

I'm Not Sure: Response to Rosalind Smith

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I AM WRITING THIS RESPONSE JUST AFTER THE AVITAL RONELL STORY HAS HIT THE mainstream media in the United States. Ronell, a well-known professor long allied with deconstruction and psychoanalytic theory, has been accused by a former graduate student of inappropriate, sexualized conduct. Ronell has denied the charges. After an eleven-month investigation, Ronell's institution (NYU) has found that she behaved improperly towards this student and has suspended her, without pay, for the 2018-2019 academic year. One of the first reports I read about this suspension was from the online NYU student newspaper, the *Washington Square News*, which drew extensively from the original reporting in the *New York Times* just a few hours earlier.¹ Somewhere around the sixth paragraph of the *Washington Square News* story I became confused. It appeared that the reporters had accidentally transposed the student's name for Ronell's, so that it was the student (not the professor) who was denying allegations of inappropriate contact; it was the student who wasn't aware that his conduct had made the professor uncomfortable; it was the student who was defending himself by saying that his language was merely flamboyant. I didn't take a screen

¹ <<https://www.nyunews.com/2018/08/13/08-13-ronell-accusations>>; <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/13/nyregion/sexual-harassment-nyu-female-professor.html>>.

shot of this paragraph and the next morning when I looked again at the online report, the language and the identities and the behaviours had all been corrected and everything made sense again: it is now the professor not the student who is the author of unacceptable conduct.

Did I just make up this transposition? I can't really be sure. However, this muddle of professor and student (this confusion about how and when behaviour becomes unacceptable) seems to be important for thinking about Title IX cases in U.S. universities, especially if one is interested in thinking about such cases deconstructively, psychoanalytically, and intersubjectively.² I have no claim to make about the available facts of Ronell's case, nor the Peter Ludlow case as described by Laura Kipnis in *Unwanted Advances*, nor the Ormond College case as described by Helen Garner in *The First Stone*. This is not an argument that we might defer an adjudication on these cases until we are sure of our facts, nor an argument that since we cannot know all the facts we are denied the opportunity to make an adjudication. Rather I want to argue that there is turbulence in all relationships and texts that makes them, at their core, epistemologically uncertain. I am curious about the intra-psychic, inter-personal, institutional, and textual implications of not being sure about what is happening.

In her response to Kipnis's *Unwanted Advances*, Rosalind Smith argues from a place of greater epistemological security, or at least from a place that hopes for such security. Smith shows how *Unwanted Advances* draws on a longstanding genre of complaint (from the early modern period) wherein women lament their unfair treatment by men. This is a dramatisation of female woes, Smith argues, for the enjoyment of the reader. Both *Unwanted Advances* and *The First Stone* fit this genre, except the gender dynamics of the genre have been reversed: now it is 'male disempowerment, abandonment and loss' that generate a sympathetic audience for the accused. We might choose, Smith argues, to join this 'sympathetic community of listeners', but given the upheavals wrought by the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements Smith is bothered by the manipulation of the reader that these books generate and she suggests instead that we could 'resist the genre's deeply coercive rhetorical strategies, its emotive imperatives and truth effects persuading us how to think'.

I am not sure that such a choice can be made, between manipulation and resistance. In the first instance, these two rhetorical effects are transposable (resistance can be Machiavellian; manipulation can be insubordinate). Manipulation and resistance are not securely differentiated from one another.

² Title IX, a U.S. Federal civil rights law, states that 'No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance'. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/tix_dis.html>.

Moreover, there is a presumption in this argument that this choice is simply ours to make—we might succumb to Kipnis’s rhetorical ploys or we might muster our critical strength to walk away. Resistance seems to lie almost entirely with the reader and her critical and political dispositions. But isn’t something like resistance (intransigence, deferral, disorder) the central dynamic of every text, irrespective of both its author and its reader (Derrida)? Doesn’t every text (mine, Smith’s, Kipnis’s) break from its author, its reader, its context, its genre, making less secure the choice between its artful and its dissident effects? The gender reversal of the genre of complaint seems to me to be more important than Smith will allow (‘the reversal of the gender dynamics within a genre is not necessarily feminism, however, nor does it approach the truth’): that the genre can be reversed in this way (male for female; perpetrator for victim) suggests that identities in this instance and more broadly are always transposable and phantasmatic.

One of the aspects of Kipnis’s writing that I have always found compelling is her subterranean deployment of Freudian principles, usually in the service of intensifying uncertainty. Take ambivalence, for example. When the final chapter of *Unwanted Advances* argues that excessive alcohol consumption allows a female student the possibility of embodying a paradox (saying both yes and no to a sexual encounter) I feel persuaded. In general, I am enlivened by a reading that positions us as subjects that are riven, uncertain, prone to error, and compensating with fantasies of certainty and the rule of law (see also Halley). In the heat of scandal or when we rage against abuses, it is tempting to find safe harbour in humanisms (truth, the transparency of experience, liberation) and quietly disown the post-structuralist principles in which many of us were schooled. Let me offer two very brief examples (one Foucauldian, one Freudian) that might help us remember how to engage the complex human interactions that make up pedagogical environments without relying quite so much on epistemologies of certainty.

