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# **“Men’s right to bother” and Deneuve controversy: Has #MeToo gone too far, or not far enough? The answer is both**

Sunday 14 January 2018, by [KIPNIS Laura](#) (Date first published: 13 January 2018).

**What is at stake in Catherine Deneuve’s recent letter in *Le Monde* attacking the feminist movement? It’s a question of where you draw the line.**

After the 10<sup>th</sup> or so person sent me the stunningly silly anti-#MeToo letter signed by Catherine Deneuve and a hundred other French women (the actual authorship of which we’ll get to), informing me that I’d love it because finally someone was standing up for sanity, I considered a form letter response: “If the question is whether #MeToo has gone too far or not far enough, the answer is obviously BOTH. Putting yourself on one side or the other is politically obtuse.”

The innovation of the Deneuve statement is to enumerate a new right for men (as if they didn’t have enough already) – “the right to bother” – which is regarded by the signatories as indispensable to sexual freedom. I understand why my correspondents might have thought this would appeal to me. I recently wrote a book about overblown sexual accusations on American campuses, in which I too deployed the language of witch hunts.

I also recounted, in print, having posed the question, during a sexual harassment training workshop: “But how do you know an advance is ‘unwanted’ until you try?” I’m on record mocking Naomi Wolf’s crusade against Harold Bloom for having placed his “heavy, boneless hand” on her knee some 30 years ago, and the hand-on-knee trope features in the Deneuve document as a proxy for what’s wrong with the #MeToo brand of American feminism, and its French counterpart #BalanceTonPorc (“out your pigs”), namely “the hatred of men and sexuality”.

My reason for calling the letter silly is that in a moment that demands subtlety, these people have brought out a sledgehammer. Let’s collapse all distinctions – in the name of freedom! Putting the move on someone “however persistently”: why not? Trying to “steal” a kiss: ditto. While rape is “a crime” and “the Harvey Weinstein scandal sparked a legitimate awakening”, such bodily incursions aren’t sufficient to make women “prey” because we’re more than simply our bodies, write Deneuve and her cohort.

I think I get what’s at stake for the women who signed this awkward document, along with their recent American #MeToo-doubting counterparts, Daphne Merkin writing in the *New York Times* [1], and Claire Berlinski writing in *American Interest* [2] (both articles were also endlessly forwarded to me by well-meaning friends telling me how much I’d love them), though I disagree profoundly with them all.

*For a lot of women, especially those of a heterosexual persuasion, in-between zones make life worth living*

They get the “gone too far” part right, but miss why the “not far enough” part is crucial. Of course I understand the objection that unproven accusations can wreck someone’s career (my book is about such a case), and yes, a lot of the recent accusations concern stuff people should just get over, but I’m not going to dismiss the political significance of the #MeToo moment so quickly.

One also suspects there’s more than fellow feeling for accused men animating the backlash. The shared anxiety is that the new regulatory spirit encroaches on zones and behaviors we might call “sexually liminal”: jokes, innuendos, come-ons, banter, dirty books and art. Merkin worries no one will be able to flirt anymore; Berlinski frets that creative types like Leon Wieseltier and Louis CK shouldn’t be subject to the same boring workplace regulations as ordinary, more mortal men.

For a lot of women, especially those of a heterosexual persuasion, these in-between zones make life worth living. Flirting is where your desirability is confirmed. Men stealing kisses opens up new possibilities; something unexpected and maybe thrilling has happened. Male sexual license can be hot.

It’s the question of where to draw the lines – and whether there should be lines drawn at all – that’s up for grabs, and we’re all drawing them in different places. What used to be liminal is getting co-opted and redefined; that makes us nervous.

Recently I found myself fumingly tweeting, in response to Michelle Dean’s *What Makes Someone a Predator?* in the *New York Times*, [3] that a person she’d identified as a “Powerful Literary Man” who’d touched her inner thigh in a bar, was an asshole not a predator.

My feeling was that they were in a bar not at work, and the bar is a liminal zone par excellence. (To be fair, the venue may have been a bar-restaurant; still, it was late and drinks were being consumed.) Bars are where we go to drink alcohol, let our inhibitions down, and see what happens. That’s the bar’s social purpose: to provide a semblance of license in an over-regulated world.

At the same time, the guy’s hand was on her inner thigh. That, arguably, crossed the line. The inner thigh is not a liminal zone. There’s a reason the “hand on the knee” has become so emblematic in these debates, and such a dividing line in itself: the knee is liminal in a way that, say, the breast is not.

A pat on the knee can be sexually benign, but maybe it’s not? Move a few inches up and all bets are off. Measure the distance from kneecap to crotch, divide it in half, breach that line, and you’ve entered the zone of the upper thigh – I suspect every woman knows precisely where that line on her body is, and what trespassing it means.

