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Inhabiting a Place in the Common Profanation and Biopolitics in Teaching

Abstract

This article considers the common and shared world in teaching, by reference to the concept of profanation in relation to biopolitics. "To profane", means to treat something (or someone) as worldly and as something "that can be played with". The act of profanation has implications for how objects that are "put on the table" can be regarded in teaching and how these "objects" can become public goods. But what happens when things that are used in teaching are representations of social injustice and suffering? This article will give a critique of the idea of profanation, specifically discussing when teaching deals with social injustice and representations of suffering.

Keywords

Public education; The common; Biopolitics; Social injustice; Representations of suffering; Giorgio Agamben; Sara Ahmed.

Introduction

When I think about what feminist politics in education involves, I think of how different bodies inhabit a place in education and in teaching; concerns that involve different aspects, such as the body, social class, gender, sexuality, ability, emotions and affects. But feminist politics also involves different kinds of educational institutions, such as kindergartens, primary schools, high schools and universities, as well as different political systems wherein these institutions work. Teaching that takes place in these institutions concerns different actions, such as the students and the teachers attending to the objects and to what is "put on the table" in front of them.¹ Teaching involves inter-generational acts, between an older generation and the young, and can be related to the creation of a shared world, to the common and the public.² Or rather, it involves actions that could have the aim of creating, or appealing to, the *common*.

1 Jan Masschelein & Maarten Simons, *In Defence of the School: A Public Issue* (Leuven: E-ducation, Culture & Society Publisher, 2013); Johannes Rytzler, "Teaching as Attention Formation: A Relational Approach to Teaching and Attention," 2017, <http://mdh.diva-portal.org/smash/record.jsf?pid=diva2:1066806>.

2 See for example: Klaus Mollenhauer, *Forgotten Connections: On Culture and Upbringing*, trans. Norm Friesen (London: Routledge, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315883007>.

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In recent research within educational philosophy, the public/private aspects of teaching have been discussed. For example, Masschelein and Simons have argued in defence of the public school,³ and Bergdahl and Langmann have discussed how teaching can be regarded as a public as well as a private space.⁴ In this article I will further discuss the common and shared world in teaching and in education by examining how different bodies as well as objects inhabit educational situations differently. I will do so both normatively and critically, and more specifically, by discussing the concept of *profanation* in relation to *biopolitics*, drawing on Giorgio Agamben. The act of profanation, which has also been discussed within philosophy of education, has implications for the understanding of the common as well as for how objects that are “put on the table” can be regarded in teaching.⁵ These implications have educational possibilities, but – and this is the question that I will come back to throughout the article – how can the act of profanation in teaching be understood in relation to education as a part of the political, of biopolitics, and to social injustice and to representations of suffering? To answer this, I will make feminist readings of these concepts of profanation in relation to biopolitics and teaching, drawing on works by Giorgio Agamben, Sara Ahmed, Ken Chen and Alexander G. Weheliye, who have done some important work towards understanding power relations, biopolitics and social injustice.

In the article I will first introduce the term “profanation” and discuss it in relation to education and biopolitics and then come to some core questions where I no longer think the act of profanation is possible – or rather, I question it in relation to ideas of what it means to inhabit a place in the common and in relation to social justice. At the end of the article I will develop my critique by taking two different paths, first, referring to Weheliye’s critique of biopolitics, and second, referring to Chen and Ahmed’s understanding of poetry and representations of violence and suffering, as well as different ways to encounter these kinds of representations of suffering.⁶ The article discusses the act of representing something (an object, a historical event, an educational matter or a text/picture in teaching) and, as well as, it reflects on how bodies with flesh, bones and emotions – that is, students and teachers – take their place in educational institutions.

3 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*.

