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I am a knife

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BLURRED LINES: RETHINKING SEX, POWER, AND CONSENT ON CAMPUS

by Vanessa Grigoriadis.

Houghton Mifflin, 332 pp., £20, September 2017, 978 0 544 70255 4

UNWANTED ADVANCES: SEXUAL PARANOIA COMES TO CAMPUS

by Laura Kipnis.

HarperCollins, 245 pp., £20, April 2017, 978 0 06 265786 2

LIVING A FEMINIST LIFE

by Sara Ahmed.

Duke, 312 pp., £20.99, February 2017, 978 0 8223 6319 4

HUNGER: A MEMOIR OF (MY) BODY

by Roxane Gay.

Corsair, 288 pp., £13.99, July 2017, 978 1 4721 5111 7

DIFFICULT WOMEN

by Roxane Gay.

Corsair, 272 pp., £13.99, January 2017, 978 1 4721 5277 0

AT THE VERY LEAST we need to ask why it took the fall of Harvey Weinstein to turn the sexual harassment of women into front page news, and whether the endless photo spreads of his female targets weren't so much designed to provoke outrage or a cry for justice as to grant the voyeur his pleasure. That of course is a pleasure on which the cinema industry thrives and which made these women vulnerable in the first place. Pictures from the archive of Weinstein with one smiling actress after another, his arm proprietorially around various parts of their bodies, deepened the offence – and undermined scattered accounts of resistance to his behaviour, since everyone looked as if they were having such a good time. More institutions and public figures were to follow – from news anchors and comedians to MPs, publishers, schoolteachers and Benedictine monks – but they had less screen potential. I couldn't help feeling that the actresses were once again being asked to audition for their part. Or being paraded across the red carpet on Oscar night.

This is just one reason why celebrations of the present moment as a historic breakthrough should be met with caution. Remember the images of Angelina Jolie walking across the stage, hand outstretched to greet William Hague at their 'summit' on rape as a war crime in London in 2014? It struck me then that she was being offered as a trade-off or collateral damage in the effort to bring such violence to an end. The initiative is now seen as a costly failure; the number of rapes recorded in the Democratic Republic of Congo, on which their attention was focused, rose in the following year and hasn't significantly decreased since. It is just one facet of this ugly reality – one more thing to contend with – that while attention to violence against women may be sparked by anger

and a desire for redress, it might also be feeding vicariously off the forms of perversion that fuel the violence in the first place.

As feminists have long insisted, sexual harassment occurs whenever women find themselves in the vicinity of men in positions of power. It also takes place on the street. Vanessa Grigoriadis, a writer at the *New York Times Magazine*, had often been whistled at and cat-called as she walked through the city, but when researching her book on sexual harassment on campus in 2016, she noticed that men seemed to be stopping and harassing her even more than usual. Her father was dying at the time. It wasn't exactly that men could read her thoughts, but certainly she felt that they were picking up on her vulnerability, seizing their moment to probe an open wound. They were excited by her distress (one target of Weinstein's advances said he was clearly roused by her fear). The aim of harassment, this suggests, isn't just to control women's bodies but also to invade their minds. Grigoriadis's experience is telling. However scarred the modern city, it can be a place of relative freedom where a woman can muse and fantasise. Harassment is always a sexual demand, but it also carries a more sinister and pathetic injunction: 'You will think about me.' Harassment brings mental life to a standstill. It destroys the mind's capacity for reverie.

As far back as 1984, in their pamphlet *Sexual Harassment at Work*, the National Council for Civil Liberties – the antecedent of Liberty – described harassment as an 'intentional assault on an individual's innermost privacy'. Ironically, in the light of recent developments, it also noted that a 'moral complaints bureau' had been set up by the Screen Actors' Guild to deal with 'casting couch complaints'. We must hope the newly proposed Hollywood-led US Commission on Sexual Harassment and Advancing Equality in the Workplace, to be chaired by Anita Hill (who brought charges of harassment against Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas in 1991), is more effective.

In the past few months, our understanding of what constitutes sexual harassment has been put under considerable strain. For all the remonstrations of the accused – 'You're making a fuss about nothing'; 'Things were different back then' – the reality is crystal clear. Sexual harassment consists of unwelcome sexual advances which – *pace* the mostly, though not exclusively, male protests – are never innocent, or a mere trifle, playful, or a 'joke'. And that is because however minimal the gesture, it nearly always contains the barely concealed message: 'This is something which I, as a man, have the right to do to you.' (Women of course can also harass, but the phenomenon is comparatively rare. The glee with which such instances are seized on by those wanting to diminish harassment as a feminist issue is notable.) Sexual harassment, we might then say, is the great male performative, the act through which a man aims to convince his target, not only that he is the one with the power – which is true – but also that his power and his sexuality are one and the same thing. As Judith Butler has argued, the performative is always melancholic, since the performer knows the role they are enacting is no more than skin deep ('melancholic' also because of all the other buried and unconsciously grieved sexual lives one might have led).

To this extent, a feminism that takes harassment as the unadulterated expression of male power and authority is in danger of colluding with the image of masculinity it is protesting against. These men may hold the power, but they do what they do precisely because they are anything but cock-sure. 'Combine male fragility with white fragility,' Dayna Tortorici writes, 'and you end up with something lethal, potentially.' The idea of the phallus is a delusion, psychoanalysts tell us, sustained not least by any man who claims to own or embody it. There is after all no such thing as an ever-ready penis, permanently erect (a truly uncomfortable prospect, I'm told). Harassment is ruthless, but it also has a desperation about it, as if the harasser knows at some level that his cruelty, like all human cruelty, has its source in a fraudulent boast. Not that this makes it any less of a threat. As Hannah Arendt argued, it is illegitimate and/or waning power that turns most readily to violence.

