

reviews

Shari L. Dworkin and Faye Linda Wachs, *Body Panic: Gender, Health, and the Selling of Fitness*, New York University Press, 2009, xiii + 227pp.

“Lights, Camera, Action!” That about sums up the constant intense gaze and scrutiny on the human body, and its pressure to be a site of combat and triumph. According to Dworkin and Wachs, “Some argue that the moral panic of the new millennium focuses on the obese and the out of shape body.” (70), where moral panic is the product of media’s exploitation of differential power relations between dominant and marginalized groups, creating and linking “signifiers of morality” to the former and producing moral panic regarding the latter (69). A more diffuse and individually reified version of this is “body panic,” or the preoccupation with the body and physical appearance. Thus, this work examines changing notions of ‘fitness’ and ‘health’ as simultaneously shaped and being shaped by the content of popular media.

Sociologists Shari Dworkin and Faye Wachs began this work as graduate students with research interests in ‘body politics’ and issues surrounding social inequality, particularly along the intersections of gender, race and sexuality. Ten years of labour on this particular analysis combined with expertise from their extensive work in the above fields has resulted in this insightful and highly readable book. Its major strength lies in its attempt at a holistic analysis that is longitudinal as well as cross-sectional, relational across both men’s and women’s representation in health and fitness content, and mindful of intersections with other social locations apart from gender. The book will be useful to an audience of undergraduate and graduate students in social science fields in general, and particularly valuable to those in Gender Studies (Women’s and Masculinity studies), Queer Studies, and Media Studies programs.

This rigorous empirical work utilizes content analysis to examine mainstream women’s and men’s health and fitness magazines that included a wide range of fitness activities for evidence of “preferred and/or hegemonic messages” (25). The text and imagery from covers, articles and advertisements were examined for mainstream messaging regarding dominant, idealized bodies — in effect “studying up” on these bodies as opposed to “studying down” on those of the marginalized (25-26). They qualify that their scope of analysis did not include other forms of media, thus their findings are not generalizable beyond this analysis. Their final selection included five men’s magazines (e.g., *Exercise for Men Only*, *Men’s Fitness*, *Men’s Health*) and six women’s magazines (e.g., *Fitness*, *Shape*, *Women’s Sports & Fitness/Self*). They highlight the fact that they found no co-ed magazines under these criteria, which emphasizes the gendered nature of health and fitness.

The book is organized into six chapters; the introductory chapter laying the foundation by positing the work's main theses, the central and other complementary conceptual frameworks that support their analyses, and the primary findings that are then explored in greater detail in subsequent chapters. The main theses include confluences of health and fitness in their sample of media, the multiple networks linking the signifiers of fitness with morality, consumption and notions of individual responsibility, and the entrenched nature of gendered, racialized and heteronormative body ideals. The central conceptual framework within which the entire work is embedded is 'healthism,' which locates health or the lack of it at the individual level. The authors point to its congruence with neoliberal notions of individual accountability and the roll-back of responsibility from state and social structures.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Dworkin and Wachs present analyses from their entire sample set. They find that it largely echoes previous findings in the literature that a convergence of gender norms and prescriptions is detectable, where women are not the only ones to be objectified, and men not the only ones to hold subjecthood. However, they also make the significant point that despite this convergence, where women may experience "subjective-aspects-within-being-as-object" and men the reverse, i.e., "objective-aspects-within-being-as-subject," (30) there is still a divergent trend in that "[...] subjecthood and objecthood are *differentially and relationally* created for women and men in mainstream health and fitness magazines." (11) (stress in original).

Thus, while men's growing body panic has wrought the "Third Wave Crisis of Masculinity" characterized by "fears of social feminization" (91) and "a backlash to feminism" (97), it is parlayed into, and indeed *remedied* by, a renewed stress on hegemonic masculinities through an over-emphasis on "signifiers of size/power, sport, and military, while women's bodies are clearly more limited to fitness, toning and reduced size, and service to the home." (102) This last point regarding the emphasis on the performance of domesticity as the major goal for women's fitness is further explicated in Chapter 4, where their insightful analysis of content data from women's health and fitness magazines finds that current conceptions of "fit motherhood" are couched in terms favouring better performance of household chores and the mandatory performance of the "third shift" of fitness.

