

Emma the Mattress Girl: Seeking a Gentleman in College

by Jessica Raimi

In September 2014, Emma Sulkowicz, a senior at Columbia College, began “Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight),” her protest against the university administration that had failed to expel a fellow student whom she accused of raping her.

Her work of “endurance performance art” also served as her senior thesis for a major in visual arts. According to the rules she invented with her faculty advisor, she was required to carry, whenever she was on campus, a mattress like the one on her dormitory bed where the alleged attack had taken place. She was permitted to accept but not request help with her burden. And she was to carry it between her dorm, her classes and her assigned studio until her accused rapist left the campus or she graduated, whichever came first.

With her striking Asian-Jewish features, fencer’s figure and confident manner, Emma was photogenic and gave good sound bites. “Carry That Weight” was greeted rapturously by the

art world and by activists at Columbia and beyond. The *New York Times* compared her project to the Stations of the Cross. Students at campuses across the country carried mattresses in solidarity. Emma became an instant feminist icon.

Why was her performance, which required so little in the way of technique or knowledge of art history, taken so seriously? Why was her claim of rape and administrative indifference believed so unquestioningly? Why did Columbia tacitly support Emma’s violation of campus rules (“interferes over a short period of time with entrance to, exit from, passage within, or use of, a University facility”) and defamation of a classmate?

Columbia has provided a setting for many theatrical protests before and after Emma’s performance. In the spring of 2024, the campus saw the most threatening and destructive disturbances since 1968, which were promptly imitated at dozens of other schools.

During the 1970s and 1980s, as growing numbers of American women attended college, many formerly all-male schools went coeducational and adapted their facilities, health services, and campus activities to the female presence. Columbia's undergraduate residential divisions, the College and the Engineering School, began admitting women in 1983.

During the 1980s, the idea of "rape culture" became widespread. Activists insisted that one female student in five—some said one in four—was likely to be raped during her college years, and that women did not lie about rape. Although both assertions were based on discredited research, and defied common sense, they were so often repeated that they became axiomatic. Thus, many people maintained two contradictory beliefs: that American campuses were as dangerous for young women as war zones, but that parents should nonetheless pay good money to send their daughters there.

By the mid-1990s, sexual misconduct had become enough of an issue at Columbia to prompt the hiring of a full-time administrator to deal with it. A series of university senate task forces in the 1990s and 2000s attempted to create alternatives to discipline administered by deans, with specially trained investigators sympathetic to women, without the protections of due process for the accused such as cross-examination and legal representation.

The belief in the prevalence of rape can be seen as a response to how sexu-

al misconduct has been redefined since the 1970s. The sexual revolution that arrived at elite colleges in the late 1960s introduced the notion that women were not required to withhold themselves from men. Virginity was devalued; promiscuity was renamed freedom to seek pleasure. Behavior that in American society would have met with disapproval in 1950—what was called "getting fresh," meaning a man attempting a kiss or other seductive move with a woman who hadn't invited it—by 1980 was harder to classify. Ungentlemanly behavior or unwelcome courtship began to be subsumed under the term sexual assault, now defined as anything from an unwanted embrace to rape.

The escalation of the terminology was a response to the changed meaning of flirtation. Before the sexual revolution, a man of good character would express romantic interest in a woman only if he contemplated committing himself to her. Dating didn't always lead to marriage, of course, but it was assumed that the parties would cease dating each other if they decided not to proceed toward matrimony, freeing them to resume their search for mates.

After about 1970, once a man was permitted to express sexual interest of a purely recreational kind without necessarily insulting a woman's virtue, his attentions could be intentionally ambiguous. The rules of casual sex allowed a woman to sleep with a man who hadn't committed himself to any future beyond sunrise. She might even be required to bed him or risk losing him

to a more permissive rival. Rather than demand commitment, she had to lower her expectations. Just as the category of the slut and the easy lay was eliminated, so was the category of the cad and the rake.

