



Christine Caldwell



Lucia Bennett Leighton



Reviewed by Kevin Jeffrey Goldwater

On August 9th, 2014, Michael Brown, an unarmed black teenager, was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri.

On August 10th, 2014, I walked into the Chicago Cultural Center for one of my triweekly choir rehearsals, completely unaware of the events that occurred the day before.

As I approached my locker, I saw a few friends in a circle, seemingly consoling someone. I asked my locker partner what was going on, and he explained that our friend Alexis was sobbing over the Brown shooting. I quickly googled the event, read up on the facts, and responded to myself, "oh wow, that's really terrible." I understood something bad had happened, but felt no connection or an effect to my world. I looked up from my phone to see Alexis and heard her explain how terrified she was to see her older brother, Julius, simply walk out their front door. She explained that it can be terrifying to be a black person in America.

I stared at this person—a black teenage girl who I have known since she entered middle school; this girl is several years my junior, however from observing her resilience, joy and talent since meeting her I looked up to, admired, and adored her. Alexis is known to all around her for having an immense vocal talent that we haven't seen paralleled, a talent so natural that it brings joy to those around her; she is a close friend of mine who shared a million memories and a million songs. I looked at her, and I became angry.

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A million thoughts swarmed my mind, and I was furious. *It is ridiculous*, I thought, *that this girl, who I look up to, would ever be treated differently from myself, just based on our skin! What the hell is that about?*

I hardly paid attention in rehearsal. I could not fathom someone treating Alexis worse than myself in any situation based on her appearance. I grew up in institutions that prided themselves on diversity, where the administrators were typically women of color and the student body (though majorly higher SES) was filled with students of all races. I had not been confronted by the fact that my peers (and higher ups) could receive different treatment. I had assumed everything “racially” was pretty much solved after the Civil Rights Movement.

While I was as old as a senior in high school, I was not aware of my white privilege, the position of being white in our world and the ways that whiteness creates ‘otherness’ for those who are not. To think of Alexis or her family, or my beloved teachers or my choir directors as ‘others’ in our society, as groups that are already pushed a step behind, became a wake-up call.

In the years following Ferguson, resistance and uprising have increased and become more in the forefront of our world than I had seen before. While institutional and societal structures have been formed against women, people of color, queer, fat, incarcerated, indigenous and disabled (and the various intersections of these) people for for the seventeen years I’d been alive, these atrocities have only recently been exposed to me and, I believe, a recent awareness for many of my white male-appearing counterparts as well.

Movements like Black Live Matters, #MeToo, the Women’s March, Sanctuary Campuses, DAPL, anti-Islamaphobia and trans rights have created a new era that not only identifies and exposes the inherent societal issues that create ‘others,’ but works and reckons with them to end them.

It is in this era that I believe Christine Caldwell and Lucia Bennet Leighton’s co-edited anthology entitled, *Oppression and the Body: Roots, Resistance and Resolutions*, comes right on time. Referenced in their introduction, [academic, journalist and activist Ta-Nehisi Coates](#) says:

“But all our phrasing—*race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white*

privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body” (Coates, *Between the World and Me*).

It is in the spirit of Coates’ words that this book was written. Understanding now that not only are institutional and societal structures are damaging to one’s mental state, but also to the body and spirit (and the three combined), we can begin understanding oppression as a physical force, one that regularly dubs bodies as ‘less than’ or ‘other’. Fourteen authors come together in *Bodies* to share their stories, their experiences, and their solutions regarding embodied experience of being ‘other’ in today’s world.

Editors Caldwell and Leighton begin the book with an aptly named preface “Who We Are and Why We’re Here,” discussing their experiences in life and the embodied oppressions they have taken on by simply existing as themselves. Of particular note to myself is something that has become one of my favorite parts of any book—authors sharing their experiences of their experience—Caldwell and Leighton noted: “We questioned if we should do this project. We talked about ‘well-meaning white-lady-syndrome’; we considered the irony of two cisgender white women asking people of color and gender-non-conforming folks to share their stories of oppression with us, which can be in and of itself a reiteration of oppression. In the end, we affirmed that this project needed doing and privilege is reinforced when we stay comfortable silent...” This realization of their place as white, cis women and their relation to others is particularly important, as they are examples of what they are trying to encourage from this.

Reflecting on their place in the world and how that world effects them, these women set the tone for each contributor by sharing raw, honest, and impassioned presentations of self.

