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## Mapping the Specter: Seeing *Asking for It* as Spectral Realism

Marybeth Ragsdale-Richards

What role do women writers play in a postmodern society? From its conception, postmodernism attempted to account for temporal changes in society in such a way that casts doubt on the universal truth that progress is inevitable. The relationship between feminist literary theory and postmodernism is fraught with familiar tension that is indicative of a postmodern world, for while postmodernism questions the Age of Enlightenment, feminist theory provides scholars a way to resist the Age of Reason in favor of (re)connecting women to their bodies and lived experience. Taken together, one way to perceive the question regarding the role of the woman writer in a postmodern world lies in the provocative authorship of Louise O’Neill, an Irish author, whose work in young adult fiction grapples with the contradictions inherent in a rape supportive culture; specifically, O’Neill’s *Asking for It* underscores the absurdity of a society that logically claims rape to be a crime while failing to delegitimize aspects of rape culture like rape jokes, pervasiveness of sexual violence, and microaggressions that justify and normalize sexual harassment.

In an interview with Aoife Berry, O’Neill states, “I was inspired [to write *Asking for It*] by a few incidents, [including] the Steubenville case in Ohio [and] the Slane Girl in Ireland.” Viewing *Asking for It* as a cultural index reflects the complex relationship that young women—like the novel’s protagonist, Emma O’Donovan—have with themselves and the society they inhabit. However, unlike the typical good-girl protagonist that features prominently in YA rape narratives, Emma is not a virgin or the girl-next-door character type; she is narcissistic and hyper-judgmental of everyone she encounters. Moreover, the relationship Emma has with her body reveals how the terms of the culture in a postmodern world dictate paradoxical messages about beauty and desire that inform the way she interacts with and interprets the world around her.

At first read, it is easy to overlook the feminist undertones in *Asking for It*. O’Neill’s approach to rape and sexual assault is brutally

honest in its characterization of patriarchal power and the way women police each other through slut discourse by rigorously exploring the pervasiveness of victim blaming and analyzing the implications of rape culture that genders rape as a woman's problem. While *Asking for It* appears to be a stereotypical dark problem novel reminiscent of the Golden Age of YA literature, O'Neill calls on readers to reject this label precisely because it risks situating rape as a private matter, a hidden problem, a secret, or a rare occurrence, which is exactly the type of rhetoric feminists seek to demystify. Alternatively, I propose categorizing *Asking for It* as an example of *spectral realism*. O'Neill employs techniques affiliated with feminist film criticism—such as haptic visuality, distanciation, and spectatorship—in a way that haunts the text and violently disrupts the notion that reading is pleasurable by breaking down the objective barrier between reader-as-subject and text-as-object as she pulls them right up against the act of rape itself.

As an instance of spectral realism, *Asking for It* blurs the line between readers-as-spectators and casts them as eyewitnesses to the sexual violence that plays out on Emma's body. Not only does O'Neill deny Emma any possibility to (re)cuperate her body, but she also uses the superficially opposing techniques of distanciation and hapticity to disturb the way rape culture anesthetizes readers-spectators to rape so that what appears to be a familiar YA novel about the consequences of hook up culture becomes a critical text that directly engages feminist theory by making explicit the dangers of turning sexual assault into a spectacle.

Accordingly, O'Neill splits Emma's life into two sections, before the rape and after the rape. *Asking for It* begins *before* the assault takes place which is different from other YA rape narratives that are typically set *after* the rape and operate in hindsight. As such, the first half of O'Neill's novel foregrounds the readership's understanding of slut discourse and situates Emma at the top of the social hierarchy among her inner circle of friends; it also conveys to readers that she is idolized by the students who attend St. Brigid's Secondary School, an all-girls' high school in Ireland. In part, O'Neill representation of Emma's negative character defects is purposeful; she plays on the readers' aversion to her so that when Paul and the other young men rape her. The readers-spectators experience a cathartic response to the events as it occurs regardless of whether Emma is an angel or a whore, a good girl or a bad girl, a virgin or a slut. However, the degree of catharsis that readers-spectators experience is largely dependent upon the degree to which they adhere to or reject rape myths. Ironically, *all* of Emma's friends, except her childhood friend,

Conor, believe that Emma *is* asking for it and see rape as a logical consequence for her salacious behavior.

Subsequently, the idea that Emma should suffer any consequence for asserting sexual agency connotes feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's conception of sadistic voyeurism and fetishistic scopophilia. According to Mulvey, filmmakers have developed and perfected the political economy of the gaze to fetishize the female body in such a way that the gaze of the camera aligns with the gaze of the male hero, which in turn aligns with the gaze of the spectator, who identifies with the male hero's ego-ideal. Mulvey argues that the male unconscious has "...two avenues of escape from ...castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma [and] punishment [or] complete disavowal of castration by the substitution of fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish object" (62). If Emma's narrative is read through this phallogocentric lens, the only ego ideal that O'Neill leaves open for readers to identify with is that of the rapists, as the novel's secondary characters are as obsessed with looking at and objectifying Emma's body as she is.

