Book Review: Little vast rooms of undoing exploring identity and embodiment through public toilet spaces

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Review of *Little Vast Rooms of Undoing* by Dara Blumenthal

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In '*Little Vast Rooms of Undoing*', Dara Blumenthal uses materialist feminist theory and posthumanism to examine identity and embodiment through an exploration of the public toilet. Through doing this she argues that the emotional responses that we experience when using the toilet help to maintain *homo clausus* order, a term she borrows from Norbert Elias to mean, "the closed, monadic subject who has a high degree of rational, emotional, a physical self-control" (3). She names these emotional responses as fear, anxiety, shame and embarrassment, (or FASE).

Personally, I went through many emotions on reading Blumenthal's book: there were moments of fascination (particularly in relation to what was, without a doubt, rich and encapsulating data), and times when I thought 'ahh yes – you're really onto something here!' However, in other places I felt frustrated at the dense prose and use of acronyms, which I often found inaccessible, and I found myself in disagreement with some analyses (although the disagreement was sometimes coupled with a sense of not knowing if I quite understood the argument proposed).

The first three chapters are deeply theoretical, as Blumenthal uses the work of Norbert Elias to theorise identity. Chapter One focuses on the *homo clauses* identity most readily drawn upon in the Western philosophical tradition. "*Homo clauses* is understood as the monadic, closed individual – seemingly neutral, but as we know from [Elizabth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Luce Irigaray, Karan Barad and Gilles Deleuze – all drawn upon in the book], there are no neutral knowledges. The ontological basis for the ideal *homo clausus* is male, and females are understood as inherently lesser and opposite to them" (186). *Chapter Two* discusses poststructuralist approaches to identity (particular Butler and Goffman). Here another of Elias' terms is used, *homines aperti*, an approach that recognises that people are "social beings" (186). Here Blumenthal seemed to have some theoretical disagreements with both Butler and Goffman, arguing that the two authors too readily reduce everything to discourse, whereas for Blumenthal (and other material feminists), materiality mattered, and matter is an active agent. Furthermore, she argues that while *homines aperti* "is a move towards a better understanding of living bodies, [it still] suffers from the social constructionist tendency to rely on atomised social categories and binaries, for example, inside/outside, mind/body, self/other" (45).

The final chapter in this section, therefore, introduces the posthumanist principle of *corpus infinitum*. "Both 'homo clausus' and 'homines aperti' take individual selves as given, as the primary avenue for understanding societies, while also minimising or entirely neglecting the role of sensory-embodiment" (45). *Corpus infinitum*, on the other hand, "entangles identity with *fleshy living bodies* as fundamental to social life generally, and crucial for the conscious rational self specifically".

It is perhaps due to a lack of grounding in posthumanist theory, but by this point I was feeling a little lost. I came to review '*Little Vast Rooms of Undoing*' through an interest in public toilet spaces, particularly in relation to issues of gender and disability (aroundthetoilet.wordpress.com). It added to my building collection of toilet-related books which are neatly lined up in my own bathroom. I was excited by the title and the blurb which suggests an empirical account arguing that, "experiences within public toilets expose the fissures of individual identity construction and

understanding and open the possibilities for a more relational and cohesive experience of the embodied self". At this point, however, there had been little interrogation of the toilet and no use of empirical data. However, Chapter Four, *The History of Western Public Toilers Since the Fifteenth Century*, marked a turning point. This offered a fascinating account of how we learn (through childhood) and have learnt (since the fifteenth century) to make toileting an act that is private. Particularly interesting (and unique from other histories of public toilets that I have read), were the excerpts of text from the 16th and 17th centuries that appeared in "instruction manuals, schoolbooks, and court regulations" (76), to teach publically about toilet etiquette. These contrasted with the much less explicit 'rules' outlined by the Victorian era, as by then (as is now) toilet training was something: a) done in childhood; and b) learnt in the privacy of the home.

Chapters Five to Seven are the empirical chapters, and overall I really enjoyed them. Blumenthal interviewed "men, women, gendernonconforming, and trans individuals" (blurb), and the interview material gave rich accounts of people's experiences. The interview data was used in Chapter Five to explore the gendered notions of movement, sight and boundaries in public toilets (with particularly interesting accounts of their fear of queerness in public toilets); Chapter Six focused upon care, touching upon notions of interdependence; and Chapter Seven centred on pleasure and possibility. There were for me, however, some questions about the sampling of participants. Firstly, most participants seemed to be in their 20s. Although it is acknowledged that the sample is "not necessarily representative of the population as a whole" (101) (and I would never suggest that it should be), neither does she explain the apparent cluster of ages. This, coupled with the statement, "it is important to note that every lesbian and queer woman that I interviewed had had multiple sexual encounters in public toilets" (167) (something which seems, to me at least, unrepresentative of the diverse population of lesbian and queer women … but perhaps I am just boring), made me want further explanation (and accounting for) the particular sample. Second, the demographic information given was always age, sexuality and gender, with no attention paid to how these identities intersect with race, class, or indeed disability. In relation to her sample, Blumenthal notes that:

"[t]rans (e.g. –gender, -sexual, or just 'trans') and queer (genderqueer of just 'queer') identities are particularly important in this study not only because of the status of their already non-conventionally bound identities, but also because these individuals are often most conscious of their bodies in these spaces (often not by choice). Many trans and queer individuals find that they are already breaching a rule of the action order by merely being present in the space (based on their appearance entangled with their sexuality – i.e., sex-gender-sexuality) when, generally, they just want to use the toilet in peace like everyone else." (102)

Although I don't disagree with Blumenthal here (and her data certainly points to this), I was surprised given this statement that her analysis seemed to end at questions of "sex-gender-sexuality". It does not take much looking at the architecture of the toilet to see that disabled people too "[breach] a rule of the action order by merely being present in the space [of a public toilet]" (102). This is not to say that disability wasn't *hinted* at (particularly in the chapter focusing on 'care'), and there was one reference to the work of Tobin Siebers (2008). Yet, unless I missed something, the word 'disability' wasn't uttered, and doesn't appear in the index (the term 'differently abled bodies' is evoked in relation to Siebers work with little explanation as to the choice of terminology).

Furthermore, there was never an explicit analysis in regards to in/access to toilets for disabled people (other than one example of caring due to frailty of old age) and how this might relate to fear, anxiety, shame and embarrassment (FASE), or identity, particularly in relation to sex-gender-sexuality. Blumenthal's writing particularly reminded me of the work of feminist disability scholar, Margrit Shildrick (2009), and it seemed a shame that she at no point engaged with Shildrick's work.

Overall, for me, this book had highs and lows. I felt I got to grips with her theoretical standpoint more as I engaged with the data, though often felt frustrated by the certainty with which she presented her analyses, even when I agreed with them (particularly as this certainty seems to conflict with a posthuman position). Although the book doesn't explicitly engage with disability, it would be of particular interest to those interested in thinking about disability and the posthuman (Goodley, Lawthom, & Runswick-Cole, 2014).

Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., & Runswick-Cole, K. (2014). Posthuman disability studies. *Subjectivity, 7*(4), 342–361.

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