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The Empire of Love: Review of Elizabeth Povinelli

Posted By [silvia posocco](#) on 1 May 2008 @ 7:04 pm in [3-Postcolonial Sexuality \[forthcoming May 08\]](#), [Issues](#) | [No Comments](#)

A review of Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press.

The Empire of Love is concerned with the analysis of intimacy, sociality and the body in settler colonies, specifically the United States and Australia. It aims to theorize how forms of liberal governance operate through discourses of individual agency and freedom – ‘autology’ – and social constraint – ‘genealogy’. At the heart of the book is an explicit effort to link theoretically two seemingly incommensurate socialities, namely the social worlds of an indigenous community in the Northern Territory of Australia, Belyuen, and a multi-sited queer community of radical faeries¹ in the United States. The book examines modes of love, intimacy and sociality as they operate in their respective contexts, with a view to explicitly trace connections between, and movements across, the multiple and complex modes of relatedness organised along kinship ties in Belyuen, and through the sociality and relationality among strangers in the networks of radical faeries communes in the US. These sites are ‘material anchors’² for social worlds which, according to Povinelli, are at once incommensurate and connected, as are ‘the racial and sexual discourses that apprehend them’.³ At stake in this analysis, therefore, is not only the issue of incommensurability between what appear to be manifestations of radical alterity – and, thus, fundamentally different forms of organising intimacy which are reciprocally Other – but also the racialised and sexualised modes of knowledge through which these socialities are figured, understood and governed.

The key argument in the book is that ‘autology’ and ‘genealogy’ are dominant forms of discipline in liberalism. Povinelli uses these terms in conjunction with ‘freedom’ and ‘constraint’, but does not quite collapse the pairs. ‘Autology’ refers to multiple discourses and practices which invoke the autonomous and self-determining subject, and which are therefore linked to, but not exhausted in, liberalism’s emphasis on ‘freedom’ more narrowly conceived as a political philosophy. ‘Genealogy’, on the other hand, is taken to refer to discourses which stress social constraint and determination in processes of subject constitution and construe the subject as bound by ‘various kinds of inheritances’.⁴ Autology and genealogy are two co-existing and intersecting forms of discipline which are constitutive of postcolonial governance. The book is concerned with tracing how these two sets of discourses and associated modes of discipline play out in the lives and deaths of subjects inhabiting the contemporary biosocialities and regimes of governance of these settler colonies. This is an ambitious project which proposes that one takes seriously specific postcolonial historicities, as they sediment in individual bodies *and* affective relations. Bodies and relations emerge through Povinelli’s account as historical sediments bearing the marks of their relational ‘enfleshment’. In turn, the intensely felt proximity engendered through social practices of kinning and relatedness suggests that these too should not be taken at face value, and rather should be linked to a critical analysis of liberal governance in postcoloniality.

The key embodied motif of chapter one, ‘Rotten Worlds’, is a sore developed by Povinelli in the aftermath of a spell of fieldwork in the Australian Northern Territory. Accounts of anthropologists’ ailments experienced during fieldwork are a well-established narrative device in anthropological writing. They often illustrate how the embodied and affective states linked to debilitating acclimatisation, cultural alienation and social distance experienced by the anthropologist in the field can be a way of becoming socialised into the ‘host’ culture. The anthropologist’s illness, with the social and cultural labour of recognition, diagnosis and care that it incites, is often figured as a key event through which a sense of empathy, proximity and/or intelligibility is attained between the anthropologist and his or her interlocutors. Anthropological accounts of the experience of illness during fieldwork therefore often operate as devices through which the inception of social proximity and cross-cultural intelligibility are invoked.

So, what of the sore on Povinelli’s back? Could it be caused by anthrax? Is it contagious? Should it be

treated with HIV/AIDS drugs? Is the source Maliya, the *durlg* (ancestral site)? Or is it staphylococcus? What ethics of concealment and disclosure does a body with a sore exact? Focusing on these diverse ways of making sense of the sore, and considering the forms of knowledge and the lived socialities associated with the 'modes of addressivity' through which the sore is conjured up, the sore provides an opportunity to analyse and theorise the carnal politics of racist indifference, embattled solidarity, ethically fraught cruising, paranoid sex-panic, grief-stricken kinship and the inequalities of postcoloniality which enmesh the flesh and reposition the author's afflicted body at each encounter. Povinelli focuses on the multiple biosocialities of the sore to consider the forms of *enfleshment* engendered through different modes of address. This suggests astute critical reflections on the place of the sore within the global distribution of life and death and the discourses of 'autology' and 'genealogy' at play in the complex carnalities of liberalism. This account resonates very directly with Achille Mbembe's discussion of 'necropolitics', where he asks, '[w]hat place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded and slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?'⁵ Povinelli addresses this necropolitical dimension through the repositioning of the body within a theoretical and ethnographic exploration of the operations of postcolonial liberalism. The sore is therefore a very powerful and effective device for the analysis of how the operations of liberal governance in postcoloniality may hold differential consequences for bodies, subjects and communities differentially addressed by discourses of autology and genealogy. Further, the sore materialises and embodies liberal forms of addressivity of both racism and sexuality.

