Body-Ekstasis: Socio-Semiotic Reflections on Surpassing the Dualism of Body-Image

Phillip Vannini
Dennis D. Waskul

Traditional psychological and social psychological approaches to the study of body-image are vitiated by a variety of serious problems. The concept of body-image—defined as “the picture of our own body which we form in our mind” (Slade 1994: 497)—is made inadequate by scholars’ reliance on a host of dualisms which permeate Western culture writ large. Such dualisms include the dichotomies of body and mind, of individual and society, and of materialism and idealism. In this chapter we suggest surpassing dualism by way of theoretical reflection and articulation of an alternative concept. After fleshing out our criticism we propose a new non-dualist understanding of body-image that draws from the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey and the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce. Our goal is not only to produce a more robust conceptualization liable to generate more refined empirical insight, but also posit a more solid foundation for coherent cultural criticism.

DECOMPOSING BODY-IMAGE: THE DECAY OF DUALISM

Dualism is an ideology as old as Western civilization itself (Synnott 1993). As Synnott reported, ideas, values, and meanings associated with the human body are particularly subject to dualist thinking. It is no accident that such ideology has been at the intellectual core of the genesis and historical development of Western medicine, psychology, religion, and many of the patriarchal discourses and institutions of our society that contribute to the regulation, control, and fabrication of bodies (Synnott 1993).

At its core, dualism is a semiotic accomplishment (Derrida 1967). The dualist assumption is a juxtaposition of dichotomous terms within a system of signification that manufactures difference, which is then presumed to create meaning. This ontological view of meaning is typical of theoretical
perspectives founded upon the semiology of Saussure, such as the structuralist anthropology of Levi-Strauss as well as Parsonian structural-functionalism in sociology. Indeed, Saussure’s semiology was instrumental in reifying dichotomization to the status of positive science (Hodge and Kress 1988).¹ As Derrida (1967) argued, the binary oppositions which structuralists presume to constitute the essence of culture are in actuality nothing but intellectual gambits operating upon the unquestioned assumptions of dualism and the metaphysics of presence. The foundational status of dualism, therefore, is but an illusion.

Semiotically speaking, body-image—as conceptualized within mainstream sociology, social psychology, and clinical psychology—is a signifier. Certainly, body-image signifies different referents for different groups of scholars. For clinical psychologists an individual’s body-image has as its referent an ideal, generalized, normal, or healthy body-image. For psychological social psychologists—much like for clinical psychologists—an individual’s actual body-image is often the distorted representation of a real and undistorted body concept that an individual should have, on the basis of how s/he “really” is. Sociologists suggest that a person’s body-image is understood as the incarnate representation of ideologies of beauty, gender, age, physical ability, and sexual preference. Nonetheless, in spite of a diversity of discourses, these various disciplinary arguments insist the same point: body-image—especially when it is distorted, unhealthy, or negative—is nothing but a reflection or representation of a reality existing outside the individual’s mind and body. Let us take a closer look at some of these perspectives.

*Body-image in Psychology*

“Body-image” cannot be understood apart from the procedures used to measure it. Not only do these procedures highlight the epistemological underpinnings of how we can know the body but by specifying dimensions and indicators of body-image they also shed light on how the body and body-
image are ontologically fashioned. Clinical and social psychology employ two measures of body-image: perceptual and subjective/attitudinal (see Thompson 1990, 1996).

Perceptual assessments test an individual’s ability to accurately gauge body size. Three main types of assessment are used: whole-image adjustment, body-site adjustment, and perceptual measurement with weight categories. In experiments conducted through whole-image assessments researchers produce a set of distorted photographs of a person’s body, then ask a research participant to select amongst the distorted images which one more closely resembles his/her actual body. The more distant a subject’s choice from the accurate photograph, the more distorted his/her body-image. In contrast, experimental psychologists who use body-site adjustment procedures ask participants to estimate the size of their body parts. Body-image is once again assessed in relation to the deviation of participants’ estimates from objective measures. Finally, studies conducted by use of perceptual measurement with weight categories utilize weight categories (e.g. underweight, overweight, normal weight) as benchmarks for subjects’ self-assessments. Individual assessments are contrasted with researchers’ objective assessments and, once again, body-image is derived from the contrast between an external objective referent and an internal (i.e. cognitive) representation.

Perceptual assessments are more common in clinical research. Subjective assessments of body-image are frequent in social psychology—in both sociology and psychology. Subjective assessments assume a variety of methodological forms including scales, questionnaires, and somatomorphic matrices. The basic mechanism underlying these assessments is a reflexive, cognitive, and affective self-evaluation. Studies utilizing subjective assessments generally focus on body-image as a precursor of body dissatisfaction. Dissatisfaction with appearance is often studied in conjunction with behavioral investments in appearance, attitudinal judgments, and other somatic domains, including dimensions of health and fitness. Common amongst these studies, as well as
studies utilizing perceptual assessments is a rigid distinction between procedures measuring emotional and cognitive indicators (Thompson and Altabe 1991; Thompson and Dolce 1989).

