

BOOK REVIEW

## Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground

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Yetta Howard's queer-radical monograph *Ugly Differences: Queer Female Sexuality in the Underground* presents in its four chapters and conclusion a critical discussion of queer radicality in underground art productions. The chapters engage with Slava Tsukerman's camp cult movie *Liquid Sky*, Sapphire's poetry, Roberta Gregory's and Erika Lopez's comics, A. L. Steiner and Narcissister's collaborative art installation *Winter/Spring Collection*, and New Queer Cinema's *High Art*. In this volume, Howard unearths a spectrum of aesthetic pleasure derived from survival and self-destruction, to tragic romance and kink intimacies. In all the material that Howard chooses for her discussions, "ugliness" enacts a powerful, political premise, which makes this book not only a captivating manifesto of queer punk aesthetics but also a thoughtful exploration of the importance of subcultural, queer-feminist politics antagonizing the norms of mainstream LGBT inclusion politics and homonormative pink-washing tendencies. Ultimately, as the key term of this volume, "ugliness" unfolds in the chapters, specifically in the analogy of three textual elements: as the "disagreeable and pejorative traits" conventionally attributed to queerness (2); a critique of the abjection and stigmatization of all bodies outside of the Western norms of white, able-bodied, cis masculinity (2); and third, as the angry, creative, punk, and anti-aesthetic textual practices of subcultural queer life (2).

Ugliness is not an unexplored theme in queer scholarship. Howard situates her book among like-minded scholarly inquiries, such as Sianne Ngai's *Ugly Feelings*, Umberto Eco's *On Ugliness*, Kathryn Bond Stockton's concept of "debasement" as well as Jack Halberstam's "queer failure" (Ngai 2005; Stockton 2006; Eco 2007; Halberstam 2011). Similar to some of them, but with an eclectic textual archive, Howard's engagement with ugliness is fiercely driven by anti-assimilationist, queer-feminist politics. Alongside ugliness, Howard also picks up the notion of the "grotesque" to further define the notion of "ugly." Whereas the grotesque, or the "female grotesque" as discussed by Mary Russo, for instance, is a spectacle driven by a politics of visibility (Russo 1995), the ugly is in contrast unseen and its visibility unwanted. Howard's notion of ugliness here is distinct from this notion of grotesque, as it is the intentionally visually unwanted item, the unattractive, unappealing un/recognition of underground cultural production with which Howard engages in these chapters.

As used in the subtitle, “queer female sexuality” presents the second significant conceptual assemblage of this book besides “ugliness.” To me, it seemed initially to be a surprising choice. When I first opened the book, I wondered what kind of “queer” and “female” politics I would encounter between the pages. Feminist studies and activism are clearly divided on the meaning (and particularly the inclusiveness) of these terms, and as a nonbinary scholar myself, and also as someone who began to engage with feminist activism in the radically queer and feminist metropolitan contexts of the late 1990s, it made me happy to read Howard situating this concept beyond a normative notion of femaleness (as cis). The author emphasizes how the concept “female” is ultimately nonessentialist in her work, and is inclusive of a wide range of nonnormative bodies comprising, for instance, cisgender as well as gender-nonconforming, queer, lesbian, butch, and femme notions of female embodiment. In the rest of this review I will write female, feminine, and related words with an asterisk in order to make this nonessentialist usage of female\* linguistically visible. I hope the author would affirm this linguistic transgression. Her own devoted theoretical engagement with linguistic experimentation, obvious in her thorough reading of Monique Wittig, *écriture féminine*, and Gertrude Stein, for instance, makes me think that she might be on my side here, as I write “female\*” in order to visualize it as a “position” that is processual and nonessentialist. Perhaps, to find inspiration here for a minute in “queer” and “trans” as concepts that are often emphasized as being verbs rather than adjectives, this also means that “female\*” might function similarly as a *becoming* or as a *doing* rather than a *being*.

The book’s wide-ranging literary, visual, and acoustic material engages with the queer postpunk notion of “ugliness.” Ugliness is used as an investigative lens, and, as the author suggests, travels through the “lo-fi and the analog, the experimental and the independent, the subcultural and the unpopular” (9). Howard traces the material through “ugliness” while centering questions of alternative erotics and its intersection with queer femininity\* as a site of resistance.

In the first chapter, titled “Postpunk Desires,” Howard takes up the camp aesthetics of the film *Liquid Sky* (1982). Her approach here is similar in the rest of the chapters, which are thematically connected through an exploration of representations of self-destruction, substance abuse, and despair. The independent film features the downtown New York, New Wave, club-culture scene and is discussed through questions of dystopian feminism, lesbianism\*, and the alienating sexual, visual, and sonic space of the film itself. It describes the precarity of the female\* subject in the “sexual and sonic landscape of nonnormativity” (27). Consequently, ugliness is rendered as a site of female\* estrangement, rape revenge, the death of the perpetrators, and questions of survival. Howard discusses the sexual scenarios of the film and the general “vibe” of the era as a form of ugliness that is punk and anarchistic and beyond any question of neatly compartmentalized, homonormative subjectivity.

In the second chapter, “The Language of Violation,” Howard analyzes the work of the artist Sapphire, for instance the text “Push” (1996), its film adaptation *Precious* (2009), and, more generally, the post-Black Arts Movement of underground performance poetry, as well as Toni Morrison’s canonical novel *The Bluest Eyes* (1970) and its textual experimentation. Ugliness is captured here through the violence of incestuous rape as much as ugliness as a feeling in the confrontation with dominant understandings of race, sexuality, and gender. In relation to Morrison, for instance, Howard also interrogates a textual ugliness, the “ugliness” of a distorted text that Morrison deploys as a conceptual tool to predict the collapse of structure and safety for the female protagonist’s body. Moreover, in relation to Sapphire, Howard links the notion of ugly in

her analysis to the physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, as well as the role of violence and violation in their impact on feelings of self-worth as well as survival.

