

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research
and Publications

Social and Cultural Sciences, Department of

5-1-2018

Book Review of *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, by Nickie D. Phillips

Heather R. Hlavka

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/socs_fac



Part of the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Social and Cultural Sciences Faculty Research and Publications/College of Arts and Sciences

This paper is NOT THE PUBLISHED VERSION; but the author’s final, peer-reviewed manuscript. The published version may be accessed by following the link in the citation below.

Contemporary Sociology : A Journal of Reviews, Vol. 47, No. 3 (May 1, 2018): 351-353. [DOI](#). This article is © SAGE Publications and permission has been granted for this version to appear in [e-Publications@Marquette](#). SAGE Publications does not grant permission for this article to be further copied/distributed or hosted elsewhere without the express permission from SAGE Publications.

Book Review of *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, by Nickie D. Phillips

Heather R. Hlavka

Social and Cultural Sciences, Marquette University, Milwaukee, WI

From the popularity and criticism of Robin Thicke’s song “Blurred Lines” to rape cases that have filled mainstream media, including those associated with Steubenville, Ohio; New Delhi, India; Brock Turner; and Emma Sulkowicz’s performance art piece “Carry That Weight”—the concept of rape culture has gone viral. But the idea of rape culture is not new. From its origins in academic discourse during the 1970s to the popular discourses of today, the term “rape culture” has permeated our collective imagination. Hook-up culture, microaggressions, trigger warnings, slut-shaming, and school dress-code violations are now shared household discussions. Defining and recognizing the term is no longer solely on the agendas of feminists, scholars, and activists. Now, as Nickie Phillips shows in her book *Beyond Blurred Lines: Rape Culture in Popular Media*, we are all in the game—dictating and deciding what sexual violence is and how we, as a culture, should respond.

Using a cultural criminological framework, Nickie Phillips provides a contemporary overview of the term “rape culture,” its rise and forms of use in a variety of spheres, including television, gaming, comic book culture, and college campuses, and the conservative backlash that has followed. Using news articles, blogs, websites, and

social media, Phillips aims to show how between 2012 and 2015 “popular culture itself became one of the primary sites through which rape culture was understood, negotiated, and contested” (p. 68).

Early chapters of *Beyond Blurred Lines* trace the origins of the concept of rape culture and its contemporary evolution as it moved into the mainstream. From academia to urban dictionaries, Chapters One and Two consider the social meanings of sexual violence and attend to the positioning of and backlash against the concept of rape culture. Phillips focuses on notorious rape cases such as those involving Bill Cosby and our suspicion and skepticism evidenced through social media. In Chapter Three, she considers how popular culture is part of our social fabric and introduces rape representations on television, such as those found in *Game of Thrones*. Phillips provides a crash course in social media misogyny, tracking how we think and talk about rape.

And while the term “rape culture” has certainly, and finally, entered the mainstream, it is but one of many lenses through which to view our misogynist culture. For example, Chapters Four and Five address “geek spaces”—specifically, gaming and comic book communities—as subcultures that have more recently become dominant institutions and contested sites for debate about gender oppression and sexual harassment. Phillips argues that controversies in geek spaces have served to reinforce and undercut feminist messaging about rape culture, as “those who feel aggrieved have effectively and strategically reframed the feminist interventions evidenced” there by characterizing them as misguided, hypersensitive, hysterical propaganda in promotion of the gender wars (p. 140).

Phillips’s review of this backlash transitions well into Chapter Six on college campus rape culture, where conservative anti-feminists and men’s rights groups emerged as vocal critics of the acknowledgement of rape culture despite report after report of the failures of colleges and universities to appropriately and legally respond to complaints of sexual assault, including problems with law enforcement, campus investigations, and victim service responses. The college campus has become a micro-site for examining aggrieved male entitlement, just as geek spaces reveal how gendered oppression and harassment thrive despite feminist gains.

Phillips argues that this intensified discourse about the concept of rape culture has created an interesting space in which to negotiate how violence against women is ignored and condoned; but it is also a space in which politics and policy-making are affected (Chapter Seven). As we collectively condemn sexual violence, in the same breath we argue about its meaning, how to define it, and how to prevent it. We need look no further than college campuses and new federal attention to Title IX, legislative changes to the concept of affirmative consent, and our cultural reception of “locker room talk” in the U.S. 2016 presidential election to understand our numerous and conflicting reactions to rape and misogyny.

Phillips concludes her book with a brief review of sex offender legislation and summarizes academic and legal critiques of laws and punishment that are directly conflicting with feminist ideas for rape reform goals. Rather than addressing sexual assault as rooted in a patriarchal society, we continue to promote stranger-danger rape myths that simply aid a capitalist society in which color-changing nail polish becomes the answer to rape prevention rather than addressing gender and race power imbalances and the education required to combat misogyny and violence.

Feminists have long contended that we live in a culture in which for some sexual violence is a criminal violation and for others it is “20 minutes of action” (as Brock Turner’s father characterized his son’s actions in a statement to the judge). Phillips explores the contemporary social meanings of sexual violence as it was dislodged from its academic roots and permeated popular media; therefore, this work is suited for mainstream consumption as well as undergraduate college students. Scholars in cultural studies, criminology, and feminist studies will be interested in Phillips’s attention to discourse and meaning and should seek to put this work in conversation with criminological and intersectional theories of crime, violence, and media representation.

In making the case for a “low-culture analysis,” *Beyond Blurred Lines* would pair well with additional readings in media framing and communications for undergraduate cultural criminology courses, alongside work that problematizes race, class, and sexuality as they are situated in rape culture and sexual violence. As some critics of SlutWalks notably argued, the essentializing of experiences of sexual violence and misogyny do not neatly line up with actual lived experiences. Surely popular culture should be similarly problematized, with additional attention paid to marginalized populations and those who are underrepresented as victims in mainstream media but often overrepresented as offenders. Conversations about rape culture need to be complicated by the various landscapes in which our collective imagination is informed, questioning how, by whom, and for what purpose our ideas are being shaped. There is a lot more to the story, but there always is. *Beyond Blurred Lines* is a useful overview of the contemporary presentation of rape culture in popular media and makes a persuasive argument against those who would deny its existence.