Psychological research has been pivotal in claims-making efforts aimed at elevating issues of body dissatisfaction—broadly defined—to wide acceptance amongst social scientists and the general public. Psychologists have been particularly adamant about stressing the psychiatric and psychosomatic problems associated with a negative body-image, such as depression, self-harming behavior, disordered eating and fasting, and so forth. Nevertheless, the conceptualization of body-image prevalent in psychology suffers from the shortcomings of a dualistic outlook of body and mind, as well as individual and social.

Hermeneutic approaches to science and epistemology have long argued that the intellectual development of academic disciplines and theoretical paradigms is inevitably shaped by socio-historical context (e.g. Foucault 1973). Psychology is no exception. Despite claims to value-neutrality, universality, and objectivity, modern psychology is deeply entrenched in a typically Western outlook on the relation between individual and society. Feminist critics, among others, have pointed out that psychology’s main bias resides in the overly individualist characterization of subjectivity—an individualist bias that risks turning psychology into an oppressive tool rather than an emancipatory agent (see Wolszon 1998).

The philosophy of individualism runs deep throughout the history of Western civilization. Conflated with liberalism, individualism posits the original ontological and moral separation of individuals from one another and from the social. Such bifurcation of individual and society is then justified as the foundation of civic and human rights of self-determination. Individualism theorizes the subject as an autonomous terminal of free will—whose only restrictions must come at the intersecting point with other individuals’ freedom. In individualist ideologies persons are motivated
by self-interest, and action is understood as an instrumental repertoire of behaviors oriented toward maximization of pleasure.

Most psychological research and theory posits human development as a life-course quest toward autonomy, often understood as a healthy separation from the dysfunctional forces exercised by familial, sexual, or cultural constraints. Psychotherapy’s goal is, by no accident, the liberation of the individual from oedipal struggles and the shackles of early, or even innate, tendencies toward dependence on others. Also typical of psychological research is the decontextualization of persons from one another and from the greater realms of the cultural and social (especially characteristic of experimental psychology), as well as the reification and dichotomization of constructs (affective vs. cognitive, behavioral vs. attitudinal levels of observation, etc.). Thus, on the surface psychological research on body-image takes into account the strength of “social” forces (whether in the form of peer pressure, parental influence, media exposure, etc.), upon closer inspection these approaches implicitly hinge on individuals who (fail to) resist and reject these appeals. Despite the strength of culture and society as an “independent variable,” and despite the individual’s status as nothing but a dependent variable, much of psychology demands that we exert individual resistance—therefore effectively turning the person into the sole agent responsible for one’s moral and physical health. As Wolszon (1998: 546) insightfully asks: “how can we be so embedded in culture and yet so able to detach ourselves from it?”

The individualist bias of this type of psychology is further exacerbated by individuals’ internalization of supposedly deleterious traits. For example, the dysfunctional effects of undue exposure to nefarious magazines, television, Hollywood imagery, and pop culture discourses may be magnified by individual susceptibility, inaccurate perception, or perhaps by the presence of certain personality traits and dispositions such as tendencies to perfectionism or irrational thought. Here it is the dualism of stimulus and response—which Dewey (1896) criticized in his paper on the reflex
arc concept in psychology—that pre-empts a comprehensive and organic understanding of embodiment by reducing organic interaction to a “patchwork of disjointed parts [and] a mechanical conjunction of unallied processes” (Dewey 1882-1898, 5:97). Thus conceived, people are reduced to psycho-cultural dupes. Or to put it in semiotic terms, people turn into signifiers—lies, standing for something they are not.

Body-image in Sociology

Within much of sociology the concept of body-image tends to lose the definitive boundaries typical of psychological constructs and becomes conflated with a loosely embodied version of the self-concept, as well as with body-imagery in general. In other words, it tends to lose its external and internal validity. Not all sociologists partake in this form of intellectual poaching, whereby an operational measure endemic to one discipline is preyed upon by another, causing the purity of the original concept to be lost. For some researchers within social psychology, the experimental and paper-and-pencil measures typical of psychological research exert great appeal, and their scholarship can hardly be distinguished from the mainstream approaches in psychology. Yet, for the majority of sociologists interested in issues of body-image, feminist theory is the true beacon of light and the exact interest is not a precise measurement of body-image, but instead the broader issue of embodied inequality. There is, of course, an enormous variety of feminist approaches to the body (for a review see Howson 2005), but despite the sophistication of some of these, for many feminists body-image is still vitiated by a number of dualisms. Let us look for example at the theory of Susie Orbach (1988) and Kim Chernin (1983) whose works are quite influential in sociology.

