Crying in Public Places: Neoconservatism and Victim Panic

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Being a self-professed feminist heretic is big business these days. It’s certainly where the kudos is in mainstream journalistic writing about feminism. As the successes of writers such as Helen Garner and Katie Roiphe have shown, it’s possible to maintain a strong media presence through attacking feminisms. So formulaic has the business become, that lately, touching base with feminist commentators in the media has been like listening to a bad commercial radio station. You keep hearing the same old song over and over again, like a ‘classic rock’ hit from the seventies, repeated ad nauseam. It’s either a tune about ‘victim feminism’ or ‘puritan feminism’, and it’s played mainly by feminists who were around then. Beatrice Faust, for example, calls ‘victim feminism’ ‘wimp feminism’, and says: ‘Wimp victims believe that they will be victims for the rest of their lives’, and that it is ‘revolutionary feminism gone to seed’.1 Susan Mitchell asks ‘was it for this that feminists had fought so hard’, lamenting what she sees as the new scourge of ‘victimhood’ among young feminists on campus.2 Bettina Arndt worries that sexual harassment legislation and amendments to the Victorian Domestic Violence Act potentially usher in a new era of punitiveness and retribution by feminist ideologues with a victim mentality and a taste for ‘vengeance’.3 Helen Garner speaks of ‘this determination to cling to

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victimhood at any cost, which seems to have become the loudest voice of feminism today’.⁴

Anyone who’s recently tuned into North American debates about feminism will recognise that there’s nothing new here. Like radio station ‘classic rock’ formats, the formula had its genesis in the U.S. The self-styled renegade North American academic, Camille Paglia, describes a cult of victimisation among young American feminists, symptomised by ‘the creeping fascism of the date-rape and sexual harassment hysteria’.⁵ Naomi Wolf, a young feminist herself, has written:

Over the last twenty years the old belief in a tolerant assertiveness, a claim to human participation and human rights — power feminism — was embattled by the rise of a set of beliefs that cast women as beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels: victim feminism.⁶

According to Rene Denfeld, a ‘power feminism’ campaigner who likes to be photographed wearing boxing gloves and squaring off to the camera, ‘feminists focus heavily on victimization and assault . . . This is victim mythology’.⁷ Katie Roiphe, who publicised ‘date-rape’ hysteria, in her book The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus, says the picture ‘that emerges from feminist preoccupation with rape and sexual harassment is that of women as victims’.⁸ Even art critic Robert Hughes weighs in:

The new orthodoxy of feminism is abandoning the image of the independent, existentially responsible woman in favor of woman as

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helpless victim of male oppression — treat her as equal before the law and you are compounding her victimization.\textsuperscript{9}

Those who have heard this song often enough will be familiar with its refrain: there’s a new type of feminism abroad — a negative, doctrinaire, punitive feminism that can focus on only one thing at the expense of all else: the idea that women are victims. According to its critics it’s a feminism that allows no possibility for fun, sex, or female power, and has reached plague proportions among young feminists.

The big crossover hit, from feminist to mainstream, in the local anti-‘victim-feminism’ charts was Helen Garner’s \textit{The First Stone}. This book purports to be an account of events that took place at a prestigious residential college of Melbourne University, where five female students filed complaints about the behaviour of their college master at a dance following a valedictory dinner in October 1991. In incidents that eventually ended up with the police laying charges and cases going before the courts, one student alleged that while dancing with the master of the college, he squeezed her breast. Another alleged that while they were together in his study he locked the door, touched her breasts and made suggestive remarks about ‘having indecent thoughts about her’. Garner’s assertion is that the women first played the role of victim by not taking direct action against the master (by, say, slapping him in the face). They then compounded this by adopting a punitive, legislative approach in going to the police, and sought further retribution by participating in an
ideologically driven feminist cabal designed to orchestrate the master’s dismissal.

The problem with The First Stone, like most victim-feminism tracts, is that its main theses — that the complainants rushed into legalistic solutions, that they should have taken ‘direct action’ instead, and that their actions were part of a campaign designed to oust the college master — don’t hold up. Far from going direct to the police, the complainants embarked on six months of informal negotiations in good faith, enduring, at the same time, a sustained campaign by the college to discredit them. But such facts are obscured in the book. Also obscured are the networks of patronage brought to bear in the college’s handling of the case, and the legalistic requirements the college hierarchy forced on the complainants in attempting to close the matter, which left them open to legal action (the college committee finally set up to deal with the charges had no brief to investigate them, or test the veracity of the complainants’ accounts). The complainants were eventually advised to go to the police not by an ideologically driven feminist cabal, as Garner suggests, but by a Collins Street lawyer, as an independent and on-the-record means of verifying their stories where no other was available. Garner has since admitted that the cabal was a fiction, contrived by splitting one character into several, to avoid litigation.

Despite claiming to ask ‘some questions about sex and power’, the book failed to mention that sexual harassment, by definition, usually occurs in
situations where it might be construed that one party seeks to exercise power associated with their formal position. It failed to differentiate between such abuse of position and the normal sexual friction that occurs between people — ‘Eros’, as Garner calls it. It neglected the fact that the complainants were in an institutional relationship with the master, that he had access to their student records and all their past personal records, say-so over their college bursaries, and, as master of a college with close links to the legal fraternity, influence over their future legal careers.