Is harassment a form of violence? I have lost count of the number of times people have expressed outrage at the mere suggestion of a proximity, on the grounds that it tars the innocent (at worst, thoughtless) and the guilty (at worst, serial predators) with the same brush. It's true that the two should not be equated, but they are surely connected, like siblings or bedfellows. At the very least, they belong on a sliding scale, since both are underpinned by a sense of entitlement ready to turn nasty (Weinstein appears to have moved effortlessly back and forth along the spectrum). Towards the end of her tribute to Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo ('Khwezi'), who brought rape charges against Jacob Zuma, Redi Tlhabi writes:

She fought for every one of us – every woman who has been too afraid to say, 'I was raped,' too afraid to say, 'That man groped me' or 'He demanded sex in exchange for the job, the lift, the favour.' She fought for all the women whose bodies have been appropriated by men, known and unknown, through lurid descriptions and graphic imagery, men who whistle and undress women with their eyes in public and private spaces. Uncles who wink at them when their parents are not looking, the managers and senior colleagues who, in a handshake, quickly turn their index finger to circle their palms, knowing that they will not call them out. They are too paralysed to react. That, even when they are being disrespected, they will pull away quietly and carry on as if nothing had happened.

Khwezi was eventually driven into exile after her case had been mangled in the courts and her house burned down.*

IN APRIL 2011, during Obama's first term, the assistant secretary at the Department of Education issued a 'Dear Colleague' letter about sexual harassment on campus which became a policy-defining document in the US. The letter is a directive to institutions of higher education on how to implement Title IX, originally part of the Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits sexual discrimination in education. Harassment is seen as a form of discrimination because by creating a hostile environment it impedes a student's educational progress. Colleges are required 'to take immediate action to eliminate the harassment, prevent its recurrence, and address its effects': investigate the complaint, appoint at least one Title IX coordinator, provide training for all campus law enforcement employees, publish grievance procedures, and issue guidelines on what constitutes sexual harassment (a college where students are deemed to be in ignorance on this matter is automatically in violation of Title IX).

Sexual violence is upfront from the first page: rape, sexual assault, sexual battery and sexual coercion are all included in the same category ('All such acts of sexual violence are forms of sexual harassment under Title IX'), although the use of conjunctions – 'harassment *and* violence' here, 'harassment *or* violence' later on in the letter – suggests a less steady link. This has been decisive. During her interviews with student activists, Grigoriadis found that the refusal to define 'assault' as 'sexual violence' was seen as a cop-out, immediately identifying the speaker as not aligned with 'the radical cause' (although clearly on the activists' side, she chooses to use 'assault' throughout her book). 'It's all violence,' one of them told her. Calling out harassment as violence, they felt, was the only way to ensure that harassment wouldn't be dismissed as petty interference or minor assault, and that it would be taken seriously as a safety issue: 'The Department is committed to ensuring that all students feel safe in their school,' the 'Dear Colleague' letter says; in the 1984 pamphlet, the NCCL too defined harassment as a health and safety concern. Any university in 'violation' of the Department directive will be considered 'non-compliant' and faces the possibility of losing its federal funding, a potentially catastrophic financial penalty (which, it should be said, hasn't yet been imposed).

Title IX was a breakthrough, but it is flawed. Legal critics have claimed it abuses 'due process' by acting as a court of law while neglecting protections such as the right to an attorney, or full advance notification of charges. They also disapprove of the standard of proof used in sexual misconduct cases: a 'preponderance of evidence' – 51 per cent, as it were – rather than the higher standard, 'clear and convincing evidence'. It is also sometimes unclear in these cases who is acting on behalf of whom. In one of its most striking clauses, the letter states that a college must take 'all reasonable steps to investigate and respond to the complaint, consistent with the request for confidentiality or request not to pursue an investigation'. This is a rare moment when the possible human cost of assault, how it might silence someone who has been its target, shows through the legalese. Anti-rape activists have long insisted that no woman should feel obliged to make a formal complaint: 'What if she doesn't want to tell her story?' Roxane Gay asks in *Bad Feminist*.

Look back over the objections to the 'Dear Colleague' letter and you can see that in each instance it was trying to smooth the path for women plaintiffs whom the system notoriously lets down whenever they bring legal charges or try to press a case. What, for example, would count as 'clear and convincing evidence': that the woman wrote it in her diary? That she told her best friend? Or perhaps that she went straight to the police or the hospital for a medical test? One of the main difficulties is that the letter obliges universities to adjudicate disputes and impose penalties even though they have no legal power to summon witnesses – who in any case are not to be found, since the only witnesses in such cases tend to be the plaintiff and the accused. This is just one reason women who report harassment and assault have historically been so vulnerable: 'Your word against his,' as one UK college adviser said recently to a young undergraduate who'd been raped by a student, to discourage her from going to the police (the student turned out to be a serial rapist). To say the absence of witnesses can be abused is an understatement. In December, four women in the US revived sexual allegations against Donald Trump first made during the 2016 presidential campaign. Trump immediately tweeted that they were part of a Democrat conspiracy. Pressed to produce evidence, Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary, said: 'The president has first-hand knowledge of what he did and didn't do' – as if the women did not. As Grigoriadis puts it, sexual assault is at once 'the problem from hell' and 'the perfect crime'.

One perhaps unexpected consequence of Title IX has been that the university itself has started to feel under threat: 'Anxiety about legal exposure,' Jennifer Doyle writes in *Campus Sex, Campus Security* (2015), 'registers on every campus as a background hum.' In response, administration and bureaucracy have swollen in American universities (as have the salaries of investigators), while Title IX cases take on 'a mind-numbing fractal complexity'. At the same time, university management across the US has increasingly aligned itself with campus security – hence the title of Doyle's book, though she is careful to insist that there isn't a seamless line running between the two. At Arizona State University, a campus police officer was recorded violently arresting a black woman faculty member, Professor Ersula Ore, who had refused to show her ID on the street. In November 2011, at the time of Occupy, police pepper-sprayed students as they protested silently against higher tuition fees at UC Davis. A subsequent investigation, forced on the authorities because a student's photo of the scene had gone viral, established that the police had been sent in by the university chancellor, Linda Katehi. In a later statement, Katehi explained that she had acted out of concern that the campus was under threat of infiltration from outside – an age-old ploy when trying to discredit political protest. Note, in a different context, how effortlessly harassment – 'groping' – can slip into far-right discourse about the threat posed by migrants: 'Our authorities submit to imported, marauding, groping, beating, knife-stabbing, migrant mobs,' Alice Weidel, joint leader of the German AfD in the Bundestag, tweeted recently. Katehi claimed she feared the consequences for the university if 'anything happens to any student while we're in violation of policy'.