Women do not always seek commitment, of course, nor do men always avoid it. But in humans, male reproductive strategy favors promiscuity, while the female strategy favors monogamy and the investment of a father's time, resources, and protection for resulting offspring. The proponents of the sexual revolution insisted that once pregnancy was avoidable or reversible, women's sexual temperament would come to resemble that of men, but it did not.

Not everyone participates in what is now called hookup culture. There has all along been a more monogamous culture of dating, where virginity is not unknown and sexual relationships are limited to partners who can call each other boyfriend or girlfriend and who may ultimately marry.

Nonetheless, since the sexual revolution, many young women have found themselves in milieus where hookups are pervasive. These tend to be the encounters, often involving heavy drinking, that result in women claiming sexual assault, at least when assault is defined as sex with an incapacitated partner.

Columbia's code of discipline as of September 2023 states,

A person cannot give consent if they [sic] lack the ability to make or understand the decision ... as a result of the level of consumption of alco-

hol or drugs.... The use of alcohol or drugs does not justify or excuse gender-based misconduct and never makes someone at fault for experiencing gender-based misconduct.

Theoretically, either partner, if drunk at the time, could accuse the other of rape, but in practice most complainants are women and most respondents men. And the term "gender-based misconduct" encompasses much behavior that may be unwelcome or impolite but not criminal.

Title IX, the 1972 federal law supplementing the Civil Rights Act of 1964, requires that any educational institution that receives money from the federal government guarantee equal access to all educational programs and activities without regard to sex. For some years after its passage the law was invoked principally on behalf of athletics for girls and women. Schools and colleges were forced to equalize their spending between the sexes, a move that was welcomed by many female soccer players, but was less appreciated by male golfers or wrestlers whose teams were eliminated to create parity.

As the belief in rape culture took hold during the 1980s, activists began to use Title IX to combat what they called a hostile environment for women, which, they argued, prevented women from taking full advantage of educational resources on offer. At first, they focused on sexual harassment, defined as demands for sexual favors in exchange for good grades or evaluations or professional opportunities.

In April 2011, the Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights issued a nineteen-page guidance document, later known as the Dear Colleague letter, to colleges for enforcement of Title IX. It demanded that college administrations themselves investigate complaints of sexual misconduct, now more broadly defined to include "rape, sexual assault, sexual battery, and sexual coercion. All such acts of sexual violence are forms of sexual harassment covered under Title IX."

Colleges were to use a preponderance of evidence standard—sometimes described as 50 percent and a feather—to adjudicate, even if the complaints were also taken up by law enforcement, although a criminal court would demand proof beyond a reasonable doubt, a much higher standard. In April 2014, the Dear Colleague letter was followed up with an even longer document, "Questions and Answers on Title IX and Sexual Violence," specifying in greater detail how colleges must respond to reports of sexual assault or risk losing federal funding.

Emma's claim of rape was a tale of friends with benefits gone wrong. Paul Nungesser, her classmate, was her good friend. They had slept together a couple of times, then agreed not to become romantically involved. On the night in question, the start of their senior year, they had met at a party after a summer apart. They ended up in Emma's dorm room, where they had sex. Then their stories differed. Emma said that Paul had suddenly attacked her, hitting and

choking her, penetrating her anally while she screamed and begged him to stop; then he got up and left. Paul said they had consensual anal intercourse and had fallen asleep together, and that he awakened a few hours later and went home.

Emma waited seven months to file a complaint with Columbia. She later said she complained only because she had met other women who alleged that Paul had assaulted them (using an expansive definition—one woman claimed he tried to kiss her at a party). Emma said she wanted to protect the campus from a serial predator. However, for some time after the alleged rape, Emma sent Paul affectionate text messages:

Also I feel like we need to have some real time where we can talk about life and thingz

because we still haven't really had a paul-emma chill sesh since summmerrrr....

I love you Paul. Where are you?!?!?!?

She did not accuse him of attacking her until after she learned that he had a new girlfriend.

When Emma finally reported the incident to the university administration, the investigation found Paul not responsible (the term of art in college disciplinary procedures), even though college investigators are usually primed to interpret any behavior by the complainant—hysteria, calm, confusion or coherence—as a response to trauma.

