

Women's Body Image

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*L'auteur parle du cours dans lequel elle fait voir aux femmes la façon dont elles voient leurs corps.
Entre autres choses, elle détruit le mythe qui dit
que la femme doit être physiquement parfaite
afin d'être acceptée par elle-même et par les hommes.*



Judy Crawley

Greta Nemiroff teaches a course about 'Women's Body Image'.

Over the past decade that I have been teaching Women's Studies courses and struggling to raise the consciousness of my students through this pursuit, there has been no single age group which has presented a greater challenge than adolescent women. It is my impression that other educators face this same problem. Indeed, in the autumn of 1980, I had the privilege of hearing a presentation given by Marie Patrick of *Pro Feminae* of Fredericton, in which she gave a most informative, if rueful, account of her travails with high school women in rural New Brunswick. In both of our experience, urban and rural, adolescence is the time when

women are most caught up by the power of the romantic myth and, consequently, least susceptible to the arguments of Feminism, no matter how well these views may be substantiated by facts, or even how unattractive their mothers' lives might appear to them.

In my experience, the most receptive age group for Women's Studies has been the 30 plus group. Women of this age have usually explored the limits of the romantic myth with its concomitant coupling, marriage and/or motherhood. They have tasted in its breadth what de Beauvoir describes as the situation of the non-essential woman blocked in the morass of the 'en

soi;' in a very visceral way, many of them comprehend Friedan's 'problem without a name'. Married or single, if they've worked outside of the home, they have some notion of the very limited place accorded to women in the patriarchal power structure. Whether they have experienced that 'great Fuck' which is supposed to alleviate all problems, or defined their sexuality as an act of unhappy submission, many are ready to entertain the possibility that there is more to life than the 'earth moving' in the male-prescribed manner.

The adolescent woman cannot draw on this background when she approaches the same material.

She might be able to conceptualize the undesirable qualities in her mother's life, but when asked to project into her own future, frequently she does not see a life substantially different for herself. She might pursue a career, but this will be in combination with the career of marriage and raising a family. The essential difference in her life will be that her 'love object' will 'help' with the childcare and housework. Housework and child care are still seen as the woman's domain but, with luck, 'he' will love her so much that 'he' will want to do part of the work. Implicit, however, is that 'he' will be 'helping' in the spirit of *noblesse oblige*. Frequently, a career is seen in the spirit of 'in case'; yet when presented with the statistics

album covers, bill boards and TV models who tell them what the current 'look' is. Whatever the look, one can be very sure that

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only a small percentage of women can possibly achieve it.

In a recent Body Image class, I asked the students to bring in photos of their ideal women. I did not stipulate that the ideal should be in appearance only; I was interested to see how they conceptualized the ideal. With two exceptions, myself and a gay woman, the students brought pictures from three fashion magazines, and they were of models who either were or looked like Farrah Fawcett or Cheryl Tiegs. No one thought to bring in Virginia Woolf, Golda Meir, or Margaret Atwood. The message was clear: not everyone can look like these models, perhaps, but everyone should at least try to. One's success in the love lottery is in direct relation to the discrepancy between oneself and the current ideal. This discrepancy creates a vacuum which can only be filled by buying the appropriate products and contorting oneself to fit the image. Since the average adolescent cannot become Cheryl Tiegs, she is continually filled with a kind of physical self-deprecation. Her only hope is that when 'he' comes along, 'he' will love her anyway for that part which remains outside the mold . . . the herself she has largely ignored. These preoccupations put her at direct odds with feminist concerns. Feminism is here perceived as a threat which will jeopardize her attractiveness to 'him' and curb her only allowable channel for competitiveness. While older women certainly suffer the same doubts about their physical appearance, it is my view that the vulnerability of the adolescent, who must at the same time sustain the shock of such rapid change in her body, makes this a crucial

time in her development and lays the foundation for her future impaired self-image.

Due to the inherent conflict between Feminism and adolescent culture, I often find a rather affectless if not defensive response to the material in Women's Studies. That there is also a sense of interest cannot be denied. Students in this age group frequently do good research on fairly 'objective' issues . . . such as women in the labour force, sex role stereotyping, history of the suffrage movement in Canada, etc. They might make very fine presentations of the material in class; they can even be supportive of one another's efforts. However, there is also a reserve, a desire to objectify the material and keep its affect at arm's length. Hence,

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of divorce and fathers reneging on child support, the adolescent often reacts with a distant and superior smile. In adherence to the romantic myth, love will direct her to the 'right' man; perhaps her mother made a mistake! These attitudes are in part created, in part reinforced, by the active marketplace directed to young women. Their consumer role is emphasized; they are persuaded to part with their hard-earned money (so many of them have part-time jobs or steady babysitting) by a specific kind of consumption. They want to be desirable and beautiful so that they will be 'chosen' by the right man. Teen boutiques carrying an infinite variety of beauty aids and clothing along with the latest albums become objects of their most immediate consumer goods. Competitive buying is encouraged and a close listening (if one can decipher the words) to the latest hits will reveal that the old stereotypes of the tantalizing seductress or yielding 'groupie' still exert power. Adolescent women are bombarded with advertisements,

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while they might process much cognitive material, they do not exhibit the kind of affective grip I have seen in older women. Wanting to spare my young students some of the mistakes of my generation and those before me, I have been vexed by the challenge of truly reaching them. To date, the most effectual introduction to Women's Studies for adolescents that I have found has been through a course I have developed which I call 'Woman's Body Image.'

