

Meenakshi Gigi Durham, **MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media**, Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2021, 191 pp., \$22.95 (paperback).

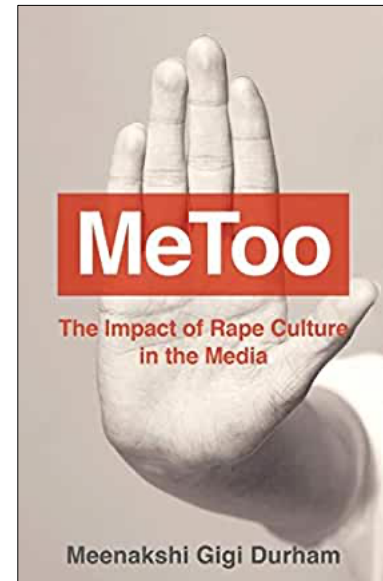
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We cannot understand rape culture if we do not interrogate its relationship to the media. Through nuanced discussion of contemporary case studies, **MeToo: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media**, by Meenakshi Gigi Durham, reveals media institutions as sites of sexual violence, media outlets as conduits for communication about sexual violence, and social media as spaces of resistance against rape culture. By studying the journey of the MeToo movement through each of these spaces, this book answers questions the MeToo hashtag left in its wake: Why do high-status men repeatedly engage in workplace sexual aggression? How do they keep getting away with it? And how can we fight back against rape culture in the media?

To answer these questions, Durham sets up the polarities of “silencing” and “silence breaking” (p. 2). Founded by Tarana Burke in 2006, the MeToo movement aimed to break deep silences surrounding sexual violence. By supporting and connecting survivors—specifically the girls and women of color with whom she worked—Burke inspired us to collectively envisage “a world free of sexual violence” (Burke, 2018, 09:54). In 2017, the MeToo hashtag was taken up by Hollywood actors and spread virally, prompting millions of survivors around the world to break their own silences. This silence-breaking among victims of sexual predators within media institutions is a response to decades of “strategic” silencing (p. 38). One of the book’s great strengths is its account of the covert and overt methods used to silence victims: from the sabotaging of internal reporting channels to the weaponizing of nondisclosure agreements (NDAs). Durham’s analysis of NDAs is incisive. Not only do they silence victims in traumatizing ways, but they strategically silence victims by legalizing and formalizing knowledge of “what must remain forever publicly unknown” (p. 44).

As well as silencing practices in media outlets’ newsrooms and offices, Durham also explores silencing within the MeToo movement. Through the case study of *TIME* magazine’s “silence breakers” edition, Durham argues that Black women, queer people, Indigenous women, and trans women continue to be silenced within media coverage of the MeToo movement.

In chapter one, “Rapacity,” Durham puts a magnifying glass to the power relations, gender dynamics, and cover-ups that facilitate rape culture in the media. Drawing from second-wave feminist thinker Catherine MacKinnon, Durham shows how economic, legal, and sexual power combine to generate the specific form of entitlement wielded by high-status predators in media institutions. Unsurprisingly, these predators want to be surrounded by people like them, and Durham exposes the violent norms that lead to promotions for sexual predators even as their employers pay settlements to their victims. This chapter builds out the concept of



“rapacious masculinity” from its root in entitlement to explain how the media supports rape culture at large (p. 46). Rapacious masculinity is most obviously illustrated by the rise of political figures around the world who publicly endorse sexist beliefs and sexual violence. Rapacious masculinity becomes a cultural norm when it is perpetuated in mainstream media narratives about sex and gender. Through this compelling concept, media culture is revealed as a “lightning rod for rape culture” (p. 48).

