

Reviews

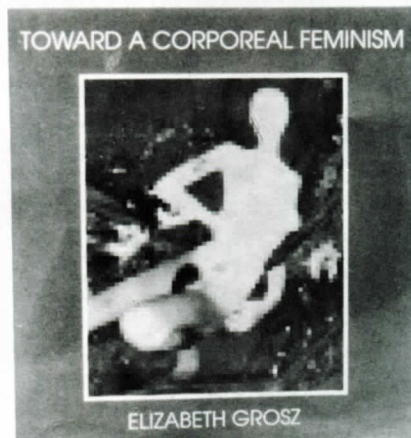
sexed BODIES, Lived BODIES

MYRNA J. ALEJO REVIEWS ELIZABETH GROSZ' *VOLATILE BODIES. TOWARD A CORPOREAL FEMINISM.*

Volatile Bodies is a cogently written and thought-provoking book on corporeal feminism. Each chapter unfolds with critical analysis of the selected theoretical works of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, pointing out the phallogocentric propensities of some of these Western theories and acknowledging the applicability of some of their propositions on reconstructing the feminist discourse on the body. With the inextricably related concepts of body, power/knowledge, desire, and signification as compository themes, Elizabeth Grosz reinvents the notion of body, i.e. the body as an "embodied subjectivity" and "psychical corporeality".

Grosz rejects the dualist notions of mind/body and of male/female where each is treated as mutually-exclusive, usually privileging the mind and the male (the symbol of rationality, thought, idea) over, respectively, the body and the female in binary relations. She also problematizes how this dualist treatment finds resonance in some of the predominant views within the feminist movement. Because of constant evasion of the question of female corpo-

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reality, some feminists tend to seek collective identity of women in "non- or extra-corporeal terms". Feminism, especially the egalitarian or socialist breed, positions women's emancipation within the social realm and renders the female body, with its dichotomization of woman as a "mother" and as a "political/civic being", as an impediment to egalitarian ends. The misogynists also tend to look at the sexual differences between the male and the female in binary

terms, specifically with their reference to the peculiar sexuality (e.g. the capacity for reproduction) of the female as "natural inequality," thus warranting the social and mental differences between the male and female.

I am particularly drawn to the author's constructive attitude towards disconcerting positions on what was commonly known or accepted. However she critically noted how Deleuze and Guattari's assertion of the possibility of "man in the woman and woman in the man", as an outcome of the process of "becoming" (i.e. the overlapping nature or "double reciprocal dependency" between binary opposites), can implicitly undermine the fundamental differences between male and female bodies. Grosz, nonetheless, recognizes the transformative potential of their argument in relation to breaking some theoretical fixation/paralysis and recreating multiple ground for analysis.

Elizabeth Grosz views the body as a social construct, a site of various cultural representations. She argues that the pleasure and pain the body feel, and the fluids it secretes are mediated by society's ensemble of norms and institutions of organizing bodily expe-

GROSZ ARGUES THAT THE PLEASURE AND PAIN THE BODY FEEL, AND THE FLUIDS IT SECRETES ARE

riences. Using the stigmata phenomenon and multiple personality syndrome as examples, Grosz argues how the body's physiological capacities/functions or biological orders can be altered or modified by specific religious practices or mental disorders.

The author gives importance to the notion of *lived body*. How a body is being lived, experienced and represented is a function of the specificity of its socio-historical and cultural milieu. With this presupposition, the book opposes or denies any claim to a universal conception of the body. The author qualified categorically that the specific lived realities of the body she mentioned, e.g. AIDs discourse, were derived mainly from the Western context. Because of the differences in the constitution of subjectivities and experiences, lived bodies differ from one culture or society to another. Grosz proposes, instead, a new, non-definitive and non-totalizing way of understanding our body, i.e. one that recognizes its alterity and, therefore, the heterogeneity of "body types."

Bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given things, immediate self-evidences because embodiment, corporeality, insists on alterity they carry within themselves (the heart of the psyche lies in the body; the body's principle and functioning are psychological and cultural) and the alterity that gives them their own concreteness and specificity (the alterities constituting race, sex, sexualities, ethnic and cultural specificities). Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment: it conditions but is also a product of the pliability and plasticity of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their 'nature', their functions and identities. [p209]

As a "cultural product", the body is always open to constant transformation or process of 'becoming'. It surfs or navigates

through the self/other, the private/public and the natural/cultural.

The principle of alterity puts into question the dominant construction of sexuality and how society normalizes certain sexual practices and behaviour. If my reading of Grosz is fairly accurate, the search for sexual identity should not just be confined to demarcating the boundaries of each sex (say, differences in sexual characteristics) in apparently fixed manner. Sexual identity should be based on a twin recognition of "irreducible" specificities of sexed bodies and the transcendence of the boundary(ies) between sexed bodies—the "*possibility of the other*." This could mean, for example, reorienting eroticism from a single (phallic) source to other (non-phallic) sources or the blurring of the distinctions between hetero/homosexuality.

Grosz's call for specificity and nontotalizing view of the body presupposes a need to reimagine the entire feminist discourse. At the risk of travailing "dangerous" path and misreading Grosz, I think reimagining involves a careful appropriation of Western concepts, a re-examination of a language which tends to 'universalize' the definition of problems such as women's oppression, and the possibility of multiple feminist discourses.

Any feminist discourse should, indeed, be informed by the particularities of the meaning system used by society, while keeping in mind how larger and more pervasive power relations can magnify common sites of oppression. In this light, several questions can be asked: How do we interpret 'oppression' and define feminism, for instance, in Islamic culture or in any indigenous community? How do we read the pleasures one gets

from sado-masochism and other so-called 'sexual perversities'? Where do we locate the new types of eroticism? How do we decode certain 'truths' about sexuality that has been produced by medical science, history and disciplines?

Grosz is both provocative and proficient in arguing the lived or sexed body as a "cultural inscription." It is the body being inscribed upon. I still, however, reckon this as privileging the mind over the body or the public over the private. What if we reverse the situation: the possibility of sexed body (e.g. sexuality and sexual practices which are usually designated as "private") inscribing upon the public, the sphere of competing interpretations? The gradual acceptance of what were previously designated as 'deviant' discourses (e.g. gay) offers a promising note. Can exhibitionism and other forms of 'sexual perversions,' which have always been treated by medical science as purely psychological dysfunctions, do the same? Perhaps we can begin from the challenges posed by Grosz:

But in their [Deleuze and Guattari] defense, it is also crucial to recognize the micro-segmentarities we seize from or connect with in others which gives us traits of "masculinity" and "femininity" whether we "are" men or women. In my opinion, this is politically dangerous ground to walk on, but if we do not walk in dangerous places and different types of terrain, nothing new will be found, no explorations are possible, and things remain the same. The risks seem to me worth taking: risking rethinking global oppositions and macroscopic hierarchies in order to have more optimistic prospects for effecting transformations and realignments of global relations, and moreover, seeing their capacity to infiltrate microscopic recesses which may appear immune to or outside of their influence. [p173]

MEDIATED BY SOCIETY'S ENSEMBLE OF NORMS AND INSTITUTIONS OF ORGANIZING BODILY EXPERIENCES.