
Book Review

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Gemma Commane, *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies: Sex, Performance and Safe Femininity*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020, 239 pp. £85.00, ISBN: 9781788311267

Female sexuality occupies an ever-contested space within women's performance of femininities and the feminist debates surrounding them. Despite relative societal liberalization regarding queer identities and female sexuality, these are still subjected to policing through social norms and a binary persists between good/clean and bad/dirty women. In *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies* Dr Gemma Commane explores the experiences and meaning-making of bad/dirty women who use their bodies and orifices, but not for male pleasure – these women who are seen to be problematic, pornographic, unsafe. Indeed, bad/dirty/leaky bodies are often associated with working class women and thus assigned less social value.

While there has been increased visibility of women's subcultures since Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber's call to arms in 1976 (McRobbie and Garber, 1976), discussion and recognition of women's subcultural practices which embody bad or dirty femininities are less common. Perhaps due to the intimate and underground nature of kinky, erotic performances it has been difficult for academics to access and research this subculture. However, *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies* is a valuable addition to an existing, but limited, field of research occupied by the likes of Feona Attwood, Samantha Holland and Debra Ferreday regarding alternative subcultures of women's bodily/sexual performativity.

In this book Commane presents original, empirical, ethnographic research that provides a robust contribution to our understanding of 'dangerous' femininities. This research is based on stories and performances gathered from numerous online spaces, over 42 events and over 170 performances involving 109 performers within the UK kink and fetish scene. It also features five case-studies of performers Empress Stah, Ms T, Doris La Trine, RubberDoll and Mouse (two of whom were interviewed). The performative nature of gender and sexuality, particularly through staged performances of BDSM, tease and kink, means that the employment of ethnographic methods by an insider researcher had much to offer this study.

Commane's research investigates subcultural and popular cultural performances of erotica and kink to explore the power of the 'Bad Girl' in her ability to navigate, queer and challenge heteronormative expectations of women's sexual identities, and thereby dismantle the socially constructed binaries of good/bad clean/dirty femininities. In doing so, Commane critiques the contemporary revival of burlesque and popular culture's references to women's 'bad' sexuality; she argues that these do not challenge mainstream heteronormative readings of women's sexualities but instead provide socially approved, often temporary, representations of sexual self-confidence. Further, Commane utilizes

these examples to shed light on how good/clean women can also be complicit in heteronormative subjugation through their othering and marginalization of bad/dirty women.

A key theme of this book is how Commane's participants use biography and alternative embodied knowledge as a form of activism in shaping socio-political discourses regarding femininity and women's sexualities. These 'Bad Girls' are shown to be outspoken about their own biographies - they enjoy their own sexuality and how dirt/filth shows up in it. They also have significant agency and independence in how they display their bodies and do not require patriarchal, hetero approval in doing so. Although their performances disrupt the boundaries of acceptability at the micro level, Commane also explores how these women have sought to challenge discourses at the meso and macro levels too (within their industry and internationally).

However, a limitation briefly acknowledged by the author is how effective the profiled 'Bad Girls' really are in dismantling patriarchal expectations regarding women's bodies when the acts of dirt or filth are portrayed by white, conventionally attractive, and (largely) able bodies. Furthermore, the tension between mainstream performers (such as revival-burlesquers and pop-stars) and Commane's 'Bad Girls' is unresolved for the reader; some of the case-study performers have international profiles and earn money through relatively mainstream methods, including heteronormatively aesthetically-beautiful pornographic content (RubberDoll) and aerial fitness training (Empress-Stah). Yet this complexity and fluidity is not necessarily a problem; rather, it re-asserts the value in moving away from binaries of 'mainstream' and 'subcultural' to demarcate authenticity or feminism, and instead helps us to identify the multitude of possibilities in how women can 'do' femininity.

Based on a highly detailed and in-depth study, Commane provides an important account of women who are often obscured from public view and discourse. The study achieves its aim in showing how bad/dirty women challenge heterocentric worldviews through the performance of dangerous femininities. As such, *Bad Girls, Dirty Bodies* would be of interest to women generally, but particularly those seeking feminist, non-heteronormative representations of female sexuality. Its insights will also appeal to the global kink/fetish community. From an academic perspective, it serves as a valuable resource for researchers and teachers in the interdisciplinary fields of culture, gender and sexuality.

Reference

McRobbie A and Garber J (1976) Girls and subcultures. In: Hall S and Jefferson T (eds) *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain*, 1st ed. Oxon: Routledge, 209–223.

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