A constant theme running through the analysis is the changing tone of fitness discourse. The authors contend that it has become increasingly synchronous with tropes that link together consumerism, neoliberalism and good citizenship. Such rhetoric places responsibility for achieving the signs of "fitness success" solely on the individual's practices of consumption and action. In fact, "[...] body fat itself has come to symbolize the out of control, unproductive, and morally inferior worker/citizen." (70). As the authors startlingly but incisively observe, the body is no longer simply the conduit for sinful acts, but the site of

sin itself: a body not mirroring dominant and gendered ideals is a ready reflection of both physical and moral turpitude, as the individual has obviously not taken the necessary actions to achieve the undoubtedly laudable goal of ‘health and fitness’ (11). Chapter 5 is a particularly telling account of the “ascendency of neoliberalism and commodity feminism” (130), tracing the evolution of the sports and fitness magazine *Women’s Sports & Fitness* from a socially responsive medium to an individualist entity (*Self*) under corporate ownership, shifting focus from addressing collective feminist issues such as sexism and equal opportunity, to promoting a consumption lifestyle for individual satisfaction.

Also highlighted throughout the book is the constant “othering” of marginalized groups. Dworkin and Wachs employ the Foucauldian concept of “docile bodies” subject to the panoptic gaze and “the confessional body of the privileged (subject to self-scrutiny)” (179). Resultantly, ‘Confessional bodies,’ through the diligent practice of self-scrutiny as promoted by healthism, and consistent participation in consumerist notions of ‘action,’ can seek ‘redemption,’ while such deliverance remains denied to those less privileged, or those choosing not to participate or conform. The authors’ additional use of Richard Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinities” to underpin much of their investigation adds to its strength since it allows for a richer analysis of gendered body images as well as an exposé of which groups society still marginalizes.

Significantly, the authors call attention to the appalling lack of representation of persons outside the hegemonic frame of “white/elite/hetero-normative” individuals except in the most token manner, and primarily only in advertizing content. This leads to perhaps the only weakness of this otherwise rich text: the omission of disabled persons from the present analysis. This is baffling, given that among other factors, (i) athletes are particularly prone to injury, and at times disability (the definition of which is admittedly problematic), (ii) the rising profile of the Para-Olympics and similar events, and (iii) “health and fitness” is gaining greater relevance with larger populations as aging and higher incidence of chronic diseases contributes to the growing near-universality of “disability” (see Zola). Disability is still a largely overlooked social interstice, much exacerbated by the relative (artificial) invisibility of this group from such magazines, and its oversight in such an analysis is regrettable.

In the concluding chapter, the authors present Foucault’s framework of “realm of the unfathomable,” which posits that existing power-knowledge intersections in determining what “knowledge claims” are left within or without mainstream discourses (159). Running like a thread in the background on which to peg findings and other conceptual frames, this particular framework also serves to effectively base their questioning of the omission of social justice frameworks and marginalized groups from such discourses, and to frame some “larger questions” for the reader to mull over. An overarchingly important question posited is whether magazines take on the role of experts and use “health” as a label to promote certain

actions and consumption patterns (165). Other important questions include whether magazines respond to legitimate need and demand when they 'erase' certain groups from their content, such as the observed inexplicable invisibility of lesbian motherhood (or explicitly homosexual content in any form), or whether they create such worlds of invisibility. Given all these analyses and critiques, this text is definitely a rich contribution to literature on gender, sexuality and the nature of society.

Works Cited

Zola, Irving K. "Toward the necessary universalizing of a disability policy." *The Milbank Quarterly*, 67/S2.2 (1989): 401-428.

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