

Short Takes: Provocations on Public Feminism Laura Kipnis's *Unwanted Advances*

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[Short Takes: Provocations on Public Feminism](#), an open-access feature of *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, offers brief comments from prominent feminists about a book that has shaped popular conversations about feminist issues. Short Takes is part of the [Feminist Public Intellectuals Project](#).

Unwanted Advances was published in 2017 by [HarperCollins](#).

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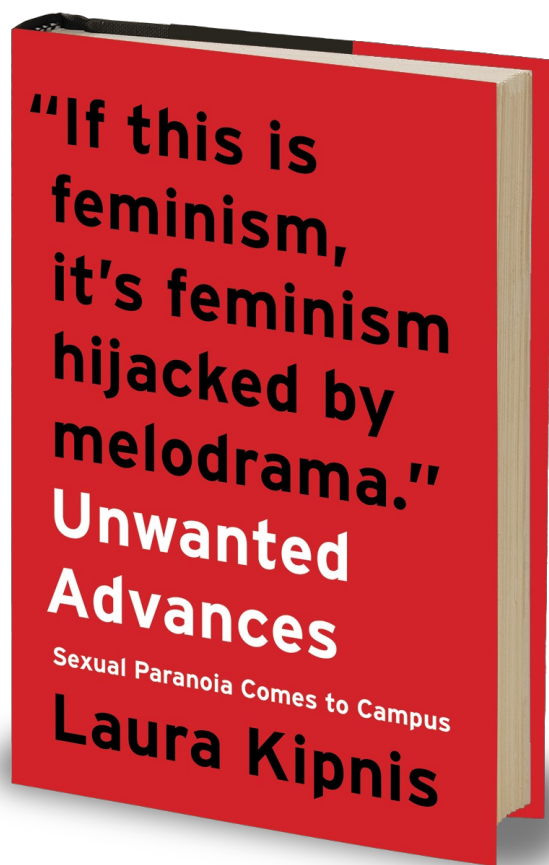
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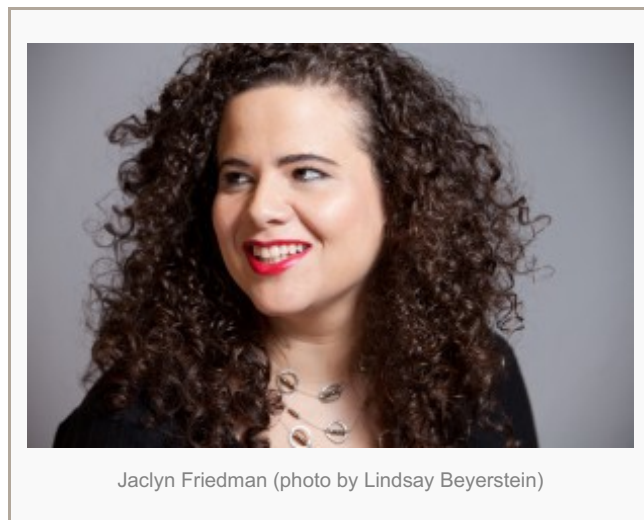
A Response

[Laura Kipnis](#)

This Isn't Feminism. It's Backlash.

Jaclyn Friedman

The great failure of *Unwanted Advances* is that it goes so thoroughly wrong while containing a premise that is both true and important: US college campuses have a long history of fumbling cases of sexual harassment and abuse. Perhaps because activists, eventually abetted by the Obama White House, have forced some change over the last decade, the moment we find ourselves in is nothing if not chaotic, with campus sexual norms changing erratically and incompletely. Many schools seem to take a defensive crouch in their approach to sexual violations, more interested in preempting lawsuits than in ensuring that students have equal access to their education, unimpeded by harassment or violence, even though the Supreme Court ruled in 1992 that Title IX obligates them to do just that.



Jaclyn Friedman (photo by Lindsay Beyerstein)

Not that Laura Kipnis seems aware of that ruling, instead attributing applications of Title IX to sexual culture to bureaucratic overreach. These kinds of basic errors are rampant, making it hard, on one level, to understand how

anyone consented to publish *Unwanted Advances* in its current form. Kipnis regularly asserts “facts” based solely on her own say-so, like when she claims “it’s far more likely for a student to derail a professor’s career these days than the other way around” (63) without providing a single supporting citation. She gets other facts fully wrong, as when she asserts that “all the research” (208) has found that current educational approaches to reducing sexual assault are “useless,” when the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found three such programs “effective” and four others “promising” in their [2014 review](#). She seems unable or unwilling to differentiate between rape and sex, or to accurately define rape culture, common definitions of which are only a Google away. And she doesn’t bother to support the sweeping claims at the heart of her book—that campuses are overrun by anti-sex witch hunts targeting men and/or professors, and that campus women are being encouraged to give up all claims to sexual agency—with anything more than a thin smattering of anecdote.