At the same time, O'Neill also problematizes the male gaze as she antagonizes it. Hence, the diegesis of *Asking for It* also challenges sadistic voyeurism as it embraces haptic visuality, a multisensory mode of visuality proposed by Laura Marks which "...is mimetic: it presses up to the object and takes its shape. [The haptic maintains] a robust flow between sensuous closeness and symbolic distance" (142). On the one hand, *Asking for It* is an exercise in mimesis as O'Neill richly captures realistic elements of youth culture that intersect with rape culture, while on the other hand, O'Neill's personal distance from the subject matter facilitates her authorship in a manner that sets her apart from other YA authors who self-identify as survivors of rape. In many ways, the events of the postmodern experience define the parameters of what constitutes trauma and since traumatic experience resists narrativization, O'Neill's outsider position affords her a different analytical framework *to speak* a textual representation of sexual violence. Furthermore, where haptic criticism offers spectators "...a way to 'warm up' our cultural tendency to take a distance" (Marks 142), Emma's narrative presses up against the lived experiences of survivors. This unique way of looking facilitates "...[o]piticalvisuality [in the sense that it] requires distance *and* a center with the viewer acting like a pinhole camera" (Marks 144). Even though Marks' criticism encourages closeness, it is also closely tied to erotic experience, and given that rape offers no chance for

reciprocity between sexual partners in terms of sexual pleasure, O'Neill manipulates the experience of the assault for the readers-spectators by filtering the sensations through Emma's body during the rape. Through spectral realism, the novel's exposition warms up the readers to then take a step back as O'Neill encloses them in the space where the rape takes place—a center—where they become embodied spectators and narrative eyewitnesses to the assault.

When O'Neill introduces readers to Emma, her identity is not synonymous with victimhood. In fact, Emma enjoys the privileges that her beauty affords her but her perceptions about her beauty—and her body—are not inborn; they gradually emerge as she interacts with people around her. In the novel's opening scene, Emma sits in front of the mirror as she gets ready for school. She observes, "My mother's face appears in the mirror beside my own. You're a lot like your mother, people always say. You're the image of her" (3). The construction of the mirror functions as a notional space that positions Nora's face in the background, behind and beside Emma's, which occupies the center. The image of the mother-daughter dyad in the mirror reflects and reproduces the tenuous matrilineal process of feminine socialization within patriarchal culture, a process that "...turns [the woman's] child into a signifier of her own desire to possess a penis" (Mulvey 57). Hence, the double-image in the mirror suggests a congruency between them, a chiasmus wherein one is exactly like the other.

O'Neill continues to make Emma's beauty the subject of the scene. As Nora speaks to her daughter, her traditional femininity informs Emma's conception of self. While Emma brushes her hair at the vanity, Nora puts a vitamin pill on her desk and lectures her about the importance of maintaining her posture and complexion. Once Emma reassures her mother that she will take the pill before school, Nora "...turns at the door to look at [Emma], her gaze working up [her] body, lingering [on] her face" (6). Tellingly, Nora's gaze marks the first of many instances that O'Neill utilizes to signify the degree to which Emma's body "connotes *to-be-looked-at-ness*" (Mulvey 60). Yet, at the same time, the look also serves as a point of connection between Emma and her mother as well as a point of contention. As Emma looks into the mirror, she can see her mother standing behind her watching her. She thinks, "And I know exactly what she is going to say to me. *You look beautiful this morning. As Always. Now, come downstairs and join Daddy and me for breakfast. He wants to see you before he goes to work*" (emphasis original; 6). The double-invocation of Nora's look tells readers something that Emma cannot escape: she

is beautiful, which is symbolic of the importance of the political economy of the gaze in the novel. Similarly, the conversation also connects to Emma's father's sight. Emma remembers:

I can still picture Mam sitting at the vanity mirror in her dressing area, a silver silk dress spilling over her body, a slash of bright lipstick, her hair twisted into a chignon. Dad would call up the stairs and she would reply, using that special voice she used with him, with all men ...I'd sit at the top of the stairs, watching her as she walked toward Dad. His eyes never left hers. (5)

Emma's memory corroborates Mulvey's conception that "...the function of woman [is to] raise her child into the symbolic" (60), and Emma takes pleasure in watching her mother dress. For her father's part, Denis only has eyes for Nora even as Emma "...started to cry as they left, arms flailing as the babysitter restrained [her]" (5). The triangulation destabilizes the plentitude of the mother-daughter dyad as Emma views her father as the responsible party for severing her from her mother and the act thus signifies her place in the symbolic order: outside.

Additionally, the opening sequence in *Asking for It* establishes the web of connections—the terms of the culture—that informs Emma's beliefs about herself and about how women and men should interact with one another. In *Asking for It*, "the terms" of the culture are double-voiced discourse. On the one hand, it encompasses the language that Emma acquires to define herself. For instance, Emma routinely surveys herself in the mirror: "I stand up straight ...I am beautiful. I mouth the words at my reflection. That is something ...money can't buy" (38). Yet, on the other hand, it refers the unspoken terms of the culture which requires her to attend to the double-bind of young adult female sexuality in patriarchal society. Emma often reflects on her sexual encounters: "I'm always wondering how I'm going to make [the other person] keep their mouth shut about what we did or didn't do" (81). Emma's internal dialogue demonstrates that she is aware of the paradox that surrounds female sexuality which calls for her to be passive but at the same time demands that she participate in her own objectification.

