

Cara Judea Alhadeff (2014) Viscous Expectations Justice, Vulnerability, The Ob-scene

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Reviewed by Andrea Beckmann

Alhadeff's stimulating book engages in very topical and interesting theoretical explorations that are grounded in experiences of embodiment that are crucially and meaningfully illustrated with Alhadeff's remarkable art. This mode of additional substantiation serves well as it also allows for a sensual illumination of Alhadeff's aim which is a process of engagement with a form of collective becoming as a never-ending project, a Nietzschean 'continual non-arrival' in contrast to the norm of assimilation to socio-political and cultural expectations of normalcy.

Alhadeff's book is sketching out ideas of possibilities of thinking and living/practicing embodied democracy whereby vulnerability and difference are cast-in contrast to contemporary Western body-phobic, neoliberal 'convenience culture' hegemonies – as resource, as physical and emotional strength as well as political strategy. An important quest that in parts reminded of Jana Sawicki's 'politics of difference' and Diprose's concept of 'intercorporeal generosity'.

Alhadeff makes use of a diversity of relevant contemporary examples to illustrate the problematic limitations that ideas of normalcy impose on the possibility of being human (e.g. 'gender', 'sexuality', 'health', 'motherhood', 'art' etc.) and of relating to and being with each other. The book invites the reader to engage with a process of interrogating and unsettling of sedimented and imposed meaning and to generate ideas of how to cultivate an aesthetic and ethical life in the context of "... corporatized education, mass consumption and contradictory digital technologies." (Alhadeff, 2013:181)

The book is illustrated with Alhadeff's intriguing art that to my mind could be interpreted as sophisticated projects of 'Entfremdung' that challenge concepts and beliefs in 'normalcy'. Thus, to Alhadeff creativity is a political imperative whereby 'risk'-taking, both intellectual and aesthetic, is understood as a way of giving a voice to and expressing the quest for social justice. These ideas are most clearly expressed in her art and in the very process of co-production/collaboration with her models that she accounts for beautifully. The author explores the possibility of a 'lived empathy', of making visible and felt our common interconnectedness within a matrix of what is here termed an 'erotic politics' and invites a collaborative becoming vulnerable towards an embodied democracy' in deep contrast to modern Western reductionist

myths of 'autonomy', 'rationality' as well as the 'institutionalized illusion of neutrality' that continue to be used to proclaim 'justice'.

In many ways this book fosters a project that is crucially important and a lot of Alhadeff's explorations are topical and innovative (e.g. notion of 'corporatizing equalities' as well as 'imperialist digital utopianism' etc.), however, occasionally other crucially relevant critical theorists like Herbert Marcuse as well as sociologists of the 'body' such as Rosalind Diprose, Mike Featherstone, Robin Longhurst and Bryan Turner are not included which is surprising as these would have added meaningful additional aspects to the diverse discussions.

The importance of the experience and appreciation of vulnerability, our shared and common vulnerability is explored very empathetically and passionately and linked to the development of forms of socio-erotic ethics and radical citizenship.

The foundation for these ethics and 'citizenship' lies for Alhadeff in a commitment to heterogenous embodied curiosity and an understanding of 'community' as rhizomatic grounded in differences. Participatory citizenship to Alhadeff is fundamentally based on the experience of the other within seen as crucial to social agency. Her art and the process in which Alhadeff collaborates in its creation with her models are facilitating and examples of such alternative practices.

The book exposes and challenges the reductionism of 'absolute' modern Western positivist constructs such as 'race' and 'gender' etc. in relation to the diversity and fluidity of 'lived realities'. This outset can at times sit quite uneasy with the parallel use of the works of Freud, Reich and Lacan as these are based on at times problematic assumptions (of e.g. 'psychosexual health', 'psychopathology', stereotypes of 'heterosexual' dichotomy between 'male aggression' and 'female' passivity, 'collective consciousness' etc.). In this context it is also important to point to Alhadeff's lack of differentiation between 'desire' and pleasure which in Foucault's work helps to make sense of how 'conditions of domination' shape what is desired.

