Contents

Contributors ix

I PORTRAYALS OF FEMINISM IN THE MEDIA
1 Introduction 3
   DONNA E. YOUNG
2 Media Images/Feminist Issues 8
   DEBORAH L. RHODE
3 Hate Radio: Why We Need to Tune In to Limbaugh and Stern 22
   PATRICIA J. WILLIAMS
4 The Making of a "Quota Queen": News Media and the
   Bias of Objectivity 27
   LAUREL LEFF
5 The Real Real Anita Hill, or the Making of a Backlash
   Best-Seller 41
   MARY COOMBS
6 Fear of Feminism: Media Stories of Feminist Victims and Victims
   of Feminism on College Campuses 57
   MARTHA T. MCCLUSKEY
7 Glamour Law: Feminism through the Looking Glass of Popular
   Women's Magazines 72
   JULIA E. HANIGSBERG

II FEMINISM, LAW, AND POPULAR CULTURE
8 Introduction 87
   SUSAN BISOM-RAPP
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 9 The Movie of the Week: Law, Narrativity, and Gender on Prime Time  91  
ELAYNE RAPPING |
| 10 Rape on Soaps: The Legal Angle  104  
DIANNE L. BROOKS |
| 11 Pop Justice: TV, Motherhood, and the Law  120  
ISABEL KARPIN |
| 12 Law and Racial Reelism: Black Women as Celluloid “Legal” Heroines  136  
MARGARET M. RUSSELL |
| 13 Women on Trial: The Female Lawyer in the Hollywood Courtroom  146  
CYNTHIA LUCIA |
| III ESSENTIALIZING GENDER |
| 14 Introduction  171  
JOYCE DAVIS |
| 15 Law, Cultural Media[tion], and Desire in the Lives of Adolescent Girls  177  
TRACY E. HIGGINS & DEBORAH L. TOLMAN |
| 16 The Politics of Surrogacy Narratives  193  
E. ANN KAPLAN |
| 17 “Bad Mothers” and Welfare Reform in Massachusetts: The Case of Claribel Ventura  203  
MARIE ASHE |
| 18 Spectacles of the Strange: Envisioning Violence in the Central Park Jogger Trial  217  
KRISTIN BUMILLER |
| IV MEDIA IMAGES OF VIOLENCE |
| 19 Introduction: The Seens and Unseens of Popular Cultural Representation  227  
LYNN S. CHANCER |
| 20 Crime News, Crime Fear, and Women’s Everyday Lives  235  
KATHLEEN DALY & AMY L. CHASTEEN |
| 21 Lesbians, Prostitutes, and Murder: Media Constructs Violence Constructs Power  249  
ANN RUSSO |
| 22 Blindfolded: Rape and the Press’s Fear of Feminism  267  
HELEN BENEDICT |
| 23 Race under Construction: The Master Narrative of White Supremacy in the Media Representation of African American/Korean American Conflict  273  
LISA C. IKEMOTO |
| References  291 |
| Table of Cases  319 |
“Victim Feminism” in the Media

A profusion of mainstream media reports have declared that one of the biggest problems facing U.S. women in the 1990s is that feminists talk too much about women as victims. “Has sisterhood become victimhood?” ask ads for Katie Roiphe’s book The Morning After: Sex, Fear and Feminism on Campus (1993b). Roiphe (1991) argues that college feminists’ emphasis on the problem of date rape has served to reinforce what she claims are traditional ideas of women as victims and men as aggressors: “Let’s not chase the same stereotypes our mothers have spent so much energy running away from. Let’s not reinforce the images that oppress us, that label us victims, and deny our own agency and intelligence; as strong and sensual, as autonomous, pleasure-seeking, sexual beings.” Hundreds of newspaper stories, magazine articles, and talk shows across the United States (and beyond) have featured Roiphe’s book as a focal point of a controversy, describing the book with headlines such as “The Victim Trap” (B. Sullivan 1993) or “Stop Whining . . .” (Picker 1993).

Conservative critics have long denounced feminism (and other civil rights movements) for promoting victimization (e.g., A. Miller 1990). The recent controversy over Roiphe’s book has stressed similar criticisms from many who identify themselves as liberals and feminists, though these critics of victimization differ widely in their overall views of feminism. In a Glamour article previewing her book Fire with Fire, Naomi Wolf (1993b) argues that “victim feminism . . . has dominated public debate for the last twenty years,” portraying women “as silenced and helpless rather than as potent agents for change”; she asserts that feminism’s recent successes mean that this attitude is now obsolete or even destructive. In an Atlantic Monthly cover story on “Feminism’s Identity Crisis,” Wendy Kaminer (1993b) warns that feminists’ emphasis on women’s sexual victimization threatens feminist political gains. A Newsweek cover story discussing the issues raised in Roiphe’s book quotes Betty Friedan as saying,
Portrayals of Feminism in the Media

“I'm sick of women wallowing in the victim state. . . . We have empowered ourselves” (Crichton 1993).

Many of those who have received the most publicity in this debate over “victim feminism” are self-proclaimed feminists whose “feminist” activism and scholarship appear to be limited to attacks on feminism, as Susan Faludi notes (1995). Camille Paglia declares: “Let's get rid of Infirmary Feminism, with its bedlam of bellyachers, anorexics, bulimics, depressives, rape victims, and incest survivors. Feminism has become a catch-all vegetable drawer where bunches of clingy sob sisters can store their moldy neuroses” (quoted in Stoffman 1994). In an essay titled “Keeping Women Weak,” Cathy Young says that feminism went wrong when it told women “that we were victims, with little control over our lives and our choices” (1994, p. 219). Discussing her book Who Stole Feminism? on the talk-show circuit, Christina Hoff Sommers (1994c) complained that “the orthodox feminists are so carried away with victimology, with a rhetoric of male-bashing,” that the most important task remaining in order to achieve gender equality is to “save young women from the feminists.”

The mainstream media often points to U.S. college campuses as the nucleus of these problems with feminism. Mona Charen (1994) warns that “gender feminists, triumphant on the American campus and highly influential in the society at large, believe that women are victims of something called the ‘sex/gender system,’ which perpetuates male dominance over females.” Newsweek sums up feminism’s influence by saying, “If it’s chilly in the workplace, it’s downright freezing on campus” (Crichton 1993). In particular, the media discussion of “victim feminism” highlights efforts at elite schools to confront acquaintance rape and sexual harassment with “Take Back the Night” marches, date rape education programs, and new rules governing sexual conduct.

