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

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Book reviews

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

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Media discourses on “getting fit” and on “body work” are a dominant issue in consumer society: individual’s ability to master cultural products and services and to deploy a self-presentation has become a key social competence. As Featherstone [1991] states, the production of gendered bodily ideals requiring daily practices and purchases to cumulatively form and sustain them is part of the shift to perspectives of the body as consumer in the postindustrial period.

The book aims at “investigating how gendered bodies are ‘made’ or ‘done’ [West and Zimmermann 1987] in the context of mainstream health and fitness prescriptions” [p. 27]. Moving from the concept of “healthism,” introduced by Robert Crawford in 1980, the authors point at how health ideals and promotion entail normative assumptions about well-being and morality. Healthism as a cultural frame situates health problems at an individual level, defining them as a matter of personal responsibility and individual morality. In so doing, it promotes neoliberal ideologies that obscure the impact of government and structural contributions to health disparities.

By adopting a Foucauldian approach, the authors underscore how body panic represent a displacement of critique of social structures onto individual bodily failures and onto marginalised categories. Health and fitness discourses involve a confessional mechanism focusing on sin display and redemption practices: but while privileged middle-class bodies can manage resources for enacting redemption (adopting self-surveillance), other subordinated and marginalized bodies are stigmatized by experts’ panoptic gaze for not fitting dominant bodily ideals (see for instance body panic regarding obesity).

Moreover, healthism obscures the gendered construction of bodily norms by focusing on a seemingly neutral individual’s responsibility to work on the body. Second wave feminism (1970s-1990s) had long claimed that women’s bodies have been objectified and trivialised through imaginery and content in media representations. The authors attempt “to move beyond an objectification thesis by underscoring how bodily subjecthood and objecthood are differentially and relationally created for women and men in mainstream health and fitness magazines” [p. 11].

The book arguments are based on ten years analysis of men’s and women’s health and fitness magazines (defining an empirical body of 11 magazines, 122 covers and 417 workouts), including content and textual analysis to identify the cultural assertions underlying the text of articles and imagery. To make a distinction for previous research adopting an approach “studying down” on the moral panic of the behaviour of the stigmatized (Cohen’s “folk devils”), the authors choose to “studying up” on normative and idealized images and meanings defining “folk angels.” Therefore they analysed how health and fitness magazines construct and circulate gendered idealised bodies and how the intersection of different social locations and power relations (race, social class, sexuality) allow or limit the attainment of these ideals.

Health and fitness magazines analysis show a trend of convergence in men's and women's consumptive bodily norms, practices and displays: fat is defined as a cultural transgression for both men and women; men and women are coming to be presented in similar ways (body positioning, smiles, head shots, active/passive imagery); what is marked to male and female bodies is converging (grooming practices, fashion consumption and leisure activities).

However, some gender differences in size and functionality of the body displayed are maintained if not reinforced: fat-fighting is aimed at attaining different body ideals (muscular body for men, slim for women); similar practices are described by using different adjectives (hard/firm, cut/toned, etc.); body functions are gendered (sport for men, fitness for women).

Following Haug's [1987] concept of "the subjective-aspects-within-being-as-object," the authors point at women experiencing subjecthood and pleasure in the process of body objectification through fitness practices, but they also extend the concept to men by underscoring "the objective-aspects-within-being-as-subject." The increasing processes of scrutiny and objectification of the male body provide new cultural resources to display and actualize hegemonic masculinity: "health and fitness discourse, and healthism in particular, play a vital, albeit complex role in paradoxically constituting and solving contemporary 'male body panic'" [p. 66-67].

In fitness magazines, the hegemonic male body is objectified through representation of large physical size (focus on men's strong and cut muscular body), institutionalized links to homosocial male contexts like sport and the military and antifeminist issues. As it has been pointed out, fitness magazines reproduce strongly gendered bodily ideals: while the male fit body is represented as big, cut, pumped and massive, female fit body is described as contained, tight and toned. By working on their bodies, women may challenge traditional gender norms of inferiority, but also reproduce new version of Connell's "emphasised femininity."

The authors argue for tension and ambivalence through the case of *Women's Sports & Fitness* magazine: founded in 1974 as a feminist magazine thematising female athletic performance and equity in sport for women, it was acquired in 1998 by Condé Nast, witnessing a shift away from sport to aesthetic fitness. Such a change in cover and contents reflects what has been critically called "commodity feminism", that is an appropriation of feminist issues as a range of strategies for capturing market share. The emphasis on body work as a means to liberation masks processes of reproduction/reinforcement of gender relations: the idealised "new woman" is enacted through middle-class consumption and individualised empowerment, and also pregnant women are required to keep fit and get their body back.

Not only body ideals are gendered: the authors take into account how race, class, and sexuality shape what kinds of subjects and objects individuals can become. In fact "how bodies are read, what translates to valuable bodily capital, and what is normalized for bodies depends on the social location of each individual body" [p. 52].

Fitness magazines analysis, besides a rhetorical and idealized representation of a "rainbow coalition," shows an overrepresentation of white models, while non-white models are focused on athletes. Moreover, health and fitness discourses reproduce heteronormativity, notwithstanding an increasing reference to what has been called a "gay

vague” (the use of cross-coding for “those in the know,” but not too direct to offend the heterosexual-by-default readership).

The book adopts an original methodological approach for media frames analysis, by connecting a longitudinal analysis of media materials, a relational analysis of both women’s and men’s fitness media texts and an intersectional analysis of gender, race, class influence. In so doing, it shows that body panic at large, and more specifically male body panic, “is not simply an individualised state of anxiety that men as a group have, but rather must be understood as part of the larger tapestry of changing gender, race, class and sexuality relations and as part of the broader structure of contemporary socioeconomic structures” [p. 9]. Moreover, it uncover how fitness consumption practices have an emancipatory potential, entailing space for agency and resistance to dominant cultural norms, but not equally accessible to everybody.

The authors acknowledge themselves some of the limits of their approach. By focusing on mainstream media, they haven’t taken into account other circulating bodily ideals. Besides, the analysis of magazines contents does not allow unravelling the variety of uses and interpretations of dominant meanings expressed by different audiences.

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