

Jamie A. Thomas and Christina Jackson (editors)
Embodied Difference: Divergent Bodies in Public Discourse
Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2019 (ISBN: 978-1-4985-6386-4)

Reviewed by Mary Edwards, 2020

Mary Edwards teaches philosophy at Cardiff University. She has published papers on the phenomenology of gendered embodiment and shame in *Hypatia* and *Discipline Filosofiche*, and is currently writing a book on the development of Sartre's existential psychoanalysis across his career.

Quote:

"[*The Bluest Eye*] fulfills its editors' aim to provide an outstanding example of how cross-disciplinary, intersectional feminist research can yield new insights. Its call for further investigations into the covert operations of the Thing in everyday life sets a fresh agenda for feminist scholarship."

In *The Bluest Eye*, the late Toni Morrison describes a young girl's discovery of what differentiates her and her Black classmates from a White peer of theirs in terms of the Thing; "the Thing to be feared," she realizes, "is the Thing that made her beautiful, and not us" (Morrison 1970, 74). Almost fifty years later, we still do not have a clear conception of the Thing that makes us see some people as beautiful, some people as deviant, and some people as simply mattering more than others. In recent years, though, scholarship in the field of corporeal feminism has deepened our understanding of the covert ways that patriarchal power relations structure our understanding of bodies.

Jamie A. Thomas and Christina Jackson's edited volume, *Embodied Difference: Divergent Bodies in Public Discourse*, represents an important contribution to this field.

This collection of ten essays has its origins in co-editor Thomas's class field trip to an exhibit on *The Making and Unmaking of Race* at Penn Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology in 2016. This exploration of local legacies of scientific racism inspired two public discussions on "how humanity is variously defined and imagined" (6), which served as the basis for the book. The result is a truly cross-disciplinary inquiry into the structures that differentiate bodies today, which brings together the perspectives of scholars working in linguistics, sociology, literature, gender studies, law, demography, anthropology, philosophy, classics, and medical humanities.

The editors envision the volume as a "teaching project" that they hope will inspire students, communities, and colleagues to pursue similar "routes of cross-disciplinary insight" (1). This pedagogical vision is reinforced by the division of the volume into three "units": Unit 1: "The Rational Mind vs. The Criminal Body," Unit 2: "The Deviant and Undesirable Body," and Unit 3: "The Beautiful Body and Its Parts." This structure is sensible, and each unit opens with a pithy preface that outlines the shared objectives and collective achievements of the chapters within it.

The first unit is the most conceptual in its approach. Chapter 1, "Our Own Flesh and Blood: Putting the Body at the Center of Violence and Dehumanization," by Krista K. Thomason, is instrumental in laying the conceptual foundations for the chapters that follow. Thomason's exploration of soldiers' and members of the Hutu Interahamwe's accounts of their experience of combat indicates that--contrary to the dominant view that dehumanization facilitates human-human violence by allowing perpetrators of it to see their victims as sub- or inhuman--violent encounters interrupt the process of dehumanization. As the body is the condition for violence, it is startling that theorists have hitherto paid relatively little attention to how it is perceived in the context of

violent encounters. Thomason explains this oversight by developing Kate Manne's view that the prevalent humanistic assumption that horrific interhuman violence is "outside the realm of human possibility" engenders the further assumption that perpetrators of it must have to (psychologically) remove their victims from the category "human" (34). But, if the "bodily and visceral aspects" of violence leave aggressors with no doubt that their victims are human (33), as Thomason argues, it points toward the falsity of both assumptions and raises important questions about the extent to which our collective investment in humanistic ideals could blind us to truths about what humans are capable of.

Jessica Wright opens the second chapter, "Are We Our Brains? How Early Christianity Shaped Western Ideas about Power, Morality, and Personhood," by reflecting on the eagerness of investigators into the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting to have the gunman's brain searched for abnormalities. She maintains that the very idea that we could blame nonhuman factors--that is, chemicals and brain cells--for humanmade catastrophes is premised upon "cerebral subjectivity" (38): the position that human subjectivity supervenes on the "normal" brain. Though cerebral subjectivity is often taken for granted today, Wright emphasizes it as a culturally specific phenomenon by tracing its origins to fourth-century Christian writers' efforts to humanize the brain by overlooking the similarities between human and nonhuman brains that were assumed by Greek medics, whose experiments on nonhuman brains first brought the functions of the brain to light. Accordingly, she contends that our modern conception of the human subject is rooted in an ancient theological claim to human "exceptionalism and hegemony" (47).