Difference to Dominance in Feminist Legal Theory

This media fascination with feminism’s so-called victim problem both reflects and distorts struggles within feminist legal theory and practice. One of feminism’s strengths has been its ability to reveal barriers to women’s full and equal participation in society. As Sommers (1994b) notes, “In the bad old days, a lot of women’s victimization was invisible.” But feminist efforts to expose the pervasiveness of restraints on women’s lives sometimes appear to contradict feminist visions of women as self-determining agents capable of creatively shaping the world.

This victim/agent dilemma echoes another dilemma confronting feminist struggles for equality: the apparent choice between equal treatment and special treatment. If equality laws require that women be treated the same as men, then women risk being penalized when they appear different from men (when women seek legal protections against pregnancy discrimination in employment, for example) (Law 1984; Finley 1986). In response to that dilemma, many feminists noted that women are disadvantaged under the law not only because the law too often falsely assumes that women are different from men but also because the law unjustly privileges men’s “differences” (Finley 1986, pp. 1152-59; MacKinnon 1987, pp. 32-45; Minow 1990, p. 58). Feminists working on a variety of legal issues have argued that apparently neutral legal rules and policies can disadvantage women if women’s particular needs are denied legal recognition or if harm to many women is perceived as trivial or natural compared to harms that primarily affect privileged men (see, e.g., Rhode 1991; Fineman 1991a). In response to the failures of formal equality law, some feminists attempted to shift the question of gender equality from whether women are different to whether men are dominant and women subordinate under the law (MacKinnon 1987, pp. 40-45; Colker 1986).

But if legal and societal recognition of harm depends as much on gender privilege as on neutral principles, then challenging gender subordination is not necessarily any easier than challenging gender difference. Kathryn Abrams has discussed the parallels between the “victimization” controversy sparked by Roiphe’s book and the long-standing feminist debates over the “dominance” approach to equality (Abrams 1994, p. 1549), which many fear may reinforce women’s subordination by stressing women’s vulnerability in the face of male power. Furthermore, if harm is a political construction as well as a discoverable fact, those with the most power will be best able to define themselves as victims.
under the law. Prominent versions of feminism have often recognized harms faced by economically privileged white heterosexual women to the exclusion of the particular problems faced by women of color, lesbians, and working-class and poor women (hooks 1984; A. Harris 1990). And if the law tends to more easily recognize and redress harm to certain groups of men than to most women, then those men may be more successful at claiming that their gender differences are deserving of the most protection. Ironically, those who suffer loss of privileges as a result of feminism may be able to make the most credible claims of victimization.

The theme of male dominance and female victimization has been particularly important in feminist discussions of issues of violence against women (Schneider 1986, pp. 220–21; M. Mahoney 1994, p. 59). Male violence against women is a widespread problem that historically has tended to be suppressed from public view in law and media (Marcus 1994), except when characterized as interracial violence against white women. Many feminists have emphasized women's experiences as victims of male violence and male sexual abuse in part in an attempt to demonstrate that those harms are serious problems deserving of legal protection. At the same time, many feminists have expressed concerns about how the legal system can be used to recognize and redress these previously hidden injuries to women without contributing to old stories that cast women as inevitably damaged and vulnerable to male control (Schneider 1986; M. Mahoney 1994). How can we name and challenge the ways in which many women are victims of gender-related harms without denying that most (if not all) women also share in a complex reality of power, pleasure, and privilege?

My thesis is that we can learn how to better respond to this apparent victim/agent dilemma by looking at another side of the story—at media representations of some who claim to be victims of feminism. After all, those who identify with privileged white male authority often have had it both ways: Our legal system is testament to the successes some have had at positioning themselves as both vulnerable victims and authoritative agents. For example, Oliver North's tearful stories of obedient suffering in the Iran-contra hearings not only helped protect him from criminal charges but also propelled him to a U.S. Senate nomination. Victimization linked to gender politics, in particular, can frequently inscribe potency as well as passivity. From Robert Bly to Rush Limbaugh, the airwaves and print media are saturated with the voices of heterosexual white men whose fame and fortunes have been secured in part through stories of suffering due to feminist power.

It is not simply the subject matter of one's story—victimization—but also one's position as authoritative subject that determines whether or not narratives of harm bolster or undermine one's power and autonomy. Victimhood can work both to confirm the inauthenticity and inadequacy of subordinated groups and to support the authenticity and strength of those with relative privilege. By comparing feminist narratives of sexual victimization with victim narratives of those whose privileged position is threatened by feminist reforms, we can better understand how authority and agency is constructed in the popular media and how that authority can be subverted and extended to "others."

Feminist Victim Narratives

In 1990, I wrote some essays for the local media commenting on a civil liberties union lawsuit that challenged my undergraduate college's right to ban fraternities. The college had decided to prohibit its students from belonging to fraternities after many years of disciplinary problems related to fraternity activities; among other problems, several all-male and predominantly white fraternities at that private college had long been a focus of complaints of sexual harassment and abusive behavior toward women (McCluskey 1992, pp. 267–68). The lawsuit challenging the ban on fraternities was a test case under a new state law aimed at providing remedies for civil rights violations from private parties, particularly hate groups like the Ku Klux Klan. The state civil liberties union argued that the college's decision to discipline some students for participating in fraternity activities violated those students' rights to freedom of association.

My commentaries on the fraternity lawsuit included a narrative about my college experiences of harassment and assault by previous members of the fraternity at issue in the lawsuit. In the dispute about the fraternity ban, the local media
had widely discussed the harm to students' rights from the college's prohibition on fraternities, without including discussion of the continuing history of harm to women and other students caused by those fraternities (see McCluskey 1992, pp. 282–87).

Like many feminist legal scholars (Coombs 1993, pp. 313–14; Estrich 1987, pp. 1–3), I attempted to use personal stories in order to explore biased assumptions underlying the law's response to the sexual victimization of women. By publishing our own victim narratives, feminist scholars have personified the victim/agent dilemma underlying the controversy over Roiphe's book. In my essays about the fraternity case, I positioned myself both as silenced victim acted upon by others and as speaking author attempting to reconstruct the framework within which those others act. But according to the critics of feminist victim stories, my victim narrative risks failure on two grounds: First, it demonstrates that I am an emotional, vulnerable female who needs protection from responsible, rigorous debate. Second, it shows that my exercise of power in speaking out about harms from fraternities is misleading and unprincipled—a result of emotional manipulation.

