

A Complete View of the Body

Embodied Resistance: Challenging the Norms, Breaking the Rules. Edited by Chris Bobel and Samantha Kwan, Nashville, TN, Vanderbilt University Press, 2011. 268 pp. \$29.95 (paper back) ISBN 978-0-8265-178-6

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A complete understanding of ourselves includes an understanding of and appreciation for our physical selves (Harter 2001). Body image researchers focus explicitly on the development of our sense of physicality and the correlates and consequences of this sense, whether it be positive or negative or somewhere in between (Markey 2010; Shroff and Thompson 2006). Although sometimes conceptualized as a “superficial” construct, body image does not merely denote a static image of the self as “something attractive” or “something fit,” but rather represents the power, confidence, and sense of agency that is derived from one’s physical being (Cash 2004; Markey 2010). Body dysmorphic disorder, anorexia nervosa, and bulimia nervosa represent psychiatric disorders hallmarked by negative body image. However, the range of normal and pathological body image experiences is broad and has psychological, behavioral, and developmental consequences all along its spectrum (Hrabosky et al. 2009; Markey 2010). *Embodied Resistance* is likely to broaden readers’ perception of “body image” research.

The overarching theme of this anthology is the role of our bodies – our physical selves – in defining who we are. The authors discuss how an inability to fit into social norms or ideals of physical attractiveness or just appropriateness can be viewed as deviant by others and may in fact represent an act of “resistance.” They suggest that our bodies can make us feel safe or threatened; we can also threaten others with the presentation of our physical selves. The topics discussed in *Embodied Resistance* are interesting but highly specific (e.g., women’s flat track roller derby). This book is about more than body image as it is traditionally viewed (e.g., Cash

2004). The variety of topics presented in this anthology may engender reactions ranging from disgust to confusion to delight, depending on the reader. Every chapter is provocative and will force the reader to rethink and sometimes reconceptualize what was formerly viewed as mundane, such as which sort of bathroom (men’s, women’s, mixed-gender) is available for use at your workplace.

This anthology focuses, for the most part, on research conducted within the United States (for an exception, see the chapter by Na & Choo), but addresses issues of diversity in general. This anthology is broken into four sections, each of which contains four chapters and two brief essays. Although there is an underlying theme to all of the chapters and essays, it is easy for the varying topics to feel disjointed to the reader (what does vegetarianism really have to do with the “red hat society”?). The pedagogical utility of *Embodied Resistance* may be limited for some readers due to the diversity of issues addressed and the brevity with which they are addressed. For others, the variety of topics discussed may be perceived as a strength of this anthology.

The first section, *Rewriting Gender Scripts*, includes chapters addressing women’s participation in roller derby by Peluso and the process of transitioning from a woman to a man (female-to-male transgender; Na & Choo). All of the chapters and essays in this section encourage the reader to rethink their conceptualization of gender and “femininity” in particular. Most engaging for their ordinary and yet significant topic of focus may be Fahs and Delgado’s chapter addressing women’s body hair and Binford’s essay describing one woman’s experience when she shaved off all of her hair (on her head), to prove that she, “didn’t care what people thought” (p. 58). However, the lesson to be learned from these readings may just be that most of us really do care what people think about us and the physical presentation of our gender is a large part of what shapes our experience of gender. This is not to say that

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gender is *necessarily* physically embodied (or that it should be), but that engaging in resistance to the physical conceptualization of gender is not always an easy thing to do (Binford).

The second section, *Challenging Marginalization*, includes chapters addressing standards of beauty in the gay community and the “red hat society.” These chapters and essays all cohere around the theme of challenging societal norms of what is attractive or “normal.” They force the reader to ponder questions such as, “Why is thinness linked with attractiveness?” (Pyle & Klein; Blank) and “Why have pregnant women been encouraged to hide their burgeoning bellies?” (Moe). This section reminds the reader that everyone does not conform to societal expectations and there may be some benefits to challenging marginalization; love (Bergart), friendship (Radina, Manning, Stalp, & Lynch; Sumerau & Schrock), and self-esteem (Pyle & Klein; Moe; Blank) may emerge in the wake of resistance to societal norms.

In the third section, *Defying Authoritative Knowledges and Conventional Wisdom*, topics addressed include breastfeeding (Reich), female genital pain (Labuski), and self-injury (Leaf & Schrock). All of the chapters and essays in this section focus on the functionality of our bodies and what happens when our bodies do not live up to our own or others’ views of appropriate functionality (e.g., genital pain prevents sex from being pleasurable; Labuski). Readers trained in psychology are likely to object to Richardson and Cherry’s conceptualization of “pro-ana” (pro-anorexia) as a form of embodied resistance given the debilitating and life-threatening nature of eating disorders (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services 2012). However, all of the chapters and essays in this section are provocative and discussion-worthy. They remind us that our physical selves are so clearly a part of who we are as individuals and others can help or hinder us from constructing our sense of self. Or, in the words of Leidolf (p. 169), “People don’t fail to meet the definition of ‘normal’ gender, but the definitions fail to meet the people.”

The fourth section, *Negotiating Boundaries and Meanings*, addresses issues ranging from vegetarianism (Kwan & Roth) to menopause (Dillaway). As is true of the three preceding sections, this section forces readers to rethink seemingly ordinary experiences, such as which restroom (male or female) they use at their place of work and why this is or isn’t something that has ever concerned them before (Connell). The two essays in this section, one written by a professor of communication studies who teaches an entire class about menstruation and the other written by a sociology professor who still hides her many tattoos from her father are interesting, compelling, and nice reminders of the preconceptions many of us bring to our spontaneous evaluations of others’ physicality.

The primary methodologies employed by the chapters’ authors are ethnographies, interviews, focus groups, and participant-observations. Sample sizes of participants studied are typically small (e.g., 25 people) and focus on in-depth

qualitative information. Scholars versed in quantitative methods, will be disappointed at the lack of firm conclusions that can be drawn from the analytic approaches employed. But, if the reader is not expecting results presented numerically, then the qualitative anecdotes will be of great interest. Many authors relay personal experiences that sparked their interest in the topic they write about, which adds relevance to the writing but may also introduce subjectivity. At times, it feels as though the authors’ opinions dominate the discourse and additional (current) references to others’ work would have strengthened the arguments they seek to make. Readers’ own academic backgrounds will no doubt influence their familiarity with and acceptance of the methods described in *Embodied Resistance*.

Embodied Resistance suggests to the reader that resistance (in whatever form it may take) may lead to increased visibility in the mainstream community making “deviant” physical appearances increasingly mainstream. If nothing else, resistance may prompt reconsideration of our cultural values, and in an ideal world leads to tolerance. Whether or not mainstream society is ready to accept these acts of resistance is highly debatable (note the current political debates about social issues such as gay marriage for evidence of this; Zernike 2012). And yet, it could be argued that students should be exposed to this sort of research that will challenge their conceptions of basic elements of everyday life – like body hair.

This book may be of interest to scholars in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, and women’s and gender studies. This book is unique in its presentation of research addressing a variety of body image topics; most books that focus on body image are self-help books devoid of significant scholarly substance (e.g., Maria 2009). The chapters and essays are relatively brief and easy to read. Both undergraduate and graduate-level students will find the topics presented interesting and thought provoking. As Rothman questions in the Afterward (p. 225), “What would it be like to be in a different body?...How much does the body you are...shape your life, your experiences?” Indeed, these are questions that we have likely all been affected by, even if not at a conscious or academic level. We can all appreciate the experience of finding some sort of limitations in our physical selves and the need to understand ourselves better through exploring these limitations. To a certain extent, we are all body image researchers.

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