The final chapter of unit 1, "Making the Case for Transfeminism: The Activist Philosophies of CeCe McDonald and Angela Davis," adds another dimension to the critique of the modern conception of the human subject by calling attention to whom it excludes. Here, Ute Bettray aims to "delineate a budding transfeminism of color" by developing Davis's transfeminism, characterized by a "willingness to see feminism's core assumption of a sex/gender binary constantly destabilized" and a "radical openness to welcoming new genders, and more specifically, new gendered embodiments" (61). The chapter describes how McDonald's embodiment of Black transwomanhood led to her being prosecuted as a "Black man who killed a White man in a street fight" because it rendered unintelligible her act of self-defense as a "(human) woman" victim of assault (68). By emphasizing transwomen's femininity as "deeply human"--as a form of "gendered humanness" realized through intention (66)--Bettray shows that their dehumanization as "unnatural" women can only be explained by the intersection of multiple forms of oppression, especially transphobia, homophobia, classism, and often also racism. Its focus on the exclusion of human, gendered embodiments from our current categories of "woman" and "human" as a source of human suffering offers a refreshingly compassionate approach to the ongoing sex-gender debate within feminism (see Rodemeyer 2018 for an overview of this debate).

Unit 2 represents the book's most novel contribution to corporeal feminism by virtue of calling attention to the normalizing function of the standards by which human ability and human value are assessed in specific domains. Paul Wolff Mitchell and John S. Michael begin this process by delving into the history of craniology. They contend that the work of eminent nineteenth-century craniologist Samuel George Morton was influenced not only by his unconscious biases but also by conscious biases that he strove to conceal by donning a mask of scientific impartiality. Naturally, the evidence is somewhat scant, but the authors make a strong case for this view by pointing to

Morton's close association with noted White supremacists, as well as to the work of his contemporary, Friedrich Tiedemann, who drew drastically different conclusions from remarkably similar empirical data concerning the capacity of the cranium across racial groups: namely, that there were "no significant differences between Africans and Europeans" (82). The authors conclude that Morton refrained from expressing his opinion on slavery so as to legitimize his attempt to establish the "cranial--and thereby rational--inferiority" of Africans as a "scientific apology for the slave trade" (89).

In chapter 5, Dorisa Costello critiques the construction of the female vampire in Joseph S. Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) and Octavia E. Butler's *Fledgling* (2005). Its close literary analysis of these two key novels in the vampire genre highlights how the figure of the vampire embodies anxieties endemic to patriarchal, heteronormative, racist societies and gestures toward the subversive potential of portraying persons from marginalized groups as the embodiment of the vampire's superhuman power. For skeptics of the notion that diverse vampiric embodiments could help to destabilize hegemonic ideas, Costello stresses the vampire's special place in the Western social imagination as its most attractive and most human monster, and notes how Bram Stoker's embodiment of the vampire as an aristocratic, White, heterosexual male in *Dracula* (1897)--which eclipsed Le Fanu's feminine prototype--remained the paradigm until very recently.

In chapter 6, "Protest Bodies: The Right to Protect Your Own in Environmental Justice and Redevelopment Battles," urban sociologist Christina Jackson argues that the public meetings regarding the redevelopment of the Bayview-Hunters Point neighborhood in San Francisco (2008–10) silenced the Black and Brown working-class residents--who would be most affected by the proposed redevelopment--while ostensibly giving them a platform to voice their opinions. Jackson explains how these residents interpreted their bodies as their only resource for asserting their presence, but the "bureaucratic formality" (124) of these meetings enabled institutional stakeholders to construe their bodily forms of resistance as disobedience. In this moment in which institutional agendas are rapidly driving the gentrification of our urban spaces, Jackson underlines public redevelopment meetings as important sites of "urban struggle" and warns that the structure of such meetings predisposes those officiating at them to interpret the distress expressed by the bodies "we should be looking at and listening to" (132) as grounds for ignoring them.

Chapter 7 offers a powerful discussion of cases of patients in a permanent vegetative state, pronounced "brain dead" or terminally ill, which are considered iconic due to the formative role they have played in United States law. The author, Barry R. Furrow, interprets the fact that the majority of these cases to date are those of young, White women as showing that they are American society's "favored group of patients" whose injury in situations that curtail their lives triggers a sense of "tragic loss" (138). Then he tracks the development of legislation in response to medical advances in end-of-life care through the cases of four White women (1976-2005) and one Black woman (2013). Through its analysis of the intersection of the law and media imagery of these women's disabled and debilitated bodies, the chapter explores the power of images of the body to influence legal and public opinion about the ethicality of life-sustaining treatment. It also further develops the volume's key theme that there is no universal standard of human value by revealing how sexism, racism, and ableism contribute to the sense that the loss of "attractive women of endless potential and childbearing age" is particularly tragic (137, *emphasis added*), which suggests that women's bodies are valued more for their life-giving and life-enhancing potential than for the lives they sustain--a point that is reinforced by chapters 8 and 10 in the next unit.