For example, Roiphe (1993b) criticizes "rape-crisis" techniques such as campus Take Back the Night marches and speak-outs protesting violence against women. Though such activities may be "intended to celebrate and bolster women's strength, [they seem] instead to celebrate their vulnerability" (K. Roiphe 1993b, p. 44). "As the speakers describe every fear, every possible horror suffered at the hands of men, the image they project is one of helplessness and passivity" (K. Roiphe 1993b, p. 44). Furthermore, Roiphe complains that the use of confessional stories of sexual abuse is "a natural trump card" that unfairly turns rational discussion into "the teary province of trauma and crisis" (1993b, p. 56). "By blocking analysis with its claims to unique pandemic suffering, the rape crisis becomes a powerful source of authority" (K. Roiphe 1993b, p. 57). Following that view, the very fact that my story of victimization may have been a compelling story of harm added proof to my inauthenticity. Victim narratives like mine are likely to be suspect both for demonstrating excessive weakness (victimizing women) and for exhibiting excessive power (victimizing men).

Indeed, casting the problem in terms of the old equal treatment/special treatment dilemma, some critics suggest that feminist complaints about sexual victimization are illegitimate attempts to retain protection in the face of growing power and equality. One conservative critic complains, "Do they want to push equity or do they want to push the victim status?"; she insists that "you can't have it both ways" (Fields 1994). Roiphe suggests that some painful experiences which many feminists attribute to date rape and sexual harassment are simply the necessary price of sexual freedom and equality. She warns that stories presenting women as victims of sexual violence risk putting women back on a restrictive pedestal, which she depicts by opening her book with an image of her grandmother spending her days of protected boredom going shopping, playing cards, and getting manicures (K. Roiphe 1993b, p. 3).

But as many activists and scholars have described at length (e.g., hooks 1984, pp. 1–3), this stereotype of a protected woman on a pedestal takes a grossly incomplete and distorted view of the problem of gender inequality by making the experience of a small group of economically privileged women stand for the problems of women with vastly different experiences. The media tends to ignore that this stereotype of the privileged woman on the pedestal coexists with (and reinforces) a corresponding stereotype of the "fallen" women—a stereotype that is tied to race, class, and sexuality (Benedict 1992).

In the traditional story, to be authentic victims, women generally need to establish sexual "innocence" (Higgins and Tolman 1997) and to affirm the authority of economically privileged white men. But women who take action to testify about their injuries from middle- or upper-class men of the same race may risk losing their status as authentic victims because their speaking against such men denies their innocence and dependence. "As Roiphe dryly notes, being 'silenced' is an experience of the articulate, whose tone is often self-congratulatory: I have survived victimization, so I am very brave" (Will 1993b). When women demonstrate agency, they often risk losing credibility. From Eve in the Garden of Eden to Anita Hill in the U.S. Senate hearings, the exercise of power by a female subject is frequently told as a sign of weakness; women's assertiveness is frequently interpreted to be moti-
vated by emotional or sexual excess, personal greed, or whim. In other words, our resistance is constructed as our victimization as instruments (or pawns) of internal or external diabolical forces.

But asserting claims to both victimization and equality can be a means of escaping a double bind rather than an attempt to "have it both ways." What this mainstream media debate constructs as a choice between protection and powerlessness on the one hand and risk and responsibility on the other may be more usefully interpreted as a contest over whose struggle for security is construed as a sign of individual responsibility and autonomy and whose is a sign of pathology and dependence.

Stories of Victims of Feminism

Media victim narratives starring men who are economically privileged, white, and heterosexual are often central to establishing the rationality and authority of their demands for protection. The mainstream media prominently features stories about male victimization from ambiguous or false claims of sexual harassment or date rape. A common theme of the media discussion of Roiphe's book was the image of fearful, confused, and powerless heterosexual males faced with threatening college feminists.

For example, Newsweek's cover story on college feminists' activism against date rape and sexual harassment opened by saying that the women at Brown University "play hardball" and create a "siege mentality" among college men through techniques such as listing the names of men accused of rape on bathroom walls (Crichton 1993). Numerous news stories tell about college men victimized by antirape flyers or posters (Manning 1993; Kranhold and Farrish 1993; Morrow 1994). Others describe the suffering of college men who have been subject to disciplinary proceedings for engaging in sexual actions without adequate consent (Adler and Picker 1990; D. Sullivan 1994). Some stories described college men's feelings of confusion and shock while attending mandatory date-rape workshops (Reidy 1993; Kranhold and Farrish 1993).

One newspaper's analysis of the date-rape issue opened by asking readers to imagine themselves as heterosexual men unable to approach women to ask them out for fear of being accused of sexual harassment; the article goes on to discuss stories of men accused of rape or sexual harassment by young women (Chunn 1993). A Washington Times editorial ("Date Rape 101" 1993) warned that fraternity parties and football games are in danger of being replaced by a tyranny of "Political Correctness gestapos on campuses" who threaten to "ruin the lives of those students unfortunate enough to fall within their grasp." New York magazine's cover story on date rape contrasted one anecdote about a woman's experience of being raped by a date with two anecdotes about college men who had been victimized by false accusations of campus rape (Hellman 1993). A British newspaper began its story on date rape by raising the specter of a male student "scrapping a living waiting at tables," having lost his professional career as a result of feminist extremists, who have spread "a new, draconian sexual code . . . like a malevolent fungus" through U.S. universities (Driscoll 1993). But despite their prominence in the media, these victim narratives about those who fear the effects of campus feminism have not faced the same kinds of controversy and criticism as have victim stories about college women who claim to have been harmed by rape or sexual harassment.

Victims Create Epidemics of Fear

Mainstream media commentators have widely discussed the danger that "rape-crisis" feminism may create an "epidemic" of fear among women. Roiphe warns that blue security lights installed on college campus walkways as part of antirape programs will make women "learn vulnerability and lurking dangers in the bushes" and will teach women "to be on your guard with every man" (1993b, p. 28). She chides date-rape educational pamphlets dramatizing female students' fears of sexual harassment, complaining that if colleges encourage such feelings of vulnerability among female students, "their hothouse flowers are going to wilt in the light of postcollege day" (K. Roiphe 1993b, p. 109). Roiphe fears that even if male victimization of women is a real problem, acting as if male dominance exists is "a dangerous train of thought" because it "carries us someplace we don't want to be" (1993b, p. 89)—back to the stereotypical pedestal which Roiphe imagines as the central feminist problem.
Yet media discussions of feminist “totalitarianism” (Sommers 1994c) and “gender war” (Leo 1994) on college campuses generally have not raised comparable concerns that such dramatic warnings will make male students wilt when they face bigger dangers after graduation. Far from scolding men for getting caught up in a crisis atmosphere and for dwelling on their vulnerability, Roiphe is proud that her publicity has brought her “hundreds of letters from men saying, ‘I’m grateful to you for saying that all men are not rapists’” (C. May 1994). Some prominent critics of “victim feminism” have promoted apocalyptic stories of men as victims of campus feminism. According to Sommers (1994b), “charges of harassment are made so carelessly and on such slight grounds that we now have a genuine witch hunt on many of your campuses. . . . Every man is now—stands to be accused if he’s ever been alone in a room with a woman.” Columnist John Leo (1994) quotes a former prosecutor who says that she is “very frightened for men on campus” and that “the pendulum has really swung” so that “young men are now the victims.” Indeed, the Heritage Foundation reports that feminist arguments about women’s victimization “are nothing less than an assault on our very existence as a nation and a society” (A. Miller 1990).

