

Mari Ruti

The Ethics of Opting Out: Queer Theory's Defiant Subjects

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Reviewed by Ephraim Das Janssen, 2019

Mari Ruti aims in this book to create a "cacophony of voices" (10). At the same time, she calls this book a map of the state of queer theory today. The book is a cacophony and a map at the same time, designed to give Lacan a place in queer theory and give queer theory the benefit of Lacan's insights about the nature of a subject: a subject that is coherent but not the same subject as is given to us by modern philosophy with all its colonialist arrogance. "The autonomous, transparent, and masterful (and so on) Enlightenment subject was a philosophical abstraction--a fantasy of humanist philosophy--that French posthumanist theory, for excellent reasons, sought to take down in the second half of the twentieth century" (147). Ruti has no quarrel with those who "take down" that subject; what she resists doing is accepting that this is the only conception of a subject that is available to us.

The audience for this book is people who know Lacan or people who know queer theory. Ruti mostly succeeds in her attempt to avoid "drowning the reader in jargon" (11), but there is quite a lot of technical language. This analysis could be quite useful for those doing graduate work in queer theory, gender theory, feminism, subjectivity, and ethics. Ruti succeeds in her aim of bringing a number of thinkers together in one book. For this reason, I would say it is best suited to readers possessing some skill in epistemic distance, and the ability to read debates about theories outside their own area of expertise.

In chapter 1, "Queer Theory and the Ethics of Opting Out," Ruti offers a brief critique of homonormativity. She does a lovely job explaining the mechanisms by which dominant scripts place the blame for failure on the failed subject rather than on the script or system that has already rendered success impossible or at least unlikely. Failure to achieve the perfect marriage is painted as the fault of the individual, not of the flawed nature of the institution of marriage itself, or of a high standard of satisfaction that is nigh impossible to achieve.

The system is rigged, and the idea of simply opting out of a rigged system is queer. Ruti describes examples of how this works. She also notes that the loudest proponents of opting out are frequently those in the most privileged positions to do so. Those who cannot afford to opt out--who have little to lose only because they have so little to begin with--are left behind by those who exercise refusal as queer defiance. There is a tendency among the queer community to simply reject any and all forms of normativity. Ruti is not one of these; she holds that normativity can be retained without promoting oppression. In a parallel argument, she holds that the subject can be retained without having to accept the colonizing humanist subject as the only possible way that subjectivity can work.

This raises a motif of the book: Ruti returns again and again to asking the question of how we are to *use* this ethics, how it is to affect ordinary living. The moment at the beginning where she summarizes the ways that queer lives are precarious is lovely, and another near the end where she rips into Jack Halberstam's equation of feminism with masochism in chapter 5 is very helpful indeed, but the remainder of this book had me hungry for examples, for a picture of what a queer life looks like in Ruti's conception. I would have to concede, though, that this

is a sign of a compelling vision, as it has prompted me to search for my own examples.

The next chapter, "From Butlerian Reiteration to Lacanian Defiance," explores a radical potential of Lacanian ethics. Ruti clearly, repeatedly, and unequivocally rejects Butler's challenge of the coherent subject, though she does not characterize the subject as a single kind of thing. Later, we will see that her commitment to the rejection of the colonialist modern subject entails a certainty that we can conceive of the self as a subject that is not necessarily that harmful, arrogant humanist subject that queer theory loves to loathe. Where most believe Lacan "envision ethics as a matter of defying the big Other" (53), Ruti understands him to "introduce new possibilities of subjective experience" (59). This is to say, a Lacanian lens has much to offer a more creative understanding of the subject: as a being capable of resisting hegemonic power. Her concomitant focus on gradients of desire (64) and recognition that, contra Edelman and Žižek, the subject is constituted within a specific context (65), place her in a space that balances between an absolute relationality she attributes to Butler and excluding relationality entirely from her conception of the subject, as some erroneously propose Lacan does. Her position that the Lacanian model offers a stronger model for political action and resistance to power (because it seeks to transform the individual subject, and thereby instigate political change) than the Butlerian model will no doubt be argued about in conference presentations for a long time to come.

Chapter 3, "Why There is Always a Future in the Future," opens with Ruti's account of the legendary Edelman/Muñoz debate. She champions neither, but agrees more with Muñoz. Her critique of Edelman strikes three major points:

- Lacanian negativity can function as creative foundation instead of mere self-annihilation.
- Loyalty to the Thing (that which is always missing and sought by the psyche) is capable of trumping the Other's insistence that we relinquish it.
- Some objects mesmerize us in ways that are enduring and life-shaping and potentially more influential than fleeting jouissance.

