

## **Book reviews: Tomorrow sex will be good again**

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## Book Reviews

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Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, Verso: London, 2020; 145 pp.: ISBN: 9781788739160.

*Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* by Katherine Angel is a public facing, scholarly book which takes the polarizing debates surrounding affirmative consent and puts them in conversation with equally polemical theories on the science of female sexuality. Sprinkled throughout are meditations on what constitutes ‘good’ or ‘bad’ sex with dedicated engagement to intersectional analysis.

Angel begins by mapping feminist engagement with the concept of affirmative consent, from the 1970s No Means No Campaigns to the recent #me too movement. Initially, I thought that Angel was taking the culture of affirmative consent to task for its anti-eroticism, but her argument is far more nuanced, acknowledging that ‘good sex’ requires both vulnerability and consent.

Indeed, Angel critiques post-feminist arguments that shame women for not speaking up. She insists that contrary to the Sheryl Sandberg brand of empowerment, ‘individuals do not bear equal relationships of power to one another’ (30) and structural factors shaping sexual interactions across lines of gender, race, and class present real life challenges for individual self-assertion. Moreover, according to Angel, consensual sex does not necessarily equal ‘good’ sex. As she highlights, ‘a woman can still leave a sexual encounter justifiably feeling mistreated, while she feels safe in the knowledge that he “acquired” consent. He asked, she said yes’ (32). ‘Bad’ and/or unpleasurable sex ‘trades on unequal power dynamics between parties, and on racialized narratives of innocence and guilt’ (28). In other words, ‘bad’ sex is political.

Angel’s argument takes a valid but less original turn when she ponders literature on the ‘new science’ of female desire and arousal. Rather than focusing on how this work *medicalizes* sexual difficulties, as scholars like myself have done, she questions their implication for sexual consent. For instance, Dr Rosemary Basson’s ‘female sexual response cycle,’ which positions female sexual desire as inherently responsive rather than spontaneous, has been applauded for challenging androcentric assumptions about sexual desire. Based on her clinical experience in sexual medicine, Basson argues that women are more likely to be sexually motivated for non-sexual reasons, often reaching desire *after* the arousal that typically follows sexual initiation. However, as myself, and far more extensively, Alyson K Spurgas (2013, 2016, 2020) have done in the past, Angel cautions, this model risks essentializing social conditioning. As she writes, ‘We must be careful not to write, into our models of sex, phenomena that are in fact social- namely, an assumption that sex is inherently satisfying to men, along with a resignation to sex being, for women, merely a tradeoff for something else of value to them’ (67).

Angel also calls into question recent scientific theories that pretend to ‘cut through the truth’ about female sexual arousal using technologies such as vaginal plethysmographs. The supposedly feminist research by Meredith Chivers highlights a ‘non-concordance’ between what women say they are aroused by and what the plethysmograph reveals as producing vaginal lubrication. Again, much like the work of Spurgas (2013, 2020), Angel untangles the flawed methodologies inherent to this research, including the analytical conflation of lubrication with arousal. She critiques the ‘forensic, detective slant to these studies- the hunting down of female sexuality’ (91), claiming it is ‘animated by the need to find out if a woman *really* wanted something.’ Linking these theorizations with debates over consent, Angel contends, ‘We make this self-knowledge a condition of women’s safety in sex; of the possibility of pleasure and non-violence; of men’s protection from confused accusations- as well as, of good, assertive feminism’ (91).

Angels firmly concludes that the solution to rape culture and/or ‘bad’ sex is not as simple as individual women knowing their desires, consenting to sexual activity, and feeling genital arousal. She positions consent as ‘the least bad standard for sexual assault’ but is bold enough to imagine a tomorrow where the sexual landscape will be better for women.

When reading *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again*, I enjoyed seeing the kinds of issues that spark debate in everyday life written with such theoretical precision. I also enjoyed the vibrancy of Angel’s writing that blends scholarly works with sexual scenarios as raised in fiction, film, and porn. There is a sexual pulse to this book, oddly a rarity in critical sexual studies.

With that said, I have one significant note of caution for readers of *Sexualities*. While this book is made more lively by its public-facing style, unburdened by the conventions of heavy-duty academic citation practices, many of the references are found only in the ‘Notes’ section at the back of the book and not in the text itself or in a final reference list. In other words, you may have to dig for reference to your work and the work of your peers as I did. I felt there was particular overlap with the work of Spurgas (2013, 2016, 2020), who was never referenced in the text itself or in the reference list, but rather acknowledged in just one of the chapter ‘Notes.’

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Kayte Stokoe, *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*, Routledge: Abingdon, Oxon, 2019; 192 pp., 4 b/w illus.: ISBN 978-1-1383-1212-8, £115.00 (hbk).

Popular renderings of drag performance have become increasingly prominent in recent years. The drag queen competition television show *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present) has become an international phenomenon, spawning British, Thai and Canadian editions in addition to the US.-based original. In the UK, drag has recently experienced prominent exposure in the West End (e.g. the musical *Everybody's Talking About Jamie* [2017-present]), on television (e.g. *Drag SOS* [2019-present]), in art galleries and museums (e.g. the 2018 Hayward Gallery exhibition *DRAG: Self-portraits and Body Politics*), in events for children at public libraries, in advertising (e.g. the 2019 'Drag Cleans' campaign by cleaning supply brand method), on internet platforms such as Instagram and TikTok, and live in nightclubs, pubs and performing arts spaces throughout the country (public health guidelines permitting).

Given this present-day visibility of drag, has the medium been rendered mainstream and milquetoast, or does it remain a transgressive outsider art? According to Kayte Stokoe's *Reframing Drag: Beyond Subversion and the Status Quo*, this is the wrong question to be asking. In engaging with earlier literature on drag and analysing how these works square with present-day drag scenes, Stokoe urges Gender Studies scholars, cultural observers and others who engage with drag performance to move past cultural debates that cast drag as being either inherently subversive or reactionary. Representations of drag, Stokoe convincingly argues, should be judged on their own terms without being burdened by generalisations that tend not to be applied to other artistic media (p. 17). In this vein, Stokoe is critical of earlier scholarship that either extols drag as an art form that essentiality upends traditional notions of gender, or portrays drag as a sexist display that mocks women and entrenches oppressive gender norms (pp. 4–6).

Much of *Reframing Drag* is spent critiquing the French- and English-language canon of works related to drag and gender variance. Stokoe highlights areas of this canon, which includes literary works such as Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) and classics of academic scholarship such as Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), that still hold utility for analysing present-day renderings of drag while also carefully updating or criticising arguments that Stokoe perceives as being no longer relevant, or misguided from the outset. For readers unfamiliar with the canon of Feminist and Gender Studies scholarship on drag, Stokoe helpfully provides an overview of works by towering figures in the field such as Butler, bell hooks and Jack Halberstam (Chapters 1 and 2). Also