

Amalia Ziv

*Explicit Utopias: Rewriting the Sexual in Women's Pornography*

Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015 (ISBN 978-1-4384-5709-3)

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Amalia Ziv's *Explicit Utopias: Rewriting the Sexual in Women's Pornography* provides a welcome investigation into the possible value of alternative sexual representations for women and feminism. Ziv studies a range of alternative pornographic prose fiction written by and for women in the 1980s and 90s, arguing that this literature provides a valuable resource that women can, and should, appropriate for the construction of female sexual subjectivities.

Chapter 1 revisits the feminist pornography debates in North America in the 1980s and 1990s. Ziv contrasts the key arguments of Catharine MacKinnon with those of the "anti-antiporn" position, finding the latter to be more supportive of women's sexual subjectivity. The remaining chapters provide a detailed evaluation of "the 'positive' claim of anti-antiporn feminism, the claim that pornography can be appropriated to construct women as sexual subjects" (69). Drawing on the notion of "phantasmatic strategies" to refer to how pornographic fiction envisions women as sexual subjects, Ziv devotes a chapter to each of the main strategies she identifies: cross-identification with gay male sexuality (chapter 2); refiguring penetration (chapter 3); resignifying the phallus (chapter 4); and a performative understanding of gender (chapter 5). Each chapter connects relevant feminist and psychoanalytical theories and debates to practical examples of the strategy under consideration, ranging from Anne Rice's *Beauty Trilogy* (72-84), to Anne Sprinkles's *The Sluts and Goddesses Video Workshop* (134-37). Chapter 6 explores how these strategies continue to play out in a contemporary context, looking specifically at cross-gender queer and transgender pornography. Ziv concludes with a brief coda, stating her core position that "pornographic fiction by women takes advantage of the phantasmatic potential of pornography to construct women as sexual subjects" (230). However, she also acknowledges the limits of pornographic resignifications, which, she concedes, must to some degree conform to our world in order to affect us erotically. This willingness to "concede some ground to antiporn feminism" (231) is rare in writers exploring the feminist potential of pornography. The ability to work with ambiguity is one of Ziv's strengths, and is particularly useful given the often polarized positions in the feminist pornography debates.

Chapter 2 explores the first phantasmatic strategy Ziv identifies: the cross-identification with gay male sexuality, where women experience a sense of sexual subjectivity through identification with gay male pornography. Ziv argues that the extensive borrowing from gay male sexual culture in both heterosexual and lesbian women's pornographic prose fiction is motivated by the desire to articulate female sexual subjectivity. Thus what may appear to be a move away from feminist identifications and commitments is in fact informed by a feminist project. Ziv offers a compelling argument for the transformative potential of this strategy (98-99), claiming that since cross-identification involves the assimilation of a desired aspect or attribute of the other, it reveals the contingency of identity boundaries. This revelation allows not only for a disruption but a destabilization of identity through the inauguration of what Ziv terms "new identity formations" (99). Here she gives the example of the identity-category *queer* as describing "an unprecedented configuration of identifications between gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, transgendered people, and other sexual and gender nonconformers" (99). Read in this way, cross-identification can be seen as a strategic political tool for transforming notions of female sexuality, though it remains limited, as Ziv acknowledges, in its "enduring equation of subjectivity with masculinity" (231).

Ziv's analysis of connected strategies of recoding penetration and resignifying the phallus, in chapters 3 and 4, continues to explore the feminist potential of symbolic disruption and resignification. In chapter 3, Ziv examines Andrea Dworkin's phenomenological claims that, when seen as an experience of the violability of the female self, penetrative sex is at odds with the quality of impermeability usually understood as a necessary condition for the integrity or autonomy of the self (Dworkin 1987, 101-09). Ziv uses Drucilla Cornell to construct an alternative model of human subjectivity (male and female) marked by the metaphor of body as threshold *for* the self rather than as barrier *to* the self (Cornell 1991). On this understanding, instead of being entered, the body "gives access" (106), which can be seen as an expression of embodied agency marked by openness and receptivity. Penetration is thus refigured from Dworkin's mode of possession to one of subjectivity. This analysis is certainly thought-provoking. However, it is undercut by Ziv's claim that Dworkin (and MacKinnon) misguidedly target the practice of intercourse rather than its cultural significations (107). In Dworkin's view, the two aspects of intercourse are inseparable--enmeshed in analysis as they are in lived experience. Ziv's suggestion that Dworkin embraces a masculine model of subjectivity rather than radically questioning it (107) also misrepresents Dworkin's project of describing the world as it presents itself to consciousness, not as it should, or could, be. Dworkin's argument articulates a masculine model of subjectivity as that which represents our common understanding of the self. Appealing to the ways in which "the self" is usually understood given the dominance of the masculine subject in systems of knowledge-production is not the same as endorsing the model underpinning this.

In chapter 4, Ziv maintains that the shared lesbian dildo fantasy that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s engages not with the penis as such but with the phallus and its entire symbolic baggage. The chapter explores various feminist theoretical approaches to the phallus, as well as how it is deployed in lesbian pornography. Ziv focuses on the arguments of Judith Butler, which, she argues, offer possibilities for disrupting the privileged position of the phallus in resignifications or rearticulations that undermine its naturalized link to men's bodies. On this view, the dildo signifies gender fluidity and the denaturalization of gender. This leads into the final phantasmatic

strategy, built on Butler's work on gender performativity. The central contention here is that since femininity has been constructed as antithetical to experiencing ourselves as sexual subjects, gender performativity can help by freeing women from "compulsory femininity, thus removing this barrier to sexual subjectivity" (193). The libidinal investment in gender divisions and roles means the naturalization of these roles can be challenged through sexual gender play (gender-bending or genderfuck), disrupting their legitimacy through revealing their contingency. This claim grounds Ziv's examination of the topos of cross-gender queer sex in literary fiction and transgender porn, both textual and visual. Ziv offers a definition of three components of the gender-bending theme prominent in contemporary lesbian pornography, though, given her later argument on the porous nature of the categories of lesbian, queer, and transgender pornography (218-26), this definition could be applied across other forms. These components are: cross-gender performance; a sense of "play" that is conscious of performing for an audience (be it one's partner, spectator[s], or oneself); and a sense of transgression regarding one's assigned place in the gender system (180).

