

Linda Martín Alcoff

Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation

Cambridge, UK: Polity (2018)

ISBN: 978-0745691923 (PB)

Reviewed by Louise du Toit, 2019

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Quote: "Experiences of sexual violation seriously undermine one's ability to make and shape oneself sexually, mostly with long-term effects, and this is the kernel of their harm."

Drawing on a wealth of feminist, activist, and more broadly philosophical literature from the past forty years, Linda Martín Alcoff in this important and timely work squarely faces the full complexity of the phenomenon of sexual violence. Responding to #MeToo and the many resonances this movement has found across the globe, Alcoff intervenes at a crucial moment to alert her readers to the multiple risks and dangers (as well as potential gains) that accompany the greater visibility and audibility of victims, or rather, those whom she suggests might be better designated as "survivors of sexual victimisation" (172). Thus, a key question she puts on the table is how to "make survivor speech as politically effective as possible," for the sake of which attention must be paid to "the conditions and context of its reception, interpretation and uptake" (11). This question follows now that we seem to have reached the "unquestionably significant" historical moment when "the enforced silence around [the] topic has receded" (23). This is also the same time that feminist activists and others have come to more fully realize that the "mere" visibility and audibility of survivors, and breaking of the silence, even in great and growing numbers, may not be sufficient to effect the social transformation needed to end the pervasiveness of the phenomenon. Not only may it not be enough, though: Alcoff provides multiple examples of how this greater visibility in fact gets appropriated for a wide range of social and political agendas that work actively against women's greater sexual (and thus social and political) freedom. Thus, the emotions predictably released by the greater acknowledgment of sexual violence get harnessed for projects ranging from intensified male or institutional control over women's sexed bodies to imperialist warfare; anti-immigration policies; racist policing; homophobic, Islamophobic, and xenophobic measures; growing nationalist and masculinist rhetoric; and more.

Shifting attention to how survivor speech and appearance are presented, framed, received, and interpreted, Alcoff opens up the range of practical and strategic problems faced by survivors who must decide whether, when, to whom, where, and how to speak about their traumatic experiences. These urgent matters are underpinned by complex philosophical issues related to questions about the nature of human experience, especially traumatic experience,

and how it relates to interpretation; the phenomena of self-narrativization, memoir, and autobiography and the place of truth and truthfulness within these; the meaning and place of sex in our relation to others and to ourselves; the conditions necessary for epistemic justice to be done to victim-survivors of sexual trauma; the link between experience and theory, expertise and credibility; the link among sex, shame, and honor, both in individuals and in collectives and institutions; the sometimes uneasy relationship between individual restoration or healing on the one hand and larger social transformation on the other; the place of sexual violence within global justice issues related to issues of class and cultural difference; imperialist interferences in other sovereign countries; racism; slavery; mass incarceration; and colonialism. Alcoff, herself a survivor of childhood sexual violation and a long-time philosopher-feminist theorist on the topic, points the way in this very complex and multifaceted field by stating unambiguously from the outset that the antirape "movement itself need not fear exploring either a more complex understanding of the constitution of the experience of sexual violence or the sometimes complicated nature of culpability" (2). Against those activists who think sexual violence has to be clear-cut, unambiguous, and a simple matter, Alcoff argues that effective resistance in fact calls for the interpretive complexities experienced by sexual violence survivors to inform our politics. The reduction of the complexities surrounding the meanings of sexual violence and victim-survivors' often ambiguous and changing responses to it, as routinely required in court cases, does not do survivors any favor, and in fact is likely to discourage many from speaking at all. Alcoff thus warns against the ways in which the legal domain has often come to be viewed as the principal site for making manifest, framing, and resisting sexual violence. By centering the court room and its logic, activists are overly restricting the kind of discourse around sexual violence that may emerge publicly, and are helping to enforce those "tightly constrained discursive spaces" that are basically conservative and not conducive for "the work of transforming our language" (14).