In fact, a detailed recounting of the case of one particular professor takes up two of the book’s five chapters, and her own case—in which she was cleared of all charges—takes up a third. Given that she spends the book’s final chapter telling women that men are never going to stop raping us so we should just get better at fighting them off and, if we fail, grow thicker skins, that leaves just one chapter in which she even attempts to provide evidence that her two main stories represent some kind of larger trend. She does this by relating some other anecdotes that people happened to send her after her own case gained notoriety. These stories are uniformly from people—almost entirely men—who feel they were mistreated as respondents in a campus judicial process. Are the tales these people are telling both truthful and complete? Kipnis doesn’t seem curious. What percentage of all of the Title IX cases on US campuses do these anecdotes represent? She doesn’t say. Some men claim to have been treated unfairly, and a few of them may even be legitimately hard done by, so the whole system must be irredeemably misandrist and feminists these days are self-victimizing crybabies. QED.

What’s missing, along with intellectual rigor, is any sense of compassion or concern for survivors of sexual violence (who are far from uniformly female, though you wouldn’t know it from reading *Unwanted Advances*). A [2010 study](#) by the Center for Public Integrity found that most schools were issuing laughably lenient sentences for rapists (when they were held responsible at all) and leaving unsupported victims to fall behind in their studies—or drop out altogether—at alarming rates. But you’d know none of that from reading Kipnis, who chooses to excuse herself from curiosity about how victims experience campus justice systems because confidentiality rules prevented her from interviewing the claimants in the cases she heard about from respondents. She does not explain why she was incapable of searching out other cases on her own. Instead, she speculates about the possible nefarious motives of claimants in the cases she studies. The few survivors she quotes approvingly are the ones who treat their assaults as “an amusing story” (205) or “no big thing” (191). She deploys words like “hysteria” (7) and “melodrama” without a hint of awareness of the gendered history of such terms. (So pleased is she with her use of the latter insult that she literally put it on the book’s cover.) Occasionally, she makes fun of victims outright, as when a friend relates that her sister had been raped in college. Kipnis continues: “‘How did it happen?’ I ask. ‘She got drunk, fell asleep in the couch in a frat house, and woke up with some guy on top of her,’ my friend answered. ‘I guess you couldn’t see that coming,’ I said. We both laughed” (186).

[There has always been a market for women who throw in with the patriarchy and congratulate themselves for being subversive.](#) [Click To Tweet](#)

As shocking as that is, it’s also why, in another way, the publication of *Unwanted Advances* is so expected as to approach cliché. There has always been a market for women who throw in with the patriarchy and congratulate themselves for being subversive. Think Tomi Lahren and Ann Coulter, yes, but also Naomi Wolf, who long ago foreshadowed Kipnis’s arguments. In Wolf’s 1993 book [Fire with Fire](#), she insisted that all women choose between “victim feminism” and “power feminism,” as though there is no power in demanding accountability for the ways we have been harmed, nor will we suffer any violence or abuse when we try to step into traditionally male-coded forms of power. (Wolf has subsequently made a career of [defending](#) Julian Assange’s penetration of a sleeping woman, [arguing](#) that rape victims shouldn’t have access to the justice system if they aren’t willing to be publicly named and shamed, and writing a [book](#) that in all sincerity insists that women can’t be self-actualized without regular sexual

penetration, ideally by a penis.) In this sense, the fact that Kipnis is being praised for her “brio” and “bravery” (as the blurbs proclaim) for framing boys-will-be-boys arguments as cutting-edge feminism at the very moment that our president stands accused of being a serial sexual predator is as surprising as a January flu.

Kipnis fancies herself a provocateur, so no doubt my criticisms will only convince her of her virtue and effectiveness. That’s fine; Kipnis’s self-regard is not my concern. What does worry me is how many people in power will be seduced by her tempting fiction that most rape is just bad sex that hypersensitive women exaggerate, and that campus administrators (and the rest of us) should relax and do less about it. It’s true that campus judicial processes leave a lot to be desired when it comes to handling cases of sexual assault and harassment. But *Unwanted Advances* will not improve them. Instead, we should be listening to the hopeful and determined student activists (and the staff, faculty, and administrators who support and collaborate with them) I encounter on nearly every campus I work with. They aren’t motivated by jealousy or bitterness, nor are they fragile snowflakes seeking shelter from adult responsibility. Instead, they operate from a fervent belief in the right of each of us to our own sexual sovereignty and in the obligation we all share, regardless of our gender, to take care with our sexual partners and to treat them as fully equal human beings. They believe a better world is possible, one in which sex is fun for everyone (not just those with asymmetrical power), abuse is rare, and no one is confused about the difference.