Victims Exaggerate Their Injuries

The media controversy over “victim feminism” has given substantial publicity to claims that feminism tends to exaggerate harm to women. Sommers has gained media fame for purporting to expose many feminist claims as inconsistent with statistical evidence. One report about her book quotes Sommers as saying that “in every case that I looked into of women’s victimization—of information produced by a feminist research center or a feminist researcher—it was unreliable” (Romano 1994). The media has also given widespread attention to Roiphe’s criticisms of a survey used to suggest that one in four women in college may have experienced rape.

In contrast, the image of the fateful “morning after” which titles Roiphe’s book and which underlies many male victim stories has not been accompanied by popular media discussions of the lack of solid empirical evidence supporting the fears of false accusation it represents. Roiphe’s book offers no evidence of male college students or professors who have suffered physical or material harm or prosecution from being falsely accused of date rape due to women who have a change of heart following consensual sexual encounters (though she does tell two anecdotes of false accusations of rape in other contexts; see K. Roiphe 1993b, pp. 39–42). Sommers disparages feminists for making claims about the prevalence of rape without adequate statistical support (1994a, pp. 210–26) but offers no statistical support whatsoever for her repeated claims of feminist “witch-hunts” against men on college campuses (Sommers 1994a, p. 116; 1994b).

Similarly, no statistics accompany the media’s frequent warnings of feminist “male-bashing” (Hinds 1993; Carlson 1994). Nor do such warnings acknowledge the diversity or complexity of feminist views on men. For example, few if any of the mainstream media commentators on Roiphe’s book appear to have considered bell hooks’s years of prolific writings on the importance to feminism of treating men as allies, not enemies (hooks 1984, pp. 67–81; hooks 1994, p. 81) or the major trends in feminist theory and activism critical of identity politics and essentialist notions of gender (Danielsen and Engle 1995; Butler and Scott 1992; A. Harris 1990).

Feminism is particularly under fire in the media for attempting to stretch the meaning of “rape” and “sexual harassment.” According to Roiphe (1991), “certain feminists are busy turning rape into fiction. Every time one Henry James character seizes the hand of another Henry James character, someone is calling it rape.” Paglia (1994a) derides feminists for “this broadening of the idea of rape, which is an atrocity, to those things that go wrong on a date—acquaintances, you know, little things, miscommunications—on pampered elite college campuses.” Naomi Wolf (1994) warns that “feminism has to start being so scrupulously fair” in order to avoid representing the problem of gender injustice as a gender war which casts “all men as brutal, rapacious beasts.”

But the proliferation of stories about male victims has not yet sparked a hot market for books like Naomi Wolf’s, Katie Roiphe’s, or Christina Hoff Sommers’s, books urging a heterosexual white male audience to be scrupulously accurate when they talk about their fears of feminist power. The media rarely feature cautionary tales about the danger to elite men of a comparable
Fear of Feminism

63

loss of authority for their tendency to expand the terms “crime” and “violence” to cover virtually any exercise of power that potentially limits elite nongay male sexual freedom.

A Newsweek article criticizes Antioch College’s student conduct guidelines (which require students to receive explicit consent for every step of sexual activity) on the ground that this policy “criminalizes the delicious unexpectedness of sex” (Crichton 1993). In fact, such student conduct codes are private disciplinary proceedings with no criminal penalties. Nonetheless, columnist John Leo (1994) gravely quotes Cathy Young’s warning that feminists are “trying to dictate the curriculum and write campus codes that would turn 90 percent of the men into rapists.” In the dispute over my college’s ban on fraternities, a local newspaper quoted a national fraternity leader’s statement that the college president “and his hand-picked thought police regiment have advanced repression to new heights” and complained that the college administration “has essentially made it a crime punishable by expulsion to be a heterosexual male who chooses to formalize his friendship with other like-minded friends” (“Colby Defends Crackdown on Underground Fraternities” 1991). In fact, the college had temporarily suspended, not expelled, the students in an internal disciplinary proceeding with no criminal consequences and had not prohibited students from associating in other kinds of exclusively heterosexual male organizations.

Feminist-inspired restrictions on male behavior may even count as crimes of historic proportions. In response to my college’s ban on fraternities, one fraternity member wrote a letter printed in the campus newspaper declaring that the college’s ban on fraternities was a form of “genocide” comparable to the Holocaust and the Cambodian killing fields. Discussing his book The Myth of Male Power (1993a), Warren Farrell warns that the current plight of men is comparable to the historical status of enslaved African Americans. Farrell (1993b) explains that “the difference between slaves and males is that . . . men are taught to think of their slavery as power.”

Victims Are Unpopular

Even though many suggest that feminists tend to sway the public too easily with unsupported stories of victimization, prominent critics of “victim feminism” also tend to blame feminists for driving the majority of women away from feminism. A common argument is that many women shrink from identifying with feminism because of the indignity of the victim role that feminists present.

Roiphe explains that women are “loath to call themselves feminists” because “being a feminist has come to mean being a victim of one form or another of oppression” (quoted in Picker 1993). Sommers (1994c) reports that few women on college campuses will admit to being feminists: “Young women don’t want to be associated with [feminism] anymore because they know it means male-bashing, it means being a victim, and it means being bitter and angry. And young women are not naturally bitter and angry.” Mary Matalin (1993) declares that “[feminist] extremists have tragically transmuted the energizing battle cry ‘I am woman, I am strong’ to the neurotic ‘I am woman, I am oppressed, victimized, powerless.’ These women do not represent people like us.” In a more conciliatory tone, Naomi Wolf argues that women in the mainstream have gone further in embracing feminist power than the “victim feminism” expressed in the organized movement (1993a, p. 142).

Yet antifeminist media spokespeople thrive on using stories of victimization to encourage popular identification with masculinist interests. Few are warning radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh that he will lose his audience—which Limbaugh (1994) claims totaled 20 million listeners a week—if he doesn’t stop talking about white male helplessness in the face of totalitarian feminist control over government and academia. Instead, commentators cite the theme of white male fear of feminism as a ticket to popular media success (Nyhan 1994; Nethaway 1995). Michael Crichton’s novel Disclosure, a story of an angry white man victimized by sexual harassment from a female superior, was on the New York Times best-seller list for twenty-two weeks before becoming a major Hollywood movie (James 1994). Indeed, victim stories by white heterosexual males are sometimes credited with being a major force behind the Republican landslide in the 1994 elections (Estreich 1994; Farney 1994).

