

Reading questions for March 13

(Notice that Oksala handily summarizes the Jouy case and Alcoff's response to it in the first three pages of her article. Skip ahead if you want to see the short version.)

Linda Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience"

1. Note that the way Alcoff uses the term "post-structuralism" refers to Foucault's work, so her juxtaposition of post-structuralism and phenomenology echoes the problematic of this course. "What is the relationship between the discourse and the experience of sexual violence?" [46]. So what is Alcoff asking when she asks this question?
2. Don't worry too much about Alcoff's somewhat technical rendering of the phenomenological tradition (pp. 47-51). Instead, the take-home message is that Alcoff thinks that "much of Merleau-Ponty's categories of embodiment can be put to the service of specific analyses of the ways in which gendered subjectivity emerges from sexual practices" [51]. Remember that Leder and Young are both, in different ways, drawing on Merleau-Ponty to offer an embodied phenomenology, so she is writing in the same general vein.
3. Focus on the section titled, "A Phenomenology of Rape." How does Alcoff read Foucault's Jouy example (two pages of original text on the website)? How does she reach her own conclusion that "we need to supplement discursive accounts of the construction of sexual experience with phenomenological accounts of the embodied effects on subjectivity of certain kinds of practices" [55]?

Linda Alcoff, "Dangerous Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Pedophilia"

1. What does Alcoff think Foucault (and his peers) thought about "pedophilia" and children's sexuality?
2. On page 108 Alcoff begins to build her critique of Foucault. "Foucault demonstrates a...blindspot by exempting his own favored entity from his theory of discursive constitution and flux: pleasure" [109] and, "despite appearance to the contrary, Foucault in fact does not hold that pleasure is ontologically constituted by discourses and exists in intrinsic and not only extrinsic relationship to structures such as patriarchy" [110]. What does Alcoff mean, and how does she reach this conclusion?
3. What are the conflicting imperatives and realities that Alcoff thinks any analysis of pedophilia will have to incorporate?
4. "The phenomenology of sex itself...involves uniquely sensitive, vulnerable, and psychically important areas of the body, a fact that persists across cultural differences...It is not social context alone that makes sexual acts significant, but social context in relation to the phenomenology of embodiment" [127-8]. What is "phenomenology" in this context, and does this claim by Alcoff jibe with the rest of her analysis of sexual *assujettissement* [what she calls, "modes of subjectivation"]?

Johanna Oksala, “Sexual Experience: Foucault, Phenomenology, and Feminist Theory”

1. What, according to Oksala, does Foucault think “experience” is?
2. How does she re-read the Jouy case (pp. 213-216)? What is a *subjugated knowledge*?
3. What does Oksala think is shown by Foucault’s treatment of the cases of Alexina Barbin and Pierre Rivière?
4. “Our everyday experience already contains fractures: it has aspects and elements that are inconsistent with its normative determinants. The potential for change emerges out of these fractures, from the space of critical self-reflection created by the self folding back upon itself” [219]. This is Oksala’s theoretical punchline. What does she mean?

To ponder:

Think of a personal experience that you’ve struggled to make sense of. It could be something as weighty as a sexual assault, or it could be something more banal (like eating an apple?!). We have all grappled with making sense of our own undergoing of and reactions to situations like relationship break-up, falling in love, illness, bereavement, becoming a parent, etc. To what extent could you think of this experience as a product of your own embodied consciousness, and to what extent is it discursively produced—the outcome of a genealogy that you may only dimly perceive?