Overall it was surprising that the author did not make use of inverted commas around problematic and limiting social constructions such as 'sexuality', 'disability' etc. as this is important in order to distance oneself from such essentialising and violent concepts and their associated meanings.

Many core-ideas (e.g. on 'bodies in pleasure') relate to the important work of Michel Foucault that deals with the politics of 'bodies' and thus in occasion it was puzzling that not more was made of e.g. his notion of the 'laboratory of life', a very crucial and clearly 'embodied' concept that the late Foucault introduced as a means to shed light on the impact of shared embodied knowledge and the power of experientiality. The experience of for example consensual SM 'bodily practices' in this context are especially relevant here as these allow ideally for e.g. the resignification of bodies, appropriation of meaning/experiences of 'body', the development of 'skin knowledges' (Howes, 2005) as well as for the development of contextual ethics etc. A lot of these potentials and the broader relevancies of Foucault's insights and their impact on claims of a nonviolent modernity are explored in my own work (Beckmann, 2001 to 2014) on consensual SM and might be a fruitful supplement to some of Alhadeff's important ambitions of countering the hegemony of Western constructions of normalcy, of global 'corporatocracy' and the hegemonies of 'convenience culture'.

Foucault's concepts of 'conditions of domination' in contrast to negotiated and consented to 'limits' grounded in 'lived experience' would have offered a meaningful addition to Alhadeff's exploration of ethics. Consensual SM [in contrast to commodified 'kink' to be sure] can offer a space for 'counter-practices' [a similar possibility that one can experience in the appreciation of the art of Alhadeff] that "[.] disconnect [.] the fundamental philosophical pattern of the Western world which tied 'sexuality' to 'subjectivity' and 'truth' which in effect permanently shaped and limited human beings' relationship to each other. (...) These 'bodily practices' allow 'lived bodies' to experiment within the spaces of subject- and object position that they are usually assigned to by the apparatuses of domination". (Beckmann, 2009: 101–102). These experiences are empowering and allow for a profound insight into the fluidity of power and its arbitrary distribution and solidification in capitalist-consumerist systems.

While engaging with Alhadeff's book I felt a mixture of closeness and kinship of ideas and emotions and an astounded distance towards the style of writing that was adopted as it not very accessible. A book that champions vulnerability and aims for an 'embodied democracy' to my mind should avoid to make use of frequently non-accessible language and, at times, unnecessary jargon in order to be meaningful and useful to the many.

In contrast to this book, the author's video of e.g. "The Erotics of the Uncanny" [vimeo.com] works much better in this respect as it is far less dense and inaccessible and offers a revealing and sound critique of the limits of art/expression even in the seemingly more 'open' space of the San Francisco Fetish Scene.

The response to Alhadeff's art is revealing and matches the overall contradictory situation of 'bodies' in the realm of consumer-capitalist societies that are on the one hand seduced to engage in exposure and transgression but on the other hand heavily censored and punished if they engage themselves in 'practices of freedom'.

At times it is puzzling why the author appears to feel the need to cram in as many concepts and established thinkers into the text in order to try to make a point as it does not always make for a better argument nor serve as an aid to access to ideas. I often thought of my former University students whom I tried to entice to engage with the wonderful works of Butler and Foucault and who frequently found their writing-styles simply too inaccessible. This is a great pity and stands occasionally in deep contrast to the central aims of this ambitious book.

Parts of this work reads rather sketchy and like a mere dwelling into ideas and a meandering through interesting and relevant ideas and thus at moments this writing-style can be frustrating. For example the author's concept of 'erotic politics' as well as of the 'erotics of the uncanny' are defined only in fragments that are sprinkled throughout the lengthy book. While postmodern texts often consciously employ a 'non structure' and embrace a fluid open-endedness, it is at times not helpful to Alhadeff's aim as important concepts should be defined earlier in the text (e.g. 'erotic politics', 'transcendence' etc.) in order to allow the reader to properly engage with them as a diversity of interpretations of centrally important concepts are possible, some of which would contradict core ideas of the book.

