

Review: Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance*, Polity Press 2018

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Sexual violence is a global problem, defying simple explanations and remedies. Its harms are distinctively social and cultural, and key to improving things is centring stories and experiences of its survivors. These are the central ideas in Linda Martín Alcoff's *Rape and Resistance*. Her treatment alternates between recondite Foucault exegesis and deeply personal autobiography; the result is a wide-ranging and thoughtful treatment of a problem both timely and timeless. Along the way, Alcoff offers insights on the social contingency of experience and desire, the normativity of sexual morality, the role of consent in sexual ethics, and many other topics. The book does important work highlighting historical complexities of sexual violence; the application to contemporary culture is a sensitive matter on which Alcoff's performance is mixed.

A central theme of the book is the importance of "sexual subjectivity": individuals should play an active role in creating and expressing sexual identities. Alcoff locates the primary harm of rape and other sexual violation in the undermining of this subjectivity. Crucial to its development is survivor speech: following Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice*, Alcoff emphasizes the importance of encouraging victims of sexual violation to contribute to broader hermeneutical resources.

The book is loosely organized around obstacles to survivors' contributions to the public imaginary: the emphasis on transactional notions of consent, an uncritical libertarianism about sexual pleasure and sexual desire (yes, there is something wrong with sex with young children), the trope of 'hysterical' rape victims (no, people don't become untrustworthy after being raped), the commercialization and objectification of stories of sexual violation (especially by 80s and 90s talk shows), and others. "Our focus," Alcoff writes on page 124, "should be on thwarting the mechanisms by which victims and low-status groups of all sorts are excluded from participating in the formation of meanings."

Alcoff also emphasizes complex ways in which sexual violence and racism interact, noting that anti-oppressive work in one category can be co-opted for oppressive purposes in another. Her examples involve violence in reaction to racist fears about brown sexual predators. These range from Donald Trump's calls for the execution of the Central Park Five, to the 1989 U.S. invasion of Panama.

The book's June 2018 publication was awkwardly timed. Its final pages celebrate the literary work of Junot Díaz; they do not discuss the many sexual violation complaints made against him

the month before, while the book was in press. But Alcoff finds connections between these allegations and the worries articulated above; Díaz becomes a test case and application for her approach. In a May 14 open letter to the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and a May 16 column in the *New York Times*, Alcoff criticized the discussion of Díaz, including that of “those on social media”, for a negative portrayal, suggesting that it reinforces racist stereotypes about Black and Latino men.

What harms befell Díaz? Some feminists called for a boycott of his books, and he stepped down as chair of the Pulitzer Prize Board (retaining instead a regular board membership). MIT investigated and declined to take disciplinary action—Díaz is listed as the instructor of record for four courses there this Fall. He suffered reputational damage, but it’s a stretch to treat it alongside the violent racist reactions to sexual assault described in the book. It’s also harmful: portraying complaints of sexual violation as racist panic is no less silencing than the ‘hysteria’ tropes Alcoff decries. On the whole, Alcoff’s stance on Díaz is hard to square with her insistence that survivor speech must be protected and encouraged. She describes Díaz as a ‘repentant sexist’, on the basis of a cursory apology (which Díaz later retracted).

The open letter complains that tweets about Díaz were “turned into trending topics and headlines”. But the Alcoff of *Rape and Resistance* understood the importance of cultivating and amplifying survivor speech, even when it is disruptive. As she nicely put it on page 201:

“Why not identify and develop methods and forums in which to actualize the subversive potential of survivor outrage? It is important to remember that too many survivors feel no such outrage and experience little or no anger except directed at ourselves. I have heard too many rape victims express tearful concern about what reporting would do to *his* life, even just to his sports career. Women’s anger on our own behalf is a success won through political and theoretical struggle; this is indicative of the threat it poses. In what ways can we express this anger, unleashing its disruptive potential, while minimizing the adverse effect on our own safety and well-being?”

In this context it’s rather jarring to see her contemporaneous op-ed, with the book’s title in her by-line, serving to silence Díaz’s accusers. None of this undermines the message of the book itself, but it serves to underscore that, as with so many anti-oppressive ideals, things are easier said than done.¹

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