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MISCELLANEOUS

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Bodies in Polyphony

Emma, Rees, ed. *Talking Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Embodiment, Gender and Identity* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), pp. 233.

Edited by Emma Rees, *Talking Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Embodiment, Gender and Identity* is a collection of eleven essays that vary in terms of methodologies, fields, backgrounds, and subjects, but are arguably united by the theme of the body along with its communicative aspect. The essays touch upon a wide range of topics, including social and anthropological takes on contemporary issues—such as body modification, online violence, and body image—but also literary and historical analyses of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Yet this list is by no means exhaustive; the authors do not avoid discussions of intimate experiences, such as vulvar pain and the trauma of rape. Because of this, *Talking Bodies* is not locked in the cage of strictly academic debate but steps out of it, which, I believe, is the book's great success. In the first chapter, functioning as an extended introduction, the editor maps the territory of the collection. Employing literary and theoretical references, Rees composes a rhizome-like argument which is non-linear and teeming in linkages. These inspirations simultaneously hint at the motivations behind choosing the particular texts. A theoretical frame "sketched" in this chapter includes such thinkers as Susan Bordo, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Michel Foucault, Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, and

Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Explaining that it is hardly possible to produce a homogenous, unified notion of the body since a variety of powerful factors affect it continually, Rees makes a promise of "an immensely productive polyphony" (p. 13)[1] in *Talking Bodies*: a promise that the next ten chapters by all means fulfil.

Unlike other texts in the volume, chapters 2 and 3 are literary analyses. In "Edith Wharton: An Heiress to Gay Male Sexual Radicalism?" Naomi Wolf reflects on Wharton's indebtedness to the legacy of Oscar Wilde and Walt Whitman as observed, among others, in "The Reckoning," *Summer*, *The Age of Innocence*, and *The Gods Arrive*. Reading Wharton's novels, Wolf notes that although the author goes through a moral transformation, she simultaneously does not cease to be critical about the consequences of liberation for heterosexual women, which are different from those which males in general and homosexual females face. In the context of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the risks include, among others, diseases, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, and social rejection. Another polarity is observed in the descriptions of sexual passion: a female heterosexual account, contrary to male ones, involves "language of submission, loss of will, yielding, loss of boundaries or loss of self" (p. 27). Wolf concludes that even though in Wharton's novels the heroines eventually fail despite all their attempts at resistance (a remarkable example of which is the fate of Charity Royall, the protagonist of *Summer*), the author has "picked up the banner" of Wilde and Whitman, redefining female liberation as presenting an array of flaws and prospects. The biggest merit of the article is the issue of risks associated with women's sexual liberation, which is strikingly current. Even though Wolf does not aim at commenting upon the 21st century, both her article and Wharton's prose reflect the problems faced by women today; for this reason, it is a pity that the author does not move beyond the 19th and 20th centuries, leaving the contemporary relevance of the matter unexplored. The next chapter addresses a similar time frame. "Losing Face Among the Natives: 'Something about Tattooing and Tabooing' in Melville's *Typee*" by Graham Atkin scrutinises the reasons behind the fear of being tattooed in the main protagonist of *Typee*. The dread of "non-consensual body modification" (p. 36) is tackled in the context of such thematic pairs as face and (white male) identity, assimilation with natives and return to so-called civilisation, and the cannibalism taboo and white male incomers' "filth" (p. 51). What Atkin offers here is an attentive and in-depth analysis

[1] All page numbers in parentheses reference the volume under review.

that nevertheless is a pleasurable read with a number of personal remarks and—often comical—anecdotes.

The following chapter provides the reader with a shift from literary studies to the ethnographic analysis of transgender people in Naples (Italy). "What the Body Tells Us: Transgender Strategies, Beauty, and Self-consciousness" by anthropologist Marzia Mauriello begins by reflecting on the interplay between the body, beauty, and satisfaction in transsexuals and transgender people. The author then points to a possible categorisation of male-to-female (mtf) transgender people and proposes another category, which is characteristic of Naples, being a part of the city's tradition, history, and culture. *Feminielli* belong to the urban underprivileged class of Naples and are characterised in short as "males living as females" (p. 60). Mauriello describes their rituals, appearance, (female) role, perception of their own sexual orientation, and attachment to traditional values. Having returned to the idea of beauty, the author makes a concluding remark on the heteronormativity of the notion of beauty for transsexuals, claiming that "an mtf transsexual body is one which, in its transformation, develops and reinforces naturalised ideals of female beauty and identity as they are imagined, and constructed, by men" (p. 69).

