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Review

Shameful Bodies: Religion and the Culture of Physical Improvement By M. M. Lelwica (2017) New York: Bloomsbury, xiii+271pp.

Reviewed by Jung Eun Sophia Park

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The current prevalent culture reinforces a certain normalcy of the human body and, as such, labels any 'non-conforming' human bodies as shameful. Michelle Mary Lelwica examines the hidden role of religion, more specifically Christianity, in the creation of a culture which underscores a healthy young body, and suggests alternative ways of considering the human body which can honour diversity, fragility and fluidity. As a feminist scholar of religious studies, Lelwica criticises the contemporary culture which can be defined as one of physical improvement, emphasising women's painful experiences with and struggles over their bodies.

In deconstructing a better body story, Lelwica pays attention to Christianity's contribution to this culture and constructs an alternative approach by engaging with Buddhist teaching, feminism and critical thinking. Furthermore, this book invites the reader to consider the corporality of impermanant body, and this theme unfolds throughout the chapters.

Lelwica evocatively utilises her own personal stories in terms of body experiences, including her own eating disorder as a teenager and a bout of osteoarthritis which involved a hip replacement surgery in middle age, along with the stories of her family, which is white, middle-class, athletic and Catholic. In this enterprise, Lelwica's personal experiences serve as a lens to reflect a culture that idealises young, slim, healthy and non-disabled bodies, and she scrutinises the fantasy of the perfect body saturated in

## Affiliation

Holy Names University, CA, USA. email: park@hnu.edu





society. In effect, she employs various narratives from academic discourse to people's ordinary stories through her wide research on the various topics of shameful bodies. Her research claims that the culture of physical improvement is operated and accelerated by capitalism.

The author's examination and critique of the body-improvement culture in *Shameful Bodies* is composed of two parts. Part I deals with theoretical foundations, focusing on the notion of the ideal body which emerged from and is sustained by capitalism, emphasising ways of deconstructing the dominant culture, and suggesting alternative approaches to the human body which are liberating and life-giving. One of the most critical analyses provided in this book concerns how the Christian narrative influences or complies with Western society – driven by effectiveness, productivity and individualism – as the background for the current culture, which promotes the concept of the improvement of the body.

Lelwica argues that 'some of Christianity's stories are part of our cultural DNA; they encode the structure and provide instructions for many of the 'nonreligious' discourses that shape our collective imagination' (p. 22). Particularly, she indicates that three facets of Christian narratives are relevant for examining the culture of physical improvement: the body's role in seeking salvation; women's association with physicality; and the homogenised perfection of bodies in the heavenly afterlife (p. 23). For example, the vision of the resurrected body as flawless, supposedly perfect and young, has been so pervasive that the message that everyone should maintain a perfect body has been powerfully internalised. The ideal body of resurrection is considered 'cleansed' of imperfection through an erasure of all deformity and diseases, and has thus brought a great level of discrimination against bodies which do not conform to the demands of the unified body norms. The culture of physical improvement manifests religiouslike characteristics and ample examples from popular culture prove this perspective.

It would be helpful to keep in the mind that Lelwica develops her inquiry in non-linear and rather relational and engaging ways. Thus, the themes elaborated in the first part reappear in Part II, and each chapter interacts with others by confirming, delving and expanding into interrelated themes. For example, when the author, as an alternative perspective, describes Buddhist teaching, which emphasises a more inclusive and intersubjective body, the analysis seems to circle around themes such as impermanence or related themes, as a web. Further, the framework of alternative ways of understanding the body in Part I unfolds in the subsequent chapters of Part II, which deal with specific areas of the shameful body. As an illustration, the notion that salvation in Christianity is linked with the perfect body is



deeply examined in Chapter 5, 'Disability Shame', as well as in Chapter 8, 'The Shame of Getting Old'.

Regarding the alternative vision, one question arises: is it appropriate or fair to compare and/or contrast Christian narratives and Buddhist teachings? In Lelwica's alternative and deconstructed vision of the human body, she refers to the teachings of Buddhist masters in the United States, without considering other possible Christian narratives, such as those found in Christian mysticism or in non-European Christianities. The author analyses Christian narratives that have been embodied and actualised in society, while her references to Buddhist teaching or spirituality come only from limited meditative or ideal contours taught in the United States. In Buddhism-influenced Asia, the notion of the disabled body is not so different from that of Christianity-influenced Western society. Many Buddhist communities still reject members who are disabled and practise discrimination against women monks. However, it would be unfair to criticise this book as referring to and deploying other spiritual teachings as a way to deliver her perspective, because this book is not just for academia; it is for a more general audience with an interest in body discourse.