Since Emma's self-worth is synonymous with whether or not others find her desirable and attractive, Emma's thoughts belie the practice of slut discourse that is always present in the background of her identity pre-rape. The principles of slut discourse require Emma to actively police how her sexual partners speak about their encounter

just as it requires her to also police the sexual practices of other girls which must remain subordinate to her own. It follows that when Emma leaves the home, the terms of the culture broaden, and she receives verbal and nonverbal affirmations about her self-presentation from her peers. Since the peer hierarchy is a powerful agent for regulating youth culture, it is not surprising that O'Neill establishes Emma's high-status among girls at school when they pass her in the hallway. Emma thinks:

I always nod at girls passing by who call my name, say hello, ask me where I got my sunglasses, or what lip gloss I'm wearing. I always smile ...and dole out compliments in return.... By time the bell rings, I'm exhausted. I have to smile and be nice and look like I care about other people's problems or else I'll get called a bitch. People don't understand how tiring it is to have to put on this performance all day. (12)

Emma's thoughts draw the readers' attention to her gender performance, which correlate to a version of her mother's idealized femininity in which she must look like she cares. Equally compelling is Emma's admission that she is not self-same; it offers the readers further contradictory insight regarding her subjectivity: Emma must find a way to be nonthreatening through traditional feminine passivity but cunning enough to maintain her status by both manipulating *and* placating her *peers*.

However, Emma does not garner esteem or respect from her inner circle through the same pseudo-egalitarianism or altruism she exudes at school; rather, she polices their femininity through the principles of slut discourse by speaking to them condescendingly. According to Katharine Armstrong et al., slut discourse is "...only indirectly related to judgements about sexual activity. Instead, it is about drawing status-based moral boundaries that simultaneously organize sexual behavior and gender presentation" (101). Ironically, it is important to remember that high-status young women may very well engage in the same sexual practices of those they label trashy, with the only difference being that low-status women do not enjoy the same esteem and respect as their high-status counterparts (Armstrong et al. 101). Here, the principles of slut discourse provide context to interpret the way in which Emma acts tyrannical towards her best friends.

For instance, Emma's friendship with Jamie is fraught with tension that involves rape. Incidentally, one of the boys, Dylan, who rapes Emma also raped Jamie at a party that takes place a year before the novel begins. Although female friendships are present in *Asking*

*for It*, they are not mutually reinforcing. In fact, Emma's relationship with Jamie is a point of intersection between slut discourse and rape culture. Given that Dylan rapes Jamie, this knowledge is the early axiom that supplies readers with insight as to how the characters adhere to rape myths including Emma. While Emma, Jamie, and two of their friends, Maggie and Ali, are sunbathing in the park, Dylan comes up to them with a group of acquaintances and taunts Jamie after she refuses to say hello to him and look him in the eye. He says, "Girls are all the same... Get wasted and get a bit slutty, then in the morning try to pretend it never happened because you regret it" (27). He directs this comment at Jamie, and Emma laughs, "a little too loudly" (27). The effect of Emma's response shames Jamie and compels the readers to want to distance themselves from her as she appears to revel in her friend's humiliation. For, despite knowing and believing that Dylan raped her, Emma's response emphasizes the paradox of a society that refutes rape culture while reinforcing it via microaggressions.

To complicate matters more, Conor is also present for the exchange in the park, and he confronts Emma for her behavior in the park when he drives her home later that night. As he castigates Emma for laughing at Jamie, she snaps, "Oh, for fuck's sake, Conor. It was just a joke. Lighten up, will you?" (36). Here, Conor conveniently points out Emma's complicity in the conversation but bypasses his own. In doing so, O'Neill showcases the damaging effects of male complicity in rape culture and conveys to young adult readers that rape remains a gender-specific problem wherein girls and women must either deal with or confront on their own. Nevertheless, Emma cannot help the memory of "Jamie's face in the park, stricken. Jamie crying and crying. *What'll I do, Emma? What am I supposed to do now?* And I wish I could go back to that moment. I would tell Dylan to fuck off and leave Jamie alone. I would stand up for her" (36). The exchange between Conor and Emma is the first glimpse of Emma's vulnerability but the moment is fleeting.

Interestingly, Conor does not appear again until Emma invites him and the girls to her house to "pregame it" (37) before Sean's party. Yet, it is not Conor's arrival that grabs Emma's attention rather it is the moment when Jamie walks through the door as she is already drunk. As Emma watches her, she thinks, "She should take it easy. She should know what happens when *you* drink too much" (emphasis mine; 65). It is interesting that O'Neill frames this statement through the use of the verb "should," as it is undoubtedly a criticism of Jamie's behavior; however, her use of the second-person pronoun "you" breaks the narrative form and inserts the readers into the text. Here, by virtue

of what Emma does not say, O'Neill makes an important cultural inference about what she suspects her readers *know*—whether consciously or not—about rape culture: when *you* drink too much, *you* put yourself at risk, because it is *your* responsibility to make sure that someone does not rape *you*. The rupture in the traditional diegesis brings readers into close proximity to Emma's own feelings about Jamie and survivors of rape.

Before Emma has the chance to approach Jamie, Conor joins her on the porch and compliments her dress, which is black and "...cut down to the navel, and very, very short" (58). This time, Conor's presence connotes the theme of men-as-women's-saviors. For example, when Emma decides she needs another beer, Conor says, "Just give it some time before your next one. Unless you want a repeat of what happened at Dylan's" (68). It is not a coincidence that Conor's speech echoes the sentiments Emma has regarding Jamie's excessive drinking, only Conor speaks directly to Emma, so readers are not confused by his use of the second-person pronoun. Likewise, it also accounts for Emma's actions on the night Dylan raped Jamie. Emma remembers:

Kevin is throwing me against a wall at the party, his teeth sharp ...he is dragging me into a dimly lit bedroom that smells of Play-Doh. *Let's go back to the party*, I kept saying. Kevin's hands are on my shoulders, pushing me down, saying, *Go on, come on, Emma*. It seemed easier to go along with it. Everyone is always saying how cute he is anyway. Afterward I made him *swear* he wouldn't tell anyone. (68)

Although Conor does not know that Kevin sexually coerced Emma into performing oral sex on him, O'Neill mirrors the image of Emma's sexual compliance with her memory of waking up at Conor's house the next morning. Emma thinks, "I woke up in Conor's single bed. He was asleep on the floor next to me. I saw a photograph of the two of us from when we were kids. I tiptoed out of his room without saying goodbye" (68). Strategically, in the same way that O'Neill uses Conor to buffer Emma's memory of Kevin, readers-spectators can glean an important aspect about gender relations through closely reading Conor's character: for as predictable as Conor's romantic interest in Emma is, it ultimately communicates that not all men who drink and attend parties are rapists.