For both Orbach and Chernin women’s bodies are fundamentally different than men’s. These natural differences provide the basis for the evolution of patriarchal systems, which in turn magnify the shaping of men’s and women’s bodies in differing and unequal ways. Orbach and Chernin not only suggest innate body differences between men and women, they also believe that
bodies have natural sizes and shapes, which are then distorted by social forces. For example Orbach (1988) finds that some women engage in compulsive eating because their natural feeding patterns are disrupted by oppressive ideologies produced and distributed by the media and the beauty industry. Whereas becoming thin is a form of normative conduct, becoming fat for Orbach is a symbolic reaction against a phallocentric system which continuously distorts women’s body-image. Not only is there an obvious form of gender dualism at work here, but also a significant dichotomization of culture and nature, body and mind, as well as individual and society (not to mention a gross homogenization of internal differences among men and women). As Shilling (2003: 59, emphasis in original) remarks “for Orbach, thin is natural, while fat is distortion.” Hence, even though bodies are subject to change, such change always occurs in a dualist and causalistic patterns of unidirectional influences: society forces individuals to become adjusted (i.e. co-opted) or maladjusted, minds generate ideologies that mold bodies after their fantasies, and females are nothing but the passive victims of male desire.

Equally concerned with body dissatisfaction is Kim Chernin (1983) who ponders how and why women become sufferers of a tyranny of slenderness which impairs their natural development and self-growth. Chernin shares many of the same themes of Orbach’s position. Women, as opposed to men, fail to take pride in their bodies and become obsessed with weight loss and other forms of appearance management. Also similar to Orbach’s (1988) analysis, women’s negative body-image is nothing but the result of men’s oppressive politics, this time emerging as a response to the threat represented by women’s innate parental connection. Much like Orbach, Chernin’s arguments are vitiated by essentialism; women’s and men’s bodies are naturally different from one another, and culture and society are seen as negative forces distorting biological realities and individual development. This is dualism at its clearest.
Chernin and Orbach are not the only influential theorists to deal with body-image, of course. Yet, their approach to the body is exemplary and symptomatic of the general preference amongst empirical sociologists to treat the body as an object of action. As we said earlier, from a semiotic perspective, body-image—as the name itself suggests—is but the signifier of a referent to which it is tightly coupled. Whereas many psychologists (including Chernin and Orbach) commit the mistake of seeing the individual as primordial, many sociologists incur in the opposite error of structural determinism, whereby issues as diverse as class standing (e.g. Bourdieu), discourse (e.g. Foucault), and social order (e.g. Turner 1984) literally make the body and body-image a social and semiotic by-product of joint action.

As our critique illustrates, across psychology and sociology the concept of body-image suffers from a variety of dualisms that do little justice to the body’s polysemy and creative force. In the following section we suggest a socio-semiotic reformulation of body-image that treats the body not only as a sign vehicle, but as “sense,” and how this approach can renovate interpretive sociological interest in this important concept.

**EKSTASIS AND THE ECSTATIC BODY**

Body-image research traditionally fails to explain how body-image is constituted and why a negative body-image has increasingly become a “normative discontent” (Wolszon 1998: 545). Such problems originate, in part, due to the psychological and sociological tendency to treat “body-image” as a definite concept, rather than a sensitizing one. A sensitizing concept “gives the user a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances. Whereas definitive concepts provide prescriptions of what to see, sensitizing concepts merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer 1954: 7).

Regarding body-image as a sensitizing concept ought to enable a broadening of conceptual and methodological horizons, and in turn allow us to better understand the social and semiotic
processes by which body-image is constituted. A sensitizing conceptualization of body-image ought to help in rejecting conceptualizations and methods that are overly-individualistic, de-contextualized, and overly-cognitive. We are suggesting an abandonment of traditional methodological procedures of studying body-image, the rejection of body-image as a definitive concept, and an updating of our understandings—all in a framework that surpasses the various forms of dualistic thinking attached to it. As our previous critique illustrates, the concept of “body-image” fundamentally owes to problematic dualisms. We therefore propose a fresh concept, namely an ecstatic formulation of the body (from the ancient Greek ekstasis). An ecstatic formulation of the body emphasizes the active, interactive, and transactive state of ekstasis—being at once both inside and outside one’s self, body, and society and in virtue of doing so annihilating those boundaries. Ekstasis entails the qualitative evaluation of the esthetic potential of one’s body.

Body ekstasis has several advantages over body-image. First, the concept of body-image does not adhere to its application. An image is most often an icon—in the classic Peircean differentiation among indexes, icons, and symbols (Peirce 1958; also see Rochberg-Halton 1982). Iconic signs are embodied representations of the object they represent. In other words, icons express something by referring to themselves, like musical notes or facsimiles. Despite this, traditional approaches to body-image patently disregard the iconic quality of body-imagery, and instead treat body-image as a symbol—which conveys meaning via a rule-based association with an object. Ekstasis, on the other hand, is not only perceived and interpreted, it is fundamentally somatic and esthetic; the ecstatic body is fully amendable to symbolic, indexical, and iconic meaning.

