

Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*.

Edited by Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder.

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In *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, a recent anthology featuring the work of radical feminist Andrea Dworkin, editors Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder have compiled a series of writings that serve to bring the controversial activist's work into the sphere of contemporary feminism, presenting it to an audience who may be more familiar with Dworkin as a militant anti-porn crusader than as a writer. Showcasing Dworkin's literary oeuvre and knack for style, the collection challenges the caricature of her as the original killjoy, seeking to litigate desire and embodying "feminism's most uncool margin" (Fateman 2019, 38).

The introduction written by Fateman (the only voice other than Dworkin's to appear in the collection), offers context and describes Fateman's own engagement with the work, recalling that "to read Dworkin at eighteen was to see patriarchy with the skin peeled back" (38). This is not to say that the editors subscribe to Dworkin's polemical and explicit analyses, nor do they anticipate the reader will; nonetheless, they make the case for a reconsideration of Dworkin's work. For many younger feminists, Dworkin's name alone stirs up trepidation, yet her enduring capacity to incite ardour, and even her polarizing legacy make

her a worthy candidate for such a re-visitation. Inevitably, the contemporary reader experiences this collection with a subtext of friction that implores them to confront their own aversion to Dworkin's radical prose which, in her own words, aspires to be "more terrifying than rape, more abject than torture, more insistent and destabilizing than battery, more desolate than prostitution, more invasive than incest, more filled with threat and aggression than pornography" (Dworkin 2019, 314–15). Through Dworkin's work, the editors provoke the reader to consider how dominant accounts of history exorcize those who contradict the narrative—a phenomenon Fateman describes as "the feminine/feminist race to perfection which renders our movement's dialectics shameful, our human arrogance, floundering, and failures unaccounted for in an honest intellectual history" (Fateman 2019, 38–39).

Dworkin's aggressive writing style was crafted with unambiguous purpose, yet the aim of this anthology is not to canonize the author nor to neutralize her divisive principles, but to pursue the value in that which culture-at-large has deemed undesirable. Dworkin's fiery indictment of pornography is strictly on moral grounds; she never considers that such material could function as anything but

a conduit for violence. Yet ironically, *The Last Days at Hot Slit* acts on a similar impulse as those who seek out the cultural or intellectual merits in taboo material, persuading the reader to approach the work with a critical and open-minded attitude. Revisiting these texts under a compassionate and reverent lens, the editors appeal to the reader to contend with Dworkin's work on her own terms, through her own words.

Dworkin writes from a deeply personal place, with experiences of sexual violence shaping many of her ideas. An incident in a movie theatre as a child, a violent medical violation after being arrested at an anti-war protest, and a brutally abusive marriage all factor prominently into her devotion to activism and writing. She makes no concession for comfort as she describes abuse after abuse, her words unsettling and the cadence by which she propels descriptions of violent acts exhausting. In a contemporaneous review of *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981), author and activist Ellen Willis concedes Dworkin's assessment of the perils of misogyny but can't endorse her approach, calling it "less inspiring than numbing" (Willis 1981). While Dworkin wholeheartedly believed in writing as a sharp tool, an accomplice in her war against misogyny, her relentless characterization of the experience of womanhood as being dictated by suffering and misery is difficult to reconcile with any outlook that includes joy or humour as part of the equation. That is not to say there is no value in Dworkin's unmerciful presentation of these events. Her forceful assembly of these stories offers solemn evidence to the atomizing experience

of abuse in a time when it was largely considered a personal misfortune rather than a culturally inflected condition. In a speech delivered to various university campuses (and included in the anthology) *The Rape Atrocity and the Boy Next Door* (1975-76), Dworkin illustrates her persuasiveness with language as she delivers her thesis that rape is not an isolated transgression against social norms committed by criminal outliers, but rather a logical conclusion of societal values that had formed around women (Dworkin 2019, 87). From a contemporary vantage point, this platform in particular is far from radical but underscores how much ground has been covered in the intervening decades.

Personifying the most polarizing battle of the second wave, Dworkin adamantly staked her polemical claim that pornography and the sex industry were driving forces in normalizing violence and dominion over women's bodies. She begins one of her best-known works, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (1981) by comparing the production and distribution of porn to Joseph Goebbels's campaign of Nazi propaganda, claiming "in life, the Jews didn't orgasm. Of course, neither do women; not in life. But no one, not even Goebbels, said the Jews liked it" (130-31). Dworkin's sweeping assessment of pornography as a dehumanizing tool used to degrade women created a rift between her and her more pro-sex counterparts. It also aligned her, momentarily, with more conservative figures who similarly lobbied against porn as obscene material. Though perhaps even more so than her views on pornography, it's her text *Intercourse* (1987) which has earned Dworkin her

contentious reputation. The common interpretation of the book reduces the thesis to “heterosexual sex = rape,” and while this is a callous summary of the text, which contemplates whether or not emancipation and penetration are mutually exclusive phenomena, Dworkin trespasses into fraught terrain with even the suggestion of adjudicating what women do with their bodies.

