

## Book Reviews

*Transforming Bodies: Makeovers and Monstrosities in American Culture.*  
Steinhoff, Heike (2015). New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2015, 267 pp.  
ISBN: 978-1-137-49378-1, C\$95 (Hardcover).

In a neoliberal society that profits from the promotion of self-improvement via “somatic transformation”, the lines between beauty and monstrosity have become increasingly blurred. Heike Steinhoff’s book, *Transforming Bodies: Makeovers and Monstrosities in American Culture*, examines the confounding curves of this cultural mobius strip through the dissection of meaning and representation in a variety of popular media texts, including TV series *The Swan* and *Nip/Tuck*, as well as Chuck Palahniuk’s novel *Invisible Monsters* (and *Invisible Monsters Remix*) and the teen novel series *Uglies*. By reading the characters’ experiences through the lens of the makeover narrative, Steinhoff draws comparisons not only within and between the texts, but also within the broader academic and popular discussion around physical change as a means of cultural assimilation and/or rebellion. Ultimately, as Steinhoff states, “*Transforming Bodies* [shows] that the discourse of somatic transformation is itself in a continuous process of transition as (textual) bodies are (trans)formed in an ongoing process of cultural affirmation and contestation” (p.13).

Steinhoff, an Assistant Professor of American Studies at Ruhr-University Bochum, has dedicated her career to studying American media. Her second published book (the first being *Queer Buccaneers: (De)Constructing Boundaries in the PIRATES OF THE CARIBBEAN Film Series*, Munster, LIT, 2011), *Transforming Bodies* is soundly structured and teeming with thought-provoking critiques that trouble our common notions of beauty, identity, and the body. Originating as a doctoral thesis, *Transforming Bodies* reads like one at times, taking the reader through a thick theoretical slog, and thus significantly restricting its potential readership. While the first chapter in the book deftly lays out Steinhoff’s course of action and intentions in a concrete and easy to follow manner, the second chapter is nothing short of a crash course into feminist and post-structural biopolitics. Far from accessible, this entrypoint into the rest of the book may seem insurmountable for readers who do not have a solid background in Foucauldian and Butlerian theory. Steinhoff uses the works of these theorists, as well as other prominent academics such as Elizabeth Grosz, to outline relationships between society, the individual (and collective) body, normative physical representation, and social and individual power. This sets the stage for interpretation of these popular texts through a critical discourse framework. From my situatedness as both a proponent of Fat Acceptance and a student of Disability Studies, I find Steinhoff’s inclusion of a multitude of lenses—including critical disability and fat studies—a clear sign of her commitment to thoroughly investigating somatechnics, a term created to “highlight [the] inextricability of soma and techné, of ‘the body’ (as a culturally intelligible construct) and the techniques (*dispositifs* and ‘hard technologies’) in and through which corporealities are formed and transformed.” (Sullivan and Murray, 3, as cited in Steinhoff, 36).

Although the initial, theory-driven chapters may be a stumbling block for individuals who are not well versed in feminist and post-structural thought, Steinhoff’s analysis of each individual text is much more palatable for the average reader. Beginning with the quintessential extreme makeover show *The Swan*, Steinhoff argues that it: “represents a powerful narrative of

‘(hyper)normalization,’ in which—in this case female—bodies are transformed in accordance with the dominant cultural norms of beauty, class, race, and gender in a process that is paradoxically framed by a neoliberal and post-feminist rhetoric of (female) empowerment, hard-work, self-improvement, and self-care. However, in a reversal of the (dominant) reading of the makeover process of ‘beautification,’ ... the show’s representation of extreme makeovers can also be read as a televisual spectacle of ‘monstrification.’” (p 43)

Beginning with this analysis of monstrification through (hyper)normalization, Steinhoff extends her exploration by then moving on to Palahniuk’s *Invisible Monsters* (and *Invisible Monsters Remix*)—an erratically structured novel driven by an ever changing (or, depending on the reader’s interpretation, evolving) protagonist who engages in self-harm as a method to escape beauty. Ironically, the protagonist inadvertently achieves beautification through monstrification—displaying the cyclical boundaries between these categories. Indeed, even earlier in her analysis Steinhoff draws the reader’s attention to the fact that “the often constructed categories of ‘beautification’ or ‘normalization’ and ‘monstrification’ and ‘resistance’ overlap; they co-exist and take shape differently depending on the cultural and discursive context of their specific (textual) construction and also depending on the process of reception.” (p9)

