On Not Being A Victim/ Mary Gaitskill

In the early 1970s I had an experience that could be described as “date rape,” even if it didn't happen when I was on a date. I was sixteen and staying in the apartment of a slightly older girl I'd met in a seedy community center in Detroit where I was just passing through. I'd been in her apartment for a few days when an older guy (he was probably in his mid-twenties) came over and asked us if we wanted to drop some acid. In those years, doing acid with strangers was consistent with my idea of a possible good time, so I shared a tab with them. When I started peaking, my hostess decided she had to go see her boyfriend, and there I was, alone with this guy, who, suddenly, was in my face.

He seemed to be coming on to me, but I wasn't sure. LSD is a potent drug, and on it, my perception was just short of hallucinatory. On top of that he was black and urban-poor, which meant that I, being very inexperienced and suburban-white, did not know how to read him the way I might have read another white kid from my own milieu. I tried to distract him with conversation, but it was hard, considering that I was having trouble with logical sentences, let alone repartee. During one long silence, I asked him what he was thinking. Avoiding my eyes, he answered, “That if I wasn't such a nice guy you could really be getting screwed.” This sounded to me like a threat, albeit a low-key one. But instead of asking him to explain himself or leave, I changed the subject. Some moments later, when he put his hand on my leg, I let myself be drawn into sex because I could not face the idea that if I said no, things might get ugly. I don't think he had any idea of how unwilling I was—the cultural unfamiliarity cut both ways—and I suppose he may have thought that white girls just kind of lie there and don't do or say much. My bad time was made worse by his extreme gentleness; he was obviously trying very hard to turn me on, which, for reasons I didn't understand, broke my heart. Even as inexperienced as I was, I could see that he wanted a sweet time.

For some time after I described this event as “the time I was raped.” I knew when I said it that the description wasn't accurate, that I had not said no, and that I had not been physically forced. Yet it

felt accurate to me. In spite of my ambiguous, even empathic feelings for my unchosen partner, unwanted sex on acid in a nightmare, and I did feel violated by the experience. At times I even *elaborately* lied about what happened, grossly exaggerating the threatening words, adding violence—not out of shame or guilt, but because the pumped-up version was more congruent with my feelings of violation than the confusing facts. Every now and then, in the middle of telling an exaggerated version of the story, I would remember the actual man and internally pause, uncertain why I was saying these things or why they felt true—and then I would continue with the story. I am ashamed to admit this because it is embarrassing and because it conforms to the worst stereotypes of white women. I am also afraid the admission could be taken as evidence that women lie "to get revenge." I want to stress that I would not have lied that way in court or in any social context that might've had practical consequences; I didn't tell the lies until I was well out of Detriot and it didn't even occur to me to go to court. My lies were told not for revenge but in service of what I felt to be the metaphorical truth—although what that truth was is not at all clear to me, then or even now.

I remember my experience in Detroit, including the aftermath, every time I hear or read yet another discussion of what constitutes "date rape." I remember it when yet another critic castigates "victimism" and complains that everyone imagines himself or herself to be a victim and that no one accepts responsibility anymore. I could imagine telling my story as a verification that rape occurs by subtle threat as well as by overt force. I could also imagine casting myself as one of those crybabies who want to feel like victims. Both stories would be true and not true. The complete truth is more complicated than most of the intellectuals who have written scolding essays on victimism seem willing to accept. I didn't even begin to understand my own story fully until I described it to an older woman many years later, as proof of the unreliability of feelings. "Oh I think your feelings were reliable," she returned. "It sounds like you were raped. It sounds like you raped yourself." I didn't like her tone, but I immediately understood what she meant, that in failing to even try to speak up for myself, I had, in a

sense, raped myself.

I don't say this in a tone of self-recrimination. I was in a difficult situation: I was very young and unready to deal with a such an intense culture clash of poverty and privilege, such contradictory levels of power and vulnerability, let alone ready to deal with it on drugs. But the difficult circumstances alone do not explain my inability to speak for myself. I was unable to effectively stand up for myself because I had never been taught how.

