

reviews

Kath Woodward. *Embodied Sporting Practices: Regulating and Regulatory Bodies*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009. 206 pp.

In *Embodied Sporting Practices* Kath Woodward develops a strong case for both an expanded consideration of the embodied realities of human experience, and for the relevance of feminist critical engagement in the realms of sport and ‘sporting practices.’ Returning to ongoing debates on gender and difference, Woodward demonstrates that careful feminist analysis of sport can uniquely reveal that bodies are not simply socially inscribed, nor are they only flesh and blood. Rather, bodies are ‘embodied’, sensate selves that remain resistant to reductionist and essentialist claims. Through the lens of sport, she argues, one can begin to understand ‘enfleshed’ bodies as inseparably complicit in the making of individual human identities and experiences.

In her efforts to rethink the body, Woodward constructs the framework for her arguments meticulously, making careful linkages and distinctions among those who have theorized the body, including (but not limited to) Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Marcel Mauss, and Luce Irigaray. Woodward articulates some of the gaps and lingering questions in the theorizing of the body, namely that we lack nuanced understandings of embodied experience in sport and in the broader social realm. She defines ‘sport’ in cultural, historical, and social contexts before locating modern sport as regulated and enacted within neo-liberal governances. Here, again, an old debate emerges—how can we simultaneously embrace difference and equality? Woodward suggests that sport vividly brings to light the ‘contradictions and inequalities that persist in neo-liberal states’ (96), recalling the struggles of minority groups to gain access and acceptance in the traditionally white, male world of sport. At the same time, she points out the inroads sport has made in terms of embracing diversity in the name of ‘fair play’ and individual rights.

After defining her terms and laying out her project’s theoretical terrain, Woodward makes her primary arguments in chapters five through seven, focusing on phenomenological understandings of the body in sport. Drawing on de Beauvoir’s feminist phenomenology, she applies Deleuzian notions of affect and assemblage, and then grounds her arguments in past and current sporting athletes and institutions. It is her discussion of ‘real’ people and events that makes Woodward’s arguments powerfully tangible and coherent. For example, in laying out the differences between sporting heroes and celebrities, Woodward invokes (citing Mike Marqusee) Mohammed Ali and Michael Jordan respectively. Of course, these chapters are full of athletes, some more or less well-known, and it is fun to encounter David Beckham not a paragraph removed from Irigaray and Foucault. But more than fun, Woodward enacts important feminist work by engaging her research across the boundaries that separate academe and sport, theory and practice.

Although this text's considerations and applications are clearly wide-ranging, some of its endeavors may seem cursory, particularly for audiences interested in media and technology studies. Woodward addresses the often invisible, but important role of media in representing and constructing athletic identities, citing the media's speed and interconnectedness as a powerful force in creating modern heroes or celebrities of sport. She also examines the ways technologies and sciences intervene, for better or for worse, in sporting bodies and practices. Her consideration of these issues include runner Oscar Pistorius' campaign to race on high-tech prosthetic legs in 'able-bodied' events, and the struggle within the world of professional cycling to regulate Erythropoietin (EPO). Given that both new media and technoscientific advances continue to evolve at an incredible pace, Woodward has pointed only to the iceberg's tip in terms of the potential for work examining technological and scientific engagements with embodiment in sport. Indeed, I would argue that *Embodied Sporting Practices* can serve as the groundwork for myriad important projects engaging feminism and sporting bodies within the realms of media, science, and politics. Thus, this text is not lacking in its treatment of the issues at hand, rather it demonstrates that embodiment in sport is a relatively untapped theoretical realm. Woodward's work here offers a new understanding of embodied experiences in sport, and it opens up space for future feminist and other social scientific investigations of embodied human experience.

Katie Snyder Marr, Michigan Technological University