



# City Research Online

## City St George's, University of London

**Citation:** Matos, C. (2019). Book review: The Technoscientific witness of rape - contentious histories of law, feminism and forensic science. *American Journal of Sociology*, 125(March ), pp. 310-312. doi: 10.1086/703550

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

**Permanent repository link:** <https://openaccess.city.ac.uk/id/eprint/21204/>

**Link to published version:** <https://doi.org/10.1086/703550>

**Copyright and Reuse:** Copyright and Moral Rights remain with the author(s) and/or copyright holders. Copies of full items can be used for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, unless otherwise indicated, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way. For full details of reuse please refer to [City Research Online policy](#).

## American Sociology Review

*The Technoscientific witness of rape – contentious histories of law, feminism and forensic science.*  
By Andrea Quinlan. Toronto, Ontario: University of Toronto Press, 2017. Pp. 254. \$51.20

In the book *The Technoscientific witness of rape – contentious histories of law, feminism and forensic science*, Andrea Quinlan provides a powerful examination of the history of the Sexual Assault Evidence Kit (SAEK) in Toronto, province of Ontario, Canada, in a well written piece of work which can be seen as the first major scholarship which assesses the contradictions in the development of a rape kit as *technology*. The latter first provided anti-rape activists in the 1970's lobbying in favour of rape victims with tools to underpin the narratives of those who had suffered from sexual abuse as "objective" and legitimate (i.e. the kit thus appearing as "witness to sexual assault"). This was within a context where the accounts of women who had been victims of rape were frequently dismissed and seen as unreliable. Quinlan makes here a contribution to feminist *technoscience* studies in her examination of the rape kit, and the evidence granted by forensic medical examinations, as well as to state responses to sexual violence and the treatment of victims in the hands of the criminal justice system, particularly within the Canadian context.

By investigating the kit's past with the aim of building better responses for victims in and outside of the criminal justice system, Quinlan signals that if the SAEK could have otherwise, then it still can be. Her work though also invites us to re-think the act of rape, and society's responses to it, in a time of neoliberalism, austerity and state retreat in most modern democracies from its role in providing citizen rights and in guaranteeing welfare policies to women. This is also inserted within a context where countries from Brazil to India are seeing a rise in conservative reactions against the legislations and rights obtained by women and other minority groups in the last decades, from the hardening of policies to convict sexual assault perpetrators in Brazil to the "rape crisis" scenario of India, where the sexual abuse act ranks in fourth place as the most common crime in the nation.

Quinlan's work can be situated within the literature on the historical predominance of male spaces within science, technologies, engineering and mathematics (STEM), which has been deconstructed by a range of feminist theorists as being systems of knowledge which throughout history reinforced white male privilege and power, marginalizing the experiences of less privileged groups. Here we can signal to works such as Donna Haraway's classic "A cyborg manifesto" (*Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the reinvention of nature* [Routledge, 1991]), to Sandra Harding's outline of a feminist approach to science that goes against the tradition of explaining the world

through the perspectives of dominant groups (*Whose science? Whose knowledge: thinking from women's lives* [Cornell University, 1991] and *Sciences from below: feminism, postcolonialities and modernities* [Duke University Press, 2008]) to Evelyn Fox Keller's quest for a gender free science and questioning of why the traditional association of objectivity/reason with the male and emotion/subjectivity with the female body (*Reflections on gender and science* [Yale University, 1985]). Technological culture has thus been denounced by feminists as being exclusive of the feminine and, much like the disciplines of law and medicine, these have carried within them a cultural understanding of being "neutral" and thus "superior", capable of producing reliable truths. This, according to these feminist accounts, goes against the reality of decades of exclusion imposed on racialised minorities and other women's groups from these institutions.

In the last decades however, the literature within the Social Science on digital feminist activism and use of ICTs (information, communications and technologies) for gender empowerment has seen in new technologies sites of contention, spaces which offer possibilities for the articulation of new discourses on gender identity and tools which assist in the struggle against misogyny and patriarchy, whilst also being sites where gender inequality and the structures of oppression can be reaffirmed. Studies on *cyberfeminism*, or on feminist *technoscience* studies, from different disciplinary traditions, ranging from Sadie Plant's positive association of technology to the female and act of weaving (*The future looms: weaving women and cybernetics* [Body and Society (3-4): 45-64, 1995]) to Wendy Harcourt's investigation, from a gender and development studies perspective, of women's activities online throughout the world, particularly from the "Third World" (*Women@Internet: creating new cultures in cyberspace* [London: Zed Books, 1999]). These seek to reclaim the role of women on the web, probing into how new technologies can serve them in their struggles whilst at the same time undermining notions of such tools as being inherently "masculine" (or "objective").

Quinlan thus manages to situate the kit within its contradictions: for some anti-rape activists, its emergence was a sign of institutional reform, for others, it continued to operate within a patriarchal system which failed rape victims, reflecting the tensions between the "masculinity" of disciplines such as medicine, science and law. The author conducted sixty-two interviews with retired and employed sexual assault nurses, police investigators, lawyers and forensic scientists, among others, in twenty six urban communities across the province of Ontario. Quinlan makes use of Donna Haraway's notion of notion of *diffraction* of technoscience, and the possibility that this can work towards more possible ethical alternatives (*How like a leaf: an interview with Thyrsa Nichols Goodeve* [Routledge, 2000]) (2000, 108), as well as the concept of the "modest scientific witness"

[\(Modest\\_witness@second\\_millennium.femaleman@meets\\_oncomouse](#) [Routledge, 1997]). The book nonetheless is heavily situated within the Canadian context, making little inroads with other histories of feminist lobbying for state responses to sexual abuse. Nevertheless, if there has been growth in the debate on the uses of new technologies for political mobilization for social and feminist movements, there has not been enough on the development of rape kits as technology, and how best for feminist groups to appropriate these in their struggle against rape at a time of a return to increasing relativism around this act as being a criminal offense and a violation of women's rights. It is precisely here where the strength of Quinlan's work lies.