Who, we might ask, is violating whom? Who or what exactly is in danger? A student's 'experience of their own vulnerability', Doyle writes, has 'translated into a sense of the university's impending doom, to which it responds with a militarisation of all of its processes'. It is scary, though common enough historically, to witness the speed with which a progressive cause can become complicit with, or be co-opted by, a nasty political agenda. Since 'outsider' usually means 'foreigner', danger to women is, not for the first time, being sidelined by a perceived racial threat – another instance of the way in which women's issues are only ever allowed to be the main event for the briefest possible interval. There is an irony here. Obama himself saw the issue of campus assault as belonging to the civil rights agenda. 'There's a reason the story of the civil rights movement was written in our schools,' he said at the NAACP centennial convention in 2009. 'It's because there is no stronger weapon against inequality' than education. Sexual harassment harms students. But I wonder if that would matter so much if the issue weren't also seen to be chipping away at national pride, undermining what – for most US citizens and certainly for students burdened with crushing debt – has always been, and is even more so today, the ever-retreating promise of the American dream.

CATHERINE MACKINNON was one of the earliest campaigners for the inclusion of sexual harassment under Title IX. In her first book, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (1979), she argued that harassment was a form of discrimination arising from inequality. Inequality rather than difference since – as case after collapsing case in the courts had shown – if you start from pre-existing, God-given difference, discrimination, even in cases of harassment, is much harder to prove (men are just behaving normally, even naturally, they can't help helping themselves). Instead she insisted, in what is for me one of her strongest arguments to date, that such behaviour can be classified as illegal under discrimination law only if it is seen to be predicated on unequal power relations. Forms of behaviour 'that would not be seen as criminal because they are anything but unusual may, in this context, be seen as discriminating for precisely the same reason'. The 'usual' – what passes as the norm for men – is precisely what anti-harassment activists consider themselves to be fighting against.

When in 1984 the NCCL published its pamphlet on sexual harassment, with specific reference to civil rights legislation, it too defined harassment as unlawful discrimination and placed it firmly in the world of work, as a trade-union matter. But, although it made reference to US legal recommendations, it wasn't confident of the success women would have in resorting to the law. MacKinnon, on the other hand, has spent much of her life trying to bring sexuality within the remit of the law. If sexuality is separated from gender inequality, she writes in her book's final pages, the risk is that sexuality will 'become a law unto itself'.

'A law unto itself' may, however, be a perfect description of what sexuality is. For psychoanalysis, sexuality is lawless or it is nothing, not least because of its rootedness in our unconscious lives, where all sexual certainties come to grief. In the unconscious we are not men or women but always, and in endlessly shifting combinations, neither or both. This is where I have always parted ways with MacKinnon and, more generally, with radical feminism, which, brooking no ambiguity on such matters, sees masculinity as perfectly and violently in control of itself, whereas for me it is masculinity out of control – masculinity in a panic – that is most likely to turn ugly. The writer and hip-hop artist Jordan Stephens remarked, apropos the Weinstein revelations, that a 'toxic notion of masculinity is being championed by men who are so terrified of confronting any trauma experienced as children that they choose to project that torture' onto others. Student-on-student harassment can open a path for anxious young men to launch themselves into power, something that might otherwise be beyond them. For a decade now, male students in the US have consistently been getting lower grades than women.

This doesn't exempt harassers in any way but it does allow (some) men a glimpse of their own imperfection. It opens up a gap between men who won't tolerate any challenge to their authority and those for whom such authority is nothing to be proud of, not least because they understand that power is always exercised at somebody else's expense. If this were not the case, feminism would be on a hiding to nothing. The mind, with no mercy, shuts down on itself (a feeling I always have when I read MacKinnon and her followers on these matters). None of which is to underestimate how unremitting masculinity can be, even when a man is convinced he is reformed or, to use the current term, 'woke'. This is how a student at the University of Austin, Texas described his new ethos to Grigoriadis: 'Shave with the grain the first time, always buy tools you don't have to replace, don't aim a gun at someone unless you intend to shoot them. Don't have sex with anyone who doesn't want to have sex with you.'

WE NEED, then, to acknowledge the vagaries of human sexuality (which has always felt emancipatory to me); recognise its stubbornness once it has been locked in place (what the feminist Juliet Mitchell has described as the heavy undertow, the drag of sexual difference); insist that sexual harassment is unacceptable and must cease. Holding these apparently contradictory ideas in mind at the same time, moving on more than one front: for me this presents the greatest challenge raised by the present crisis. The tension between the various components of the issue perhaps helps us to understand why legal attempts to curtail harassment, as they have spread incrementally across campuses in the US, seem so often to be ineffective, to go awry, even to defeat themselves. Grigoriadis cites statistics suggesting that attempts at legal redress over the past decade have not reduced the incidence of harassment on campus. But even if Title IX hasn't eliminated campus harassment or resulted in a change in attitudes, Grigoriadis concludes that on balance it has been a good thing. The fact that she has to spell this out indicates how far from certainty on this matter her journey has taken her.

Her book, however grim, is a carnival of characters. There is no one she declined to talk to, no place she wouldn't go. Not altogether willingly – in tune, one might say, with her topic – she immerses herself in the college fraternity scene, where male students in their first term at college set out to prove they have arrived by grabbing as much sex as they can, their unbridled misogyny seemingly the source of most assaults. ('Last night I should've gone to jail' is a popular response when she asks them about consent.) She traces such behaviour to the 1950s, when GI Bill undergraduates who had returned from foreign wars 'with notches on their belts' were unwilling to bend to 'Eisenhower's moral strictures at home'. In 2016, the North American Interfraternity Conference joined with the National Panhellenic Conference and agreed to spend \$300,000 on lobbying against, among other things, fraternities going co-educational, as they had at Harvard and Wesleyan. They were also calling for congressional withdrawal of Obama's 'Dear Colleague' letter (on this they would get their way).

Grigoriadis listens to young women who, while entering freely into a campus hook-up culture of casual sex, also give accounts of falling into an alcoholic stupor and waking up to find they have had sex they knew nothing about and certainly weren't in any state to enjoy. Alcohol on campus plays a key role, but that fact is most often turned against women, as if the problem were their being out of it, not that someone has taken advantage of their state. That the woman was intoxicated is, of course, precisely what the accused and the police will say in rape cases to discredit her evidence and get a case dismissed. In a recent survey, 7 per cent of women students answered yes when asked whether they had been penetrated while asleep, unconscious or incapacitated by alcohol or drugs.

