

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Stella Gonzalez-Amal, Gill Jagger, and Kathleen Lennon, *Embodied Selves*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, 272 pp., \$90.00 hardcover (9781137283702)

Stella Gonzalez-Amal, Gill Jagger, and Kathleen Lennon frame their edited anthology, *Embodied Selves*, both with and against the variegated backdrop of scholarly literature concerned with the question of the body. Vis-à-vis longstanding tensions in the humanities and social sciences that pit discursive understandings of the body — the body as a marker of social identity, for example, or as a site of power relations and disciplinary practices — against materialist ones — that focus, for example, on biological or organic properties of the body — this text is refreshingly committed to theorizing the body as a kind of discursive corporeality, a thorough and complete “entanglement of matter and meaning” (p. 3).

Avowedly drawing on theoretical insights from the “new materialist” turn within social and political theory, the collection attends explicitly to the material properties of the body and to its corporeal practices; according to the editors, the text seeks to “ensure that matter — the material — is accorded an active role” and that “... the weightiness of the body’s materiality is felt” (p. 3). The editors are quick to caution, however, that the turn toward the material ought not (and indeed, I would argue, cannot) be accomplished by turning away from the discursive. “In our view” they note, “the insights of the [new materialist] theoretical turn need to be tempered to ensure that neither the material nor the discursive should be privileged” (p. 2). The body always and only appears in the midst of a sociocultural milieu that mediates and shapes the ways in which it can be lived, understood, and felt. In the thirteen essays that comprise this interdisciplinary collection, the body appears in a variety of ways, as that which is, at once, decidedly discursive — power and oppression, marginality and resistance — and inescapably material — flesh and bone, mind and senses, pleasure and pain, life and death. A central promise of the text and one that is, I think, its most valuable and distinctive contribution, lies in its attempt at depicting the indeterminacy of the fleshly, material body; the body that is always corporeally and contextually specific yet can never be reduced to a static or singular nature.

The volume is divided into four sections, each drawing on a breadth of topics, questions, and methodologies. Notions of affect, agency, identity, performance, autonomy, intersubjectivity, and interdependency are raised as matters of interest. While the four sections serve the purpose of curating particular conversations between authors/essays, such partitions are, in the words of the editors, “artificial” as many of the essays share multiple, overlapping themes.

In the first section, *Biology and Sexed Difference*, essays by Linda Martin Alcoff, Kathleen Lennon, and Stella Sandford discuss the possible role of biology in anchoring categories of the body, each with a notable focus on biological forms of reproduction and their relation to the division of the sexes. Read together, the chapters comprising this section exemplify the pull of an objectivist account of the body as well as the limits of such an account. Articulating some of the central themes from her 2008 book, *Visible Identities*, Alcoff argues that one’s “relationship of possibility to biological reproduction” determines the “material infrastructure” of sexual difference (pp. 19, 17). Perhaps more interesting, however, is Lennon’s critique of Alcoff in Chapter Two. Echoing Alcoff, Lennon concedes that the body’s relation to biological reproduction has important and even profound effects on who we are and how we can (are permitted to) move through the world. And, like Alcoff, Lennon also acknowledges that there are a great many ways of relating to reproduction (through the use of technology, for example). In her critique of Alcoff, however, Lennon — crucially acknowledging the body of the pregnant man — reminds us that the ways in which we relate to biological reproduction are “*not coextensive with our divisions into male and female*” (original emphasis, p. 37). Further complicating Alcoff’s thesis is Sandford’s reading of excerpts from Plato’s *Symposium* that make particular reference to male pregnancy and birth. Rather than reading these articulations as merely metaphors or dismissing them as mistranslations, Sandford proposes that the language and imagery of male pregnancy and birth is pedagogical. Sandford argues that such representations cultivate a “bisexual imaginary,” which, in her words, “*disregards any logical correlation with the sequence of physiological processes in human reproduction*” (original emphasis, p. 55).

