night marches in the aftermath of the protest. Their impact was short-lived, however, and the issue slipped from public view once again.

Feminist lobbying against sexual violence (with more of a focus on adult than child victims) intensified in the wake of the constitutional negotiations process of the early-1990s, bearing fruit in the provisions for gender equality, and protection from physical harm (including sexual violence) which would become entrenched in the new constitution’s Bill of Rights. In 1993, three draft bills on women’s rights issues were tabled in parliament, including the Prevention of Domestic Violence Draft Bill (which criminalized sexual violence within married couples). But, according to feminist activists Gouws and Kadalie “the debate in parliament was embarrassing in its irrelevance and by the patronizing attitudes of its male members” (Gouws and Kadalie 1994: 221). So, notwithstanding the few moments of recognition and concern, the problem of sexual violence—particularly in familial settings—was still largely a non-issue: the butt of sexist stereotyping and political disinterest, in parliament as much as within the wider society.

The issue began to come into public view more intensely and acutely after 1994, in the post-apartheid milieu. Tellingly, it was a focus on the violent sexual abuse of children—cases which subverted the comforting image of the protective and fatherly male most powerfully—which excited the highest orders of concern. But even then, until 2001, it remained a story of intermittent sightings of sexual violence, with feint to moderate signs of activism.

The removal of apartheid’s media censorship regime created new public spaces within which to represent and grapple with the realities of sexual violence (Posel 2005). In many instances, the problem was located most vividly within largely Black urban communities. A series of television dramas—with huge audiences across races, genders and generations—were crafted as social exposes of violence in urban townships, including sexual violence of various types. For the first time, programmes designed for family viewing tackled problems of adult rape and child sexual abuse head-on.

Child sexual abuse made a brief headline appearance again in 1997, with the claim that “in South Africa child abuse [including sexual abuse] had reached epidemic proportions” (HSRC 1997). The media focus and public interest remained fleeting, however, until June 1998, when the beginnings of a more sustained shift in public mood became evident. It
emerged in response to the sentencing of police sergeant Mandisi Mpengesi, for the murder of a man who had raped one of his twin daughters in January 1997. Himself a survivor of childhood sexual abuse who then became a child-abuse investigator in the sprawling township of Khayelitsha, Mpengesi briefly captured the public imagination as an heroic vigilante warrior in a lax justice system which failed the child victims of sexual assault. Angry crowds protesting his 9 year prison sentence for the murder picketed the Western Cape High Court.

This was the first instance of public anger animated by a changing sense of the victim of sexual violence: as defenceless, vulnerable and morally innocent children, betrayed by a system which ought to have protected them. But the sense of Mpengesi’s valour vindicated the figure of the father, as the defender and protector of the home. Indeed, as the victim of child sexual abuse turned warrior, fired up with moral rage at the violation of his daughters, Mpengesi’s biography epitomized the moral integrity and authority of the patriarch, as the pillar of social order and fount of moral community. It would take three years yet for that figure to be plunged into crisis.

With the high profile afforded to this court case, the issue of child rape received more sustained media coverage than typically the case in the past. NGOs dealing with child abuse exposed schoolboys playing a game called Catch and Rape, and declared it “time to challenge other men on child abuse”. However, the call did not yet strike much of a chord. The following year, the problem of adult rape hit the headlines early in 1999 with the much-publicized rape of journalist Charlene Smith, along with a resurfacing of the issue of child rape. This time, the spur was its relation to the AIDS pandemic, in allegations that HIV-positive men were raping young girls, believing that this would cleanse them of the disease. A feature article in a national newspaper cited a prominent government official endorsing research findings that “the myth that AIDS could be cured by having sex with a virgin is prevalent thinking in Kwa Zulu Natal”. And a magistrate there was quoted as reporting that “at least five child rape victim cases are being dealt with every day”. Yet, according to the article, the issue was largely suppressed by the “overwhelming silence over AIDS”.

The issue of the virgin myth then became the site of heated and persistent controversy, with political leaders, community activists, and researchers joining the fray. It was the first public insight into the close connections which had developed between sexual violence and AIDS: sexual violence exacerbated the spread of the HIV, and the secrecy which attached to AIDS compounded the urge to hide the prevalence of sexual violence, particularly the rape of virgins whose purity could allegedly cleanse the contamination of AIDS.

