Unwanted Advances by Laura Kipnis

Book Review by Sam Mountford
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What role does the university play in the present historical moment, not in terms of education but rather as an institution? The political culture wars, developing online in the years and months leading up to Trump’s presidential election, played out on campuses throughout the United States. In 2014 Emma Sulkowicz began her Mattress Performance at Columbia. Milo Yiannopoulos’s Dangerous Faggot Tour visited campuses for over a year before ending in 2017 with the Berkley protests. The Biden’s 2016 Summer Playlist on Spotify featured Lady Gaga’s single Till It Happens To You, recorded for the soundtrack the The Hunting Grounds, a 2015 documentary on campus rape culture.

Administrative reaction came in the form of new codes such as those prohibiting sexual and romantic relationships between undergraduate students and faculty. Relationships between grad students and faculty are not prohibited but considered “problematic” and have to be reported to the department chair. While similar codes have since been introduced internationally, specific to the United States is the federal civil rights law Title IX, enacted in 1972 to protect individuals against sexual discrimination in federally funded education.
Laura Kipnis’ book *Unwanted Advances: Sexual Paranoia Comes to Campus* was first published April 2017, in the interim between the beginning of Trump’s presidency and the advent of the #MeToo movement. It takes stock of the dominant discourses surrounding sexual harassment on campus and examines the responses in internal policies and policing. *Unwanted Advances* is a comprehensive follow-up to an essay written by Kipnis and published in 2015 by *The Chronicles of Higher Education* entitled *Sexual Paranoia Strikes Academe*. The reception to this essay resulted in student protests at Northwestern University where Kipnis is a professor, and ultimately led to Title IX claims being made against her.

Kipnis retaliates with *Unwanted Advances*, both a case against the increasing implementation of Title IX within universities and its weaponisation against both students and faculty, and, a comprehensive critique aimed at a “broken” feminism and the bureaucratic apparatus that both enables and endorses it.

The text consists of five chapters, an introduction, and a coda. Three of the chapters focus on the specifics of Title IX claims against philosopher Peter Ludlow and Kipnis herself. In these chapters Kipnis scrutinises the evidence on which original claims and conclusive findings were based, in order to demonstrate the negligent bias of those employed to oversee and conduct investigations. The treatment of this evidence by; generally consisting of personal correspondence, social media content, interviews, official statements and interrogations, is pseudo-journalistic; borderline exposé. Personal vendettas aside, *Unwanted Advances* goes to recognisable lengths to understand what has led to a “radically transformed” campus culture; one fraught with a contagious paranoia Kipnis compares to that of Salem in the late seventeenth century.
“Policies and codes that bolster traditional femininity – which has always favoured stories about female endangerment over stories of female agency – are the last thing in the world that’s going to reduce sexual assault…” (Kipnis 9)

Kipnis’ is concerned for the state of feminism. This concern stems, in part, from what she perceives as a changing narrative regarding sex and sexual agency. Reflecting on her own experiences as a young woman Kipnis draws a distinction between the dominant narrative of her youth and what she observes today among her students. Her narrative was one of freedom, liberation and experimentation, with an acceptance of the trial and error that entailed. The present narrative, Kipnis believes, is one of danger and misadventure, which becomes the filter through which issues of sex, agency and consent are discussed.

Encoded within these resounding affirmations of experiences of sexual harassment, manipulation, and coercion, Kipnis detects a fatalistic conception of femininity as a state of constant vulnerability and endangerment. The emphasis on harm and violation as the defining experience for women can too easily, Kipnis argues, become entrenched in a gendered binary logic of predator and victim, active and passive: where “…men’s power is taken as given instead of interrogated: men need to be policed, women need to be protected.” (Kipnis 14)

In the context of the university this un-interrogated (and unquestioned) power is not only vested in masculinity. It is a more general conception of power entirely based on a top-down model that continually frustrates Kipnis as she determines its influence in student testimonies, investigatory processes, and university policy-making. In response to what she perceives as a regressive undertone in progressive feminist politics Kipnis advocates for a “grown-up feminism”, described as “…one that
recognises how much feminine deference and traditionalism persist amid all the “pro-sex” affirmations and slogans, even as women are trying to switch up gender roles and sexual scripts.” (Kipnis 201) By focusing on the shifting narratives fundamental to political ideology Kipnis acknowledges the issue as that of different historical approaches to the common experience of patriarchal oppression. Her challenge is aimed at the message and the method, not the cause.

The #MeToo movement could be considered the greatest public articulation of this common experience of oppression to date. As American professor Jane Gallop, author of Feminist Accused of Sexual Harassment, premises in her review of Unwanted Advances, March 2018: “Kipnis’ book already seems out of step with the times” (Critical Inquiry), requiring reassessment after the fact of #MeToo. Kipnis herself has argued elsewhere that the #MeToo movement similarly represents women as “the morally upstanding gender…under siege by male sexuality.” (The Guardian) She views this as a rearticulation of the same narrative being perpetuated, embodied and reinforced through the alliance between young feminists and administrative bureaucracy. Which brings us to Kipnis’ major critique: the institutional hijacking of civil rights, or, the rise of “carceral feminism”.