Their work is incomplete—social change takes time—and sometimes that leaves things pretty messy. But the remedy for that mess isn’t to return to the bad old days of telling women how not to get raped and calling it a day. That approach has been tested over decades, if not centuries. If it was going to work, it would have done so already. Slapping a bold red cover on it and calling it feminism doesn’t make it so.

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Jaclyn Friedman’s work has redefined the concept of “healthy sexuality” and popularized the “yes means yes” standard of sexual consent that is quickly becoming law on many US campuses. She the founder and former executive director of [Women, Action, and the Media](#) (WAM!), and the creator of two books: [Yes Means Yes: Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape](#) and [What You Really Really Want: The Smart Girl’s Shame-Free Guide to Sex & Safety](#). Friedman hosts [Unscrewed](#), a podcast exploring paths to sexual liberation, and her next book, [Unscrewed: Women, Sex, Power, and How to Stop Letting the System Screw Us All](#) is forthcoming in November from Seal Press.

Men Say the Darnedest Things ... When They're Accused of Sexual Assault

Kelly Oliver

Laura Kipnis’s [Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus](#) is not about campus rape. It’s not *really* about feminism. And it’s not even about Title IX, at least not in principle, or as it is generally put into practice. For the most part, the book is about former Northwestern philosophy professor and endowed chair Peter Ludlow and the fallout from Kipnis mentioning two sexual assault cases against him in [an article she wrote](#) for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. After reading Kipnis’s account—if I didn’t know better—I’d be tempted to call him Saint Peter. I have to admit, as an academic soap opera, the book is a great read. I was captivated in part because years ago, when he was just spreading his wings, Ludlow was a colleague of mine in the philosophy department at Stony Brook.

About three-fourths of the book is spent discrediting the two sexual assault cases against Ludlow at Northwestern, along with their plaintiffs. (One of the plaintiffs is [now suing](#) Kipnis and HarperCollins for alleged inaccuracies in the book.) In conclusion, Kipnis uses the Ludlow case, along with the Title IX suit brought against her by one of the same women, to discredit Title IX tout court. Guilt by association. It is crucial to note that neither Ludlow nor Kipnis was found guilty on a Title IX offense; in fact, both were exonerated. And, although Ludlow was demoted (for buying

drinks for a minor, a criminal offense to which he admitted), he was not fired, as Kipnis sometimes suggests. He was brought up on dismissal charges for a “pattern of behavior,” but he quit and moved to Mexico before the university ruled on his case. There were rumors that Ludlow was sleeping with students (or at least one student) while at Stony Brook, and he moved to Northwestern with a woman who had been an undergraduate student at Michigan (after Stony Brook and before Northwestern). Then, of course, there is the now infamous graduate student at Northwestern with whom he claims to have had a consensual romantic relationship. So, is it fair to say, Ludlow did have a pattern of having sex with students?

Kipnis depicts the women who brought charges of sexual assault against Ludlow as psychologically unstable “gold diggers” out for “revenge” (85, 237). She says the undergraduate woman needed money and hoped to get a settlement from either Ludlow or Northwestern (56-7, 75).

Throughout the book, Kipnis repeatedly throws out dollar figures and bemoans the amount of money spent by the university on Title IX cases or how much poor Ludlow had to spend on lawyers. At one point, she jokingly hopes that her suit is costing the university more than another professor’s (145). *Unwanted Advances* revolves around a treasure trove of material Ludlow supplied when Kipnis interviewed him in Mexico. Kipnis spun those documents into gold. I’d say hers were *wanted advances*, namely the advances her agent negotiated on her behalf with HarperCollins.



Kelly Oliver

[Increasingly we are seeing the open celebration of the lack of consent by some men on \(and off\) college campuses.](#) [Click To Tweet](#)

One chapter of the book is a compilation of the best of the Title IX horror stories Kipnis accumulated while undergoing her own Title IX nightmare. Accused professors and graduate students from across the country shared Kipnis’s bile toward the regulation they blamed for losing their jobs, being forced into retirement, or being put on probation. This section of the book could be retitled “Sh*t Men Say” or “Men Say the Darnedest Things ... When They’re Accused of Sexual Harassment.” I’m sure they find a beacon of feminist legitimation in Kipnis’s book. All the same, reading these stories was chilling. From now on, I’ll think twice about making jokes in class or complimenting a student on her appearance.