4 Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006); Lovisa Bergdahl & Elisabet Langmann, “Where Are You?” Giving Voice to the Teacher by Reclaiming the Private/Public Distinction,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 51, no. 2 (May 1, 2017): 461-75, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9752.12244.\u00c0\u20221{\}\u00c1f\}Journal of Philosophy of Education}> 51, no. 2 (May 1, 2017)

5 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*.

6 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004) <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203700372>; Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham; Duke University Press, 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822376491>; Ken Chen, “Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show,” Asian American Writers’ Workshop, 2015, <http://aaww.org/authenticity-obsession/>.

To profane

The term *profanation* comes from religious language, in which one can be said to profane that which is sacred. Profanation means to treat something (or someone) as worldly and as something “that can be played with”. It is an act that *separates* the thing from its context and makes it free.⁷ For Agamben, this concept has religious implications but it also has implications for how to understand politics, capitalism and consumption, and it has something to say in relation to education.⁸ Agamben writes: “Sacred and religious were the things that in some way belonged to the gods. As such, they were removed from the free use and the commerce of men...”⁹ Through the act of profanation, that which is sacred becomes *useable*. For example, in the act of sacrifice there will be a part of the flesh that becomes free – free to use and free to eat. There is a line between *using* and *profanating*, Agamben writes. For example, one can regard a profane time or a profane thing as decoupled from its otherwise normal use.¹⁰ It is made available to those who would otherwise not usually have access to the thing.

As an example, Agamben relates the term “profanation” to play and how a child who plays with ancient or old things does not care about their former use or that they are sacred, but finds a new use for the things:

“Children, who play with whatever old thing falls into their hands, make toys out of things that also belong to the spheres of economics, war, law, and other activities that we are used to thinking of as serious. All of a sudden, a car, a firearm, or a legal contract becomes a toy.”¹¹

Another example by Agamben is the cat that plays with yarn, and how the yarn, for the cat, has another meaning than its original one. To profane things is to treat them as a *total means*. They become useable outside of their original sphere. The same goes for museums (which can be rooms, buildings, or whole cities), which are, as Agamben writes, “separate dimensions to which what was once – but is no longer”.¹² The things in a museum are not there to be *used* anymore, but to be observed or looked at. They have been separated from their ordinary area and use.

Profanation has a function in religious life, but as Agamben shows, it also has meaning in relation to such diverse topics as play, museums, and – Agamben’s area of interest – to (bio)politics. The connection is made by how profanation should be understood in relation to the *common*, to the public:

7 Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations* (New York: Zone Books, 2007).

8 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*.

9 Agamben, *Profanations*, 75.

10 Agamben, *Profanations*, 74.

11 Agamben, *Profanations*, 76.

12 Agamben, *Profanations*, 74.

"Profanation, however, neutralizes what it profanes. Once profaned, that which was unavailable and separate loses its aura and is returned to use. Both are political operations: the first guarantees the exercise of power by carrying it back to a sacred model; the second deactivates the apparatuses of power and returns to common use the spaces that power had seized."¹³

Agamben reminds us how it was through the act of profanation that the "free man" in ancient Greek and Roman worlds got access to that which was considered to be sacred. It was made free and available to be played with. Here, profanation and the common intersect, and this is where education also has a role, since it is the very place where these actions of profanation can take place, something that I will discuss further below.

Education as free time

In Masschelein and Simons' *In Defence of the School*, they begin in antiquity and from there they try to pinpoint what the public school can be as an ideal.¹⁴ They write that the idea of the school is based on the idea of *free time*, which is the most common translation of the word *Schole*, namely, free time to study and to practise:

"In other words, the school provided free time, that is, non-productive time, to those who by their birth and their place in society (their 'position') had no right to claim it. Or, put differently still, what the school did was to establish a time and space that was in a sense detached from the time and space of both society (Greek: *polis*) and the household (Greek: *oikos*). It was also an egalitarian time and therefore the invention of the school can be described as the democratization of free time."¹⁵

The idea of free time was that the school could be a place that offered knowledge and experience to the public.¹⁶ The students who attended the school were able to leave behind the roles, identities and work associated with their life outside the school; in other words, they could be suspended from their other life. Masschelein and Simons write:

"The school is the time and space where students can let go of all kinds of sociological, economic, familial and culture-related rules and expectations. In other words, giving form to the school – making school – has to do with a kind of suspension of the weight of these rules. A

13 Agamben, *Profanations*, 77.

14 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*.