First, one of the things that seems to have dropped out of most conversations about Title IX cases is how we could model power other than through conventional understandings of hierarchy and capture. In the vast majority of feminist and critical commentaries that I have read on Title IX cases, and this is almost always true of conversations in the media, power is thought to be held, stored, wielded, shared, taken up or given up as if it is a possession. Most of all, power is said to be a mode of subjugation: power says no. Many feminist responses to Title IX, drawing on the conceptual infrastructure of what Janet Halley, Prabha Kotiswaran, Rachel Rebouché and Hila Shamir (Halley et al.) call governance feminism, employ this juridical notion of power in which power excludes and denigrates (Foucault, ‘The History of Sexuality’ 183). This conventional (repressive) model of power is popular even on social media where

the speed at which stories can circulate and the ease with which they can be edited and modified, transposed and muddled, seem to evidence just the opposite: that power is productive, tactical, adaptable and the subject positions that power generates (male, female, professor, student, victim, perpetrator) are mutable, sometimes even mercurial. Instead of the notion of a power that comes to bear on already existing subjects, distorting their relationships, we could think of power as a set of relations that constitutes subjects through 'mobile and transitory points of resistance, producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remodeling them, marking off irreducible regions in them, in their bodies and minds' (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 96). It seems to me that both Kipnis and Garner, exhausted as they are by a certain mode of radical feminism, are trying to articulate a different understanding of institutional and interpersonal power. If power is mobile and relational and has constitutive effects, then questions of violation become significantly more complicated than governance feminism is able to allow. In particular, the institutionalisation of anti-sexual harassment guidelines in the U.S. under the auspices of Title IX begins to look like an exemplary case of what Foucault has called the incitement to discourse (Lieberwitz et al.).

Second, the latent Freudianism of *Unwanted Advances* could be intensified through the work of Thomas Ogden (Ogden). Ogden argues that the psychoanalytic session is structured not by the interaction of two subjectivities (the analyst and the analysand) but by the relationship between these subjectivities and an intersubjectivity co-constructed by the analyst and analysand that he calls the analytic third. These three subjectivities do not exist separately, in pure form; instead they 'create, negate and preserve each other' (4). Moreover, the experience of the analytic third is not the same for the analyst and analysand (reflecting the asymmetrical nature of the analytic situation). The goal of the session is not to tease apart these subjectivities (which are my feelings? which are yours? which did we compose together?), nor to equalise them, but rather to give as much interpretive attention as possible to the overlapping experiences of the analyst and analysand with the intersubjective third. For this reason, it is no longer possible, Ogden argues, to speak of analyst and analysand (or professor and student?), as 'separate subjects who take one another as objects' (3). Crucially, the individual subjectivities that appear to pre-exist the third are actually configurations of the third. That is, in a temporal paradox, the intersubjectivity of the analytic third doesn't reconfigure already stabilised analysts and analysands (spoiling their relationships), rather it constitutes analysts and analysands, as such.

Ogden's paper has not been widely read outside clinical circles, but it speaks, I would argue, to the everydayness of what others have called transference—a

relationality that Sándor Ferenczi noted in an early and influential paper is 'evidenced in all situations of life' (Ferenczi 36). It seems to me that, in the light of Ogden's important reevaluation of relationality in the analytic session, we might explore how pedagogical relationships share some of the same structurings of intersubjective dependency and co-constitution but without the safety nets built into clinical work. For example, part of what can make pedagogical relationships precarious, and sometimes injurious, is that they operate without the holding function of a frame (a set time of day for meeting, a fee, confidentiality). Pedagogical relationships also lack one of the most important parts of a clinical encounter: rigorous reflection on the relationship itself and the subjectivities and intersubjectivities it has brought into being. In many feminist commentaries on pedagogical relationships that have gone wrong there is a strong desire to disaggregate those relationships into clearly distinct actors and actions, at the expense of the phantastic ways in which subjects and their experiences are made (Scott).

Smith says that, in the light of the #MeToo and #TimesUp movements, *Unwanted Advances* (written in 2014 and 2015, and published in 2017) feels 'oddly belated.' I fear that my response will also arrive out-of-date, such is the speed with which mediated scandals like the Ormond College, Peter Ludlow and Avital Ronell cases can materialise and then, just as quickly, be forgotten or deemed immaterial. I would very much like to write something about which I could be more certain, two weeks, two months, two years from now. However, I write this response not just in the heat of the Ronell scandal, but also at the beginning of a semester when I teach deconstruction and feminism. One of the things I would like to think about in this class is how every text is belated, betrayed internally, at odds with itself. I would like the students to think about the kinds of conceptual and political responses available to us to interpret uncertainty in the world: not to fix the meaning of the text (the book, the lawsuit, the accusation, the defense, the tweet, the identity, the institution) but to read for how every text is out of sync with itself, with its context, and with its authors and readers. Of course, I can't be sure how this will turn out.

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