Given the realization that Emma acts out sexually in ways that are contradictory to how she actually feels, O'Neill contrasts Conor's



behaviors against those of the young men who rape Emma, Conor's presence reminds readers that women are not *always already* ready and willing to have sex with them, despite either party's outward appearance and behavior. However, when Emma and her posse arrive at Sean's party, O'Neill reflects the same web of causality in the novel's opening sequence between Nora's "look" and her father's "sight," as the male gaze permeates all aspects of the party scene. For instance, Emma notices Dylan staring at Jamie, only this time so does his girlfriend, who verbally accosts Jamie: "Is it not enough you fucked my boyfriend once—now you want to do it again?" (71). Just like the afternoon in the park, multiple people laugh at Jamie; Emma thinks, "*I need to get away from this. From Jamie*" (72) and flees the room. As she meanders down the hallway, Emma overhears Sean and another boy having a conversation about "a fucking ride" (74), a fourteen-year-old girl named Mia. When Sean realizes that Emma is listening, she "...doesn't want to seem boring so [she] smiles because it shows [she's] cool" (74), but he reads her utterance as sexual interest in him, as he "pulls [her] toward him" (74) until she has to physically push him away. As Emma is about to walk outside, she overhears Mia whisper loudly, "*Oh my God ...no way ...is that actually Paul O'Brien?*" (77) and sees that Jack is with Paul.

Immediately, Paul notices Emma and he approaches her. As he speaks to her, his eyes sweep over her body: "I have to say, you're looking particularly ravishing this evening, Emmie" (78). Although Emma ignores him, she notices that his eyes follow her, an act that connotes voyeurism. To escape Paul's gaze, Emma sits next to Jack while he plays *Grand Theft Auto* with a group of other boys. She listens as one says, "I need some health" (80) to which the other responds, "Just fuck a hooker, that'll help" (80). Thus, the avatar of the hooker becomes the fetish object with which the gamers use for their own pleasure. In this way, Sean's party is a signifier for rape culture. In order for this type of rape ethos to emerge, the partygoers must disregard the feelings of young women entirely which is achieved through objectification.

Yet the paradox pertaining to feminine sexuality in rape culture comes to the forefront once Emma sees Mia in Jack's lap and notes that Mia is "irritatingly tiny and doll-like" (87). Sardonicly, Emma confronts Jack: "I didn't realize you were into children" (87), but he merely shrugs his shoulders. In effect, Mia threatens Emma's position as the object of male desire, which, in turn, threatens her status among both sexes. Therefore, not to be outdone by a child, Emma endeavors to make Mia jealous by flirting with Paul since she knows that Mia

idolizes him. Paul quickly notices Emma's interest in him, but it comes when his teammates want to leave the party. As one of the players leaves, Paul hands him a sandwich bag full of pills. When Emma inquires about the bag's contents, he says, "Nothing for an innocent girl like you to be concerned with" (90). At the prospect of being innocent, Emma thinks, "I am sick of people thinking they know me. No one knows what I'm capable of" (90). Ironically, Emma's ire stems from an experience she has as a fourteen-year-old girl when she overhears two boys at a disco club say, "*Emma O'Donovan is hot ...but she's boring as fuck*" (26). In part, the incident becomes the locus of control that informs Emma's doctrine about her gender performance as the boys reaffirm an aspect of her identity that she already knows while they offer her a critique of her self-presentation. Hence, when she "...leans over to whisper in [Paul's] ear 'I want it' [and notices] his breathing is getting heavier" (91), she perceives that his reaction is evidence of her power over him. In actuality, power belongs to Paul.

After Emma swallows the pill, she encourages Paul to take one, but he shakes his head no, pulls her into his lap, and holds out his hand expecting to be paid. Here, O'Neill mirrors the image of Mia in Jack's lap with Emma in Paul's, as she says, "Oh, I don't pay for things" (91). Of course, metaphorically speaking, Emma's statement is ironic considering the ways "pays" for her actions throughout the course of the night. Nonetheless, Emma's performance has an effect on Mia as she inquires from her friends why Paul is sitting with Emma if he already has a girlfriend. Emma "...sits up straighter when [she] sees jealousy flash across her face. Somehow, it makes Paul more handsome, as if their envy is a flattering Instagram filter" (91). Mia's reaction satisfies Emma's desire to make her jealous which, in turn, makes her feel powerful.

After a few minutes, Emma begins to feel the effects of the drug and leans into Paul's touch as his hand stokes her thigh. He tells her, "Well, well. That didn't take long" (94), and he leads her towards the stairs. However, two things happen at once that interrupt their ascent upstairs. First, Emma verbally resists to Paul's suggestion. She hesitates, "I don't want to go" (94), and slows their pace. Second, Ali sees her and asks, "Have you taken something?" (95), to which someone else remarks, "It's not like her though, you know what a control freak she is" (95). As she and Paul turn the corner, Emma runs into Conor, who hands her a drink of water. She thinks, "Conor is so much nicer than me ...I wrap my arms around him, and press our hearts together too. I kiss him, but then Paul is there" (96). Here, Paul

shoves Conor out of the way: “Finally” (96), he says. Although Emma wants to protest, she sees Jack leading Mia out of the room and desperately “needs him to *see* [her]” (emphasis original; 96). Thus, she follows him to the bedroom, “locking the door behind [them]” (97). The moment the door closes, O’Neill sequesters the readers—as spectators and witnesses—to Paul’s assault of Emma, as the moment also cuts them off from observing the events that are happening in the peripheral.