If, in seeking to reduce everything to a simple-minded meditation about sexual desire, the book failed to deliver on its philosophical promise, then in its suggestion that the complainants were part of a cabal that sought the dismissal of the master, it failed as journalism. Despite repeated inference to the existence of such a plot (and Garner’s public status as a Walkley award–winning journalist), the book provides no evidence to substantiate its claims, relying instead on hearsay. The master’s resignation actually came after a vote of no-confidence by the college council on three grounds: the substance of his testimony in court, the fact that the judgements in all hearings made a point of saying that the young women were not lying, and that the case, stemming from the master’s involvement in the matter, had brought the college into disrepute when reported in the media. Given the college’s own role in escalating the matter, and that the cases ended up in court because the police chose to lay charges after independant investigation, it would be spurious to blame the complainants for the matters ending up in court. The council vote took
place many months after the court cases, and two months after the master refused to approve the bland statement of conciliation penned by the college council in the wake of an Equal Opportunity Commission hearing on the case.

‘Victim-feminism’ tracts, though, rarely let facts get in the way of a good story. They’re emotive, and work as parable, often at the expense of accuracy, but always to a pattern. Like other victim-feminism tracts, *The First Stone* reverses the underlying power dynamic of the situation to pretend it is women who have unleashed incredible power by getting the ‘Ormond blokes on the run’,10 conveniently sidestepping the fact that it was the college hierarchy who closed ranks, and first sought legalistic solutions. If this ‘reversal’ is one of the first things that anti-‘victim-feminism’ tracts do, then another, as the feminist critic bell hooks has written of Roiphe’s *The Morning After*, is ‘to construct and attack a monolithic young “feminist” group that shares a common response to feminist thinking, most particularly around issues of sexuality and physical assault’.11 Rather than detail concrete links between the wide range of men interviewed in the book, Garner prefers to concentrate on the tenuous links between a disparate group of women. This ‘group’ of women is apparently so overwhelmingly powerful that even the ‘establishment’ is afraid of them.12 *The First Stone* is undeniably primarily a book about connections, especially those between women, which are developed into the pretence that feminism is no longer a social movement, but a conspiracy.
It makes for a good sound-bite. ‘Victim-feminists’ take their place among all those other ‘armies of the night’ — Asian crime waves or youth gangs — rarely seen, yet assuredly real; a silent bogey group whose existence is somehow proved by speaking of their invisibility. Like most victim-feminism tracts, *The First Stone* expedites its argument by repeating tantalising possibilities endlessly. For example, despite a lack of evidence linking the complainants to a supposed leaking of information to the press at the time of the initial college investigation into the matter, this inference is made any number of times throughout the book. Another claim, that a leaflet calling for the master’s sacking was circulated throughout the university, is also repeatedly mentioned, and linked to the complainants through hearsay, though no concrete evidence is supplied. That the complainants specifically disassociated themselves from the leaks and the leaflet, both in print and formally before the college council, is worse than ignored. In a narrative sleight of hand, Garner uses even this against them, choosing to take at face value a college council member’s query as to why the complainants would mention the leaflet if they didn’t have anything to do with it. Why indeed, except if they were acting in good faith or, if, like everyone else involved in the case, they had a vested interest in not escalating it.

The language of conspiracy is everywhere in *The First Stone*, couched in vitriol that would do a feminist-baiting radio talkback rant proud. Garner persuasively mentions ‘a certain nexus of forces’,¹³ or speaks of ‘several other university feminists who had supported the complainants’,¹⁴ and a
‘faceless group of women’,\textsuperscript{15} of ‘radical feminists’ and ‘ideological passions . . . on the rampage’,\textsuperscript{16} of ‘puritan feminists’ who exerted a ‘certain influence’,\textsuperscript{17} ‘faceless supporters’,\textsuperscript{18} ‘feminist ideologues’,\textsuperscript{19} ‘the politically correct gang’\textsuperscript{20} who as a group ‘maintained facelessness and voicelessness’,\textsuperscript{21} and even, in a triumphant moment of unsubstantiated certainty, of ‘the feminist group in Ormond which had organised against Colin Shepherd’.\textsuperscript{22} Readers hear, too, of silent advisers who ensure that the ‘path to Elizabeth Rosen and Nicole Stewart [Garner’s names for the two complainants in the book] was plainly not only blocked but mined and ambushed’,\textsuperscript{23} and who maintained a ‘cordon sanitaire’\textsuperscript{24} around them — the necessary pretence being that they’re mindless dupes who can’t decide anything. Despite occasional flashes of empathy for the complainants, which Garner never lets take her anywhere, it’s the men who do the ‘truth-telling’. When the master remarks on the possibility of conspiracy, saying ‘I think there was a conspiracy, very well orchestrated’\textsuperscript{25} Garner slips it into the text at face value. When he offers the view that the complainants are ‘at the root of all my problems’,\textsuperscript{26} this too is reported unremarked. When the women’s solicitor is quoted as saying that ‘the girls’ aim was not to destroy Shepherd’,\textsuperscript{27} the narrator, perfunctorily dismissive, intervenes straightaway: ‘So Dr Shepherd was only caught in the crossfire between the girls and the college? I found this hard to swallow’.\textsuperscript{28}

Take away its construction of young feminists as a monolithic group and the central thesis of \textit{The First Stone} — that the women went straight to the
cops — can’t survive. Garner admits, near the middle of the book, that its main thesis is looking ‘cruder and less applicable’ with every asking, yet within 30 pages the thesis is no longer a question, not even a tentative one, but a firm statement (in flagrant breach of fact): ‘So they charged past conciliation into the traditional masculine style of problem-solving: call in the cops’. No evidence is presented to support this charge. What has taken place in the interim is an interview with a feminist who uses the words ‘retribution’ and ‘dismissal’ in the course of a long conversation about sexual harassment. There is no connection drawn between this woman and the complainants, the assumption for the purpose of Garner’s argument being that all are young feminist ‘ideologues’, and therefore think and act as one.

