

Cultures of Complaint: Protest and Redress in the Age of #Metoo

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WE OVERHEAR A WOMAN WEEPING BY THE SIDE OF A RIVER, HER TEARS MINGLING with its water and her voice echoing back to her to amplify her complaint. Caught up in grief and, occasionally, anger, she laments her unjust treatment by her male lover, even as she declares her unrequited love in the face of his abandonment (Kerrigan 14-23). In the late sixteenth century, when such complaints flourished, this abandonment could have devastating social and economic consequences for historical women's lives, especially if the woman were pregnant. These chronicles of woe dramatised such consequences for both the unknown victims of assault and recognisable historical figures, in an early form of true crime writing. Yet this kind of female-voiced complaint was rarely a vehicle for women's own protest or pursuit of redress. Early modern women's complaints against love gone wrong were often written by men and framed by male narrators: they were the imagined responses of abused and abandoned women dramatised for the reader's enjoyment and used to voice larger complaints against the times. Around these weeping figures formed sympathetic and generative communities, from the intimate publics who listened to the speaker's lament within the text, to the broader communities of men and women who heard, read, copied, circulated or rewrote these complaints as their own.

In the last year, the #metoo and #timesup movements have also seen the mobilising of communities around complaint on an unprecedented scale, witness to experiences of sexual harassment and assault and protesting against the individual, local and societal conditions that foster sexual predation and the victim's silence in response. Rather than narratives of woe that dramatise betrayal and impotence, complaints against sexual harassment have become effective grounds for change, ending the careers of powerful men across a range of industries by exposing their histories of sexual offence. This new politics of complaint makes Laura Kipnis's book *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* (2017) oddly belated, overtaken by astonishingly effective narratives of collective protest that must have seemed unimaginable in 2014 and 2015, when her book was written. *Unwanted Advances* presents a treatise against American tertiary students' misuse of Title IX legislation: a provision within the 1972 Education Amendment, which protects people from discrimination on the basis of sex in education programs or activities that receive Federal funded assistance. Kipnis vividly represents a culture of sexual paranoia arising from excessive or mischievous interpretations of this legislation, an account fuelled by nostalgia for a time where students and faculty freely socialised, drank and (consensually) slept together, when 'a crush on a professor used to be the most ordinary thing in the world' (44). *Unwanted Advances* aligns with, and pre-empts, reactions against the #metoo movement such as that led by Catherine Deneuve in France, part of a collective of 100 women who protested in a public letter against the 'puritanism' of #metoo, its inability to distinguish between sexual violence and 'a clumsy come-on,' and its infantilising of women as subjects who need state protection (Worldcrunch 1).

Kipnis's version of these arguments, transferred to the febrile atmosphere of the US college campus, is a compelling read. As Claire Potter comments in a special issue of *Signs* on Kipnis, she 'would read anything Laura Kipnis wrote, even if it was written on the inside of an old candy wrapper' (10). If you have not encountered Kipnis's iconoclastic combination of satire, persuasive rhetoric, and unorthodox topoi in pursuit of understanding the difficult subjects of love, sex and scandal, I suggest that you take a look. *Unwanted Advances* is a good a place to start as it exemplifies how effective Kipnis is as a rhetorician, and how her texts create their persuasive effects in ways both distinctive to her and typical of the genres in which they participate.

At the centre of *Unwanted Advances* is an account of an investigation into one of Kipnis's colleagues, the Northwestern philosophy professor Peter Ludlow, over what were claimed to be a series of non-consensual sexual relationships with students. The charges against Ludlow centre on an incident in which an undergraduate student spent the night in his bed and a three-month relationship with a graduate student who claimed, after the relationship had ended, that she

had been manipulated into a relationship that included non-consensual sex. For Kipnis, this provides an opportunity not only to examine the evidence that Ludlow provides her with as the grounds for his defence, but also to excoriate the processes under which accusations are prosecuted under Title IX legislation on university campuses. Her advocacy for Ludlow through articles in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* led to her own Title IX investigation for 'retaliation', a process detailed in the book's third chapter, and this critique is then amplified and generalised by multiple accounts of unfounded or botched investigations that Kipnis became aware of as other, largely male 'victims' of Title IX investigations contacted her. Although the final chapter of *Unwanted Advances* makes some suggestions of other solutions for combatting sexual assault and harassment on campus, such as compulsory self-defence classes for all first-year women students, its overall thesis is that Title IX allows false, delusional or at best exaggerated accusations of sexual assault and harassment to be prosecuted by universities in a process that is far from transparent, fair or appropriate in scale.