Here, O’Neill segregates the spectators’ gaze so that they only have two areas to focus on: the spatial arrangement of Sean’s parents’ bedroom and Emma’s body. Yet, on its own, fetishistic scopophilia and sadistic voyeurism are not enough to explain the way O’Neill oscillates from one sense modality to another. O’Neill’s representation of the bedroom is an example of phenomenological space which is “...not orchestrated for sight alone but by means of visual cues [that] refer to other sensations and relations of bodies and objects in a lived world” (Pollock 91). Although Emma and Paul do not exist in a lived world, spectral realism posits that the spectators do exist in a lived world, therefore their gaze is a knowable reality. O’Neill describes Sean’s parents’ bedroom in minimal but important detail: “[T]he bedding is white with red oversize roses *splattered* across them, and the carpet and curtains match. On the table nearest to the door, a photo frame of a baby and a tube of women’s hand cream” (emphasis mine; 97). The room, however sparse, is eerily foreboding and gendered female, as the description of the roses on the duvet and curtains being splattered across them foreshadows the violence that is about to take place.

The rape scene begins as Paul pushes Emma onto the bed and undressing himself as he does so. As he strips Emma of her clothes, she notes, “He turns me around and kisses my neck from behind as he grips my throat. He runs his hands all over my body, whispering to me what he is going to do to me, and what he wants me to do to him” (98). It is here that O’Neill posits the encounter as a zero-sum game and speaks to the pornutopic rape fantasy, which she exemplifies through competing ideologies in Emma’s stream-of-consciousness. Kelly Oliver, a feminist philosopher, defines pornutopia in relation to rape culture as the idea that “...all women enjoy violent sex and ask for more. In rape culture, the pornutopic fantasy enables the male to act on his own sexual desires, which always satisfies the recipient, no matter what she says or how she feels about the sexual activity” (54). The zero-sum metaphor manifests as Paul’s speech and actions become increasingly forceful and violent as the assault escalates at the same

moment Emma realizes she has underestimated her ability to control the situation. While Paul assaults her, she begins to hear her mother's voice in her head. Emma narrates:

Paul says, "Stick ..." (*Emmie, why would a boy buy the cow when he can have the milk for free?*) "...in your mouth ...now." (*It's different for boys and girls.*) "You like that ..." (*Be more ladylike.*) "You like that don't you? ..." (*Cover yourself up, Emmie, for goodness sake.*) "...Dirty little ..." (I don't like that word, wait! No ...) (ellipses original; 98)

Although both voices attest to the angel-whore dichotomy, Nora's voice shames her daughter. However, since Paul has not vaginally penetrated her yet, Emma believes that she can still stop the attack, so she tries to push him away and bargains with him. She says, "[M]aybe we should go back to the party" (98), but he "...pushes [her] face into the center of the rose-print duvet [and] tells her, 'Don't be silly. Don't be a fucking cock tease'" (98). Paul disregards Emma's plea for him to stop and he operates from the understanding that she was asking for it; therefore, for him to stop is absurd, even as she begs: "'No. Wait! I don't—' but he pushes me back down, yanks my underwear aside, and he's inside me, and I'm not ready and it hurts, and I don't feel well, and I don't think he's using a condom" (98-99). The act of rape itself, as Paul forcefully enters Emma, affirms Paul's position in the symbolic order as a subject-Self, but it also shows his complete disregard of her verbal refusal, which is evidence of her subordinated position as object-Other. In the issue of consent, specifically affirmative consent that so often accompanies conversations regarding rape prevention, Paul violates the metamessages Emma gives him in the posturing of her body and her hesitation just at the moment he violates her literal refusal of his sexual advances. In a rape supportive culture, such as the one in the microcosm of Sean's party, Emma *is* nothing more than an object for Paul to win, an aspect of the zero-sum game that foreshadows the public shaming Emma experiences her blacklisted status at school and among the community.

Moreover, if the readers-spectators "read" the rape is read through Mulvey's theory of narrative and visual pleasure, the absolute focus of the rape scene is Paul's fascination with Emma's body. However, O'Neill is not content to fully align the readers-spectators' gaze with the rapist's. Rather, Emma's narration refocuses the readers-spectators' attention to the domestic space around her in such a way that it disrupts the onerous male gaze as the sense of claustrophobia and restraint are "...read into the pressurized placement of [Paul and

Emma] in shallow depth” (Pollock 92), and this forces the readers-spectators “...into a confrontation or conversation with the painted figure[s]” (92). Although Emma and Paul are not painted figures, they are nonetheless metaphorical “painted” representations of embodied figures in narrative fiction.