Grigoriadis also talks to a group of young women whose casual attitude to sex extends to assault, the reality of which they dismiss, even while rolling their eyes at male boorishness. Yet they too

describe the 'weird' things that happened to them at the start of their freshman year, and wonder whether encounters meant to be sex may in fact have been rape. She talks to the mothers of boys who say they have been wrongly accused. Some of them have been sent down from college, their educational ambitions and future prospects in shreds. She talks to one boy who seems genuinely to believe that he 'accidentally' had anal sex with his girlfriend. She talks to abusers and rapists who demonstrate no shame over what they have done, and lists their sickening comments about women, which I have chosen not to reproduce here. She listens as one student first denounces Trump as likely to prove 'terrible' for his country, then triumphantly proclaims, 'The bitch is dead!': 'We're back, we won, and we're mad.' She describes cases about which she felt, as she got deeper and deeper into their complexity, that the facts had begun to 'blow away'.

Hesitantly, Grigoriadis admits to not believing every student plaintiff, although she has no doubt that the call to believe women has resulted in a welcome sea-change. She allows for mixed motives and confused memories, for situations in which both plaintiff and accused may genuinely feel they are telling the truth, or where what one student experiences as unwelcome may not 'knowingly' have been done with an intent to harm. 'Unknowingly', again, brings us slap bang up against the unconscious, where all hues darken and blur. The *Blurred Lines* of Grigoriadis's title is an allusion to a notorious song by Robin Thicke, in which he repeats the line 'I know you want it' at least six times. The song is also the basis of an essay by Roxane Gay; one of the reasons she calls herself a 'bad' feminist is that she finds herself wanting to sing along.

Blurred Lines starts and ends with the case of Emma Sulkowicz, an art student who, having brought a failed rape charge against a fellow undergraduate at Columbia University in 2015, politicised a generation of students on the issue of sexual harassment with her *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, a work of endurance art and political protest whose self-imposed 'rules of engagement' required her to carry a dormitory mattress everywhere she went on campus for nine months. 'That image,' Hillary Clinton said in her speech to the Democratic National Committee Women's Leadership Forum in 2015, 'should haunt all of us.' By the end of the book, Grigoriadis believes Sulkowicz's account of what happened, despite its having been challenged down to the last detail by Paul Nungesser, the student she accused, who went on to file his own complaint against the university for violating his Title IX rights by allowing Sulkowicz to continue with her protest piece, for which she received academic credit. (Columbia settled with him out of court.) And Grigoriadis continues to believe her when, in a gesture Grigoriadis sees as verging on a 'retraction', Sulkowicz writes in a note accompanying a later piece based on her experience: 'Everything that takes place in the following video is consensual but may resemble rape. It is not a re-enactment but may seem like one. If at any point you are triggered or upset, please proceed with caution and/or exit this website. However, I do not mean to be prescriptive, for many people find pleasure in feeling upset.'

On one thing Grigoriadis is absolutely clear, and that is the energy, commitment and imagination of the students who have launched and are struggling to keep up the anti-harassment campaign. As she was writing her book, the alt-right were busy targeting universities. A culture of grievance, they claimed, was spreading from colleges to the whole of the US, as if educational institutions were the cause and worst exemplar of the 'nanny state'. In September 2017, Betsy DeVos, Trump's education secretary, announced that she was rescinding Obama's 'Dear Colleague' guidance on Title IX. The new guidance describes Obama's letter as 'well-intentioned' but 'stacked against the accused'; it makes no reference to the historical backdrop that made the strongest possible support for the complainant seem essential. On the contrary: 'In the 45 years since the passage of Title IX,' the new guidance asserts, 'we have seen remarkable progress towards an educational environment free of sex discrimination.' Even before the election, it was clear that DeVos would do 'her damndest' – not, Grigoriadis adds, that she would use such language – to roll back measures which, however flawed, young women see as progress. In their bid for 'sexual

empowerment', Grigoriadis writes, 'fierce, ruthless, determined' anti-harassment activists have 'cast off the old language of victimhood'. They want a world in which rape will no longer be what historically it has been: 'a property crime, the women's fault, or a man's privilege'. They want to be listened to and believed, they want an end to sexual harassment.

THOUGH it occupies the same territory, Laura Kipnis's *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* feels as if it has arrived from another planet. It too was published in 2017. Grigoriadis refers to it just once, in parenthesis, as an 'anti-Title IX manifesto'. She is being measured: I would call it a tirade. Kipnis sees herself as belonging on the side of freedom, which now has to fight back against a repressive, stultifying, mollycoddling administrative world (she appears unaware that she is echoing the alt-right critique of Title IX). There is a feminist backstory to this argument. Twenty years ago, in *Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment*, Jane Gallop made a plea for the erotics of teaching: a case made more effectively by bell hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*, which had appeared three years before. All hooks's teachers at a segregated school in Kentucky had been black women who, although they never said it in so many words, were fired up by a 'revolutionary pedagogy of resistance'. For these women, rousing their students was to transgress a racial heritage that did everything it could to suppress black thought and desire. (Later, in her career as an academic, hooks's own 'revolutionary pedagogy' would include at least one sexual liaison with a student.) All this changed with racial integration. Black children bused to white schools quickly discovered that their passionate enthusiasm in the classroom was seen as a threat to white privilege. They were cut down to size. This, I think, from Pema Chodron, could fairly be called a manifesto:

My models were the people who stepped outside of the conventional mind and who could actually stop my mind and completely open it up and free it, even for a moment, from a conventional, habitual way of looking at things ... If you are really preparing for groundlessness, preparing for the reality of human existence, you are living on the razor's edge, and you must become used to the fact that things shift and change. Things are not certain and they do not last and you do not know what is going to happen. My teachers have always pushed me over a cliff.

Likewise – though not exactly – Kipnis is arguing for the myriad, uncontrollable and often sexual nature of human behaviour and thought. So far so fair, though Grigoriadis is there to remind us that you can be on the side of the complexity of life and mind without, as Kipnis does, turning against Title IX as the devil's work (I barely exaggerate).

