

Review

Embodying precarious masculinities

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Jamie Hakim, *Work that Body: Male Bodies in Digital Culture*, Radical Cultural Studies series, Rowman & Littlefield 2019

I first met Jamie Hakim at the ‘Doing Sex: Men, Masculinity and Sexual Practices’ conference at Newcastle University in 2017, where he explored some of the most fascinating work in this book - his research on Chemsex cultures in London. *Work that Body* explores the changing relationships between men, masculinity and embodiment in digital media and cultures, and the ways men’s bodies are represented, performed, commodified and experienced. What is so unique about this book is its exploration of how these changing relationships and patterns are part of a neoliberalising project that has emerged because of the increasingly precarious times in which we live. The financial crash of 2007/08, the austerity policies implemented in its wake by governments around the world, and the subsequent declining opportunities for secure paid work, are the context in which this book is set. One of its original contributions is its exploration of the role of precarity in shaping the ways that gendered and sexualised digital embodiment is produced, practised and experienced.

Hakim discusses the ways in which men’s bodies are increasingly experiencing neoliberal pressures in similar ways to women. For example, he highlights how they are valued in terms of their size and shape, and require to be ‘worked on’ to achieve

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this desirability: he sees this as part of the ‘feminising axiomatic’ of neoliberalism - a set of rules that organise its conditions of possibility, in this case its practice of ‘feminising’, a ‘weakening’ of men’s social position. Thus, men’s bodies, too, are increasingly commodified and sexualised as a way of negotiating the precarity of everyday neoliberalism. Hakim uses Stuart Hall’s understanding of neoliberalism as a hegemonic project in the Gramscian sense, one that operates both ideologically and materially (avoiding a Foucauldian focus on governance as well as a Marxist focus on economic and political processes). In doing so, Hakim understands digitally mediated bodily practices as emerging in response to the material conditions that have been created by (uneven) neoliberal ideologies.

For Hakim, neoliberalism and precarity are structural, embodied and affective. The book engages with interdisciplinary feminist, queer and postcolonial scholarship to explore how men’s digitally mediated embodied practices are produced by intersections of gender, class, race, sexuality and ability, at individual, collective and national levels. One contribution here is continuing the understanding of neoliberalism as a gendered and embodied process that is constantly being remade as we engage in body work in and across digital and material worlds. Hakim is here making a contribution to scholarship on gendered embodiment, cultural studies work on neoliberal cultures, and to methodological work on conjunctural analysis.

Some of the ways Hakim does this are through his empirical research on male ‘nude leaks’; the rise of the spornosexual;¹ Ru Paul’s Drag Race; and Chemsex cultures in London. In each example, Hakim uses a range of interviews and media analysis to effectively highlight how austerity and global economic crises have produced a set of conditions that produce new patterns of behaviours in men - all of which are responses to feelings of uncertainty. The range of empirical research makes for interesting reading, for example in its content analysis of YouTube videos and interviews with PR professionals and Chemsex participants. When exploring celebrity men’s nude leaks (the sharing of naked pictures on the internet, often without consent), in Chapter Two, Hakim highlights how men who have starred in reality TV shows may leak their own nude pictures onto the internet as a way to keep themselves in the public eye, and investing in a particular ‘brand’ of masculinity. Hakim understands the nude leak as post-Fordist work - or as part of digital capitalism: as men’s social positions have been weakened and threatened, they are relying more on their bodies to find or secure paid work.

Soundings

Chapter Five examines Chemsex cultures - sex parties amongst men that involve the use of chemical drugs, often organised and advertised through digital dating apps. It shows how the decline of physical queer spaces, and the increase in cost of accessing existing ones, especially in London, mean that many gay and/or queer men are excluded from queer urban night-time economies. Now that these spaces no longer act as places of connection, as Hakim's interviews with Chemsex participants highlight, the parties create a sense of collective intimacy and belonging - especially important for migrant, working-class and poor men. Both the nude leaks and the Chemsex examples illustrate how neoliberal agendas are gendered and embodied in ways that impact men's practices.

To conclude, Hakim explores potential futures based around collectivity - or corporeal commons - as a way of resisting the neoliberal individualising processes, and asks what a future would look like where we are collective in our practices. He looks at the possibility that using the internet for collective political organising could be a form of resisting the neoliberal and commercial platforms we use (for example Facebook); and that using hook up apps to facilitate Chemsex parties can be a way of subverting capitalist and patriarchal notions of sex. Hakim also draws out the tensions here: for example, Chemsex cannot fully create a post-neoliberal body as it is lived in tension with the violence that neoliberalism enacts on queer collectivism. Hakim turns to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming as a way of thinking about dismantling the hetero-patriarchal and capitalist structures that we exist in - where all bodies *become* 'other' and are no longer marked by the differences in power. The book is particularly compelling in the way it brings together ideas on neoliberalism, gender, the digital and affect, in ways that explore changing relationships with our bodies due to the precarious conditions in which we live. By doing so, Hakim has created an important text for academics and students interested in embodied practices and neoliberal and digital cultures, and how to enact resistance. This is a subject that will only continue to rise in importance, given that our economic futures are increasingly uncertain and precarious due to the Covid-19 pandemic, during which more people are becoming oriented towards digital platforms for work, leisure, connection, play, entertainment and intimacy.

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Notes

1. This is a term coined by Mark Simpson to describe a type of man/masculinity that is interested in developing gym toned bodies, body hair regulation and tanning in sexualised ways. Simpson points to men from reality tv shows like *The Only Way is Essex* as examples.