15 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 28.

16 I would like to thank the reviewers of this article who reminded me that a form of public and compulsory education may have been introduced in some cities in the ancient Greek and Roman worlds, which could have challenged the existing power structure during that time. Doubtless, education also had from its very beginning a reproductive function, but at the same time it was complex and surely had its own explicitly or subtly violent modes of exclusion, discrimination and power politics.

suspension, for instance, of the rules that dictate or explain why someone – and his or her whole family or group – falls on a certain rung of the social ladder.”¹⁷

As part of the suspension from the second – other – life, people inhabited the school as *students*. It is a category that has certain connotations – as a subject created and open to transformation. But also, as argued by Masschelein and Simon as well as by Tyson Lewis, the student is in school *to study*.¹⁸ The suspension means that the roles that exist in other areas, such as in the home, are no longer valid – students do not attend school as daughters or sons, or as carriers of class, gender or specific origins (which of course can be questioned and something that I will come back to). This suspension is limited in time (during school time) and is something students come in and out of during the day and during the school year.

It is in relation to this free separated time that the act of profanation also has a function. It is in this separated time that students, through the act of profanation, make objects and things available and public. In relation to educational theory, Masschelein and Simons write that the idea of profanation stands in relation to what it means to make something available, to make it a public or common good, in teaching. They discuss it in relation to play (which goes back to the understanding of the Latin word for school, *ludus*, which also means “game” or “play”), and to what is put on the table in front of the students. They write:

“...something (a text, an action) is being offered up and simultaneously becomes separated from its function and significance in social order; something that appears in and of itself, as an object of study or practice, regardless of its appropriate use (in the home, or in society, outside the school). When something becomes an object of study or practice, it means that it demands our attention; it invites us to explore it and engage it, regardless of how it can be put to use.”¹⁹

The idea of profanation and the understanding of *use* stand in relation to Masschelein and Simons’ idea of the public school, and also to the idea of teaching. That is, how “to put something on the table”, in front of our gaze, our hearing and our hands, can be regarded as something central for teaching. Masschelein and Simons, also drawing on Agamben, regard this action of profanation as a way to create free time (for study).

Free time, for whom?

The act of profanation, as well as the separation, contributes to the possibility of free time. Masschelein and Simon’s book wants to defend the public school, as the title clearly states:

17 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 35.

18 See also: Tyson E. Lewis, *On Study: Giorgio Agamben and Educational Potentiality* (New York: Routledge, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203069622>.

19 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 40.

In Defence of the School: A Public Issue. It is a defence of a public school that in past years has undergone some serious changes and demands related to marketization, alienation and corruption as well as criticism for reproducing the class system or for failing to produce graduates that are employable and effective in other areas of life.²⁰ The idea of education as a separate time, a free time which *separates* students from their other life (outside school), can be related to Agamben's idea and argument concerning how profanation works in relation to the *common*. Through actions of profanation, the things at hand become available, free to use, and they become public goods. What we can see from Masschelein and Simons' argument is that the ideas of profanation and suspension have a bearing on a theory on what education can be, as an ideal, of what to think and strive for. There is something important in this, especially when relating it to the otherwise productive life, for example, jobs that I have had, working-class jobs, like working in kitchens or factories, or as a care assistant for the elderly, where free time is *non-existent*. Rather the opposite, as the Swedish poet Emil Boss' poems speak of in *Acceleration*, or the writers in the book *Lösa förbindelser*, on the working conditions for the commercial employees, how every hour can be counted and clocked, every movement (with both left hand and right hand) can be maximized.²¹ But even if this is an important aspect to highlight, entering education is not done beyond our bodies (with our social class, gender, sexuality, abilities, emotions and affects) but rather through them. Masschelein and Simons also refer to this reproduction of social injustice, but they argue that:

