

## Review

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# Power, rape and the media

Hannah Hamad

Meenakshi Gigi Durham, *MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media*, Polity 2021

Meenakshi Gigi Durham's short monograph is a superb primer for its subject matter. It introduces readers to the key issues and debates concerning the high-stakes relationship between media culture and rape culture with extraordinary clarity and precision. And it does so in ways that work extremely well to convey the gravity and timeliness of its subject matter. Durham's work is global in its outlook, cross-disciplinary in its approach, and engaging in its writing style, ensuring its potential appeal to a wide audience of readers with political commitment to, or interest in, bringing an end to the major problem of sexual violence.

While the book is not long, its scope is wide-ranging and its aims ambitious. From the candid identification and debunking of rape myths in the Introduction, to the Coda's call for anti-rape activists and campaigners to conceive of imaginative ways to end sexual violence through confronting the realities of rape culture, Durham extensively charts and explains the power relations that characterise the relationship between rape culture and the media.

In the main body of the work, the material is organised into three sections that each tackle and investigate a dominant aspect of that relationship. Each emphasises the importance of breaking the silencing of 'victim-survivors' - a term used consciously by Durham both because she finds power in the term 'victim' for what it does to call out the deliberate violation and harm that is done by perpetrators, and in recognition of the fact that 'not all people who are sexually

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attacked survive' (p13).

The first section, 'Rapacity', addresses the US entertainment, news media and other corporations (the Weinstein Company, Fox News, etc) whose institutional rape cultures, and the fallout that emerged from them, were, in many ways, at the heart of the worldwide rise to prominence of the MeToo movement from 2017 onwards. Here, Durham interrogates the extent to which rape culture at these organisations was both rife and normalised and yet rendered invisible to the outside world, with a view to shedding light on how the behaviours and attitudes of corporate sexual predators are propped up by the institutional frameworks that enable them.

The second section, 'Representation', moves the reader's attention from rape culture in media industry practice and organisation to rape culture in the media as it manifests in content and output. Here, Durham documents the range of ways in which 'rape culture has been systematically incorporated, resisted, and reinforced through representations, from pornography and sexual cybercrimes to news reporting' (p11). Examples span from the investigative reporting into rape and sexual violence conducted by the *Boston Globe* newspaper's 'Spotlight' team, to the contemporary rape culture phenomenon of 'revenge porn'.

The third section, 'Resistance', deals with the plethora of challenges, critiques and backlashes to anti-rape culture activism that have emerged since the global rise to prominence of the MeToo movement. These, Durham explains, have manifested in some quarters in the form of accusations that the movement's practices are akin to a 'witch hunt' (this is ironic, given the deeply patriarchal and misogynist mindset that has historically informed the hunting of so-called witches). From another direction, there have been more measured and grounded critiques of the movement informed by ideas stemming from intersectionality theory. These shine a light on the operation of intersectional power and privilege, which allowed the voices of white women in positions of relative social empowerment to rise to prominence over and above the voices of the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised, and those from minority communities.

The principal focus of the book is thus contextually specific to the discourse around rape culture that emerged from two main factors. The first was the normalisation of the term itself, which had entered into mainstream popular parlance in the middle years of the previous decade, in response to a perceived

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resurgence of rape culture in media, culture and society. And the second was the range of media flashpoints that arose from the revelations of the MeToo movement. These included the virality experienced by the #MeToo hashtag following Hollywood actor Alyssa Milano's famous Tweet about her experience of sexual violence, and the naming of the so-called 'Silence Breakers' (who had publicly lifted the lid on their experiences of rape and sexual violence) as *Time* magazine's 'Person of the Year' for 2017.

Despite this focus on current affairs and contemporary culture, the book has a welcome historical perspective. Its arguments are strongly supported by the breadth of the author's engagement with a wide range of scholarship on rape, sexual violence and rape culture, going back to second-wave feminism and beyond. Furthermore, despite the focus on western media flashpoints concerning elite individuals and high profile organisations, Durham is also committed to elevating the voices of the disempowered and the socially marginalised the world over. Many parts of the book address the under-discussed and under-noticed victim-survivors of rape culture in locations and situations that are less likely to attract western and global north mainstream media coverage than those whose stories originated from the US entertainment and media industries.

This book takes its place alongside other contemporaneously or recently published works on this subject matter, such as Karen Boyle's *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Nickie D. Phillips's *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, and Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes's edited collection *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*.<sup>1</sup> It is essential scholarly reading for anyone with an interest in the nature of the relationship between rape culture and the media, and anyone with a stake in how sexual politics is mediated, or the sexual politics of the operation of media industries.

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### Notes

1. Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism*, Palgrave Macmillan 2019; Nickie D.

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Phillips, *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, Rowman & Littlefield 2017; Bianca Fileborn and Rachel Loney-Howes (eds), *#MeToo and the Politics of Social Change*, Palgrave Macmillan 2019. See also Tanya Serisier, *Speaking Out: Feminism, Rape and Narrative Politics*, Palgrave Macmillan 2018; Kelly Wilz, *Resisting Rape Culture through Pop Culture: Sex After #MeToo*, Lexington Books 2019; and Maria B. Marron (ed), *Misogyny Across Global Media*, Lexington Books 2021.