Emma appealed and lost again. She then filed a Title IX complaint with the Department of Education's Office for

Civil Rights, which appears never to have been formally resolved. She also tried the police, whom she later said didn't take her seriously. She had come to them nearly two years after the event, which did not give investigators much to go on. From the start, she countered critics and disbelievers by saying that she would never have invited hostile attention to herself as a rape victim if it hadn't been true.

The police complaint, which Emma filed in May 2014, put Paul's name into the public record, and provided an item for *Spectator*, the Columbia student news site. The editors explained that they had decided to publish Paul's name because it was now a matter of public record; because anonymous flyers naming him as a rapist had been posted in campus bathrooms; and because Paul had been accused of sexual misconduct by three different women, even though he had been found not responsible in all three cases. By the time Emma began her mattress performance in September 2014, she did not need to name Paul. His identity was well known.

Spectator covered her project from its first day. Online comments were sharply divided. Supporters agreed that Emma had been victimized by both Paul and Columbia; critics didn't believe she'd been raped and were outraged at her targeting of her classmate, and sometimes at her artistic pretensions. After months of anonymous debate online, the hostility proved too much for *Spec's* editors and they disabled and

erased all comments on opinion pieces concerning sexual assault.

Paul was kicked out of his fraternity, abandoned by his friends, and generally shunned. Some of his professors told him privately that they believed him to be innocent, but dared not defend him publicly. University administrators counseled him to take a year off and finish his studies after Emma had graduated.

Meanwhile, many faculty were privately outraged that Emma was getting academic credit for her protest, but virtually no one spoke up publicly. She had the support of Columbia's president, Lee Bollinger, a law professor and First Amendment scholar. He told the *New York Times* a few months into the performance, "The law and principles of academic freedom allow students to express themselves on issues of public debate; at the same time, our legal and ethical responsibility is to be fair and impartial in protecting the rights and accommodating the concerns of all students in these matters." He never mentioned that Emma was protesting a rape that the university's own disciplinary proceeding had concluded was unproved, nor that Emma's protest violated university rules—rules that Bollinger himself had drafted.

On April 23, 2015, Paul Nungesser sued Columbia University, its trustees, President Lee Bollinger, and Emma's advisor, Jon Kessler, in the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of New York. The suit claimed that Columbia had "significantly damaged, if not ef-

fectively destroyed Paul Nungesser's college experience, his reputation, his emotional well-being and his future career prospects."

The lawsuit reproduced some of Paul's and Emma's text messages. Years earlier, before their first sexual encounter, they had this exchange:

Emma: fuck me in the butt

Paul: eehm
maybe not
jk [just kidding]
I miss your face tho

Emma: hahahah
you don't miss my lopsided ass?

Paul: I do.
just not that much ...

Emma later claimed that her request was not meant literally but was a figure of speech. In 2020, she told an interviewer that in her circle, "If we were upset about something, we'd say something like, 'Oh man, I just got assigned another essay. Fuck me in the butt.'"

No one but Emma and Paul can know what transpired between them. Emma's version might be true, although it seems unlikely that she would have simply gone to sleep after being choked and violated rather than go to the emergency room or at least alert a resident assistant. She never produced any evidence of bruises or abrasions.

As she had vowed she would, Emma carried her mattress the entire academic year. On Class Day, May 20, 2015, the College graduation ceremony, sharing the load with several women

classmates, she bore it past President Bollinger. In subsequent interviews, she expressed surprise that Bollinger had turned away when she passed, so as to avoid shaking her hand as he did for the other graduates. In the audience for this act of her drama were Paul Nungesser, also graduating, and his parents.

Paul's suit against Columbia was ultimately dismissed. He was preparing an appeal when, in July 2017, Columbia settled with him for an undisclosed sum. Columbia may have been influenced by the change in the leadership of the Department of Education, which had begun to question the Obama-era regulations and enforcement of Title IX. The university commented publicly, "Columbia recognizes that after the conclusion of the investigation, Paul's remaining time at Columbia became very difficult for him and not what Columbia would want any of its students to experience. Columbia will continue to review and update its policies toward ensuring that every student—accuser and accused, including those such as Paul who are found not responsible—is treated respectfully and as a full member of the Columbia community."