Chapter two, 'Spiritual Freedom, Cultural Copyright', explores the addressivities of autology and genealogy in the stranger sociality of the radical faeries. This is the network of individuals and communities founded by Harry Hay in the United States in the 1950s and characterised by a distinctive kind of *bricoleur* spirituality which drew heavily on Native American spiritual practice. Harry Hay claimed to have received spiritual endorsement from a Native American spiritual leader. A gay-rights advocate, Hay argued for homosexuality as a cross-cultural reality, a position supported by his research into *berdaches*, those historical figures whose representation is inextricably bound up with the anthropological literature and popular readings of the ethnographic record which have presented them as 'traditional' figures of both homosexuality and gender transitivity (of male to female social identity and self-identification).⁶ The Native American spirituality embraced by Harry Hay is one of a very heterogeneous set of radical faeries' beliefs and practices which combine elements of indigenous religiosity with sexual permissiveness. In Povinelli's account, the cultural creativity of radical faeries' fashioning of bodies, identities, relations, communities and traditions well exemplifies the operations of discourses of freedom and the constitution of the autological subject in liberal settler colonies. However, the autonomous self-fashioning of the radical faeries is complicated by charges of cultural appropriation and theft, as indigenous advocates denounce their culturally cannibalising practices, simultaneously casting the indigenous subject in the realm of genealogy. Here, Povinelli argues, one can discern how the radical faeries, as the subjects of the discourse of freedom, must appear as wholly free and unfettered by 'culture', whilst indigenous subjects, imprisoned as they are in the bind of discourses of genealogy, must figure as culture-bound and culturally determined, even in the pursuit of self-determination, as in indigenous claims for reparation, restitution and exemption only admissible on cultural grounds.

Chapter three, 'The Intimate Event and Genealogical Society', considers how normative ideas concerning love and intimacy operate in liberalism and Empire through a series of juridical and theoretical readings. The chapter reviews different perspectives on the history of liberal love and its Others, with a view to restage questions concerning trajectories of European Enlightenment and modernity firmly in relation to histories of coloniality, as in much postcolonial theory.⁷ The focus here is the 'intimate event', that is, a cluster of fantasies variously concerned with anti-miscegenation, inter-racial marriage, bigamy and sodomy which are shown to be both 'disrupted and secured by the logic of the exception'.⁸ Whilst these fantasies lack a proper referent, they are nevertheless shown to instantiate and subtly realign the centrality of the intimate in liberalism, notably through the governance of the intimate heteronormative couple and the self-sovereignty of the subject whose intimacy is thereby produced and regulated. The 'intimate event' might be completely naturalised and made to appear common sense, but is in fact a shifting nexus between 'micro-practices of love' and 'macro-practices of state governance... capital production, circulation and consumption',⁹ which attains coherence and stability through specific operations, namely by delimiting what the specific domain of intimacy ought to be, conceiving of intimacy as explicitly normative, and construing forms of social organisation other than those regulated by the intimate event as different and immoral.¹⁰ Through the mechanism of exception, the intimate event is therefore implicated in the production of difference. Further, what the juridical and theoretical readings reveal is that 'liberalism', 'autology', 'genealogy' and 'the intimate event' itself, are not easily defined or circumscribed. Rather, they are 'moving targets'¹¹ where the operations of power are exposed in their

citational and disciplining dimensions.