Unwanted Advances opens with the moment Kipnis was charged under Title IX for writing an article in which she opposed a new directive banning all sexual relations, even if consensual, between undergraduates and faculty. She was seen as taking the wrong side, encouraging discrimination, betraying the progressive cause. Gallop had been treading similar ground when she argued that all teaching relationships were in effect 'consensual amorous relations'. As a student, she had seduced a number of her teachers and come to no harm; she saw the experience as a conquest, which made her feel 'cocky' and in touch with her own 'power'. She was most excited by students who wanted to be like her (perhaps not something to boast about). She announced at a conference that her 'sexual preference' was graduate students, which unsurprisingly didn't go down very well. A charge of harassment was brought against her after she passionately kissed one of her students in a crowded room; she admits she got off on the spectacle.

Gallop, Kipnis and Jennifer Doyle have in common that they have all been embroiled in university statutes on harassment, though in Doyle's case the comparison stops there, as she was the one bringing a complaint under Title IX against a student who had been harassing and stalking her. Sexual harassment comes mainly from men to women, faculty to student. That doesn't mean we should lose sight of the fact that neither women nor men automatically pitch up in the most

obvious place. Still, as I read *Unwanted Advances*, I couldn't help wondering about Kipnis, not for the first time: whose side does she think she is on? She would probably take that as a compliment.

This is by no means Kipnis's first foray into sexual politics. Her previous book, *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation* (2014), opens with a paean to Larry Flynt, the editor of *Hustler*, a magazine she considers disgusting – 'It grossed me out' – but celebrates nonetheless for its pornographic assault on American prudery and social hypocrisy. She puts it in the tradition of Rabelais. When she meets Flynt, he is in a gold-plated wheelchair, the result of an assassination attempt years earlier by a white supremacist enraged by *Hustler's* interracial slant. She isn't wrong that there is a progressive stripe running through this monstrous magazine, though you have to dig deep to find it. Kipnis is open about the pleasure she gets as a woman writing about men: 'potency', 'a bit of lead in your pencil'. Another of her earlier books, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (1996), opens with the case of Daniel DePew, stung by a San Jose undercover police officer who lured him to a hotel room and got him to engage with the idea of making a snuff movie that would involve the kidnapping and murder of a child. As Kipnis saw it, DePew, who was sentenced to 33 years in prison, had been arrested for a fantasy, 'a crime that never happened'. It sounded to me more as if he had been caught making a plan.

Whether today's focus on harassment is making people afraid of their own thoughts seems to me a fair question. But already, in these remarks about DePew from twenty years ago, Kipnis strikes me as having made an odd use, or misuse, of fantasy. For psychoanalysis, unconscious fantasy, as distinct from conscious fantasy or daydream, is not something you want to happen; indeed it is something that would horrify you if it happened in real life. This is an easier distinction to grasp than it might first appear. One student told Grigoriadis he understood that women's rape fantasies weren't real: 'Men don't want their penises cut off but dream about it anyway.' You cannot and should not be punished for any such fantasy: most often the voice chastising you in your head is punishment enough. But men in a hotel room discussing how to murder a child would not make the cut.

This may seem far from Title IX, but I think it is central. By her own account, Kipnis's strongest identifications are with men – on the first page of *Men* she describes herself as a 'daddy's girl' – and especially with those she feels have been victims of injustice: Larry Flynt, Daniel DePew and, at the heart of *Unwanted Advances*, Peter Ludlow, a philosophy professor at Northwestern University, who was charged under Title IX with inappropriate sexual behaviour (in one case rape) by two students, and forced from his job. One of his accusers had been a first-year in his class, the other a postgraduate student. Kipnis gives them the pseudonyms Eunice Cho and Nola Hartley, and has written the case for the defence. You could argue that she is trying to redress the balance, but that is a term I have always considered corrupt in an unbalanced world (I have also noticed that the demand for 'balance' is made only when you clash with the official position or are seen to be on the wrong side of a debate, never when your views are welcome).

For Kipnis, the administrative behemoth that is Title IX is part of a backlash against the intellectual and sexual freedoms seized over decades by feminists, and puts at risk student autonomy, intellectual spirit and the impulse to learn. A mental and sexual straitjacket is turning women students into passive victims, who are, or see themselves as, the prey of men. (Isn't being the prey of men precisely what anti-harassment activists most hate?) She wrote her book when, having expressed sympathy with Ludlow, he gave her access to a stash of more than two thousand emails and messages between himself and Hartley, with whom he had been in a relationship for more than a year. When she is critical of Ludlow it feels like a concession: 'Let me be honest,' she says, 'you are not going to find me arguing that Ludlow showed fantastic judgment' (independent of the main charges against him, he admits to having had two undergraduates in his bed). She also demonstrates that the Title IX investigators in this case, and in others, were heavily inclined

towards the plaintiff. But as I see it, she makes the fatal error of confusing her critique of injustices under Title IX with tearing the complainants' evidence to shreds. Even allowing that she is driven by the wish that women claim back their sexual agency the feminist aspect of this way of proceeding escapes me. Challenged on Facebook, Kipnis responded that *Unwanted Advances* is 'a polemic, not journalism. It's a work of opinion. It's based on reporting, and a close reading of the available documents, but the heart of the book is my interpretation of that material.' The Philosophy Graduate Student Association accused her of the 'unauthorised exposure of private information and reckless, unfounded speculation' about Nola Hartley.

In *Unwanted Advances*, terms like hysteria, projection and paranoia are thrown around, alongside 'witch hunt', as if they could be used to settle political debate, with no regard for the way they have been used historically to persecute, insult and silence angry women. Faced, for example, with contradictory behaviour on the part of one of Ludlow's two main accusers ('both flinging herself at Ludlow in a sexualised way and also feeling victimised'), she doesn't hesitate to offer a wild diagnosis of 'borderline personality disorder', which means the patient, instead of being happily – or rather unhappily – neurotic like everybody else, sits on the border between neurosis and psychosis. One of its components, we are told, is 'provocative or seductive behaviour', at which point I find myself wanting to invoke Jane Gallop as an ally. Victimised and seductive. Far from being a sign of mental disturbance, this might instead be grounds for hope: it suggests that a woman's ability to seduce hasn't been completely quashed by ambient violence. Is it disordered, in a sexually disordered world, for a woman to feel something of both?