“the ever-present attempts at co-option and corruption occur precisely to tame the distinct and radical potential that is unique to the scholastic itself. From its inception in the Greek city states, school time has been time in which ‘capital’ (knowledge, skills, culture) is expropriated, released as a common good for public use, thus existing independent of talent, ability and income.”²²

In relation to this idea of entering school beyond social class, and existing independent of talent, ability and income, I think of two different things.

First, I think of my own experience in an educational situation, during my three years of studying to become a chef in Borås, Sweden, during the 1990s. Inhabiting a place in that school and in that classroom is slightly different from other institutionalized situations, since it involves a restaurant and, more specifically for me, since I chose the restaurant and not the servant path, the restaurant kitchen, which was at the school and also involved working in different restaurant kitchen, as internships. It involved the very practice of profanation, as we handled food: meat, vegetables, and fish and so on. It was food that in

20 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 15-16.

21 Emil Boss, *Acceleration: Dikt* (Stockholm: Bokförlaget Lejd, 2017); Jenny Wrangborg, *Lösa förbindelser: om kampen för fasta förhållanden i handeln* (Stockholm: Leopard, 2017).

22 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 16.

some contexts could be considered sacred but in the kitchen was not. In the educational kitchen, we could experiment with the food but also learn traditional dishes. Inhabiting a place in that situation was for me a very gendered and class-based experience (of becoming a female chef in a male dominated occupation), but it could also be sexualized and racialized and involve different aspects, such as ability or different skills (being quick or slow, the handcraft of slicing, preparing, cleaning and so forth). The idea of the possibility of inhabiting an educational institution and teaching beyond the sociological categories overlook the fact that educational institutions are the very central part and base where class and gender are created and reproduced. The educational practice was *free* in the sense that we focused on what was put in front of us, but at the same time we were shaped into social beings and workers.

Second, and in line with what I have explored elsewhere, testimonies that witness historical injustice – different parts of and stories from history that speak of sexism, slavery, colonial and social injustice, class and racist violence – can be regarded as something *impossible*.²³ They are stories that speak of that which is difficult, and they present ethical, political, and epistemological challenges. One therefore has to ask, can *everything that is put on the table* be used and profaned and be regarded as *pure means*? Can testimonies be explored and involved in whatever way they can be used? If not, which other ways are possible?

In a discussion on the public matter of the school, Bergdahl and Langmann go back to Arendt's understanding of how the public (*polis*) is separated both from the private realm of the home and from the impersonal sphere of the social. Rather, it is a "sphere that people come together in a particular way to deliberate on things held in common".²⁴ Bergdahl and Langmann argue, drawing on feminist philosophers such as Irigaray, that the school is neither a private nor public sphere but includes aspects of both.²⁵ To extend their critique on what to inhabit the common world could mean, I will discuss different aspects in relation to *profanation*. First, I will deepen the understanding of biopolitics in relation to education as well as to profanation, and after that I will discuss recent critiques of understandings of biopolitics, drawing on Weheliye's black feminism. Second, I will draw on Chen and Ahmed's different readings of representations of sufferings, where I discuss what it means to represent something in relation to teaching, as well as in relation to emotions. At the end of the article I will come back to what the act of profanation and what inhabiting a place in the public can include.