If, as many columnists writing on the matter were eager to claim, The First Stone sparked a debate about running to the law and excessive social legislation, commensurate with the charge of ‘victim-feminism’, then it arguably did so under false pretences. Perhaps they were swayed not because the book dealt in facts — it didn’t — but because it played straight into mythologies prevalent among opinion columnists about living in a rising tide of so-called ‘political correctness’. Contemporary anxieties about excessive social legislation, with their parallel anxiety about losses of long-enjoyed privilege among those already in powerful positions (namely, powerful men), are writ large throughout The First Stone and the ensuing debate. P.P. McGuiness, the newspaper columnist, for example, took The First Stone at face value, claiming the ‘persecution and
destruction of the Master . . . is reminiscent of the way German universities in the ’30s submitted to the pressures of the Nazi students and forced out Jewish teachers’. Morag Fraser claimed the book to be ‘premised on the belief that truth is more important than feminist party solidarity’. Newspaper columnist, Terry Lane, compared the Ormond case to ‘Salem witch-hunts’. The editorial writer of the *Sydney Morning Herald* claimed the book’s account of the master’s dismissal had resulted in a strong critique of feminism.

From Roiphe’s *The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus*, to Christina Hoff Sommers’ *Who Stole Feminism?*, to Denfeld’s *The New Victorians*, to Wolf’s *Fire with Fire*, to *The First Stone*, the appearance of each new anti-‘victim-feminism’ book has sparked a new round in this debate. It’s a debate that for me, at least, and for many of the young and older feminists I know, seems strangely off to the side. No-one I know speaks of it, or of ‘victim-feminism’, with any seriousness. When they do speak about ‘victim-feminism’, it’s a conversation centred on these books and about something that is supposed to be a controversy, not something to do with anyone’s lives. If I were to try and think of a motif for this lack of fit, it would be that the controversy, unreal as it is, has the same relationship to people’s lives as the material offered in the books, with their reliance on hearsay, exaggeration, suggestion, subjective value-
judgements, and impressionistic, partial accounts, and their predisposition to moral panic, has to fact.

These aren’t books about anyone’s lives so much as they have a ‘typical’ story to tell, that is, after a little narrative nip and tuck. Their practitioners commonly bend events, imposing a template on stories to make them fit the pattern of the currently compelling bogey myth. But rarely do you encounter a balanced, substantiated account. Roiphe’s depiction of Take Back the Night marches in *The Morning After* portrays every women who ever put up a hand at a march to tell her story about an instance of sexual harassment as being only able to think of herself as a victim, and as therefore symptomatic of everything that’s wrong with feminism. Other possibilities simply don’t get mentioned. Rene Denfeld expounds a similar anti-‘wowser’ line of thinking when, criticising a rape-avoidance pamphlet, she says, ‘Rarely is it acknowledged that women might want to have sex. In victim mythology, the idea alone is an affront. The assumption is that they don’t’. But is it really so surprising, in the context of a rape-avoidance campaign, not to find material rhapsodising the pleasures of sex?

As even Naomi Wolf, who runs an anti-victim line herself, has said, Roiphe’s book attracts attention mainly through overstating its case, taking ‘the occasional excesses of the rape crisis movement and using them to ridicule the need to raise consciousness about sexual violence’. Like Garner’s, Roiphe’s book has been enormously influential, and there
are some archetypal similarities between them. Both focus on campus life and portray universities as being full of rampant young feminists. Both talk of sour-pussed feminists destroying male academic careers. Both are centred on a college dorm — Garner has Ormond house, Roiphe, Adams house. Both portray a vulnerable and naive college professor beset by young feminists. Both recommend a good slap in the face as a solution to harassment. Both even focus on the supposed slovenly house-keeping of young ‘victim-feminists’, with their messy dorm rooms.

Much about recent local ‘victim-feminism’ debates is typical, not original. Cover versions. Camille Paglia was almost invisible — a washed-up academic (she said it herself) — until she started attacking feminism in the media. As Wolf says, ‘Paglia was fêted in the very press that had, over the course of the decade, assiduously neglected to present to the public the currents thought she had indicted’.39 Her inflammatory remarks against feminism launched her career as a public figure, and according to the U.S. feminist, bell hooks, those of Roiphe and Wolf as well:

Without Paglia as trailblazer and symbolic mentor, there would be no cultural limelight for white girls such as Katie Roiphe and Naomi Wolf. And no matter how hard they work to put that Oedipal distance between their writing and hers, they are singing the same tune on way too many things. And (dare I say it) that tune always seems to be a jazzed up version of ‘The Way We Were’ — you know, the good old days before feminism and multiculturalism and the unbiased curriculum fucked everything up.40
As hooks points out, it’s no accident these women have made a career from criticising feminism in the media while inferring at the same time that they are the only ones so doing. This too, is the pattern locally. That feminism has always been diverse and self-criticising, or that recent criticism has included powerful critiques of the idea that power is a one-way street, and of the idea that women are helpless, necessarily passive ‘spectators’ to the all-pervasive machineries of patriarchy or media, is conveniently forgotten by those pushing highly publicised attacks on feminism and its supposed lack of self-reflexion, who would cement their proprietorship over the story. The work of well-known feminist auto-critics such as Eva Cox, Wendy Bacon or Meaghan Morris is barely mentioned in the context of such debates.