If Mpengesi’s court case had marked a significant moment in the recasting of the victims of sexual violence as morally innocent and defenceless, the discursive articulation of rape and AIDS gave a dramatic fillip to this shift. In terms of the virgin myth, it was exactly the moral purity and sexual innocence of the children (offering the promise of redemption to a sexually tainted man) which made them victims of rape. And the violation of the child by an HIV-positive man was a graphic instantiation of the polluting quality of rape: not only was the child morally violated, but the risk of the transmission of the HIV virus doomed the child to the prospect of death. With this, the image of the rapist also began to shift. The spread of the HIV/AIDS traversed society at large; various public health education campaigns had already impressed the enormity of the epidemic firmly within the public imagination. The figure of the rapist as an HIV-positive man therefore positioned him much more firmly within the social mainstream—a member of a community, rather than a deviant and faceless brute on the fringes of communal life.
With public anxieties about the brutal sexual predations of men beginning to mount, the first large public march by men protesting against sexual violence took place in Cape Town on Saturday 25 November 2000. Organized by an inter-religious forum to condemn violence against women and to call for stricter sentences for perpetrators, the march drew thousands of men onto the streets. So, by 2000, the problem of worsening sexual violence, and particularly the sexual victimization of children, was clearly on the agenda of the press, and increasingly a subject of political engagement. And the signs of critical public scrutiny of male sexuality were becoming apparent, even among some groups of men themselves. These stirrings were partly the product of feminist efforts to focus attention on the problem of sexual violence. But its visibility was largely the product of more conventional sites of moral outrage. Certainly it was the latter which exploded in October 2001, triggered by the first reported case of baby rape, followed in rapid succession by many more such cases given saturation coverage in the media.

Baby rape
In late October 2001, six men, aged between 24 and 66, were arrested on charges of gang-raping a 9 month-old baby girl, in Louisvale, a small and impoverished community in the Northern Cape. The details of the crime were scant: the baby's mother had gone to buy food, leaving the baby in the care of someone else; later, the child's grandmother had seen the baby covered in blood, and called the police. But the moral horror was absolute. It rendered the six suspects immediately and thoroughly guilty in the eyes of the media and public opinion, and sparked a media frenzy on the subject of baby rape. This was a newly invented category of sexual violation, and never before the focus of any media commentary or public debate. The first newspapers reports of the Louisvale incident were carried on 30 October. By 1 November, the press had suddenly uncovered two more cases of the rape of the very young—all the more alarming because the perpetrators were members of the baby's family. Equally rapidly, the press was also awash with a litany of shocking statistics of child rape cases, going all the way back to 1994. By the 5 November, The Star announced that “child rape had rocketed to a national crisis”, with no less than 58 child rape cases a day. And by the end of that month, a further 13 cases of child or baby rape had been documented. Indeed for the next year and more, most newspapers carried stories about rapes—in dramatic contrast to the generally desultory, if intermittently more animated, coverage of the issue which had marked the post-1994 period until then. Within the space of a month, sexual violence—and particularly the rape of the very young—had suddenly become a national obsession, and the focus of overt public anguish and political alarm. Members of the public dialling in to radio talks shows could speak of little else; letters columns in newspapers and magazines were consumed with the issue. “After the brutal rape of 9 month-old baby, should we not be at war?” read the headline of a letters to the Editor column, quoting from one of the letters on the subject. An editorial in the influential newspaper, The Sowetan, deemed it a state of emergency. The office of the Minister for Justice and Constitutional Development was “inundated with emails from people who are concerned and outraged by recent incidents of violence against children”. Protest marches took to the streets; public vigils were held. Calls for vengeance were loud and persistent. Groups of protestors picketing outside court hearings of alleged rapists, as well as participants in radio programmes and writing into the press, joined some political parties in calling for the return of the death penalty as an appropriate punishment for rape,
The scandal of manhood—a moral panic

Elements of the narrative presented above bear strong resemblances to the notion of a moral panic first conceptualized by Stanley Cohen.

particularly child rape. In other instances, mob justice took over, as alleged rapists were attacked and punished by groups of vigilantes.