Unit 3 questions how the aesthetic standards that maintain oppressive norms of gender, race, and sexuality influence our perception of human worth. Although this topic is not new, the examination of the function of these standards in the contexts of biomedicine, dance, and science fiction is enlightening. Emily August's contribution strives to implicate medical textbooks in defining the "normal," "healthy," human body (168). By subjecting Henry Gray's *Anatomy, Descriptive and Surgical* (1858) to a close literary analysis, August probes the potential of medical writing to instill cultural biases. She argues that the passive voice employed throughout Gray's *Anatomy* effects the "erasure" of the (White, male) author-surgeon as well as his violation of dead bodies, which lends the book a great deal of discursive and material power; specifically, the power to (1) authorize medical brutality by naturalizing surgical intervention as a response to violence (174-77), and (2) reaffirm European cultural dominance through a tacit reassertion of racist hierarchies (177-78). The argument for (2) is especially compelling because it highlights the numerous biases implicit in the book's assertion that the pelvises of European females are the "most roomy" (177); its assessment of women's bodies in relation to their "proper function," that is, childbearing; and its implication that European women are "heroically best outfitted" for their role as mothers (178). It is, however, a pity that the images analyzed are not included in this chapter (though this may well be due to copyright reasons).

In chapter 9, Kat Richter explores the successes of Misty Copland--the first African American woman to hold the rank of principal dancer with the American Ballet Theatre--and Michelle Dorrance--celebrated White, female, tap dancer--in relation to the construction of the "ballet body" as slim, strong, and White, and that of the "tap body" as a marginalized body by virtue of its associations with "slavery, blackface, minstrelsy, segregation, and racism" (194). Then it cautions that even though Copland's and Dorrance's successes appear to represent progress toward a "postracial" society, they also evince the persistence of Eurocentric ideals in dance, since the former artist is "light-skinned" and the latter artist's whiteness and multiform training enable her to "render tap more palatable to white audiences" (195).

The tenth and final chapter, by Jamie A. Thomas, interrogates the reanimation subgenre of science fiction, defined by its presentation of the revivification of the human body as a possibility. By subjecting three exemplary cinematic representations of this genre to close feminist critique, it brings the gendered differences in the assessment of bodies into even sharper relief. First, it shows how *The Brain That Wouldn't Die* (1962) reproduces discourses that "base a woman's worth on her status as able-bodied, and often heterosexually compliant" by presenting what--given cerebral subjectivity--could be taken as the survival of the human subject through the survival of her head alone as her "transformation into a nonhuman animal" (216). Then it examines how the female lead in *Passengers* (2016) owes her reanimation to her inert body's capacity to awaken heterosexual male desire. Finally, it describes how Dr. Elizabeth Shaw's infertility is framed as "a disability that detracts from her White womanhood" (225), and how her becoming an unwilling gestational surrogate to an alien fetus dehumanizes and disempowers her in *Prometheus* (2012). Thomas argues--persuasively--that the sexist degradation of women in each of these films serves to enhance the dignity of the White, heterosexual, male characters who embody the trope of the "mad scientist" in the reanimation genre (228). She then rightly concludes that the efforts of these popular films to impose traditional gender roles on women's bodies should concern feminists because they constitute an "imagining of patriarchal power" into speculative futures that could be free of it (230).

Students and scholars interested in corporeal feminism will find the analyses of underresearched modes and contexts of embodiment collected in Embodied Difference to be of great value. Some central topics in twenty-first-century corporeal feminism--such as the possibilities for new kinds of embodiment afforded by advancements in enhancement technologies, virtual realities, and social media--are not addressed, though, which is a regrettable omission in a work that is cutting-edge in other respects. The volume nevertheless fulfills its editor's aim to provide an outstanding example of how cross-disciplinary, intersectional feminist research can yield new insights into how policies, practices, and pop culture influence our interpretation of bodies in ways that tend to reinforce the unequal distribution of power and privilege along axes of gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability. Its call for further investigations into the covert operations of the Thing in everyday life sets a fresh agenda for feminist scholarship.

References

Morrison, Toni. 1970. *The bluest eye*. New York: Vintage Books.

Rodemeyer, Lanei M. 2018. *Feminist and transgender tensions: An inquiry into history, methodological paradigms, and embodiment*. In *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, ed. Clara Fischer and Luna Dolezal. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.