 Victims Are Weak and Cowardly

The media have widely reported concerns that feminists who talk about women as victims repre-
sent women as whiny and weak rather than strong and brave. Writing for the New York Times Book Review, Wendy Kaminer says Roiphe is persuasive when she warns that feminist stories of elite college women as victims will contribute to what Kaminer disturbingly terms the “effeminization of feminism” (1993a, p. 41). Similarly, Roiphe approvingly quotes Betty Friedan’s use of the words “impotent” and “sterile” to describe feminist antirape activism (1993b, p. 44). But neither Kaminer nor Roiphe nor other prominent mainstream media commentators have shown comparable concern that a strategy that focuses on the victimization of men will contribute to the so-called effemination or impotence of masculinity.

To the contrary, in the debate over President Clinton’s proposed changes to federal prohibitions against lesbians and gay men in the military, those straight male soldiers who confessed fears of shared showers and same-sex sexual advances were not widely scolded or scoffed at for talking like prudes. Instead, such concerns about imagined male sexual victimization deserved extensive hearings and sober recognition for raising tough problems of national defense.

For heterosexual white men, apparently, complaining about gender oppression demonstrates resistance to weakness (Keith 1993). A leader of a men’s rights organization explains that “instead of being wimps . . . men are finally speaking up and they’re getting tough about it” (DeMarco 1994). For women, however, complaining about gender oppression shows capitulation to weakness. Camille Paglia declares that men are weak because they are “emasculated by feminism’s stern dictates” (quoted in Corliss 1994), while she suggests that women are weak because they are too prim, pampered, and infantile to accept what she claims is natural male aggression (Paglia 1994b, pp. 30–35). Indeed, the common choice of words like “effeminate” and “impotence” to describe feminism’s victim problem suggests that women act like victims not because of anything they do or say but because they are not virile heterosexual men.

While those women who speak out about white male abuses of power risk perpetuating images of female weakness and whininess, those who speak out against abuses of feminist power frequently use their tales of victimization to establish themselves as models of strength and honor. Reporting that she has been “pilloried and picketed, in a torrent of abuse and defamation,” Paglia explains that she is “an ornery outsider” who has “helped restore free speech to America” (1994b, p. xv). Sommers complains that feminists have attacked her and called her names but that her husband “calms her down” (quoted in Carton 1994); her husband says he worries about her because “she attracts so much hostility from these women,” though he insists that Sommers still “stands up very well” (quoted in Romano 1994).

The media has particularly portrayed Roiphe as a victim of feminist “attack”: She “feels misunderstood” (Worrell 1993), “pilloried and excommunicated by some feminists” (Noble 1993) and faced with “name-calling,” “threatening letters,” and “people who really hate” her (Picker 1993). Yet Roiphe’s experiences of verbal victimization at the hands of feminists confirm her status as someone who is “courageous” and willing “to speak out against the herd” (Lehmann-Haupt 1993b).

It is not only Roiphe’s victimhood that is heroic: Her irresponsibility is also evidence of her bravery. Kaminer’s review applauds Roiphe’s book for showing that college feminists’ injudicious use of the terms “sexual harassment” and “date rape” is evidence of their “fashionable emptiness” and of the students’ “sheer mindlessness” (1993a, p. 41). At the same time, Kaminer decides that Roiphe’s “injudiciousness” in criticizing feminists in her book is “part of its charm” and is what makes the book “nervy” and “brave” (1993a, pp. 1, 41).

Victims Need Protective Rules

Prominent critics of feminist activism against date rape and sexual harassment frequently point to feminists’ demands for legal or political change as a particular sign of weakness. In their view, many feminists tend to contribute to images of women as helpless victims when they seek institutional rather than individual solutions to problems of sexual victimization.

Roiphe denounces new college codes that aim to set higher standards of consent for student sexual conduct: “The implication is that women are too gullible or too weak, or too innocent, too fragile to communicate on a very basic level” (quoted in D. Sullivan 1994). “The idea that
Fear of Feminism

Wright argues that "victim feminists" fail to understand that the sexual double standard is a matter of "nature," not politics; he claims that laws which attempt to control what he sees as natural male heterosexual aggression risk victimizing both men and women (though he adds that such laws nevertheless may sometimes be justifiable on "higher" grounds).

Yet this concern that legal protection leads to victimization did not get much attention in the mainstream media discussion of President Clinton's short-lived attempt to lift prohibitions against gay men and lesbians in the military. In that situation, heterosexual military men sought not just a pamphlet or a counseling session but congressional hearings and federal legal protection—and not from verbal coercion or emotional pressure but simply from the merest mention of their comrades' same-sex desires.

Stories that portray heterosexual white men as uniquely prone to emotional domination may establish their demands for institutional support as reasonable and natural rather than as irrational or infantilizing. For example, in the Glen Ridge rape case, a group of white male high school students were accused of using a baseball bat, a broomhandle, and a stick to rape a young woman who had a mental disability. A news story about the case reported that attorneys for the accused students argued that "the young woman wasn't vulnerable to the young men, so much as the young men—and their raging hormones—were vulnerable to her" (Dreyfous 1993). Though the argument in that case was unsuccessful (the jury found the students guilty), many still assume that laws against sexual harassment and rape should accommodate heterosexual men's supposedly natural weakness in the face of women's sexuality—without concern that such protection will make men into victims.

The more common fear expressed in the media is that men become victims when feminists remove legal protections that excuse men for nonconsensual heterosexual behavior. A Playboy interview reports that men "respond naturally" to women who dress in certain ways, so that as a result of sexual harassment laws, "we have men absolutely terrified in the office" (Kammer 1994). Similarly, in a 1994 New Republic cover story titled "Feminists, Meet Mr. Darwin," Robert Wright argues that "victim feminists" fail to understand that the sexual double standard is a matter of "nature," not politics; he claims that laws which attempt to control what he sees as natural male heterosexual aggression risk victimizing both men and women (though he adds that such laws nevertheless may sometimes be justifiable on "higher" grounds).