In the second section, *The Body for Self and the Body for Others*, the authors explore the entangled relations between the “inner” and “outer” body by drawing on personal narratives of and/or case studies about trans embodiment (Stella Gonzalez-Arnal), sex work (Maddie Coy), torture (Stephen Burwood) and cultural identity and religious practice (Paul Gilbert). In each of these essays, the body appears as that which is distinctly a “self,” yet a “self” that always exists in, to, and for a world

of other bodies. I was concerned, at times, that the essays in this section (most notably, Gilbert's piece, but also others) did not adequately reflect on the ethics and politics of drawing on the particular (Gilbert's use of the case of Madame Silmi, for example) to exemplify more general claims being made about identity and embodiment. The primary value of this section, however, lies in how the essays collectively depict a body that is, at once indeterminate and material; a body that exists somewhere between the self and the other; the private and the public; a body caught between intimacy and vulnerability; ownership and autonomy; power and agency. Between all of this, the body appears as that which exceeds our modes of understanding and apprehension and yet remains very real.

Section three, *Bodily Difference and Bodily Possibilities*, contains essays by Jackie Leach Scully, Alexa Schriempf, Minae Inahara, and Margrit Shildrick. In this section, the authors trace the promise of nonnormative embodiments — notably, disabled and/or ill embodiments — by attending, in particular, to modes of interpretation and communication. As a researcher and teacher in the field of disability studies, I found this section to be particularly compelling in its commitment to complicating any fixed understandings of disability and illness. Notable, for me, were the first two chapters in the section: Leach Scully's provocative essay questioning the ways our embodiment — and the relations between our bodies and our cultural norms of functionality — shape our cognition, and Schriempf's thoughtful analysis of the tensions and possibilities between Deaf politics and the material effects of therapeutic responses to D/deafness. Complimenting these chapters are Iananra's meditation on symbolic and semiotic understandings of pain and Shildrick's reading of Derrida's notion of hospitality against narratives of transplantation. Taken together, all four chapters tell the story of the nonnormative body as a site of possibility, a body that has much to teach us about our existence as intercorporeal beings. Here, we are confronted with "a politics of hybridity" to borrow from Shildrick: "where the categories of embodiment are no longer clear cut" (p. 206).

The final section, *Power and Embodied Agency* features work by Lois McNay and Gill Jagger. With McNay's meditation on Axel Honneth's work on suffering and Jagger's intertextual reading of Bourdieu and Butler, the final two chapters are tied together in their attention to the regulatory effects of power in the constitution of embodied subjectivities. Even as they work to map out power and its often insidious effects, both essays refuse to foreclose possibilities for novel forms of agency, transformation, and social and individual change.

In their introduction to *Embodied Selves*, the editors aptly remind us: "the boundaries of the body are not always stable" (p. 2). This idea

was well exemplified throughout the collection. While the fleshly surfaces of the body are composed of a host of physical properties that are themselves fluid and moving and that move us in turn, the ways we (can) move and how these movements are felt, perceived, and interpreted are born of our intimate and changing relations with other moving bodies. Drawing from a diverse array of disciplinary perspectives — from bioethics to critical disability studies, from feminist epistemology to neurophysiology — the contributing authors collectively tell a story of the human body as that which is never still, never alone, never one. Most broadly, *Embodied Selves* gives us an account of a body that exists as a relation between us. What is at stake in this approach to theorizing the materiality of the body has everything to do with, in the words of the editors, “the intersubjective making of the self” (p. 9).

As this is an interdisciplinary text, it will be useful in a wide variety of academic contexts. Taken as a whole, the collection will serve as a rich resource for senior undergraduate and graduate studies in social and cultural theory. Several of the chapters will also be of interest to students and scholars in such areas as sociology of health, disability studies, and feminist theory.

University of Toronto

Anne McGuire

Anne McGuire is an Assistant Professor in the Equity Studies Program at the University of Toronto where she teaches courses in disability studies. Her research interests revolve around questions of disability representation and violence.

anne.mcguire@utoronto.ca