Anti-‘victim-feminism’ tales are compelling not because they pretend to provide factual information about ‘victim-feminism’, but because they aspire to tell a certain story about feminism. Namely, of contemporary feminism’s supposed corruption and decline. If being a self-professed feminist heretic is big business these days, and if attack, rather than critique, is an entrée, then other feminists prominent in the media also like to play the renegade. Bettina Arndt heads up many of her articles in the mainstream press with claims about their ‘feminist heresy’; Beatrice Faust’s self-professed rebel status is an ongoing theme in her regular column for The Weekend Australian. It’s a great calling-card, that inadvertently says much about the space available for feminism and women in public space. For example, Faust’s contribution to Peter
Coleman’s anti-‘political correctness’ book, *Doubletake: Six Incorrect Essays*, is self-consciously entitled ‘Reflections of a Skeptical Feminist’. She is the only woman among the contributors.

So noisy is the future-of-feminism story, that in the wake of the publication of *The First Stone* there was almost no meaningful discussion about sexual harassment — an irony being that one reason the case escalated at Ormond was a similar lack of discussion. As controversy raged, there was little commentary on the introduction of changed procedures for handling harassment at many university colleges, including Ormond, or on the relatively painless resolution of a similar case there, put in the hands of an independent arbitrator, shortly after the changes were made. There were exceptions, such as article by John O’Neill, who, writing in the now defunct *Independent Monthly* on a similar case at the Australian National University said, ‘The ANU case suggests it might be the system of investigation, rather than puritanical feminism, which drives students with complaints — and who want disciplinary action — to outside organisations’.42 But by and large the big story was about a grand movement betrayed, one effect of this being to portray sexual harassment as a problem within feminism, rather than as a social problem. It became a story about what goes wrong when ‘original’ seventies feminists are no longer in control. Of youth fucking up and getting it wrong. Again. Coupled with a prurient interest in youth sexuality, as discussion slipped, in the wake of a subsequent address by
Garner to the Sydney Institute, from being about community standards to being about individual mores and sexual availability.

It’s all a very strange business, made more so by the fact that the anti-‘victim-feminism’ crew are clinging to some blatant misapprehensions about recent feminisms. The pretence is that younger feminists have a ‘fear of sex’ or ‘fear of life’, and are hell-bent on ‘retribution’ for crimes enacted on so-called ‘victims’. Such stereotypes, with their overblown rhetoric and twisted logic, are more reminiscent of the clichés surrounding ‘second-wave’ seventies separatism than of recent feminisms. In their fancifulness they look like a projection of fears many middle-aged men have about feminism. If most attackers of recent feminisms weren’t so woefully out of touch, they’d realise how ill at ease accusations of ‘victimhood’ and ‘Victorian spinsterhood’ sit with the iconic status of Madonna, Penny Arcade, Annie Sprinkle, the Harley-riding kd lang, or the wide general acceptance of make-up, piercings and even S&M among many young feminists. Ultimately, the idea that young feminists are all doctrinaire ideologues is as laughable as the cliché that seventies feminists were all bra-burning man-haters.

But the misconceived clichés have precedents. If Garner likes to criticise the clothes of ‘priggish’ young feminists in their Blundstones, Paglia also likes to discount young feminists and their ‘dress codes’. In her essay, ‘No Law in the Arena’, she says,
Ambitious young women today are taught to ignore or suppress every natural instinct, if it conflicts with the feminist agenda imposed on them . . . Today, with the callow new brand of yuppie feminist with her simpering prom-queen manner, we have regressed to the Fifties era of cashmere sweaters and pearls . . . Victorian spinsters, shrieking at a mouse.43

There are other rhetorical similarities. Where Paglia says, ‘It is woman, as mistress of birth, who has the real power’, 44 Garner asks, ‘has a girl like Elizabeth Rosen even the faintest idea what a powerful anima figure she is to the men she encounters in her life?’. 45 Where Paglia says, ‘If you advertise, you’d better be ready to sell . . . In America one sees overprotected white girls . . . conspicuously and bouncingly bra-less, a sight guaranteed to invite unwanted attention’, 46 Garner says:

It is an article of faith amongst some young feminists that a woman can go about the world dressed in any way she pleases. They think that for a man to respond to . . . what he sees as a statement of her sexuality, and her own attitude to it, is some sort of outrage . . . Sexy clothes are part of the wonderful game of life, but to dress to display your body, and then to project all the sexuality of the situation onto men and then blame them for it just so you can continue to be innocent and put upon, is not at all responsible . . . 47

It seems odd that, twenty five years after the second wave of feminism, we are still hearing that women should take responsibility for the sexuality of men, and are misbehaving if they don’t. Where Paglia says,

Men strike women for quite another reason: because physical superiority is their only weapon against a being far more powerful than
they. The blow does not subordinate; it equalises . . . the violence came not from his sense of power but from its opposite, his wounded desperation and helplessness.48