Furthermore, as he rapes her, Emma no longer hears her mother’s voice. Instead, she hears her own: “I did this. There isn’t any point in stopping him. It doesn’t matter” (99). Emma’s attempt to downplay the assault through *misnaming* herself as the guilty party is an insidious misnomer of a phallogocentric belief system that perpetuates rape myths and clearly positions her as the disadvantaged party in the zero-sum game: while denial is a defense mechanism against the guilt and shame Emma feels during and after the assault, it is one that ultimately fails her. Notably, Emma does not disassociate during the rape as many protagonists in YA rape narratives do but instead becomes hyperaware of what Paul is doing to her body. Emma narrates:

He’s wraps some of my hair around his fist, wrenching my head back he bites my shoulder, hard ...and he leans over me again biting my ear, telling me I’m a slut, *you know you want it, Emma, you know you want it, Emma*, thrusting harder and harder, slamming his body into mine. And finally, his fingertips gouging into my hip bones, he pulls out, gives a long, desperate groan while a wet heat splatters across my lower back. He collapses on top of me. All I can see is the splatter of red across white. (99-100)

Despite its textual form, one of the risks that Emma’s graphic depiction of the rape indelibly comes up against is the question of pornography. Such a question is relevant, and it speaks to embodied spectatorship that O’Neill creates by bringing the spectators into the closed space of the bedroom. However, while closely reading the rape scene the readers-spectators must ask: for whose eyes is this scene for? Since a feminist interpretation of Brechtian dis-identifactory practices allows for the “...disruption of narrative, [and the] refusal [to] identif[y] with heroes[,] a different form of realist knowledge [emerges that] actively involve[s] the spectator in its production” (Pollock 96). Thus, Emma’s narration resists Paul’s attempt to claim her as her attention to the roses on the duvet interrupts the gaze of the readers-spectators and prevents them from completely aligning with Paul’s sadism.

During the rape, Emma fetishizes the flowers on Sean's parents' duvet where her mind abstracts the red roses and transforms them into splatters of red across white, an element of the narrative that actually resists the theory of sadistic voyeurism by reconfiguring what kind of spectacle is being made of Emma's body during the attack. While distanciation works to undermine "...the specularity of reflection and its system of exchange [by] creating a new contact between stage and the auditorium and thus giving a new basis to artistic pleasure" (Brecht qtd. in "Screening the Seventies"; 95), O'Neill's depiction of Paul raping Emma creates a new contact in the sense that the system of exchange between author, spectator, and spectacle gives rise to a deeply disturbing artistic *dis*-pleasure. Through reading the rape scene as spectral realism, the readers-spectators cannot escape the spatial reality of Sean's parents' bedroom any more than Emma can, which is a testament to the capacity of O'Neill's authorship to enjoin the readership-spectatorship's psychological closeness to the act of rape itself. Even though Paul rapes Emma, readers-spectators experience the violence of the rape through Emma's textual corpus.

However, O'Neill's choice to narrate the rape from the position of firstness as opposed to thirdness is no less risky than other YA writers' choice to portray it in fragmented memories. Here, haptic images "...do not invite identification with a figure so much as they encourage a bodily relationship between the viewer and the image" (Marks 144). O'Neill's authorship of the rape facilitates a multisensory experience that allows her to launch her own assault on the readers-spectators' senses only to violate a tenet of haptic visuality that insists "...[w]hat is erotic is being able to become and object with and for the world, and return to being a subject in the world" (Marks 144). Haptic criticism sees a sensuous continuum between the representation of the subject and the object as opposed to a gap between them, which O'Neill embraces at the level of text and reader as well as the specularity of reflection and its system of exchange but she prohibits readers-spectators from passively observing or reckoning with what would otherwise be read as an erotic encounter.

Nevertheless, after Paul rapes her, Emma wraps herself in a sheet while he appears to be asleep and tiptoes into the bathroom connected to the bedroom. Her first reaction to seeing herself in the mirror is to note that "...the bones in my face have shifted" (101). Clearly, the shift in Emma's face marks a moment of transition wherein readers-spectators begin to look at her differently: to be up close against Emma is to simultaneously feel embodied and wish for

disembodiment. To that effect, the zero-sum metaphor also speaks to the cost of embodied spectatorship, as readers-spectators bear witness to the active gaze of a rape culture that insists Emma is asking for it. It is at this point that O'Neill leaves them no choice but to reflect on the violence they have just encountered and the dis-ease/disease it brings forth in the rest of the novel.

Yet, Paul's assault on Emma is only the first of the night. When Emma returns to the bedroom, she expects that Paul will be gone, but instead she is met by Paul, Sean, Dylan, Eli, and another boy named Fitzzy. Without warning, Paul rips the sheet away from Emma, exposing her breasts and the rest of her body to the other boys. For his part, Paul makes an "...oops face and says, 'Ah, you're too hot not to show off. Boys, look at her'" (103). As they look, Emma staves off the urge to run back into the bathroom: "This is the price of my beauty, and I have to pay it. I am willing to pay it" (103). Not surprisingly, Emma's willingness to pay the cost of her beauty further emphasizes the zero-sum game metaphor, as Paul puts Emma's body on display for other young men fetishize as he has. Emma's response to the other young men looking is as equally as disturbing, for her behavior does not suggest she has just been brutally raped. Rather than cry out for help or call the police, she simply refuses to meet their gaze but voluntarily takes another pill that Paul offers her and loses consciousness.

Hence, O'Neill abruptly distances spectators from witnessing or experiencing the gang rape that takes place in between the time when Emma loses consciousness in Sean's parents' bedroom and when she regains consciousness the following afternoon. Although O'Neill dissolves the notional space of Sean's parents' bedroom and refocuses the narrative in Emma's home, she also places the burden of knowing what happened between Paul and Emma on readers. The burden of knowing and being witness to the rape further attests to the way O'Neill's authorship and Emma's narration blurs the gaze of the readers-spectators superfluously between text and reality as Emma briefly suffers from amnesia for twenty-four hours after she wakes up on the lawn of her family's home.