Repeatedly, Kipnis states that she writes as a feminist and that she believes sexual assault should be punished: 'In case I haven't made it sufficiently clear, I absolutely believe there are sexual harassers on campus, and bona fide harassers should be fired' (82). But at the same time, she is deeply committed to ideas of individual self-empowerment, where women take responsibility for their own actions and selves, including the messy and often drunken sexual experiences that are part of student life. Inter-generational sex with the powerful might well form one of those encounters and if the student is burnt by it, Kipnis believes that they should chalk that up to experience, just as she did (*Unwanted Advances* 205; 'Sexual Paranoia' 1-2). In this argument, institutions have no business intervening in the majority of complex erotic relations between individuals, where power might shift between participants at different moments in all aspects of their relationships and nothing is cut and dried.

In an Australian context, this is a familiar story. In 1994, Helen Garner's *The First Stone: Some Questions about Sex and Power* took a similar approach to a sex scandal at Ormond College, University of Melbourne, represented as between two college students and the master of the college, although it later emerged that five women made claims of sexual misconduct. Garner offers a detailed, lucid account of the subsequent trials, advocating strongly for the defence of the master as a decent man whose career was destroyed by the students' pursuit of their complaints against his behaviour through the courts. Like Kipnis, Garner believes the student's action in going 'to the cops' was disproportionately punitive to what she perceives as the fumbling, harmless actions of the weak, 'nerdish passes at a party' (10, 38). Institutional power is not seen to correlate with erotic power relations; many analyses have commented on Garner's

description of the student's physical appearance as femme fatale, vividly associating female youth and beauty with power that is both alluring and dangerous: 'a woman in the full glory of her youth, as joyful as a goddess, elated by her own careless authority and power' (58). Under the name of feminism, Garner subscribes to what Jay Thompson refers to as neoliberal narratives of individual women's empowerment; like Kipnis, she finds it incomprehensible that the student in this case did not realise her own power, deal with the situation herself at the time, and move on (Thompson 9-10).

In both *Unwanted Advances* and *The First Stone*, the techniques of true crime writing are used effectively to create persuasive narratives. In true crime, unlike detective fiction, the outcome of the case is known—rather than evidence assembled to close the case and find the criminal, true crime narratives select or manipulate evidence to create a compelling story that presents as 'truth' (Knox 8-9). One of the genre's most persuasive effects is to create a sense of intimacy between the narrator and the reader, neutralising any critical distance that might admit opposing views. Both Garner's and Kipnis's narrators present themselves as victims of sexual abuse and harassment in their own pasts. They are simultaneously victims themselves and experts on how to deal with the experience, declaring their sympathy for and identification with the women involved at the same time as producing a robust and extended critique of the students' actions. Any position of sympathy from the reader towards the female plainants in these cases is colonised by the narrator, who repeatedly uses the strategy of entertaining and advocating for the opposing view, then shows it to be wrong. Reinforcing this rhetorical technique, both Garner and Kipnis populate their narratives with a cast of characters who like, agree with and endorse their version of events—laughing helplessly together in a community united against the victims' misguided actions: 'We sat at the table howling with laughter' (Garner 106); the feminist philosopher who lucidly defends Ludlow, represented as rising to the occasion 'heroically, transforming the hearing into a symposium, and herself into the best sort of mentor' (232). In stark contrast, the women plainants are supported by shadowy feminist extremists, fuelled by self-interest, who represent the opposite of the shared, humorous rationality enjoyed by Kipnis and Garner's narrators and their communities. This strategy narrows the gap between reader and narrator: who wouldn't prefer laughing in a café at the absurdity of it all to aligning with the bitter machinations of the feminists egging on students to bring down their male colleagues, motivated in Kipnis' account by petty professional rivalries (78, 112)? The narrators' charm, turn of phrase and ability to mobilise sympathy within the narrative all work to make theirs seem like the only version of events, foreclosing alternatives and creating the effect of truth. As James Woods comments, *The First Stone* 'seems a brilliantly prescient book—in its complexity, in the tense torque of its self-argument, and in its very vulnerability and stunned intolerance' (Woods 7).