Garner speaks of ‘the terrible fragility of men’s egos’,49 remarking ‘blokes who behave as Colin Shepherd was accused of doing aren’t scary or powerful. They’re just poor bastards’.50

Where Paglia talks of ‘paganism’, Garner talks of ‘Eros’. To anyone suspicious of what looks like psychobabble, or prefers not to spend their evenings sitting in circles, daubed in goat’s blood, howling at the moon, it hardly seems a useful concept. But if to speak of ‘Eros’ is to suggest that society is heterogeneous, no law is universal, the sum of desire is too complex to comprehensively map, then this, strangely, is not so far from the later Foucault, and discussions taking place in some recent feminisms. Unfortunately ‘Eros’, in The First Stone, serves a more plainly rhetorical function, that is, to play white to the black, boo-words, ‘sexual harassment legislation’, in a crude opposition that puts the social, and ‘ideological’ on one side, and the spiritual on the other.

The problem with attempts to get outside politics is that to talk about things as being outside the social is to draw them back into the social in the very act of speaking. If ‘Eros’ is a comfort zone that Garner wants to leave pure, virginally untouched by ideology, untouched even by the practicalities of social interaction, then another problem is that, ultimately, ‘Eros’ is just a displaced way of speaking about masculine desire. There’s
little need for Foucault here. In *Damned Whores and God’s Police*, Summers argues,

> The distinctions of mind/body, good/evil, Logos/Eros have all at times been utilized in the spurious quest to give male supremacy a philosophical justification.\(^{51}\)

Worse, ‘Eros’ has feet of clay. As Garner wants to imagine it ‘Eros’ is a beautiful dream, but the places where desire gets played out, in the end, are ever specific, and involve actual people. Garner never mentions whether or not she thinks ‘Eros’ is a two-way street (nor does she distinguish between wanted and unwanted advances), but unless ‘Eros’ cuts both ways, ‘the spark that ignites and connects’ is just a wank.\(^{52}\)

The two big targets of US anti-feminism are Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, who made their names as virulent anti-pornography campaigners, and were advocates of Anita Hill (belatedly in MacKinnon’s case) in the Hill–Clarence Thomas sexual harassment scandal that shook the U.S. judiciary, which is where much of the U.S. rhetoric against ‘victim-feminism’ gathered its momentum. Paglia, Roiphe, Denfeld and even Robert Hughes, have furthered their careers by bashing Dworkin and MacKinnon, although Wolf, who exempts herself here, has pointed out that the media reception of many of Dworkin and MacKinnon’s supposed slogans, such as ‘all sex is rape’, relies on quoting them out of context and using other ‘sleights of hand’ in order to
demonise them as extremists. In Australia Dworkin and MacKinnon have little influence, and there is no parallel to the Hill–Thomas sexual harassment scandal, or the parallel Republican campaign, in which Thomas played a leading role, against U.S. affirmative action legislation. But local media-feminists have learnt to parrot anti-Dworkin–MacKinnon rhetoric without mentioning the names, and the anti-anti-harassment rhetoric without canvassing the issues. When Paglia concludes an essay with the statement that ‘MacKinnon and Dworkin, peddling their diseased rhetoric, are in denial, and what they are blocking is life itself, in all its grandeur and messiness’, the conclusion of The First Stone comes to mind — ‘If only the whole gang of them hadn’t been so afraid of life’.

For anyone with a passing knowledge of recent feminisms, it is especially strange to see the U.S. anti-pornography debate, dominated by two crusading liberals, held up as a warning about local contemporary feminisms, given that so many recent local feminisms are anti-liberal. The media-feminists would seem to have their wires seriously crossed; victims perhaps, of a tendency to uncritical importation — too many shoddy goods bought wholesale off the international journalistic racks. No wonder that the debate seems so irrelevant, so ‘off to the side’. Summers, at least, has mentioned this discrepancy:

Either we are dealing with a serious time-lag problem, or the US experience — and the books that emanate from it — have little relevance to Australian women. (I opt for the latter explanation myself.)

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Stangely, for all their self-professed concern about feminism as an issue, one thing media-feminists rarely discuss in depth is gender politics. If discussions about sexual harassment tend to slide very quickly from being about power and institutional context to being about individual mores, or if debates in general tend to be dominated entirely by middle-class, white feminists who fail altogether to mention the importance of issues like racism and ethnic background in the Ormond case, then this is perhaps because, ultimately, the rhetoric of the media-feminists is deeply normative, and relies not so much on embracing politics, as denying them. The standard rhetorical strategy of anti-‘victim’ crusaders, when presented with the political, is to veer off into an affirmational anecdote, usually about someone who slapped a wrist or pushed away a hand in a circumstance where there was little ongoing consequence, or who was stridently brave enough to resist an advance where there was, and who should therefore serve as an example to the rest, as proof of their moral cowardice, and as a sign that the purveyors of bigger-picture politics have got it wrong.

*The Morning After, The New Victorians, Fire with Fire* and many media-feminist columns are full of such anecdotes. In *The First Stone* they muddy the waters, as if Garner’s own failure to chastise a masseur who molested her, or her own consenting dalliance with a tutor, might shed light on the Ormond case. What these anecdotes arguably seek is to deny the
institutional nature of sexual harassment, and that such matters involve formal as well as informal power. It can be equally be argued that seventies ‘equity’ feminism, of the sort espoused by most anti-‘victim’ crusaders, will always do this at one level or another, because it lacks a theoretical apparatus capable of analysing deeper sexisms. It seeks to make women equal, but only within the existing social system, which it always seeks to validate.