The next three chapters are case studies relying mostly on interviews with women. Nina Nyman's "Tattoos: An Embodiment of Desire" is an analysis of interviews with seven tattooed women, which touched upon, among others, the women's decisions to be tattooed, their relations to their bodies, the visibility of their tattoos and people's reactions, but also their own reactions to other people's tattoos. Nyman looks at the responses through the prisms of Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming, Grosz's take on productive desire inspired by Spinoza, and Rosi Braidotti's reading of schizoanalysis. Becoming tattooed is seen as a strategy that blurs the inside/outside dichotomy and thus leads to "the 'deorganising' of the borders of bodies" (p. 85). Based on an independent decision to modify one's own body, getting a tattoo is finally defined as a potential feminist strategy. Concerned with a more normative set of body modifications, "Learning Womanhood: Body Modification, Girls and Identity" by Abigail Tazzyman discusses, among others, wearing make-up, shaving pubic hair, and having one's ears pierced. What is investigated is the relation between appearance, self-image, and gender. The author uses Gesa Lindermann's distinction between the objectified body, the experiencing body, and the experienced body, to claim that it is crucial to add another category—the *ideal* body. Thereafter, Tazzyman turns to the close reading of the significance of such

practices for parents and daughters. Having portrayed the consequences of perceiving body modification as a stage that denotes becoming a woman, Tazzyman looks at its normative aspect, along with the social expectations that accompany it. She concludes that body modification is not based on an independent decision or individual preferences: it is a result of certain norms and a sign of fitting in, or of "learning womanhood" (p. 111). Chapter 7, "The Construction of a Personal Norm of Physical and Psychological 'Well-Being' in Female Discourse" confronts a corresponding issue as it reflects on the central position the body occupies in female identity, and on the relevance of judgement and norms. Grounding her research upon body image studies and linguistic analysis, Maria Krebber observes that social norms are internalised by the interviewed women, who tend to claim that one's well-being depends solely on one's will and decision to take care of oneself; these women fail to recognise that dissatisfaction with one's body may be more than an individual problem.

"No Body, No Crime? (Representations of) Sexual Violence Online" by Jemma Tosh introduces a topic that is still barely present in academic debates even though its significance for contemporary young generations is striking. By analysing forum discussions, the author reflects on violence and rape in online games, noting the inconsistencies between the definitions of rape in the "real" and "virtual" world and questioning the validity of this quasi-solid distinction. Tosh identifies four discourses of defining sexual violence online; she carefully de-constructs them and points out how they fall short of expectations. This voice is essential in hyperreal times when virtual reality has merged with the offline life. Yet it is not the question of technology itself; the author reaches the conclusion that sexual abuse online is not a novel phenomenon: "technology only develops existing forms of abuse" (p. 156), and such abuse is gendered.

The following two chapters involve confessions, the first exploring respondents' experiences of living with vulvar pain, and the second the personal story of the author. In "Heteronormativity as a Painful Script: How Women with Vulvar Pain (re)Negotiate Sexual Practice," Renita Sörensdotter observes that the women interviewed make a distinction between the norm—a heterosexual, "real" type of sexual practice—and its substitutes, whose result is an engagement in painful sexual acts in order to live up to the expectations and satisfy the needs of the partner (even if the partner himself claims that such practice is not essential for him). The author then examines women's strategies of coping with the challenge the aching body poses to them and to norms themselves. "Queer Wounds:

Writing Autobiography Past the Limits of Language" shares an intimate account of the author's own traumas. Quinn Eades provides the reader with an insight into several events and experiences that seem to have redefined her life (among others, a rape, therapy, and a hysterectomy), intermingled with references to Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. Via this powerful and moving testimony, she endeavours to show in what sense "it is possible to *write* the wound" (p. 187; emphasis added).

A return to theoretical considerations, the final chapter scrutinises the use of the notion of body image. Agreeing on the "communicative advantage" (p. 208) of the term, Melisa Trujillo nevertheless finds the connotations of body image problematic if one takes into account its seeming applicability to the majority of body-related questions and gender issues. "The Trouble with Body Image: The Need for a Better Corporeal Vocabulary" thus identifies the problem and postulates seeking more fitting language. The author suggests two tropes that may inspire such searches, namely "black is beautiful" and "shattering the gender binary." Unfortunately, in the article there is no harmony between the questions and the responses to them; although Trujillo leaves the reader with the diagnosis and encouragement to go on with the research, she herself withdraws, without proposing any alternative vocabularies.

Talking Bodies edited by Emma Rees is indeed creatively polyphonic. If one keeps in mind the size of the book, the variety of topics tackled is impressive as the volume offers not only insightful analyses of relevant issues concerning society and selfhood but also invitations to theoretical and literary debates. The underlying theme of all the texts is the body, but it has to be noted that it is not always the main subject of the argument; in a number of articles it functions either as a pretext for a different discussion or as a resurfacing trope. Nevertheless, there are more levels at which the texts meet—they share references to certain thinkers (some mentioned in this review), a mostly feminist or gender perspective, and an academic interest in the notions of norm and normativity. One could only wish the "dissensions and tensions across the landscape of the book" (p. 13) Rees declares went deeper into the chapters, constructing the dialogical relation between them and not merely the implied background; the lack of direct interaction creates an atomised structure for the volume, which in turn may leave an impression of randomness.

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The article is a review of *Talking Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Embodiment, Gender and Identity*, a collection of eleven essays edited by Emma Rees. Although they stem from different fields and tackle various issues, all the contributions share an interest in corporeality as a site of formative experiences. The range of subjects covers normativity (contemporarily, and in the 19th and 20th centuries), body modification, self-image, violence, (trans)gender, intimate pain, and trauma; the result is a highly heterogeneous, *polyphonic* volume.

Keywords: body, normativity, body modification, corporeal experiences, gender, embodiment, identity

Słowa klucze: ciało, normatywność, modyfikacja ciała, doświadczenia cielesne, *gender*, ucieleśnienie, tożsamość