Presenting the Body as an Accumulation Strategy with Regards to Self Identified Queer Communities

David Harvey’s piece, entitled “The Body as an Accumulation Strategy”, offers an important Marxist critique of the way that the labouring body participates in the exchange and circulation of various forms of capital. He presents the body as “the irreducible locus for the determination of all values, meanings, and significations” in an attempt to position the body “as a measure of all things” (Harvey, 2000). In doing so, he looks to shed light on the ways in which meaning and values are determined. His efforts reflect a desire to position the body as something that transcends cultural boundaries. Here, I will offer a functional application of Harvey’s arguments concerning compromised body’s ability to partake of the capitalist market’s exchange of variable capital. In doing so, I will argue that post-feminist expressions of the self as deviant, alternative, or even just unique, are limiting the ability of self identifying queer individuals to effectively stake a claim in the market. I will identify pop culture representations of post feminist queer identity as limiting to individuals who identify as queer or transgendered, especially in the context of Lady Gaga’s work and televised representation of queer promiscuity.

Harvey begins his work by making two fundamental propositions. The first is that the body is “an unfinished project” (Harvey, 2000). It is prone to periods of evolution, and change as a result of both internal and external forces, which he sees as being most popularly analyzed through the lenses of psychoanalysis and social constructivist approaches respectively. This is an important point, as it mirrors the arguments that gender theorists have been making for some time now. Gender and sexuality are by no means fixed, and are subject to frequent change over the course of an individual’s lifetime, in the same way that Harvey presents the body as an
evolutionary thing. Indeed, when an individual does present a relatively static sexuality, it is only through conscious gendered performativity that they are able to do so (Pascoe, 2012). The ability to enact hegemonic masculinities or ideal femininities supports Harvey’s claim that the body is an important site of socially constructed and supported values (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008).

His second proposition is that the body is not a closed or sealed system. Rather, its creation and sustainability is only made possible by its relation to complex processes (Harvey, 2000). This, for Harvey is somewhat problematic, as it means that the body internalizes the processes by which it is created, supported, and sustained. This makes meaningful analyses of the body as a measure of things inaccessible, since we must first locate that which the body is being formed in relation to. Put simply, the body is influenced to behave in a certain way due to the pressures exerted upon it by external and pre-existing social systems. It then evolves to operate within the parameters of this system so well that it becomes nearly impossible to determine whether the body is determining the structure of the system, or the system is determining the structure of the body. This reciprocal relationship mirrors the struggle of early sociologists to determine whether gender is reliant on biological sex, or whether the two are even related to each other at all (Siltanen & Doucet, 2008). This is a prime example of why the body not being a closed system is problematic for Harvey; for so long, male genitalia were assumed to be a marker of heterosexuality, until notions of alternative and deviant explorations of human sexuality began to become more mainstream.

Harvey expands on this idea of the body as being internally contradictory by pointing to some of the processes by which it functions in an attempt to position the body as a true measure of all things. He argues that the body cannot accomplish anything independently of certain socio-ecological factors. More specifically, the body cannot be said to perform any activity
entirely without the influence of “the technological, physical, social, and economic environment in which the body has its being” (Harvey, 2000). As such, Harvey is effectively arguing that any challenge a dominant system must actually pose challenges to the very processes by which the body operates and identifies itself relationally. This is a dangerous proposition, as any attempt to drastically alter the dominant structures of society rejects also the body’s position within that structure. He is careful to argue that the body is not simply a passively receptive product. In the same way that the body is shaped by external forces, it is also capable of ordering and contextualizing these processes in ways that are actually transformative to its environment too. As such, if the body is so adept at internalizing all things, then it can truly be said to be the truest measure of all things.