Kipnis’s claim is that women who take up the position of helpless victim are playing into age-old stereotypes of feminine passivity. She argues that women need to take responsibility for campus rape just as much as—perhaps more than—men. They need to take self-defense courses and fight back instead of drinking themselves silly and passively succumbing to both stereotypes of femininity and sexual assault (203, 216). She has a point. Yet, when nearly every week brings another [headline](#) about serial rapists on campus or “[rape conspiracies](#)” involving drinks spiked with rape drugs, and when every fall we hear of women welcomed to campus with [banners](#) and [chants endorsing nonconsensual sex](#), we have to wonder whether rape culture is more than just girls getting drunk and boys taking advantage of them, or even an acceptance of sexual assault. Rather, increasingly we are seeing the *open celebration* of the lack of consent by some men on (and off) college campuses. These men don’t want sex, they want rape. And they make [no bones](#) about expecting their frat brothers to join them in going out and taking what they want, namely “sex” with unconscious girls.

In this context, it seems odd, to say the least, to write an entire book devoted to defending men—one man in particular—against charges of sexual assault, *in the name of feminism*. But, as Kipnis continually reminds us, she’s a feminist provocateur. Her book may not be an advance for feminism, but it certainly is provocative.

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Kelly Oliver is W. Alton Jones Professor of Philosophy at Vanderbilt. She is the author of fifteen scholarly books, including *Hunting Girls: Sexual Violence from The Hunger Games to Campus Rape*, winner of a 2016 Choice Award. She takes up themes of campus rape and human trafficking in her feminist fiction, *The Jessica James*, *Cowgirl Philosopher*, *Mysteries*. Her first novel, *WOLF*, won an IPPY Gold Medal for best Mystery/Thriller. To learn more, go to www.kellyoliverbooks.com.

Does Title IX Work?

Claire Potter

Disclaimer: I would read anything Laura Kipnis wrote, even if it was written on the inside of an old candy wrapper. This is not because her views are easy to read, or often even right, but because she hates whiners, tackles some of the most vexed problems in erotic life, and is a lucid and fearless writer. “Why *is* intergenerational sex such a great taboo, when not so long ago it was no big thing?” she writes in the introduction to *Unwanted Advances* (29). [Jane Gallop](#) and [Terry Castle](#) have two very different takes on whether it is a big thing, but back in the day, sex between students and faculty was no big thing for some people. It was career ending for *other* people, too often the student.

The centerpiece of *Unwanted Advances* is philosopher Peter Ludlow, Kipnis’s colleague at Northwestern, who ultimately resigned while being investigated for being serially and romantically involved with students. Kipnis is at her best when writing about things that make other people cringe: if you are the squeamish type, Ludlow’s story will curl your hair. To inoculate *Signs* and myself from legal action (see below), I am punting on describing what exactly happened, except to say that Kipnis was persuaded, from reading text messages that one of the women sent to Ludlow, that she was genuinely in love with him and he with her. A dedicated Kipnis reader will see disaster looming right now. As we learned from [Against Love](#), romance is nature’s sucker punch. In Ludlow’s case, love ended in a career-ending Title IX hearing and permanent residency in affordable, sunny Mexico.

Should faculty be doing the horizontal bop with students under any circumstances? Nearly all the feminists I know, including men, would say: “No! Power imbalance eliminates the possibility of consent!” A Kipnis feminist, on the other hand, says: “Hey! Which faculty? Which students? What did they do? What’s the nature of the harm?” As someone who had an affair with a teacher, and who has also been sexually harassed and sexually assaulted, I can tell you: although a great many of the people who condemn Ludlow couldn’t care less, all of these things are different, in the moment and in retrospect, and they aren’t actually that hard to distinguish from each other. But as Kipnis argues, universities are too highly focused on fending off ugly publicity to really care who did what to whom, a tactic that works until it doesn’t.

I agree with Kipnis that how universities adjudicate sex is self-serving, expensive, and arbitrary; I also agree that students in these situations are not always the helpless victims that the legal filings make them out to be. That said, Kipnis gives short shrift to the perspective that mixing sex with a pedagogical relationship can be unusually toxic. Teaching is a gatekeeping relationship, while sex is often deeply self-serving and easily harms others in its vicinity. Despite my past as an undamaged teacher lover, as I grew into my faculty shoes, the Ludlows in my life started to annoy me. This was not because I thought they were always dangerous (although sometimes they were), or because the students complained (very few did), but because these serial affairists played out their disruptive,



Claire Potter (courtesy of The New School, Martin Seck)

attention-seeking little dramas in a space where most of us were trying to get on with the business of teaching and learning. Many of the Ludlows I knew were men, some were women, and all of them were utterly deluded about why they were doing what they were doing.