23 Hållander, Marie, *Det omöjliga vittnande: Om vittnesmålets pedagogiska möjligheter* (Malmö: Eskaton, 2017).

24 Bergdahl & Langmann, "Where Are You?", 465."container-title":"Journal of Philosophy of Education","page":"461-475","volume":"51","issue":"2","source":"Wiley Online Library","abstract":"In a time of cultural pluralism and legitimization crisis (Habermas

25 Bergdahl & Langmann, 473."container-title":"Journal of Philosophy of Education","page":"461-475","volume":"51","is sue":"2","source":"Wiley Online Library","abstract":"In a time of cultural pluralism and legitimization crisis (Haber-

Biopolitics and education

The connection between the state and educational systems differs depending on which educational system we are talking about. The educational idea can be formulated through the idea of freedom, but education can also be used by different leaders and states to control the people; the control has also been apparent with bodily punishments or/and with the exclusion of different minorities or the working class from education. In relation to the capitalist society, Tyson Lewis writes that the current capitalist society has implications for our educational systems, where “[t]he subject is captured as a resource of the world; his or her choices become nothing more than reflexes of the needs of the world to replicate itself”.²⁶ The control over people's lives takes different forms, and education and pedagogies do not fall outside the biopolitical but are instead at the very centre of it.

To achieve a deeper understanding of profanation and why Agamben writes about it, one has to relate it to the understanding of the political, an understanding that also has implications for education in relation to how states shape bodies and institutions. Agamben develops his ideas about the political in different books, and a term that is central to understanding his philosophy is biopolitics. It is a term that works at the intersection of politics and biology, or rather, it is a way to see how politics controls life as well as death. Among other books, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* reveals and problematizes the fundamental relationship between political sovereignty and naked life (*la nuda vita*) and how this relationship is fundamental to how subjects in the different nations are able to appear in the public life or how they are left outside of it.²⁷

According to Agamben, states become sovereign by controlling both *zoe* and *bios*, both the “living, naked life” and the “qualified life” in, for example, politics, which means that states have the opportunity to become sovereign through differential acts and by placing subjects within as well as outside the law.²⁸ An extreme form of biopolitics was found in Nazi Germany, with its extermination camps, but the governance can also be applied to the control of other states (and in Sweden we have numerous examples of this from recent history, including forced sterilization of groups and class and racial decisions on schooling (or rather non-schooling) of some children by classifying non-normative sexualities as diseases etc. States control, but as I also would like to include other actors of power such as owners of capital, the living and bare life (*zoe*) through different decisions. This means subjects have different opportunities to enter the qualifying life, and thus appear as subjects,

26 Lewis, *On Study*, 7.

27 Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, 1st ed. (Stanford University Press, 1998).

28 Homo Sacer is a figure in Roman law, where the holy and sacred character of the law is bound to human life. It says: “The sacred man is the one whom the people have judged on account of a crime. It is not permitted to sacrifice this man, yet he who kills him will not be condemned for homicide; in the first tribunitian law, in fact, it is noted that “if someone kills the one who is sacred according to the plebiscite, it will not be considered homicide.” Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, 71. It is a double bind where the person can be killed and have in that sense no legal rights. The person being counted as homo sacer is at the same time inside the law as well as outside the law.

since this discussion about biopolitics is ultimately about subjectivity. Agamben writes in *What is an apparatus?*:

"What defines the apparatuses that we have to deal with in the current phase of capitalism is that they no longer act as much through the production of a subject as through the processes of what can be called desubjectification."²⁹

Agamben connects desubjectivity with several different historical and contemporary subjects, such as the historical figure of homo sacer in Roman law, or with the Muselmänner in Auschwitz.³⁰ But one can also make connections to refugees who do not have access and legal rights in the context in which they are located because they are outside states and laws. In a further reading, desubjectivity can also be made in relation to those who lack voice or who are unable to influence their lives, whose choice only means, in the Swedish poet Stig Sjödin's words: "den stora favören att få välja / där val ej fanns" ("the great favor of choosing / where there was no choice").³¹ Agamben's investigation of these figures (homo sacer, naked life, qualified life, etc.) shows how political sovereignty is also based on ruling out and enclosing, as well as controlling people's lives. It is through these exclusions and inclusions that states become sovereign: they are the ones that have the opportunity to suspend the law and impose a state of exception.³²

Biopolitics and profanation

At the very end of the essay *Profanation*, Agamben writes: "The profanation of the unprovable is the political task of the coming generation."³³ The concept of profanation can be regarded as a political concept, and I regard Agamben's work on profanation as a reflection of this state of capitalism and biopolitics: is it possible to think of actions that create spaces and times that do not exclude people?³⁴ Are there actions that make things, and also people, a part of the common or that can be related to a common future?

