

Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal (editors)  
*New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment*  
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*Reviewed by Erinn Gilson, 2019*

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Quote:

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*New Feminist Perspectives on Embodiment* aims to offer new perspectives on the perennial feminist topic of embodiment. The perspectives therein are considered new because they analyze both "new technologies and policy issues in a globalized and neoliberal world" and the relatively new focus on the "theme of vulnerability" in feminism (2). In addition, the essays in the volume address the shared themes of normalization, sexual violence, reproductive politics, dualist conceptions of embodiment, and the tension between materialism and social constructionism. They engage with a wide range of interlocutors and intellectual resources within feminism (new materialism, transfeminism, ethics of care, and significant thinkers such as Judith Butler and Iris Marion Young) and beyond it (phenomenology, pragmatism, poststructuralism).

Many of the essays develop the volumes core themes by analyzing specific forms of vulnerability in a global (Diana Tietjens Meyers, Namrata Mitra) and/or a neoliberal context (Julia Jansen and Maren Wehrle, Dianna Taylor). A shared concern of several essays is the way em-

bodiment is a site of both coercion and oppression, and possibility and creativity. This Foucaultian point--that power is ambivalently productive in its shaping of embodied subjectivity--is developed in Jansen and Wehrle's chapter on normalization and normality. They explore the phenomenological dimensions of normalization and the phenomenological idea of normality in order to elaborate how the reflexive relationship we have to our own embodiment, our "inner distance" (39), is a basis both for constraining forms of disciplinary normalization and for the reflection needed to resist them. Necessary and inevitable bodily normalization, however, becomes even more invisible within a neoliberal framework that valorizes free choice. Jansen and Wehrle contend that whereas disciplinary normalization pertains to the body as object and image, neoliberal normalization works on the body as lived (47-49): what we can do rather than how we look. From a feminist Foucaultian perspective, however, it's not clear that these dimensions of embodiment are distinct either in experience or in critical theorizing about it: discipline is paradigmatically about what the body can do, the cultivation of capacity, and Sandra Bartky's work (which the authors cite) reveals how typical feminine socialization produces a docile but *enhanced, more capable*, body. The chapter, thus, would benefit from more extensive familiarity with scholarship, especially Foucaultian feminist work (for example, Susan Bordo's work is especially pertinent to discussion of neoliberal ideals of choice and freedom; Dianna Taylor's work on normalization and normativity; Foucault's own treatment of neoliberalism in *The Birth of Biopolitics*). The topic of embodied experience within a neoliberal framework is a timely one, and the new dimensions the authors mention (publicity vs. mere visibility, virtual spaces) deserve analysis. For this reason, the argument merits more sustained examples or case studies to drive home the significance of the theoretical points.

Taylor's chapter compelling and effectively reveals the consequences of the aforementioned invisibility of normalizing norms by showing how the ambivalent moral and emotional responses" to sexual violence "indicate that women's lives do not (fully) count as lives" (148). Her argument makes vivid the significance of Butler's concepts of framing, recognition, and grievability, elaborating how gender is a frame that denies women full recognition as persons, harms to whom are grievable. In particular, she argues that this misrecognition occurs when "sexual violence is not unambiguously considered to be violence" (154) and when it is "not unambiguously considered to be a violation" that requires redress (156). By engaging in self-critique, Taylor also illustrates Butler's take on the ambivalent productivity of power, namely that resistance to oppressive frameworks of intelligibility comes from within those very frames, that is, from their inherent incompleteness, their iterability, and their exclusionary nature (159-60): what lies outside the frame can break it or precipitate a reframing. The aim of feminist theory and practice, therefore, is to identify the points of breakage in dominant frames and work to break those frames.

