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The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls

Reviewed by Haley Kendrick

IN *THE Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls*, American historian Joan Jacobs Brumberg examines the complex relationship between girls and their maturing bodies in the United States from 1830 to the 1990s. By researching the diaries of girls and cultural artifacts such as magazine advertisements from the Victorian era forward, Brumberg tracks the changes in society's attitudes towards girls and their bodies, as well as girls' own changing attitudes and values. The author suggests that as girls are maturing physically at younger ages, the prolonged gap between physical and social adulthood puts girls in a place of increased scrutiny of their bodies. As a result, girls engage in a number of different "body projects" as a means of internal control, replacing the external control of corsets and other things socially determined as appropriate for women prior to the 1920s.

Brumberg begins by explaining ideas and practices held from the Victorian era through the mid 1900s within the United States surrounding menarche in girls to discuss the change in cultural ideology and knowledge of the female body. Many beliefs centered on women's vulnerability and weakness associated with the ovaries and menstruation and resulted in inequality for women and girls. As American society became healthier with better diets, women began experiencing menarche at earlier ages; because social maturation into adulthood did not change to match girls' changing bodies, the time between menarche and emotional and social maturity became marked by changing social controls of girls' bodies.

The first of these changes Brumberg explores is the change in views of menstruation; in the twentieth century, the experience became medicalized and sanitized. Rather than focus on the experience of "becoming a woman," menstruation became a sanitation issue, and disposable hygiene products became popular for those that could afford them. Here Brumberg demonstrates the beginnings of a relationship between women's bodies and the economic market; sanitization of menstruation drove girls to stores and producers of hygiene products began advertising in popular teen magazines. The author argues that the sanitization of menstruation alone does not remove associations of weakness and vulnerability of the female body, but focus on the physical and social impact of maturation must also be maintained for the health of girls.

In chapters three and four, Brumberg examines different "body projects" that many girls began to engage in beginning in the twentieth century. First, she discusses the ideal of "perfect skin" as mirrors entered middle class households and later the pockets and purses of American girls through the "compact." Here Brumberg returns to the relationship of girls' "body projects" and the market—those who could afford skin care regimens would invest in their daughters' skin care, sometimes at the expense of their education. Physical beauty, not education, was seen as girls' biggest opportunity for success. Brumberg also illustrates the relationships between "perfect skin" and sexuality: as she explains, the Victorian belief that pimples were evidence of sexual immorality and the later unexpected solution to acne found in birth control pills.

Additionally, Brumberg mentions that African-American and other minority girls had no opportunity to achieve the ideal “perfect skin” because not only was it free from acne, but also it was almost always white.

The author then examines the different “body projects” of “slimming,” dieting, exercising, etc. that became popular in the twentieth century. She suggests that the increased focus on the female body, particularly the size and proportions, resulted in a general sentiment of “I hate my body” among young American girls. Brumberg concludes the section by discussing practices of body control such as piercings, particularly of the genitals, and popularity of lingerie. She suggests girls used these practices to claim their bodies as their own but contradictorily blur the lines between the public and the private.

Brumberg then discusses the “disappearance of virginity.” The cultural focus of physical virginity, proven by an intact hymen, vanished. She discusses the diverse reasons for this disappearance, but also she considers the evolving nature of social control of women’s bodies. While girls’ bodies may no longer move from under the ownership of their fathers to the ownership of their husbands, there remains a societal control of women’s bodies, as well as continued risks of sexual assault of women. She concludes the book with a call for girl advocacy: to protect vulnerable girls from an increasingly sexualized society before they reach cultural adulthood.

Brumberg’s historical examination of the changing place of girls’ bodies in American society offers valuable insight into not only the social construction of femininity but also the degree to which girls have internalized these societal expectations. Brumberg’s suggestion that internal controls such as perfect skin and dieting for the perfect body have replaced external controls such as the corset. She brings to light an interesting interpretation of what some may see as women’s liberation. She clearly

moves from vulnerability resulting from the decreasing age of physical maturation through the various forms of control of girls’ bodies as they continue to mature socially and emotionally. Brumberg returns to girls’ vulnerability in the conclusion of the book by calling for girl advocacy but stops short of suggesting much in terms of action.

Though her analysis is lacking in discussion of racial and ethnic minorities, Brumberg’s *The Body Project* does include insightful information concerning the female experience in American culture over the last two centuries. Feminist scholars interested in gender equality could greatly benefit from this investigation of societies relationship with girls bodies and girls relationships with their own bodies. Brumberg offers in her book an in depth look at another area of socially constructed gender inequality. With the understanding gained from her work, we can begin to dismantle the social controls placed on women’s bodies from childhood.

