



Russell, Y. (2019). Book Review: Rape and Resistance. *Social and Legal Studies*, 28(4), 563-566.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663919844132>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1177/0964663919844132](https://doi.org/10.1177/0964663919844132)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the author accepted manuscript (AAM). The final published version (version of record) is available online via Sage at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0964663919844132> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

LINDA MARTÍN ALCOFF, *Rape and Resistance*. Cambridge: Polity, 2018, pp. 269, ISBN: 978-0 745-69191-6, £17.99 (pbk).

Linda M. Alcoff's book *Rape and Resistance* makes a timely entry into the small but lively canon of feminist theoretical work on sexual violence. The first major work of theory to be written after the #MeToo movement and cultural phenomenon commenced, Alcoff's aim is to maximise the current moment of political visibility of sexual violence to engender social change (pp. 23-55). She urges us to resist shying away from the complexity of sexual violence, and to eschew simplistic binary categories and claims, often caricatured in accounts of feminist discourse on sexual violence, that rape is about power but not sex (p. 12). In framing the current political moment, Alcoff relies on José Medina's notion of 'meta-lucidity', which refers to how we come to know, and how we may be impeded in knowing (Medina 2013). Meta-lucid subjects, explains Alcoff, 'are those who are aware of the effects of oppression in our cognitive structures and of the limitations in the epistemic practices grounded in relations of oppression' (p. 32). In order to foster a community of meta-lucid subjects who can mobilise in resistance to sexual violence, two other aspects of Medina's framework are necessary. A moment of reckoning brought on by the tension in conflicting knowledge claims, or 'epistemic friction', is required to 'motivate change in our conventional norms and practices of knowing' (p. 31). Epistemic friction must also be accompanied by a process of 'echoing': making portable a claim or idea across contexts (p. 31). The current political moment is such a time in which the epistemic friction around sexual violence has the potential to produce a polity with enhanced meta-lucidity (p. 33). A key factor in continuing this process, says Alcoff, is to increase the circulation of survivor speech. Survivor testimony is the key to generating the epistemic friction necessary to encourage meta-lucidity. But for this to have purchase we must rework the discursive conditions that interpret and circulate our speech (p. 45). In order to do this, Alcoff presents a new agenda for theory centred around six key points (pp. 46-55). These include developing venues of communication, further educating the public on the history of intersecting oppressive structures, and an exaltation to 'push back against the hegemony of the legal domain' (p. 46).

Alcoff returns to familiar theoretical territory in her appraisal of anti-rape politics, by relying on Foucault to both understand the harm of rape and to think about the question of resistance. His framework, she argues, advances a theoretical agenda 'necessary for the movement's progress' (p. 3). Alcoff's analysis of the value of narrative and the importance of investing survivor speech with epistemic authority is the central theoretical focus of the book, and is a welcome contribution to the literature on rape, feminism and the 'speak out' (see further: Brown 1996; Cahill 2001; Gavey 2005, Heberle 1996; Mardorossian 2002; Scott 1992; Serisier 2018). Alcoff argues for centring survivor experience to the feminist project of resistance to rape. Experience, she notes, is not 'pre-theoretical', nor is theory separable from experience (p. 199). Social change, therefore, does not need to

'get beyond' the personal narrative or even the confessional in order to become political, but rather needs to analyze the various effects of the confessional in different contexts and struggle to create discursive spaces in which we can maximize its socially transformative effects (p. 200).

What does need to transform, however, so that we can hear the truly subversive speech of the survivor, are the arrangements of speaking in which survivors are rarely authorized to act 'as both witnesses and experts, reporters of experience and theorists of experience' (p. 198).

