

RETHINKING GIRLS: PHENOMENOLOGY AND THE BODY¹

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Abstract

Rethinking Girls: Phenomenology and the Body explores the lived experiences of young adolescent girls, theories around the body, and the social, historical, and political burden of *not-being-enough* in American culture. More specifically, this dissertation project is about a group of seventh grade girls of color from a majority-minority middle school in a southeastern region of the United States who participated in a yearlong writing group with me and the beautiful ways in which they worked to resist the disciplined parameters American culture inscribes on bodies every day. Using phenomenology as both a philosophy and a methodology, I asked what it was like for the eight girls in the study to experience what I refer to as *bodily-not-enoughness*: moments when someone or something was telling one of girls in the writing group she was not enough *of something* in her lived or physical body (e.g., not thin-enough, athletic-enough, pretty-enough, white-enough, feminine-enough, English-speaking-enough, smart-enough, popular-enough, or wealthy-enough). I drew on key philosophers in phenomenology (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962), as well as queer, postcolonial, and poststructural philosophers (Ahmed, 2006; Caputo, 1988; Fanon, 1987) to suggest that in those moments some kind of resistance came into being, which I call *talking-back-TO*.

Rethinking Girls: Phenomenology and the Body calls for educators and researchers to acknowledge the importance of bodies in education and education research—how bodies are constantly perceived and misperceived, disciplined and controlled—if we want to reconfigure the role of embodied experiences in the development of knowledge. If we as K-12 educators, teacher educators, and qualitative researchers could move away from the learned belief that as “adults” we have somehow transcended “adolescence” in a way that excuses us from the responsibility and

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opportunity of learning from and with young adolescents, and could instead move toward listening to them *differently*, we might be able to understand better how young adolescent girls experience the world through their bodies, as well as observe the amazing ways they are always, already drawing on resources to *be enough* in their bodies. More importantly, we might move beyond the tendency to totalize the bodies of girls of color from lower and working class backgrounds within deficit perspectives in order to create more spaces where educators and researchers alike can perceive traditionally marginalized young adolescent bodies as possibilities rather than problems.