Not only did Paul lose on Title IX grounds, with District Judge Gregory H. Woods arguing that the mistreatment Paul endured was not proved to be due to his sex. The judge also contended that while Paul had suffered emotional distress, "There is no suggestion that his grades dropped, that he was delayed or prevented from graduating (to the contrary, he graduated on time in May

2015), or that he missed a single class as a result of these events.”

In late 2023, news reports revealed another possible reason for Bollinger’s eagerness to appear to believe a woman who said she was raped. A Columbia gynecologist, Robert Hadden, was arrested and charged with sexually abusing dozens of patients, apparently with full knowledge of colleagues and staff, for decades. Hadden was first arrested in 2012, two years before Emma’s mattress performance, but the university had concealed the scandal and permitted him to continue to practice. Bollinger was surely aware of all this.

But even without that impetus, the mood on campus in 2014 might have seemed to demand that Bollinger take Emma seriously. The semester preceding her performance had seen Title IX complaints and student protests against rape culture; in May 2014, Emma herself had been featured on Time.com as a rape victim and activist. In response, Bollinger had enlarged the university’s Title IX staff and opened a second rape crisis center. But students continued to complain and demonstrate. On October 29, 2014, a crowd deposited twenty-three mattresses on the doorstep of the president’s house, symbolizing the twenty-three Title IX complaints filed the previous semester. (At this writing, none of them appears to have been formally resolved.)

For decades, female students have been in the majority at Columbia and at universities nationally. Faculties and administrations have been similar-

ly feminized. Women cannot claim to be marginalized but arguably have the upper hand in campus life. At the same time, the surplus of female students forces them to compete for straight men and weakens the female negotiating position in dating, often letting men get away with bad behavior. Thus, women have been able to capture the college disciplinary system to avenge the wrongs committed by inconstant men. Students use Title IX as a verb: “She Title Nined him and got him expelled,” meaning that a woman accused a man of taking advantage of her after an encounter the man had thought to be consensual, and that a biased administrative investigation found him responsible.

In recent years, hundreds of young men have sued their colleges, claiming that they were convicted of sexual misconduct by their administrations without evidence and were unfairly suspended or expelled. Many have won their cases.

If the belief that one-quarter of college women are raped while pursuing their education constituted a moral panic, a moral solution was needed. In 2014, President Bollinger and the university’s Title IX staff required a sacrificial victim whose punishment and exclusion would restore the social fabric. Many on campus believed that it didn’t matter whether Paul Nungesser was innocent of rape because other men were raping other women, and defending those women was more important than Paul’s individual well-being. As a

straight white man, he was assumed to be a privileged oppressor, who would succeed no matter what roadblocks were constructed for him.

Despite being found not responsible in three complaints against him, Paul was treated as though he were guilty. Columbia in effect delegated his chastisement to Emma, her thesis advisor, and her supporters. Bollinger and the administration pretended that a daily protest of nine months' duration, visible from a block away and given academic credit, was no more damaging than an opinion article in *Spectator*. They pretended that Emma's project did not target Paul individually, on the technicality that she had not used his name in it. But they knew she had already publicized his name along with her accusation and could leave it to others to draw the connection.

On graduating, Paul Nungesser returned to Germany, his native country, to pursue a career in film. He had hoped to stay in the U.S., but Emma's assault on his reputation had robbed him of opportunities. Emma Sulkowicz remained a celebrated artist for several years, doing internships and giving talks and performances, before withdrawing from the art world to study traditional Chinese medicine. She now has an acupuncture and cupping studio in Manhattan. Lee Bollinger retired from Columbia's presidency in July 2023 and was succeeded by a woman, Minouche Shafik, whose term would be embattled and brief.

