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Alcoff's *Rape and Resistance*: A Précis

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Abstract This article summarizes Linda Martin Alcoff's Rape and Resistance (Polity, Cambridge, 2018). Alcoff's analysis centers on a political and philosophical defense of the need to recognize the complexity of both the phenomenon of sexual assault and the various political attempts to counter it. Such complexity extends to the process of describing an experience of sexual assault (whether public or private), which Alcoff argues is always shaped by a multitude of political and social discourses. Alcoff's Foucauldian analysis results in an innovative description of the harms of sexual assault, one that focuses on the ways in which experiences of sexual assault prohibit the active involvement of the subject in the development of their sexual subjectivity. Recognizing that gender-based violence is a global phenomenon, Alcoff nevertheless argues that place-specific instances of such violence are contextualized by the larger phenomenon, which is heterogeneous to its core. The article concludes by posing several questions to Alcoff, centered on the themes of the ethics of sexual experimentation, assailants' ascription of hyperagency to targets of sexual assault, and how sexual assault may influence the sexual subjectivity of maleidentified victims, particularly those who were assaulted as children.

Keywords Sexual violence · Rape · Foucault · Subjectivity · Global gender-based violence

Linda Martín Alcoff's book *Rape and Resistance* (2018) arrives at a charged, fraught moment in US gender politics. On the one hand, we're one and a half years into the reboot of the #metoo movement, which has been credited with holding powerful men (and some women) accountable for acts of sexual harassment and/or

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sexual violence. In many cases, those acts stretched across years or decades, and involved multiple victims, which means that the perpetrators had been protected by reliable, concentric circles of support, ranging from individuals (Weinstein had a lot of help, as did Cosby) to institutions. #metoo managed to erode that support, at least in some cases, and the diffuse, decentralized movement seemed particularly well suited to illuminate what has always been one of the central tensions about the phenomenon of gender-based violence: namely, that it is simultaneously deeply damaging, and thus horrific, and that it is quotidian. #metoo, so many female-identified people said. In my family, in my workplace, in my marriage, on the streets, in the classroom, in the church, in the fields, in the clubs, on the subway, at the philosophy conference, me too, me too, me too. We tried to raise a chorus that could not be ignored, and it had an effect.

On the other hand—and a basic familiarity with social movements should preclude us from viewing this as a paradox, or even a contradiction—we have a federal government moving to reduce Title IX protections against sexual harassment and violence in educational settings, a sense of emboldenment and entitlement among male supremacist groups, who frequently are cited as providing inspiration for mass shootings, and a president whose bragging about committing sexual assault, even though caught on camera, proved no deterrent to his political ascendency. To top it all off, recent data indicates that public opinion has become increasingly negative toward #metoo, demonstrating the rising belief that the movement has "gone too far."

In trying to break through the noise of denial, the endlessly shifting rhetoric of dismissal and deflection that has filled in those concentric circles of support like insulation blown into attic walls, the anti-rape movement has settled on certain refrains, claims whose sheer simplicity and consistency are designed to return the discourse to some semblance of moral sanity. Rape is rape, we say. Believe women. It's about power, not sex. It's not her fault.

This is the moment of Alcoff's intervention. Most generally, *Rape and Resistance* is an argument in favor of complexity when it comes to all matters regarding sexual violence. Alcoff argues that assuming that there is an ethical simplicity to either what counts as an act of sexual violence or to forms of resistance to rape culture is a philosophical and political mistake. It is a philosophical mistake because such an assumption flies in the face of our existential situation, which is a marbled amalgamation of materiality, discursivity, consciousness, and experience, none of which can be separated cleanly from each other. It is a political mistake because permitting into the social discourse only those narratives which hew cleanly to those simplified refrains will marginalize many survivors, thus perpetuating precisely the kinds of wrongs the anti-rape movement is attempting to dismantle. Moreover, such filtering will result in an inaccurate, even if satisfyingly coherent and consistent, representation of the social and political phenomenon that is sexual assault, leaving the movement to struggle against an illusion.

And so, Alcoff argues persuasively, the anti-rape movement needs to be undergirded with a recognition of the ways in which all the discourses that surround and construct the phenomenon of sexual violence—overlapping, intersecting discourses about sex, agency, narrative, race, the self, gender, and so on—shape

it into the particular phenomenon that it currently is. Any conceptual or rhetorical approach that assumes a givenness to rape beyond its discursive particularity will by definition miss the mark. Moreover, any movement to counter rape culture is itself a discursive phenomenon, with its own constitutive and constituting elements.

