

Bodily Self-making in Girlhood

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BOOK REVIEW

Carla Rice. 2014. *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.



Carla Rice's book, *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture*, brings the reader deep into the discussion of girlhood as understood from the perspective of embodiment. The analysis focuses on the experiences of women who came of age anywhere between the late 1970s and the early 1990s—the generation eclipsed and bounded by the second and third waves of feminism, an “unnamed cohort” (5) overlooked by researchers more interested in feminism's defining moments. Having interviewed almost a hundred Canadian women aged from 20 to 45 about their experiences of maturation in a consumerist, media-saturated culture that offered limited access to feminist organizing, Rice suggests that their narratives of embodied transitions from childhood to womanhood convey complex and ambiguous understandings of gender, race, sexuality, disability, and other dimensions of identity.

Written in an accessible and engaging manner, the book stands out not only for its wide thematic scope, but also for the deliberate and thoughtful emphasis on how the ideas about racial and bodily difference shape the process of embodied self-making. All too often, feminist research on body image focuses on white, middle-class, able-bodied females, and Rice admits her initial difficulty with recruiting diverse participants. To ground her research in a multiplicity of voices, Rice reached participants from various social locations through a strategic approach that included snowball and targeted sampling as well as distributing flyers that directly addressed women who identify with minority groups. The resulting intersectional analysis is the book's defining strength.

Historically, theories of child development imagined children as imperfect, incomplete beings-in-the-making or, as Jens Qvortrup suggested, as “human becomings” (1994: 4) juxtaposed against supposedly rational and independent adults. Childhood itself has often been understood to be a transitional state, a journey towards an adulthood believed to be a stable,



inevitable, and identifiable destination. Drawing simultaneously on feminist theory and on scholarship in the area of childhood studies, Rice's work is closely aligned to the current critiques of conventional approaches to childhood as a time of passivity and ignorance. Critiquing the dominant theories of childhood socialization, she draws on Barrie Thorne's observations of gendered play and argues that gender should not be understood as a set of fixed traits imposed on children by the outside forces, but as a fluid way of being that children, having "agencies in gendering themselves" (1993: 78), actively construct.

Rice's research is underpinned by the idea that people "do not 'progress' from being unformed children to fully formed adults" (27) but, rather, develop in multiple and not really apparent directions. In particular, when talking about cultural contradictions of girlhood, Rice stresses the importance and limitations of agency within the constricting demands of the image culture. For example, in the chapter on disability, she explains how a sense of self for girls with disabilities has been negatively affected by stigmatizing portrayals of disability and the invalidating practices of some medical professionals and yet, when research participants—whom Rice calls storytellers—recollected their girlhood experiences of bodily difference, they spoke of various coping mechanisms they used to counteract their heightened vulnerability to abuse, maltreatment, and an intrusive gaze. When she discusses the experiences of women with disabilities, she underscores their resilience in the face of systematic oppression: "while their self-agency may not have been acknowledged or accorded value, all responded and acted—separating their bodies from themselves, closing off their emotional lives, and navigating systems as best as they could to keep themselves intact" (119).

The field of girlhood studies has produced a sizable body of scholarship on sexual and/or gender identities, and the unique contribution of this book lies in its reliance on the body becoming theory to conceptualize a *sexed* identity by which Rice means girls' understanding of their physicality and changing bodies, an understanding developed in connection with the cultural messages they receive at school, in a family, in a clinical setting, and in the media. Especially important are the two chapters in which Rice analyzes puberty as a "sexual spectacle" (159) and maintains that most pubescent girls tend to experience lowered levels of self-esteem, higher levels of emotional discomfort, and other types of distress. While mainstream literature tends to explain these negative outcomes either as changes brought by hormones or as consequences of girls' presumed inability to cope with their newly sexual bodies, Rice offers a powerful alternative to the dominant sto-

ries of maturation. Analyzing a wide array of academic literature on body-image and image culture, instructional materials on sexual development, and popular texts, she shows that young female sexuality has routinely been pathologized and cast as a problem for medical and educational experts to solve. At the same time, “girls’ subjective sexual sensations are written out of definitions of normal puberty, while their bodily changes are infused with sexuality as soon as they begin budding breasts” (168). Thus, Rice argues, girls’ negative experiences of maturation are largely a response to cultural messages that position adolescent female sexuality as abject and dirty; female adolescents are seen to be violable, and sexually available. Simultaneously, though, these messages hold girls responsible for maintaining the standards of idealized femininity.

Throughout the book, an examination of cultural imagery is intertwined with the analysis of interview transcripts in order to illuminate the meanings women attach to their experiences of sexed and gendered embodiment mediated by various beauty practices including dieting, cosmetic surgery, skin lightening, and hair care. What is interesting here is how Rice uncovers the ambivalence of some participants towards the body-acceptance rhetoric of second wave feminism that encourages women to accept their bodies regardless of how they are positioned in a wider culture. In other words, caught between normative standards of beauty and an alternative feminist impetus to celebrate previously devalued forms of embodiment, some participants felt that their aspirations towards a conventionally attractive body signified their perceived failures as feminists. As Rice puts it, “[N]ot only did the beauty industry make them feel bad about their bodies, but the popularized feminist platform also made them feel bad about feeling bad!” (13). Although Rice does not pursue this line of analysis much further, the participants’ unease with the ideas about body acceptance offers rich opportunities for investigating the limitations of dominant feminist conceptualizations of beauty as either oppressive and victimizing or alternative and subversive. Her emphasis on the ambiguities of body-image can be a starting point for a discussion of contemporary body positivity movements and the ways in which these movements can be exclusionary to people whose self-image diverges from the principles of unconditional self-love.

In the chapter on the history of beauty culture, Rice provides a succinct overview of how beauty standards tended to reflect predominant social hierarchies while being propelled by the marketing industry. Starting with the discussion of the Victorian era’s burgeoning beauty industry, her analysis emphasizes innovations and the business success of several female entrepre-

neers. The chapter also provides a cursory look at the key changes in the marketing and advertising of beauty during the first half for the twentieth century—the “science of beauty” (236) discourse of the 1920s, the promotion of cosmetics as a means of emotional well-being in the 1930s, the link made between women’s beauty and keeping up troop morale during the Second World War, and finally, the emergence of ads targeting teenage girls in the 1950s. Although brief, this overview is important for illuminating ideologies and discourses that have shaped a contemporary visual landscape of consumer culture.

The book closes with an exploration of several forms of agency—individual, relational, and institutional. Particularly insightful is Rice’s reflection on her participation in *The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* in an advisory capacity. This campaign is centered on improving the body-image of girls and women through advertising that includes both diverse models and empowering messages. After examining the limitations and failures of feminist engagements with corporate advertising that necessarily opts for safe and commercially profitable representations, Rice concludes with a call to expand conceptualizations of beauty radically in order “to see difference differently” (282). Overall, given its conceptually compelling analysis and its wide range of critical questions, *Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture* would be a useful addition to undergraduate and graduate courses on girlhood, body politics, identity, embodiment, and consumer culture.

References

- Thorne, Barrie. 1993. *Gender Play: Boys and Girls in School*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Qvortrup, Jens. 1994. “Childhood Matters: An Introduction.” Pp. 1–23 in *Childhood Matters: Social Theory, Practice and Politics*, ed. Jens Qvortrup, Marjatta Brady, Giovanni Sgritta and Helmut Wintersberger. Aldershot: Avebury.