IN UK UNIVERSITIES, those accused of harassment in whatever form tend not to be named, on grounds of confidentiality. Cases rarely get to court as universities do all they can to avoid adverse publicity, even where rape is involved. In June 2016, Sara Ahmed resigned from her post as director of the Feminist Studies Centre at Goldsmiths, University of London over the university's treatment of harassment. In solidarity with Ahmed, a student blog reproduced images of the title pages of 16 books, found in the Goldsmiths library, by a member of faculty who had been charged with harassment, each page scrawled with accusations that the author was a serial harasser who had been allowed to resign before a full disciplinary hearing could be held. This type of outcome – hushing up, discreet departure, financial settlements or non-disclosure agreements with students – is not uncommon, either in the UK or, despite Title IX, in the US. Among other things it means that the accused, if he is never formally charged, can more or less seamlessly move on to another institution, safeguarding, indeed advancing, his career. When Carole Mundell spoke out against a colleague at Liverpool John Moores University's Astrophysics Research Institute for writing a glowing reference for a serial harasser, the colleague made a libel claim against her (it was thrown out by the High Court). The harasser had been able to leave the university without charge and take up a prestigious university position in South Africa. By contrast – and this is one of the least commented on aspects of campus sexual harassment – women graduate students who have been on the receiving end as often as not fall by the professional wayside. 'Get used to it or get out of it,' Ahmed writes in *Living a Feminist Life*: 'No wonder if these are the choices, many get out of it.'

Goldsmiths has appointed someone to work out ways to improve its practices. The new plan includes a single policy on sexual harassment, violence and misconduct; a partnership with Rape Crisis in South London; more robust co-ordination of records; and training for all staff. The college is aiming to make its policies 'exemplary' – an acknowledgment of the fact that there has been no co-ordinated policy on harassment across the UK. A central concern has been that insufficient attention has been paid to the overall culture that allowed things to go so wrong in the past. When I spoke to Lisa Blackman, joint head of media and communication at Goldsmiths, about what had happened and what the college was doing in response, she said about colleges and universities in general: 'We don't have the measure of the problem' (she wasn't speaking in her

official capacity and is herself involved in sexual harassment initiatives across the UK). According to a survey published by the *Guardian* in December, 63 per cent of universities have no harassment advisers or sexual violence liaison officers; 23 per cent have no designated point of contact for anyone wanting to bring a complaint; 39 per cent do not train staff in any aspect of sexual misconduct. All this despite a recommendation in 2016 from Universities UK, the higher education representative body, that a centralised reporting system should be established for all such cases.

Instead, and perfectly in tune with the behaviour expected of women on the receiving end of harassment, most British universities have continued to turn a blind eye. 'Not addressing the problem of sexual harassment,' Ahmed blogged shortly after her resignation, 'is reproducing the problem of sexual harassment. By snapping, you are saying: I will not reproduce a world I cannot bear, a world I do not think should be borne.' This might serve as a caution to anyone wanting to put the clock back on Title IX. Laura Kipnis, asked whether she wanted Title IX rescinded (a fair conclusion for anyone reading *Unwanted Advances*), suggested that this on its own wouldn't be enough to turn the tide: the solution would come only when men like Ludlow, who have fallen foul of Title IX, sued institutions for lost reputations and livelihood. As I cast my eye from the UK to the US and back again, it strikes me that in the matter of harassment there is no legal or procedural middle ground. Sexuality collides with the law. The only available options, at least to date, seem to be too much interference or not enough.

For Kipnis, the atmosphere around Title IX meant that the critical, inquiring spirit of women students was being suppressed. For the Goldsmiths students, on the other hand, it was the crushing of curiosity about sexual harassment, the quiet disappearance of the accused and the lack of transparency that was threatening minds and bodies alike. As far as they were concerned, they were just reaffirming the impulse that brought them to university in the first place: 'We are at university because we are curious and we want to learn ... Clearly something is being covered up which makes our desire to learn even stronger.'

Like the million and more voices in the #MeToo campaign, the young women studying at universities today are filled with rage. They are not passive; nor are they 'damsels' tied to the railway tracks – to cite just one of the images used by Kipnis to describe the way women students are portrayed under Title IX. Today's feminist students aren't excited by the same things as the sisters turned on by feminist teaching in the 1970s and 1980s. Why, at a time when misogyny and assaults against women show no sign of diminishing, would they not be a little more cautious about sex? Grigoriadis's book is full of stories of women students who look back on their willing participation in hook-up culture with regret, not least because of the dire sex. Or because it took them time to understand what had happened. 'It took me a while to realise that he shouldn't have done that,' one woman told the *Guardian* in response to their call-out on harassment. She is not denying responsibility: 'I thought ... that's OK, I put myself in that situation. I took a while to realise what he did was wrong.' None of this, it should be said, implies anything about a woman's pleasure and agency during a consensual sexual act. Or indeed about so-called passivity, a term that could itself do with some undoing. As Freud once observed, striking a blow against one of the most damaging binaries of them all, it can take 'a large amount of activity ... to achieve a passive aim'. (Kipnis reads this as passivity's bad faith: I take it as a sign of its latent energy.)

EVIDENCE is always key, especially in a disputed case. But it isn't neutral. 'The evidence we have of racism and sexism,' Ahmed writes, 'is deemed insufficient *because* of racism and sexism.' Evidence has to be interpreted. When a student in a long-term consensual relationship with a tutor messages him to apologise for hurting his feelings and tells him that she loves him, someone has to decide whether her subsequent claim that he had raped her the day before was a lie. Someone has to decide that when there is a delay, possibly a long delay, between an event and your feeling upset about it, that means your claim to have been disturbed by the event is false (this again would be news to anyone informed by psychoanalysis, which takes the mind's reluctance to register what is happening at the time it is happening as one of the marks of trauma). Someone has to decide that a student who messages a hook-up inviting him to have anal sex with her must really have wanted it, or if she had wanted it at that moment, couldn't have changed her mind, could not, therefore, have been anally raped. Someone has to decide that a student whose messages establish that she wanted to have sex with a male student who was rejecting her advances, that she even mused on the pleasures of violence ('It is always nice to be sexually assaulted without breaking the law'), could not have been raped. They asked for it, no? I take these examples from the cases of Ludlow (the first two), Sulkowicz and Liam Allan respectively.[†] Each opens a door into the murky world of sexuality, where all bets are off, where desire can flare up and be followed by a change of heart in the space of a single breath. Such moments may indeed give us pause. But it is the elation with which they are seized on, the unseemly haste with which they are used to bludgeon the complainant's case, that I find chilling. A woman starts down a sexual path which she then for whatever reason no longer wants to continue. She tries to bring it to a halt. If the man doesn't stop – and please don't tell me that he might fail to understand the message, or that once he gets going no man can control himself – then that is rape.