The book is divided into three parts, each exploring types of bodies and the different forms of oppression that take over.

The first part, "The Oppression of the Body in Societies," discusses how oppression in general forms into trauma, how one's identity of the body develops, the influences of our body-earth connection, and finally how shame effects the body. This first part allows the reader to understand oppression on a multitude of levels, from development to modern day, and the various ways that oppression has been manifested and manifests itself. Leighton opens the section educating the reader on the forms of trauma delegated to non-normative bodies, with Caldwell then exploring the immense intersection of body and identity and the plays between them. Jeanine Canty is the first contributor introduced after the editors, with a remarkable work discussing the general fear and mistrust of both the biological sphere and the body, and the interplay of the two limiting themselves from freedom. Katie Mathey closes the first section, bravely discussing her own experiences with internalized fat phobia. She shares how she was able to overcome her self phobia to achieve an embodiment of health and happiness, then challenges us to fight our own automatic thoughts and judgments.

The second part, "Marginalized Bodies in Society," focuses on specific types of bodies and the oppression created by that specificity. It is in this section that we see the themes from the first section in action. The first entry by Eli Clare explores the impact of gendering bodies and the variety of issues stemming from our understanding of ability and disability. Rae Johnson then explores being in a queer body and questioning every day habits to reclaim the body. Of a particular note is the release of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* in 2010, followed by the documentary *13th*, which have started a new age of dialogue around the state of prison and prisoners. Lalo Paingco Rivera provides new and expansive information about such in his chapter in *Oppression*. Rivera discusses the impact of being incarcerated on the body, particularly reducing the body as property of the state, or even private prisons. Citing examples like cavity and strip searches, the acts of tattooing and simply being numbered cause the reader to challenge the notions of what a prison may actually be.

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Cara Sherrel continues the entries by discussing ancestry and the various ways that we have rooted discussions and understanding from a white basis. Particularly, Sherrel discusses the effect of white supremacy and the demand to conform to whiteness on her and her family's bodies. Beit Gorski then closes the second part by discussing the medicalization of the bodies, especially trans bodies who have to face an abhorred amount of prejudice, ignorance and embarrassment from medical situations.

The third part, "Embodied Action," is dedicated to solutions and actions. Each author in this section discusses moving forward and challenges readers may face. They write about the myriad ways that bodies can be reclaimed, ranging from resilience to code switching to grieving. Jen LaBarbera discusses her experience as a fem, queer, brown, sexual assault survivor, and the issues stemming from both dealing and *not* dealing with the oppression she experiences. Marcia Warren Edelman introduces her theory of 'embodied code switching,' which I viewed as a valuable tool for any person considering their multiple identities. Leighton and Caldwell team-up to present a model designed to work on and through ongoing bodily oppression. Beit Gorski closes the section with group intervention work for trans people to work through their body dysphoria.

This collection contains an almost overwhelming amount of information that is not only relevant but also challenging for readers on an emotional level. Remarkably, however, the multitude of themes and multilayered groups are allotted space and author reflection that render them digestible and understandable. Because of this, the collection allows the reader to reflect, reckon with, and challenge their own understanding of their body, their identity and their place in

society. Supplemented with poems and works of visual art from activists "whose work often comments on societal structures," the contributions are rendered not only as immensely valuable works to be praised, but as stories of the self that are quite relatable.

I see this collection as an invaluable collection that we, as a society, need. Understanding the ways our siblings, internationally and of different make-up, are experiencing themselves in the world makes room for empathy, resistance, and active change. Personally, after years of work and research, I learned so much about Alexis' experiences, my own experience as a queer person and that of people whose experiences and stories I've yet to hear after reading this book. While I can never truly understand the lived experience of other identities, my understandings have been magnified and challenged, and as a white male presenting person I am thankful for the chance to reckon and expand my knowledge. This collection serves as a eye-opening intersection of personal experience, somatic science and the psychotherapy of oppression that both educates the reader and earns a center place on the psychological zeitgeist book shelf.

Kevin Jeffrey Goldwater studies applied psychology with a minor in music and social & cultural analysis at New York University. He is set to graduate in May of 2019. Born in Chicago, Kevin has done immersive research on psychoanalytic theory and the role of gender in today's media. Most recently, Kevin has been working in cultural psychology, focusing on the impact of colonialism on indigenous and minority patients. In addition to working for *Somatic Psychotherapy Today*, he writes reviews for the *International Psychotherapy Journal*.



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