Part II examines four aspects of the shameful body, that is, the body which is disabled, fat, chronically sick and aging, as a specific investigation. Lelwica argues that the prevailing definitions of somatic 'improvements' are constructed through disparaging views of disability (p. 60). Disability is considered equivalent to sin, whereas healing/correction of defects is related to salvation. As a consequence, the disabled body represents shame. Lelwica analyses people's reactions against the shameful body as a projection of the fear of impermanence, diversity and vulnerability. As a deconstructing strategy, the author suggests an atypical vantage point, one which refuses to be conformed in expressing an opposition to 'compulsory able-bodiedness' and which opens up to diverse meanings of healing (p. 92).

As one obvious phenomenon of culture, the fat body carries a great deal of shame. Lelwica examines the historical traces of shame in relation to the fat body, wherein the fat body has been incredibly oppressive for people in general and for women in particular. The author employs the insight of Health at Every Size (HAES), a grassroots movement, as an ethical and practical path that claims that one's wellbeing is not contingent on size. This alternative approach challenges society by honouring our bodies' particularities, listening attentively to the wisdom of our flesh, and committing to create a world in which every body is respected (p. 125).

Also, the chronically ill body and the aging body bring shame in our society, so that many people tend to hide their pain. This is especially prev-



alent in women, many of whom suffer from chronic pain but fear being considered psychologically weak. Aging and becoming sick are essential aspects of a human being's natural process of life. Lelwica's new way of thinking about chronic pain and old age embraces vulnerability as a form of maturity in one's spiritual journey. In addition to deconstructing the ideology of the ideal young body, the author suggests that anyone who experiences aging (which is everyone!) needs the spiritual practice and knowledge of differentiating the inevitable suffering of aging from a suffering which can be reduced, avoided and transformed (p. 213). More importantly, a sick and aging body undergoing the inevitability of suffering could help the person extend and deepen the understanding of self in relation to and in union with others, as well as with the struggling Earth.

It is challenging to categorise this book, but it is clearly an interdisciplinary study, as Lelwica pulls from various research on body discourse from religious studies, sociology, psychology and disability studies. This book challenges readers by breaking boundaries, including lines demarcating 'academic' and 'personal', 'concepts' and 'experience', and the 'individual body' and the 'social body' (p. xi) within a well-knitted structure. Obviously, this book suggests a direction to move beyond the contemporary notion, which is stuck in dominant cultural standards of physical 'normalcy', 'health' and 'beauty' (p. xi), and invites an alternative view of the body which includes any state of the human body situated as a non-conforming ideal body. In this way, Lelwica implicitly suggests a spirituality that provides a new perspective, overcomes forcing social norms, and moves into a transformative approach towards a human and embodied way of life, by embracing human nature. However, it is neither desirable nor possible to find definite answers for body matters in this book. Lelwica rather 'explores some possibilities for such rethinking by outlining an alternative perspective on physical improvement that honors the truths of embodied life' (p. 44) and invites readers to find their own alternative ways.

Shameful Bodies is attractive in several ways. First, Lelwica situates Christianity within its cultural background. While still influential, Christianity is not deployed as the dominant cultural norm. In her analysis of secular contemporary society, 'the multiple and implicit ways some traditional Christian narratives are embedded in the culture of physical improvement become more apparent when we examine this culture's religious-like features: the beliefs, images, rituals, and moral codes that encourage us (especially women) to make our bodies "the pivot of salvation," and to define salvation in reference to another-worldly fantasy of bodily perfection' (p. 29). Also in her analysis, the myth of the better body is operated through



capitalism, which is the dominant driving force in delivering the message that the body should be young, non-disabled and slim.

Second, this book invites readers to not only analyse the body-improvement culture, but also to question systematically the meaning of life by reading various narratives and body discourses. Additionally, many photographs, which are in the book as well as referenced on the website, offer readers an active engagement with the book. In a very inclusive way, and without forcing the reader, this book suggests several spiritual practices, such as:

- sharing your critical awareness with others and pursuing conversations that take body shame out of the closet, so it has a chance to be transformed:
- wrestling and reconciling with the difficulties of life its fragility, transience and finitude - while supporting and emphasising the somatic frailties and struggles of others;
- practising an attitude of fascination, wonder and humility in the face of the mystery incarnated in human flesh and in all forms of life (p. 216).

Third, this book utilises a feminist approach, by which I mean that it emphasises women's experience. It uses storytelling and listening as a crucial epistemological tool, stressing a critical thinking which resists any ideology or practice that might oppress people. In so doing, it advocates social justice for individual life, society and the world. Also, it should be mentioned that Lelwica develops her critique in a highly subtle manner, while still emphasising the dangers of a culture of physical improvement.

This book invites us to reconsider our limited view of the body, which can easily oppress anyone who does not conform to social norms or who admits that human nature is vulnerable, weak and ephemeral. Alternative ways of thinking can invite us to understand various bodies and to expand the capacity of being in solidarity with other human beings. This book should be first on the list for more evocative and necessary work to be done on the human body.