Thinking about these accounts as genre fiction, rather than non-fiction or even a narrative approaching the truth, clarifies why *Unwanted Advances* and *The First Stone* make such compelling reading. Generically hybrid, they import into true crime some of the techniques of new journalism, foregrounding the narrator as reporter, piecing together evidence in order to understand what happened, alongside an interest in recreating and understanding the lived experience of crime. True crime writing typically works at two levels. The first is a detailed recreation of events carried out by its first-person narrator, usually privy to a unique cache of evidence (in Kipnis' case David Ludlow's materials relating to his investigation, handed over to her after his resignation) or deeply invested in the case, attending trials, interviewing participants and scrutinising documents. Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966) inaugurates many of the conventions of this element of the contemporary sub-genre, as his eponymous narrator seeks to reconstruct the events surrounding the quadruple murder of the Clutter family in Kansas in 1959. Capote's text also typifies the second element of the genre: beneath its apparent concern with narrative detail, true crime mobilises powerful, active sub-texts for its persuasive force, fuelling the narrative with its emotional power and speaking to the reader's own vulnerabilities and anxieties (Biressi 34-40; Seltzer 1-21). For Capote, the stories activated beneath its reconstruction of events are concerned with masculinity, aberrant psychology and the status of the nuclear family in mid twentieth-century America. In *Unwanted Advances*, the subtexts activated are about nostalgia for an imaginary past where individual freedom can be pursued without institutional regulation. Couched as feminism from an earlier generation, it appeals to fantasies of female empowerment, male vulnerability, and a utopian past when power relations were negotiated between individuals on a level playing field, without interference.

If female-voiced complaint of the early modern period frames early modern women's histories of erotic abandonment and loss by male narrators and authors, ventriloquizing female narratives of woe, Kipnis's tale in *Unwanted Advances* reverses this dynamic. The complaint described in this book is one of male disempowerment, abandonment and loss at the hands of multiple inimical forces: the infantilised woman who seeks institutional protection against acts of sexual harassment, her shadowy feminist supporters, institutions themselves obsessed with limiting exposure to risk, and a society where individual freedom is under threat. It is a story of male vulnerability persuasively presented to a sympathetic audience, one constructed both within the boundaries of the text in the narrator's compliant companions and ideological supporters, and beyond its boundaries with her tightly bound readers, who are repeatedly offered exemplary models of how to behave in response to the narrator's account.

In these contemporary complaints, the gender of the weeping plainant is reversed, with Peter Ludlow 'reduced nearly to tears in front of a room full of people' by an aggressive counsel (233) and Garner's Colin Shepherd surrounded by lamenting supporters: in the courtroom, his teenage son 'burst into loud, racking sobs' (36-37), in an interview, his wife began to cry 'almost immediately' and 'hardly stopped for the whole two hours' (139). As readers of *Unwanted Advances* and *The First Stone*, we are witness to male lament, amplified in a chorus of weeping, and ventriloquised through the frame of female narrators and authors. This reversal of the gender dynamics within a genre is not necessarily feminism, however, nor does it approach the truth. Reading Kipnis and Garner, we encounter a contemporary form of complaint, with all its strategies, conventions and pleasures, where love's new losers speak to broader grievances against the times. In this centuries-old economy of protest and loss, we have the choice of becoming part of a sympathetic community of listeners, manipulated into sharing the narrator's perspective on the speaker's plaint. Or we can resist the genre's deeply coercive rhetorical strategies, its emotive imperatives and truth effects persuading us how to think. In the early modern period, Ovid's complaints were central texts in the humanist classroom, meaning that readers of complaint were attuned to and trained in the rhetorical techniques of the genre and their persuasive effects. The contemporary readers of Kipnis and Garner are perhaps less aware of the ways in which their narrators' particular ideological investments are made to seem normative, rational, or even, for Kipnis, the best the academy has to offer. Jessica Wilson, the feminist philosopher who defends her colleague Peter Ludlow at the end of Kipnis's book, has an energy summed up as 'such conviction in the power of thinking to solve problems that it was mesmerizing' (233). It also sums up the dynamics of these books: exercises in conviction that succeed when they hold the reader in their spell, discarding anything outside their narrators' version of the facts, and submitting to the communities of sympathy that they work so hard to generate.

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