Ironically, Emma's first post-rape memory is her mother's frantic voice. Since her parents were out of town celebrating their anniversary on the night of the assault, they find Emma sprawled across the front lawn just before dinner, naked and burning in the sun (107). Emma hears her mother tell her father, "Her skin is ruined. Pick her up Denis. Bring her inside" (107), but when she opens her eyes,

she sees her father hesitate, as if he has an aversion to her. While it may be tempting to interpret Emma's second and third-degree burns as a symbol of rebirth, her burns speak to how O'Neill specularizes rape culture in Western society, which is to say, the burns allegorize society's penchant for hiding the epidemic in plain sight and masking it as something other than the complete violation that it is. Despite having burns all over her body, Nora makes her daughter go to school the following day, insisting that it is just "sunstroke" (111). On the car ride to school, Emma wonders, "*Why am I so sunburnt? Why can't I remember anything? What happened?*" (112). The didactic function of her questions is to remind readers that they were spectators to the rape.

As Emma walks down the halls of St. Brigid's, her peers are silent and avoid making eye contact with her. It is a stark change in comparison to the way other students idolize her at the beginning of the novel. When Emma walks into class, she confronts her friends, but Ali shuts her down: "Well, maybe you should try being less of a whore. Don't you remember fucking four guys in one night? Don't you remember how you let all of them take pictures, and Fitzzy film it!" (120). The vehemence in Ali's tone renders Emma speechless as she remembers the memory of Paul raping her at the same moment she. Emma grapples with how to verbalize Paul's attack but words fail her. She and Jamie speak:

"I didn't ...I don't know what you're talking about, but Paul ...He—"

"What are you trying to say, Emma?" Jamie narrows her eyes at me.

I don't know. I don't know what I'm trying to say.

"That's right," Jamie says. "Best not to say anything.

No one likes a girl who makes a fuss, do they?" (125)

Jamie's words are cruel but it is the first time in the novel that Emma is without power relative to her position in her peer group. Instead, Jamie possesses it and wields slut discourse to shame her. In effect, the exchange marks the end of Emma's friendship with Jamie, Ali, and Maggie.

Moreover, Emma continues to be shamed as she walks home from school; however, this time it is by Dylan's girlfriend Julie, who throws an aluminum can of soda at her. The Coke hits her in the back before it hits the ground and explodes, *splattering* across her back in the process: "You're fucking finished, do you hear me? I saw the snapchat" (129). Julie's actions solidify Emma's newly acquired low-



status position in the peer hierarchy that leaves her in a position to victimize Emma. In fact, Julie's assault on Emma's body compels readers to re-experience the body's affective response to the moment Paul ejaculates on Emma's back during the rape. Thus, O'Neill subjects the readers to the verbal *and* physical violence that Emma suffers at the hands of her supposed best friends as well as those who are not in her immediate circle. It is an aspect of the text that puts the pervasiveness of rape culture on full display; Julie's metaphorical ejaculation via the coke-as-phallus is no less violent as Paul's assault.

Subsequently, after Emma arrives home, she gets in the shower to rinse off the evidence of Julie's attack. As soon as she feels the water in her mouth, it induces a flashback: "Hands pushing my bones into the center of my body, as if they're trying to make me smaller. *Lads, I don't know if this is a good idea.* Laughter, something wet splaying across my skin and running down my throat" (133). The fear of the memory paralyzes Emma. It is not until the phone rings that she finally comes out of the shower. The voice on the other end of the line tells her to check her social media accounts and quickly hangs up. Once she logs in, the computer informs her that she has several hundred notifications, one of which is an invitation to join a new private group, "Easy Emma" (134).

Here, Emma sees naked photo after naked photo of her body—which Dylan has posted. One of the captions reads, "Can we all just take a moment to appreciate The Body That Is Emma O'Donovan?" (135). Where Paul had made a spectacle of Emma's physical corpus, Dylan treats it as an absent referent. She is no longer a trophy; she is no longer beautiful; she is no longer Emma O'Donovan, but The Body in its most basic form—flesh. Emma observes:

The photos start at the head, work down the body, linger on the naked flesh spread across the rose-covered sheets. Dylan on top of that girl. His hands cover her face. She is just a body. An it. A thing. Now Dylan's fingers are inside the body. He spreads her legs, gesturing for the camera to come closer, the next few photos of pink flesh. Dylan puts his head between her legs. Next, a photo of Sean, his face twisting into a grimace as he pushes inside her, puke gushing out of his mouth onto her face and hair. They laugh. Next, my front yard. Dylan stands there, his dick in his hand, a thin yellow stream of piss flowing onto her head. I feel shame ripping through me as I scroll, breaking me apart. (135-36)

It would seem, then, that the photos of Emma's body taken by the young men as they gang rape her provide irrefutable evidence that they raped her but this is not the case. Whilst Oliver refers to these types of photos taken during a party rape as creepshots (5), the comments from Emma's peers and even strangers communicate that hunting Emma is a spectator's sport. For instance, one commenter states, "Some people are asking for it. She deserves to get pissed on" (143), while another notes, "She's deader than a doorknob. She's deader than Oscar Pistorious's girlfriend. Her ass looks good though" (300). Again, the idea of woman-as-trophy is at issue: her body is both prey and trophy. Yet the photos do more than transgress the dichotomies of hunter/hunted, trophy/object, or self/other, they facilitate an element of spectral realism that transmutes Emma's figure into the body-*cum*-corpse.