The ambit of argument widened rapidly. The spate of rape, particularly child and baby rapes, was now interpreted as evidence of profound failures of political leadership, along with the gross inadequacies of an under-resourced and unresponsive justice system. With the state under pressure to respond, a special parliamentary debate was rapidly convened to discuss the horrific rape of Baby Tsephang (the pseudonym given to the 9 month-old baby raped in Louisvale). Its proceedings declared that “almost every speaker said South Africa had been shamed”, and a “unanimous motion committed MPs to fight and expose the scourge, and campaign for the harshest punishment permissible under the Constitution”.20

As had been the case in other societies—such as France (Vigarello 2001) and Namibia (Green 1999)—it was the effective exposé of child sexual abuse which had the effect of electrifying the politics of sexual violence more generally. Press coverage of different types of rape proliferated. During the course of the next year, television viewers saw graphic footage of rape in prisons; dramatic revelations were made about the extent of sexual violence in schools, where schoolgirls were the victims of sexual coercion from school-teachers as much as fellow pupils. And increasingly the scope of public judgements widened to condemn the full spectrum of sexual violence, as an indictment of the very moral fibre of the nation.

With President Mbeki remaining reticent on the subject, Deputy President Zuma was forthright in pronouncing South African society sick, and declaring the need for a wholesale programme of moral regeneration. Addressing the Moral Regeneration Movement National Consultative Meeting, convened in the immediate aftermath of the rape of Baby Tsephang, Zuma was emphatic: “there is a consensus that there is something seriously wrong in our society. We are still haunted by the news of six adult men having raped a 9 month-old baby, and there are many other cases, which display barbarism and moral decay of the worst kind”.21 Nor was he alone in this mode of questioning. “What has become of us? Why have we—and more especially men—become sexual cannibals?”, pondered journalist Lucky Mazibuko. Letters to newspapers protested the moral betrayal of the country’s struggle: “baby rape mocks liberation”, ran one of the headlines.

The idea of South Africa’s moral degeneracy in turn struck a powerful chord in other zones of public vigilance, as the recognition of a fundamental sexual malaise grew to encompass other sorts of crime and degradation. In Zuma’s words, “the lack of respect for the sanctity of human life, for the next person, private property, disregard for the law of the land, lack of parental control over children, and the general blurring of the lines between right and wrong and continuing to plague our communities”.22 The call for moral regeneration galvanized by the baby rape, now encompassed the “blurring of ... right and wrong” across the board.

Sexual violence, then, had rapidly become a trope of degradation, violation and moral frailty in all its manifestations. Rape now exemplified the most fundamental political and moral challenges confronting the newborn democratic nation: the terms and conditions of the new nation’s moral community, the manner of the national subject (who are we that we can do such things to our children?), and the meaning of hard-fought liberation and democracy.
Societies appear to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible. (Cohen 1980: 9)

We have seen that the production of the problem of sexual violence in post-apartheid South Africa in many ways followed this course: an issue, beginning to take shape within the public imagination, suddenly rocketed to the forefront of public and political concern. A new category of experience (baby rape) was rapidly constituted, and new patterns of sexual violation were suddenly discovered. In the midst of this, there was widespread alarm at the prospect that the newborn democracy, the fledgling nation, was sick to its core, confronted with the threat of moral death at the very inception of its new life. For a period of several months, the sense of fragility was intense and the enormity of the danger writ large. Then, as is the case with moral panics elsewhere, the phase of acute anxiety passed, and the visibility of the problem of sexual violence receded somewhat. In the latter months of 2003, there have been relatively few reports of baby rape, and the mode of reporting on rape more generally has been much calmer and less prominent.

Yet, there is at least one significant difference between Cohen’s version of a moral panic and the politicization of sexual violence in South Africa. In Cohen’s case, the production of a moral panic involved the discursive demonization of a delinquent individual or group lurking within deviant sub-cultures of the society, posing a deep threat to the cultural and moral mainstream; hence the moral indignation of the establishment, setting themselves up as the guardians of the moral order under siege. In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, the panic was all the more intense and profound because it was not the product of a discourse of deviance, which could then be isolated and positioned as something exterior to the essential core of the society. Here, the source of the perceived threat to the moral order was at its very core: within the domain of the home, wielded by the head of the family and the father of the nation. The very pillar of the society was creaking.

