

IDEAS

# The Real Harvard Scandal

Claudine Gay is not the real story. Academics debase their profession when they redefine plagiarism to suit their politics.

By Tyler Austin Harper



Illustration by The Atlantic. Source: Haiyun Jiang / Bloomberg / Getty; Kevin Dietsch / Getty.

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**C**LAUDINE GAY is gone. The Harvard president’s slow-burning plagiarism scandal was finally fanned into a full-blown conflagration that neither she nor the university could stamp out. After weeks of mounting accusations, several new instances of alleged plagiarism uncovered Monday night—added to about 40 earlier examples—appear to have been the final straw. Her resignation was tendered yesterday afternoon.

The conservative activist Christopher Rufo, who helped kick off this controversy when he and fellow conservative Christopher Brunet leveled a round of accusations against Gay last month, has spent the past 24 hours doing a victory lap. It is this unseemly context that many academics are hung up on: In their minds, a college president succumbed to conservative pressure. And this fact is melting their brains and obliterating their standards for professional conduct. As Harvard Law’s own Charles Fried told *The New York Times*, “It’s part of this extreme right-wing attack on elite institutions.” And: “If it came from some other quarter, I might be granting it some credence ... But not from these people.” Although the donor revolt and conservative pressure campaigns on elite universities—and, more important, public universities—*are* deeply worrying, the response of some faculty members to this plagiarism scandal is bound to make things worse.

[Read: Claudine Gay’s resignation was overdue](#)

The true scandal of the Claudine Gay affair is not a Harvard president and her plagiarism. The true scandal is that so many journalists and academics were willing, are *still* willing, to redefine plagiarism to suit their politics. Gay's boosters have consistently resorted to Orwellian doublespeak—“duplicative language” and academic “sloppiness” and “technical attribution issues”—in a desperate effort to insist that lifting entire paragraphs of another scholar's work, nearly word for word, without quotation or citation, isn't plagiarism. Or that if it *is* plagiarism, it's merely a technicality. Or that we all do it. (Soon after Rufo and Brunet made their initial accusations last month, Gay issued a statement saying, “I stand by the integrity of my scholarship.” She did not address those or subsequent plagiarism allegations in her resignation letter.)

Rufo won this round of the academic culture war because he exposed so many progressive scholars and journalists to be hypocrites and political actors who were willing to throw their ideals overboard. I suspect *that*, not the tenure of a Harvard president, was the prize he sought all along. The tragedy is that we didn't have to give it to him.

**A**S *THE ATLANTIC*'s David A. Graham wrote yesterday, Gay is only the latest scholar to be embroiled in the “old-fashioned scandal” of plagiarism and academic misconduct. She joins other recent high-profile scholars who have faced such allegations, including former Stanford President Marc Tessier-Lavigne, the Duke behavioral economist Dan Ariely, and the Twitter-famous Princeton historian Kevin Kruse. The charges against Kruse were ultimately dismissed by his university as a case of “careless cutting and pasting.” (As it happens, “careless cutting and pasting” seems to be a pretty good working definition of plagiarism).

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good, at least prestigious, company. And it's clear, too, that her violations pale in comparison to some other real and rumored instances of plagiarism in elite higher education. Still, the linguistic gymnastics in her defense are shameful. Indeed, the historian David A. Bell wrote that the language games some progressives are currently playing are positively Trumpian. "What bothers me most about this whole affair is the fact that Gay herself has not taken responsibility for the plagiarism," Bell said, "and that so many have supported her in not doing so." A Harvard alum who's an academic acquaintance of mine offered a similar summary: "Sitting here watching people I respect say 'We all do this all the time; nothing to see here' actually hurts me a bit. I feel gaslighted, in the parlance of our time."



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Gay's champions insist that the provenance of the plagiarism accusations matter, and that is no doubt true. It is impossible to talk about this controversy without acknowledging the fact that the unraveling of Gay's presidency was the product of a well-planned right-wing broadside, an attack that began taking shape after her December 5 congressional testimony on campus anti-Semitism, and that was fueled by activist Harvard donors such as Bill Ackman. Harvard's leader was one of a trio of elite university presidents, joining the heads of the University of Pennsylvania and MIT, who refused to explicitly state that "calling for the genocide of Jews" violated university policies against harassment. The hearing was a dumpster fire, but to my eyes Gay quite clearly outperformed her peers. That's why it was so telling, if not surprising, that much of the media attention and right-wing criticism ended up focusing on the lone Black president. After Penn's Liz Magill resigned—she had been under fire herself since September for having the temerity to allow her university to host a Palestinian literature festival that donors wanted canceled—the crosshairs of the conservative ecosystem turned to Gay.

When the plagiarism scandal ramped up just a few days after the congressional hearing, it felt pretextual *because it was*. Rufo and Brunet’s first allegations were wheeled out on December 10, and Rufo was transparent about their intentions: “We launched the Claudine Gay plagiarism story from the Right,” he wrote on social media. “The next step is to smuggle it into the media apparatus of the Left, legitimizing the narrative to center-left actors who have the power to topple her. Then squeeze.”

Conservatives have long seen Gay as the “diversity hire” avatar of their DEI bogeymen. They wanted an excuse to force her out, so they went looking for skeletons. The problem, for progressives, is that the conservatives found a closet full of bones. As *The Intercept*’s Ryan Grim put it, “The right launched a witch hunt against Gay but instead found a plagiarist.” Although the initial examples of plagiarism were weak—easy enough to excuse as shoddy paraphrasing and forgotten quotation marks—a series of subsequent investigations by the conservative outlet *The Washington Free Beacon* found more damning cases. As Rufo predicted, the plagiarism story soon broke into the mainstream, thanks to sustained coverage in outlets such as *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times*. A fair-minded but bracing December 21 *Times* op-ed by John McWhorter, simply titled “Why Claudine Gay Should Go,” was a nail that struck especially loudly against the coffin wood.