Lots of people—faculty, students, and administrators—still get away with sexual behavior that ranges from foolish to destructive. What has changed is that students are now using Title IX, a federal law that can threaten a range of other institutional interests, to strike back. In response, universities now have Title IX coordinators whose only task is to ferret out and squelch these cases before they go to court. What is now called “sexual misconduct” covers sins that range from serious crimes, like criminal rape; to lesser crimes like groping; to actionable, but non-criminal, offenses like verbal and online harassment. It is a highly contextual and not always legal category, creating grounds for sanction that would have no traction off campus. [Northwestern’s policy](#), which mirrors and expands on Illinois law, prohibits a great many behaviors that seem ordinary and, as Kipnis suggests, might be *remembered* differently. For example, when inviting a subordinate to lunch (many of us do that), might she see you as pressuring her for a date? How do you know whether the student really wants to go—or believes that he cannot say no? What if she later comes to believe she was being groomed for sex?

[In the name of advancing feminism, these investigations and hearings are not changing behavior but articulating new forms of harm.](#) [Click To Tweet](#)

In February 2015, Kipnis decided that Ludlow was getting a raw deal and [wrote a story](#) about his case in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. To her shock, and mine, Northwestern students demonstrated against her. Among other things, a mattress was born aloft, an homage to Columbia University [antirape activist Emma Sulkowicz](#) and an implicit accusation that Kipnis is a rape apologist. She was then summoned into the Title IX star chamber at Northwestern herself, accused by the complainants in the Ludlow case of retaliation, something she only learned after she was there.

Northwestern’s students and Title IX administrators obviously hadn’t done their homework on Kipnis, or they would have known that efforts to intimidate her would just cause her to get a big advance to write a book about them. Kipnis concludes that the whole point of these hearings is not to help students but to help the university rid itself of faculty that are “bad for the brand” (226). But a second, perhaps genuinely unwanted outcome is that in the name of advancing feminism, these investigations and hearings are not changing behavior but articulating new forms of harm that students may not even have known they had suffered.

Having identified the harm, did Northwestern help these Jane Does? One of them, at this writing, has filed a [civil suit](#) against Kipnis and her publisher, HarperCollins. A woman who thought she only wanted to be a philosopher in the fall of 2011 is now, six years later, and poised to go on the job market, still fully enmeshed in litigating her relationship with Peter Ludlow. You decide if Title IX is working.

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[Claire Potter](#) is professor of history at the New School. She is currently writing a history of feminist antiviolence politics, “Beyond Pornography: Susan Brownmiller, Andrea Dworkin, Catharine MacKinnon and the Campaign to End Violence against Women, 1968-2000.”

The Personal is Political and Academic

Aishah Shahidah Simmons

I can’t begin to respond to Laura Kipnis’s recently released book [Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus](#), published by HarperCollins, without sharing an excerpt of my Black feminist lesbian journey. [1] Similar to and yet very different from Kipnis, I start with the personal to locate the place from where I write. I am a survivor of

incest, child sexual abuse, and rape. When I was ten, my paternal grandfather kissed, touched, and fondled my preteen body for two years. When I was twelve, the twenty-three-year-old son of one of my father's best friends fondled me. My rape happened when I was a soon-to-be twenty-year-old sophomore in college in 1989. I was on a study abroad program and broke all of the university's rules to go out, very late at night, with the man who would become my rapist. I was raped in the hotel room for which I paid. I told the man who raped me, "I don't want to do this. Please stop." I didn't violently fight back. I didn't scream or yell at the top of my lungs because I was afraid. I didn't want to make a scene. I blamed myself for saying yes, for breaking the rules about spending the night away from where we were housed, for paying for the hotel room, and for asking the man who raped me to put on a condom.



Aishah Shahidah Simmons (photo by Daniel Goudrouffe)

The morning following my rape, I went back to where the university housed the students, and I lied to my friends because they wanted to hear a good story about a wonderful night. After all, they also risked getting severely reprimanded by our university for covering for me. I didn't tell them that I was afraid to turn back after I had left them. I never uttered the words that I was frightened once I got into the hotel room that I paid for and that I was forced to have sex against my will. In an effort to both deny what happened on the night of my rape and to be in control of my body, I had consensual and pleasurable sex with another man the following evening, less than twenty-four hours after my rape. When it was time to return home to the United States, I was pregnant and didn't know which of the two men was the biological father. I was fortunate to have a safe and legal abortion at the Elizabeth Blackwell Health Center for Women in Philadelphia in 1989.

It is important to note that I initially didn't call what happened to me rape. I thought rape was when a strange, unidentifiable man lurking in the bushes grabs you in the middle of the night. I didn't know that rape could happen under circumstances like mine or that I could have the audacity to change my mind.

I share a part of my story because for many people who don't have any understanding of what rape is, they would not define what happened to me in March 1989 as rape. Frankly, after reading Kipnis's deeply troubling *Unwanted Advances*, I'm not sure she would define what happened to me as rape.