Victims Are Oversensitive to Speech

Critics frequently charge that some feminist legal protections against date rape and sexual harassment are misguided attempts to protect women from the effects of offensive speech. According to Paglia (1994a), "if someone offends you by speech, we must train women to defend themselves by speech. You cannot be always running to tribunals." Roiphe writes, "Instead of learning that men have no right to do these terrible things to us, we should be learning to deal with individuals with strength and confidence. If someone bothers us, we should be able to put him in his place without crying into our pillow or screaming for help or counseling" (1993b, p. 101). Cathy Young (1993) says, "What I find demeaning is the portrayal of women as helpless victims who can't put a jerk in his place without running to Big Brother—or Big Sister—for help." Paglia (1994a) admonishes feminists to follow her example: "I express my anger to men directly. I don't get in a group and whine about men." (Of course, she doesn't hesitate to get on national TV to complain about feminists.)

But media stories about those who are victims of feminist speech frequently assume that feminist verbal criticism is too harmful to be left to private individual rebuttals. Media stories warn of college graffiti or posters accusing male students of date rape or harassment, but such stories do not tend to ask why those male students cannot simply respond to such speech with more speech of their own. Without discussing why college males are so vulnerable to verbal persuasion, columnist John Leo (1994) quotes Cathy Young's claim that campus educational workshops on date rape and sexual harassment leave male students "sometimes essentially badgered into conceding that they may have raped some of their seemingly willing sexual partners."

Narratives of male victimization through feminist speech often describe men's fear not of vio-
Portrayals of Feminism in the Media

ience or physical coercion but of being called names or feeling embarrassed. A local newspaper columnist protested my undergraduate college's punishment of student football players who violated the college's fraternity ban; he argued that making the football team a laughingstock by removing some of the players is "more offensive than any amount of hazing, beer drinking, or wolf whistles," since "losing is bad for a young man's soul" (Hanrahan 1990). But rather than demonstrating that college men are thick-skinned and able to chalk disappointing setbacks up to experience (as Roiphe insists that women must do when hurt by some forms of sexual harassment or date rape), this columnist declares that male college football players' sensibilities are so delicate that they need more protection from laughter than women do from sexual harassment.

Leo (1994) fears that few men will speak up about gender issues "out of fear of being identified as huggers and drummers in the woods." Sommers reports that male professors and administrators cannot stand up to what she claims is widespread feminist control of universities because many men have "lived in fear of being called sexist. A lot of men just run for cover" (Carton 1994). Some suggest that heterosexual men cling to the protections of the sexual double standard because they worry that they might have to face questions about their sexuality if women have equal authority to ask men for consensual sex (Chunn 1993; Hitchens 1993).

"Real" Victims Are "Others"

The mainstream media critics of campus-based "victim feminism" typically purport not to disparage all claims of victimization but instead to more sharply confine such claims to "real" victims and victimizers. Roiphe (1993b) explains that her criticisms of "rape-crisis feminism" are not meant to deny the seriousness of real sexual victimization. Instead, she objects to extending concern about rape to the "average man" (p. 100); she disparages suggestions "that we should subject all of our male friends to scrutiny" (p. 65). As a sympathetic Newsday reporter noted, "That's not to say that Roiphe thinks women are free to take a midnight stroll through Central Park" (Picker 1993). Roiphe explains, "I just don't think we need to teach every freshman woman that the average rapist might be the boy next door" (quoted in Behrens 1993). Mary Matlin (1993) tells Newsweek readers that feminist "extremists" who complain about violence against women must be distinguished from "women like you and me," insisting, "Our sons are not brutes; our men are not monstrous pigs."

Newsweek's discussion of Roiphe's book acknowledges that even conservative statistics show that college women are at high risk of sexual assault but then comments: "You want to talk victimization? Talk to the mothers all over America whose children have been slaughtered in urban cross-fire" (Crichton 1993). Sommers (1994c) complains, "There's more services to protect these young [college] women from rape than for women in, you know, downtown New
dark." In the media coverage of my college's fraternity ban, a local newspaper columnist imagined the situation of the young college men punished for joining a fraternity as "absurd" and went on to mock the idea that "a gang of bleeding heart liberals decided fraternities are akin to the Khmer Rouge and L.A. street gangs" (Hanrahan 1990). Right-wing activist Phyllis Schlafly (1994) writes, "The feminist ideology is based on the lie that American women are oppressed victims, whereas in fact American women are the most fortunate class of people who ever lived." Sommers (1994c) similarly scorns the idea "that contemporary American women are in the thrall to men, to male culture... It's so silly... No women have ever had more opportunities, more freedom, and more equality than contemporary American women."

Such comments by critics of "victim feminism" displace negative images of victims and victimizers from elite college students onto "others" who are supposedly distant in terms of race, class, nationality, ethnicity, or disability, while reinforcing the identification of victims of oppression as marginalized, powerless, and pitiful. bell hooks notes that white fascination with black victimization through white supremacy silences more subversive representations of "loving blackness," though she cautions against a mere reversal of a white privilege/black victim paradigm (1992, pp. 10-12).

Concern about appropriating the pain of "real" victims is rarely discussed in the publicity over stories of victims of real or imagined excesses of feminism. The media coverage of Oleanna and Disclosure, two popular fictional nar-
Fear of Feminism

By emphasizing those critics’ shared gender identity with the feminist college women they criticize, the mainstream media gives the critics an impartial position from which to reveal feminist antirape activism as self-serving.

This superficial appearance of impartiality, however, depends on making gender eclipse considerations of race, class, and sexuality. In fact, the mainstream media discussion of Roiphe’s book generally excluded any comments from women of color. When Newsday published an essay by bell hooks (1993), it was titled “Color Roiphe Privileged, Says Black Feminist.” In contrast, Roiphe was typically denominated “author” or “young author,” not “white author” (see, e.g., Worrell 1993). And Mary Matalin’s Newsweek essay praising Roiphe’s book was titled “Stop Whining!” without the qualification “Says White Wealthy Conservative.”

By portraying both elite college feminists and inner-city or foreign “others” as victims (legitimate or not), the mainstream media tends to construct the illusion of a white American middle class of strong, autonomous individuals. In this view, elite college women do not deserve legal protection from certain kinds of sexual victimization because of their relatively powerful socioeconomic position. Their claims of victimization are represented as evidence of a desire to stay on a protected pedestal. But “other” women, with less socioeconomic privilege, may not deserve legal protection, because their victimhood is evidence of their failure to exercise responsible agency, or because legal protection will reinforce their victim status. This media picture means that feminist activism becomes either the elite asking for privilege, or the poor asking for handouts—and therefore supposedly irrelevant or threatening to the presumed majority of women.

"Real" Victims Need to Be Controlled

"Real" victims, whose injuries deserve redress and protection, apparently are those who are unable to effectively assert autonomous agency. But the dependency those victims must establish to prove they deserve institutional protection also makes their claims for protection suspect in a culture that idealizes individual autonomy. Writers for the conservative press sometimes contrast the “culture of victimization” (often attributed to...
Portrayals of Feminism in the Media

feminists and to “black leaders”) with “personal responsibility” (Karl 1992). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (H.R. 4), which aims to reform welfare by penalizing poor women and children, shows that women who might appear more likely than elite college feminists to fit the stereotypes of “real” victims are also more likely to receive less sympathy, more criticism, and additional injury.

