

# Book Review

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**Bobel, Chris and Samantha Kwan. *Body Battlegrounds: Transgressions, Tensions, and Transformations*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2019, 272 pages.**

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In Euro-American society, we have a tendency to act as if we live from the neck up. Bobel and Kwan's edited volume, *Body Battlegrounds*, brings into focus the ways embodiment enters into our daily lives as we establish social control and transgress those boundaries to reclaim ourselves and redefine the meaning etched into our bodies. The contributors to this volume explore a variety of ethnographic subjects to problematize the "naturalness" of the body and show how bodies are situated in a cultural and social milieu that both seeks to control the body while providing particular opportunities for embodied resistance. The contributors examine how patriarchy produces rules to control the bodies of women and queer people, as well as prescribing what masculine bodies should be and do. They show how embodied knowledge gives us a holistic understanding of phenomena, not only in our daily lives but also in our research practices. The book consists of four parts, each comprised of three or four research essays, followed by a series of personal stories.

Part I, *Going Natural*, explores what embodied resistance and resistance to this resistance tells us about the normalized expectations in society. It shows the power available when bodily taboos have prevented people from having healthy relationships with their bodies. Fahs advocates taking body hair seriously as a scholarly feminist subject, using her own pedagogical experiments to discuss how body hair makes us crazy, while showing how body hair taboos can reveal the social meaning of bodies as well as the networks of social control over bodies. Basile undertakes embodied research with radical doulas, exploring how these doulas embody the ideal of intersectionality by bringing their work to those who have been excluded from popular depictions of birth and motherhood due to their intersections of class, gender identity,

race, and sexuality. Esacove explores the transgression of bodily taboos within the segment of the natural death movement known as home funeral advocacy. She shows that while some practices appear transgressive, it is important to understand how the strategies used to transgress these taboos reinforce the gendered stereotypes rooted in white supremacist patriarchy. The section concludes with a series of personal stories about learning to resist society's beauty standards by loving oneself.

Part 2, *Representing Resistance*, illustrates how society assigns meaning to biological bodies, continuing the narrative of embodied resistance by showing how these bodies need not passively accept these meanings but may in turn create cultural products that reinterpret the meaning inscribed on their bodies. Kafai explores how menstrual activist artists challenge the taboos around menstruation by making it visible. They reinterpret something patriarchy has constructed as disgusting and “out-of-control” as something beautiful—as art—challenging the notion that women's bodies need to be controlled. Phelps examines the 2011 YouTube trend “Am I Pretty or Ugly” to understand how adolescent girls use satire and comedy, as well as sociality, to resist dominant discourses about American girls and force their audience to become aware of the status quo. Grave and Schrock explore how Mormon feminists critique the rules of embodiment present in the Mormon Church through online forums, demonstrating the power associated with the reclamation of one's own body. The section concludes with several narratives about using personal expression and art to share embodied knowledge and resist the dominant discourses about one's body.

Part 3, *Creating Community, Disrupting Assumptions*, drives home the collection's central theme of embodied resistance, looking at how people flaunt the limits of bodily expression to reclaim their bodies in the face of oppressive stereotyping. Sears and Craig explore transgressive Black femininity as Black girls use the liminal space of the bus to redefine the negative stereotypes associated with Black women as positive traits and assert themselves as kids. Whitesel uses a performativity lens to examine how big gay men subvert the stigma that arises at the intersection of these men's queerness and their pathologized physical appearance understanding how these stigmas are deeply intersectional, size being a different issue for them within the gay community than it is when they pass as straight men. Katz explores how mothers on welfare who have survived domestic abuse use their bodies to resist welfare policies that stereotype, stigmatize, and revictimize them. The section consolidates its themes by concluding with personal stories about how people have expressed themselves both in spite of and because of the risks associated with this expression.

Part 4, Transforming Institutions and Ideologies, emphasizes the themes present throughout the rest of the collection, tying the work together. It reveals how the patriarchy uses assumptions about what is “natural” to justify discrimination while exploring how the lived realities of people prove the complex nature of human beings can never be effectively fit within simplistic binaries. Sumerau uses their daily experiences as a trans nonbinary and pansexual person to illustrate the cis- and mono-normative assumptions of our society and their [dangerous] consequences. Additionally, they show how people try to fit them into cis and mono-normative frameworks despite their clear, embodied defiance of these norms. Ehrlich explores how laws against women baring their breasts in public limits women’s bodily autonomy by perpetuating the sexual double standard between men and women. Haltom looks at how patriarchy not only controls women’s bodies but also places limits on masculinity as men and boys in twirling resist the feminized coding of the sport to negotiate a masculine space for themselves. Riley questions the binary of hetero-conformance versus non-conformance in Black lesbian relationships in South Africa. Through her exploration she shows that assuming a binary of conformance versus transgression is simplistic and ignores the agency, creativity, and understandings of the women in these relationships. Concluding Part 4 is a series of personal stories about how the body is present in the world, particularly when it defies normative expectations.

*Body Battlegrounds* is an excellent read for anthropologists interested in embodiment as well as for those interested in exploring how transgressions reveal normative assumptions about a society. While the contributors to this collection note the importance of an intersectional lens and the importance of expanding embodied research beyond the bodies explored here, the collection primarily tells the story of patriarchal control over women’s bodies. While queer bodies and heterosexual male bodies in feminine/queer-coded spaces are explored, black masculinity is notably missing from the collection, only being touched on briefly in one personal narrative. Additionally, while many of these stories look at how people transgress bodily taboos by rejecting the automatic sexualization of the body, this angle could be enriched by including an exploration of life in a sexualized world as a person on the asexual spectrum. Nonetheless, this is an important and pertinent topic as “Western” scholars seek to overcome Descartes’ legacy of a mind-body divide to recognize the importance of embodied knowledge and the phenomenological reality of bodies existing in the world.