The ‘Rape Culture’ Lie

Zero shades of grey.

By Heather Wilhelm

In September Barack Obama launched the “It’s on Us” campaign, designed to fight what he called the “nightmare” of campus sexual assault. “An estimated one in five women has been sexually assaulted during her college years,” Obama announced, pausing for emphasis. “One in five.” America, the president went on to argue, suffers from a “quiet tolerance of sexual assault,” all too often blaming victims, making excuses, or looking the other way. To combat sexual violence, he said, we need a “fundamental shift in our culture.”

With these words, the president of the United States went all in on the idea that America’s academic institutions have been taken over by a “rape culture”—a culture that normalizes, trivializes, and quietly condones male sexual assault against women, blaming female victims while subtly celebrating male predators.

Once rather obscure and confined to sociology and women’s studies departments, the term “rape culture” has slowly invaded the national consciousness. According to Google search analytics, the topic generated almost no traffic in 2005 or before. After 2011, its popularity slowly began to rise—as we’ll later see, this is no accident—and then, beginning in 2013, it spiked, the graph forming a hockey stick that would make global-warming doomsayer Michael Mann proud.

The idea that one in five college women has or will be sexually assaulted is mind-boggling and horrifying. It’s also not true. As Slate’s Emily Yoffe pointed out in December, the statistic—together with two other dubious studies that, just for the heck of it, upped the ante to one in four—would “mean that young American college women are raped at a rate similar to women in Congo, where rape has been used as a weapon of war.”

Both the “one in five” and “one in four” sexual-assault numbers, it turns out, have been repeatedly and resoundingly discredited. The former statistic comes from the 2007 Campus Sexual Assault Study, an online survey of students at two college campuses that reportedly compensated respondents and categorized actions such as “kissing” and “rubbing up against” someone as sexual assault. (Even the author of the study, Christopher Krebs, told Yoffe that “one in five” is not “a nationally representative statistic.”)

“One in four” has proved even more resilient, given that it first popped up in a 1988 Ms. Foundation study by an Ohio State professor named Mary Koss—a survey later dismantled by Christina Hoff Sommers in 1994 based on work originally conducted by the Berkeley social-welfare scholar Neil Gilbert. As Sommers wrote, “For Gilbert, the most serious indication that something was basically awry in the Ms./Koss study was that the majority of women she classified as having been raped did not believe they had been raped. Of those Koss counts as having been raped, only 27 percent thought they had been; 73 percent did not say that what happened to them was rape.”

A more recent “one in four” study, conducted by the Department of Justice in 2000 and subtly titled “The Sexual Victimization of College Women,” went even further afield. Its initial results were within the boundaries of reason; it estimated that 2.8 percent of college women had been victims of rape. After performing some serious statistical voodoo, however, the authors estimated that one in four women “might” be raped—but, they admitted, “these projections are suggestive.” Oh. Well, OK. Good thing we don’t have a national panic on our hands.

Well, cancel that last thought: Actually, we do.

This month, CNN Films, in partnership with the Weinstein Company, is slated to release The Hunting Ground, which the Sundance Film Festival has called “a piercing, monumental exposé of rape culture on campuses.” The film’s promotional poster, as the New York Times noted, “resembles an ad for a horror movie.”
This follows the release of yet another “study,” thrown into the pack in January. It declared—allow me to paraphrase—that men are soulless, earth-ravaging ogres. “Nearly one-third of college men admit they might rape a woman if they could get away with it,” Newsweek reported, breathless and giddy. As it turned out, this new survey, which was eagerly splashed across international media, had a sample size of 83, a participation number of 73, highly questionable survey methods, and was conducted solely using volunteers seeking extra credit at the University of North Dakota.

If your professional dream is to concoct a completely biased yet well-received and well-publicized study, congratulations: It’s apparently fairly easy. If you wish to soberly present facts and data, well, good luck. The latest Department of Justice hard data on sexual assault, released in December 2014, estimates that 0.61 percent of female college students are the victims of sexual assault. That’s 6.1 cases per 1,000 women. Curiously, these new numbers, which come from the Obama administration, aren’t making headlines at the Obama White House’s official website. In fact, in a special public service announcement broadcast during February’s Grammy awards, the president informed the nation that “nearly one in five women in America”—not just college students—“has been a victim of rape or attempted rape.”

Speaking of culture, what does it say about ours when such clearly preposterous statistics are so easily believed? More important, what does it mean that discredited and long-debunked rape “statistics” are repeated, over and over, all the way up to the bully pulpit of the highest political office in the country?

