

**Rachel O'Neill**

## Book review: performing sex: the making and unmaking of women's erotic lives by Breanne Fahs

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### *Feminism & Psychology*

Reviewed by: Rachel O'Neill, King's College London, UK

*Performing sex* is a study of sexual subjectivities and sexual politics in the contemporary United States of America. Bringing together feminist theory, psychological research and social analysis, author Breanne Fahs examines women's negotiations of a highly contradictory sexual culture, where discourses of empowerment are intimately bound up with new modes of disempowerment and compulsion. Performance is conceived not as a distinct action but as a concept or paradigm, enabling Fahs to consider more literal instances of performance (for example, faking orgasm) alongside more abstracted performances (for example, underplaying sexual coercion). Referencing the lack of consideration typically given to affect and experience in sex research (often displaced by an interest in behaviour and practice), Fahs places women's narratives about sex and relationships at the centre of her work. Through the stories of these women, who occupy a variety of social locations shaped by their sexual identity, race, ethnicity, class and age, we learn something of the psychic patterning and affective texture of contemporary sexual politics. In this review I provide an overview of the book, detailing the analytic focus and theoretical discussions of each chapter, before considering how this work can be put into dialogue with current feminist scholarship on postfeminism.

Chapter 1, entitled 'Getting, giving, having, faking: Orgasm and the performance of pleasure', centres on women's performances of orgasm in the context of partnered sex. Taking seriously the political implications of sexual pleasure, Fahs considers female orgasm as a kind of index of gender and sexual (in)equality. The chapter begins with a detailed analysis of how cultural understandings of female orgasm have changed over the course of 20<sup>th</sup> century, before considering the emergence of women faking orgasm as a common finding in contemporary sex research. Fahs notes a dominant tendency for women to narrate their orgasms in terms of a 'gift' metaphor, whereby orgasm is constructed as something their partners 'give' to them, rather than something they bring about for themselves with or in relation to others. A majority of women described feeling pressured by partners to orgasm and reported faking orgasm as a way to avoid guilt and shame about 'failing' to do so. This analysis makes clear that the embodied actuality of women's sexual pleasure is secondary to its enactment, as the pretence of pleasure functions as a strategy for women to deal with cultural and interpersonal demands for their orgasm.

Drawing on Adrienne Rich's formative work on compulsory heterosexuality, Chapter 2 develops an analysis of 'performative bisexuality', where women engage in homoerotic acts for men's pleasure. Fahs first sets out the historical context of research on bisexuality. She then examines the increased visibility of same-sex eroticism within popular culture (as encapsulated in such 'media moments' as the Britney-Madonna kiss and popular programming such as *Girls Gone Wild*) and

debates whether this amounts to the acceptance or exploitation of bisexual and lesbian desire. Exemplifying the importance of an intersectional research framing, she finds distinct differences in women's experiences of performative bisexuality in terms of both age and sexual identity. For example, among younger women (under 35) pressure to engage same-sex eroticism was most often exerted by men in social contexts such as parties and clubs, while among older women pressure to perform as bisexual was usually experienced in the context of coupled relationships, for example, through partners' requests for threesomes. Though performative bisexuality may be seen to open out space for women to explore same-sex attraction, the character of these experiences suggests another reading. Where men actively pressure women to perform as bisexual, and the presence of men serves as an authorising mechanism for women to engage same-sex sexual practices, performative bisexuality may ultimately serve to reinforce compulsory heterosexuality. In this sense, performative bisexuality is not so much a challenge to compulsory heterosexuality as a reconfiguration of its boundaries, whereby the threat of women's same-sex desire is neutralised not through renunciation but through incorporation.

Described as a prospective analysis, Chapter 3 examines women's responses to the emerging medicalisation of female sexuality. The chapter opens with a fascinating investigation of recent attempts by the pharmaceutical industries to develop sexual enhancement drugs for a female market (so-called 'Viagra for women') alongside the emergence of conditions such as 'female sexual dysfunction' and 'hypoactive desire'. Facilitating these developments is the generalised acceptance of a biological model of sex, where attraction, desire, arousal and pleasure are reduced to exclusively physiological processes. Fahs asked participants what they thought about medical intervention in women's sexuality and how they would decide whether to use any sexual pharmaceuticals that become available. Their responses ranged from generally supportive, to ambivalent or conditional, to fiercely critical, with a majority of women expressing distrust of the pharmaceutical industry and opposition to the medicalisation of female desire. Given that these responses reflect an anticipated rather than actual scenario, and also considering Fahs' arguments regarding the distortion and cooption of feminist politics, it will be interesting to see in years to come whether and how this resistance is sustained.

The book's fourth chapter explores women's lived experiences of sexual pleasure through a discussion of 'best sex' narratives. During discussions with participants, Fahs found that women often struggled to articulate their pleasure. When asked what they find sexually satisfying or enjoyable *in general*, women's answers were halting, marked by hesitation and confusion, and commonly punctuated by the iteration 'I don't know'. By contrast, when asked about their *best* sexual experiences, women's responses became vivid and detailed. Examining these narratives, Fahs identifies four main themes: emotional connection; attentiveness and embodiment; newness and experimentation; and 'being away'. Of these, attentiveness was the most prominent theme, and indeed more than half of the women interviewed used this *precise* term to describe their best sexual experiences. As Fahs relates, this is a significant finding, evidencing women's appreciation for partners who are fully engaged with and respectful of their desires. What is striking about these narratives is the sense of *immediacy* which characterises many women's

accounts of their best sexual experiences. For example, one participant describes a particularly memorable encounter by saying: “It was probably one of the few times when I felt totally like I was feeling something, and I wasn’t feeling that I *should* be feeling something” (p.169). This suggests that an intense desire to somehow get beyond the overwhelmingly *mediated* character of contemporary sexuality, to exceed that which cuts us off from our selves and each other.