When I was growing up in the 60s, I was taught by the adult world that good girls did not have sex outside marriage and bad girls did. This rule had clarity going for it but little else; as it was presented to me, it allowed no room for what I actually might feel, what I might want or not want. Within the confines of this rule, I didn't count for much, and so I rejected it. Then came the less clear “rules” of cultural trend and peer example that said that if you were cool you wanted to have sex as much as possible with as many people as possible. This message was never stated as a rule, but, considering how absolutely it was woven into the social etiquette of the day (at least in the circles I care about), it may as well have been. It suited me better than the adult's rule—it allowed me my sexuality at least—but again it didn't take into account what I might actually want or not want.

The encounter in Detroit, however, had nothing to do with being good or bad, cool or uncool. It was about someone wanting something I didn't want. Since I had only learned how to follow rules or social codes that were somehow more important than I was, I didn't know what to do in a situation where no rules obtained and that required me to speak up on my own behalf. I had never been taught that my behalf mattered. And so I felt helpless, even victimized, without really knowing why.

My parents and my teachers believed that social rules existed to protect me and that adhering to these rules constituted social responsibility. Ironically, my parents did exactly what many commentators recommend as a remedy for victimism. They told me that they loved me and that I mattered a lot, but this was not the message I got from the way they conducted themselves in relation to authority and social convention—which was not only that I didn't matter, but that *they* didn't matter. In

this, they were typical of other adults I knew as well as of the culture around them. When I began to have trouble in school, both socially and academically, a counselor exhorted me to “just play the game”--meaning to go along with everything from social policy to the adolescent pecking order—regardless of what I thought of “the game.” My aunt, with whom I lived for a short while, actually burned my jeans and T-shirts because they violated what she understood to be the standards of decorum. A close friend of mine lived in a state of war with her father because of her hippie clothes and hair—which were of course de rigueur among her peers. Upon discovering that she had been smoking pot, he had her institutionalized.

Many middle-class people—both men and women—have learned to equate responsibility with obeying external rules. And when the rules no longer quite apply, they don't know what to do—much like the enraged, gun-wielding protagonist of the movie *Falling Down*, played by Michael Douglas, who ends his ridiculous trajectory by helplessly declaring, “I did everything they told me to.” If I had been brought up to reach my own conclusions about which rules were congruent with my particular experience of the world, those rules would've had more meaning for me. Instead, I was usually given a set of static pronouncements. For example, when I was thirteen, I was told by my mother that I couldn't wear a short skirt because “nice girls don't wear short skirts above the knee.” I countered, of course, by saying that my friend Patty wore skirts above the knee. “Patty is not a nice girl,” returned my mother. But Patty *was* nice. My mother is a very intelligent and sensitive person, but it didn't occur to her to define for me what she meant by “nice” and what “nice” had to do with skirt length, and how the two definitions might relate to what I had observed to be nice or not nice—and then let me decide for myself. It's true that most thirteen-year-olds aren't interested in, or much capable of, philosophical discourse, but that doesn't mean that adults can't explain themselves more completely to children. Part of becoming responsible is learning how to make a choice about where you stand in respect to the social code and then hold yourself accountable for your choice. In contrast, many children who grew up in my milieu were given abstract absolutes that were placed before us as if our

thoughts, feelings, and observations were irrelevant.

Recently, I heard a panel of feminists on talk radio advocating that laws be passed prohibiting men from touching or making sexual comments to women on the street. Listeners called in to express reactions both pro and con, but the one I remember was a caller who said, “I'm an Italian woman. And if a man touches me and I don't want it, I don't need a law. I'm gonna beat the hell out of him.” The panelists were silent. Then one of them responded in an uncertain voice, “I guess I just never learned how to do that.” I understood that the feminist might not want to get into a fistfight with a man likely to be a lot bigger than she, but if her self-respect was so easily shaken by an obscene comment made by some slob on the street, I wondered, how did she expect to get through life? She was exactly the kind of woman whom the cultural critics Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe have derided as a “rape-crisis feminist”--puritans, sissies, closet-Victorian ladies who want to legislate the ambiguity out of sex. It was very easy for me to feel self-righteous, and I muttered sarcastically to my radio as the panel yammered about self-esteem.