Second, the word “image” clearly connotes a visual concept. Emphasis on the visual is problematic at a multitude of levels. The primacy of sight is clearly linked to cultural and historical biases in which sight reigns as the supreme sense (Synnott 1993). This is clearly observed in our folks sayings such as “seeing is believing,” “I’ll believe it when I see it”—each suggestive of sight as
the ultimate empirical verification—thus lending merit to urge disbelievers to “see for yourself” (Synnott 1993:207). Indeed, in these ways and many more (see Synnott 1992) the privileged status of sight is directly linked with the most privileged of human faculties—knowledge and reason. Thus, for related reasons, the cultural supremacy of sight partially owes to the emergence of the modern world, and further represents a somatic consequence of a continued androcentric bias. In other words, to reduce the esthetic evaluation of one’s corporeality to the visual is a particularly male logic; the politics of the gaze are decidedly gendered: the gaze “is political surveillance, control, domination and power” (Synnott 1993: 222). Furthermore, image, in this sense, connotes an overly-static mental picture. Sight is certainly important to the ecstatic body which, by virtue of a self, engages in body imaging—an active and reflexive rendering of the body as a visible object, materially and in one’s mind. However, sight is but one sense that constitutes the ecstatic body.

Third, body-image smacks of Cartesian dualism: “I think about my body, therefore my body is.” Or, alternatively, “I have a thought about my body, therefore I have a body.” The problem with the concept of image is that traditional research regards the body as a sign-vehicle, or representation, of the object created in one’s mind. As said, conceived this way body-image is nothing but the signifier of a mental concept. Not only is this a problem in terms of dualism, but it is also over-reliant on idealism and solipsism. Body-image connotes nothing but a ghost in the machine. In contrast, ekstasis is transactive and denotes obliteration of the alleged boundary between mind and body, self and body, and body and the bodies of others. Ekstasis is a fluid state of being and becoming. Moments of ekstasis may be beyond reason and self-control, a state of intense exaltation of emotionality and somatic sensitivity that alters mood, cognition, and action.

In many cultures ekstasis is also a departure from the spatial limitations of one’s body by way of embracing fusion with the divine or with other bodies. Without suggesting that ekstasis is necessarily a mystical experience we are positing here that the ecstatic body has the power to
implode the artificial differences between body and mind, self and others, emotion and cognition, pre-reflexive and pre-linguistic sensation and linguistic reflexivity, as well as perception and action—perhaps even the boundary between this world and another. Let us examine some of the characteristics of the body-ekstasis.

_Habit and Meaning: Ekstasis as Evaluation_

Our first contention is that ekstasis is evaluative. The ecstatic body is a habitual body; old and new habits are the emergent outcomes of non-dualistic processes of transactive evaluation—the starting point of this argument is Dewey’s idea of organic interaction, or transaction. For Dewey (1925, 1934) self and world, mind and body, and subject and object cannot be specified in isolation from one another. Transaction is the concept that Dewey employs to describe the relationship of codetermination of experiencing and experienced. For him such relationship “was a single structure, not two separate, discrete structures which somehow causally ‘act’ upon one another” (Kestenbaum 1977: 1). Dewey recognized that consciousness was not something first existing in itself and only later entering into a relationship with something else. Indeed Dewey’s (1929: 294) belief that “the characteristic human need is for possession and appreciation of the meaning of things” led him to suggest that meanings are “had” before they can be known, or in other words they are sensed in qualitatively immediate ways that are distinct from, and preconditions of, reflexive knowledge.

People sense and evaluate the immediacy of meanings through the operation of habit (Dewey 1922; also see Kestenbaum 1977). The concept of habit allows us to surpass the binary of freedom vs. determinism. As Crossley (2001: 136-137) explains, habits are forms of embodied creative agency shaping meaningful and purposive conduct arising out of the “interaction between the organism or agent and the world.” However, habits are also the “result of imitation” (Crossley 2001: 137) and the crystallization of historical meaning and value. Habit plays a pivotal role in Dewey’s philosophy of embodiment and selfhood. For Dewey (1922: 40-41) “habit:”
express[es] that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for overt manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued form even when not obviously dominating activity.

Habits constitute the basic nature of the embodied self (Dewey 1922: 25) and the basic nature of the body-mind unity, as well as the organic unity with bodies-minds of other people.

