

Becoming women: the embodied self in image culture

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Review of:

Rice, Carla (2014) *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. Toronto and London: University of Toronto Press.

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As Rice notes, '[m]ost books about bodies focus either on cultural imagery or on personal narrative' (4). Yet, *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture* is different in that it cleverly weaves 'fleshy stories' (10) alongside illustrate cultural examples which serve to make Rice's analysis both fascinating and accessible. Indeed, the number of artistic and activist endeavours that Rice signposts her reader to makes the book a multimodal experience. Whilst reading I was both reminded me of classic texts (films, art, blogs, activist stunts), and introduced to new ones; leaving me with a host of teaching material which I'll be using to spark conversations with my students.

In Chapter 1, '*In the Shadow of Difference*', Rice offers a fascinating and nuanced account of debates around the 'realities' of sex and gender. Starting with the one-sex model developed by ancient Greek and Roman scholars, moving through the scientific revolution of the eighteenth century and up to present day, Rice plots how the female sexed body has always been subordinate to the male sexed body. What is particularly important about

Rice's work, however, is that throughout the book she positions disabled and racialized bodies as fundamental to understanding women's gendered and sexed experiences. After giving her reader this useful context, Rice goes on to explain her theoretical framework: body becoming theory. Through body becoming theory she carefully positions 'sex and gender as outcomes of biology, psyche and society in interaction' (53). *Body becoming theory* is explained further through Chapter Two, as Rice explains:

"Body becoming theory has important implications for understanding how we embody gender. It tracks how people come to be gendered and sexed without regulating sex to biology or seeing gender as wholly social. It allows us to analyse the interplay of biology and society in the body's becoming via the psyche – how individuals learn to identify with and embody gender and sex throughout their lives" (67)

It is in this chapter, too, that Rice begins to introduce us to some of the stories that her women participants shared with her. Of particular interest to Disability and Society readers, Rice describes how disabled women that she interviewed, spoke of both a childhood awareness of their bodily differences, whilst still experiencing their bodies as 'vehicles of exploration and connection' (69).

Chapter three focuses particularly on disabled women's contradictory positioning as both gazed upon (by institutions such as medicine and individuals fascinated by Otherness) and invisible (desexualised and dehumanised). It tells powerfully shocking stories as disabled women reflect on their embodied childhood encounters with medicine and in some cases come to understand this as abuse. Importantly, however, Rice is careful throughout the book to not deny agency to the women that she spoke to. Whilst she acknowledges, therefore, how cultural and societal influences (differently) shape experiences of becoming women, she is clear that "women *are not* simply dupes" (4) of the forces around them. In

this instance, disabled women storytellers talk of strategies which they used to manage, mitigate and resist the clinical gaze.

Chapter Four explores how we learn about what a good body should do a be (white, able, slim) through schooling practices. Stories of (failing) femininity, fatness and physical education (PE), alongside critiques of a liberal ‘multiculturalism’, make visible the biopedagogies which underpin education systems. From here, Chapter Five moves us into a fascinating account of puberty. Rice outlines how as scientists are not generally trained to notice their role in the creation of ‘facts’, they do not pay attention to how their own subjectivities influence their research. As such, she points out that ‘scientific’ accounts of puberty are in fact shrouded in classist, racist, ableist, fatphobic, and sexist ideals, which very rarely take into account the role of culture and society. Rather than purely focus on and demonise girls’ bodies, Rice follows feminist poststructuralist and new materialist theories to tell a story of puberty which ‘privileges neither the biological nor the social, but shows how the body becomes through its physiology and other forces acting on it’ (161).

Chapter Six continues to muse around puberty. Here, however, Rice focuses particularly on the cultural scripts that situate first periods and breast growth as signs of leaving childhood and entering womanhood. Reflecting on the pedagogical devices that (explicitly and implicitly) teach girls about their bodies and puberty alongside women’s stories, Rice highlights “the contradictory belief system that values girls primarily for their sex appeal yet sees their moral worth as rooted in their sexual purity” (196). As always, however, Rice is careful not to homogenise experiences, instead exploring how race, disability, culture and other embodied differences led to different experiences, feelings and understandings of becoming women. As is the case throughout the book, here we see the

negotiation of negative experiences and oppressive imagery, alongside “stories of resistance and action, delights and desire, resolve and recuperation” (26).

In the concluding chapter, Rice writes that “the search for visibility and personhood doesn’t stop in adolescence” (287). This is obvious through reading the accounts of Chapter Seven where weight, fatness, eating ‘disorders; skin tone, hair texture, body hair and cosmetic surgery are addressed. Reflecting on the stories of her participants, Rice is neither critical nor celebratory of beauty ideals and regimes, rather she calls for nuance, context and sensitive “intersectional understandings on the role that beauty plays in women’s lives” (240). Her final conclusions include calling for a pedagogy which ‘expand options for becoming’ (287) and imagine possibilities for diverse experiences of embodiment.

Overall, I really enjoyed this book, and feel that it is one that I’ll keep returning to. As somebody researching and teaching in an interdisciplinary context it is a useful resource – relevant to those within psychology, sociology, education, and many other overlapping contexts, including disability studies. It felt accessible to students from undergraduate level (particularly if used in conjunction with the range of cultural texts that Rice points to, which would be useful for use in classes). For me, what was most exciting about this book was its inclusion of disability amongst other forms of diversity and difference, meaning that it will hopefully reach those who do not (yet) have an interest in disability studies. Furthermore, it is a useful text for those within disability studies to think about overlaps and divergences that disability has with other forms of marginalisation and oppression. My only concern was that although trans and intersex experiences were used to make theoretical points, none of the women interviewed were trans or intersex women (or at least this wasn’t mentioned or acknowledged). Perhaps there is an extension of this nuanced and scholarly work to be done, which includes trans and intersex voices.