Points of breakage within feminist theories of embodiment is the concern of Lanei Rodemeyer's chapter, which analyzes the limitations and value of four different paradigms for thinking gender and embodiment in feminism and philosophy: 1. sex/gender, 2. queer theory, 3. phenomenology, and 4. transfeminism. Rodemeyer's clear, helpful analysis pays particular attention to the limitations of these paradigms for understanding the experiences of transgender people. The sex/gender frame employed by trans-exclusionary radical feminists breaks down because it dichotomizes sex as biological and gender as social and yet relies on both sides of that dualism--an essential, biological sex that trans people are said to deny and the social construction of gender as the source of women's oppression--to condemn trans people. A complex, felt sense

of gendered embodiment, which is vital for understanding trans people's experiences, remains unintelligible through this frame. Queer theory, on Rodemeyer's account, may make room for more complexity in gender identity and experience, but it reduces gender to social construction. Phenomenology, in contrast, centers on a sense of embodied experience that is irreducible to either matter or discourse, but can be too focused on the individual to the exclusion of social factors. Transfeminism, however, reframes gender and identity by melding theoretical frameworks, "employ[ing] an intersectional approach . . . to bring embodied experience to theories of gender in new ways[,]" beyond the binaries of sex/gender and materialism/social constructionism (117-18). In so doing, it offers a richer and more inclusive theoretical framework for embodiment.

Kathleen Lennon's chapter also addresses the nature/culture and materialism/social constructionism dualisms, focusing on feminist critiques of scientific perspectives on gendered, sexed bodies. These critical perspectives aim to overcome these dualisms but alternately over-emphasize either how culture constructs nature or, in the case of new materialism, how "culture is also in some sense a product of nature" (130). Lennon thus appeals to Merleau-Ponty's process-focused ontology and notion of expression as way out of the dichotomies that seem to persist in other feminist accounts. Just as Taylor calls attention to how transformation is possible because frames must be reiterated and so can be reiterated differently, so the Merleau-Pontian ontology highlights the "openness of" future iterations, the way new practices of gender and sex can be instituted (136). A related argument is developed by Clara Fischer for the fruitfulness of John Dewey's pragmatism for feminist attempts to move beyond binaries when theorizing embodiment as simultaneously material and social. Fischer's specific argument criticizes feminist new materialism and affect theory for, first, presuming, and then simply reversing the priority of, the dualism between the body, affect, and materiality and cognition, language, and culture, and,

second, not being as new as they claim. Rather, Fischer asserts, they would benefit from recourse to a long-standing approach like pragmatism, which is "truly anti-dualistic" (88) in its attention to concepts of process, action, practice, habit, and transaction. Such concepts have affinities with the new materialist theories of Karen Barad and Stacey Alaimo as both theorize "nature as agentic" and relations between nature and culture, the environment and humans as *mutually* formative (94).

Co-editor Fischer's critique of claims to newness raises the question of the newness of the perspectives in this volume. The ostensibly "new" perspectives of many of the essays actually amount to dialogues between feminist concerns and established methods such as phenomenology and pragmatism. There is nothing wrong with that--these alliances are valuable--but such dialogues are not new, per se, as Fischer indicates by referring to feminist pragmatism. Drawing other traditions into dialogue with feminism is both a merit of the volume, demonstrating its pluralism and breadth, and an occasional pitfall: several of the essays are encumbered by an exegetical approach in which lengthy exposition of theories and concepts comes at the expense of analysis and the application of those theories and concepts. This exposition-focused style usually means an essay won't be suitable for undergraduate teaching, but neither is it really necessary for scholars who specialize in the area (and are generally familiar enough with the concepts). Consequently, one of the drawbacks of this collection is consistency with respect to who the intended audience is. A number of the essays (such as those by Gail Weiss, Rodemeyer, Taylor, Meyers, and Mitra) would be positive additions to an undergraduate feminist theory course, but others engage in too much specialized exposition. Weiss's chapter in particular will be valuable for introducing students to feminist critique of the dualistic history of embodiment and sexist associations tied to the body. Weiss provides a clear overview of feminist critiques of philosophy's his-

tory of devaluing the body and elevating the mind and reason (in Plato, Descartes, Aristotle), considers how this trend is manifest in the existentialism of Sartre, Beauvoir, and Fanon, and then turns to how positive considerations of embodiment lie at the center of Eva Kittay's ethics of embodied connection and care, and the feminist turn toward vulnerability.

