

UNSAFE SEX

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Oliver Davis and Tim Dean, *Hatred of Sex*, University of Nebraska Press, 2022, pp206, £19.99 paperback.

In *Hatred of Sex* Oliver Davis and Tim Dean diagnose an ‘aversion’ to sex (pix) in contemporary culture and in the academy. This ‘hatred of sex’ is motivated by the ‘centrifugal, disordering effects of sex’ (p6) within the psyche which, in their diagnosis of contemporary sexual politics, gives rise to the wish to make sex safe; sanitising the ‘deplorable’ nature of sex. Mainstream queer and feminist politics arguably reduces the question of sexuality to identity and limits sexuality to the visible and the knowable. As such, it refuses to think through the problems that sex presents to the psyche and, in the psychoanalytic defense of sex in this book, the enigmatic nature of the unconscious.

The ‘nonstraightforwardness’ (p16) and paradoxical pleasure of experiencing sex – the violation of the ego – stirs the aversion to sex in popular culture, as well as the ‘domestication’ of sex in the academy. Gender theory for example, privileges identity formations over the ‘disturbing and deplorable’ nature of sexuality that Davis and Dean are defending in this book. The ‘hatred’ in the *Hatred of Sex* is thus, on the one hand a tendency they criticise – the aversion, the looking away from, as well as a psychoanalytic defense of sex as an unsettling and thus transformative force.

Oliver Davis is a political philosopher who has written extensively on the French philosopher Jacques Rancière. Tim Dean is an English professor specialised in psychoanalysis and queer theory. *Hatred of Sex*, their first collaboration, is published in the *Provocations* series at the University of Nebraska Press. The provocation of this short book (less than 200 pages) is not the sexual content or the polemic title, they assert, but the ‘claim to universality’ – that is, sexuality as a transhistorical phenomenon that cannot serve contemporary politics in any straightforward way. Queer theorist Leo Bersani is probably the most important precursor for the work that Dean and Davis are undertaking here: advocating the use of psychoanalysis in queer theory and conceiving of sex as fundamentally anti-social. For these thinkers, sex resists the straightforward interpretation or incorporation in one political programme that the pro-sex and anti-sex camps in the sexual politics debate aspire to. Like Bersani, Davis and Dean turn to Jean Laplanche’s concept of ‘énbranlement’ or ‘perturbation,’ which treats the question of sex not as one about sexual satisfaction but as psychically disturbing – pleasure is always tied up with unpleasure. Bersani (1987) called this perturbation the shattering of the self. Sex disorders the self but ‘disorder refers not to disease

or pathology (as in a psychological disorder or a sexual dysfunction) but to the disruption of psychic coherence occasioned by sexual intensity' (p20). *Hatred of Sex* outlines the ways in which we tend to look away from this 'problem' and instead sanitise or domesticate sexuality as belonging to the consenting, rational, agential adult.

In the titular first chapter 'the aversion to sex' is both a structuring force, a 'constitutive hatred', the unsettling, disturbing nature of sex, as well as a symptom of the desexualised concept of sex they see at work in identity politics today. Here they draw on the 'hatred of democracy' which Rancière theorised as the necessary disorder at the core of democracy: 'Government by the multitude inevitably would be messy because it involves too many people or the wrong sort of people (the rabble), with the quantitative excess of *too many* already implying the qualitative deficit of *wrong sort*' (p3). The polemic of this book is thus partly invested in a critique of identity politics, in particular Davis and Dean insist that sex is always a site of social antagonism. The constitutive hatred inherent to the *demos* and to sex as antagonism is not a problem to be solved, but a productive structuring force.

In the second chapter, 'Does Queer Studies Hate Sex?' Dean and Davis elaborate on their view that recent queer theory 'domesticates' sex, leaving behind what they call the 'deplorable and unsettling nature of sex' that queer Freudians like Bersani initially aimed to politicise. The institutionalisation of sexuality studies in the North American academy instigated a desexualisation of sex. Dean noted in 2015 how the institutionalisation of sexuality studies coincided with the emergence of 'queer' and domesticated sex:

Sex is deemed worthy of study principally when wedded to identity or personhood. It is now mostly okay to talk about lesbians or gay men or transgendered folk or bisexuals. When attached to the dignity of personhood, sex merits research inasmuch as those it marks are deemed worthy of legal and institutional protection. When detached from the dignity of personhood, however, it becomes much sketchier. The recurring anxiety is that sex will demean personhood; it is assumed to need strong identity formations to redeem and render it safe.¹