Those who rushed to characterize her resignation as the outcome of a “bullying” campaign designed to oust Harvard’s first Black president omit an inconvenient detail: She was clearly guilty. The bullying worked because the facts were too difficult to massage. That didn’t stop many of my fellow academics from trying.

A day after McWhorter called for Gay’s ouster, the Renaissance scholar, climate-change activist, and New School affiliate faculty member Genevieve Guenther shared a disturbing story on social media about a professor who, she claims, stole her ideas

and then went on to great acclaim and success. She added, “And EVERYONE KNOWS HE’S A PLAGIARIST.”

Guenther was a graduate student at the time, and the abuse she alleges is terrible. But her thread ends with a bizarre twist: Strangely, the lesson Guenther draws from this experience is that we need to “Support Gay. Support DEI. Support antiracism.” Rather than hold everyone accountable or even suggest that we revisit our punishments for misdemeanor-style plagiarism like the former Harvard president’s, the thread ends in a tacit call to obliterate academic standards in the name of politics.

What is galling about this kind of defense is that it is perfectly possible to maintain that Gay shouldn’t have been fired while *also* conceding that she’s guilty of serial, if low-stakes, plagiarism. But many progressives have been deeply reluctant to admit that Gay did anything wrong or unusual *at all*. Rather than use the P-word, Guenther describes Gay’s plagiarism as “repeating banal phrases”—yet another polite euphemism to be added to the Orwellian pile. Not until yesterday did she concede that at least one of the examples (arguably the most egregious) did amount to an example of plagiarism.

Not to be outdone, the CNN reporter Matt Egan was at pains to note that Gay had not stolen anyone’s ideas. An important and mitigating distinction to be sure, but Egan goes on to add, “She has been accused of ... copying other people’s writing without attribution. So it’s been more sloppy attribution than stealing anyone’s ideas.” Again, “copying people’s writing without attribution” is just a way of saying “plagiarism” in five words rather than one. Harvard’s plagiarism policy doesn’t contain a waiver for “sloppiness,” nor have the policies of any institution I’ve ever attended or taught at.

Others have attempted not simply to minimize but to actually *normalize* the kind of language theft practiced by Gay. A number of professors on Twitter have suggested that every academic would be found guilty of plagiarism were their scholarly record subject to sufficient scrutiny. The Emory University quantitative theorist and historian Jo Guldi asserted in a social-media post that has since been removed that “Claudine Gay has resigned on the basis of a plagiarism charge that could have been leveled at anyone we know via the power of text mining applied without sound standards of how to assess the results.” In an [earlier post](#), Guldi had insisted that it is not Gay who should be condemned, but the other professors who accused the president of plagiarism. These claims are preposterous on their face: One needn’t be an expert on text mining to look at two nearly identical paragraphs and determine that plagiarism has taken place. Whether or not Big Tech tools were used is entirely ancillary to what was found, and what was found was straightforward theft.

Responses like these are so frustrating in part because the right response—one that embraces long-standing professional norms while fending off academia’s conservative critics—is so simple. D. Stephen Voss, a political-science professor at the University of Kentucky, is one of the scholars at the center of the Gay controversy. A passage from an article he co-authored is among the most egregious examples of the former president’s plagiarism. And yet Voss has managed to maintain his academic integrity while offering grace to the embattled social scientist. “I’ve consistently defended Claudine Gay in almost every way,” he wrote in [a post](#) viewed nearly 2 million times, “so it might seem curious I keep emphasizing that for her to use my words & paragraph logic was plagiarism.”

He then shared an especially prescient email he had sent to a student not long ago. It read: “Please understand that you cannot use whole sentences from people ... unless you want to get in trouble for academic dishonesty ... Later on in your career, especially if you’re successful, it could cause a scandal, of the sort that periodically hits public scholars.” Voss reiterated this same point in a subsequent response to me. “I want to support Claudine,” he said, “but I cannot respect anyone who, in pursuit of political goals, would pretend that students are allowed to do what Gay did. Changing principles to suit the controversy du jour occurs too often on both sides of the political divide.”

Voss is entirely correct. Using watery euphemisms to refer to blatant plagiarism debases our profession, and the assertion that everyone plagiarizes if you just look hard enough debases it further. The media are currently distracted by the shiny bauble of Harvard’s ousted president, but we should be far more concerned about the crisis of academic culture that this incident has exposed. For all the talk of “glass ceilings,” Gay is a Cambridge woman through and through: Born to a family that runs a Haitian concrete empire, she was shot out of America’s most prestigious boarding school before being educated at Princeton, Stanford, and Harvard. As the first Black woman to lead America’s most prestigious university, Gay may have changed the color of the mold, but she sure didn’t break it.

The idea that clear and long-established criteria for plagiarism should have been thrown out to save the elite-born president of an elite university, solely on the basis of her skin color, is not only preposterous; it’s that old soft bigotry. There are talented senior academics and administrators of color across this country who don’t need anyone to lower plagiarism standards for them. Harvard can, and should, hire one of them. Doing so would put a thumb in the eye of the meddling right, defending the ideal of diversity while sending a clear message that neither conservative media nor billionaire alumni get to decide who runs the university.

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