To which we must surely add that a woman can be driven to co-operate in a violent sexual act, or seem to be co-operating, out of fear. This is common in cases of rape. 'Judges and juries are more convinced if they can see torn knickers and proof that the victim was beaten,' the human rights QC Helena Kennedy has said about the 'ideal' victim in rape trials in the UK, but

even the signs of resistance have to be more than the odd bruise, which defendants explain away as the result of vigorous sex-play and playful pinching. The paradox is that the requirement to show that they put up a fight flies in the face of everything we are told about self-protection. As one victim said when interviewed about her experience, 'Everything I did right to save my life is exactly wrong in terms of proving I was telling the truth.'

In which case, the 'evidence' will be fake.

What of the strange idea that loving or caring for an abuser, even as soon as the morning after, rules out a claim of abuse? Jennifer Marsh is vice president of the US national support service for abuse victims, RAINN. They take an average of 266 calls a day. 'One of the first things our users say is: "I don't know what happened to me." It's not uncommon for them to say things like: "I woke up the next morning and cooked him breakfast."' 'As in all things shitty,' Hartley messaged Ludlow the morning after the alleged rape, 'this too shall pass. I love you.' Women's refuges across the UK are packed with women who have entered, willingly and lovingly, into intimate relationships that turn violent. The enduring nature of the attachment is one of the reasons it can be such a struggle to stop them from returning home.

This hasn't prevented the government, at the exact moment when sexual harassment and assault are in the news as never before, from ending guaranteed funding for refuges, a move that is predicted to leave around four thousand women and children stranded. The government has also

slashed legal aid, which will disproportionately affect abused women, who will have no choice but to represent themselves in court, often face to face with their abusers. In 2013 the government introduced a fee of £1200 to go to tribunal; since then there has been a 71 per cent drop in the number of discrimination cases brought on grounds of sex. In October, when the Weinstein scandal spread to Westminster, Theresa May made a commitment to create 'robust' policies to protect staff from sexual harassment. By November, the speaker of the Commons was demanding that the proposals for handling allegations of harassment be made public, while members of the cross-party working group complained that the plan was simply being transferred from the procedure for dealing with employment grievances, and wouldn't offer sufficient protection since it would remain in the hands of MPs – like 'foxes talking about how to make the hen house safer', in the words of one member. Their final report, published in February, recommends a mechanism of independent investigation.

All of which should, again, make us wary of the notion that a corner has at last been turned. Institutions can only do so much (though doing something would surely help). We also need to look beyond Westminster and Hollywood. According to a TUC report last year, more than 50 per cent of women in the workplace have experienced sexual harassment, most of whom haven't reported it or failed to get a positive outcome when they did (which more or less takes us back to where we started in the 1970s). Today, women who are casually and precariously employed are the most vulnerable, and their numbers are steadily rising. 'Me Too' was founded by an African-American woman, Tarana Burke, in 2007 as a grassroots movement for women, particularly women of colour, in underprivileged communities, with the motto 'Using the power of empathy to stamp out shame'. At the height of the Weinstein scandal, 700,000 women farmworkers sent a letter to prominent figures in Hollywood protesting against the constant harassment they experienced at work.

I HAVE NEVER SO regretted agreeing to write on a subject. But as I have sunk deeper into the morass, Roxane Gay has more than once come to my aid. Gay became famous as the 'bad' feminist who had fantasies about Bill Clinton and likes to wear pink. She has also made assault against women more or less her life's work. Reading the stories of sexual harassment both here and in the US, I have started to feel that all the attention has served not only to bolster the urgent call for a better world but, oddly and at the same time, as a diversionary tactic to help us avoid having to think about sex. Or, to put it another way, if harassment and sexual violence are, as a certain version of radical feminism would have it, the whole story of human sexuality, then we may as well lock the door on who we are and throw away the key. How can we acknowledge the viciousness of sexual harassment while leaving open the question of what sexuality at its wildest – most harmful and most exhilarating, sometimes both together – might be?

Gay was gang-raped at the age of 12. The gang included a boy she loved who set the whole thing up and whom, though he had treated her badly, she had more or less trusted until then. The legacy of that moment – above all a manic appetite that turned her body into a fortress against pain – is the subject of her memoir, *Hunger*, which was published last year: 'If I was undesirable, I could keep more hurt away ... My body could become so big it would never be broken again.' Among other things, *Hunger* is a riposte to those who find it odd that a woman could go on loving a man who treated her with unforgivable violence ('I woke up the next morning and cooked him breakfast'; 'As with all things shitty, this too shall pass. I love you'). Or that it might take a very long time for what happened to register fully, for the experience to break the threshold of anguish and pass into speech. Gay doesn't shy away from the word 'victim'; she prefers it to 'survivor': 'I don't want to pretend I am on some triumphant, uplifting journey.' Far from rendering her passive or pathetic, naming herself in this way is a form of agency that makes it possible for her to live and to write – 'I am stronger than I am broken' – though there is a price to pay: 'Writing that kind of story requires

going to a dark place. At times, I nauseated myself in the writing and by what I am capable of writing and imagining, my ability to go there.'

At the same time as telling this gruesome story, Gay explores the furthest limits of a woman's imagination, the lengths to which she can be driven, or choose to go, in the domain of love and intimacy. This is especially true of her second collection of short stories, *Difficult Women*, which also appeared last year but received less attention than *Hunger* – critics seem to have greeted it either with disappointment or false cheer. Gay has been accused of exploitation. She has also been praised for having 'fun' with her 'ladies': 'no shrinking violets', they give 'as good as they get'. She is, I suggest, a borderline writer, a term I intend not as diagnosis but as praise. Despite, or perhaps because, of what happened to her, Gay is always on the side of the untamed. *Untamed State* is the title of her first novel. It too tells the lurid story of a rape, with which – and this is one of the strengths of her writing – race and class are given full recognition: the daughter of a rich Haitian businessman is kidnapped, held to ransom, and repeatedly raped by a gang of men who roam the streets spreading fear.