In contrast to the rape scene, readers experience the gang rape from the perspective of the present moment reflecting on the past. Although readers encounter the images with Emma, the angle of the camera used to take the photos completely aligns with the male gaze, thus, it does exclusively align with the gaze of the rapists. Once again, O'Neill compromises the readers-spectators' positionality in relation to the text by creating an uneasy tension between haptic visuality and distanciation. On the one hand, the spectacularity of the images requires readers to touch the photos of Emma's body with their eyes which is evident in her description of the way the camera starts at her head and descends down the rest of her body, as well as when she notes that Dylan waves his hand and invites the camera closer (135). Moreover, readers-spectators also become witnesses that cannot un-see Dylan and Sean rape Emma at the same time they desecrate her body. Yet, the enabling factor that allows such vulgar and violent objectification to occur is the culmination their collective fetishization of Emma's body.

On the other hand, by experiencing the creepshots alongside Emma, haptic visuality produces catharsis in spectators—a push to sympathize or to identify and understand her pain. This technique calls into question the distanciation that O'Neill relies on so heavily in novel's exposition of the characters which occurs via slut discourse by villainizing Emma and actively discouraging readers from identifying with her.

The photos draw the attention of the school guidance counselor at St. Brigid's, who alerts the police and contacts Emma's parents. Here, Emma is doubly acted against, as it is not her choice to press charges, the state does it for her. Initially, Emma agrees to press

charges against the young men but after the case garners national attention, the community shuns her as well as her family. Her father is relocated to manage a bank in the next town, her mother's bakery stand in the market goes out of business, and even a year after the assault, Emma continues to receive threatening emails and is tagged in photos on social media (292). Here, the earlier terms of the culture that posit Emma as a someone to envy become the grounds for public humiliation that intensify her shame.

As a result of the public backlash, Nora decides to homeschool Emma but the post-traumatic effects of the assault prevent her from being able to complete any work. Despite seeing a therapist and taking a daily regimen of anti-psychotic and anti-depressant medication Emma attempts suicide twice (159; 206). However, when Emma finds out that the photos the rapists took will not be admissible in the court proceedings, she cedes, "All I am is a thing. They are all innocent until proven guilty. But not me. I am a liar until I am proven honest" (270). After her lawyer informs the family that the local priest has agreed to serve as a character witness for two of the boys and that Emma's sexual history will be a part of their defense, Emma capitulates. For their part, Emma's parents applaud her for "doing the right thing" (314) by not "...dragging the family through anymore public humiliation" (314). Emma is disgusted by her parents' reaction to her decision and feels betrayed by them.

Alone, once more in her bedroom, Emma checks her email and finds a letter from Conor, who laments that he "...should have been there to protect [her]" (315), a juxtaposition that mediates her parents' failure to do so. Of all the characters that O'Neill interjects into the first half of the novel, only Conor still attempts to speak to Emma, but since she will not agree to physically see him, he emails her daily. As she reads his last email, she fantasizes about what she would have been like if she had left the party with Conor. She notes, "I belong to those other boys, as surely as if they have stamped me with a brand. They have seared their names into my skin" (315). As she says this, Emma takes stock of her/self in the mirror. It is not a coincidence that it is the same mirror that appears in the novel's first chapter.

Notably, O'Neill ends *Asking for It* in the same physical space where she begins it: Emma's bedroom. However, Emma's evaluation of her reflection is no longer narcissistic or self-flattering but distant and detached. She notes, "How is it that two eyes, a nose, and a mouth can be positioned in such varying ways that it makes one person beautiful and another person not? What if my eyes had been a fraction

closer together? I might be different” (315). In an act of hyperbole, she is only able to tear her eyes away from the looking glass when Nora yells up the stairs and tells her to “...hurry and come down for breakfast. Your father wants to see you” (317) that Emma gives readers the novel’s closing lines: “I must look like a good girl. It’s important that I look normal. It’s important that I look like a good girl. I walk down the stairs” (317). Yet, it is within these lines that attests to O’Neill’s most significant achievement regarding spectral realism: as Emma describes the attributes of her face on the last page, readers realize that they do not actually know what Emma looks like. Embedded throughout *Asking for It* are generic similes that allow readers to make inferences about what Emma “looks like” without ever divulging any specific details about her appearance. Although this is a facet of O’Neill’s authorship that points towards women as icons, it also speaks to the embodied gaze of the spectators pertaining to the novel’s secondary characters and readers alike, who “...project [their] fantasy onto [Emma’s] body” (Mulvey 60) and inscribe it thereafter.

In essence, Emma’s body is a palimpsest text. She is a translucent specter whose corporeal form only exists through the nonspecific inferences that O’Neill threads throughout the novel. Emma’s physical features, which often provide identity markers for the reader, are irrelevant. In a grotesque inversion of narrative expectations, O’Neill operates from the perspective that readers always already know what Emma looks like. Therefore, at the center of O’Neill’s representation of Emma is the tension between haptic visuality and distanciation, for readers only know that she “looks like” her mother, a model, a porn star, a slut, a liar, a whore, a dead girl, a good girl, and like she was asking for it. Since the act of reading requires an individual’s participation to make the text meaningful, O’Neill repurposes the rape narrative as a political statement by seizing the opportunity to bring readers behind locked doors and witness the rape—its effects and its affects—without the promise or guarantee of narrative closure. Thus, O’Neill’s plays on the readers’ assumptions about what they think they know regarding the terms of rape culture. It is up to readers—as spectators and witnesses—to imagine what happens to Emma after she descends the stairs to join her parents for breakfast. Through spectral realism, O’Neill jars readers from their assumptions about who is and who is not rapeable and at the same time, unapologetically scrutinizes rape culture.



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