The scope of this book is ambitious beyond describing a toxic media culture. It also shows readers what silence-breaking looks like in the current media landscape. Case studies of investigative reporting by *The Indianapolis Star* and *The Boston Globe* reveal the press as a powerful ally to the MeToo movement through trauma-sensitive reporting and rigorous fact-checking. This chapter opens a window into the minds of journalists reporting on Larry Nassar’s sexual abuse of women and girls. Their thoughtful framing and meticulous language choices in describing Nassar’s abuse led some of his victims to realize for the first time that they too had been abused. The case studies in this hopeful section, “Reporting and Rape Culture,” are an essential and instructive read for any journalist who aspires to be a silence breaker.

Did the MeToo movement go too far? Or not far enough? Did it focus too much on the experiences of privileged White women? Did it affect meaningful change? In chapter three, Durham takes up these common responses to the MeToo movement using the case study of Aziz Ansari. Sexual misconduct allegations against Ansari brought several of these critiques into public debate. Durham cleverly deploys this case study to explain how rape myths are embedded in media discourses on sex, gender, and consent. In this analysis, Durham shows how women’s refusal is “constantly and tortuously questioned,” their consent is “indiscriminately inferred,” and the language used to discuss sexual violence ignores the power relations that “frame sex and constrain agency” (p. 107). Durham resists arguing for or against the innocence of individual figures like Ansari. Instead, she uses his example to reveal how rape myths in media discourses mischaracterize the MeToo movement as, at best, a good idea taken too far, and at worst, a vengeful misandrist faction that seeks to “destroy all men” (p. 101).

Durham also speaks to another major critique of the MeToo movement: It centered famous White cisgender women. In chapter 2, “Representation,” Durham writes detailed historical accounts of resistance to sexual violence among Native, LatinX, and API communities in the United States. From *Alianza Nacional de Campesinas* to *Women of All Red Nations*, this chapter spotlights movements to end sexual violence that have not had the same mainstream news coverage as MeToo. Drawing again from *TIME* magazine’s cover story, Durham argues that its exclusion of MeToo founder Tarana Burke exemplifies a failure to see and honor the work being done in “marginalized communities and unseen spaces” (p. 59). In the same breath, Durham reassures us that new—intentionally intersectional—feminist activism is addressing this erasure (p. 59). This analysis of Black women’s erasure from a movement built on generations of their own activism is important. Missing from this analysis, however, is acknowledgement of White women’s complicity in this extractive relationship to marginalized groups. Although Black feminist ideas like “intersectionality” (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1296) are incorporated into the book’s arguments, actively applying an intersectional analytic (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020) would have exposed the MeToo movement’s matrices of power and privilege more acutely, for example, the way “White women’s safety” (Phipps, 2020, p. 10) is used to justify violence against marginalized groups. Claiming victimhood for privileged White women is predicated on the erasure of the experiences of

Black women and trans women as victims, and White women are often complicit in policing access to victimhood for sexual violence survivors.

The final chapter, "Reformulating Desire and Consent," spotlights survivors as they articulate new cultures of sexual desire, autonomy, healing, and nonpunitive justice. The reader is asked to follow the example of survivors by reimagining the way they think about sex, violence, and consent. For Durham, this reimagining must include finding language other than "consent" to assess sexual assault claims and finding nonpunitive methods to pursue justice for victims. It is in these areas of potential change that Durham locates hope for the MeToo movement. But it is difficult to be optimistic about the legacy of the MeToo movement when research indicates that it may have made men less likely to hire women, have one-to-one meetings with women, or consider women for jobs that involve close collaboration with men (p. 127). Nevertheless, for every one of these statistics, Durham furnishes the reader with a more hopeful story (i.e., the growth in digital feminist activism against sexual cyber-abuse). Although the book's structure obscures its through line at times, each case study elaborates on a different aspect of rape culture in the media and offers routes to address it.

*Me Too: The Impact of Rape Culture in the Media* is a damning indictment of media institutions that normalize rape culture and a tribute to the survivors who hold these institutions to account. For this reason alone, it merits a wide reading among feminist scholars, communication scholars, journalists, and survivors of sexual violence. This book reminds us that speaking out is powerful, and that whether we are survivors, advocates, journalists, or bystanders, we can all be silence breakers.

### References

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