Alcoff seeks to inject nuance into the central questions that have framed both the philosophical and activist conversations about sexual violence: how are we to understand the relationship between sexual norms and sexual violence? If the act of identifying whether a certain interaction does or does not instantiate sexual violence is not a matter of applying a known term to a specific experience (as if we're matching terms from two columns on an exam), how are we to understand the process of naming our experience? How can we better identify, and struggle against, ways in which appeals to protection against sexual violence are weaponized by white supremacists, colonialists, and others? How can we describe the harms of sexual assault without falling prey to the sex/violence dichotomy, and in a way that recognizes the complex, intersubjective nature of sexual agency? In addressing these questions, Alcoff draws from two sources most extensively: experiences of sexual assault, both her own and that of others'; and Michel Foucault's work on biopower, discursivity, and the self. And in doing so, she demonstrates that the two phenomena which make up the title of her book are, perhaps counterintuitively, more intertwined than oppositional.

Take, for example, the tactic central to #metoo: the sharing of personal experiences of sexual harassment or violence. For Alcoff, the act of making meaning is simultaneously open-ended (that is, not determined by a static or objective reality) and constrained (by complex discursive systems). When it comes to the narratives of sexual violence provided by survivors, then, both the content of those narratives and the political use to which they may be put emerge from existing social structures even as they may challenge some of those structures, or play a part in building new ones. Alcoff warns against an understanding of the increased production of such narratives as a form of revelation, an unveiling of that which was previously masked or hidden. Such a model would assume that the forms of circulation of such narratives are politically innocent, and that a certain moral confidence in how they will be received and taken up is justified. Here, Alcoff is pushing back against the assumption that the failure to address sexual assault is primarily a failure of understanding or knowledge, such that to merely inform the community that is failing to address the phenomenon that it is occurring will be sufficient to instigate a just response. Such an approach, Alcoff argues, ignores the epistemic complexity of the avenues through which such narratives are expressed, and the intersubjective ways in which the meanings of those narratives can be produced.

If narratives of sexual violence are to be politically transformative—and Alcoff clearly believes they have that potential—we must attend carefully to the ways in which they circulate, and the meanings that are attached to them. Using José Medina's term, Alcoff calls for a "meta-lucid" understanding of how narratives of sexual assault can be taken up, for good or for ill (such as, for example, the nefarious use of violence against women used to justify the invasion of Panama). Meta-lucidity, Alcoff argues, should serve to call into question the epistemic

privilege of the legal domain (as if it were the site where communities find out what "really" happened), and the systematic devaluing of survivors as knowers. It should also ground an approach to narratives of sexual assault that acknowledges context-specific discursive structures, develops alternative avenues of communication, and counters the unjust epistemic suspicion usually imposed on survivors in favor of a "presumptive credence to accusations [that] is not the same as granting an automatic *acceptance*" (2018, 54).

Complexity remains a theme when Alcoff turns her attention to, to quote her chapter title, "The Thorny Question of Experience." Utilizing Foucault's "tripartite approach to experience (involving domains of knowledge, forms of normativity, and relation to one's self" [74]), Alcoff focuses on the many forces in play when an individual undertakes the challenging task of making sense out of an experience of sexual assault. Among those forces are the terms and concepts that the individual's social location has on hand—many of which may be ill-fitting, or imprecise. On an even more Foucauldian note, the kinds of selves we have become, and are in the process of becoming, frame our experiences in specific ways—and of course, how we frame our experiences influences the self we are becoming. In this way, interpretations of experiences of gender-based harassment and violence ought not to be seen as merely correct or incorrect descriptions of a given experience, but rather as complex acts of meaning-making that are beholden to forces beyond the interpreter's control. This beholdenness does not rob the interpreter of agency—there is still work to be done, even if the tools provided are of particular kinds and a finite number. But Alcoff points out that the object of such work is not only the experience itself: to interpret an experience in particular ways is to construct one's self as a particular kind of being. Experience and its interpretation are sites where subjects are formed in particular material, discursive contexts, and so the work of interpreting an experience of sexual assault is a fluid, malleable, ongoing process without a definitive conclusion.