While gender haunts the pages of Alcoff's book, it is never addressed as a central category for theoretical attention. Women are the 'hermeneutically weaker' party, upon whom the burden of consent falls (p. 130), consent as a concept is ill-equipped to protect women (p. 138), women and girls are disproportionately targeted for sexual violence with little historical or geographical variance (p. 153), and we cannot assume that women have today attained the status of free and equal members of society (p. 154). This lacuna in the analysis is starkest in Alcoff's attempt to think sexual subjectivity. Our central concern with sexual violations, she says, 'should be their inhibiting and transformative effects on sexual subjectivity or self-making capacities' (p. 111). Alcoff turns to Foucault's care of the self to ground this understanding of sexual subjectivity as central to the process of self-making. Through attentiveness to one's self and one's own sexual imaginary, 'human beings across historical and cultural difference' can craft a reflexive self capable of developing a sexual subjectivity (p. 113). Alcoff notes both that the '...problem of sexual violation cannot be treated as distinct from the problematic of sexuality itself' (p. 113) and 'the empirical findings also make clear that ideologies about gender and sexual differences have an impact on what things we do sexually, and who does them' (p. 114). However, critical attention to the particularities of sexual difference are still not addressed. Instead we need a 'more open-ended conception of sexuality' (pp. 120-121) like the one Foucault's framework provides, which has the capacity to understand a 'model of causation that is plausibly holistic and multi-dimensional, incorporating material and social elements as well as the vagaries of individual interpretation, all in mediated relations with one another...' (p. 137). This will involve rethinking key concepts like desire and pleasure, and problematising the hermeneutic hegemony of consent.

Alcoff attests to the centrality to the feminist project of creating the conditions in which women can 'speak for themselves' when they speak of sexual violation (p. 226). However, she asserts this having paid no attention to what a specific feminine sexual subjectivity would entail. Attempting, perhaps, to avoid the dreaded gender binary (she intimates as much, see p. 112) Alcoff, I would argue, advances a programme that stops short of doing what it says it will do: she insists on sexual subjectivity as central to her agenda for theory and resistance, but her attempt to do this without any reference to sexual subjectivity *as sexed* means that her analysis waives the opportunity to truly think sex and sexuality differently.

Given the key concerns of the book, Louise du Toit's work is a notable omission. Du Toit's book *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape* (2009) addresses the question of sexual subjectivity in great detail and attempts the difficult process of rethinking the feminine outside the monologic of normative neutral (masculine) subjecthood. She does this in a way that neither reifies essentialist notions of womanhood, nor forecloses the possibilities of multiple morphologies of difference. Reference to Drucilla Cornell's dynamic re-thinking of feminine sexuality in political context in *The Imaginary Domain* (1995) may have also assisted here, particularly in light of Alcoff's acknowledgment that access to one's own sexual imaginary is crucial to the project of rethinking sexual subjectivity (p. 113), and the process of 'concernful and agential self-making' (p. 144).¹

Alcoff concludes *Rape and Resistance* with a call for a thoroughly intersectional feminist anti-rape agenda, in which privileged women no longer function as the paradigmatic victim (p. 229), and there is a shared commitment to developing our understanding of how all forms of oppression exacerbate the problems of sexual violence (p. 233). Her call is one well-made and her commitment throughout this text to centre multiple

¹ Or indeed the work of Elizabeth Grosz (1995) whose research on experimental desire includes a fruitful engagement with Foucault.

and intersecting forms of oppression is a brave and necessary intervention into this body of literature. She insists that anti-rape strategies that focus on individualising defensive responses to sexual violence must give way to 'concrete forms of justice' which approach the needs of different communities in a holistic way (p. 229) and, importantly, links the fight against rape to the fight against imperialism and for democracy (p. 240). While I am not in agreement with important theoretical interventions in this book, it is a compelling and thought-provoking contribution to the field and is likely to demand attention for many years to come.

YVETTE RUSSELL

University of Bristol, UK

REFERENCES

- Brown W (1995) *States of Injury*. Princeton University Press.
- Cahill A J (2001) *Rethinking Rape*. Cornell University Press.
- Cornell D (1995) *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment*. Routledge.
- Du Toit L (2009) *A Philosophical Investigation of Rape: The Making and Unmaking of the Feminine Self*. Routledge.
- Gavey N (2005) *Just Sex? The Cultural Scaffolding of Rape*. Routledge.
- Grosz, E A (1995) *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*. Routledge.
- Heberle R (1996) 'Deconstructive Strategies and the Movement Against Sexual Violence' *Hypatia* 11(4): 63-76.
- Mardorossian C M (2002) 'Towards a New Feminist Theory of Rape.' *Signs* 27(3): 743-775.
- Medina J (2013) *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. Oxford University Press.
- Scott J W (1992) "'Experience'" In *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Butler J and Scott J W pp. 22-40. Routledge.
- Serisier T (2018) *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*. Palgrave Macmillan