Ziv provides a persuasive argument against Butler's attempts to remove the theatrical trope of performance from the concept of gender performativity (176-78), highlighting how Butler's earlier formulations did in fact draw on analogies with theatrical performance. For Ziv, rejecting the theatrical model risks losing "the singular suitability of the theatrical trope for describing the embodied character of gender" (176). The point here is that Butler's call to understand gendered acts as speech acts elides the dimension of bodily experience contained in those acts. The embodied character of gendered acts is absent in an understanding of gender purely in terms of linguistic performativity, whether or not that embodiment can be experienced (or indeed, as Butler would have it, exists at all) beyond or outside of the performative. In place of Butler's positioning of the linguistic trope of "citationality" as the principle explaining gender performance, then, Ziv suggests a notion of performativity that "hovers productively between theatricality and citationality" (177).

Ziv's highlighting of Butler's conceptual move away from the embodied character of gendered acts brings to light a tension that underlies Ziv's study, namely focusing her study so as to avoid discussing pornography as an embodied practice. An often overlooked aspect of the work of both MacKinnon and Dworkin is how they framed pornography as both speech (that is, representational) *and* as a sexual practice that is enacted, performed, rehearsed, and used in what for Joan Mason-Grant are real life "socially structured, irreducibly embodied activities" (Mason-Grant 2004, 33). Such a productively ambiguous model resonates with Ziv's own task of hovering between the theatrical and the citational. In defending the decision to focus on pornographic prose (as opposed to film or photography), despite acknowledging that this decision may seem "retrograde" to some readers (7), Ziv appeals to the stark lack of literature on women-produced literary pornography. However, she also notes that focusing on this genre "offers the significant advantage of sidestepping the ethical concerns that inevitably come up in relation to most photographic or moving-image pornography, that is, the question of exploitation and abuse of models and performers" (7). An unexplored question here is whether we can consider avoiding ethical concerns to be advantageous for the task of evaluating pornography's potential in women's sexual liberation. The decision to sidestep the ethical concerns that arise in the production of pornography is also confusing given that filmed pornographic texts do in fact

form part of Ziv's analysis, particularly (though not exclusively) in her discussion of phallic resignification in lesbian pornography (160-67) and FTM transgender pornography (207-14).

A second objection concerns Ziv's characterization of the anti-porn position in chapter 1 on the feminist "porn wars." Ziv attributes the whole of the anti-porn position in the 1980s and 1990s to MacKinnon. This leads to the perceived flaws in MacKinnon's work being discussed not only as though these are the flaws of the anti-porn position in its entirety, but also as though her legal project absorbs Dworkin's more phenomenological approach, or as though her work hasn't been critiqued and developed by theorists who also adopt a critical perspective on the potentialities of pornography for women's sexual liberation, for example, Karen Boyle (Boyle 2010). This absence of any discussion of the contestations from within the anti-porn position in the body of the text is highlighted by the citing of Boyle in an endnote critiquing the reduction of anti-porn feminism to MacKinnon and Dworkin (244, n. 55). Boyle's *Everday Pornography* is a collected edition that challenges the reductive approach Ziv applies to the contemporary anti-porn position, here attributing current anti-porn feminism to just two women, Pamela Paul and Gail Dines. This approach enables Ziv to characterize the contemporary feminist anti-porn position as one constructed around notions of authentic sexuality, the addiction paradigm, and engaging with men "not as oppressors called to relinquish their privileges but rather as abused victims" (61). The work of critical masculinity scholars engaging in anti-porn work, in both contemporary and twentieth-century contexts, is hidden here, along with their focus on men as conscious agents making commitments to pornography (see, for example, Hearn 1991; Cowburn and Pringle 2000; Jensen 2007). Limiting the present anti-porn position to two women also hides how contemporary critics of pornography challenge addiction and trauma models for understanding pornography use; Boyle's chapter on representations of porn consumers in her collection is an example here (Boyle 2010).

Such a construction thus hides the overlaps and commonalities between, as well as the contestations within, the positions characterizing the "sex wars," unhelpfully reinforcing the very oppositional binary that Ziv acknowledges as having led to a stalemate. Although I sympathize with the difficulty of providing a satisfactory overview of what are intricate and in places internally contested positions, the contending views need to be stated precisely and the tensions and complexities within them acknowledged. The combination of this reductive account of the anti-porn position and the focus on pornographic prose fiction enables Ziv to critique speech act theory without acknowledging how this has been carefully developed by writers occupying a critical position on pornography, for example, Rae Langton (Langton 2009; most recently critiqued by Bauer 2015) and Mason-Grant (2004), while simultaneously bypassing MacKinnon's insights into the harms in pornography as a practice, most notably in its production.

Ultimately, Ziv's analysis of the resignificatory potential of pornography upholds the position of Pat Califia, whom she quotes (179), in affirming that through sexual play we "can select the things that are regarding and gratifying about the male/female gender system and leave behind the ugly aspects of institutionalized inequality" (Califia 1983/1994, 186-87). The promised rewriting of the systems limiting women's sexual subjectivities stays at the level of individual revolt in such a framing, as the sexual self negotiated through such practices has no investment in dismantling inequality for those it leaves behind.

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