

## Book Review: Gender, Health and Popular Culture: Historical Perspectives

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**Book under review:** Warsh, Cheryl Krasnick, ed. 2011. *Gender, Health and Popular Culture: Historical Perspectives*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

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The connections among gender, popular culture, and health may not be immediately apparent. At best, this overlap is intriguing; at worst it seems unrelated or at odds. Yet, as demonstrated in *Gender, Health, and Popular Culture*, popular culture is a medium through which gender constructions of health are disseminated, discursively produced, and maintained.

This edited collection is organized into two sections: the transmission of health information; and popular representations of the body in sickness and health. Both themes are viewed through the lens of popular culture. The thirteen chapters bring together interdisciplinary scholars across Canada, Australia, and the United States, who cover a wide range of topics, such as reproduction, medical technologies, and displays of the body. Taken together, the overarching themes demonstrate the role of popular cultural and medical texts in not only translating knowledge, but also regulating bodies in ways that maintain the normative body as the healthy ideal, and non-normative bodies as models of sickness.

While medical authorities claim objectivity, medical and popular texts maintain a pervasive hold on the dissemination and transmission of health information and the subsequent production of a healthy, normative, gendered body. The value-laden nature of medical texts and artifacts weaves throughout this collection, demonstrating how these documents are imbued with cultural norms. For example, as described by Annette Burfoot, representations of the anatomical body draw on cultural signifiers of race, sexuality, and lifestyle to produce and delineate what constitutes a healthy, normal body.

The cultural values embedded within medical

discourse are also exemplified by Lisa Forman Cody, whose chapter illustrates how the prenatal nutrition advice and guidelines given to expectant mothers shift over time to reflect broader cultural beliefs about women's bodies and beauty. Similarly, in their role as dominant commentators of the body, doctors define womanhood in terms of pathology. For example, Lisa Featherstone discusses how medical discourse constructs womanhood as disease and disorder—and how womanhood is predominantly defined by deviation from the male norm. Femininity, in these texts, is vulnerable, sick, and sickening. Masculinity is independent and defined by its repudiation of the feminine. To be ill, to be disordered or disorderly, is to be feminine or feminized.

Yet while prescriptive literature and advertisements function as regulatory and norm-producing technologies, popular culture can also reclaim body authority. For example, as discussed in Mandy Hadenko's chapter, by publishing women's personal testimonies, which removed issues such as cervical cancer from the lens of regulating authorities and placed them in the forefront of public discussion, the Canadian magazine *Chatelaine* allowed women to claim ownership and expertise over their own bodies.

The first section of the book illustrates how the body is a battleground upon which regulating authorities lay claim over the contested territories of sexuality, reproduction, and sex education. While contraceptive technologies are often equated with women's sexual liberation, 1970s advertisements for the birth control pill played an equal role in the maintenance of normative feminine scripts. Specifically, as discussed by Heather Molyneaux, these advertisements depicted their consumer as moral, white, middle-class, and married, while emphasizing the pill as another part of a woman's "cycle" that included motherhood. By using "symbols of morality" to quell public fears surrounding the pill and female promiscuity, Molyneaux shows how advertisements discursively maintained the parameters of appropriate female

sexuality and sexual behaviour. Similarly, according to Sharra L. Vostral, the "prescriptive literature" of menstrual education films illustrates how regulating authorities provide specific rules and instructions for how to act, think, and behave. As Vostral argues, these behavioural dictates script pathways to attain ideal femininity, while reinforcing the expectations of motherhood.

Through such texts, feminine scripts remain firmly anchored in motherhood. As such, abortion and the willful termination of a pregnancy challenge ideal feminine norms. For example, Lisa Forman Cody explains that while Canadian women have gained the legal right to terminate pregnancy, they are nonetheless beholden to standards of femininity and motherhood that necessitate self-sacrifice and a moral obligation to the unborn. Self-sacrifice, Forman Cody argues, is a feminine imperative, and an ideology exemplified by the cultural demand that a mother put aside her own desires because "baby comes first." Yet, Christabelle Sethna's chapter exposes the whiteness embedded in the self-sacrificing feminine ideal through the paradoxical stigmatization of abortions, juxtaposed by the forced sterilization of women of colour. This work demonstrates how medical and legal regulations of women's bodies are anchored in racist, sexist ideologies.

As a whole, the second section of the book outlines how popular cultural representations conflate beauty and health, whereby health is promoted as the retention of youth and is achieved through capitalist pursuits of idealized feminine norms of beauty. For example, the chapter by Christina Burr looks at how films circulate cultural ideals about the feminine body, and thus demonstrate how the "star body," as exemplified by Jamie Lee Curtis, functions as a normalizing standard against which other bodies are measured and disciplined (i.e. racialized, queer, fat, and AIDS bodies). In contrast to Burr's "star body," or Burfoot's discussion of the normalizing visual display of anatomical models, Heather Murry's chapter discusses how the display of the AIDS body can reclaim the visual occupancy and cultural spaces

withheld from non-normative subjects. For example, by requesting his funeral be made into a public display and subsequent advertisement for ACT UP, Mark Lowe Fisher forced the public to “bear witness” to the reality of death from AIDS. In this way, while representations of the body in sickness and in health uphold concepts of gender, race, and normative beauty, the visibility of non-normative bodies can serve as a counter-discourse. Similarly, Jenny Ellis’ chapter illustrates how the fat-centric aerobics classes “Large as Life” demonstrate the counter-discourse produced through visibility. For the members of LAL, aerobics was a form of self-expression that facilitated both individual growth and a re-articulation of fatness. The LAL classes pushed-back against the “star body,” to carve out a space within 1980s popular culture wherein fat bodies could be celebrated and enjoyed, while challenging norms of what it means to be fit.

Tensions between body authorities and subjectivity weave throughout *Gender, Health and Popular Culture*. Over the course of the collection, the reader begins to re-evaluate the self-proclaimed objectivity of medical or other regulating authorities, and understand the role of popular cultural texts in translating knowledge and regulating embodied norms. As a result of the collection’s focus on popular representations of health, marginalized identities remain somewhat at the peripheries. By centering this collection on popular representations, the collection facilitates a discussion surrounding marginalized identities but does little in the way of contributing to the conversation. Consequently, the collection does not sufficiently push the boundaries of “womanhood” or “motherhood” in terms of race, sex, or sexuality. Possible sites to push motherhood beyond cisgender whiteness include the historical and contemporary depictions of the mammie versus the jezebel, childbearing transmen, chestfeeding, or depictions of same-sex parents in popular culture. By focusing on the production of gender norms, the varied embodiments of pregnancy, gestation, and parenthood beyond cisgender motherhood remain absent in this otherwise insightful collection.