Body-ekstasis, we contend, is a form of habit. I am my own ecstatic body in that all I sense, feel, or think “emerges out of behaviours which follow a habituated pattern” (Crossley 2001: 140). As a form of habit, body-ekstasis is nonetheless a form of motion; it is indeed the potential for both stasis (old habit) and movement beyond stasis (new habit). The ecstatic body indeed emerges by becoming committed to its future projects. Again, following Crossley (2001: 140), there are old habits and “‘habit-busting’ habits; habits which both equip and incline me to question and change the way in which I live my life.” This is so because habits are reflexive, in that they enable us to turn to our embodied self as an object of reflection and action, when old habits get “busted” and replaced with new ones. This happens, for example, when the evaluative processes underlying ekstasis lead to the person’s adopting and engaging in new forms of body maintenance and modification, or reflexive body techniques (Crossley 2005). Out of such ekstasis also emerges another stasis; as a habit of sensing the potential of one’s body that remains temporarily stable until another movement of ek-stasis gathers up speed. Such structure (stasis) and anti-structure (ekstasis) of experience is a continuous process of development “from a state of wholeness to a state of wholeness by way of an intervening phase of reconstruction” (Alexander 1987: 127). Yet, this is not a simple or even a teleological progression from automatic routine to automatic routine via mechanical reintegration. Rather, such is the very temporal condition of experience “as a total field of action which has a complex structure at each and every moment and different degrees of focus,
clarity, obscurity, and organization...by increasing articulation, illumination, meaning, and apprehension” (Alexander 1987: 127). Ekstasis is temporally dynamic, yet ordered.

Habits are reflexive, but because they are impulsive they are also pre-objective and pre-reflexive (see Alexander 1987: 136-137). Humans are sense-giving, sense-having beings who operate on a level of access to the world that is firstly immediate and meaningfully tacit. For Halton (2004: 90) it is through the “breathing, palpitating, bodily awareness of the situation [that] the spontaneous soul is brought to bear on life.” Through this organic interaction “the living gesture bodied forth in the signifying moment [connects] with the very conditions out of which the human body evolved into its present condition” (Halton 2004: 90). It is at this pre-reflexive level that habits first operate—thus temporally preceding linguistic formulation, reflexive consciousness, and deliberate critical knowledge. Hence, it is at this level that ekstasis is originally constituted and then shaped throughout processes of linguistic reflection; the constitution of the ecstatic body is coterminous with the genesis of the embodied self. As the infant develops embodied habits, and therefore a rudimentary sense of self, s/he learns to sense the bodies of others and one’s own. That sensing is of course pre-linguistic and only crypto-reflexive. Yet, it is creative by definition because it creates the conditions of existence of the ecstatic body by making sense of embodied self, others, and the world.

The infant’s sensing habits are esthetic in nature. Recall that the meaning of the word “esthetic” is rooted in the Greek word for “sense” and “perception.” This sensing is also evaluative. As infants sense their being-in-the-world they evaluate the immediate qualities of objects in relation to their potential for meaning and value. A parental face and touch, for example, is sensed and evaluated for the comfort it brings to the body. Recognition of others—following this argument—is therefore firstly esthetic.
As the perception of one’s body and others’ becomes more and more reflexive something else happens. In addition to developing habitual and reflexive knowledge about the ecstatic body on the basis of the interpretation and internalization of others’ evaluations of us (Cooley 1902; see part one of this book), the embodied self also communicates his/her esthetic evaluation of others’ bodies to those others. This can be as simple as an infant crying in the presence of a stranger, or as complex as a group of friends organizing an intervention to persuade a dear one to lose weight or stop smoking. The process of constitution of ekstasis is thus parallel not only with the somatic constitution of body, self, and society, but also with the constitution of physical inequality, via differential evaluation of the unequal esthetic potential of others’ bodies. More on this later.

*The Esthetic and Qualitative Nature of the Ecstatic Body*

Our second contention is that ekstasis is an esthetic experience. In other words, in suggesting that the constitutive process of ekstasis relies on the immediacy of sense and therefore on qualitative immediacy we are arguing that the ecstatic body is esthetic in nature. Dewey (1934) used the word “esthetic” or “aesthetic” to denote not art, but instead the consumption of the inherent quality of an act, situation, or object (see Rochberg-Halton 1982). In Dewey’s anti-dualist thinking this conceptualization of esthetics avoided any undue distinction between the object of esthetic evaluation and the perceiving subject. In fact, in the case where the esthetic quality of an object is believed to either “lie in the eye of the beholder” or in the object itself (on the basis of objective esthetic standards or conventions), beauty is respectively thought as either a subjective or objective experience. But if we understand an esthetic evaluation to emerge as a transaction between the unique and immediate qualities of an object and the unique ways of sensing that object, then esthetic evaluation is a holistic experience and the ecstatic body is in therefore an emergent intersubjective accomplishment (see Joas 1983). Understood this way, the esthetic quality underlying the
constitution of the ecstatic body is not dependent on the opposition between object and subject on which the concept of body-image depends.

It is somewhat ironic that esthetics is never mentioned in the psychological or social psychological literature on body-image. As Rochberg-Halton (1982: 172) nicely puts it: “the lack of attention given to esthetic quality is another of the effects of the Cartesian world in which we live. Social scientists tend to ignore esthetic quality as if it were solely a matter of convention, or else physiology.” Such is of course the case of mainstream discourse on body-image. When the body’s ability to sense esthetically is excluded, living bodies and their sensations become accidental byproducts of the mind alone and its projections. Instead, a pragmatist formulation of an ecstatic body sensitizes us to the existence of a living, feeling, communicative body—a somatic body that is oriented toward the immediate quality of sensing-and-being-in-the-world.