In fact, if the latest official statistics are accurate—the unfortunate yet not-so-dramatic 0.61 percent that many feminists seem intent on ignoring—then America seems to have the opposite of a “rape culture.” Rather than pushing actual rape under the rug and celebrating male predators, in other words, we’re inventing fictional rapes and throwing actual men under the bus.

“Rape culture,” in other words, is an idea that swings, cocky and unhinged, from media and campus chandeliers. It dodges logical bullets, performs backflips around statistical cannonballs, and waltzes right through ground-leveling factual nuclear bombs. Much like an Olympic diver, it’s an idea that easily slices, clean and quiet, into the crevices of supple brains.

And once it’s settled in, it’s hard to pry it out. Like a poorly stabbed and strong-limbed B-movie villain, it refuses to die. This is, in part, because it’s an idea with a long, storied provenance, dating back more than 40 years. It has been a central feature of American feminism for nearly as long: “Feminism,” as legal theorist Catherine MacKinnon wrote in a 1988 book, is “built on believing women’s accounts of sexual use and abuse by men.”

But the enduring power of the rape-culture concept comes from another source as well. It addresses, albeit in a scrambled and unjust fashion, a deep problem in contemporary American life—a huge cultural resistance to the fact that sex is a profoundly serious business.

In 1968, a self-described “striver,” civil rights activist, and journalist in New York City named Susan Brownmiller was a pot on the verge of a boil. Employed by the American Broadcasting Corporation on a freelance basis, Brownmiller “seethed in silence” (as she would later recall in a memoir) over her seemingly dead-end, gender-restricted career options, particularly her failure to reach the status of on-air television correspondent. ABC, she was informed, “already had a woman” in that capacity, and that was more than enough.

“I was a woman,” Brownmiller wrote, “in a defiantly male preserve.”

One night she shuffled into a meeting of the New York Radical Women, a “consciousness-raising” crew peppered with socialists, antiwar activists, and feminists. Two weeks earlier, the group had gained notoriety by ambushing the Miss America pageant and inaugurating the concept of “bra-burning.” The event sparked later debates as to whether its members had actually set fire to their brassieres outside the beauty contest or merely thrown a bunch of high heels, Playboy magazines, and false eyelashes into an empty Atlantic City garbage can. (Spoiler alert: It was the latter, but we can be consoled by the fact that at least a few rogue bras were tossed into the mix.)
The group’s long-run impact, however, went far beyond protesting skin-tight sequins, soulless marimba playing, and, as one pamphlet put it, the nation’s most “degrading mindless-boob-girlie symbol.” At each meeting, the New York Radical Women engaged in a “sharing” time, “designed to unlock the door to collective truths.” One should never underestimate the power of a good consciousness-raising session.

Brownmiller, while skeptical at first—“oh brother,” she thought when the sharing began, “how naive”—was promptly sucked in when the topic turned to abortion. There, crammed in a “decrepit office building,” Brownmiller sat in silence, shocked that most of the group’s women could claim only one abortion each—unlike her three illegal abortions, which she promptly detailed. “I guess,” she told the group, eyes filled with tears, “I’m lucky to be alive.”

That first meeting with the New York Radical Women, Brownmiller later wrote, was “my feminist baptism, my swift immersion in the power of sisterhood.” It also sowed the seed for the hugely successful and influential book she would write just seven years later. Released in 1975, Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape became a national bestseller, gaining critical acclaim—the New York Times Book Review labeled it “monumental” and “chilling”—and standing as a classic in feminist circles for years to come. Brownmiller didn’t invent the term “rape culture”—that credit is largely given to Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women, a compendium published in 1974—but she certainly paved the way for the concept’s impressive growth and emerging power over the next 40 years.

On the surface, Against Our Will is rather simple: It is an exhaustive and detailed history of rape. The topic of serious sexual assault, the author told People magazine upon the book’s release, “is part of women’s experience that hasn’t been considered important enough for the history books.” The book is not without authority or value, but it is—there’s no other way to put this—kind of nuts. Brownmiller’s historical observations include the claim that gang rape “must have been” one of “the earliest forms of male bonding,” the declaration that “Little Red Riding Hood” is a “parable of rape,” and, as she famously put it: “From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”

“All men.” “All women.” If true, it’s a deeply discomfiting idea. In a speech to a men’s conference eight years later—not just any old men’s conference, it should be noted, but the regional meeting of the “anti-sexist” National Organization for Changing Men—the radical feminist Andrea Dworkin would take this idea to its logical endpoint: “We are very close to death. All women are. And we are very close to rape….Men are doing it, because of the kind of power men have over women.” Dworkin’s conclusion: “Men are very dangerous.” Here one might imagine a drafty auditorium full of earnest, fidgeting, and slightly doughty males, heads slumped in collective shame.

