

Alternative femininities: body, age and identity

Samantha Holland, Berg, Oxford and New York, 2004, ISBN 1 85973-808-7 £14.99 (Pbk); ISBN 1-85973-803-6 £50.00 (Hbk)

Samantha Holland's book is a study of a group of women she identifies as occupying into adulthood an 'alternative' presence, manifest in their use of clothes and body modifications. The book aims to break a double silence, accounts of 'spectacular subcultures' (from (sub-) cultural studies to a fashion theory) have, she argues, viewed similar groups (and their associated 'resistances') as the exclusive preserve of 'youth', and literatures on ageing have concentrated on 'mainstream' femininity and its tensions over time. The book provides sensitive and nuanced analysis of her participant's accounts of how their appearance reflects on, and is implicated in, their complex relationships to femininity, feminism, consumption, the politics of the body and their own ageing. It is a testimony to Holland's careful handling of the participant's words that her knowledgeable and theoretically sophisticated readings never obscure the reader's sense of the women's own awareness of the complexity of their negotiations, and this is one of the book's real strengths.

The second chapter of the book offers a useful literature overview, which Holland divides into five themes (femininity, fashion theory, sub-cultural theory, identity and the body). Insights from these literatures are then drawn upon throughout the empirical chapters that follow, to provide a vivid sense of the participant's ongoing and 'everyday' production, contestation of, and conformity to, gendered and embodied identities. The 'background reading' chapter is presented almost apologetically since Holland makes clear that the book aims to attract a readership outside of the narrowly 'academic' and appeal, indeed, to its own participants. Holland asks 'Sub cultural groups are studied, yes, but how often do they read the end product? How often is the end product written in a way that a general reader, even if the book is 'about you', would want to read it?' (p. 2) This is, indeed, an interesting question, and Holland's engagement with her participant's lives produces 'personal and localised' (p. 179) narratives, which invite curiosity as to how they reacted to the book. Nonetheless, Holland's inclusive address shouldn't obscure the fact that, while ostensibly aiming to attract a non-specialist audience, she produces a very useful introduction to a number of key debates in contemporary (British) cultural, gender, and media studies and students from all these and related disciplines would benefit from reading the book.

The book subsequently divides into themed 'empirical' chapters based on the interview data. She offers an overview of the participants reflections on 'femininity' and describes the ways that the participants construct, via their appearance, an alternative to 'traditional' femininity, named here as 'fluffy' (although it is not entirely clear how Holland's preference of this appellation out

of the three voiced by her participants – the others were ‘frothy’ and ‘girly’ – comes about). The multiplicity of meanings contemporary culture attaches to ‘girl’ and ‘girly’ is nicely summed up in the description of the study’s participants that ‘they “do” girl and feel like girl but also feel like and are seen to be resisting girl’ (p. 45). That this ‘resistance’ is time consuming, costly, rigorous and highly disciplined is clear from the account given here of the investments made in appearance and the cultural politics of such an investment. At this point in the book, the construction of femininity is likened to masquerade. However, a little surprisingly, this isn’t then linked to existing theoretical models of understanding ageing as ‘masquerade’ (Woodward, 1989: 121) despite the foregrounding of age later in the book. The reflections on ageing provide empirical evidence for some of the ironies of contemporary ageing noted elsewhere, particularly that anxiety over the processes of ageing are occurring earlier in life, despite changing paradigms (in the west) of ‘successful ageing’ (Katz and Marshall, 2003). Holland’s book demonstrates the reach of these anxieties beyond the conventional or the normative; indeed the analysis shows the coexistence of both highly conventional and contested understandings of ageing and its relationship to femininities.

Holland produces a fascinating account of the ‘persona’ of the ‘alternative woman’, and the complexity of this figure in relation to the construction of gender and identity over time. She explores the diverse ways that clothes, in particular, are used in the routine policing of the boundaries between and around ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ but also in relation to work and leisure. The relationship between this and individual life courses is suggestively sketched through the participant’s reminiscences about their relationship to, and hostility toward, various femininities including the figure of ‘the fairy princess’ and representations of feminists. Some lovely details emerge in the study, including, for example, the relationship between clothes and work, one participant names her non-work wardrobe her ‘real’ clothes, those worn at work as a ‘disguise’ and another demonstrates how decisions made about work (‘they’ll want to stick me in some crap old blouse or whatever’ (p. 91)) are arrived at through clothes.

Differences between the women who all responded to Holland’s request for ‘adult women (over aged 25 years) who dress and present themselves in ways which resist how a woman “should” look’ (p. 205) are carefully drawn out. Some participants demonstrated equal hostility toward both ‘traditional femininity’ and feminists. The ‘embattled’ reflections on ‘claiming’ femininity from a participant who did identify as feminist, testify to the ongoing need for theoretical and empirical work of this kind especially given recent debates over ‘feminism’s’ future in a popular cultural moment, which seems determined to present it as obsolete (McRobbie, 2004).

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references

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