

Book Review: The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, Images, Experience by Rebecca Coleman

by Blog Admin

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*The relationship between bodies and images has long occupied feminism, and this book offers an alternative framework for analysis. Thinking through her original empirical research with teenage girls, involving focus groups, individual interviews and image-making sessions, **Rebecca Coleman** moves from a consideration of media images – the focus of much feminist research – to examine images more widely; as mirrors, photographs, glimpses, comments, imagination. **Nicole Shephard** finds that the book is also of methodological interest in terms of bridging a perceived divide between theory and empirical work in cultural studies.*



The Becoming of Bodies: Girls, Images, Experience. Rebecca Coleman. Manchester University Press.

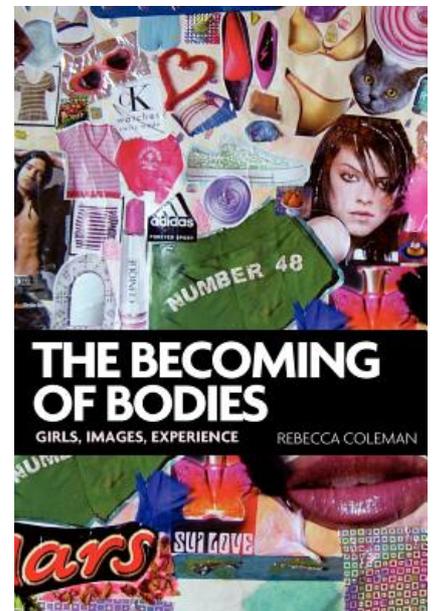
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After the turn of a new year, it is virtually impossible to fail to notice the fervour with which personalised online advertising and magazines encourage new year's resolutions including revolutionary diets, the latest fitness crazes and other methods on how to look young, slim and conventionally beautiful, in a cisgendered and heteronormative way, make the relevance of body images inescapable. What is the potential impact of these media images on the bodies and minds of women and girls?

In *The Becoming of Bodies*, [Rebecca Coleman](#), currently a lecturer at Lancaster University's sociology department, re-examines the ways in which this impact is conceptualized and investigated. She draws on her research with (white) British teenage girls to argue from a feminist Deleuzian perspective that bodies and images are entangled rather than separate entities and thus become through one another: "bodies and images are not inherently distinctive nor in need of distinction" (p. 49).

The starting point for Coleman's intervention is an examination of the ways in which feminist research and activism in particular have to date addressed the relations between female bodies and media images. She finds that the problem is predominantly framed in terms of media-effects with a focus on either promoting a less narrow range of ideals, or on fostering resilience against negative effects of media images on women's body image. Such research relies on an ontological separation of bodies and images in terms of a subject/object dichotomy where media images are thought to have a rather straightforward effect on young women's bodies – eating disorders, exercising, diets, to name just a few. Instead, in asking how bodies become through images, Coleman's book offers an alternative research framework. It sets out to "shift the focus of feminist empirical work (...) from questions of media cause and effect towards a consideration of how bodies are known, understood, experienced – how bodies become – through images" (p. 24).

The Becoming of Bodies, newly available in paperback, is structured into six substantive chapters. Chapter one discusses the theoretical (Deleuzian) underpinnings of the empirical study and the book as a whole, and chapter two discusses the methodology of the study. The subsequent chapters draw on the empirical material to explore the relations between young women's bodies and images in terms of what images can do (three), looking at bodies as assemblages (four), affect (five) and the temporalities of



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becoming (six). The Deleuzian notion of becoming is the thread that runs throughout the book. It holds theory, methodology and empirical explorations together to lead up to the broader argument for an ontology of becoming as a way of overcoming the subject/object divide that feminist research maps too unquestioningly onto body/image.

To prepare the reader for the extensive exploratory discussion of the empirical material, out of which the argument for her ontology of becoming arises, Coleman introduces an impressive range of theoretical concepts. She works through the Deleuzian notions of assemblage, the fold, relationality, the virtual and the actual, as well as affect and intensity, to show how they become productive tools in re-thinking the relationship between bodies and images. The theoretical shift, from questions around being to what bodies might do and become, asks the researcher to understand a body as the very relation between “what philosophy has conventionally called a human subject and images” (p. 50) instead of *being* the subject that has a relation *with* images.

The Becoming of Bodies thus convincingly argues for an alternative approach to bodies and images in feminist research – one that overcomes subject/object dichotomies in favour of entangled becomings. In this capacity *The Becoming of Bodies* will appeal to students and researchers in a range of disciplines including sociology, women’s and gender studies, media studies and cultural studies. Additionally, the book is of methodological interest in terms of bridging a perceived divide between theory and empirical work in cultural studies, as it discusses a creative exploratory methodology navigating Deleuzian feminist theory and an empirical project on teenage girls’ body images and imagined bodies.

Less convincing was the application of the framework to other dichotomies, for instance sex/gender or male/female. Coleman advocates a Deleuzian ontology of becoming precisely as a way to address feminist concerns with such binary oppositions. The argument’s broader ontological implications for feminist theory and research thus seem at times somewhat at odds with the ways in which the study refers to the girls/boys in terms of research participants/others and to masculine/feminine without extending the same scrutiny to the entangled becomings of sex and gender as to the becoming of bodies through images. While gender is understood “not to pre-exist bodies but to constitute them” through “affective relations” (p. 142), the un-separability and in-betweenness so forcefully put forward where the relation between bodies and images is concerned, fails to materialise from the discussion. As the book constitutes an intervention into feminist research practice, the disclaimer that the book “is not an empirical study of class or race, or indeed gender” (p. 74) does not quite make up for this blind spot.

I nevertheless recommend *The Becoming of Bodies*, not least because I would like to see Coleman’s innovative approach applied and adapted to the becoming of other human and non-human bodies, as well as to binarisms other than the one addressed.

[Nicole Shephard](#) is a PhD candidate at the LSE Gender Institute, where her research conceptually explores how people become transnational subjects. The analysis engages with the notion of transnational social space, intersectional theory and the queering of methodologies. Her broader academic interests include gender, migration, social movements, online activism and research methods. She holds an MSc in International Development from Bristol University and a BA in Social Work and Social Policy with a minor in Social Anthropology from University of Fribourg (Switzerland). Her pre-academic professional background is in IT and Human Resources, where she has worked in application management and process management. [Read more reviews by Nicole.](#)