Obviously, the act of sharing an experience of sexual assault, and thus of bringing another person into the process of figuring out *just what the hell happened*, occurs in a variety of contexts, ranging from the intensely private to the dramatically public. When she turns her attention to public acts of disclosure (acts that are frequently mediated by media of various sorts), Alcoff again disrupts the easy association of disclosure with liberation. It is impossible, in my mind, to read these particular passages of Alcoff's work without thinking of Dr. Christine Blasey Ford, who continues to bear the brunt of the backlash against her for coming forward with her story of assault at the hands of now Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh. Alcoff's Foucualdian analysis help us to understand both the resolute contextualization of any act of disclosure—that it occurs at a particular social and political site, framed by particular discourses—as well as its subjectively constitutive effects. A public disclosure is not, from Alcoff's perspective, a mere revelation of what is true or real. It is a social act, frequently framed in contemporary Western societies as a form of confession, complete with a mediating authority who serves to receive the survivor's narrative and provide an authoritative interpretation of it for the viewing audience. The dangers here are clear: "As the television examples demonstrate, one of the dangers of using the confessional mode on mainstream

television is that survivor speech becomes a media commodity with a use value based on its sensationalism and drama, which then circulates within the relations of media competition primarily to boost market share and wake up dull-eyed viewers…A second danger is that the confessional mode focuses attention on the victim and her psychological state and not on the perpetrator" (194–5).

Other dynamics associated with public survivor disclosure, including the sheer pressure to disclose that some survivors may experience from anti-rape activists, can similarly serve to encroach upon the survivor's autonomy. Again, Alcoff returns to the particular expression of autonomy that is found in the meaning-making act; that is, she emphasizes the ways in which certain contexts (particularly, but not only, those that involve the mediation of an expert) frame the survivor as providing epistemically raw material that other, more qualified persons can and should interpret. Such a pattern, Alcoff claims, denies the ongoing subjective process of meaning-making, by which a survivor comes to an understanding of their experience:

> Clearly, a primary disabling factor in the confessional structure is the role of the expert mediator. In order to alter the power relations between the discursive participants we need to reconfigure, if not eliminate, this role. And this requires overcoming the bifurcation between experience and analysis embodied in the confessional's structure. We need to transform arrangements of speaking to create spaces where survivors are authorized to act as both witnesses *and* experts, reporters of experience *and* theorists of experience. (198)

To grapple with an experience of sexual violence, whether publicly or privately, is, in Alcoff's view, simultaneously a matter of agency, the construction of one's self, and relations. Yet too often the discourses that shape such narrativizing of experiences undermine one or more of those three; and so, again, we must be wary of acts of resistance, such as public revelations of experiences of sexual violence, that may remain enmeshed in oppressive dynamics.

One of the most substantial contributions that *Rape and Resistance* makes is in its articulation of the ethical harms of rape. Alcoff sets up the twofold philosophical challenge here quite clearly: first, such an articulation must recognize the vast diversity of forms that sexual assault can take; and second, it must address the philosophical suspicion, arising from multiple sources, toward any kind of sexual norms. That suspicion results in a sometimes implicit libertarianism that not only critiques specific existing sexual norms—which are quite obviously heterosexist, misogynist, racist, ableist, and so on—but sexual norms per se. Often, Alcoff notes, this suspicion of any norming turns to an ethics grounded in pleasure and desire—and as a good Foucauldian, Alcoff isn't buying it.

Alcoff argues that sexual subjectivity is not grounded in natural, innate desires, but is an ongoing project, taken up in specific historical and political locations. Moreover, whatever knowledge is produced about sexuality, sexual desires, sexual violation, etc., becomes part of the existential situation out of which sexual subjectivities emerge. And so, as Foucault sometimes emphasized (Alcoff analyzes important inconsistences in Foucault's work on this point), sexual desires and

pleasures are just as immersed and shaped by systems of power and knowledge as any other existential attribute, and so cannot provide a safe ground to which to retreat, or from which to battle against oppressive sexual norms.

Yet Alcoff is clear that we are not free to abandon the notion of sexual norming in its entirety. Sexual violation is harmful, damaging, and unethical; but we must be able to analyze it ethically without adopting a notion of the sexual self, or its desires, as prepolitical or presocial. Alcoff argues that what is needed is the development of sexual norms that protect the self-making capacities of individual selves, their ability to participate meaningfully in the construction of their sexual subjectivity. In fact, it is precisely the ways in which sexual violation forecloses that capacity, stunting an individual's ability to engage in that process of forming a sexual self, that, Alcoff argues, we find its most central harm.

