

Rape Culture on Campus

Meredith Minister

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Reviewed By

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While speaking directly into an undergraduate university context, this book should be required reading for anyone involved in education at any level. Employing scholarship from various fields such as pedagogical, feminist, womanist, queer, and disability theory, Minister provides an analysis of where we are with respect to rape culture in America, where we should be aiming to go based on ethical considerations, and how we might get there by means of specific practices in our classrooms.

Minister's book is especially pertinent for those who teach in the field of religion since "religious texts and traditions both perpetuate and destabilize rape culture" (xvi). It contains an introduction, three main parts that each include two chapters, and a conclusion. Minister moves from the general to the specific. That is, Part I, "Untying the Knot of Rape Culture," situates the reader in the culture at large, addressing the relationships between purity culture, violence, and policing. At the risk of oversimplifying her argument for the sake of this brief review, Minister highlights the ways that purity culture is associated with rape culture. Seemingly the domain of Protestant evangelicalism, even the most secular American has imbibed and assumes the terms of purity culture in which a (white) woman's virtue is tied to pristine virginity that is to be protected (by a hypermasculine, even militarized, police force) as it represents hearth and home. So important is this value to the state that it is heavily policed, even on college campuses. "The goal of rape culture is social conformity to the patriarchal order" (31). Institutions (both educational and religious) benefit from that order and their policing strategies propagate it. The problem of rape is reduced to protecting the chastity of individual (white, straight, nondisabled) women from would-be individual rapists rather than situating the problem in a larger context and assessing the ways the institution perpetuates the principles of rape culture even while purportedly combating it.

Part II (Rape on Campus) moves the conversation onto the college campus and interrogates the ways both institutional structures as well as campus programs and policies might contribute to, rather than solve, the structures that perpetuate rape culture. But this section also starts to offer solutions and insist that universities have a distinct opportunity (and call) "to build an alternative world in which rape is not an everyday occurrence" (49). Universities have histories that are built on patriarchal power structures and binary assumptions about gender and other cultural assumptions that may deserve to be questioned as part of the student's education at said institution. Policies and programs are certainly important, but they tend to be problematic in at least two ways: first, they assume that sexual violence is the problem of an individual, not a society or a culture. Second, they focus on intervention at too late a time—the moment of attack or just before. I love this concluding quote to the book:

The classroom . . . as the soft flesh of the institution, has the potential to transform and challenge rape culture. Rather than focus educational efforts on the moment of violence, including education about consent and bystander intervention, we need to teach broad cultural awareness about the diverse manifestations of rape culture. This broad cultural awareness has the potential to challenge rape culture at its roots rather than at its margins. (133)

How does one challenge rape culture at its roots, one might ask? Consistently, emphatically, and intentionally in the real-life setting of the classroom, which is the subject of Part III.

Part III (Sexual Violence and the Classroom) brings to fruition all of the careful work of Parts I and II like a crescendo. Minister has so compellingly built her case from the start that Part III rewards the engaged teacher immensely. Here it all comes together in such a smart, inspiring, practical way that one actually gets excited about the real effect that her course could have on students and the world they are called to serve or at least engage. She discusses trigger warnings; invites the teacher into "critical pedagogy"; challenges and shows us how to design exercises that foster cultural imagination rather than personal imagination; and suggests practical ways to turn our classrooms "outward." She argues for the transformational potential of experiential, engaged learning done well (while also providing examples of it done poorly) and guides us through questions about how we might assess such assignments:

If we are no longer assessing student understanding of reified knowledge, what are we assessing? In evaluating learning that does not perpetuate rape culture, we must measure cultural analysis and forms of knowledge that prioritize the value of understanding social issues from multiple perspectives.” (127)

Minister’s riveting, brilliant presentation is simultaneously sobering and inspiring; sobering because she intrepidly and incisively diagnoses what ails us as a society (of which we and our institutions are inescapably a part) but also inspiring because she firmly believes in and models the ways that classrooms, as the “soft flesh” of the university, can transform society. Honestly, between her analysis and her concrete, achievable strategies related to how we shape our classes in terms of both content and form, she equips us all to participate immediately and efficaciously in transformative education, no matter our starting point. She has left us with no excuse for timidity or failure. For that we owe her deep gratitude. This book isn’t just another interesting armchair read on pedagogical theory. Rather, it will make you change your syllabus and specific assignments for your courses right away.

Finally, the structure of the book makes it easy to use. At every turn Minister clearly indicates her main points, argues them cogently, and then summarizes them succinctly. There are ample visual cues such as subheadings, italics, and numbered points. Between the notes at the end of each chapter and the general bibliography, Minister provides a wealth of further resources in any area that the reader needs to explore further.