As well as asking women about their best sexual experiences, Fahs also asked participants about their worst sexual experience. What emerges in response is a profoundly troubling exposition of the pervasiveness of coercion and violence in women’s lives. These narratives form the basis of Chapter 5, ‘The culture of domination: Sexual violence, objectification, and access’. When describing their worst sexual experiences, participants almost invariably recounted stories involving coercion and violence. Indeed, coercion is such a typical feature in these narratives that Fahs writes: “when discussing coercion, it is not a matter of *if* women have experienced coercion, but rather a matter of *how, in what context, and what the coercion meant to them*” (p.26). Fahs separates the participants’ narratives into four analytic categories: unambiguous coercion and violence, where women have a clear sense of violation and label this as such (over one-quarter of participants); ambiguous coercion and violence, where women feel coerced but do not label the experience as ‘rape’ or ‘violence’ (more than one-third of participants); performative coercion, where women feel pressured to perform in ways that make them uncomfortable; and ambivalent encounters, where women report mentally or emotionally disengaging during sex. Taken together, these narratives illustrate the ways in which men’s right to sexually access women’s bodies is inscribed within the fabric of gender relations, and raise further concerns about how the impetus to perform as sexually ‘liberated’ informs women’s experiences of manipulation, coercion and violence.

Chapter 6 examines the symbolic content of women’s sexual fantasies, considering how this relates to the narratives presented in mainstream pornography. The chapter begins with a fairly balanced if somewhat conventional discussion of ‘sex negative’ and ‘sex positive’ feminism, relayed in the past tense and centred on the well-known arguments of scholars such as Catherine MacKinnon and Gayle Rubin. While Fahs is right in positing that these debates continue to inform contemporary feminism (as reflected in much of the discussion around the establishment of the academic journal *Porn Studies*), there is little recognition here of the more complicated stances many feminists take on issues such as pornography, positions which refuse the binary opposition marked out by categories such as ‘sex positive’ and ‘sex negative’. Examining women’s fantasy narratives, Fahs elaborates six thematic categories before discussing the most common of these, namely fantasies involving dominance, coercion, force and rape. These findings are related to the analysis developed in Chapter 4 through a consideration of the disjuncture between women’s lived and imagined sexual pleasure. Fahs explores multiple interpretations for women’s preoccupation with themes of violence in their fantasy lives, ultimately positing that: “fantasy is fantasy – and people should not underestimate the political and social significance of it – but women’s lived experiences matter a whole lot more” (p.274).

Though not directly engaged with feminist scholarship on postfeminism, Fahs' work can be usefully put into dialogue with such literature. Parallels can readily be drawn between the analysis developed by Fahs and the examination of postfeminism put forward by British cultural theorists such as Angela McRobbie and Rosalind Gill. Describing her work as concerned with 'the current trappings of empowerment discourse', Fahs elaborates a cultural context in which celebrations of progress are caught up with new modes of disempowerment and oppression. McRobbie engages a similar problem space, describing her concern with a social and cultural landscape in which the assumption that gender equality has been achieved enables the renewal of gender injustices and the reinvention of patriarchal relations. Fahs' work may also be seen to offer the kind of psychosocial framework recently called for by Gill (2011), developing a close examination of the relationship between culture and subjectivity and giving careful consideration to the affective dimensions of gendered power relations. In doing so, Fahs negotiates difficult issues surrounding women's agency in the context of gender inequality, which feminist scholars engaged in debates on postfeminism will find useful to think with and against. The conceptual framing of performance Fahs elaborates would also be usefully related to emerging work on mediated intimacies.

*Performing Sex* is a sensitive and compelling analysis of women's sexual subjectivities. While most directly addressing a psychology and women's studies readership, and almost entirely concerned with the cultural context of the United States, the arguments developed in this book are provocative and deserve wider attention. Perhaps one of the most important lessons to be drawn from Fahs' work is her discussion of how feminists can productively engage the tension between empowerment and disempowerment. Recognising that claims to liberation continually give way to new forms of oppression, and that feminist political campaigns are always subject to distortion and cooption, Fahs charges that "all solutions to the problem of women's sexual disempowerment are impermanent at best, futile at worst" (p.296). As such, the challenge for feminists and other social justice advocates is not to outline an absolute programme for change, but instead to find a multiplicity of ways to *think* and *feel* differently, to *reimagine* bodies and sex, desire and intimacy. In this way, we commit ourselves to more radical and creative modes of feminist politics, a project Fahs has taken up already in this journal with her extraordinary work on critical pedagogies (Fahs 2011). Through these kinds of engagements, which insist upon the necessity of *keeping the question open*, feminists can become more agile and strategic in responding to current permutations of gender inequality and sexual oppression.

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