

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Margaret A. Lowe. *Looking Good: College Women and Body Image, 1875-1930*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. viii + 212 pp. \$40.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-7209-9

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## The Body, Imagined

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Asked to review this book about early American college women and their variously constructed body images, I plunged into memories, not only of my own published and unpublished musings on the subject of appearance, but of my personal history. I went to Radcliffe College for an admissions interview in 1959, when I was sixteen years old. I wore a polyester blouse with a big pleated polyester bow which accentuated my large breasts. The woman who interviewed me remarked that there was a certain type of girl who would fit in at Radcliffe. It was clear that I was not that type. Radcliffe turned me down for early admissions, regular admissions, and then regretfully notified me that I had not made the waiting list. I was heartbroken. Indignant relatives said that Radcliffe had filled their quota of New York Jews. But in my heart of hearts I knew it was the polyester bow that did me in.

In *Looking Good*, Margaret A. Lowe has compiled a collection of fascinating data on the ways U.S. college women saw themselves and were seen by others in the period from 1875 to 1930. Her organizing principle, stated clearly in her conclusion, is to trace the foundations for the concept of "body image," a phrase coined by Paul Schilder in his 1935 book, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*. It would be helpful to read this concluding chapter right after the introduction, as it gives an essential frame for the intervening chapters.

The strengths of Lowe's approach are various. She has been meticulous in collecting details, some of them

fascinating, from college students' letters home, drawings and articles in campus newspapers, and various college archives. I especially appreciate some of the drawings and also some extracts from students' letters that give a flavor of the high spirits of young college women in the late-nineteenth century. In 1887, Janet Wallace wrote home describing a physical exam in great detail, and commented about the examiner: "In fact she made me feel like one of those dictionary pictures of a steer with the parts numbered for each measure she took down in a big ledger." Clearly, a deep pool of imagination preceded the feminist poster art of the seventies, showing images of women as meat.

Lowe's choice to present data from three colleges—Cornell, a pioneer in co-education; Smith, a white woman's college; and Spelman, a college for African-American women—serves her purpose well, offering a wide spectrum of U.S. college women's experience. She concludes that "as white and black women claimed access to the life of the mind, it was their bodies that drew intense personal, public, and institutional scrutiny. As a result, in conjunction with commercial culture, scientific discourses, and medical domains, the college campus became a critical site where modern notions of female body image were mapped out" (p. 161). This conclusion is well supported by her data and, I think, uncontroversial. It is the final statement of the book, and is preceded by the remark that "female students have understood and used their bodies (moved, located, dressed, enjoyed, and contained them) for a variety of distinct purposes. Female students' self-perceptions and bod-

ily practices—what today we call body image—emanated most directly from their everyday customs, habits and desires” (p. 161). Again, the statement is well supported and unexceptional; here is my complaint: I have not been led by this book to think more deeply about the nature of “female students’ self-perceptions and bodily practices” or what it meant to them that it was their bodies “that drew intense personal, public, and institutional scrutiny” rather than their claim to have “access to the life of the mind.”

Instead, I have been offered some potentially useful information, which is nothing to sneeze at, and which, offered as it is largely without explicit value judgment, can be applied and tested in many ways. For example, how were students affected by the fact that admissions officers at Cornell routinely noted their impressions of students’ appearance? Howe says that “the savvy college girl, then, made style, appearance, and weight management decisions in order to improve her chances ... she would know that such authorities favored women who presented a professional appearance that projected northern, white, native-born, middle-class femininity.” And she continues, “Students could not alter the realities of their family background, race, or place of birth, but they could recast how they ‘appeared’ to counselors and faculty, through dress, diet, gesture, and hairstyle” (p. 142). This would be a conclusion to test.

Given my personal history, I am more cynical than Howe about the options really open to students who would be labeled not “savvy” if they failed to present the “professional appearance” valued, but only indirectly and implicitly, by Howe as well as by the “authorities” she is describing. Consider the case of Catherine McDermot, documented in Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* (1992). McDermot, whom I knew personally from childhood since she was my best friend’s mother; was a pioneer in computer engineering in the 1950s. She was lured away from IBM by the Xerox Corporation, only to be fired on the grounds, following a physical exam, that she was “grossly obese.” McDermot proceeded to sue Xerox, using no legal counsel, and after eleven years of litigation, won her case on the grounds that Xerox had unlawfully discriminated against her; a healthy, large woman, solely on the basis of unwarranted assumptions based on her appearance. It is easy to speculate that many college women, judged in similar ways by “authorities,” might have been “savvy” and still left out in the cold, not because they

lacked brains or initiative but because assumptions about appearance, professional or otherwise, are more complex than Howe’s book indicates.

Faludi’s *Backlash*, offering a sophisticated analysis of contemporary appearance issues for American women, is not, so far as I could tell, included in the unindexed “Essay on Sources” (which is not a good substitute for a bibliography) and neither is Jan Todd’s *Physical Culture and the Body Beautiful* (1998). Todd’s book examines the debate about women’s exercise and physical education that began in the United States in the late-eighteenth century and continued into the present, and she gives special attention to the effect of this debate on college women, including the period covered by Howe. It would provide a helpful context for understanding much of the information about college women’s body image presented by Howe.

Howe also pays curiously little attention to the influence and significance of popular culture for her subjects, mentioning, for example, that “we know less about [the] movie-going habits” in the 1920s of students at Spelman than at Cornell or Smith, but not mentioning that portrayals of black women in American movies of the twenties were either absent or demeaning. What was the effect of that on literate, self-conscious African Americans? To find out, since, as she several times reports, there is a scarcity of records from Spelman students, Howe would have had to look further afield than she did. I would love to know if there are women alive now who attended Spelman before 1930 and what they remember of that period. I would also be inclined to look at American fiction written in Howe’s period of investigation to find out how college women are depicted there, and how women’s bodies are depicted there.

Given the scope of her inquiry, Howe has performed a valuable service in providing information which can be used to fuel a deeper inquiry into some of the questions she poses, and some she does not pose. For the purpose of such inquiry, it might be helpful to reflect, while following the currently accepted idea that images and ways of thinking about images are socially constructed, that our own ways of speaking and thinking reflect the social constructions of our specific personal and cultural histories. I would have liked to know more about the perspective Howe brought to her investigation of body image; knowing more about her perspective would have helped me to better understand the choices she made.

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