Ending with an analysis of Scott Westerfeld’s *Uglies*—a series of dystopian novels that examine a future in which all teens must undergo cosmetic surgery—Steinhoff offers a message of hope for the next generation of young readers. Far from the typical oppressive beauty myth with which American youth are indoctrinated, Steinhoff argues that *Uglies* “emphasizes that what might be presented as a technology of the self is actually a technology of domination,” (p. 195) potentially problematizing valuation of beautification among its young readers. While *Uglies* engages with the potential for self-harm as a practice of resistance (a technique also seen in *Invisible Monsters* as well as *Nip/Tuck*), Steinhoff draws the reader to consider the fine line between mutilation and therapeutic or beautifying practices, which become ever finer as the reader progresses through the text.

Ultimately, *Transforming Bodies* is a story of change—an exploration of our linkages between somatic and psychic transformations, and the desirability and potential for social change via subversive texts (which, Steinhoff deftly points out, often simply “reproduce and potentially foster” (p.240) the very notions that they seek to trouble). Steinhoff refrains from making any concluding statements regarding these issues, and in fact quite skillfully maintains the fluidity of all of the examined texts, allowing them to float between subversion and reification of common beliefs surrounding somatic transformation. Avoiding essentialism, she maintains her post-structural stance, acknowledging that even *Transforming Bodies* “is a text that is itself potentially unfixed” (p. 246), leaving the reader to engage with the text in a personal manner. As we see in Steinhoff’s work, meaning, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder.

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*Ecosystems, Society and Health: Pathways through Diversity, Convergence and Integration*, Edited by Lars K. Hallström, Nicholas P. Guehlstorf, and Margot W. Parkes. Montréal, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015, 352 pp. ISBN 9780773544796, C\$34.95 (Paperback).

*Ecosystems, Society and Health: Pathways through Diversity, Convergence and Integration* demonstrates the intersection of issues related to human health, the environment, and society. The common thread throughout the collection is the need for an interdisciplinary perspective in research and practice. To this point, the contributors represent public policy, biology, political science, English literature, religious studies, community health and epidemiology, nursing, planning, sociology, and First Nations studies. The collection's editors, Hallström, Guehlstorf, and Parkes argue that traditional approaches to science and public policy are not adequately able to address issues of sustainability, justice, and well-being and propose that the answer lies in an approach grounded in interdisciplinary experience and expertise. By framing the volume in this way, they offer an effective argument that policy agendas should be treated as inter-related with direct impacts on environment and health outcomes, rather than the distinct silos in which they often operate.

The book is divided into three sections:

I. "Socio-Ecological Approaches to Health, Environment and Community" focuses on the role of local context and varying forms of knowledge in epistemological, theoretical, and methodological approaches. The chapters in this section argue for health research and practice to be grounded in social and ecological perspectives, as well as for the role of citizen engagement. Importantly, the authors also highlight the limitations of models which do not adequately account for historical influences on health, health disparities and inequities, and macro-level determinants of health such as legislation and policy. This section draws links between cultural and ecological health by re-imagining safe places in healthcare and nature-based health promotion, and it suggests that engagement with nature can contribute to overall health and well-being.

II. "Deliberation, Policy, and Collaboration as Pathways to Integration" considers the ways in which the environment interacts with social concerns and health issues while recognizing a disconnect between people, place, and environment in public policy and participatory politics. Case studies including New Zealand and the Midwestern United States examine issues of public awareness, citizen engagement, and collaboration. They demonstrate that the challenges of environment and health regulation are further complicated by administrative discretion and anti-democratic tendencies.

III. The final section of the book, "Linking Ecosystems, Society and Health through Learning and Local Knowledge" explores practical concepts related to the intersection of sociocultural and environmental issues and their relationship with health. The three distinct chapters in this section explore high-level conceptual understandings along with practical issues related to research and practice in cases of community development and fish poisoning in Cuban fishing villages; the intersections between religion, environment and health; and healthy communities, integrative science, and two-eyed seeing.

While this work offers an expanded interpretation of approaches to environment and health, there was a missed opportunity to include content on the health outcomes related to exposure to toxic

substances and in particular, the low-dose cumulative exposures which are influenced by sex and gender and the important role of primary prevention. However, this collection does offer an important contribution to the field by offering national and international perspectives and lessons of collaboration for a common purpose. It will be especially relevant for students who are broadening their understandings of the intersections between ecosystems, health, and society.

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