Dworkin writes with such ferocity that she leaves zero room for partial agreement—she isn’t interested in a compromised version of her ideas. It can be suffocating and disheartening, especially when she applies this rhetoric to sex workers, whose agency is outright dismissed. Again, Dworkin draws her theoretical premise from her own life, a quality in her writing which is both an advantage and a limitation. She deduces her evaluation of sex work from her own experiences, but in her effort to weaponize language against the pillars of misogyny she often sacrifices any chance of tenderness or nuance. But Dworkin’s style and whatever loss of substance occurred as a consequence, are chosen by her with dogged intention and precision. Fateman and Scholder’s framing of Dworkin’s work brings this emphasis of style to the fore. Included in the compilation is the afterword of her 1974 text *Woman Hating* (a work whose early manuscript lends the book its name), entitled “The Great Punctuation Typography Struggle,” which details Dworkin’s strife with an editor who refutes her wish to publish without punctuation. What begins as an internal conflict with her editor manages to coalesce into one of the more hopeful excerpts in the book. Likening the standardization of punctuation to

a social convention, Dworkin considers what is at stake for the writer, and what is the cost of their (her) compromise in the name of such conventions. She concludes by arguing that:

to permit writers to use forms which violate convention just might permit writers to develop forms which would teach people to think differently: not to think about different things, but to think in different ways. that work is not permitted. (74)

Ultimately, this collection adds new relevance to her legacy by emphasizing her range and sophistication as a writer and theorist, as well as highlighting her more redeeming and prescient arguments alongside those that remain difficult to swallow. Amongst her Second Wave cohort, Dworkin was an early adopter of intersectionality, occasionally producing compassionate and thoughtful considerations of how race and class collide with gender to produce the inequitable conditions of existence under patriarchy. Identifying the objectification of racialized women in mainstream porn, she leverages this contradiction by asking “how then, does one fight racism and jerk off to it at the same time? The Left cannot have its whores and its politics too” (166). But again, her analyses suffer at the expense of her myopia. Race and gender are sporadically pitted against one another to the obvious detriment of her argument’s integrity. In a memorial to Nicole Brown Simpson, Dworkin compares the Rodney King riots to the muted response of spousal murders (352), as if there is any value in prying prejudices apart at some imaginary seam to analyse them quantitatively.

In a previously unpublished piece, “Goodbye to All This,” which is included in *Last Days at Hot Slit*, Dworkin pens a letter to her opponents, identifying them on a first name basis and bidding them adieu. In it, she indicates a level of resignation, a poetic cadence crystalizing around cheeky, semi-affectionate characterizations of her critics as “swastika wielding dykettes” and “proud, pro-sex, liberated Cosmo intellectuals” (214). The letter critiques the liberal and pro-sex positions which Dworkin so vehemently opposed, and shows how the Left, perhaps even more so than the Right, had spurned her. From the vantage point of nearly four decades, many of Dworkin’s opinions have become outmoded. As she seems to predict in her letter, the pro-sex platform has become the dominant mode of feminist discourse. Yet even amongst the misfirings, Dworkin wields a sharp capacity to deliver poignant critiques of her Leftist opponents. The reduction of her legacy in the canon of the Second Wave is evidence of the Left’s compulsion to homogenize the voices within it, a tendency that unceremoniously expels outliers and radicals like Dworkin—and this is exactly why the compilation feels so timely. As feminist discourse has migrated to the mainstream, it has suffered a notable defanging. The contemporary brand of diluted rhetoric that centres on #girlboss culture and the like has essentially commodified the landscape and swapped out radical change for sloganeering and superficiality. This is undoubtedly a culture Dworkin would loathe, and while even those who take the mantle of radical outliers today, such as Andrea Long Chu or Jessa Crispin, seem genealogically distinct

from Dworkin’s principles, her legacy offers an important lesson in embracing dissent, even at the cost of cohesion or, god forbid, commodity. Chu’s work in particular seems aptly in dialogue with Dworkin’s. Her recent essayistic book *Females* (2019) adopts as its figurehead Valerie Solanas, author of the S.C.U.M. manifesto. But Chu seems to relish rather than resent her status as an outlier, treating her material with a provocative ambivalence that is completely antithetical to Dworkin’s tone. Addressing the question that Dworkin poses in her book *Intercourse*, Chu asks, “can women have sex without getting fucked?” Valerie’s answer is still the best one: “No, but who cares?” (Chu 2019, 88).

For many, Dworkin is a *persona non grata* banished to the wrong side of feminist history. A potential consequence of emphasizing Dworkin’s merit as a writer is that the focus shifts from what she is saying to how she is saying it. While this offers readers the chance to consider the complexity of her convictions and literary evolution, I also wonder: what are the stakes of doing so? How can Dworkin’s work be introduced to the ecosystem of feminist scholarship with an intellectual flexibility that she herself was so adamantly opposed to? Fateman’s tender and sincere introduction does offer somewhat of a roadmap for how she has come to terms with the paradoxical prose, but ultimately, readers will have to navigate this challenge for themselves.

Fateman refers to herself as “a different kind of loyalist.” She embraces Dworkin “right or wrong—right *and* wrong” (Fateman 2019, 38–39). An event in conjunction with the publication of

Last Days at Hot Slit featured readings by the editors, as well as other artists and writers (including Chu) who are mostly aligned with the sex-positive politics that are synonymous with the Third and Fourth Waves of feminism. The line-up indicates that perhaps (like Fateman) those who carry the torch of Dworkin's work do so not in perfect agreement with her, but in admiration of her radical and unrelenting spirit. Reviewing this book for *The New Yorker*, writer Lauren Oyler remarks how she found herself "trying to contort into agreement" with Dworkin (Oyler 2019). I too found myself struggling to see my politics reflected back to me by her words, a pursuit that was often compromised by Dworkin's hyperbolic absolutism. It is in moments when she describes her subjectivity as a writer, or as a Jewish woman, that her prose hits me intimately. However, I will resist the urge to declare "Dworkin! She's just like us!" Because while *Last Days at Hot Slit* certainly provides previously lacking attention and dimension to her legacy, it does not propose that Dworkin is ordinary or even relatable. Rather, she is shown as the radical she was—tenacious, zealous,

and uncompromising. A singular figure whose work is deserving of the care and consideration that Scholder and Fateman have offered it.

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