1. Tim Dean, 'No Sex Please, We're American', *American Literary History*, 27:3, 2015, pp614-624, p615.

This tendency not only implies a turn away from sex, *Hatred of Sex* argues, but from theory itself. The problematic nature of sex must be accounted for in theorising sex and the authors argue that the fundamental instability and unknowability of sex *is* the object of study. A desexualised concept of sex erases the negativity at work in sexuality and the difficulty that sex presents to thinking itself: 'no knowledge formation is immune from defensive reaction to what makes sex difficult, and therefore none can claim full authority over it'. What might such a non-authoritarian mode of theorising look like then? In this book the two thinkers articulate their differences but they do not aim to synthesise their modes of thought. Rather, the provocation represents a

‘multitude of voices’ and ‘any authority accruing to the ‘authorial’ voice is acknowledged here as necessarily provisional’ (pxi). The provocations are also multiple – critiquing #metoo, trauma-oriented therapy, queer studies in the academy – which at times feels like a lot to take on in such a short book.

Another problem they see in queer studies today is the dominance of intersectionality discourse, prescribing what should be queer theory’s object of study. For Davis and Dean sex itself – and thus the study of sex – cannot be intersectional because sex is not identity. The authors warn of the ‘impossible fantasy of inclusivity’ (p59) and target intersectionality discourse in particular. Post-#metoo feminism is dismissed as liberal feminism, only concerned with a defense of ‘victimology’ (p93) and moralising sexual behaviour. At times this feels like a crude generalisation of the debate, but their explication of how their concept of sex makes such a moralising sexual politics impossible is nevertheless convincing.

Throughout his work Dean promotes the use of the psychoanalytic approach to sex for queer theory, but always insists on thinking through the material practices of sex – the act – as well as the theoretical ideas about how sexuality is defined by the unconscious. For Dean, for example, the Lacanian concept of the unconscious ‘deheterosexualizes’ desire and in his work on barebacking (a subculture around unprotected sex among gay men) sexuality is theorised as the proximity to risk.² Dean attends to the risk involved in some sexual practices and frames barebacking as an act that resists neoliberal demands for self-surveillance and the commodification of safe sex practices, engaging instead with intimacy, pleasure and shared vulnerability. In their defense of ‘deplorable’ and ‘inappropriate’ sex, *Hatred of Sex* makes a similar case for attending to the ways in which the sexual act can destabilise theories of sex.

Davis and Dean trace the aversion to sex back to the rise of attachment theory in the 1980s, when Freud’s radical theories were ‘consumed from within by the parasitic project’ (p98) of John Bowlby’s attachment theory. Bowlby’s proposed four basic styles of attachments (secure, avoidant, ambivalent, disorganised) would make us too easily governable as sexual beings. In the third chapter they show how Bowlby’s ‘behaviorable consistency’ (p100) is fundamentally anti-psychoanalytic in advancing a theory closer to developmental psychology than to psychoanalysis. In the fourth chapter they push this point further, suggesting that traumatology (trauma-oriented therapy) is the ‘weaponized form’ of attachment theory as it positions trauma as the primary explanation for intrapsychic conflict. The problem with this is that it locates the potential for harm and disturbance as coming only from the outside. Simplifying the complexity of the repercussions of trauma, which psychoanalysis thinks through the fundamental unknowability of the unconscious, becomes a matter of identifying trauma as the one and only origin of psychic troubles. Instead, Davis and Dean propose to expand our understanding of sexual harm: not everything that doesn’t feel good

2. Tim Dean, ‘Lacan and Queer Theory’, *The Cambridge Companion to Jacques Lacan*, Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp238-252.

is harmful and they propose 'benign sexual inappropriateness' (p120) as distinct from abuse.

If Freud showed us how unnatural the sexual drive is, claiming it to be 'polymorphously perverse'³ Davis and Dean want to show us that sex divides us, both on a psychic and on a social level, and that this division can be activated both in sexual politics and in theory. In *Hatred of Sex* Davis and Dean do not situate their provocative arguments in the more subtle debates in psychoanalytic theory, nor do they directly respond to specific thinkers working in queer studies today. This short book has its limits, as the authors themselves acknowledge, but it succeeds in its mission to force the reader to get stuck on how sex resists interpretation and how theorising sex involves unsafe sex.

3. This claim is made in Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, James Strachey (trans.), Basic Books, 1962 (1905), p57.

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