Since October 2023 most activism on campus has concerned Israel and the war in Gaza, and Columbia has been embroiled in protests, occupations, and police interventions. Little student energy seems available for the war on rape culture at the moment.

While the Trump administration in 2025 reinstituted necessary Title IX protections for the accused, the issue of sexual misconduct is unlikely to disappear. College is in large part a mating marketplace, where female students currently outnumber and compete for males. More than half a century ago, the elite colleges abolished many of the arrangements, such as single-sex dorms and parietal hours, designed to protect women from men. More recently, colleges have increasingly celebrated sexual minorities above the nuclear family, while accommodating a growing proportion of foreign students, some of whom are religious in ways incompatible with hookup culture. It is difficult to predict how dating will be conducted in the future.

If Emma was choked and raped, her subsequent behavior—her long delay in reporting the incident, her declaration of love for Paul—is within the realm of possibility. However, it is easier to believe that Paul did not rape her and that she accused him only after it was clear that he was not going to become her boyfriend.

Emma's supporters weren't concerned with due process. To them, perhaps, Paul's crime was that he had had his way with Emma and deserted

her. The timeworn mattress she carried on Class Day was less an emblem of violation than her version of Miss Havisham's wedding dress. But under the terms of sexual liberation, her coupling with Paul included no promises that could be breached. Thus, she complained with the means available: an accusation of rape.

The regulations surrounding Title IX and student sexual misconduct were revised by the Trump administration. The Biden administration promulgated new revisions that took effect in August 2024. Some of the Biden provisions, such as the addition of gender identity to the categories protected from discrimination and the elimination of some due process protections for those accused of sexual misconduct, were widely contested. As of early 2025, it remains to be seen what the second Trump administration will do in this policy area.

The Columbia administration has a history of offering impunity from the rules governing protests and demonstrations to activists for favored causes. President Bollinger permitted Emma to defame a fellow student and potentially block access to university facilities from September 2014 to May 2015. In the spring of 2016, he accommodated student protestors demanding an end to university investments in fossil fuels who occupied his own office suite and the Low Library rotunda for two weeks, while he worked from home. And in April 2024, President Shafik let anti-Israel protestors set up a tent city on the

lawn, where for weeks they chanted, selectively denied access to reporters, and harassed Jews and those suspected of being Jews. Finally the police were called. They arrested some protestors, but the encampment moved to another quadrant of the lawn and was permitted to stay.

On April 29, protestors invaded, vandalized and barricaded Hamilton Hall, the main administration and classroom building of Columbia College. The campus was shut down. The following night, the city police entered the building through a second-story window and overwhelmed the occupiers, ultimately clearing the campus of protests. The university-wide commencement exercises were canceled. The schools' separate graduations were relocated away from the main campus. President Shafik was listed as a speaker at the College and General Studies ceremonies, but did not attend.

On August 14, 2024, Shafik resigned and was succeeded by an interim president, Katrina Armstrong, who has headed Columbia's medical center since 2022. In March 2025, the Trump administration threatened Columbia with a loss of federal grant funding unless the university institutes various reforms concerning protests and demonstrations; admissions; its Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies Department; and other matters.

No one can say how severely the recent unrest will damage the university's future attractiveness to students, scholars, researchers or donors. At the

Columbia College Class Day on May 14, 2024, the valedictorian wore a keffiyeh, carried a “DIVEST” sign and, on being handed her award, placed on it a “FREE PALESTINE” sticker. Whether she knew it or not, she followed in Emma’s footsteps, making her classmates the audience for her personal political theater, with the administration’s blessing.

Jessica Raimi was managing editor of the alumni magazine *Columbia College Today* from 1985-1991, and subsequently a contributing editor to *Columbia Magazine* and a freelancer for various university offices. From January 2008 through May 2019, Raimi was on the staff of the Columbia University Senate. Her writing has appeared in the *Gettysburg Review*, the *Palo Alto Review*, *Tribeca Trib*, and elsewhere. Her memoir “Ballet School,” in the *Antioch Review*, was named a Notable Essay of 2012 in “Best American Essays 2013” (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt).