> And this *making* requires an expansive imaginary and conceptual repertoire for thinking beyond the arbitrary conventions of one's present milieu. Hence if we aim merely to enact pleasure or overcome restrictions, we are aiming at inadequate goals, since neither challenges the way in which our sexual subjectivity has been constructed, or how our capacities for pleasure or sexual expression can be commodified and instrumentalized within societies or communities in which we are largely silenced. (89)

Alcoff's emphasis on sexual subjectivity entails a persistent focus not just on the specific desires, preferences, etc., that a sexual subject may have (although these are certainly part and parcel of sexual subjectivity), but on the sexual subject's agency, which includes the ability to forward one's own sexual becoming, to have significant and meaningful influence on the kinds of sexual interactions that one engages with, and to participate in a substantial way in the meaning-making process of interpreting those interactions.

This focus on the ability to participate in the process of the making of one's sexual self helps us to understand, as Alcoff details, the limitations of ethical analyses of sexual violation that emphasize the lack of consent, or desire, or pleasure. All such analyses focus on the event of sexual violation as if it denied one isolatable aspect of the victim's subjectivity. Moreover, such analyses can make little sense of sexual interactions that were experienced as traumatic or unwanted, even if they were accompanied by consent, desire, or pleasure.

> We can then pinpoint the harm of sexual violation as an inhibiting of the very possibility of sexual self-making. What is violated is not a substantive set of normative or normal desires, but the practical activity of caring for the self. Trauma atrophies possibilities…There is a wealth of personal experience written by survivors that suggests that rape gets in the way of being able to engage in open-ended reflective practices around one's sexuality, to put it mildly. It may cut off our activity, our desire, and our pleasure, cramp the will toward paranoia and safety concerns, cloud our minds with traumatic imagery rendering any other thoughts mute. No matter when it happens in one's life, one's sexual life is forever changed. But if it happens when we are young, or

> very young, the possibility of forming a participatory sexual subjectivity is seriously disabled. (145–6)

Alcoff's analysis is grounded in a persistent recognition that the phenomenon of gender-based violence is a global one. However, her approach to it as a global phenomenon does not emphasize the similarity of the threats and harm that female-identified persons face in different social and political contexts, as is frequently the case in mainstream discourse and sometimes in scholarly work as well. Instead, she seeks to describe how gender-based violence, and the responses to it, are deeply implicated in past and present forms of colonialism. She is particularly concerned to emphasize the ways in which anti-rape narratives can be hijacked to forward and justify racist, colonialist violence and oppression (155). In addition, she argues that frameworks of consent, victimhood, and honor that emanate from the global North have proved woefully inadequate to the task of understanding gender-based violence in the global South and elsewhere, and that engaging with the multiplicitous and context-based operationalization of terms associated with gender-based violence can help clarify the limitations of, for example, the use of contract theory in relation to sexual assault. The recognition of gender-based violence as a global phenomenon, Alcoff argues, requires understanding place-specific instances of such violence as contextualized by the larger phenomenon, which is heterogeneous to its core.

Summarizing Linda's complex book has taken up most of the time allotted to me, and so I have only a few moments left to articulate some questions that I invite her to follow up on or ignore, as she wishes, especially because I cannot develop them in much detail! First, I would invite her to expand on the ethical possibilities of sexual experimentation. Specifically, how important would she see the need for sexual experimentation in terms of the process of creating a sexual self? Additionally, how would we understand some ethical principles that could undergird sexual experimentation? (I'm intrigued by how the emphasis on consent seems to preclude the possibility of sexual experimentation, for example.) Second, I wonder if she could comment on the patriarchal, misogynist, tendency to ascribe an odd kind of hyper-agency to victims of sexual abuse—that is, describing victims as, in one way or another, acting in such a way that the perpetrator had no choice but to enact certain behaviors? There seems an interesting kind of paradox here, where the person who is associated with more social and political power (the assailant) adopts a kind of protective passivity. How are we to understand this association and perpetuation of power with helplessness? Finally, how might her focus on the harm of rape as encroaching on one's ability to shape one's sexual subjectivity throw some light on the phenomenon of the sexual abuse of boys, and the effects of that abuse writ large? Is it possible that such inability to shape one's sexual subjectivity might have quite different ramifications for male-identified subjects in patriarchal contexts?

I cannot end without a note of gratitude. This is a compelling, richly philosophical work that does not shy away from unnerving questions and the irreducible murkiness of embodied, political, social, and sometimes traumatic

experience. I thank Linda for her philosophical and political courage, which is so desperately needed at times such as these.

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