While reading Kipnis's book, I found myself asking, why this book now? I'm assuming she wrote the manuscript before the (alleged) [sexual predator in chief](#) was elected to govern the United States. Perhaps she and her mainstream publisher thought it would be a very provocative and insightful read during a Hillary Rodham Clinton presidential administration. It might have been. However, in the current political climate, where [conditions and interventions that can follow a sexual assault](#) are at risk of becoming defined as preexisting conditions under the proposed American Health Care Act, which recently passed in the House of Representatives, her book is a very frightening and I believe dangerous read.

To be fair, Kipnis, a self-identified feminist, repeatedly states that she's not talking about actual rape per se. She also explicitly states that she's not victim blaming or slut shaming. Instead, she challenges how paranoia about sex leads to Title IX "witch hunts" (30) against innocent men and some women including herself. The problem, however, is that she never fully acknowledges that rape, sexual harassment, and sexual misconduct are realities on campuses throughout the United States. She doesn't acknowledge that professors have herstories/histories of abusing their power with students in the classroom and also in the bedroom. This is not to deny the painful reality of false accusations that harm faculty and students. It is to inquire about why Kipnis didn't hold these two realities in tension in her book. Instead, her premise is that sexual paranoia is destroying innocent people's lives, most especially faculty, on campuses. I would argue that in exponentially more instances than not, it is sexual violence

and other forms of sexual misconduct that's destroying people's lives on campuses.

Kipnis's two-page foray into talking about Black students and alleged sexual misconduct on campuses was deeply problematic at best and racist at worst. First of all, the only time she references Black students is when she addresses athletes. This inadvertently implies that Black men are only attending universities because they are athletes, not because they are also intellectuals. Equally as egregious, Black women are referred to only as appendages to Black men, as in competition with white women and other Black women for Black men's attention. Kipnis doesn't provide any in-depth cultural context about African American students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs). Additionally, Black women are not even presented as possible victims of sexual misconduct. Instead, in these two pages, she uses broad generalizations—including mentions of drinking, drugs, unprotected sex, abortions, traditionalism, and respectability politics—that draw on stereotypes to frame an entire, albeit tiny, community on a PWI campus. In Kipnis's world, even alleged sexual violence isn't something that happens to Black women. Given all of this, I think it would've been best if she had stayed clear of the issue, given her inability to go beyond a token mention that I believe causes more harm than it offers insight. This is coming from a documentary filmmaker who spent twelve years making *NO! The Rape Documentary*, a film about intraracial rape and sexual assault in Black communities.

Also deeply troubling is that Kipnis assumes that her audience is already on board and has an acute understanding of what rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of sexual misconduct are. What she's offering to (presumably well informed) readers is an opportunity to look at some of the tough challenges Title IX presents.

[The solution is to explore what can we do to either improve the accountability systems that are in place or to radically change them.](#)[Click To Tweet](#)

I would be among the first to share that I have some concerns about Title IX, especially mandatory reporting. Over the years, students have been drawn to talk to me about violence that they've experienced because I'm out, about, and public about being an incest and rape survivor. When I'm in an instructor role at colleges and universities, a student's disclosure puts me in a precarious position, not only because of Title IX requirements but also because I need to have established boundaries to avoid any confusion about my role as their instructor and not as their friend and confidante. With that said, the solution is not to diminish the very frightening reality that so many survivors of sexual violence—and of less violent but often quite harmful sexual harassment—face. Tragically, this is what Kipnis does in her book.

The solution is to explore what can we do to either improve the accountability systems that are in place or to radically change them. However, radical change should not mean that we create environments where, unless it's a strange unidentifiable man in the bushes who rapes someone, it is assumed that the person hasn't been harmed.

[1] I use and capitalize the word *Black* and use it interchangeably with African American to describe some of the descendants of enslaved Africans who were brought to this hemisphere against their will in chains. In this context, *Black* is not a color, it is a politicized racial identity. I identify as a Black feminist because I see myself and my work as part of a continuum of radical Black / African American women who have been fighting for racial, gender, and sexuality justice in the United States and internationally for centuries.

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Aishah Shahidah Simmons is an award-winning Black feminist lesbian documentary filmmaker, activist, cultural worker, writer and international lecturer. She is the creator of the internationally acclaimed Ford Foundation-funded film *NO! The Rape Documentary* and the Just Beginnings Collaborative-funded multimedia campaign [#LoveWITHAccountability](#). She is also a visiting scholar at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice, where she is affiliated with the Evelyne Jacobs Ortner Center for Violence. An associate editor of the

online publication *The Feminist Wire*, Simmons has screened her work, guest lectured, taught courses, and facilitated workshops across the North American continent, and in numerous countries in Europe, Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

Missing Feminism in *Unwanted Advances*

Lisa Wade

Laura Kipnis's book, *Unwanted Advances*, is a critique of college women's turn to institutions of higher education to protect them from rape, sexual assault, sexual harassment, and sexual exploitation by faculty. Kipnis sees this development as deeply "antifeminist" (20), a "broken" feminism (17), pointing out that feminists of previous generations fought for exactly the opposite: institutional noninterference, or an end to universities acting in loco parentis. The result, she argues, has been the emergence of a nefarious "sexual assault industrial complex" (219), operating in cahoots with the federal government, that engages in grave institutional overreach and is biased in favor of alleged victims, who are by definition women.