In “Politically Incorrect, Visually Incorrect,” the third chapter, Howard turns to underground, queer-feminist comics. By focusing on two artists, the white lesbian artist Roberta Gregory and Latinx lesbian artist Erika Lopez, ugliness emerges in how the comics present a nihilistic perspective and interrogate the limits of racial, gender, and queer belonging. The series *Bitchy Butch* by Roberta Gregory and *Lap Dancing for Mommy: Tender Stories of Disgust, Blame and Inspiration* by Erika Lopez guide Howard’s conversation with “ugliness” and sexual, racial, gendered, and erotic identity. She shows in this chapter the connections among gender nonconformity, queer sexuality, and nonwhite queer visibility while tackling the dominance of conformist mainstream politics. Ugliness and nonconformity emerge here together to reveal the discrepancy and restrictions placed on the sexually and gender-deviant\* subject. As Howard’s lens, ugliness comes alive in this chapter as a form of marginality, unseen and unheard voices of the unpopular art of zine-published comics.

The final chapter, “The Erotics of Artificiality,” presents Howard’s investigations of the object of the mannequin in artwork through the question of erotics, with the “unnatural” plastic doll and the doll’s interaction with the nonnormative sexuality of living humans. By conducting a close reading of the twelve-minute-long film *Winter/Spring Collection* (2013), a collaboration between the artists A. L. Steiner and Narcissister, Howard explores how the mannequin and mannequin body parts become eroticized body parts that, in echoing ideas of phantom limbs and prostheses, are used by Narcissister’s character in the film to perform an erotic character who fuses politics of race, disability, gender, and sexuality into their performance. Howard creates here a discussion of ugliness as a notion of “radical reassessment of objectification” (114) strategies that deal with the racialized, crip, and gender-nonconforming body in a normative context. The desire brought into question here is the fetish-coded, nonnormative desire for mannequins and the social classification of this desire as abject, resulting in its pathologization as “agalmatophilia.” The plasticness of the doll itself renders it other, outside of the “naturalness” and normativity of human-centered intimacy. In its alignment of queer desire and sexuality with artificiality and the unnatural, this chapter forges interesting links among crip politics, crip aesthetics, and kink erotics. The ugliness in this chapter is explored through how the film challenges cis and hetero norms of eroticism.

Howard concludes her book with “The Negative,” where she further develops ugliness and its queer subcultural emergence through the notion of the “negative” as a material object in the process of reproducing an image in photography as well as in the form of a metaphor. This concluding chapter is devoted to Lisa Cholodenko’s film *High Art* (1998), which, as Howard argues, frames lesbian\* desire through the medium of photography. The photographic negative, as Howard discusses, becomes the metaphor for the main characters’ possible development of their desire amid heteronormative expectations and substance abuse. Ugliness is outlined here as literally the “negative” of photographic technology and the abstract form of queer desire, drug abuse, and death.

I experienced reading Howard’s contribution as a unique and rare opportunity to engage with a plethora of postpunk subcultural texts in academic writing and a refreshing radical reading of them through the concept of ugliness. If I could wish for anything further from this book, I would perhaps have asked for an even more radical tone of writing against the mainstream of homo- and cis-normative politics and their

collaboration in further cementing nationalism, racism, trans-, fat-, and crip-phobia. I would also have welcomed a braver, more explicit self-positioning by the author, as I kept wondering what her reflection is on her own gender identity, her experiences of race and racialization, for example when writing about Black art as an apparently white author. Yet I was intrigued reading Howard's discussion of "ugliness" and "grotesque" and the tensions among visibility, spectacle, and the rewards of certain visibilities as well as the sanctions applied to others. I hope the author will choose to pick this up in a future publication as it is promising in relation to the discussion of norms of visibility in mainstream LGBT politics, as well as the mainstream's neglect of the "non-visible" as apolitical. The tension between subcultural and mainstream politics, increased antitrans, antiblack, and anti queer violence and their convergence with visibility politics as part of a homonormative regime could be interesting. Moreover, Howard's inquiry, although driven and devoted, sometimes seems to be too close to the question of recognition of the marginalized art and culture of the underground by non-subcultural aesthetic reception. The margins may not need to be included in order to flourish and create unique worlds and alternate realities and politics. However, the material archive she has compiled in this volume is unique and well composed, and pays attention to the unhappy, destructive, and perverse elements of queer-core subcultures.

As a final note, I truly appreciated Howard's particular attention to the textual and to form as part of the materiality of the politics of ugliness. Her fascination with Gertrude Stein's punctuation and Toni Morrison's epigraphic reworking in *The Bluest Eyes*, for instance, or her careful reading of the form-text play in her analysis of Erika Lopez's work, are only a few examples of where she has convincingly and interestingly picked up on questions of conceptual representation of text, the collapse of normativity on a textual level, and the driving force of these collapses by radically different aesthetics, social and political ideas, and critique. Especially for this, as well as many other aspects of the study, I would highly recommend this volume for scholars of queer art and queer ethics, but it would also be a great addition to course syllabi addressing queer negativity, relationality, queer death studies, as well as wider cultural studies for teaching undergraduate as well as advanced students interested in those topics. This book was really a joy to read—queer in a literal sense—provocative, unapologetic, and thoughtful.

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