We also suggest that ekstasis is a qualitative experience. By qualitative we refer to the Deweyan (and Peircean) concept of qualitative immediacy and to the “mercurial essence that is the vital source of meaning” in Dewey’s philosophy of quality (Rochberg-Halton 1982: 162). Dewey (1925, 1934) argues that humans have the capacity of sensing and are able to “make sense” (Dewey 1925: 258), or in other words that sensation differs from reflexive thinking in that the experience of sensing entails capturing the immediate qualities of existence. Thinking is somewhat more detached from embodied experience because it relies on symbols, whereas sensation is the interpretive experience of icons, and icons do not depend on the same rules of abstraction on which symbols depend.

Peirce (1958) argued that signs have differing qualities of firstness, secondness, and thirdness. Of course these are not separate and distinct experience, but rather contiguous aspects of experience understood as a continuum of reflexivity (Alexander 1987). Firstness refers to immediate consciousness of sensing—so immediate that the word “consciousness” may even be
misleading (as we further discuss later). Sensation and firstness are not synonymous with emotionality, as emotionality requires a deeper level of reflexivity, knowledge, and interpretation. Sensation and firstness are instead correlates of quality, “…an instance of that sort of element which is all that it is positively, in itself, regardless of anything else” (Peirce 1958, 1:306). From this conceptualization, experiencing or sensing meaning is a purely embodied affair occurring in the present in relation to past experiences and future action:

Imagine, if you please, a consciousness in which there is no comparison, no relation, no recognized multiplicity (since parts would be other than the whole), no change, no imagination of any modification of what is positively there, no reflexion—nothing but a simple positive character (Peirce 1958, 5:44).

The “material” of the ecstatic body—we suggest—consists of qualities. Whereas in the mainstream psychological conceptualization body image is a cognitive experience resulting in the formation of a set of symbols that stand for experiences that are never seriously experienced (they are more like reactions), our conceptualization treats ekstasis as immediately felt and part and parcel of an esthetic process that only later becomes an integral process through intellectual reflection. In sum, ekstasis is dependent on reflexivity, but such reflexivity can only exist insofar as we keep in mind the origin of ekstasis in pre-reflexive sensation and the unity of esthetics and reflection. In empirical research dualism occurs as categories such as cognition and perception are reified and thought to encompass experiences and objects that are essentially different from one another. Our formulation instead, while it respects such qualitative differences as those existing between esthetic and intellectual experiences, posits that one cannot exist without the other; one is mutually constitutive of the other.

*Ekstasis as Potential*
For our argument, one of the most important aspects of qualitative immediacy is potentiality.

“Potential” is an interesting word because it connotes emergence—a foundational concept in pragmatism and symbolic interactionism (see Mead 1934)—but also because in Peircean semiotics potentiality is not contrasted to actuality. Potentiality is meaning, because potentiality is sense, as Rochberg-Halton (1982:165) explained:

…potentiality is itself genuine… [In] trying to delineate a mode of being concerned with potentiality, with what “might happen,” Peirce tried to account for the importance of immediacy in experience, as well as showing how essential it is to novelty, uniqueness, to the creative aspect of human experience and the world at large.

Defining ekstasis as a form of potentiality, therefore, points to the possibility of developing an esthetic evaluation of one’s body that is not merely a passive internalization caused by way of exposure to the ideological codes produced by the “mechanical other” (Halton 2004: 91). We do not deny that ideologies—in particular hegemonic discourses of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexuality—have a great role in the development of the ecstatic body, but by embracing a view of ekstasis grounded in potentiality and the immediacy of embodied sensation we suggest that the concept of the ecstatic body relies on an understanding of the body that is neither stuck in passivity, nor entrenched in dualism. Furthermore, potentiality indicates the processual constitution of the ecstatic body. Traditional research on body image, by necessity of operationalization and dimensionalization, instead treats body image as a structure—a structure of cognitive beliefs and dispositions about the body, rather than of the body, as potentiality implies.

By suggesting that ekstasis is about firstness, immediacy, and potentiality we are advancing the point that the development of the ecstatic body depends on the purely embodied sensation of one’s body, self, objects, and others. When we say purely embodied sensation we mean that the
development of ekstasis depends on firstness, that is, the pre-reflexive and even pre-conscious transaction between the person and the world.

