

Mari Ruti

Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings: The Emotional Costs of Everyday Life

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Reviewed by Shannon Winnubst, 2019

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Quote: "If you read *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings* without becoming unnerved about some small moment in your everyday habits, then I would argue you have not really read the book."

"Mama is upstairs, suffering from penis envy. . . .
She's looking for the medicine for the penis envy."

I read Mari Ruti's latest book, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings: The Emotional Costs of Everyday Life*, during winter break. The catchy image, cast against a dainty pink background, of the kitchen knife poised above a ripe yellow banana provided a wonderful antidote to the holiday onslaught of greeting cards and sugary treats. The irony was not lost on my eleven-year-old daughter. She immediately incorporated "the penis envy" into all kinds of jokes and quips. The more I laughed, the more she generated. And the more she understood that there is no medicine, the more she had her other mom frantically chasing the illusory pill.

This cascading into our intimate family holiday scene is precisely what Ruti designed this book to do. Written for a broad academic and nonacademic audience (xliii), especially those of us in the United States who suffer from "gender obsession disorder" (xvi), *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings* invites readers across the spectrum of genders and sexualities to reflect a bit more carefully on our "everyday bad feelings." She uses this old-fashioned psychoanalytic figure of "penis envy" not so much for theoretical allegiance as for its explicatory heft. Far from trotting us back down the lanes of the 1980s/1990s debates about the applicability of Freudian and Lacanian analyses to particular subject formations, Ruti teaches her readers how a little psychoanalysis can shed a whole lot of light on a remarkable range of phenomena, from autobiographical anecdotes to broad cultural narratives and practices. The text bounces from insight to insight, often like a terrific short story full of intriguing characters and impossible plots. There are recurring characters (straight cis women, as Ruti specifies them) and recurring plots (Romance, especially its heterosexual iterations, again as Ruti specifies them), but the story aims and claims to speak to all trapped in "the human condition" (a striking recurrent phrase for a self-named posthumanist theorist). True to a Lacanian thinker and writer, Ruti weaves her autobiographical anecdotes and her larger cultural narratives into a complex web that conveys

the reader into a singular truth: we are damned by our own desire, whoever and wherever we might be, to suffer the impossibility of ever fulfilling it.

Ruti's book thereby does its work across scales, ranging from longstanding cultural narratives to particular contemporary examples, but it demands that readers engage it at the scale of intimacy. That is, after all, the uncomfortable aspect of psychoanalytic theory: one's own unconscious is called explicitly into the scene of reading. If you read *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings* without becoming unnerved about some small moment in your everyday habits, then I would argue you have not really read the book. Whether it is the power of the beauty industry, the complex challenges of pornography, the repeated escape into television, food, drugs, alcohol, or daydreaming, or the powers of melancholia in our everyday attachments, Ruti offers a cornucopia of insights into "the emotional costs of everyday life" that implore us to read and respond intimately.

For me, however, *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings* took on a kind of intimacy that is not only unnerving, but uncanny: the book bears a startling resemblance to my most recent book, *Way Too Cool: Selling Out Race and Ethics*. Both thematically (desire, pleasure, anxiety, and social difference in neoliberal biopolitics) and theoretically (Foucault, Lacan), Ruti's work tracks almost exactly along many of the same lines of inquiry I pursued in *Way Too Cool*. Yet we come to fairly different conclusions. In what follows, I pose these disagreements in an effort to engage Ruti's brilliant work in a longer dialogue. I do not read the synchronicity of our work as mere coincidence: many, many of us are trying to sort through the dizzying alterations underway in these neoliberal times, and recourse to the toolboxes of twentieth-century French theorists is fully expected. But Ruti's precise terms of desire and anxiety, along with gender and forgetting, make the interplay between her text and mine particularly noteworthy. Therefore, with apologies for the classic narcissism of minor differences that is no doubt at play here, I offer the following responses to *Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings* from a strikingly different position that has also wrangled with desire, anxiety, suffering, and social difference in neoliberal biopolitics.

My first node of inquiry revolves around the role of "neoliberal biopolitics," as Ruti often names it, in the text as a whole. It is clear that Ruti wants to develop robust tools to understand the extraordinarily confusing cultural discourses that circulate around gender in the contemporary United States, especially for women. Whether the cruel tyranny of monogamy or the damage wrought by internet pornography, Ruti locates her analysis in contemporary US culture. She also repeatedly marks her analysis, especially early in the text, as a loosely Foucauldian inquiry. As the text develops, however, Foucault is discarded in favor of Lacan as the major theoretical resource. More specifically, with a refreshingly light touch, Ruti adeptly develops the Lacanian concept of desire to make sense of the constant failures of gender to deliver its promised goods: structured by an ontological lack, desire cannot ever fulfill its aims; however, despite this repeated failure, we nonetheless continue to desire and fail, over and over and over. The many ways that Ruti weaves this cruel Lacanian insight into the very fabric of so-called "post-feminist femininity" is one of the book's most brilliant interventions.

As this applies to neoliberal biopolitics, however, I raise two concerns. First, why must we choose between Foucault and Lacan? Ruti perpetuates the longstanding Lacanian assumption that the onto-epistemologies of Lacan and Foucault are incommensurable. If we want to generate

the fresh theoretical resources sufficient to grasping neoliberalism, I argue we must revisit this bifurcation of these two theorists. Second, is the schema of desire sufficient to neoliberal biopolitics? For the majority of her readings of neoliberalism, Ruti draws on the work of Todd McGowan, who also frames the lures and traps of advanced capitalism through Lacanian desire. I worry that this framework is insufficient to capture that which is new in these neoliberal iterations of capitalism. As developed by Foucault in his *Birth of Biopolitics*, the new kind of subjectivity generated in neoliberal practices is "a subject of interests," who is not structured by the same kind of teleological lack that Lacan articulates as "desire." Neoliberalism, that is, seems to me to have outstripped this traditional form of ideological critique that assumes consumer culture traps us in an endless, failed pursuit of the Perfect Thing. To the contrary, consumer culture appears to be eminently enjoyable to its participants and fans. Consequently, the Lacanian concept of drive, with its ateleological circular structure of satisfaction, may be more apt to capture neoliberal subjectivity. An approach through both desire and the drive might lead Ruti to a more complex and fraught reading of the everyday bad feelings and pleasures generated by the consumer culture of neoliberal biopolitics.