Decades after Brownmiller’s 407-page opus and Dworkin’s damning speech, buoyed by dozens upon dozens of “rape culture” essays she may or may not have read, Audrey Logan, a student at Occidental College in Los Angeles, believes she is a victim—or “survivor,” in today’s preferred parlance—of rape. Her rapist, as she told the Nation in the summer of 2014, was a “young man she considered a friend.”

Oddly enough, this “friend” managed to assault Logan on two separate occasions. “Because she knew him and had been very drunk both times,” Michelle Goldberg reported in the magazine, “it took a while for her to identify what had happened as assault.” It wasn’t until “a close friend at another school simply listened and validated my feelings that I finally was able to start my arduous healing process,” Logan told Goldberg.

That “healing process” largely consisted of filing a complaint with the school, not the police. Thanks to a 2011 directive from the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights—the same year that “rape culture” began to trend in Internet searches—colleges now set up campus tribunals to adjudicate sexual-assault reports, needing only a “preponderance of evidence” (as opposed to, say, evidence “beyond a reasonable doubt”) to find accused students guilty. In Audrey Logan’s case, Occidental’s dean of student life, who is employed as neither a judge nor a lawyer, led the charges against Logan’s former friend. He was later expelled.
Quiet Occidental, a private school where tuition and fees reached $60,972 in 2014, is no stranger to “rape culture.” One of the most notorious recent student-rape accusations also happened to bubble up at Occidental, where, in the wee morning hours of September 8, 2013, “Jane Doe,” at the time a rather drunken young lady, capriciously texted her equally boozed-up friend, “John Doe.”

Bogie and Bacall it wasn’t. “In the messages,” the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education reports, “the accuser asked Doe, ‘do you have a condom,’ texted another friend ‘I’m going to have sex now’ [sic], and, in an exchange spanning 24 minutes, coordinated with Doe to sneak out of her dorm and proceed to Doe’s dorm to have sex with him.” Later, Jane Doe, traumatized by the experience, decided it had been rape. John Doe was expelled, quietly whisked away to the proverbial but fast-growing Island of Outcast Young Men.

For people who take rape seriously—and for those who understand it as the horrible crime it is—cases like these are jarring, even insulting. Occidental, however, is not alone. Similar stories have mushroomed at universities across the country, including the University of Michigan, Auburn, Stanford, and Duke. According to a database compiled by A Voice for Male Students, there are at least 57 pending legal cases filed by accused young men who claim they were railroaded by a false rape charge, their due-process rights thrown out the door. This number will, no doubt, continue to grow.

“We’ve been around for 15 years,” says Joe Cohn, the legislative and policy director at the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), “and we started seeing this issue as a priority in 2011.” This was when the Department of Education, as President Obama later put it, “clarified” the “legal obligations” of universities “to prevent and respond to sexual assault.”

“The quintessential case” of this kind, Cohn told me, “is Caleb Warner’s at the University of North Dakota back in 2010. There was such overwhelming evidence of his innocence.” Despite this—and despite the Grand Forks Police Department’s later charging his accuser of lying to police—Warner was banned from the university campus and given a three-year suspension. After his case gained national attention, Warner was eventually reinstated. His accuser’s name remains unreported, even though police in North Dakota issued a warrant for her arrest for lying to them. She is still at large.

Most of these contested rape cases share a few common threads: alcohol, texting, a consensual hookup gone awry—and, most notably, “empowered” young women who are apparently too weak, too afraid, or too emotionally torn to know what they want. “Research shows that women engage in sex they don’t want for a variety of reasons,” writes Robin Wilson in the Chronicle of Higher Education, describing the struggle colleges face to define rape properly, “including to avoid conflict, because they don’t want to be labeled a tease, and because they feel obligated.”

Conduct a thorough reading of questionable college rape reports, and you’ll begin to see a pattern: A legion of confused young women, long coached that sex means nothing—casual sex is just something that empowered women do, after all—who quickly and traumatically realize, either consciously or not, that something feels dreadfully wrong.

