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Special Issue: Gender and Bodily Difference

Gendering bodily difference: An introduction to contemporary feminist thinking

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When the editors of Radical Psychology approached me to edit a special issue on gender and bodily difference -- I thought the focus of this issue was long overdue. Over the last 35 years, western feminists working in the areas of health, cultural, and women's studies have written passionately about the pernicious effects on women's body perceptions and practices of pervasive beauty ideals ([Brownmiller, 1984](#); [Orbach, 1979](#); [Wolf, 1992](#)). Concerns of activists and clinicians about the harmful consequences of "the body beautiful" first mounted in economically privileged, image-oriented, media-driven cultures, where an "acceptable" image had become integral to women's self and emotional health ([Bordo, 1993](#); [Székely, 1988](#)). More recently, transnational feminist scholars, in tracking the rapid spread of western-controlled companies, have uncovered how beauty commodities and campaigns capitalize on a global hierarchy of physical traits. Rooted in colonial, patriarchal, and biomedical histories and legacies, these industries not only are reproducing sexist but classist, racist, and ablest normalized and idealized images as well ([Mire, 2005](#); [Rice, 2009a](#)).

Today, global beauty businesses, in addition to selling body modification products as wide ranging as skin lightening and teeth whitening aids, also trade in powerful personal transformation narratives that preach image enhancement as the ticket to success. Beauty pageants, makeover shows, and modeling competitions are only a few commonplace examples of commodity entertainment that feed female fantasies about exciting life opportunities through mundane appearance alteration. At the same time, many feminist scholars have become attuned to the ways that a vast majority of young and adult women in the west and elsewhere, rather than feeling constrained to fit cultural ideals (or being condemned to a life of misery), strategically, often secretly, negotiate ideals and alter their images in what they have been taught to conceive as their best interests ([Davis, 1995](#); [Smith, 1990](#); [Rice, 2009b](#)). In my own research, for example, I have mapped some of the ways that diversely-bodied women growing up in image-based cultures such as Canada move between two options in their everyday lives: changing their bodies to the extent that they are ethically, technologically, and/or financially able to; and changing their social locations through accessing or creating spaces and relationships where they find value in, and affirmation for, their preferred

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a critical project for diversely situated feminist writers and activists. Yet involvement in participatory arts-based action research with, by, and for women with physical disabilities (such as spinal cord injury and blindness) and physical differences (burn injury, mastectomy) has taught me that such trailblazing feminist scholarship provides partial insight into the ways that social and economic forces constitute female bodily experience. Through my conversations with women living with facial and physical differences and disabilities, I have come to see how beauty ideals are shadowed by other images, phantoms of the abject body that, like the ideal, also haunt the bodily self ([Kristeva, 1982; 1991](#)). These include the phantom of fat, unusual, uncontrollable, absent, aging, racialized, or other rejected body parts or processes rendered as abject in western culture ([Kristeva, 1991](#)). How this abject constitutes female bodily experience is a domain of inquiry that many artists, writers, and activists only now are beginning to explore. Visionaries such as Jo Spence, Renee Cox, Cindy Sherman, Julia Kristeva, Margrit Shildrick, and Rosemary Garland Thomson are at the forefront of critical inquiry into the ways that cultures construct disabilities and physical differences through categorizations of bodies as normal and anomalous ([Hobson, 2005; Spence, 1988; Garland Thomson, 1996; Shildrick, 1997; 2002](#)).

Contemporary feminists consider how meanings given to familiar social categories of difference (such as gender or race) intersect with those given to bodies biomedically designated as anomalous, and how the ensuing constructions further constitute bodies. In western cultural history, for instance, the female body has been framed as pre-disposed to disability and disease, and as “other” and lesser than the male norm. Today, the legacy of this conceptualization continues to be reflected in the discriminations faced by women who embody disabilities and differences due to the combined effects of myths and misconceptions about gender and bodily difference woven throughout daily social relations. Because what counts as a difference from the culturally idealized or normalized body varies across time and place, and because prevailing values about social differences shape what counts biomedically as a physical anomaly, bodily anomalies must be approached as categories always already saturated in cultural meaning and value. As such, they are fluid, variable, and interconnected with social variables -- culturally constructed differences that construct the meaning and experience of other embodied differences. To give an example, in my narrative research, women with disabilities and differences tell how misconceptions of bodily differences an incapable, burdensome, and undesirable distort their gender and sexual identities, and disqualify them as “other than female”.

In many ways, the theoretical conversation about bodily difference now occurring throughout the social sciences and the humanities is indebted to past and present feminist theoretical and creative insights and outputs. The *Gender and Bodily Difference Special Issue* contributes to this conversation by examining meanings about

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Radical Psychology's series on *Feminism and Psychology*, this issue considers the special significance of gender to any analysis of concepts and experiences of bodily difference. Contributors to the special issue draw on feminist phenomenological, poststructuralist, and critical perspectives to explore representations, social relations, and lived realities of gender and bodily difference in image-based cultures. They highlight issues of obesity and fatness, emaciated thinness, eating disorders, weight loss and feeding surgeries, disability and physical difference, and technologies of bodily normalization and transformation, and interrogate how these intersect with gender, sex, and sexual difference conceptually and in people's embodied everyday experiences. The many outstanding papers included in this special issue have been organized into the three sections that follow: *Making Difference*; *Embodying Difference*; and *Encountering Difference*.