Kipnis's suggestion that Title IX is antifeminist is curious. Not only because the law was explicitly designed to ensure women's full access to education but because feminism has always involved a fight for institutional recognition and protection. Arguably the first modern feminist movement—the fight for women's suffrage—was exactly about that: a feminist claim to institutional self-governance, not freedom from it. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, likewise, gave women the right to equal treatment at work. Anita Hill and her contemporaries fought for the legal recognition of sexual harassment. The spirit of Title IX is in this vein, setting the expectation that colleges and universities would reorganize their institutions so as to stop favoring men on campus. Whether in politics, work, the law, or education, targeting institutions is a timeworn—and essential—feminist strategy.



Lisa Wade

[Whether in politics, work, the law, or education, targeting institutions is a timeworn—and essential—feminist strategy.](#) [Click To Tweet](#)

Kipnis never mentions the history of women demanding institutional equality, perhaps because she is so strongly committed to a notion of liberation defined by *freedom from* interference. The essay that sparked the Title IX investigation of Kipnis herself, for example, made a strong case for [the right of professors to sleep with students](#), and vice versa. She sees herself a defender of pleasure (and ambivalence), letting others concern themselves with risks and danger, staking a claim in a long-standing and important feminist conversation. But liberation requires more than noninterference. Freedom from interference must be balanced by a *freedom to*. We need to be enabled by our institutions as well as unconstrained.

For Kipnis, though, the institution can only constrain freedom. She characterizes student demands that colleges and universities ensure equal access to education as "a vast, unprecedented transfer of power [from women themselves] into the hands of the institution" (17). Not that she has much to say about what women themselves might do instead. As an afterthought, she checks in with a few of her own students who confirm the prevalence of rape, assault, and harassment of women on campus, much to her stated surprise. In response, her sole recommendation is a

requirement that all incoming female first year students take self-defense classes.

Her limited vision of both feminism and freedom as properties of individuals is, in fact, exactly why she fails to see that the collective effort of students around the country to raise awareness, organize, and hold institutions accountable *is* feminist. She sees the mobilization of Title IX as evidence of a lack of female agency, a “transfer of power,” as if women standing arm in arm holding their attackers responsible is not a brave show of force.

Kipnis’s book will resonate nonetheless, because—despite the recent exemplary [collective action](#) around sexual assault—the *freedom from* view is most consistent with contemporary American culture. Decades of rising individualism, neoliberal politics, and the simplistic appeal of libertarian values have left us with impoverished ideas of both freedom and agency. As Barbara Risman’s [forthcoming book](#) chillingly shows, even young feminist radicals have a hard time imagining anything other than individual resistance to the status quo. There is a real risk that collective action will become a lost art.

Indeed, the follow-up question to Kipnis’s claims, one to which I am more sympathetic, is why women seem to feel that *only* the institution can protect them. As someone who has spent [a lot of time listening to college students myself](#), I can confirm that many women experience male danger like a frightening but inevitable meteorological event. From this point of view, there is little one can do to stop the storm from coming, short of praying to the gods who have control over these things—or to the closest thing on their campuses: college administrators.

I can see many other solutions, not the least of which would involve women agreeing among themselves that they could easily go without sex with men—indeed, without any male attention at all—until and unless men on campus cooperated to offer them a safer sexual playground. To channel the feminist [Adrienne Rich](#), what men fear much more than women’s scorn is the possibility that women might have no need or regard for them at all.

Unfortunately, in contemporary America, people on all political sides often see only individual solutions. Women can and should be responsible for themselves, in this logic, because people can and should be responsible only for themselves, only to themselves, because it is every man for himself. Ironically, sexual assault on campus arises from a very similar dynamic: a valorization of sexual competition between status-seeking students who are more interested in scoring than they are in pleasure, intimacy, or any of the other ways in which sex has the power to connect and transcend the individual.

Kipnis wants to free students up to enter this game and play at their own risk—free, but only from interference. I want to change the sexual culture, to free students from having to engage with each other antagonistically, from seeing danger as inevitable, from rigid sexual scripts and identities, and from an erotic marketplace that privileges the already powerful. The latter, though, requires a group effort, something Kipnis can’t see as feminist at all. I hope college students are able to see beyond her.