Against this (to draw a makeshift dichotomy), many recent feminisms raise the possibility that the liberal contract of individualism which underpins the existing social system is itself masculinist, and that, according to the equity model, women are defined by default according to a male archetype. They point out that ‘equity’ feminism not only aspires to a middle-class version of white masculine citizenship, but tends to be espoused by white, middle-class feminists who can afford to take their ‘individualist’ privileges for granted. What ‘equity’ feminists tend to laud as the freedom of equality, and freedom from ideology, more recent feminisms see as the logic of the status quo, arguing that to aspire to it is to buy into a whole new set of ideologies, even if no-one speaks of them as such.

Somewhere in this difference the anti-‘victim-feminism’ debate gets going. If there is nothing more important to most ‘equity’ feminisms than the idea that the individual functions as a node of inherent truth (as opposed to the idea, say, that ‘truths’ are produced in social contexts, according to
the requirements of the dominant group of the day), who is defined by making autonomous choices, then, as such, they tend to think gender politics as involving private and personal matters of choice, not as involving public or institutional questions about power. If ‘equity’ feminisms seem almost allergic to insights about the masculinism of the status quo, and tend to fling the label ‘victim-mentality’ about, then it’s because the logic of individuation is all they recognise. More recent approaches to analysing and dealing with oppression, whatever their hue, are habitually read as adopting a stance of de-individuated powerlessness. When Garner talks about how much she hates ‘this constant stress on passivity and weakness — this creation of a political position based on the virtue of helplessness’, her formulation stems not only from a fondness for cant, but also from a refusal to acknowledge the underlying systems that govern gender relations, and a tendency to see any mention of such systems as a form of victimism, or, to put it another way, a lack of proper individualism.

Often such arguments to support the status quo cede into what looks like a quiet misogyny. In an article on a new domestic violence component of divorce legislation, Bettina Arndt establishes her feminist credentials early on by opening with a pro-feminist flourish about the potential of the new legislation. But what follows is a diatribe about ‘punitive laws’ and the possibility that some aggrieved women might use the legislation as a means of ‘retribution’. While the vast majority of paragraphs relate possible disadvantages of the legislation to men, mainly based on extreme
hypothetical cases, there are no equivalent paragraphs dealing any more than peripherally with possible benefits or drawbacks for women. The article raises the spectre of rampant feminist ideologues and mentions the possibility of ‘significant payouts’ by men suffering at the hands of unscrupulous women over and over again, with scant mention of the inbuilt checks and balances of the system.58

The language of The First Stone is equally revealing. The book is populated by the most agreeable bunch of men you could ever meet. As a matter of course, they are ‘pleasantly spoken’ and ‘smiling’,59 or possess a ‘tough posture . . . softened by a smile and a warm expression’,60 or are ‘decent’ and ‘open’,61 and exude ‘warmth and energy’.62 That is, presumably, when they are not being ‘commanding’63 or ‘straight-shooting’.64 These wonderful men, throughout the book, are routinely taken at their word, and have their dialogue quoted without refutation. Garner is sometimes skeptical about their authority, but she never seriously challenges it. The Christ-like, biblically pure Shepherd (Garner’s name for the college master), especially, is described as an innocent. He’s a pure, good, ‘agreeable looking’ man; welcoming, dog loving, with hands like a pianist and a ‘soft’ face with ‘bright blue’65 eyes, who welcomes Garner into a large, pleasant reception room full of light.

The women, on the other hand, are described in almost entirely negative terms. It’s from this contrast that the book generates much of its emotive power. Left to these women, ‘Eros’ would be dead, poor angel (probably

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Blundstone trampled), and the pleasantness of the master’s reception room would almost certainly be replaced by the anarchy of the young feminist’s room which ‘could have been beautiful’, but was ‘amazingly disordered’. Elizabeth Rosen’s room too, was in ‘a disgusting state . . . There were cigarette butts, broken glass, cigarette ash, obviously spilt alcohol in the carpet . . . drawings on the walls and furniture’. Worse, she ‘didn’t perform any of the functions expected’.68 ‘She never went to uni. She played loud music very late’,69 and ‘her three aims in life were to own a Ferrari, a diamond necklace, and for someone to have her name tattooed on them’.70 Against the meek Shepherd, Rosen is ‘elated by her own careless authority and power’.71 Likewise, Nicky Stewart, the other complainant described in Garner’s book, ‘never fitted in’.72 Neither is once taken at her word. Together they are described as ‘priggish, disingenuous, unforgiving’,73 ‘over the top’,74 ‘two college misfits’75 in the grip of ‘an absurd, hysterical tantrum’,76 and ‘wimps who ran to the law to whinge’.77 They are ‘noisy, talkative, opinionated’,78 ‘grim and dull and wowserish and self-righteous’79 ideologues, with a ‘mingy, whining, cringeing terror of sex’.80 In a final enactment of the set of classic dichotomies Garner contrives (man/woman, honest/dishonest, warm/cold, sexual/priggish, human/inhuman), their hands are cold, blue, alien and hard.