Agamben writes that the state that the western world today is in of capitalism (as a religion, drawing on Walter Benjamin's fragment "Capitalism as Religion") has the function of trying to find that which is *unprovable*. This idea is different from – opposite to – the idea of the child playing with toys or the cat playing with yarn. The logic of capitalism is different, since its aim is to create spaces and places that are not profanable; rather, capitalism and consumption aim at creating spaces that are no longer separated: capitalism "realizes

29 Giorgio Agamben, "What Is an Apparatus?" And Other Essays (Stanford University Press, 2009), 70.

30 Agamben, *Homo Sacer*.

31 Stig Sjödin & Erling Öhrnell, *Sotfragment : Dikter* (Göteborg: Lindelöw, 1996), 34.

32 Giorgio Agamben, *Undantagstillståndet*, trans. Sven-Olov Wallenstein, Site Edition (Lund: Propexus, 2005).

33 Agamben, *Profanations*, 92.

34 Agamben, *Profanations*, 83.

a pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate".³⁵ There are no longer sacred days and weekdays: every day is open to work, exploitation and maximization of profit. Agamben continues: "If to profane means to return to common use that which has removed to the sphere of the sacred, the capitalist religion in its extreme phase aims creating something absolutely unprofanable."³⁶ Consumption is something that does not belong to the present, he writes, but to the past or the future. It belongs to our memory or to our anticipation. The call for profanation can, through this lens, be regarded as a way to open up the capitalist system, to see how it works and what its problems are.

Black feminism and biopolitics

Weheliye's book *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* gives a critique of how researchers and philosophers such as Agamben and Foucault do not include race as a fundamental part of biopolitics. Weheliye argues that there is a need for a reconceptualization of race, subjectivity and humanity to Agamben's and Foucault's considerations of racism vis-à-vis biopolitics since they have been too vague, or rather, that the concepts of Foucault and Agamben have been "deemed transposable to a variety of spatiotemporal contexts because the authors do not speak from an explicitly racialized system ... which lends their ideas more credibility and, once again, displaces minority discourse".³⁷ He argues that race should in fact be placed at the very centre of the understanding of the argument of biopolitics. In this vein, Weheliye argues

"that black studies and other formations of critical ethnic studies provide crucial viewpoints, often overlooked or actively neglected in bare life and biopolitics discourse, in the production of racialization as an object of knowledge, especially in its interfacing with political violence and (de)humanization."³⁸

Furthermore, he stresses that race should be placed at the front and centre in considerations of political violence.³⁹ Bracketing the different bodies that are present in education does not make the bodies into one uniform being, in the coming community, rather, it neglects them. It puts them, once again, into the minority discourse – in the margins and in the footnotes.

What I want to say with Weheliye's critique of how biopolitics is understood and used is that the argument also has bearings on the understanding of the idea about what the public school could mean. Displacing the gendered experience or the racialized and so

35 Agamben, *Profanations*, 81.

36 Agamben, *Profanations*, 82.

37 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 13.

38 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* 13.

39 Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus* 13.

forth, understanding of the public school as a place where students can leave their social backgrounds, once again puts the gendered, different class-based and racialized experience in the margins and footnotes.

Regarding the act of profanation through the different aspects that I have discussed here, that is, in relation to biopolitics and desubjectivity, in relation to the capitalist system and in relation to how understandings of the biopolitical have marginalized race as a fundamental part of how it functions in different states, I will here try to rethink and develop what inhabiting a place in the common can mean. I will do so by shifting from profanation towards Ahmed's and Chen's critique on representations of social injustice.