I could not have stumbled onto this possibility anywhere other than at the New School of Dawson College where I teach. We are an alternate community college offering a pre-university diploma in Social Sciences, Literature or Creative Arts. It is our philosophy which distinguishes us, however, as we base our teaching on the premises of Humanistic Education. The central premise quite simply, is that people do their best learning in subjects which interest them on an affective as well as cognitive basis. That is, if students can see an

emotional pay-off in learning something, that it will correspond to some *felt* need, the quality of their learning is likely to be profound and of value to them. We start each term with no prescribed courses or time-table. Rather, the teachers each compose 'Academic Profiles' in which we outline our current preoccupations and skills. The students read these, interview us, and eventually out of those of their expressed needs which intersect with our skills, interests, and needs, learning groups or courses form. In the fall of 1979, I mentioned in my profile that I had lost a considerable amount of weight and now no longer had a true sense of my body size. Invariably I would approach the wrong rack in a clothing store and I had

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difficulty imagining a proper space for myself on the bus. This experience led me to realize how important body image was to women and how our images are rarely based on objective fact. Was anyone else interested in this subject, I inquired, because it might be a good way to approach Woman's Studies . . . from the inside out, as it were. Ten young women immediately presented themselves and together we decided to construct a course out of all our shared concerns. Our basic reason for formulating this course was how we felt about our bodies, but we also expressed a need to explore writings by others on the subject of our body image, women's physiology and the nature of perception.

The first class in Woman's Body Image was proto-typical, it turned out. We had a bit of everything: a conventionally lovely young woman who had worked at modeling; someone who had had anorexia nervosa over a two-year period and was still a bit shaky; a very obese and ill-groomed young woman who claimed not to care

about her appearance at all and only wanted to know about others; a young woman who had had an operation to reduce the size of her

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breasts from DD to B the year previously and more. We started our first class by each one of us giving a quick resumé of how she felt about her body. 'I hate my body,' was almost the universal theme but, as many of us were virtual strangers, there was very little detail offered. Even at that stage, however, the discrepancy between self-image and other people's perception became clear. 'I'm as flat as a board,' complained one young woman with a look of real self-loathing on her face. We all gaped at her; she showed a healthy swelling around her chest. I pointed to the door. 'Do you mean as flat as that door?', I asked incredulously. 'Yes,' she said in full conviction. No one could convince her otherwise.

A good place to start, I have found, is at the relatively low risk subject of clothes. We start with simple questions. What are they for? What do they tell us about others? others? Of what are they emblematic? Who designs women's clothes? What is the purpose of the ever-shifting self-image propagated by the market place? We do readings from a variety of sources: a cross-cultural approach is well served in Rudovsky's *The Unfashionable Human Body*, and a very good first-hand account of what it meant to grow up as a Victorian woman is offered in Gwen Raverat's chapter on clothes in *Period Piece*. As an exercise, I have often asked young women each to design the most flattering, comfortable and useful article of clothing she could for herself. It has been my experience that the majority of women still design clothes very much like Laura Ashley's beautiful white lacey

Victorian reconstructions, hardly appropriate to the daily lives of the average 18-year-old. In workshops I have since designed for older women, I ask them to think back on when they felt they were best and worst dressed in their lives. What were the factors that made them feel that way? To what extent did it reflect a feeling of their own rather than a projection of what others might feel?

Because course content always emerges from the situation at hand, we had the opportunity to experience a rather interesting Halloween. One year, when it became clear that our next class was to fall on that day, I brought up the subject of witches. Did those martyrs of the past think they were witches or were they

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only perceived as such for the convenience of others? Was it conceivable that poor, oppressed and lonely old women might not have wanted to let go with a curse or two, I asked. The students were intrigued. Why not, we agreed, all come dressed as the witch that lurks within each of us and armed with an appropriate incantation. I assigned some readings on witchcraft along with some excerpts from *Malleus Maleficarum*, that 15th century catechism of demonology by two demented Dominican inquisitors. A week later, we all assembled and, to our surprise, only half of us were in costume. It turned out that the other half had experienced immense difficulty facing the witches within themselves. They were 'blown out' by the anger this search uncovered within themselves. They described feeling 'ugly' when they found such anger; the beauty they craved was very clearly associated in their minds with passivity and 'sweet' mannerisms. After a class devoted to discussion of this, we agreed to try again the next week. So, that

year, it took us until a week after Halloween to face the witches within ourselves. An extraordinary thing happened during that extra week, though. Some of our very negative incantations of the week before were rethought and turned into powerful incantations geared towards a litany of freedom.