But some victim stories can serve to confer a double benefit instead of a double bind. Victim narratives by those with privilege can work to deny the social agency that results from that privilege, cleverly making the most privileged deserving of the greatest legal protection. If less privileged “others” offer opposing victim narratives, they merely confirm their subjective self-interest and failure to take responsibility for their own actions—thereby proving the illegitimacy of demands for “special” legal protection above and beyond the norm. In contrast, those who claim to be harmed by feminism often succeed in invoking their personal victimization as evidence of their impartiality and responsibility.

When I told my stories about fraternity violence against women, some responses suggested that I was talking about emotional personal experience with little relevance to the issue of fraternity members’ civil liberties (see McCluskey 1992, p. 276, n. 73). In contrast, media stories described the fraternity members’ feelings of victimization by the fraternity ban as a problem raising questions of universal rational principles, such as freedom of association rights. Similarly, media reports frequently presented Professor Silva’s claims of victimization by charges of sexual harassment as a defense not of personal ambition or class privilege but of free speech (A. Lewis 1994; Kilpatrick 1994). Reporters and editorial writers typically did not ask why Silva did not simply quit (or move to another university) if he was annoyed by feminist challenges to his teaching style (in contrast to questions asked of Professor Anita Hill when she testified about sexual harassment by Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas).

When those who traditionally have had access to public authority complain about their own fear and suffering from charges of harming others, their complaints often are presented as evidence of their sensitivity and as occasions for public sympathy and generosity. A New Republic article titled “Defining Deviancy Up” protested the extent to which “normal” and “ordinary” middle-class heterosexual men are now accused of deviancy, while “others” who were previously widely seen as deviant (criminals, people with mental illnesses, and single mothers) now may be portrayed as “normal” (Krauthammer 1993). The author criticized feminists for expanding the concept of rape to include date rape by college students, suggesting that these victimizers are particularly prone to being victimized: This “higher class of offender” is “more malleable” (Krauthammer 1993). He worries that “the guilt-ridden bourgeois, the vulnerable college student, is a far easier object of social control than the hardened criminal or the raving lunatic” (Krauthammer 1993). The heterosexual male college student, in this view, demonstrates his responsibility and credibility as a victim through his greater dependence on social approval from others than those with less privilege.

Similarly, when several female senators unsuccessfully sought to withhold full retirement honors to Admiral Frank B. Kelso 2d because of his wrongdoing in the investigation of the Tailhook sexual harassment scandal, supporters won sufficient votes to protect Kelso’s full pension by using sentimental testimony about his family’s potential suffering (Dowd 1994b). Senator Sam Nunn claimed that to deny the admiral his four stars would be to scapegoat him (Dowd 1994b; “So Little Leadership” 1994). This view implies that Kelso’s position of authority (Chief of Naval Operations) excused his irresponsibility, while his suffering as a result of his irresponsibility in turn justified continued protection of his authority.

When those with a tradition of authority are held accountable for their actions, they may be represented as victims; restrictions on their independence are seen as frustrating their ability to act as free and responsible agents. But when those with less authority are held accountable for their actions, restrictions are commonly seen as necessary for free and responsible agency. Newsweek’s cover story on feminist activism against date rape and sexual harassment on college campuses was titled “Sexual Correctness” and contained numerous stories warning of the problems caused when society turns away from liberal standards of tolerance (Crichton 1993). That issue emphasized the harms to young people of enforcing rules establishing “correct” sexual conduct on
college campuses. Another *Newsweek* issue with a cover titled "Shame" featured an article stressing the need to reject liberal standards of tolerance and the importance of a societal return to strict rules of morality—particularly regarding sexual conduct (Alter and Wingert 1995). This time, however, the magazine concentrated on stories about the success of using shame and punishment to force "correct" sexual conduct on welfare recipients, inner-city youth, and single parents—with no mention of the merits of feminists' attempts to impose stricter standards of sexual conduct on college campuses.

Beyond Campus Victims

Feminists may be tempted to dismiss the media's fascination with "victim feminism" as a trivial matter. When asked for a comment on Spero's book, a spokesperson for National Organization of Women responded, "Because we're working on pressing issues like health care reform and the Violence Against Women bill in Congress, we do not have the time to comment on the latest critique of feminism" (Carton 1994). The mainstream media's identification of feminism with activism on date rape at elite U.S. colleges contributes to constructions of feminism as a movement outside the purview of the majority of women, or, as bell hooks (1993) suggests, a sport for privileged white girls. The diversity of women's experiences of sexual and intimate violence (see, e.g., Russo 1996; Crenshaw 1994; Eaton 1994; Lundy 1993) tends to be excluded from this media debate. Furthermore, this media attention to campus "victim feminism" contrasts sharply with the lack of media attention to feminist activism (on and off campus) on other issues, such as welfare, tax policy, health care, labor organizing, and economic development—issues where feminism might more readily be viewed as relevant to women and men of many races, nationalities, and economic classes.

Yet the "victim feminism" debate also provides an occasion to challenge and reconstruct the popular assumptions about power and individualism, assumptions that underlie many other public policy debates. The mainstream media often constructs the controversy over "victim feminism" as an intergenerational split: young feminists who want to celebrate sexuality and independence are supposedly rebelling against certain feminist foremothers who have advocated sexual protection. This construction of the "victim feminism" debate repeats and reinforces coinciding narratives in popular media that blame mothers, particularly single mothers and those who are women of color, for economic dependence and inequality (see Fine 1995, pp. 107-10).

In addition, critics of campus activism against date rape and sexual harassment may have captured media attention because this activism appears to pose a particular threat to particularly privileged men—the putative authoritative "fathers" of traditional legal discourse. Some of the most generous publicity for Roiphe's views, for example, has come from news media particularly aimed at highly educated and wealthy white men. For example, the *New York Times* originally published Roiphe's views on college date rape as an op-ed essay (K. Roiphe 1991), then published a chapter of her book in the magazine section (K. Roiphe 1993a), followed by two generally favorable book reviews (Lehmann-Haupt 1993b; Kaminer 1993a), one gushing interview (Noble 1993), and a second op-ed essay (K. Roiphe 1993c)—with only some short letters from critics in response. In comparison, the less upscale and less prestigious *USA Today* published one generally approving article about Roiphe's book (DeCrow 1993) and one that balanced Roiphe's views with the views of those who believe campus date rape is a serious problem (Manning 1993).

