Becoming Women: The Embodied Self in Image Culture **by Carla Rice. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014, 408 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4426-1005-7 (pbk).**

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Becoming Women is a collective ethnography of Canadian women born between the late 1970s and the early 1990s – those who grew up in the undefined space between second wave and third wave feminism. Girls who came of age in a media-dominated culture, heavy with idealized and idolized (mis)representations of women and beauty. In a culture that uses physical beauty as a measure of moral character and worth, it is no surprise that girls internalize these pressures and learn to self-regulate. The body "becomes the playground or battleground for this to get worked out" (p. 12).

Between 1997 and 2001, Rice carried out telephone interviews, face-to-face interviews, and survey questionnaires that encouraged women to explore the images and messages they received about their bodies growing up. Rice refers to these women as "storytellers". This powerful language gives them agency, control, and space for their voices to be heard. Although many of their experiences were difficult and negative, Rice still manages to illustrate the subtle ways in which the storytellers resisted dominant narratives by (re)claiming power over their bodies and identities.

Rice is aware of the literature that already exists on the subjects of beauty and media culture and frames her own intentions by unearthing the limitations of this previous research. Literature on the subject tends to essentialize and privilege the experiences of white, middle class, thin, able-bodied women, thereby erasing others. Her focus is

therefore on the women missing from these stories – those with diverse socioeconomic, cultural, and bodily experiences. With a commitment to intersectionality, she hopes "to grasp – without collapsing – women's experiences of differences" (p. 5). Rice is aware of her power as the researcher and remains very self-reflexive in her writing process. She is transparent about how the storytellers' words have been edited. Her intentions in this decision were to obtain clarity and conciseness while still attempting to capture their authentic voices.

Becoming Women uses Body Becoming theory to tell stories. A lot of critical disability theory takes a poststructuralist approach, which encourages one to reimagine and redefine the meanings around disability; or the social model, which diverts focus away from the individual impairment to the ableism in society. These are powerful approaches that have influenced the ways we think about disability, but as Rice points out, they have also been criticized because of the way they erase somatic experiences in favour of the symbolic and systemic. Rice's Body Becoming approach places the physical body back into the equation, while still maintaining the strengths of these other theories. It views bodies and identities – our very selves – as constantly in flux. The book is an exploration of how these storytellers "find, lose, and re-create themselves in interactions with their surroundings in a process that is never fully coherent or complete" (p. 17). The first chapter focuses on the social construction of difference. Rice uses French feminist philosopher Julia Kristeva's theory of the "abject" in order to frame her work. The abject stirs up both "fear and fascination" by reminding us of our bodies' "unknowability and uncontainability" (p. 31) She quotes Kristeva, who asserts that "it is

thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection, but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (p. 32).

Rice also frames the abject as an "embodied way of understanding identity formation" (p. 32). We establish identity by "othering" that which does not fit. Interpreted in these nuanced ways, Kristeva's work can be viewed as a very important contribution to embodiment theory (at least in the North American context).

The second chapter examines the storytellers' childhood process of "becoming gendered" (p. 61) and how they negotiated the complexities and conflicts of this process – through play and dress, as well as through their relationship with their mothers. Rice explores how their experiences with their bodies shifted from being "sensed" (through the tactile exploration of the world around them) to being "seen" (their bodily value being created by and through images).

Even though critical disability discourse is weaved throughout the book, the bulk of the discussion lands in chapter 3, titled *Invisible in Full View*. The title is a comment on the dichotomous nature of popular media's depictions of disability. Throughout the chapter, Rice employs the works of disability artists and scholars like Rosemary Garland-Thomson, Eliza Chandler, and Eli Clare to help deconstruct these meta-narratives. Women with disabilities (or, disabled women, for those who do not identify with person-first language) are portrayed as both hypervisible (to be stared at) and invisible. This

dichotomy also has historical roots, where disabled people were used as spectacles in freak-shows, or hidden away in institutions. Those with disabilities are also represented through contemporary media as tragic figures or inspirations who overcome their limitations (dubbed as “inspiration porn”). Both these tropes serve to frame disability as deviance and erase the multitude of actual lived experiences.

Chapter four shifts its focus to experiences growing up at school, an institution shaped by “biopedagogies” (a set of values taught through “information, instructions, and directives about how to live, what a body should be, what a good citizen is, and what to do in order to be healthy and happy” (p. 121)). These standards are typically modelled after white, able-bodied, male norms, so they continue to reinforce racist, ableist, and sexist systems. Rice examines the ways in which bodies are controlled (and self-controlled) through fitness programs and health campaigns that promote fear and create shame around physical difference.

The next two chapters focus on experiences of puberty. Rice asserts that the transition to womanhood is not a strictly individual, biological process, but rather one that is produced through culture. Young girls have to grapple with images that depict their changing bodies as both sexualized and shameful objects. They are taught that these changes must be controlled, contained, and cleaned. Their breasts, body hair, and menstruation (their “leaky bodies”) are labeled as abject. Rice does a great job of deconstructing scientific research about puberty by making underlying moral and cultural assumptions visible. She also comments on the lack of studies conducted that

actually include girls' lived experiences. *Becoming Woman* is therefore unique and has the potential to (hopefully) transform some of the ways in which puberty is typically framed.

The concluding chapter revolves around ways that we can move forward. Rice discusses real projects (including the Dove campaign) and poses real questions that we need to explore in order to shift the way we construct the "body beautiful" and engage with differences. We need to not only challenge shame-inducing policies and promote "body equity" strategies in our institutions (p. 276), but we also need to deconstruct the very foundation of inequality: the binary thinking about bodies as "normal/abnormal". Rice asks, "rather than advising people to adopt imposed norms, how do we create the conditions that will enable them to imagine other possibilities for their bodies? How might we make space for more ethical responses to physical differences?" (p. 277). Social media and image culture are ripe places to carry out this work. Rice provides many resources of various art and media projects that "talk back" to our culture's pressure to conform to normative beauty standards. With regards to disability and difference specifically, she includes discussion about Sins Invalid performance collective, jes sasche's "American Able" photo shoot, and one of her own projects, "Project Re.Vision". Project Re.Vision is a collaborative story-telling initiative that hosts film making workshops for participants who embody difference. Participants produce short films that challenge society's representations of disability in creative and meaningful ways (p. 283).

Becoming Women's strength lies in the comprehensiveness and complexity of its scope. It is a fascinating synthesis of feminist theories and the conflicting and complementary ways in which they intersect. One of Rice's gifts is the ability to take complex theories – such as Kristeva's – and distill them down to their essences in order to make them both accessible and relatable. She also travels across disciplines, using a blend of history, biology, medicine, and psychology to enrich her narrative. It would be great to see the Body Becoming approach applied with an even deeper and targeted focus on disability. Hopefully this is the work that Rice continues to do or allows others to build on and carry into the future. These stories need to be told [1].

Note

[1] I chose to focus mainly on discussions of disability in this review, but it's important to note that there are a lot of important discussions about the ways that differences in race, size, and sexuality are experienced.