I was conflicted, however. If there had been a time in my own life when I couldn't stand up for myself, how could I expect other people to do it? It could be argued that the grown women on the panel should be more capable than a sixteen-year-old girl on acid. But such a notion pre-supposes that people develop at a predictable rate or react to circumstances by coming to universally agreed-upon conclusions. This is the crucial unspoken presumption at the center of the date-rape debate as well as of the larger discourse on victimism. It is a presumption that in a broad but potent way reminds me of a rule.

Feminists who postulate that boys must obtain a spelled-out “yes” before having sex are trying to establish rules, cut in stone, that will apply to any and every encounter and that every responsible person must obey. The new rule resembles the old good girl/bad girl rule not only because of its implicit suggestion that girls have to be protected, but also by its absolute nature, its iron-fisted denial

of complexity and ambiguity. I bristle at such a rule and so do a lot of other people. But should we really be so puzzled and indignant that another rule has been presented? If people have been brought up believing that to be responsible is to obey rules, what are they going to do with a can of worms like "date rape" except try to make new rules that they see as more fair or useful than the old ones?

But the "rape-crisis feminists" are not the only absolutists here; their critics play the same game. Camille Paglia, author of *Sexual Personae*, has stated repeatedly that any girl who goes alone into a frat house and drinks is cruising for a gang bang, and if she doesn't know that, well, then she's an "idiot." The remark is striking not only for its crude unkindness but for its reductive solipsism. It assumes that all college girls have had the same life experiences as Paglia, and have come to the same conclusions about them. By the time I got to college, I'd been living away from home for years and had been around the block several times. I never went to a frat house, but I got involved with men who lived in rowdy "boy houses" reeking of sex and rock and roll. I would go over, drink, and spend the night with my lover; it never occurred to me that I was in danger of being gang-raped, and if I had been, I would have been shocked and hurt. My experience, though some of it had been bad, hadn't led me to conclude that boys plus alcohol equals gang-bang, and I was not naïve or idiotic. Katie Roiphe, author of *The Morning After: Fear, Sex and Feminism on Campus*, criticizes girls who, in her view, create a myth of false innocence: "But did these twentieth-century girls, raised on Madonna videos and the six o'clock news, really trust that people were good until they themselves were raped? Maybe. Were these girls, raised on horror movies and glossy Hollywood sex scenes, really as innocent as all that?" I am sympathetic to Roiphe's annoyance, but I'm surprised that a smart chick like her apparently doesn't know that people process information and imagery with a complex subjectivity that doesn't in any predictable way alter their ideas about what they can expect from life. I trusted that the particular guys in their particular houses wouldn't rape me not because I was innocent, but because I was experienced enough to read them correctly.

Roiphe and Paglia are not exactly invoking rules, but their comments seem to derive from a

belief that everyone except idiots interprets information and experience in the same way. In that sense, they are not so different from those ladies dedicated to establishing feminist-based rules and regulations for sex. Such rules, like the old rules, assume a certain psychological uniformity of experience, a right way.

The accusatory and sometimes painfully emotional rhetoric conceals an attempt not only to make new rules but also to codify experience. The “rape-crisis feminists” obviously speak for many women and girls who have been raped or *felt* raped in a wide variety of circumstances. They would not get so much play if they were not addressing a widespread and real experience of violation and hurt. By asking “Were they really so innocent?” Roiphe doubts the veracity of the experience she presumes to address because it doesn't square with hers or with that of her friends. Having not felt violated herself—even though she says she has had an experience that many would now call date rape—she cannot understand, or even quite believe, that anyone else would feel violated in similar circumstances. She therefore believes all the fuss to be a political ploy or, worse, a retrograde desire to return to crippling ideals of helpless femininity. In turn, Roiphe's detractors, who have not had her more sanguine “morning after” experience, believe her to be ignorant and callous, or a secret rape victim in deep denial. Both camps, believing their own experience to be the truth, seem unable to acknowledge the truth on the other side.

It is at this point that the “date-rape debate” resembles the bigger debate about how and why Americans seem so eager to identify themselves and be identified by others as victims. Book after article has appeared, written in baffled yet hectoring language, deriding the P.C. goody-goodies who want to play victim and the spoiled, self-centered fools who attend twelve-step programs, meditate on their inner child, and study pious self-help books. The revisionist critics have all had a lot of fun with the recovery movement, getting into high dudgeon those materially well-off people who describe their childhoods as “holocausts” and winding up with fierce exhortations to return to rationality before its too late. Rarely do these critics make any but the most superficial attempt to understand why the

population might behave thus.