It is further a bit irritating to come across “throughout this thesis” as this appears to indicate that the author did not even slightly alter her thesis before its publication as a book. This is not just a formal problem/issue but one of privilege as most people who publish their Ph.D.’s will be asked to at least alter such phrases before publication.

Occasionally Alhadeff’s explorations are very closely connected to and at times perhaps too entangled with her own experience and view of the world. For example Alhadeff refers to ‘Jews’ as the ‘adipose flesh on the social body’ which appears to be a very selective choice of focus that is not explained as her descriptions do also apply to the violences (both corporeal and symbolic) that e.g. Kurdish, Roma and Sinti people experienced and continue to experience. This unexplained selective focus and related suggestions reappear later in the book when the author makes some uncomfortable and contestable claims about operations of exclusion specifically targeted at ‘Jews’ which are valid for a diversity of ‘othered’ people, too.

There are other moments when the author appears to focus on quite arbitrary aspects of interpretation without really accounting for the selectiveness e.g. she refers to the interesting notion of ‘petroleum parents’, however, only a selection of possible criteria are addressed in this context. Alhadeff engages in a very interesting discussion of the ‘uncivilised human’ as ‘wound’ and contrasts this notion with ‘cutting’, however, when the notion of ‘sacred wound’ is brought into this context a cross-cultural comparative exploration of the meaning of the ‘sacred’, ‘religare’ and ‘wound’ might have been better in order to avoid a rather limited exploration of this experiential and existential realm on the basis of Western ideas. These limitations are then confirmed when the author refers to Taylor in order to reflect on a secular world (who is excluded here?). In this context it is also important to reflect on Alhadeff’s discussion of Winnicott’s notion of ‘psyche-soma’ as it could have been helpful to also make use of the work of Maslow, Tart, Jaspers, etc., the concept of DCBD (Deliberately Caused Bodily Damage; see: Hussein and Fatoohi, 1998) and to explore the fundamental tenets of mysticism and spirituality in order to explore the meanings of ‘sacred wounds’ for a diversity of people.

Alhadeff’s aim to ‘position oneself’ (Butler) is of course very important, however, to my mind it seems strange that in this context ‘Jewishness’ is somehow taken to be essence and not a construct such as ‘gender’ and ‘sexuality’? While Alhadeff later on states that Judaism is neither mandated nor definitive and discusses the ‘false stability of identity’, this emphasis on ‘Jewishness’ returns when the author refers to ‘wandering’ and being in Exile as ‘Jewish’ and then proclaims the notion of ‘collaborative citizenship’ to be at the core of ‘Jewish relationality’.

There are moments when the author appears not to reflect on her relative position of privilege as for example in her discussions of ‘self’-sacrifice and the ‘seduction of homelessness’ which only work alongside the author’s argument on a merely theoretical level as only someone who has the relative freedom to make choices to sacrifice themselves and someone who was never forced to live without the shelter of a home would choose this terminology. This of course clashes with the explicit ambition to connect theory/praxis as well as Alhadeff’s use of Freire’s work and of critical pedagogy as represented by other authors such as Giroux.

While Alhadeff uses Kant, Luxemburg and Thoreau could have offered important and helpful contributions in relation to the development of alternative ethics as well. Towards the end of her book Alhadeff makes very good use of Butler and Nietzsche in order to discuss the processes involved in and the effects of the Occupy Movement. Nietzsche's notion of a 'transvaluation of all values' is made use of in order to account for Occupy's aims and praxis and Alhadeff to my mind correctly hopes that this book and her art will engage and stimulate people to participate in a fundamental transformation of the ways in which power is exercised on and through 'bodies'.

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