A hand placed above that line requires one to make a decision, in a way that flirting does not. Our bodies are zoned: there are public areas and private ones; parts you can touch without permission, such as my hand, and parts you’re trespassing if you encroach on them without my permission.

I know all about gray areas; I also understand the impulse to rain punishment on bodily trespassers, even though my own #MeToo moments have been largely negligible. In fact, one of the more memorable of them – which, as it happens, occurred on British soil – actually turned out rather well.

The culprit was a future MP and Europe minister, the friend of a friend. We were in a group of people heading into a restaurant, and this guy, later to become so politically illustrious, who was walking behind me, and whom I’d met maybe 10 minutes before, reached forward and goosed me.

By goosed, I don’t mean he touched me on my butt, but in my butt, through the thin skirt I was wearing. I turned around and glared at him – I was young, jetlagged, and confused. Was this

customary in Britain? What he'd done felt humiliating. I turned ahead and resolutely kept walking, whereupon he did it again.

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When I say things turned out well, what I mean is that he later went to prison. The ostensible reason was for cheating on his expenses, but I like to think it was cosmic justice for his crimes against my person. Inconsequential as they were, untraumatized as I was, I was delighted to see him put away nonetheless, if only for a brief six months.

Overreach? Criminalizing the "right to bother"? Perhaps. But why should my body have been enlisted to enlarge his supposed rights, which were clearly plentiful enough? Here was someone perfectly willing to take what wasn't his due in any sphere.

What the Deneuve statement misses, with its high flown talk about rights and freedoms, is that rights don't exist until they're conferred politically, and the democratic revolutions that substantiated them in France and America didn't confer them equally on everyone: it was men who achieved self-sovereignty.

Women didn't even get the vote in France until 1944; birth control was illegal until 1967. What kind of freedom does a woman have who can't prevent a pregnancy because male politicians have denied her that right?

It's the historical amnesia of the Deneuve document that's so objectionable. To the extent that women's bodies are still treated as public property by men, whether that means groping us or deciding what we can do with our uteruses, women do not have civic equality. To miss that point is to miss the political importance and the political lineage of #MeToo: the latest step in a centuries long political struggle for women to simply control our own bodies.

Of course, some women find bodily violation rewarding, and one of those women is Catherine Millet, listed as a co-author of the Deneuve letter, though, having read her 2002 memoir, *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*, I'd like to request a forensic analysis of the two texts for stylistic similarities - I suspect Millet of having had the largest hand in the enterprise. At least the thematic similarities are overwhelming.

Even a philosophically ignorant American recognizes an antiquated Cartesianism rearing its head in both, in marked contrast to the optimistic American feminism of, for example, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, devoted as it was to undoing the old mind-body dualism the Deneuve document wishes to reinstate.

Precisely the same dualities fueled Millet's memoir, which describes a period in her life devoted to group sex - with 30 or 40 men a night on some occasions, her body a passive receptacle for gallons of semen in every available orifice.

When not attending orgies she provided free sexual services to anonymous strangers in the street, who could do with her what they chose. None of this was especially pleasurable, at least not in the bodily sense: the gratifications were cerebral, and tied to self-abasement, as she herself acknowledges. It sounds like an especially Catholic form of sexual rebellion, involving much mortification of the flesh.

*"À chacun son goût,"* as the saying goes. And while I might appreciate the contribution to a literary lineage - Sade, Bataille, Genet, Pauline Reage - endorsing such a posture in the guise of a political

manifesto on behalf of women's freedom is a different matter.

The mind-body split assumed in the letter's supposedly rousing conclusion – "Incidents that can affect a woman's body do not necessarily affect her dignity ...because we are not reducible to our bodies. Our inner freedom is inviolable" – reduces all available freedom to the inner sanctum of our minds. The authors appear to believe that what happens to the body doesn't happen to the person.

The political requirement of the post-#MeToo moment is insisting that control of our bodies is the beginning of freedom. Not its terminus, but a starting point. Freedom needs to be more than notional, it also needs to be embodied.

**Laura Kipnis**

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**P.S.**

\* "Has #MeToo gone too far, or not far enough? The answer is both". The Guardian. Sat 13 Jan 2018 07.00 GMT Last modified on Sat 13 Jan 2018 16.50 GMT:

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/13/has-me-too-catherine-deneuve-laura-kipnis?utm>

\* Laura Kipnis is the author, most recently, of *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*.

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## **Footnotes**

[1] <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/05/opinion/golden-globes-metoo.html>

[2] <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2017/12/06/the-warlock-hunt/>

[3] [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/magazine/what-makes-someone-a-predator.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/19/magazine/what-makes-someone-a-predator.html?_r=0)