One female student, cited in Wilson’s Chronicle of Higher Education piece, “realized she didn’t want to have sex” midway through a romantic—or, in hindsight, not-so-romantic—encounter with a male classmate. “But she kept quiet,” Wilson writes, “flashed him an occasional fake smile, and stared at the ceiling waiting for it to be over.” Later, of course, “part of her thought she’d been violated,” and, sorting out her feelings, she finally declared the encounter to be “rape-ish.” Thus far, she has apparently refrained from pressing charges.

In her bestselling memoir, Not That Kind of Girl, Lena Dunham, television star and widely celebrated “feminist icon,” romps through several meaningless sexual encounters upon her arrival at college. The most notorious is a cloudy recounting of what she would later call rape. Many details are, to put it kindly, questionable, as Dunham herself has admitted. But whatever you think of Dunham’s claim of sexual assault—and the story is tragic on a number of levels—it’s telling to read what she reportedly told herself while that assault was happening: “The refrain I hear again and again in my head, a self-soothing mechanism of sorts, is: This is what grown-ups do.”
How strange, really. How sad. The implication, of course, is that she’s still a child—and that she doesn’t really understand sex at all.

When you have a large, mysterious, and oppressive culture to blame for your dysfunction, it removes a great deal of psychological pressure. As a concept, rape culture also offers a highly useful mechanism for shooing away troublesome, sexually laden emotional issues—as well as any sense of responsibility—and sending them off into the wilderness.

On November 19, 2014, *Rolling Stone* published “A Rape on Campus,” detailing a horrific gang rape that allegedly took place at a University of Virginia fraternity. The story was based on the testimony of a student named Jackie, who claimed, among other things, that she had been raped on a bed of broken glass by a posse of savage pledges who, echoing the serial killer in *The Silence of the Lambs*, referred to her as “it.” The magazine’s account quickly set the media, the nation, and the campus aflame.

It took 16 days for the story to completely unravel. Jackie, it appears, concocted the entire gang-rape tale—including a handsome and fabricated suitor with the soap-opera name of “Haven Monahan,” to whom she wrote fake emails, lifting passages of dialogue from the now-defunct teen show *Dawson’s Creek*—in order to win the affection, or at least the concern, of her unrequited campus love.

I would say that you can’t make this stuff up, but, apparently, you can. The UVA story is remarkable on a number of levels, but two in particular stand out. The first, of course, is Jackie. Why did she think such an over-the-top tale, pieced together with conflicting and inconsistent facts, would be believed?

The obvious answer would chalk things up to some sort of mental or emotional imbalance, which is fair enough. But that approach would also ignore the cold, hard truth: For two straight weeks—and for a number of feminist activists, professors, and journalists, even longer—Jackie was believed, no questions asked. As a matter of fact, she was celebrated. Jackie, while potentially unhinged, was clearly on to something: namely, that the power of the rape-culture concept, together with its widespread, quasi-religious following, ensured she would be taken at her word, no matter how outlandish it was.

Which brings us to the second striking by-product of the Jackie saga: Despite much weeping and gnashing of teeth, no one seemed all that interested in catching a band of violent and evil rapists, apparently still at large after committing the equivalent of a war crime just down the street. Instead, student leaders organized a “Slut Walk,” designed to fight “slut-shaming, victim-blaming” rape culture. The faculty, not to be outdone, dedicated their own anti-gang-rape rally to “Taking Back the Party.”

This is curious, is it not? When there’s a crime spree going on, isn’t the first goal of the response to catch the criminals? When it came to seeking justice, did people just not want to bother? Was it because, deep down, they knew Jackie’s story strained credulity?

Or was it—and this, all evidence considered, seems the most likely scenario—because they wanted to believe in the rape-culture theory, which removes responsibility and accountability from just about everyone? (Well, everyone, that is, except for a few stereotypical, “privileged” frat boys, but such are the wages of original sin.)

“I choose to believe Jackie,” wrote feminist Jessica Valenti in the *Guardian*, even as the UVA story unraveled. The National Alliance to End Sexual Violence took to Twitter with “#IBelieveJackie.” Zerlina Maxwell, a frequent speaker on rape culture, argued in the *Washington Post* that “we should believe, as a matter of default, what an accuser says.” This, she added, is a “moral,” not a practical, imperative. Moreover, “to let fact-checking define the narrative,” as UVA student Julia Horowitz wrote in *Politico*, Jackie’s story long in shambles, “would be a huge mistake.”