The three key chapters in the book are stylistically different, with rich and evocative ethnographic accounts in the first and second chapters. In contrast, the last chapter is much less descriptive in style, with only minimal information provided on the key juridical cases discussed, and skeletal contextualisation of key theoretical arguments such as Giorgio Agamben's work on sovereignty, state of exception and bare life,¹² Mbembe's analytical focus on necropolitics,¹³ contemporary debates on the politics of the performative¹⁴ and publics and counterpublics.¹⁵ This sparing and terse prose may offer no concessions to the reader. Nevertheless, it matches very well the author's determination and clarity of vision in proposing a fundamental reconfiguration of the terrain for thinking about sexuality as not coterminous with identity. Sustaining this theoretical and analytical effort throughout, Povinelli contributes to the critique of identitarian paradigms already well entrenched in queer theory. Further, this analysis meticulously circumvents tropes of commensurability, in the diffusionist as much as in the translational inflections popular in contemporary cross-cultural and transnational approaches to the study of sexuality. Contemporary diffusionist accounts commonly conceive of sexual formations as relatively stable and assume their diffusion cross-culturally¹⁶ and trans-historically. Translational accounts, on the other hand, stress the explicitly local character of sexual formations. They point to the social, cultural and historical specificity of local understandings and interpretations of what 'sexuality' might mean in any given context.¹⁷ Further, critical perspectives on translation focus on the disjuncture between differently culturally located sexual meanings, understandings and epistemologies, as well as on the histories and consequences of specific sexual translations.¹⁸ *The Empire of Love* is not, strictly speaking, an exercise in translation or a meditation on translation's limits, failures and implications. Rather, the book offers a set of ethnographically informed theoretical reflections on the 'social matrix' in and through which sexuality emerges, and intimate socialities acquire coherence and substance. 'Sexuality' is extended and expanded as a result, against 'a certain literalism of the referent',¹⁹ and in directions other than those proposed by contemporary identitarian, diffusionist and translational accounts. Here sexuality is a field of power where discourses of 'autology' and 'genealogy' continually reconfigure the sphere of the intimate to determine – and govern – disparate, incommensurate and yet connected socialities, and enmesh bodies biopolitically and necropolitically, as gendered, racialised and sexualised historical sediments.

The Empire of Love is a remarkable book which is theoretically ambitious as it is compelling. It makes a very significant critical contribution to thinking sexuality in the operations of liberal governance, to open up and reinvigorate this field of analysis and theoretical intervention.

Notes

1. for more information on the radical faeries see for example [this site](#) [↗]
2. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 46. [↗]
3. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 2. [↗]
4. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p.4. [↗]
5. Mbembe, Achille (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15(1):11-40, p. 12. [↗]
6. For critical readings of this, see Epple, Carolyn (1998) 'Coming to Terms with Navajo *Nádleehí*: a Critique of Berdache, "Gay", "Alternate Gender", and "Two-spirit"', *American Ethnologist*, 25 (2):267-290; see also Towle, Evan B. and Lynn M. Morgan (2002) 'Romancing the Transgender Native: Rethinking the Use of the "Third Gender" Concept', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 8(4):469-497. [↗]
7. See, for example, Mignolo, Walter (2000) 'The Many Faces of Cosmo-polis: Border Thinking and Critical Cosmopolitanism', *Public Culture*, 12(3):721-48. [↗]
8. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 193. [↗]
9. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 191. [↗]
10. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 198-9. [↗]
11. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2006) *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy and Carnality*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, p. 181. [↗]
12. Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereignty and Bare Life*, Stanford: Stanford University

- Press; Agamben, Giorgio (2005) *State of Exception*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. [↗]
13. Mbembe, Achille (2003) 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15(1):11-40. [↗]
 14. Butler, Judith (1997) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, London and New York: Routledge. [↗]
 15. Warner, Michael (2002) 'Publics and Counterpublics', *Public Culture*, Vol. 14(1):49-90. [↗]
 16. See, for example, Altman, Dennis (2001) *Global Sex*, Chicago: Chicago University Press. [↗]
 17. See, for example, Blackwood, Evelyn (1998) 'Tombois of West Sumatra: Constructing Masculinity and Erotic Desire', *Cultural Anthropology*, 13(4):491-521; Gagnon, John H. and Richard G. Parker (1992) *Conceiving Sexuality: Approaches to Sex Research in a Postmodern World*, New York and London: Routledge; Lancaster, Roger (1992) 'Subject Honor, Object Shame', in *Life is Hard: Machismo, Danger and the Intimacy of Power in Nicaragua*, Berkeley: University of California Press. [↗]
 18. See Hemmings, Clare (2007) 'What's in a name? Bisexuality, Transnational Sexuality Studies and Western Colonial Legacies', *International Journal of Human Rights*, 11 (1&2):13-32. [↗]
 19. Povinelli, Elizabeth (2007) 'Disturbing Sexuality', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3):565-576, p. 575. [↗]

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