Overall, the collection is at its strongest in the more "applied" essays, namely those concerning sexual violence (Taylor, Mitra, and Meyers), because the analysis is most sustained and effective in these chapters. Like Taylor, Mitra utilizes Butler's concept of framing to criticize the patriarchal lens through which sexual violence is perceived in India. She analyzes how this patriarchal framing--which draws upon notions of honor, community, and national identity that developed through both the history of British imperialism in India and the nationalist politics that originated in Partition--renders the survivors' experience of sexual violence illegible and invisible. Dominant patriarchal discourses, exemplified by courtroom practices and law, that condition recognizability make survivors' bodily experience in general utterly irrelevant. For example, marriage precludes the possibility of rape: "If the harm of sexual violence against women is the loss of honor it brings to the men in her family . . . then marital rape becomes a contradiction" (192). Resisting the way these dominant frames make violence against women routine involves creating new, feminist frames that make survivors of sexual violence legible and visible.

Meyers's chapter does not reference the concept of framing, but is likewise concerned with how law and policy render gendered and sexual harms illegible. Although the chapter has little to do with embodiment or embodied experience, it offers an incisive critique of US antitrafficking law and its impact on women who are trafficked, with particular attention to harms to their reproductive rights. The "law enforcement gestalt" that governs US policy involves two problems: 1) framing the women as *smuggled* migrants rather than *trafficked* and so denying

them the protections extended to trafficking victims, and 2) prioritizing crime prevention and punishing traffickers “over rectifying the wrongs done to trafficked victims” (170-72). These problems stem from the belief that "de-agentification has come to stand for non-complicity" (175); that is, framing "true" victims as nonagentic prevents trafficked women from being recognized and treated as victims, and so precludes harms done to them in their reproductive capacities from being recognized and rectified.

The essays that focus squarely on reproductive politics and technology (EL Putnam, Luna Dolezal) are promising. Putnam proposes that pregnant performance artists, like Marni Kotak, create new representations of pregnancy that center women's embodied, intersubjective experience of pregnancy, providing a rejoinder to medicine's and art's history of marginalizing or ignoring women's embodied experiences. Dolezal addresses the impact of the metaphor of hospitality (as well as birth as labor/production and the uterus as container) on reproductive surrogacy. The hospitality metaphor may reinforce "the idea of an essential feminine altruism" (227), obscuring the complex economic and social conditions that underlie surrogacy, or may stem from a "dematerialized and idealized feminine" (330), abstracted from the real women who make it possible, as in the work of Derrida and Levinas. In contrast, feminist theorist Irina Aristarkhova's concept of "hospitality invokes the ongoing constitutive maternal-foetal relationship through a relation of giving and receiving," and pertains to the whole of the gestating women's embodiment rather than treating her as a separable womb (232). In these chapters, however, the exegetical components (of Heidegger, and Derrida and Levinas respectively) again take center stage when more detailed treatment of the concrete realities of embodied experience--what is the specific content of these artists' embodied experience that they seek to communicate? how do these meta-

phors affect women's experience of pregnancy?--would serve the aims of the essays and the volume better.

This collection contains a number of insightful essays, some of which are suitable for inclusion in undergraduate feminist philosophy courses and may be of interest to scholars researching related topics. Each essay reveals different ways that "women's embodiment still constitutes contested terrain" (12). It is, however, not quite representative enough of the diversity and range of topics regarding embodiment that concern women and feminists today. The editors do note the limits of the volume and the topics that could not be included for reasons of space ("religious expression, disability, aesthetic surgery") (12). Yet, given the frame of "newness," and themes of vulnerability, globalization, and neoliberalism, some omissions are striking: there is scant consideration of race or intersectionality in these essays (apart from Taylor's self-critical conclusion and Mitra's related analysis of the overlapping categories of caste and class), for instance, and no discussion of embodiment in relation to carcerality, immigration, disability, poverty, social media and technology, and sexuality apart from sexual violence, which, among other topics, are central to much new feminist work. These omissions may be due to the theoretical bent of the volume, which would be more aptly titled *feminist perspectives on theories of embodiment*, or to the selection of the theories with which dialogues are sustained (mostly established philosophical traditions rather than, say, critical race theory, postcolonial theory, disability studies, trans studies, queer theory, and so on). This bent also lends itself to the more exegetical approach of many of the essays. Such an approach is a disciplinary norm, especially from continentally informed perspectives, but for this reader more attention to the concrete particulars of embodied experience in contemporary life--through analysis of examples and cases, and in-depth application of



the concepts and frameworks that are elucidated--would make the collection more effective, more valuable for teaching, and more revelatory of the newness of these perspectives.