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[Lisa Wade](#) is an associate professor of sociology at Occidental College. She is the author of [American Hookup: The New Culture of Sex on Campus](#) and [Gender: Ideas, Interactions, Institutions](#). You can learn more about her research, public writing, and speaking at her [website](#), or follow her on [Twitter](#) or [Facebook](#).

A Response

Laura Kipnis

I’m trying to remember why I agreed to do this exchange. I suppose I thought it was a chance to have an interesting discussion with people I figured would disagree with the book. Of course, I assumed they’d be discussing the book I’d written, which turns out to have been wrong. Four of the five respondents would rather caricature my arguments

and hurl accusations—I'm antifeminist! I'm pro-patriarchy! I'm racist!—and remind me that rape is bad (duly noted). Is *Signs* seriously asking me to respond to Jaclyn Friedman's charge that I think "most rape is just bad sex," or Aishah Shahidah Simmons's that I'd deny she was raped? For the record, my central concern throughout the book is the content of sexual consent. If you tell someone to stop and they don't, it's rape. Rape is a crime.

Kipnis author pic crop

Laura Kipnis

I am however cheered by Lisa Wade's solution to the campus assault issue: college women should stop having sex with men. That's supposed to be an example of collective action as opposed to my suspect individualism. And right in line with the approaches of Friedman, Simmons, and Kelly Oliver: nunnish. These are people so busy praying to the church of their own holiness they can't be bothered with the messy realities of sexual life as lived. The happy exception is Claire Potter, who's (thankfully) no nun, and is willing to get her hands dirty. And to take an intellectual risk or two.

For the others I'm a "provocateur," and thus all forms of evidence I present can be batted away. Except it's hardly me alone making these arguments. I'm joined by law professors around the country (including [twenty-eight from Harvard's Law School](#)), who've issued a series of open letters about the failures of due process in Title IX implementation and the climate of hyperaccusation that's seized our campuses. There's also Harvard law professors Jacob Gersen and Jeannie Suk's important 2016 *California Law Review* essay "[The Sex Bureaucracy](#)." And by the way, Title IX officers themselves have started acknowledging they've gone too far; see the recent white paper "[Due Process and the Sex Police](#)" (from NCHERM, one of the major Title IX consulting firms).

A few other irritable rejoinders:

To Simmons: Before you hurl charges of racism around, try reading more carefully. The "stereotypes" you accuse me of promulgating were accounts by black women students about their own experiences, as told to another black woman student, whom I call Tania, who interviewed them. These weren't broad "generalizations," they were glimpses at things *some* black women students said on one campus. It's clear that those accounts were related by Tania, who's fully aware—as *she* says—that the issues she and her friends discussed, particularly regarding black athletes, risk sounding stereotypical. Their dilemma is that not discussing them ends up shielding badly behaved men.

Speaking of badly behaved men, Oliver thinks I turn Peter Ludlow into "Saint Peter." Again, try reading more carefully, for example, the passages where I write that, despite my ambivalence about Ludlow's behavior, *reading the evidence* convinced me that the Title IX cases against him were based on gender bias and specious logic. Oliver says Ludlow had a pattern of sleeping with students. Right, but that's not the same thing as sexual assault. Does being a feminist mean no longer being capable of making rudimentary distinctions? Does social justice require putting our intellects on hold?

[Our women students aren't nuns, nor do most of them wish to follow in the holy footsteps of their feminist elders.](#)[Click To Tweet](#)

Potter is someone I'd happily have a longer discussion with, not because we agree on everything, but because she's more interested in exploring complexities than scoring virtue points. Her insight about serial affairists playing out little dramas at other people's expense is all too true. I'd only add that the same scenarios get played out off campus and throughout adult life. Unfortunately for us all, people's sexual motives aren't always upstanding, nor is human behavior universally stellar. Among the goals of a decent education, I believe, should be educating our students to navigate the complex realities they'll face in their postgraduation lives. *That's* the solution I propose: stop deploying regulation in lieu of education.

Our women students aren't nuns, nor do most of them wish to follow in the holy footsteps of their feminist elders. Nor are male students (or professors of any gender) saints. Feminists have always disagreed about what feminism

means, but feminists who can't talk honestly about sexual realities—including the vast array of sexual interactions that are *not* rape—should do the world the courtesy of admitting their irrelevance and let others carry on the conversation.

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Laura Kipnis is a cultural critic and former video artist whose work focuses on sexual politics, aesthetics, emotion, acting out, bad behavior, and various other crevices of the American psyche. Along with *Unwanted Advances*, her seven books include *Men: Notes from an Ongoing Investigation*, *How to Become A Scandal*, and *Against Love: A Polemic*, and have been translated into fifteen languages. Her essay, “Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe” was included in *The Best American Essays 2016*, edited by Jonathan Franzen. Kipnis is a professor in the Department of Radio/TV/Film at Northwestern, where she teaches filmmaking.

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