Regardless, of what?

Ken Chen, in his article "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show", discusses various poetic performances that deal with colonial and racist violence and how they balance between a poetic testimony, on the one hand, and an exposure on the other.⁴⁰ For example, Chen discusses conceptual poetry in the US and, more specifically, Kenneth Goldsmith's poetry. Goldsmith is a poet who created a reading of Michael Brown's autopsy protocol. The shooting of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old black man, occurred on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, a northern suburb of St. Louis. In relation to this poetic act, which used the autopsy protocol of Brown's body, Chen asks whether there is a line that separates a "poetic testimony" from one that expropriates and exploits already vulnerable bodies:

"What is the ethically responsible way to show the occult photographs of lynchings [...]? How can one present such images of sublime horror without either simple-mindedly reenacting their violence or disenchanting them into clichés? How can one gaze on the memento mori of colonial horror without staring with the gaze of Medusa? What is the line separating one writer as a poet of witness and another as a poet of expropriation [...]?"⁴¹

In terms similar to Chen's, I ask where the line is between a teaching built on witnessing, on the one hand, and an education that expropriates the bodies of others, on the other hand. As I see it, it is in relation to these questions that Masschelein and Simons' development of Agamben's notion of profanation must be problematized. Can testimonies, the material that is placed on the table, be profaned, and can we "explore it and engage it, regardless of how it can be put to use"?⁴² Where is the line between use and abuse? The questions are rhetorical and not possible to answer. In relation to this, however, Ahmed's understanding of emotions, related to historical stories of suffering, are fruitful to read.

40 Chen, "Authenticity Obsession, or Conceptualism as Minstrel Show."

41 Chen, 2015.

42 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 35.

Through a Marxist analysis of the *wound* and *suffering*, Ahmed writes about how the wounds and testimonies are parts of the global market. Sensational stories and testimonies can turn pain into a form of media spectacle, which, as well as giving rise to sorrow or anger and the like, can likewise be met with laughter. Testimonies about suffering and wounds (and Ahmed is specifically speaking of testimonies that are marketed through various aid organizations) tend to become global and thus are a part of a global economy: the testimonies can be honoured and fetishized. Commodity fetishism transforms the *subjective*, abstract aspects of economic value into *objective*, real things that people believe have intrinsic value. According to Ahmed, this fetishism is also a central part of the testimony culture, where aid organizations can use personal stories to raise money. Ahmed writes that “the differentiation between forms of pain and suffering in stories that are told, and between those that are told and those that are not told, is a crucial mechanism for the distribution of power”.⁴³ These boundaries also mean that the stories of suffering are relational: the witnesses stand in relation to different nations, movements and subjects. As an example, Ahmed mentions an aid organization’s stories of war, where the stories were not aimed at those actually suffering from the blasts of mines but rather at those reached by the testimony – at those asked to give money. The “value” of the testimony and human response to it is created through a circulation in the global economy. Based on this analysis of the emotions that people are asked to feel in response to the testimony, Ahmed believes that emotions are not something we have, but rather that they are something that creates an inside and an outside, establish boundaries between them.⁴⁴ Ahmed’s reading of different historical wounds, in relation to emotions, highlights how the past, as well as the present, is *not* one homogeneous entity. It is full of different bodies and histories, wounds, and different power relations and it stands in relation to different nations, movements and subjects.

Ahmed does *not* here speak in terms of profaning stories, *nor* does she speak of the line between use and abuse, but rather about how to read historical wounds, through oneself. Ahmed writes in relation to Fiona’s testimony; on how Fiona, an Aboriginal in Australia, was taken from her mother:

“It is not just me facing this, and it is certainly not about me. And yet, I am ‘in it’, which means I am not ‘not in it’. Here I am, already placed and located in worlds, already shaped by my

43 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 32.