In a fussing, fuming essay in these pages ("Victims, All? October 1991) that has become almost a prototype of the genre, David Rieff expressed his outrage and bewilderment that affluent people would feel hurt and disappointed by life. He angrily contrasted rich Americans obsessed with their inner children to Third World parents concerned with feeding their actual children. On the most obvious level, the contrast is one that needs to be made, but I question Rieff's idea that suffering is one definable thing, that he knows what it is, and that since certain kinds of emotional pain don't fit this definition they can't really exist. This idea doesn't allow him to have respect for other people's experience—or even to see it. It may be ridiculous and perversely self-aggrandizing for most people to describe their childhood as a "holocaust," but I suspect that when people talk like that they are saying that as children they were not given enough of what they would later need in order to know who they are or to live truly responsible lives. Thus they find themselves in a state of bewildering loss that they can't articulate, except by wild exaggeration—much like I defined my inexplicable feelings after my Detroit episode. "Holocaust" may be a grossly inappropriate exaggeration. But to speak in exaggerated metaphors about psychic injury is not so much the act of a crybaby as it is a distorted desire to make one's experience have consequence in the eyes of others, and that such desperation comes from a crushing doubt that one's own experience counts at all *or is even real*.

In her book *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional,* Wendy Kaminer speaks harshly of women in some twelve-step programs who talk about being metaphorically raped. "It is an article of faith here that suffering is relative; no one says she's rather be raped metaphorically than in fact," she writes, as if not even a crazy person would prefer a literal rape to a metaphorical one. But actually, I might. About a year after my "rape" in Detroit, I was raped for real. The experience was terrifying: my attacker repeatedly said he was going to kill me, and I thought he might. The terror was acute, but after it was over, it actually affected me less than many other mundane instances of emotional brutality I've suffered or seen other people suffer. Frankly, I've been scarred more by experiences I had on the

playground in elementary school. I realize that may sound bizarre, but for me the rape was a clearly defined act, perpetrated on me by a crazy asshole whom I didn't know or trust; it had nothing to do with me or who I was, and so, when it was over, it was relatively easy to dismiss. Emotional cruelty is more complicated. Its motives are often impossible to understand, and it is sometimes committed by people who say they like or even love you. Nearly always it's hard to know whether you played a role in what happened, and, if so, what the role was. The experience *sticks* to you. By the time I was raped I had seen enough emotional cruelty to feel that the rape, although bad, was not so terrible that I couldn't heal quickly.

My response may seem strange, but my point is that pain can be an experience that defies codification. If thousands of Americans say that they are in psychic pain, I would not be so quick to write them off as self-indulgent fools. A metaphor like "the inner child" may be silly and schematic, but it has a fluid subjectivity, especially when projected out into the world by such a populist notion as "recovery." Ubiquitous recovery-movement phrases like "We're all victims" and "We're all co-dependent" may not seem to leave of room for interpretation, but they are actually so vague that they beg for interpretation and projection. Such phrases may be fair game for ridicule, but it is shallow to judge them on their face value, as if they hold the same meaning for everyone. What is meant by an "inner child" depends on the person speaking, and not everyone will see it as a metaphor for helplessness. I suspect that most inner-child enthusiasts use the image of themselves as children not so that they can *avoid* being responsible but to learn responsibility by going back to the point in time when they should have been taught responsibility—the ability to think, choose, and stand up for themselves—and were not. As I understand it, the point of identifying an "inner-child" is to locate the part of of yourself that didn't develop into adulthood and then to develop it yourself. Whether or not this works is pretty questionable, but it is an attempt to accept responsibility, not to flee it.

