

Book Review

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Latimer J and Schillmeier M. *Un/known Bodies*. Oxford. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. The Sociological Review. 2009 (ppb) 277pp. ISBN 978-1-4051-9083-1

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As a former Roman Catholic Convent School Girl, the ambiguities of the body featured gravely in our consciousness. The body was at once sacred, 'a temple of the Lord,' but also a site of dangerous depravity. It was known to us in these terms. But it was also un/known to us in a physical sense as certain areas were out of bounds; rules forbade areas of exploration which, if transgressed, led to severe consequences. An interest in the sociology of the body had begun and the title of this book struck a particular resonance.

This book, which is part of the Sociological Review Monograph series, presents an exciting challenge to contemporary theory concerning the body and embodiment. The collection of papers presented in the book developed from a colloquium held at Cardiff in 2007, the aim of which was to re-theorise bodies as known, knowing and unknowing. The book cover is decorated with an *assemblage* of The Exquisite Corpse (Man Ray 1926). Assemblage is an artistic process in which composition is made through putting together assorted objects presenting complex forms of relationality. This is an apt illustration and captures the essence of the book as each chapter stands alone but also becomes part of a heterogeneous whole, which results in a re-theorization of the body which is both imaginative and compelling.

The colloquium participants wanted to shed light on the fact that there is more than one world just as there is more than one body. They wanted to promote understanding of the body as for both being in the world and shifting worlds. A major concern of the contributors was to expand upon and to differentiate between the four theoretical perspectives of the "world forming" theme of bodies. These four perspectives are

described here as embodiment and “world-reflecting”; secondly, interaction and “world making”; thirdly, “assemblages” and world building; fourth, “relational extension” and world shifting. The book is organised in these four directions and is divided into four sections: Opening up the Body; Moving Worlds; Bodies and Technology; Absences and Presences. It is a timely book and provides a richness of detail and adds a new perspective to the burgeoning corpus of literature on the body. The chapters reveal the research interests of the authors who are drawn from a trans-disciplinary scholarship consisting of sociologists, nurses, psychologists, anthropologists and philosophers. There are chapters concerning ageing, ethnicity, trauma, ageing and disability. The book comprises both theoretical work and empirical research. The theoretical chapters present creative and persuasive approaches to knowing the body. For example, Latimer’s chapter in the section ‘Opening up the Body,’ examines the self-portraits of the Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in order to promote understanding of the notions of self and reality. The portraits represent a way of viewing bodies against the life events and cultural influences of the artist. To fully appreciate this chapter one needs to be sat by a computer to call up the paintings Latimer refers too, although some small images are provided in the text. Kahlo’s paintings are both of herself and her reality, which would appear to be one of physical and emotional pain from a disabled body. However, it is suggested that they may also reveal a political nuance whereby Mexico is subjugated to the power of its more sophisticated neighbour, as well as suggesting the suppression of women in a patriarchal society. Latimer suggests that Kahlo’s methods bring into view all that is usually hidden ‘the openness, fragility and leakiness of the body self’ such as blood, umbilical cords, and foetuses attached to the outside of its mother’s body. This method of painting is known as assemblage, a collection of figures and symbols that

portray relationships. Latimer explores how Kahlo demonstrates that bodies and persons are made up of fragmented and manifold materials. What is striking says Lawler, is how Kahlo although portraying the body and self as unstable and ambiguous, does not present a picture of a divided self. Latimer suggests that Kahlo's portraits make explicit the divided nature of embodiment, not just as her own being, but as 'perspective of knowing being'. Perhaps this chapter intrigued me so much because of my convent experiences described above, where pupils wished to make the unknown body known. In the section entitled 'Absences and Presences,' Rudge describes an ethnographic study, which took place in a hospital burns unit. Here, as in Kahlo's paintings, body parts normally obscured by skin, in this case, muscles, tendons, sinews, are exposed to the eye. Here the body moves from the known well body to the unknown burned body. The data collected demonstrated that as the patients recovered a process took place that contained both the known, the sensation of grafted skin, and the unknown: abnormal sensations of the unaffected skin. Rudge demonstrates how the embodied practices of nurses as they care for burn injured patients produces a kind of caring that takes account of the intertwined embodiment of nurses and recovering patients. She suggests an approach to care that acknowledges the complex nature of interactions among embodiment and social processes and allows for risk-taking and instability. Many other chapters merit discussion but space forbids it. I feel that the authors have achieved their aim to open up assumptions that revolve around the lived body as "knowing". It has resulted in a collection which has originality, variety and richness. This makes for an exhilarating read.

I would not recommend this book to those who are new to the study of the sociology of the body as it presupposes prior knowledge and conversance with the literature.

However for post-graduates with an interest in the body, sociologists and those whose

work involves an academic interest in healthcare this book would provide a rewarding and challenging experience.

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