This leads me to my second node of inquiry, which cuts to a more fundamental question of Ruti's normative understanding of gender and its relation to race. As I noted earlier, Ruti invites readers of all genders and sexualities to engage her analyses. Although she explicitly notes her primary object is cis heterosexual women, she nonetheless offers various points of connection to queer and trans identified subjects. Her fixation on gender, however, impedes any sustained reflection on the racializing mechanisms always already at work in her writing. Most explicitly, Ruti clearly states in the Introduction that "although I do not focus on racial discrimination in this book, an awareness of how fundamentally it shapes American society is necessarily a part of my conceptual apparatus" (xxxv-xxxvi). To be clear, I am not charging Ruti with a wholesale dismissal or ignorance of racism in the United States. Nor am I demanding that she must account for all forms of social difference. However, as a book that is explicitly marked as the work of a Finnish émigré to the United States and Canada, laced with autobiographical anecdotes, the whiteness of this book informs and constrains its analyses--even, and perhaps most poignantly, in its universalizing claims to truths about "gender" and "heterosexuality."

The discussion of race and castration in the introduction serves as a good example here. As Ruti skillfully introduces the structure of phallic power as her overarching heuristic for "the American Dream," she carefully notes that not all forms of castration are symbolic: "Black men," she writes, "have historically been castrated not only metaphorically but literally" (xxxiv). As she briefly develops this difference through the cultural example of "black male rap artists [who] grab their crotches in a bold gesture of defiance" (xxxv), Ruti distinguishes this kind of literal castration that marks black male bodies as a "context-specific" (xxxv), rather than ontological, modality of lack. That is, as she elaborates, "there are some bad feelings that may be intrinsic to the human condition (ontological): 'existential' in the sense of being unavoidable" (xl) and others, such as her example of the systemic literal castrating of black men in the United States, that are context-specific. Ruti makes it clear, repeatedly, that she is concerned with the ontological and existential kind of lack--the same kind that Lacan diagnoses in his schema of desire--and that her focus on gender and heterosexuality across the book delivers precisely this mode of analysis. Drawing these distinctions together, therefore, shows that Ruti assumes, from the outset and

without reflection or argumentation, that gender and sexuality are ontological conditions of being human, whereas race is a historically modulated difference.

This is a strident as well as dangerous assumption. First, it could unmoor the general logic of equivocation that neoliberal practices and logics generate and thereby uproot some of the pernicious effects of these neoliberal times. Therefore, if this is a position Ruti wishes to develop, then it certainly merits an explicit investigation and elaboration. However, Ruti does not ever mark it in this strident manner, and this leads me to worry about the danger of such an unspoken, foundational assumption. As black feminist theorists have developed since Hortense Spillers's 1987 germinal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," both gender and sexuality function as racializing mechanisms that carry the ontology of antiblackness into some of the most intimate areas of all of our lives. To avoid this argument altogether too easily enacts some of the hallmarks of whiteness--namely, to speak in universalizing terms that are abstracted from the lived historical experiences of persons and communities of color. Unfortunately, the offhanded remark discounting Afropessimism (206; 243, note 3) and the laundry list of writers who explore racial discrimination (233, note 19) do not offer any serious, protracted engagement with antiblackness as an ontology that directly challenges Ruti's readings of gender and sexuality.

My final node of inquiry is related to this general avoidance of race and antiblackness. It emerges in the final pages of the book, where Ruti turns to Nietzschean forgetting as a therapeutic panacea for the suffering of everyday life. I share Ruti's lifelong fascination with Nietzsche's provocative insights about the everyday demand to forget immense amounts of sensory, emotional, and social data just in order to function. In the hyper-speed of media, technology, and markets that seep into our everyday lives, we have all surely become more adept at this "forgetting" than Nietzsche might have ever imagined. I also assume that, given the autobiographical voice that laces through this text and emerges strongly in the final pages, Ruti's advocacy of Nietzschean forgetting is aimed at the level of the individual. But, even at this level, it seems dangerous. Constant dissociation seems to be the encouraged psychic state of those in power, and balancing this "forgetting" with "dissociation" seems to be a dangerously delicate practice. But even more worrisome, if we assume that this kind of individual forgetting would implicate the socius, I warn that this embrace of forgetting is also a hallmark of whiteness. Habituated to an abstracted, universalizing voice, white culture continues to entice and reward us to forget the long, systemic histories of antiblack violence that ground cultures, economies, and institutions across both North America and Europe. We are enticed and rewarded to forget the animating ontology of antiblackness. Consequently, I wonder how to read Ruti's closing embrace of Nietzschean forgetting at this historical moment, when remembering may be one of the most radical ways to work through whiteness and all of its ongoing violence.

Penis Envy and Other Bad Feelings is a delightful book that spills over with insights into the everyday suffering that these neoliberal times produce in so many of us. As an explicitly marked work of a Finnish émigré to North America, it is also an instructive work of whiteness. Reading it in this manner will likely produce a further onslaught of bad feelings, but it may also initiate fresh ways of reflecting on the many forms of suffering, both ontological and context-specific, that would also precipitate political, ethical, and feminist modes of resistance in these neoliberal times.