When I was in my late teens and early twenties, I could not bear to watch movies or read books

that I considered demeaning to women in any way; I reflexively evaluated what I saw or read in terms of the attitude it expressed towards women—or the attitude I *thought* it expressed. I was a very P.C. feminist before the term existed, and by the measure of my current understanding, my critical rigidity followed from my inability to be responsible for my own feelings. In this context, being responsible would have meant that I let myself feel whatever discomfort, indignation, or disgust I experienced without allowing those feelings to determine my entire reaction to a given piece of work. In other words, it would have meant dealing with my feelings and what had caused them, rather than expecting the outside world to assuage them. I could have chosen not to see the world through the lens of my personal unhappiness and yet maintained a kind of respect for my unhappiness. For example, I could have decided to avoid certain films or books because of my feelings without blaming the film or book for making me feel the way I did.

My emotional irresponsibility did not spring from a need to feel victimized, although it may have looked that way to somebody else. I essentially was doing what I had seen most mainstream cultural critics do; it was from them that I learned to view works of art in terms of the message they imparted and, further, that the message could be judged on the basis of consensual ideas about what life is, and how it can and should be seen. My ideas, like most P.C. ideas, were only slightly different from mainstream thought—they just shifted the parameters of acceptability a bit.

Things haven't changed that much: at least half the book and film reviews that I read praise or condemn a work on the basis of the likeability of the characters (as if there is a standard idea of what is likeable) or because the author's point of view is or is not “life-affirming”--or whatever the critic believes the correct attitude toward life to be. The lengthy and rather hysterical debate about the film *Thelma and Louise,* in which two ordinary women become outlaws after one of them shoots the other's would-be rapist, was predicated on the idea that stories are supposed to function as instruction manuals, and that whether the film was good or bad depended on whether the instructions were right. Such criticism assumes that viewers or readers need to see a certain type of moral universe reflected back at

them or, empty vessels that they are, they might get confused or depressed or something. A respected mainstream essayist writing for *Time* faulted my novel *Two Girls, Fat and Thin* for its nasty male characters, which he took to be a moral statement about males generally. He ended his piece with the fervent wish that fiction not "diminish" men or women but rather seek to "raise our vision of" both—in other words, that it should present the "right" way to the reader, who is apparently not responsible enough to figure it out alone.

I have changed a lot from the P.C. teenager who walked out of movies that portrayed women in a demeaning light. As I've grown older, I've become more confident of myself and my ability to determine what happens to me and those images no longer have such a strong emotional charge; they don't *threaten* me in the same way. Its not that I think I'm safe, that I can't be hurt by misogyny in its many forms. I have been and can be. But I'm not so afraid of it that artistic representations of it viscerally disturb me, especially not if they are truthful depictions of how the artist sees his or her world, including the ugly elements. Stories or imagery like that help me to understand, to feel the ugly places in myself, to see the anguish and violence of it from somebody else's view, even if the view is a priviledged one. The truth may hurt, but in art anyway, it also helps, sometimes profoundly.

I consider my current view more balanced, but that doesn't mean my earlier feelings were wrong. The reason I couldn't watch "disrespect to women" at that time was that such depictions were too close to my own worst experience, and I found them painful. I was displaying a simplistic self-respect by not subjecting myself to something I was not ready to face. Being unable to separate my personal experience from what I saw on the screen, I was not dealing with my own personal experience—I think, paradoxically, because I hadn't yet learned to value it. Its hard to be responsible for something that isn't valuable. Someone criticizing me as dogmatic and narrow-minded would have had point, but the point would've ignored the truth of my unacknowledged experience, and thus ignored me.

Many critics of the self-help culture argue against treating emotional or metaphoric reality as if

it were equivalent to objective reality. I agree that they are not the same. But emotional truth is often bound up with truth of a more objective kind and must be taken into account. This is especially true of conundrums such as date rape and victimism, both of which are often discussed in terms of unspoken assumptions about emotional truth anyway. Sarah Crichton, in a cover story for *Newsweek* on “Sexual Correctness,” described the “strange detour” taken by some feminists and suggested that “we're not creating a society of Angry Young Women. These are Scared Little Girls.” The comment is both contemptuous and superficial; it shows no interest in *why* girls might be scared. By such logic, anger implicitly is deemed to be the more desirable emotional state because it appears more potent, and “scared” is used as a pejorative. It's possible to shame a person into hiding his or her fear, but if you don't address the cause of the fear, it won't go away. Crichton ends her piece by saying, “Those who are growing up in environments where they don't have to figure out what the rules should be, but need only follow what's been prescribed, are being robbed of the most important lesson there is to learn. And that's how to live.” I couldn't agree more. But unless you've been taught how to think for yourself, you'll have a hard time figuring out your own rules, and you'll feel scared—especially when there is real danger of sexual assault.