Alcoff may thus be said to attempt to liberate processes and discourses around sexual-violence-survivor speech from the straitjacket of the legal domain and its often counterproductive logics. This stance flows from the way in which she understands the logic and harm of sexual violence. She draws on feminist phenomenology to make the point that "the most profound" harm of sexual violence, among many harms, "is the effect on our sexual subjectivity, or our concerned making relationship to ourselves as sexual subjects" (121). If she is right, and "the concepts of sexual violation and sexual subjectivity are necessarily intertwined" (121), then she is also right in arguing that the traditional concept of violence, rooted as it is in meanings of concrete impact and physical damage, should be replaced with the broader notion of "violation" in the case of sexual attack. As we well know, physical injury need not result from profound sexual injury. As Alcoff puts it: "To violate is to infringe upon someone, to transgress, and it can also mean to rupture or break. Violations can happen with stealth, with manipulation, with soft words and a gentle touch to a child, or an employee, or anyone who is significantly vulnerable to the offices of others" (12). The focus of resistance against what we often call sexual violence is not so much physical coercion as "a violation of sexual agency, of subjectivity, of our will" (12).

In light of this wide range of concerns and the nature of the concerns, it might not come as a surprise that Alcoff chooses as her main interlocutor Michel Foucault. Although she disagrees with some of his substantive positions, notably on rape, she is strongly influenced by his "meta-approach" (155), especially by his understanding of the role of discourse in the structuring of power relations, and how we are shaped, and shape ourselves, into subjects, also sexual subjects, in response to discursive constructs. She positions herself with Foucault

against a certain Freudian reading that would see human sexuality as the repressed truth about one's real or deep or hidden self, and that would link our sexuality with the older concept of the self as a soul and substance (121). This is arguably the view of sexuality that underpinned the sexual revolution of the 1960s: underneath the social repressions and taboos are the natural, sexed selves that need to be located and then expressed in social transgression. For Alcoff, Foucault's work "in the 1970s was a Molotov cocktail thrown straight at the heart of the idea of sexual liberation" (89) because for him, the supposedly natural sexed self was as much a discursive and disciplinary construct as was anything it opposed itself to. On his understanding, we are thoroughly constituted as subjects, also as sexual subjects, through disciplinary discourses, and if we respond to these constitutive rules and norms through transgression, we in a sense do not transform but merely reinforce their hold over us, as he saw, for example, expressed in the confession of Christianity and psychoanalysis (182). Thus, to oppose one "truth of the self" with another "truth of the self" as if the self were a substance, is for Foucault to stay within the same oppressive logic.

Instead, and increasingly in his later work, as Alcoff discusses, Foucault highlighted what he called the ancient practices of "technologies of the self" or "care for the self," which provide us with an alternative understanding of our relationship to ourselves. These ideas do not conceive of the self as a substantive entity to be discovered and expressed, but instead see it as a proper subject, which means that we take up a relation to ourselves of self-fashioning and self-making without an ideal outcome (121). The same contrast can be expressed in the difference between *scientia sexualis*, which "aims for an objective representation of the ahistorical or fixed truths about the deep nature of human sexuality" and *ars erotica*, which "offers only a how-to manual with practical possibilities for sexual experiences"--for Alcoff, the latter means "we can fashion a more open-ended conception of sexual subjectivity with guide-ropes but without scripts" (121). Basically, what sexual violation does is to target and do long-term damage to victim-survivors' capacities for sexual self-making or *ars erotica*: what is violated is "not a substantive set of normative or normal desires, but the practical activity of caring for the self" (145). She thus shares Foucault's suspicion about creating normative sexual identities and practices, but without this suspicion leading her into a "blanket anti-normativity" and the inability to judge (77).