Furthermore, by suggesting that ekstasis is dependent on qualitative immediacy we are positing that the body has and is comprised of immediate meaning, since not only does the body make sense, but the body also is the origin of sense. This is a difficult concept that requires careful explanation. The basic starting argument is that the ecstatic body is a sign. In Peircean semiotics a sign is “something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity” (Peirce 1958, 2:228). A sign has creative power because by addressing somebody it creates another sign—which Peirce named interpretant. A sign also involves an object, or referent, and a sign vehicle used to represent said object. So, how is the body a sign? We know that obviously the body may work as a sign vehicle (when it represents something) or even as an object (when, for example, it is object of emulation; see Stephens and Delamont, this volume), but to complete the Peircean semiotic triad the body must also be sense and have the capacity of making sense.

The body makes sense of things for it connects with the qualitative immediacy of its world (indeed, recall that the firstness of qualitative immediacy is such that it can only be sensed and therefore its embodiment precedes its enselment). Secondly, the body is sense in virtue of its being an icon. An iconic sign conveys information by embodying an object, in this case itself. Of course a body cannot be sense by itself for sense (i.e. the Peircean interpretant), which depends on an interpersonal communicative achievement; a body therefore is sense for somebody whom it addresses. The body or to be precise, bodies, therefore are meaning and meaning-full. By conceptualizing bodies as signs of firstness we have put in place the conditions for a pre-reflexive, pre-conscious, embodied agency. At the same time we have begun to erase the embodied individual-society dualism.
Understanding the body as sense does not preclude us from thinking of the body and ekstasis as thirdness. Ekstasis is also form of thirdness because it entails introspective reflection and knowledge obtained through linguistic reflexivity and interpretation. But thirdness cannot exist without firstness. Such a formulation is extremely important in erasing the dualism of mind and body. Through this formulation the body is of the mind as the mind is of the body. The concept of ekstasis precisely captures this dialectic process. The relation between body as a sign, self as a triadic sign (Peirce 1958), and society as a triadic sign gives rise to sense, or an interpretant, which is a new sign, from which new semiotic and social relations emerge. What we have here is a post-dualistic vision of the constitution of body, self, and society.

THE ECSTATIC BODY AND STRUCTURES OF EMBODIED DIFFERENCE

As an evaluative process, the constitution of the ecstatic body is also the genesis of socio-semiotic structures of bodily differences. In fact, the ecstatic body is relational and comparative; its meanings and values emerge out of a reflexive looking-glass process whereby the qualitative potential of one’s body is dependent on an evaluative contrast with others. I may feel deficient in muscular mass, for example, in comparison to my perception of your muscular mass. Or you may feel obese as you sense the thinness of my body build. The point is that the constitution of the ecstatic body is necessarily rooted in difference.

From our pragmatist perspective there is nothing morally improper with the existence of such differences. Difference is the condition of existential uniqueness. The absence of difference would mean that no tension exists in organic interaction, and the absence of tension would mean the lack of potential for existential growth. Without the tension emanating from structures of differences transaction would be empty and meaningless and esthetic experience would be impossible (Dewey 1934). As Alexander (1987: 124) puts it, for Dewey meaning arises in a world in which there is “structure and destruction; one in which action matters because it can effect a
reconstruction; one in short, in which there are both stable and precarious features so that growth rather than static, bare existing is the mark of life.”

A problem, therefore, occurs when the structure of embodied differences is reduced and stasis becomes the norm. This is not an uncommon occurrence. Many of the discourses on health, fitness, and appearance abundant in popular culture and everyday life (see Edgley, this volume) indeed prescribe that the bodies of the citizens of our polity resemble this body size rather than those, this shape rather than that, and this style, look, etc. rather than another (see M. Atkinson, this volume).

Embodied social inequality is therefore not the inevitable product of organic interaction, but instead the unfortunate byproduct of the discursive and practical solidification of ideologies. Such discursive and practical solidification results in the constitution of shared social habit (Crossley 2001). Such social habits have a direct consequence in the process of formation of the embodied self. The “Me,” for instance, may feel the stigma associated with certain socially shared habits and feel a sense of deficiency and dissatisfaction toward one’s ecstatic body. As Crossley (2001: 150) puts it, all societies “involve basic systems of classification which are focused upon the body or particular ‘markers’ thereon. And these systems of classification both construct and enforce a particular definition of the me, creating significant forms of structural (vertical) differentiation.”

Needless to say, the embodied self is reflexive and following Mead (1934) it would be an obvious mistake to reduce the self to the “Me.” Then again, what may (and does) frequently happen is that the extent to which certain habits are commonly shared and regularly unchallenged results in the stasis of habits of recognition.