After my experience in Detroit I was a lot more careful about getting high or drunk with people I didn't know. I never had another experience I could call “date rape” again. But sometimes I did find myself having sex with people I barely knew when I didn't really want to all that much. Sometimes I did it for the same reason I did in Detroit; I was secretly afraid things might get ugly if I said “no.” But sometimes it was for a different reason that may be subtly related to the prior one: part of me wanted the adventure and that more questing side ran rough-shod over the side of me that was far more sensitive and shy. I'll bet the same thing happened to many of the boys with whom I had these experiences. All people have their strong, questing aspects as well as their more delicate aspects. If you haven't developed these characteristics in ways that are respectful of yourself and others, you will find it hard to be responsible for *any* of them. I don't think its possible to develop yourself in such

ways if you are attuned to following rules and codes that don't give your subjective experience enough importance.

I am not idealistic enough to hope that we will ever live in a world without rape and other forms of sexual cruelty; I think men and women will always have to make an effort to behave responsibly. But I think we could make the effort less difficult by changing the way we teach responsibility and social conduct. To teach a boy that rape is “bad” is not as effective as making him see that rape is a violation of his own masculine dignity as well as a violation of the raped woman. Its true that children don't know big words and that teenage boys may not be much interested in dignity. But these are things that children learn more easily by example, and learning by example runs deep.

When I was in my mid-thirties I invited to dinner at my home a man I'd known as a casual friend for two years. We'd had dinner and drinks a few times when I'd been on the East Coast; I was living on the West Coast where he was visiting, so he'd looked me up. In the original version of this essay, I wrote that I “didn't have any intention of becoming sexual with him,” but its closer to the truth to say that I didn't have strong intentions one way or the other. He was ten years younger than me and I wrongly assumed he wouldn't be interested in a woman my age—so I wasn't thinking about him that way either. But after dinner we slowly got drunk and soon were making out on the couch. I was ambivalent not only because I was drunk but because I realized that although part of me was up for it, the rest of me was not. So I began to say no. He parried each “no” with charming banter and became more aggressive. I went along with it for a time because I was amused and seduced by the sweet junior-high spirit of his manner. But at some point I began to be alarmed, and then he did and said some things that scared me. I don't remember the exact sequence of words or actions, but I do remember taking one of his hands in both of mine, looking him in the eyes and saying “If this comes to a fight you would win, but it would be very ugly for both of us. Is that really what you want?”

His expression changed and he dropped his eyes; shortly afterward he left.

In the original version of this essay I didn't mention that when I woke up the next day I couldn't stop thinking about him, and that when he called me I invited him over for dinner again. I didn't mention that we became lovers for the next two years. I just went on to say that I considered my decision to have been a responsible one "because it was made by taking both my vulnerable feelings and my carnal impulses into account," and that I "respected my friend as well by addressing both sides of his nature." I stand by what I originally wrote. But in omitting the aftermath of that "responsible decision" I was making the messy situation far too clear-cut, actually undermining my own argument by making it about propriety rather than the kind of fluid emotional negotiation that I see as necessary for personal responsibility.

In the original version of this essay, the last lines I wrote were: "It is not hard for me to make such decisions now, but it took me a long time to get to this point. I only regret that it took so long, both for my young self and for the boys I was with, under circumstances that I now consider disrespectful to all concerned." But I don't truly regret most of the experiences I've had, even the half-hearted ones. They are part of who I am. The only circumstance I truly regret is the one I remember most vividly; the one in Detroit. Because as I remember him, that young "urban-poor" black man was no rapist. He was high on acid and misunderstanding just as I was. If I had held his hands and looked in his eyes and said some version of "It could be ugly for both of us. Is that really what you want?" everything might've been different. I'm not sure. But I regret that I wasn't even able to try, and that I lied about it instead. Truly, the lies had no practical consequence; he never knew of them. But still, far more than any sex act, these lies were "disrespectful to all concerned."