In this central aspect of her argument, Alcoff resonates with Drucilla Cornell's arguments in *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment* (1995), where Cornell argues for the minimal conditions to be put in place for all people to equally freely imagine (shape or make) and reimagine their own sexual identities for the sake of individuation or of becoming a self. Of the three conditions she stipulates, the guaranteed right to bodily integrity comes first, suggesting, as does Alcoff, that when one's body is sexually accessible to and accessed by another or others with impunity, one's ability and chances to freely shape one's sexual self are severely harmed, and often in the sense of shrunken, truncated, and stunted into forms of fleeing, avoiding, self-blame, and self-protection (see 119). Thus, for Alcoff, if we were to restrict our resistance aims to survival or the punishment of individual offenders, we would be setting our sights way too low. In families, institutions, and nations, we need not so much to police sexuality (with specific sexual norms in mind) as to "cultivate the conditions in which new forms [of sexuality] can be invented" (144) and everybody's "capacity for the art of existence" (145) can be protected. For both Alcoff and Cornell, equal freedom for the sexes will importantly include equal freedom for women and men, girls and boys, to engage in the aesthetic, playful, risky, open-ended process of fashioning oneself as a sexual being. It seems to me the only limit on such creative freedom is the creative freedom of others, which would thereby, for example, place

clear limits on what an adult may do with a child sexually in pursuit of the adult's sexual self-shaping, and on what anyone may do sexually with another person who is drunk, asleep, or unconscious. This is the sense in which we can combine the absence of sexual scripts with the presence of guide-ropes, in Alcoff's terms.

These theoretical positions illuminate and draw on her personal experience of sexual violation. After being raped at the age of nine by a neighbor, Alcoff's relation to herself as a subject in the world changed dramatically: she had difficulty "negotiating the everyday environment," she experienced "an ever-present fear," a realization that the world, "including [her] own street," was unsafe and that "neither [her] family nor [her] friends could protect [her] from terror"; these fears translated into bodily habits such as a severe reduction in physical play because she could no longer stand being chased, and experiences of sudden and intense startle responses (21-22). She started to find refuge in a tree, but she did not limit her response to survival. She constructed for herself a plank seat: a safe space in the tree where she could see anyone coming, and thus could safely sit and read for hours on end: "The reading was a true seduction, a safe world opening up before me in a space I could control, offering an expansion of experience with limited risk" (22). This small story about a nine-year-old fleeing into a tree to find a safe space in which to risk and expand herself powerfully captures the heart of the current book. Women need safety but not for the sake of mere survival. We need enough sexual safety that we may shape ourselves into the sexual selves we want to be, through playful, risky, aesthetic, and open-ended sexual practices. And we must be free and equal enough with men that we may freely explore our sexuality with others in mutual risk-taking, without the constant fear of violation.

Experiences of sexual violation seriously undermine one's ability to make and shape oneself sexually, mostly with long-term effects, and this is the kernel of their harm. For example, "[r]ape is used to season girls into prostitution, to turn rebellious wives into compliant ones" (165) and thus to fundamentally change their sexual subjectivity, with consequences for the totality of their being-in-the-world and being-with-others. Therefore, Alcoff is also cognizant of how selves are never isolated, atomic beings, but always embedded in, and constituted by, their relationships, and how the harm of rape and other forms of sexual violation is therefore always to some extent communal harm (164-65). This fruitful insight opens up new avenues to be explored, for example, a critical reading of how partners, families, institutions, and nations might respond to the greater visibility of sexual violence by distancing themselves as far as possible from it. People intuitively understand the stigma and shame of sexual violence and how it can become contagious. Its contagious or communal nature might account to some extent for the phenomenon that "there is less policing of rape than of rape victims' speech" (21), and for institutions' typically frantic attempts to contain rape accounts to avoid their potential harm to the institutional "brand."

Alcoff's book might be summarized as the working out of three central claims: (i) sexual violation entails being harmed in one's capacity to make oneself as a sexual subject; (ii) if our response to sexual violation is not to repeat the harm of the violation itself (diminished agency, diminished subjectivity), victim-survivors' experiences and interpretations of the event must be centered in all of these responses (including respect for those who wish to remain silent); and (iii) the only way in which the problem of sexual violence can be effectively resisted is if *all* victims are taken seriously and given presumptive credibility. A really productive and interesting dimension of the book is how Alcoff works out the third claim, which I do not have space to explore here. Further avenues of inquiry that she opens up relate to the selectiveness with which survivor speech is received and amplified, almost

always with ulterior motives in mind. The selectiveness follows fault lines of racism, capitalist oppression, imperialist aims, homophobia, and more. If all victims, including male victims of prison rape, are to be taken seriously, nothing short of a total social revolution will follow.