Making difference: In highly competitive, image valorizing, neo-liberalizing societies, there is no question that more and more physical and mental attributes and idiosyncrasies are being defined as lesser than, inadequacies, and deficiencies. Since the 19th century, western governments and the agencies that serve them have invested in generating increasingly exacting standards of normal and in evaluating citizens against a proliferating range of norms for appearing, performing, and being. As narrower and narrower notions for "what is normal" are defined and applied, people are induced to normalize themselves across many domains of their lives. For example, in "This is the Face of Obesity": Gender and the Production of Emotional Obesity in 1950s and 1960s Canada" Deborah McPhail offers a case study about the making of one physical difference, fatness, into a physical and an emotional pathology. She shows how feminization of fatness as a mental pathology served to confine women to the private sphere during period of burgeoning feminism. Avigail Moor continues with this theme in "Full of Power: The Relation Between Women's Growing Social Power and the Thin Female Beauty Ideal". Here she uncovers male anxieties about the fat female body and offers new empirical evidence for the old feminist argument that cultural ideals of thinness reflect male fear of growing female power.

With the proliferation of idealized and normalized images of female bodies in patriarchal commodity culture, women face escalating pressure to represent their bodies in ways that will enable them to pass as "acceptable". As a result of the pornification of popular culture, moreover, formerly "private" female body parts have come under greater public scrutiny. In "The 'Designer Vagina' and the Pathologisation of Female Genital Diversity: Interventions for Change", Virginia Braun and Leonore Tiefer propose feminist responses to the pressures placed on women to sculpt their vaginas and vulvas to appear as "normal" and as desirable. Taken together, these essays invite readers to question ubiquitous biomedical and psychological discourses (including within the reality TV and confessional talk show genres) that authorize conventional and deeply

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making of bodily norms and differences.

Embodying Difference: In image-based biomedically-driven cultures, visible difference and visual perception play a primary part in constituting normal and anomalous bodies. This is why what counts as difference becomes the object of people's intense looks and stares. Throughout cultural and medical representations and people's taken-for-granted responses, conflicting emotions of fascination and fear, desire and repulsion, and awe and aversion, often prevail in the visual interest paid to physical difference. But how do such perceptions and processes affect the day-to-day realities of those who live difference? In what ways do prevailing attitudes and associated emotions -- from fear and revulsion to pleasure and pride -- contour people's embodiment and modification of difference? In "Sylvie: A Reflection on Embodiments and Transformations" Hilde Zitzelsberger begins exploration of these questions through a short story on conjoined twins penned by Canadian fiction writer Barbara Gowdy. She uses Gowdy's tale to interrogate what forms of embodiment and "possibilities of being" are lost, and hence what is at stake, in biomedicine's recuperation of anomalous bodies to a normal state.

Samantha Murray in "Women Under/In Control? Embodying Eating After Gastric Banding" continues the conversation about embodied difference through considering how surgical transformation can produce new anomalies that must be contained by biomedicine to naturalize its body norms. Drawing on her experience as a post-operative gastric banding surgery patient in a cultural context that reads fat women's eating as always already out-of-control, Murray reveals how biomedicine reframes the disordered eating imposed by gastric banding surgery as "normatively feminine". Changing track and tone in "Reading Boots: Reading Difference", Nancy Viva Davis Halifax offers a lyrical inquiry into embodied disability experience through an everyday object that shapes the visibility and materiality of her difference: her boots. Eliza Chandler ends this section with a temporal account of disability pride in "Pride and Shame: Orienting Towards a Temporality of Disability Pride". She allows for embodied subjects' fluctuating moments of pride and shame while still claiming disability and fatness as positive identities. These essays show how women marginalized by cultural misconceptions have insights about the dynamics of difference in social relations that position them as sites of knowledge for everyone ([Rice et al. 2005](#)).

Encountering Difference: The ambiguous cultural response to differently embodied people as fascinating and frightening has animated, and has been animated by, the clinical gaze. Due to biomedicine's authoritative power in naming and ameliorating anomalies (as Zitzelsberger notes in this issue), the medical gaze activates and amplifies the broader cultural dynamics of desire and revulsion. This poses particularly pressing ethical challenges for health care policy and practice. What are ethical concerns in health care encounters with those who embody differences? What ethical

social context where men are positioned as experts in curing and women as experienced in caring? These are some of the questions taken up by the authors in this final section, *Encountering Difference*. Gillian Craig begins the discussion with an exploration of the concerns expressed by mothers who care for disabled children with feeding difficulties in “Horror and Disgust: Gastrostomy Feeding and Identity Transformation”. Using mothers’ dilemmas regarding their children’s treatment as a case example, she explores how mothers, due to gendered associations and their close proximity with bodily difference, frequently are framed as monstrous for failing to care for their children properly. In “Fat Panic in Canadian Public Health Policy: Obesity as Different and Unhealthy,” Natalie Beausoleil and Pamela Ward turn our attention to an examination of contemporary public policy responses to bodily difference, in this case the obesity epidemic, as an example of how government campaigns mobilize public fear to enforce body norms. This special issue closes with the “Relational Consequences of Dietitians’ Feeding Bodily Difference.” Here dietitians Jacqui Gingras and Jennifer Brady trouble the profession’s relationship with fat, and its’ adoption and enforcement of gendered norms of embodiment.

As editor of *Radical Psychology’s* Special Issue, I hope that readers are inspired by this collection of cutting edge feminist scholarship on gender and bodily difference.

C. Rice
Toronto
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lectures in culture, health, and psychology. A leader in the field of body image within Canada, she is a founding member and former director of innovative initiatives such as the National Eating Disorder Information Centre and the Body Image Project at Women’s College Hospital in Toronto. Her research explores representations and life history narratives of body and identity.