“Carceral feminism…the hawkish security state swerve in social policy on women’s issues: more policing, more regulation, an eagerness to trade away civil liberties for illusory promises of safety, and the same complacent failure of analysis.” (Kipnis 17)

It was in 2011 that the Obama government cracked down on North American universities demanding their responsibility in pursuing cases of sexual harassment and discrimination. Guidelines and expectations were regularly updated through the ‘Dear Colleague’ letters and universities considered negligent in upholding the
standards of the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) faced federal investigations costing hundreds of thousands of dollars. Kipnis takes the reader step-by-step through the processes and findings of several Title IX investigations to cast doubt on the underlying motives of these efforts.

Kipnis is disturbed to witness campus feminism in cahoots with university administration, resulting in the invasive bureaucratisation of the private lives of students and faculty alike. Her attitude towards authority is leery at best, and she devotes much of the book to analysing how the overreach of administrative jurisdiction has negatively impacted higher education: putting faculty in an increasingly defenceless position and making examples out of students and staff in order to appease public relations. The outcomes, in her opinion, have “exactly nothing to do with gender equity and emancipating women”, and more to do with “extending the reach of campus bureaucracy into everyone’s lives. It’s a vast, unprecedented transfer of power into the hands of institutions” (Kipnis 16) Kipnis once again questions the crude and naïve conception of power that considers the authority of institutional administration benign while fixating on the threat of individual trespass.

*Unwanted Advances* identifies a mutation that took place under the increased pressure of the OCR: the student-as-consumer model became, in practice, an infatalising and anarchic *in loco parentis*. New campus codes simultaneously seize a student’s ability to consent as an adult while also making any consent given (ever) retroactively retractable. Claims are made on premises ranging from inappropriate jokes to lecturer curriculum choices to misinterpreted eye contact to instances of physical assault. From Kipnis’ surmising, it is this indiscriminate formal complaint making, combined with investigatory processes of non-disclosure and the strategic withholding of evidence, that creates a “state of crisis” in which critical distance
becomes unfashionable or simply verboten. Critical distance can be understood here as an epistemic position, something which Kipnis determines as fundamental to both higher education and the resolution of conflict. Furthermore, this climate of suspicion is no longer localised to the university, which, following new codes is “…obligated to consider the effect of off-campus conduct.” (Kipnis 119)

As a disclaimer I will mention that I was recently involved in an internal investigation carried out by the University of Tasmania in Australia. Many of Kipnis’ recollections of her own experience were true to my own, despite very different circumstances. The fallout from this investigation, the findings of which remain undisclosed, was the withdrawal of several students and the resignation of several staff, the conditions of which are still being negotiated eight months later. The method is to wear you down. It’s effective.

“What’s being lost, along with job security, is the ability to publish ideas that go against the grain or take unpopular positions. With students increasingly regarded as customers and consumer satisfaction paramount, you’d better avoid controversy if you’re on a renewable contract.” (Kipnis 146)

Laura Kipnis is a learned bedfellow of controversy. A quick browse of her published titles gives some sense of this; yet, there is a significant difference between researching controversial subjects and being the subject of controversy. Kipnis shows no discomfort bridging this gap. In her own words “…I’ve always been drawn to what you’re not supposed to say, it’s almost a methodology at this point.” (Kipnis 170) It is worth noting that she is a tenured professor and therefore spoke from a position of relative security, which she acknowledges. The public response to her critical commentary has been varied, alienating many on the left while validating the millennial bashing of the right. Kipnis herself identifies as a leftist-feminist while
expressing a strong libertarian streak in her writings. As for *Unwanted Advances*, the value of Kipnis’ contribution to the ongoing public discourse regarding female sexual agency and systemic abuses of power should be judged in the context of the moment in recent history to which it was responding.

How institutions such as universities react to destabilising changes in cultural discourse and respond to them through internal policy and process should remain under scrutiny. It is on this matter that *Unwanted Advances* seems most relevant today. Kipnis’ final remarks on the case against Peter Ludlow, her primary example of the McCarthyesque witch hunts that Title IX investigations become, are articulate in concrete terms: “Big universities are multimillion-dollar businesses…and Ludlow was bad for the brand.” (Kipnis 201)

I will finish this review with a very brief cross-reading of Sarah Schulman’s *Conflict is not Abuse*, published late 2016. In this book Schulman tries to take account of what she terms “overstatements of harm”, in which conflict, that can be resolved, is mistaken for abuse, which inevitably leads to forms of violence.

In the first chapter Schulman recounts an interaction in which she suspected she was being flirted with. This was not unwelcome, and the suggestive conversation evoked desire in Schulman. As the interaction was taking place within a professional context however, this desire felt dangerous. Based on the prescribed codes of conduct Schulman is aware that she could be “accused of desire” and that by responding in kind she could easily become “the sad object of an outraged story on the dreaded grapevine…” (Schulman 27) Schulman considers the historical victims of the danger of desire, typically minorities but also women. The relevance of Schulman’s thesis to Kipnis’, as it has been considered in this review, can be deduced from this sentence: “Just as unresolved, formerly subordinated or
traumatised individuals can collude or identify with bullies, so can unresolved, formerly subordinated or traumatised groups of people identify with the supremacy of the state…” (Schulman 9)

Moving beyond the expanding realm of the university, whose role remains ambiguous and therefore under scrutiny, the question becomes something to the effect of: how are the terms of empowerment undermined by the apparatus of power it enlists? Unwanted Advances provides a useful case study.

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References:


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