A clearer understanding of this can be achieved by way of distinction among types of habit. In Art as Experience Dewey (1934) differentiates between habits of recognition and perception. In recognition the meaning of an object is merely dependent on previous habits of interpretation,
whereas in perception the meaning of an object comes to live through a novel sensation of its unique qualities. Many of our mundane transactions with the world are based on recognition rather than perception and herein lies the foundation for sociological and cultural criticism: whenever vertical structures of differentiation become so habitual that they effectively reach a relatively enduring static hegemony people temporarily lose their capacity for novel and creative sensation. This is what happens, for example, when we recognize beauty in always the same forms, shapes, sizes, colors, types, and tones prescribed by hegemonic social discourses. And this is what happens when we aspire to have and to be the body prescribed by ideologies of gendered beauty. When this happens ideologies become embodied in habits of recognition that end up shaping the ecstatic body of self and others in unjust and unequal ways; unjust and unequal because stasis recognition curbs the dynamic potential of ecstatic esthetic evaluation. In other words, the potential of body-ekstasis is stymied; bodies are either appealing or not on the basis of discriminatory hegemonic prescriptions. In those cases, the reduction of potential difference generates in many people dissatisfaction with one’s body, and dissatisfaction becomes therefore a normative discontent.

CONCLUSIONS

We have detailed the inherent dualism implied and evoked in the concept of body image. We have also crafted an alternative framework suggesting that esthetic body assessments (poorly framed as “body image”) are actively fashioned in the margins between stasis and ekstasis. We have further located those dynamics in classic pragmatist and socio-semiotic perspectives that are central to interactionist thought and practice. We conclude with brief commentary on body-stasis, body-ekstasis, and the potential of liminality.

As previously discussed potential is significant, not only to body-ekstasis but also to classic pragmatism and socio-semiotics as well as contemporary symbolic interaction as manifest in concepts such as emergence. Indeed, Blumer’s (1969:18) “play and fate of meaning” owes to a
legacy of potential and continues to characterize symbolic interaction. Our formulation of body-ekstasis is equally pregnant with potentiality, not only because it relates to the classic literatures we have already cited, but also because potentiality is ever-present in circumstances of liminality. Indeed, the potential of body-ekstasis is bred in the fertile dynamics of liminality.

Our characterization of body-ekstasis significantly owes to Victor Turner (1967, 1969). Akin to interactionist formulations (see Waskul 2005), Turner suggests that all social worlds are composed of two parallel, yet seemingly contrasting models. On one hand, there exists society as “a structure of jural, political, and economic positions, offices, statuses, and roles in which the individual is only ambiguously grasped behind the social persona.” On the other hand there is “society as communitas;” experienced in betwixt and between moments—at the interstices and edges of norm-governed and institutionalized social order—where “concrete idiosyncratic individuals…confront one another integrally, and not as ‘segmentalized’ into statuses and roles” (Turner 1969: 177). One juxtaposes the other in a relationship that is mediated by moments of liminality, a condition that is “neither here nor there” but “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1969: 95). Turner’s model magnifies how individuals are necessarily tied to the social world through institutionally grounded statuses and social roles, yet also experience with equal necessity moments of ekstasis where “men [and women] are released from structure…only to return to structure revitalized by their experience…what is certain is that no society can function adequately without this dialectic” (Turner 1969: 129). The same dynamic is implied in our conceptualization of body-ekstasis.

Body-ekstasis is a liminal moment in which the qualitative and esthetic potential of one’s body is evaluated and re-evaluated. This liminal moment is necessarily active and is, indeed, an act—an act of what Dewey would call “perception” “in which an object’s meaning includes its unique qualities as well as a person’s culturally conditioned habits of interpretation” (Rochberg-
Halton 1982: 171). In this way, body-ekstasis juxtaposes body-stasis. In fact, body-stasis is fully situated in the exact opposite—what Dewey (1934) calls “recognition”: “an object's meaning is solely dependent on previous [passive] habits of interpretation.” Like Turner, we suggest that body-stasis and body-ekstasis juxtapose one another, but not as a dualism, instead as a relationship that is actively mediated by liminality: aesthetic experiences that stand over and against the experiences of merely recognizing the aesthetic potential of one's body and other people's body in everyday life; it is a kind of liminal perceptual experience where both the aesthetic potential of one’s body and others’ may be re-evaluated in a context of loosened temporal, physical, and normative constraints. The ecstatic-body transcends the static-body and, in that transcendence, potentiality is realized.

NOTES

1. For Saussure the most elementary unit of difference—which stood as the basic ontological genesis of all forms of difference—was the relation between a signified and a signifier. A signifier is a sound-image of a signified, that is, a mental concept invoked by a signifier. Within this idealist model the unity of signifier and signified—regardless of the materiality or lack thereof of the signified—constitutes a sign.

2. Within much of sociology body-imagery refers to the circulation of images and discourses of and about the body in the mass media and public discourses and while it does not always get at an individual's introspective assessment of physical appearance, research on body-imagery uses a variety of indicators (some quantitative, some qualitative) to suggest that many people are dissatisfied with their body.

3. Significantly, Mead (1934: 273-281) recognized the significance of ekstasis in remarkably similar terms. Ekstasis is implicit in moments of “fusion” of the “I” and the “me,” which Mead described as “particularly precious” situations that lead to “intense emotional experiences” of a kind and quality that he likens to religious and patriotic exaltation: “This, we feel, is the meaning of life”.
WORKS CITED