Edelman's cardinal sin, on Ruti's reading, is in regarding sexuality as "the sole axis of theoretical investigation" as opposed to intersectional understandings of experience wherein multiple axes coexist. Ruti notes too that Lacan is being read today by queer theorists mainly through Edelman's interpretation, which reduces him (Lacan) to the death drive and jouissance. Her aim is to help "her Lacan" escape this reduction and bring him to the aid of queer theory (92-93). Ruti makes the excellent point that "there is always a limit to the degree of social control that desire is willing to tolerate," and this limit has the potential to direct political and ethical resistance to the hegemony of dominating social control (101). Add to this her observation that "*desire de-centers the subject precisely insofar as it centers on an object*" (105, Ruti's emphasis) and we can see how the subject can exist as an individual in resistance to the power exerted by the social body without having to resort to the pitfalls of metaphysical contradiction that have led to the humanistic subject being so thoroughly critiqued by queer theory so far. This is crucial to crafting a theory of the subject that can also "possess a strong commitment to matters of social survival, justice, and responsibility" (128).

"Beyond the Antisocial-Social Divide" (chapter 4) is a bit difficult, but stands up to multiple readings. As Ruti's "cacophony" crescendos it can be a bit like trying to follow the threads of conversation at a loud party. That said, this chapter does a lot of work, both positioning Lauren Berlant's understanding of the queer subject against Edelman's despite their having collaborated on *Sex, or the Unbearable* (2014), and also introducing Lynn Huffer's widely read take on Foucault (2010) to Ruti's Lacan, from which a conversation arises. Ruti returns again

to the critique of the subject, critiquing the critique as likely to harm those already leading precarious lives. She demands of this critique some practical value, asking of queer theorists' failure to risk sacrificing the very foundations of their existence, "If you're not gonna do it, why are you even talking about it?" (150).

Ruti closes this chapter by drawing Lacan and Foucault together, as a host might draw together rivals to liven up a gathering, noting parallels between their thinking and enabling them to play nicely together for a time. Both, on her reading, are "trying to figure out how to destabilize the humanist subject without thereby annihilating the subject entirely" (167). This bolsters Ruti's own argument that claims to rights and justice made by queer subjects and queer theorists alike are made on the basis of the very systems that are destroyed by the eradication of the subject. If the political subject is not conceived of as an autonomous individual, then the demand that the individual be respected by the state is (possibly) rendered incoherent. Ruti would have us improve the systems under which oppression occurs, not abandon them wholesale. "The fact that rights-based justice fails as often as it succeeds does not mean that it never succeeds, that it accomplishes nothing" (154-55).

In the final chapter, "The Uses and Misuses of Bad Feelings," Ruti explores bad feelings and how they can be used by queer theory. She challenges a common tendency among queer theorists to use bad feelings in such a way as to equate subjectivity with victimization, exploring instead the role hope plays in resistance to hegemonic power. Confrontations with suffering must occur, but they are sometimes opportunities to identify "the gaps, breaks, and fissures in the normative narrative of what the good life is supposed to entail in order to conjure up an alternative understanding of what 'reality' consists of" (180). This is how melancholia and utopianism can be reconciled: they share an understanding of what is lacking. The lack, of course, is essential to desire, and as we saw earlier, there are times that desire ceases to tolerate obstacles in its path. Without hope, melancholia is mere wallowing, and without melancholia, hope would be mere naïveté.

Ruti very boldly confronts a key element of the current state of queer theory that is sorely in need of resistance: the alignment of queerness with masculinity. The dominant normative script has not left its own resistance unscathed; queer theory suffers from being focused on masculine perspectives and centering of masculinity as the real. This is quite obvious in Ruti's reading of Jack Halberstam's work, and she pulls no punches in calling out his references to feminism with sacrifice, masochism, and self-injury: "What the fuck? That is what I wrote on page 135 of *The Queer Art of Failure*. It seems to me that when feminism becomes defined as a matter of 'female unbecoming,' let alone of self-cutting, patriarchy truly has won" (189).

The field of queer studies occurs within a society still dominated by heteronormative patriarchal control as a resistance to that control to which it is itself still prone to submitting. Like capitalism--which profits from anticapitalist movements by, for instance, making a tidy profit selling us t-shirts with anticapitalist slogans--heteropatriarchy infuses our antiheteropatriarchy. How are we to resist heteropatriarchy if it infects our very movements of resistance? The answer seems to be in the conclusion: silence.