In *Hunger*, revulsion towards fat people is seen as being fuelled by anxiety about unruly bodies, bodies whose outlines stretch to infinity and which break all the rules: 'My body is wildly undisciplined' ('undisciplined' and 'unruly' are a refrain). A fat body stands as a terrifying rebuke to anyone who foolishly believes that their mortal bodies, not to speak of their inner lives, could ever be truly under control. Hence the 'strange civic-minded cruelty' with which Gay, like all fat people, is greeted, as if such cruelty were the only way the people hurling the insults or turning away in disgust can feel confident of keeping their place in the ranks of the civilised. 'My wife and I,' the narrator of the short story 'Florida' explains, 'watch documentaries about the lives of extraordinarily fat people so we can feel better about ourselves.' Despite the ugly beginnings, *Hunger* – which portrays appetite as uncontrolled, unruly, untamed – slowly but surely comes to testify not only to trauma, but to the intensity and breadth of human desire: 'I often tell my students that fiction is about desire one way or another ... We want and want and oh how we want. We hunger.' This is what Gay does so brilliantly: she points the finger at male violence and its deadly aftermath for women, while exuberantly – some would say 'perversely' – keeping open all the pathways of the mind.

'North Country', another story in *Difficult Women*, includes a cameo of sexual harassment at a fictionalised version of Michigan Technological University, where Gay studied for a PhD. The narrator is the only black person and the only woman in her department. Her dissertation adviser, with whom she has had an affair, takes up with his new lab assistant – she finds them having sex in the lab – when she fails to move on after the death of their unborn child (he endlessly promises her a future and then reneges). Babies who have died recur in Gay's stories. They are often, but not always, the cause of the agonised pleasure her protagonists take in psychic and physical pain: 'At a bar I found a man who would hit me ... I used one hurt to cover another ... I tried to lose myself in my bruising.' She would be a much less interesting writer if that were always the explanation, as if violated virtue were a woman's only possible route to vice. Gay sits on a border between a space in which trauma is the sole cause of anguish – 'Look what has been done to me' – and one in which the mind, thumbing trauma, takes flight: 'See how far I can go.' Perhaps the most disturbing story opens: 'My husband is a hunter. I am a knife.' She likes him to mark her body and takes pleasure in skinning and disembowelling his prey. Long ago, when her sister lay dying by the roadside after their car was hit by a drunk driver, she used her knife to cut out the heart 'he did not deserve' and placed it inside her sister's chest, until the two hearts 'started beating as one'. At the end of the story, she delivers her sister's unborn child, and then loses her own: 'I wish I could carve the anger out of my body the way I cut everything else.' To borrow the title of the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin's most recent book, Gay's characters are 'beyond doer and done to', or, to be more precise, they are both. They are violated, but they also cut through life with

exceptional energy and determination. Gay is here to remind us that fiction, rather than being suspect or fraudulent ('She made the whole thing up'), is an imaginative tool that belongs at the centre of these debates. It can depict damage as well as freedom, seized from a wretched past. In her hands, telling stories – her own story, the stories she invents – is the place where impossible paths meet.

Footnotes

* *Khwezi: The Remarkable Story of Fezekile Ntsukela Kuzwayo* by Redi Tlhabi (Jonathan Ball, 260 pp., £16.99, September 2017, 978 1 86842 726 0).

† Liam Allan was the student at the centre of the recent row over the failure of the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to disclose evidence in criminal cases. Allan's trial for 12 counts of rape and sexual assault was dropped when it emerged that police had failed to hand over phone records including text messages from the alleged victim. The Metropolitan Police has since announced that it will review all live rape cases to ensure that rules on disclosure have been properly followed.

Letters

Vol. 40 No. 5 · 8 March 2018

Jacqueline Rose writes that since 2013, when the government introduced a fee for taking a case to an employment tribunal, there has been a 71 per cent drop in the number of sex discrimination cases (LRB, 22 February). Tribunal fees were ruled unlawful by the Supreme Court last July, and the journal *Labour Research* notes that between July and September there was a 60 per cent increase in claims compared with the previous quarter, when the fees were still in effect. The figures are for claims of all kinds, but there is no reason to suppose the increase doesn't include a rise in sex discrimination claims.

Chris Purnell
Orpington, Kent

Vol. 40 No. 7 · 5 April 2018

Thank you to Jacqueline Rose for taking on the gnarly subject of sexual harassment (LRB, 22 February). Recently there has been a burst of truth-telling about systemic sexual harassment in New Zealand too, disrupting the mood of national self-congratulation at the country's election of a young, progressive female prime minister who is pregnant with her first child. A top-echelon law firm has been outed for tolerating years of sexual harassment of student interns and young lawyers. It seems abuse of power is rife in some professional firms, where the partners are virtually untouchable thanks to their status and the money they bring in.

Rose makes one remark in particular that struck home with me. 'It is scary,' she writes, 'though common enough historically, to witness the speed with which a progressive cause can become complicit with, or be co-opted by, a nasty political agenda ... Women's issues are only ever allowed to be the main event for the briefest possible interlude.' When I was young and into Women's Lib and consciousness-raising, we talked a lot about the threat of patriarchal backlash (denial, ridicule and punishment were the main weapons). There was co-option too, and it fuelled doubt and divisiveness within the movement. Some big things were achieved, notably in legal statutes; a few glass ceilings were broken and girls' education was improved. But conditioned behaviours and cultural norms have been a lot harder to shift, in the home and in the workplace.

I sometimes wonder if my generation of women, who were radicalised in the 1960s and 1970s, have failed younger generations. It rankles when I hear some younger women arrogantly rejecting what they take to be 'feminism', but more than that it makes me sad to see women today virtually back at square one, having to reinvent feminism by insisting all over again that 'the personal is political,' and exposing their own vulnerability in doing so. When women are the focus, that also makes them a target. Young women's anger will make many uncomfortable, and we can anticipate a vigorous reaction from the establishment.

Belinda Meares
Motunau, New Zealand