A similar routine misogyny inhabits Roiphe’s The Morning After. She also prefers to take men at their word while determinedly doubting women. For example, when a ‘big jock’ pins a freshman woman to a wall at a crowded party by putting his hands on either side of her head without
touching her, then whispers in her ear ‘So baby, when are we going out’, Roiphe chastises not him, but the woman, for carrying this incident ‘around in her head for six years’ as an overblown instance of ‘sexual harassment’, and thinking it symbolic of campus sexual politics. Refusal of unwanted advances, for Roiphe, like most accusers of ‘victim-feminism’, equates with puritan sexlessness. She commensurates women’s liberation with sexual liberation and, lacking a framework for deeper analysis, is doomed to characterise its ‘opposite’ as prudery and repression.

When another man invites a woman on a date, is refused, and then comments repeatedly on her appearance in public over a period of time, finally turning up in her dormitory room uninvited and refusing to leave, telling her she must be unliberated or hung up about sex, he is similarly excused. Maybe he just ‘likes her’ and is ‘nervous around girls’, complains Roiphe, who chastises the woman for feeling nervous and afraid as a result of these incidents and concludes: ‘of course the worry here is not Bill. Bill will be fine’. For Roiphe it is the woman, whom she casts in the traditional female role of the hysteric for refusing unwanted sex, who is the real problem. Again, what Roiphe does is juxtapose an underlying power relationship, excusing the aggressor, not the aggrieved. One effect of this deft flip is to short-circuit the argument, reducing the problem to not one of community standards, but of undecidables about private mores and sexual preferences. To disavow, in short, the possibility of politics, and to simultaneously uphold the contract that many equity feminists, especially those prominent in the media, apparently enter into.
That is, to champion at every turn a system that accepts them as ‘equals’, and at the same time police its boundaries, gate-keeping — as Paglia, for example, does so expertly — what henceforth is and isn’t acceptable feminism.

Taken together, ‘victim-feminism’ tracts form a recognisable genre not only because they repeat an old catalogue of misogynies, but because they addresses a specific contemporary anxiety. All make mention of sexual harassment legislation and dutifully try to anticipate possible male responses to it. Not for nothing are the vast majority of victims of injustice in anti-‘victim-feminist’ narratives naive, middle-aged men, cut down by attractive and knowing young women with a smattering of recent feminist knowledge. The same tableaux is rehearsed obsessively, from David Williamson’s Brilliant Lies to David Mamet’s play, Oleanna; from The Morning After to The First Stone to the Kennedy–Miller movie Gross Misconduct (shot at Ormond!), based on a play based on the infamous Sydney Sparkes Orr sexual harassment case in Tasmania. Always with the same closely scripted narrative elements — a young woman, a student or junior employee, who destroys or attempts to destroy the career of an older man, her boss or a professor, via a charge of sexual harassment. Her archetypal features are unreasonableness, coupled with a hint of dishonesty, while his are innocence and surprise. Another cover version, the underlying structure of these stories follows that of femme fatale narratives, made famous by hardboiled detective fiction (and resurrected in recent films such as ‘Basic Instinct’ or ‘Fatal
Attraction’), where a woman of ambiguous, possibly ‘dysfunctional’ sexuality (she doesn’t want him/is she gay?), ‘leads-on’, annihilates and emasculates a man who desires her, leaving him in tatters as a form of retribution against the ‘crime’ of his desire, or for some other crime that is depicted as being at least half in her imagination.

Given that some of the strongest challenges to equity feminism have come from within universities, it’s no coincidence that many anti-‘victim’ fables are set there, and have student and academic feminists as their target, and senior male staff as set upon. Such fables, and attacks on the so-called excesses of feminism are generally occasioned by vehement anti-intellectualism, as can be seen in many of Beatrice Faust’s columns, for example, or David Williamson’s anti-feminist, anti-academic play, Dead White Males. Here another parallel emerges between local attacks on ‘victim feminism’ and the North American debate about the Hill–Thomas incident. As the Nobel prize-winning writer Toni Morrison commented:

Anita Hill’s witnesses, credible and persuasive as they were, could be dismissed, as one ‘reporter’ said, apparently without shame, because they were too intellectual to be believed (!). 82

Far from being the long-awaited corrective they aggressively advertised themselves to be, recent attacks on feminism have functioned quite differently. They played out another round in a struggle that, as Meaghan Morris has argued, is currently taking place between the press and the academy for cultural authority, which can be seen in debates over the literary canon, lately questioned by academics and promoted heavily by

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newspapers. In terms of the current anti-intellectualism, the anti-‘victim-feminism’ genre can take a place alongside many current standards from the U.S. neo-conservative top-forty currently trading heavily in the moral panic business, on the basis that they disavow to the justice business the importance of a little intellectual curiosity. Books like Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, ex-Reagan adviser and anti-affirmative action campaigner Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*, and Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*, spring to mind, all of which have been influential among local columnists as well as influencing plays such as *Dead White Males*. Like high profile attacks on ‘victim-feminism’, all get anxious about the current questioning of the paradigmatic liberal white male subject and parallel changes in humanities curriculums, portraying men as being under siege by feminism.