We were then ready to turn to the body as it is ... except how is it really? Can we hope to perceive our own bodies in an unmediated way? We read excerpts from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, in which he demonstrates the sexism which informs male artists' views of nude women. Women, of course, internalize these male visions as something called 'the truth'. Some of us were concerned with obesity: the anorexic as much as the obese ill-groomed young woman. We read and discussed *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and another fascinating book, *Such a Pretty Face*. At the students' request, a nutritionist — who is also a feminist — was invited to conduct a workshop. Here it was amply demonstrated that body image anxiety is often accompanied by very elaborate food phobias.

The culmination of this part of the course, and usually of workshops I give on this theme, is an extensive body image exercise. Here the participants are divided into pairs and each person is given a six-foot piece of brown wrapping paper as well as a small collection of markers. Taking turns, they lie down on the paper in whatever position they care to assume. The partner does a careful outline of the body and then they reverse roles. This part of the exercise invariably helps people build up a sense of trust. There is often something very moving in the care with which women trace one another ... sometimes complete strangers. Once the bodies have been traced, each person goes off for a while to 'dialogue' with her 'body image', filling in comments and drawings wherever she wants. She then might share those insights she wants to with her partner, or with the group at large, depending on size and trust-level. This is often a cathartic experience. The first class I taught had a strong group feeling, and so we lined up our 'body images' in a row and stood back to look at them. We were immediately struck by the fact that, with the

exception of two people, everyone had repudiated their breasts. Here are some of the words written across them: 'hate', 'ugh', or 'yech'. Breasts were either too small or too large. Most of them had a sad propensity to 'hang'. It emerged that the only truly acceptable breast was that of a nubile girl. I asked them how it was that no one complained that men's testicles 'hung'. The implication of their ideal was that each woman could only expect about six months of 'breast perfection' in a lifetime. Someone in the group alerted me to the increasing number of advertisements of exclusive products which showed middle-aged men sporting around with young adolescents. (See the recent Campari ads, for instance.) Significantly, in this discussion about breasts, not one woman addressed the issue of lactation; they were erotic beauty objects quite divorced from biological purpose. An excellent book for exploring the subject of women's attitudes to breasts is *Breasts*, by Ayalah and Weinstock. Since that time, I have done this exercise with several groups of older women and witnessed fascinating results, from tears at the time and energy wasted fighting nature to a pleased acceptance of things as they are. The purpose of this exercise is to tune women into the following: 1) who sets the standards for women's body image? 2) to whose advantage does a seasonally changing 'look' work? 3) do women have to buy into it? 4) what would we like to change in ourselves and why? Can we? 5) setting up a critical path for those changes we can, should and would like to effect. What are our needs, the prognosis, our obstacles and our sources of support? Without exception, women of all ages have shown enormous support for one another through this exercise. It is high-risk exercise, but must be conducted on the principle that no one person be asked to share more than she wants to. Within any group of women facing the issue of our body images, there is bound to be at least one other person who can share one's experience. The group should always be treated as the gold mine of resources that it is. Group leaders need only develop the ability to animate others and draw out what is already there.

Many other issues have been raised and addressed in Body Image courses: menstruation and menopause, birth control, sexuality, mastectomy, and abortion. I have found *Our Bodies, Our Selves* particularly useful in providing information on these issues. Lately, I have been interested in the way in which women present themselves through voice and gesture. We have such tiny, ineffectual voices ... so easy for men to over-ride, contradict or take over for us. I have developed a set of vocal exercises to help women explore their talking selves. Another issue which young women in particular often like to discuss is that of friendship between women. Once the old romantic myth is put in its proper place, women no longer have to base their relationships on the axis of their competition for men. It is fascinating to see women coming to grips with their needs for one another's friendship and demonstrative affection.

Women's Body Image is an emotionally charged subject. My experience with adolescent women has demonstrated to me that through self-examination in the arena which most interests them, young women can become aware of the politics which inform their own appearance. Through this increased awareness, 'girls' may become hooked on *Women's Studies*; they want to explore themselves further and explore their psychology, economics, sociology, anthropology ... all the disciplines which the consideration of women's body image has opened to them. Older women, too, through facing that these concerns about appearance rather than reality never leave them, often become more receptive to a feminist analysis of their situation. While an almost infinite number of courses could be designed from this basic concept, it is also possible to construct interesting workshops from this basic framework. As women get more in touch with themselves from the inside out, as we strip off those layers of packaging which have been applied to us in the spirit of 'convenient social virtue', we can decide how we want to wear our skin. From that vantage point, we can work towards a security of posture; we can consider taking on the world. ☉