For, with the rape of a baby, there could be no question of the culpability or collusion of the victim; none of the familiar exonerations or qualifications of a rapist’s behaviour (“she asked for it”, “‘no’ really means ‘yes’”, “women like a bit of rough handling”, etc) had any purchase. The moral horror of the violation was absolute and undiluted, and it emanated unconditionally and unambiguously from the actions of the male rapists. The widely read Drum magazine, in an article on “Rape—Our National Shame”, therefore focused the spotlight of shame squarely on men: “baby rape ... is the most barbaric thing a man can do. It puts all men in a very precarious position”.23 A letter to Drum, published a week later, echoed this newfound sense of the root of the problem: “oh God, what is wrong with the man of this planet?”24—in much the same vein as voluminous correspondence in the press, such as that of the male author of a letter in the press on the subject of punishing rape monsters, who implored the “men of South Africa, why do we allow lust and greed to turn us into beasts without emotions?”25

Worse than that: many of the instances of baby and child rape which were cited in the media, were incestuous or familial. The most brutal threats to women and children had come from the men closest to them: no longer protectors, fathers, husbands, relatives and friends had been exposed as predators. And within this exposé, the most intimate settings were now the most dangerous ones: no longer a sanctuary, the home had become...
the zone of moral menace of the worst kind. The journalists at Drum despaired: “With men raping their daughters and sodomizing their own sons, who can trust us?”

Public expressions of anger, guilt and shame from various groupings of men animated calls for social activism. The National Association of People with Aids (NAPWA) “called on men and boys to join them in their campaign against the rape of children. ‘Men of Africa, do you care enough to stand up against the sexual violation of women and children?’” The South African Men’s Forum, founded by Bongani Khumalo, was even more forthright in its challenge to men:

Men form a large proportion of the moral degeneration that we see in our society. There is not a single crime—whether rape, robbery or abuse—where a man is not the common denominator. Until you address the issue of men, and the violence they perpetrate in our society, you will not begin to steer society towards moral regeneration.

From this standpoint, therefore, the country’s moral crisis was fundamentally a crisis of manhood: if men failed to don the mantle of responsible fatherhood, they jeopardized the possibility of responsible nationhood.

The limits of controversy: Sub-texts of race

The new discourses and politics of sexual violence, while prominent and dramatic, were neither wholesale nor unanimous. The fact that the rape issue had amplified into an indictment of the fledgling nation—with family and fatherhood, two of the pillars of nationhood, both scandalized—was bound to intensify the resistances to its visibility among those who favoured other tactics of nation-building. So, although there were few public declarations of dissent from members of the public, there was probably a wider sympathy for those public figures who expressed some scepticism, anger and/or discomfort at the growing public furore about rape and abuse—as much in their refusal to partake in the clamour of acknowledgement as in their spoken responses. President Thabo Mbeki, in particular, was slow to respond to the rape of Baby Tsephang, prompting accusations of indifference (“keeping silent ... on the abomination destroying not only the country but eating away at our nation’s soul”) from the Editor of the influential newspaper, The Sowetan. NGOs offering support to victims and families of child abuse complained that the President ignored their calls for support. When Mbeki did express his disgust at the incident—by way of his spokesman, a month later—he refused to acknowledge any undue problem or sense of emergency.

Perhaps the principle reason for his refusal was the extent to which the sense of a “crisis of masculinity” had been tacitly racialized. As the previous discussion showed, the issue of rape was politicized within a variety of public spaces opened up by the media once apartheid regimes of censorship had been revoked. Within this newfound interest in matters of sexuality, within which the growing visibility of sexual violence was embedded, the Black urban township became the dominant site for its visualization and exposure. The media coverage of rape, more specifically, tended not to dwell explicitly or directly on the race of the perpetrators. Yet, in most instances, the reportage gave local readers abundant clues, such as the geographical location of the crime, its venue (e.g., in a shack), the reasons for the absence of the mother (e.g., drinking in a shebeen) to enable a racialized reading of the incident.

