
Unwarranted Allegations in *Unwanted Advances*: On Laura Kipnis's Attack on Title IX

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Long before writing her latest book—*Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus*—Northwestern University professor Laura Kipnis made a name for herself as a provocateur known for exposing hypocrisy with humor. Her previous books have been delightfully stinging with a keen eye toward irony and unseen contradictions: politically incorrect in ways that leave the reader tickled. Uncomfortable, but fun.

Unwanted Advances is not like that.

This book certainly *is* politically incorrect, but instead of punching up at the privileged, she punches down at sexual assault victims and their allies. She comes to her position through a series of convoluted steps in which she transfers personal outrage over her own encounter with Title IX (the U.S. federal law aimed at ensuring women's equal right to higher education) to a sense of comradeship with undergraduate men who have been reported as perpetrators of sexual assault. Though her case revolved around speech and was resolved in her favor, in a kind of the-enemy-of-my-enemy-is-my-friend sort of logic, she allies with alleged rapists against Title IX; and when she aligns her gaze with theirs, it is not only the institutionalized process of protecting victims of sexual assault that comes into her crosshairs—it's the women who turn to it for help.

Kipnis's argument is that, in the name of protecting women from sexual assault, harassment, and exploitation, Title IX officers and their conspirators are unfairly demonizing male sexuality and erasing female sexual desire and agency. Alongside this institutional misappropriation of the law, she argues, female students have become "malevolently fragile," wielders of a "passive-aggressive femininity" that makes them comfortable with accusing known-innocent men of sexual assault, lying through the adjudication process, and living with the consequences (pp. 65, 125).

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She concludes that campuses are characterized by a "new norm" of "rampant accusation" in which women are "deploying Title IX to remedy sexual ambivalences or awkward sexual experiences, and to adjudicate relationship disputes post-breakup" (pp. 6, 17). She says that the sexual assault adjudication process on college campuses is now a resource for "anyone with an agenda, a grudge, neurosis, and sometimes financial ambitions," concluding that "witch hunt conditions [against men] are now an institutionalized feature of campus life" (p. 30). Women now have the power, she claims, to retroactively turn any act of sex into rape at will. When such accusations are made, she writes, quoting *The Crucible*, an "Inquisition" begins in which all "the accusers" are "always holy" and "the process is stacked against the accused" (pp. 22, 23, 27, 238).

She offers no citations for these claims—simply anecdotes—though there are citations available (and anecdotes aplenty) suggesting just the opposite is true: that victims face substantial obstacles to seeing perpetrators held responsible, if they report their assaults at all (Association of American Universities 2015; Karjane, Fisher, and Cullen 2002; The Center for Public Integrity 2010; United States Senate Subcommittee on Financial & Contracting Oversight 2014). Kipnis's characterization left me curious as to what day, exactly, on campuses writ large across America, the balance of power shifted in favor of (non-)victims of sexual assault. Was it before or after Annie Clark reported her assault to an administrator at the University of North Carolina and was told that "rape is like football" and asked to consider

what she “would have done differently” in hindsight (Clark 2013)? Was it before or after Florida State University buried reports of Jameis Winston’s rape of Erica Kinsman so that he could win the Heisman Trophy (McLaughlin 2016)? Was it before or after administrators at Baylor University spent years ignoring and suppressing at least 52 acts of rape by 31 of its football players (Grinberg 2017)?

We can all cherry-pick examples, but the preponderance of evidence should be weighed and there is little that suggests we will someday look back at the effort to end rape and sexual harassment on campus, as Kipnis predicts we will, with headshaking and sheepish “bemusement,” chalking it up to “collective paranoia” (p. 1). And while I am certain that reports of sexual assault are sometimes false (because all crimes have false-report rates) and that sometimes innocent people are found responsible for things they did not do (because all systems are imperfect), the much more pressing matter is the frequency of victimization suffered by both men and women, the egregiously low reporting rate, and the perverse incentives faced by campuses that make suppression preferable to adjudication of any kind (United States Department of Justice 2014).

In Kipnis’s narrative, it’s almost as if female students are bogeywomen: an imagined enemy on the other side of her anonymous men’s anecdotes. She speaks of these women and their allies abstractly as “zealots” (pp. 31, 32, 34). They do not appear in the book except as dangerous, unprincipled accusers. In fact, thousands of studies have been published showing the prevalence of women’s sexual victimization on college campuses (notably, Fisher et al. 2000; Krebs et al. 2007; White House Task Force to Protect Students From Sexual Assault 2014); but by virtue of including no citations, there is a complete absence of engagement with the broader literature.

She admits to not talking to female students at all except as an afterthought. On page 191 in the final chapter before the Coda, she discusses asking the students most convenient to her—those in her classrooms—about their experiences with sex on campus. Even though her college is not “much of a party school” and, she

admits, the problem is likely more extreme elsewhere, “many of the women, and one gay male student, had experienced some version of nonconsensual sex or had friends who had, especially during freshman year” (pp. 190–191). She finds this “illuminating” and concludes that there is

no doubt that plenty of men are having sex with women who are comatose or close to it; or using various combinations of persuasion or physical advantage, or assuming consent where none was given. Also, for a lot of women, this is a standard part of the college experience (p. 191).

It’s a hint to the intellectual dishonesty of Kipnis’s book—or, at least, her inability to see the situation clearly—that these revelations from actual students do not cause her to rethink the entire project. Of course, she *says* here and there in the text that she takes rape very seriously, but she really does not—at least, not within the pages of this book. Having excoriated any efforts by students to demand institutional accountability, her sole recommendation is that women take self-defense classes. And this is not doing men any favors either, since they are statistically much more likely to be sexually assaulted than they are to be accused falsely of sexual assault (Kingkade 2014).

Instead of taking sexual assault seriously, Kipnis accuses victims and their advocates of being merely theatrical. Emblazoned on the cover of her book is her claim: “If this is feminism, it’s feminism hijacked by melodrama.” But it is Kipnis herself who uses hot-button words like “hysteria” (pp. 1, 7, 31, 55, 82). It is she who describes the presence of Title IX on campus as “an accusation machinery so vast and indiscriminate that it becomes a magnet for neurotic schemes, emotional knife play, and monstrously self-exonerating agendas” (p. 126). It is she who has gone far beyond satire, ticklish political incorrectness, and hyperbole into the realm of the paranoid. *Unwanted Advances* is a polemic—a disorganized and dishonest one—that adds plenty of heat to this difficult problem, but no light to speak of.

Kipnis admits that she enjoys “stirring up trouble,” but it matters who we stir up

trouble for. As the humorist Lindy West (2012: n.p.) once wrote in a famous essay about the “rape joke”:

The world *is* full of terrible things, including rape, and it *is* okay to joke about them. But the best comics use their art to call bullshit on those terrible parts of life and make them better, not worse. . . . Easy shortcut: Do not make rape victims the butt of the joke.

As the newest victim of her satire and wit, Kipnis chose the burgeoning movement against sexual assault on campus. Undoubtedly, the progress this movement has made toward making campuses safer and more accountable to victims of sexual violence has brought new questions and problems to the fore. Principal among them is how to adjudicate reports in the fairest way possible. But on this *Unwanted Advances* is hopelessly and unapologetically one-sided, without much consideration for either truth or consequences. If what Kipnis wants is a more just system, I do not see how her book helps us get there.

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