This final section of the book takes a sharp turn into an entirely new style: a conversation between Ruti and one of her grad students, where the major themes of the book are recapped and the subject of the many forms silence can take is explored. This is a sort of riff on that silence, with particular leaning toward the ways that silence and queerness intersect. The suggestion here is that the answers to the questions we have about resistance will best be found in creative activities that subvert the social order, refusing the demands it makes at our

expense.

In my copy of this text, I have scrawled at the end of chapter 1 the question, "So how *does* one walk away from Omelas?" (LeGuin 2004). This chapter left me excited and wanting to know just how it is that we can opt out of dominant cultural scripts that trap us in harmful contradiction while still retaining concepts of normativity and subjecthood. Spoiler alert: The answer was not as satisfying as I had hoped. The text of the traditional part of this book ends with the following:

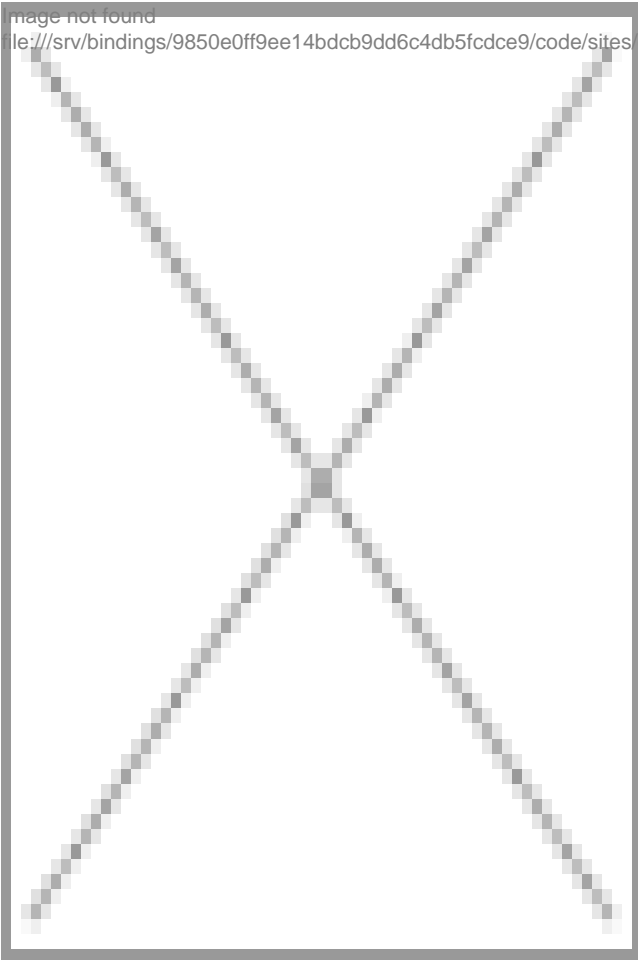
The longer I ponder the contours of contemporary ethics, the more convinced I become that impersonality and universalism--and perhaps even universal models of justice--are worth a second look. Don't get me wrong: I do not want to return to Western metaphysics, for its impersonality and universalism were never genuine; its so-called impersonality and so-called universality were used to promote the interests of the powerful. But impersonality and universality--like subjectivity, autonomy, and rationality--are not the property of Western metaphysics. They *can* be thought along different lines. One of the many things I appreciate about the work of Lacan, Dean, and Bersani is that they have begun this process of thinking impersonality and universality anew. For now, it's just a start. But it's something. (213)

This is to say, although Ruti recognizes the dangers of universalization as privileging some subjects over others, she still regards it as a worthwhile project because the notion of slaughtering the subject or crafting nonuniversal ethical standards is to her mind more dangerous still. She sees selfhood as either a coherent subject or logical contradiction and normativity as either universal or incoherently relativist or based in emotion. I'm not sure I agree, at least not yet. Explorations into notions of selfhood or personhood that do not presuppose the coherent subject are still quite young, and we should be no more eager to abandon them as fruitless than Ruti is to abandon impersonality and universalism. It's likely that many helpful answers will be found among the middle gears. These explorations stand to be rendered all the richer by Ruti's contribution in this book; she gives the field of queer studies a set of questions that need to be addressed, tidily framed up for us; this is an impressive accomplishment. This book's orchestration of theories into a set of questions and challenges to the current trends in queer studies will no doubt stir some very lively responses. I look forward to reading them.

Reference

LeGuin, Ursula K. 2004. The ones who walk away from Omelas. In *The wind's twelve quarters*. New York: Harper Collins.

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