The political controversy which attached to the sudden and urgent prominence of brutal sexual violence, then, was both spurred and limited by the post-apartheid politics of
race, which has been at its most fraught in its intersection with questions of sexuality and gender (Posel 2005). In ways which echoed some of the terms of his denialism in respect of HIV/AIDS, Mbeki’s refusal to acknowledge the enormity of rape in the country was couched within the terms of his mistrust of the hysterical measurements of the problem and his distaste for the political prominence of the issue as a symptom of the tenacity of racist stereotyping. In similar vein, when the BBC announced its intention of making a documentary of the Baby Tsephang case, some MPs protested that the publicity afforded to rape would portray South Africa as the leader in all aspects of bad things.

Conclusions

This paper has documented the manner in which sexual violence has been “brought into discourse” (Foucault 1979) since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994, showing how legislative and political changes, partly responsible for opening up new spaces for diverse media coverage of rape, articulated with mounting popular anger about sexual violence, to trigger the beginnings of critical discursive shifts in the figure of the rapist, his victim, and the nature of the violation. The discovery of baby rape in 2001 then ignited an already volatile field of public concern and controversy, into nothing short of a moral panic, manifest as a crisis of manhood. With the figure of the father, once the protective and powerful guardian of moral order, having merged with the figure of the rapist, popular anxieties about sexual violence became a crucible of wider fears and arguments about the normative foundations of the new democratic nation. Both the politicization of sexual violence, as well as the limits of that process produced by refusals to concede the magnitude of the problem, attest to the centrality of discourses of sexuality in the pursuit of nationhood in the post-apartheid era.

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Notes

1. The former is dealt with in D. Posel. ‘Sex, Death and the Fate of the Nation’, forthcoming in Africa, 2005.
5. The law offered some protection from domestic sexual violence in provisions against indecent assault—a lesser order of offence, and difficult to prove.
6. M.W. Cronje, for Minister Vlok, to Carole Charlewood, re “Representation regarding...”.
7. ibid.
8. Sunday Times, 4 April 1999, ‘Child Rape: A Taboo within the AIDS Taboo’.
9. ibid.
10. There isn’t the space here to examine the relations between AIDS and rape more fully. See Posel 2005.
12. The rape of a 14 month-old baby by her two uncles in Tweeling, Free State and another case of a 3 year-old toddler raped by her grandfather, also alleged to have ‘abused his own daughter, the injured child’s mother, for years’.


17. Cape Town, 25th; ANC Youth League on 5 December.


22. Ibid.


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Résumé

Cet article fait l’historique de la violence sexuelle comme enjeu public et politique en Afrique du Sud, depuis sa marginalisation et sa minimisation initiales durant l’apartheid,
jusqu’à l’explosion d’angoisse et de colère qui a marqué l’ère post-apartheid, de manière particulièrement dramatique en 2001 et 2002. Il est particulièrement intéressant de se demander comment et pourquoi le problème de la violence sexuelle a fini par être perçu comme un scandale de la masculinité, plaçant la sexualité masculine sous le regard scrutateur de la société. L’article argumente que l’éruption soudaine et intense d’anxiété publique, et les débats sur la violence sexuelle qui ont marqué la période post-apartheid, avaient relativement peu à voir avec les analyses et les politiques féministes (influents, bien que dans d’autres domaines). Cette politisation de la violence sexuelle se comprend plutôt grâce à ses résonances avec des angoisses politiques et idéologiques plus larges, à propos du sujet national et de la communauté morale de la démocratie naissante du pays.

Resumen
En este documento se sigue la genealogía de la violencia sexual como un problema público y político en Sudáfrica, desde su marginación y minimización inicial durante la era del apartheid, hasta la explosión de angustia e indignación que ha marcado el momento del periodo postapartheid, y de manera más espectacular durante 2001 y 2002. Es especialmente interesante la cuestión de cómo y porqué el problema de la violencia sexual se ha convertido en un escándalo de la virilidad, situando a la sexualidad masculina bajo un decisivo escrutinio público. En este documento se arguye que la repentina e intensa aparición de ansiedad pública y las discusiones sobre la violencia sexual que marcaron el periodo tras el apartheid tenían poco que ver con los análisis feministas y políticos (que sin embargo han sido influyentes en otros campos). Sino que más bien la clave para entender esta politización de la violencia sexual radica en sus resonancias con un espectro más amplio de ansiedades políticas e ideológicas en cuanto a la actitud del sujeto nacional y la comunidad moral de una democracia en ciernes.