If, currently, the accusation ‘victim-mentality’ is doing good business, then it’s not just among high-profile feminists working in the media. It’s on high rotation elsewhere as well, getting ‘thrashed’ in among other contemporary playlists that ask people not to attribute their problems to systemic ills or fundamental social inequities, but to blame themselves for a failure of their own volition. The jangly rhythm of supposedly regulation free, economic ‘Eros’ – economic rationalism – is big lately. Like the emergence of anti-‘victim-feminism’ rhetoric from second-wave ‘equity’ feminism, its rise has marked a shift, as moderate conservative
rhetorics about creating social change have become radical, neo-liberal, neo-conservative rhetorics about social correction. In particular, the shift from liberalism to neo-liberalism, for both middle-of-the-road feminisms and economics, is marked by a collective failure of liberal nerve, especially in the idea that organised redistribution of wealth, or justice, is possible. The once moderate idea of ‘equity’ is no longer so much a goal to be accomplished by regulatory means, as an excuse for not undertaking such redistribution. The presumption is that people are always already equal and, so hypertuned is the ideology of individualism, that redistributory measures make them less so.

There are many close similarities between the rhetorics of anti-‘victim-feminism’ and those of economic rationalism. Both discredit the idea of the public self in favour of the idea of the privatised self, and seek to discredit the idea of community and collective action. Both prescribe sole agency, and striking individual contracts. Both laud the old Reaganesque ‘can do’ attitude. Both upend underlying power dynamics to suggest social inequities don’t have wider contexts, or, at least, that such contexts are irrelevant compared with the inherent power of the individual. Both adopt the classic liberal model of negative liberty (‘negative liberty’ because ‘freedom’, here, is envisaged in negative terms as ‘freedom from, to act’), where people are imagined as centres of inherent, essential ‘truth’, who become more ‘true’ and humane as they are unconstrained from social regulation to make freer choices. Both have hardened from a relatively tolerant liberalism to a neo-conservative intolerance of social
variance, while using increasingly strident and vitriolic rhetorics to defame their critics. Both enjoy the patronage of a recently globalised media that itself has been one of the major beneficiaries of deregulation. Both segue from attacks on perceived system ‘abusers’ to attacks on welfare and advocacy systems. Both espouse philosophies which facilitate a winding back of welfare. For example, as I write, single mothers’ pensions are under attack on the grounds that they encourage a ‘victim’ mentality. In the U.S., the anti-‘victim-campaign’ has dove-tailed neatly into the anti-‘affirmative-action’ campaign run by the Republican Party, feeding off the Hill-Thomas case. Locally, this commensurates with, for instance, an Age editorial published in the wake of The First Stone, calling for a watering down of sexual harassment legislation.  

Anti-intellectualism and anti-academicism are much played tunes in both worlds. One complaint often made by those who whinge about recent feminisms is that the university courses in which these things are supposedly ‘taught’, aren’t vocational. Summers, for example, has said that for young feminists:

years on campus, arguing theories and being cosseted by a comfortable set of shared assumptions among most of their colleagues, had in no way prepared them for the real world.  

According to the economist Michael Pusey, a strategy of economic rationalism, having successfully widened the gap between rich and poor, is to pull up the ladders and cover the tracks. Since the strategies are simple adaptations of Thatcherism and Republican ‘attack politics’ the
third predictable prong of the strategy will be an assault on the quality press, public broadcasting, the remains of the liberal university, and on other constituents of critical debate in a ‘public sphere’.86

While the real world/academy dichotomy is lately often drawn by neo-conservatives to discredit non-vocational education, few of my own feminist friends with university educations have had the problems described by Summers. Most work in their chosen professions as writers, editors, lawyers, journalists and activists, just as many feminists of Summers’ generation do. More than two decades after International Women’s Year, during which my own daughterless mother (who I’m proud to say has moved with the times) decided it was her duty to introduce her sons to feminism through academic-written texts such as The Female Eunuch and Damned Whores and God’s Police, it’s sobering to hear a feminist with Summers’ credentials being critical of feminist courses of any kind. Or to notice how neatly her comments, with their high-handed tone, their hyperbole and fear of new approaches, their quiet pandering to conventional wisdom and louder cross-generational paranoia, so neatly embellished what the loudest voices here — middle-aged male columnists and self-styled feminist heretics prominent in the media — have insisted on calling a ‘debate’.

1 Beatrice Faust, Backlash, Balderdash: Where Feminism is Going Right, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney, 1994, pp. 7-15.

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2 Susan Mitchell, ‘Vicious Writing on the Wall’, Australian, 15-16.4.95, p. 15.


12 Garner, The First Stone, p. 140.


33 P.P. McGuiness, ‘Feminism Debate Has to Go Far Beyond the Dogmatism of the Wimminists’ *Age*, 10.8.95, p.12.

34 Morag Fraser, ‘It’s Time for Feminism’s Egos to Call a Truce’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10.8.95, p. 13.

35 Terry Lane, ‘Burnt at the Ideological Stake’, *Sunday Age*, 27.9.95, p. 19.


38 Wolf, *Fire with Fire*, p. 147.


41 See, for example, Bettina Arndt, ‘Beyond Glass Ceilings’, *Age*, 9.4.96, p. A11.


44 Paglia, ‘No Law in the Arena’, p. 32.

49 Garner, The First Stone, p. 150.
52 Garner, The First Stone, p. 112.
53 Wolf, Fire with Fire, p. 132.
56 Summers, ‘Shockwaves at the Revolution’, p. 29.
58 Bettina Arndt, ‘Bruising Break-ups’, Age, 16.11.95, p. 11.
60 Garner, The First Stone, p. 108.

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Editorial, ‘Sex Law is Way Out’ *Age*, 22.1.96.

Summers, ‘Shockwaves at the Revolution’, p. 29.

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