Slate’s Amanda Hess was one of the few to catch the mystical subtext of this unending chorus of belief. “It suggests,” she wrote on December 11, “faith in something that lies outside the bounds of human knowledge.” Indeed it does.
At this very moment, at a university near you, a complicated moral code—the new rules of “sexual consent”—is feverishly under construction. These rules, which require “clear,” “affirmative,” and “unambiguous” consent for every step of sexual activity, appear to contain the ingredients for disaster. At root level, they are the clear and logical outgrowth of the resilient cult of rape culture.

It’s impossible to know how many rape accusations are false. Current estimates, cobbled from a number of sources including FBI data, indicate around 8 or 9 percent. With the new sexual-consent rules popping up across the country, however, that number seems destined to increase. “People can and frequently do have fully voluntary sex without communicating unambiguously,” as the Yale law professor Jed Rubenfeld pointed out in November in the New York Times. “Under the new consent standards, that can be deemed rape if one party later feels aggrieved.”

Or, perhaps, if one party later feels empty. Or directionless. Or confused. Jackie’s rape story, University of Virginia senior Anna Burke told Politico, “was a refrain I had heard before. There was a sort of familiar sadness to it.” More important, Jackie’s story, like most great fables, contained a searing moral clarity: an innocent, blameless victim, tossed in a room against her will; evil, no-nonsense villains, bent on destruction; zero shades of grey.

The theoretical existence of “rape culture,” in many ways, cleanses young women of unrighteousness. It is a purification ritual of sorts, rivaling those from ancient civilizations around the world. Through the scourging of others—hapless young men, expelled into the wilderness, bearing the sins of others away—countless young women attempt to find peace. Their hope appears to be this: With the right rules, the right consent forms, the right controls, and the right scapegoats, they might just be able to navigate our nihilistic, norm-free sexual landscape without angst or guilt.

Is rape a serious problem and a horrible crime? Of course. Is there injustice in the world? Absolutely. Is America’s current “conversation” about “rape culture” a complete and total farce? Sadly, yes. In a September essay for Time, Camille Paglia argued that the modern campus is simply incapable of recognizing real evil, criminalizing “oafish hookup dramas.” She may be right, but the problem is deeper and more ambiguous than that.

Bathed in the sexual revolution and its culture of sexual freedom, many young Americans, male and female, now have no idea how—or why—to impose even the flimsiest moral framework around the most intimate, exposing, literally naked act in which two human beings can engage. Having been told that sex is easy, meaningless, and always pleasurable, many young people are shocked to discover that’s not invariably the case—that sex is often anything but casual, that it triggers deep and powerful emotions and needs they cannot integrate with the cultural insistence that sex is no big deal. They do not have the vocabulary or the clarity to grasp why. What has happened to them feels wrong, not right. It is disturbing, not ecstatic. And for these feelings, they believe they deserve redress.

It is easy to understand the hunger to reduce this moral crisis to a simple moral trope: a dastardly villain, a blameless victim. And perhaps, in the end, that victimhood is real. But the perpetrator, ironically, isn’t a massive, oppressive “rape culture.” It’s the “sex means nothing” culture, together with the ready embrace of a radical feminist worldview that holds women always blameless—even when they’re self-destructive—and men always guilty, simply because they are men.
Rape culture is a sociological concept for a setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality. Behaviors commonly associated with rape culture include victim blaming, slut-shaming, sexual objectification, trivializing rape, denial of widespread rape, refusing to acknowledge the harm caused by sexual violence, or some combination of these. It has been used to describe and explain behavior within social groups, including prison rape and in conflict. The literal definition would posit a culture that advocates and normalizes rape, which is plainly not true of the Western world and why people obviously deny it (because it doesn't exist). Feminism's redefinition though sigh is a sub-ideology that concerns the collective issues, cultural ingraining and disparagement of rape. Basically a pseudo-theory that society has been groomed by patriarchy to enable and excuse rape. Setting in which rape is pervasive and normalized due to societal attitudes about gender and sexuality. Rape culture is prominent in all aspects and forms of society today and is a major social issue. The reason being is, If rape culture is allowed to continue then men and women will view rape as socially acceptable.

If rape culture is a big lie, according to Dima, there is one form of culturally sanctioned sexual assault that is all too real: Have you ever heard the word “swolesting.” It’s the phenomenon weightlifters experience of women groping their swoles (swollen muscles) as they move through a crowd. Hey, dudes, what were you thinking getting all swole like that? It’s like you were asking for it! Sorry; that was Swolesting Culture talking. Dima then goes on to mansplain that the real reason women don’t like rape is because they don’t want inferior rapist DNA in their babies.