44 In *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, Ahmed experiences different feelings such as love, hate, pain, shame and shows how they create boundaries. She is not interested in what they are, but rather what they do, politically and technically. And she argues for how they are sticky, and how they connect, and disconnect, for example through “the love of the nation”, “the hate of the others”. Emotions can have a function of determining the relational form that takes place, it is possible to say, through Ahmed, that this also applies to other emotions, such as hatred and love. The feelings are aimed at someone, or against something – and thus determine how and in what way the relationship will take place.

proximity to some bodies and not to others. If I am here, then I am there: the stories of the document are shaped by the land I had been thought to think of as my own.”⁴⁵

Through Ahmed, and this is my point of view, I learn how there are other ways to encounter stories of suffering than through the idea that they can be used or misused. Rather, the reading or the encounter of injustice can include knowledge of how I am in it, a part of it, of history, and at the same time, not ‘not’ in it. The reading, Ahmed writes, is not about her feelings, or about her, or how she can *use it*. Rather, the knowledge of this history is a form of involvement which is not easy or obvious knowledge, rather the opposite, since it also includes knowledge about oneself and one’s own history. These encounters, readings of representations of suffering, can also be a part of what it means to inhabit the public. Regarding the act of profanation through this lens, dealing with questions of social injustice, racism and representations of suffering, as with Brown’s autopsy protocol, and as with Fiona’s testimony and Ahmed’s reading, puts the understanding of *use* in another light. It puts it in a more ethical as well as political light.⁴⁶

Conclusion

At the very beginning of *The Coming Community*, Agamben writes: “The coming being is whatever being.”⁴⁷ The *whatever being* is related to a *singularity, such as it is*. It is a being that is not related to a concept: “being red, being French, being Muslim, but only in its being *such as it is*”.⁴⁸ Therefore, the ideal of inhabiting the common is, for Agamben, a state where we have the possibility of entering the common beyond our social categories.

Agamben’s understanding of profanation is different from what Ahmed talks about with fetishism. Agamben is speaking of different aspects and things, such as a toy, or a museum, and Ahmed is speaking of historical wounds, such as the loss of a child because of racism in Australia. On the other hand, both of them are giving a Marxian critique of the capitalist system of creating injustice, but where Agamben, as well as Masschelein and Simons, tries to think of a future and a school beyond social class and gender, Ahmed, as well as Chen and Weheliye, instead puts these social categories at the centre – since the opposite, again, puts these experience in the footnotes and in the margins. And even if Masschelein and Simons do not deny that schools are a part of reproducing an elite as well as a working class, they put the ideal of the scholastic school at the centre. As I have shown in this article, this argument has some problems, especially regarding social injustice and cases of historical wounds.

45 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*, 36.

46 See also: Hållander, *Det omöjliga vittnandet*.

47 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, Theory Out of Bounds, 99-1970768-6 ; [1] (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

48 Agamben, *The Coming Community*, 1.

Educational institutions are a part of shaping students into social beings. Through the understanding of education in connection to biopolitics, I argue that bodies (with their different aspects of social class, gender, sexuality, ability, emotions and affects) do not exist beyond their own bodies, but through them and, perhaps, *because* of their own bodies. They do not “let go of all kinds of sociological, economic, familial and culture-related rules and expectations”,⁴⁹ but rather live them, from within.

Education as free time, suspended from the other time that is productive, is, however something that is important to highlight, not only because it tries to defend the public, common school, but also because it can highlight the *other language* that does not speak of free time, but rather about competition, maximization and production. And, even if I am sympathetic towards Masschelein and Simons’ defence of the public school, I disagree with that there exist a possibility of inhabiting schools beyond our social ladder and social being. An education that is free from productivity and effectiveness is something different from being free from social and cultural aspects. Let’s not put these aspects in the footnotes any longer.

49 Masschelein & Simons, *In Defence of the School*, 35.