Richard Goldstein (1995) notes that the backlash of "angry white men" has substantial appeal among prosperous white male professionals, who fear that their authority to make the rules is no longer taken for granted—despite their success in maintaining disproportionate economic power. Nonetheless, traditionally misogyny has been more likely to be a subject of sustained mainstream media criticism when it is associated with, for example, construction workers, teenage black male rappers, or Arab fundamentalists rather than white American corporate executives or elite U.S. college students. Feminism, on the other hand, tends to be represented in the mainstream media as a concern of white women in professional career paths. Within that framework, feminist claims to victimization appear to be little other than elitist whining. Feminists must
confront the ways in which elite white men are particularly implicated in male supremacy, yet such efforts must not be grounded solely in a concern for remedying harm to elite white women.

Using Victim Stories to Challenge Inequality

Feminist victim narratives are not necessarily transformative, just as they are not necessarily regressive. My point in contrasting victim narratives about harm from feminism with victim narratives challenging male violence against women is not to suggest that feminist stories of gender-based harm are necessarily more authentic or credible than others. Instead, I hope that this examination of the double standard in victim stories can help us move from contests of competing victimizations to more complex understandings of the relationship between exercising power and experiencing injury.

Narratives from both feminist victims and those who feel victimized by feminism demonstrate that telling stories of suffering is an act of power as well as a confession of powerlessness. Though the preexisting social and political context influences whether a narrator's stories of harm are interpreted as heroic or victimizing, those victim stories can also contribute to reshaping the narrator's authority and the broader political context in which the narratives are interpreted. The claims of victimization made by those who feel harm from feminism reflect not just feminist weakness and antifeminist power but also feminism's real power in changing law and public opinion. Clearly it can be effective, as well as rational and responsible, to give voice to personal pain and to respond to expressions of others' pain.

Yet not all claims of suffering deserve relief. It is necessary to decide which declarations of injury simply express the hurt feelings that may result from giving up the privilege to hurt others with impunity. Victim stories need to be told and evaluated with awareness of their power and potential impact on others, not dismissed or venerated on the assumption that they are beyond criticism and rational debate. Nor should victim narratives be assumed to be rebellious assertions of individual identity in resistance to societal dictates. Victim narratives get their power and meaning from a social and political context that may exceed their author's intentions. White women who carelessly level accusations of male sexual violence without examining and challenging the relationships between narratives of sexual victimization and racial oppression can fuel a climate of racism that harms men of color, just as promoting epithets that link prochoice feminists with Nazis can help fuel a climate of misogynist violence against abortion clinic workers.

If women tell victim stories as an assertion of our own problems without considering others' pain, we may simply reinforce a model that grounds strength and autonomy in a demonstration of the ability to push away others' concerns. That model of autonomy underlies Rush Limbaugh's claim that his version of promoting group fear and blame constitutes "rugged individualism," while the Democratic Party's efforts to build coalitions that recognize the needs and contributions of a diverse society are merely examples of a "constituency of victimhood" (Limbaugh 1994).

The mainstream media often presents the "victim problem" in feminism as an issue of feminism going too far beyond individual opportunity and equality for women (for example, Wattenberg 1994). But the problem is more that the mainstream media tends to construct a version of feminism that does not go far enough. What makes women appear to be victims is not women who talk about how they are harmed by gendered privilege and power, but the media's frequent presentation of feminism as a movement that simply purports to allow individual universalized "women" to compete on the same terms as individual unspecified "men," without challenging the underlying double standards and intersecting forms of oppression and power which structure that competition.

Stories of victimization may have limited value for ending oppression, not because they make the oppressed seem too dependent and lacking in autonomous agency but because they may make oppression seem too individualized. Feminists should strive to use expressions of personal harm not simply as individual catharsis but to question and change the political institutions—like law and media—in which that harm is interpreted. We need to tell stories that help to undermine the dichotomy between those seen as strong and responsible individuals on the one hand and those needing social support on the
other. Autonomous agency is a product of social and political support as well as individual pluck. If power and victimhood are seen as mutually exclusive, many women may be alienated by feminism both because they feel both too victimized and too powerful—neither sufficiently free and strong to succeed without social support and male authority nor sufficiently powerless and oppressed to forego claims to independence, creativity, and pleasure.

Furthermore, feminists should strive to make the media and the law attend to the ways in which race, class, sexuality, physical ability, and other factors combine with gender to harm women. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1995) explains that feminist efforts to politicize violence and sexual harassment must include attention to problems of concern to many black women, such as harassment of recipients of public benefit programs. To “take back the night” for all women, feminists will have to address other forms of violence than date rape.

Finally, the problems of powerlessness in women’s victim narratives are not automatically converted into power in men’s victim narratives. The extent to which stories of personal victimization bring their narrators power and powerlessness depends in part on a complex interaction of identifying factors that include race, class, and sexuality as well as gender. Justice Clarence Thomas’s victim narrative claiming that his televised congressional hearings on sexual harassment charges represented a “high-tech lynching” helped him secure his nomination to a position of highest legal authority in the U.S. Supreme Court; yet, unlike many white male public figures facing comparable charges, he could not escape being the focus of a public spectacle fraught with anxiety over race and gender which left his credibility damaged. But being a victim does not necessarily prevent one from also being an oppressor; responsibility does not require complete autonomy and perfect power.

Comparing the authenticity of competing victim stories in a contest for the “most oppressed” risks taking away our attention from the underlying structures that make too many of us victims. Male victim stories have gained so much power recently not simply because of male privilege but because so many men—and women—in the United States have become real victims of our misguided economy and inadequate social support systems. The media’s construction of a struggle for power between “angry white men” and feminists deflects attention from the growing economic inequality between a relatively small group of highly educated white men in skilled professions and the majority of white men in the United States. We need to expose the class differences between white men and to emphasize the common benefits to many women and men that can come from looking at victimization and power as an issue of race, class, and sexuality, together with gender. Though feminists should continue to speak out about gendered oppression, and though we should question many of those who claim to be victimized by feminist reforms, we should strive for solutions that will create fewer victims.

Notes
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1. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick presents the image of Oliver North’s tears to note that “straight male self-pity...is associated with, or appealed to in justification of, acts of violence, especially against women” (E. K. Sedgwick 1990, p. 145).


3. Rush Limbaugh (1994) claims that he has sold six million copies of his books and that his programs are broadcast on 659 radio stations and 250 TV stations.


6. For an astute discussion of how the “woman as victim” model in the context of divorce law leads to individualized solutions that fail to address the political problems faced by custodial mothers, see Martha Fineman 1991a, pp. 145–46.