

# The Body as Vehicle for Transformation

Sonya Renee Taylor (2018) *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (First Edition). Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

## Reviewed by Shameeka Smalling<sup>1</sup>

*The Body Is Not an Apology* (TBINAA) is Sonya Renee Taylor's contribution to the world of transformation through the power of radical self-love. In this powerful work, she discusses body shame and its oppressive impact on our bodies while telling us that we can in fact reclaim our natural intelligence, what she calls radical self-love. The book is not about self-help but frames the chapters and sections with radical reflections and unapologetic inquiries that ask the reader questions meant to move them onto a trajectory from body shame and guilt, past self-acceptance, to radical self-love. The ultimate goal is global transformation; her framework embraces both individualism and societal relationships through an intersectional and systems lens.

*The Body is Not an Apology* was first a poem, then a global movement before being born into a book. Sonya Renee Taylor is a black, queer, feminist, poet, educator, thought leader, and Founder and Radical Executive Director of The Body is Not an Apology, a digital media and education company that focuses on radical self-love as the vehicle for social justice and global transformation. With over one million followers in 140 countries, TBINAA has a vast global audience, which means the book's audience is inclusive of all members of society. Taylor rejects the duality of academic work and self-help book, using inquiry to educate and, hopefully, help the reader to transform. It successfully illustrates how we, the readers, may have come to body shame and how it impacts us in society and provides the tools to change our thinking to that of radical self-love, reclaiming our natural intelligence and eventually transforming the world/finding liberation.

*The Body is Not an Apology* starts chapter one, Making Self Love Radical, by shaping the conversation around the ontology that we all have a body and articulates the intersectionality of the body. According to Taylor, all oppression is enacted through the body, therefore liberation from body shame and judgment begins with radical self-love. This is through the Three Peaces, peace with not understanding, with difference, and with your body. In chapter two, Shame, Guilt and Apology – Then and Now, she introduces us to the anatomy of body shame in ourselves and society through body shame origin stories, the Body-Shame Profit Complex (BSPC), and Body Terrorism. This discussion transitions to the crux of the book in chapter three, Building a Radical Self-Love Practice in an Age of Loathing, making peace with your body. Taylor explains that “living a radical self-love life is a process of de-indoctrination” (p. 59) and introduces a process of “thinking doing being”. Taylor then describes the movement from individual to transformational radical self-love with the Four Pillars of Practice- taking out the toxic, mind matters, unapologetic

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action, and collective compassion. In chapter four, *A New Way Ordered by Love*, TBINAA moves from the individual to societal impact. She discusses implicit bias through the analogy of speaking French, and circles back to in-group-out-group bias, which she introduces earlier in the book. Taylor states, “we must deconstruct body terrorism in ourselves and others to dismantle the systems and structures of body terrorism” (p.81). According to Taylor, this personal transformation will lead to world transformation. In the fifth and final chapter, *Radical Self-Love Toolkit*, Taylor houses the ten toolkit pieces under the four pillars of practice. Of note is that she uses these practical tools to teach us to love our bodies, and therefore others, more. Finally, Taylor acknowledges that for her, the answer to what liberation looks like is for every human to live in radical self-love.

Dozens of books exist about self-love; however, there are only two books on radical self-love: *The Body is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love*, and *Radical Self-Love: A Guide to Loving Yourself and Living Your Dreams* (Darling, 2016). Gala Darling is widely known as the self-love guru and her book promises to be a tool for people to find their way to self-love. The book is designed to help the reader love themselves first and moves on to loving others, and then provides tools for self-love in the final chapter. The books do not focus only on the individual but delve into the complexity of relationships with others. *The Body in Not an Apology* is distinct in that the conversation is multidimensional; it is about dismantling body shame through radical self-love and using that radical self-love to love others enough to begin dismantling oppressive systems.

The book is self-described as “a global movement guided by love.” Taylor uses the body-shame origin stories to initiate the conversation about our relationship with difference. Through her definition and description of body terrorism the discussion of body-shame and the Body-Shame Profit Complex become much more significant. It demonstrates that society is one of laws that oppress bodies of all types through body terrorism. It gives an individual a lens into how loving themselves more can lead to being a contributor to a better society. The reader can expect to move toward radical self-love, and this will in turn lead to better treatment of others, which moves from the individual to the systemic lens of “a more just and compassionate world” (p. 56). Transitioning from body shame to radical self-love means looking at systems that oppress the body and disrupting them.

On the surface, *the Body is Not an Apology* is about body empowerment. But the book also addresses the fact that oppression is enacted and held within the body. This is relevant to the discourse Resmaa Menakem engages in *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies* (Menakem, 2017). Like the trauma that Menakem says lives within black, white, and blue bodies, in her own way Taylor argues that oppression is a somatic experience. In recent years, the Black Lives Matter Movement, issues of police violence against black bodies, school shootings, all speak to terror that is lived and experienced within the body. TBINAA is a transformative read specifically because it defines and describes body terrorism for the reader. The urgency of violence in today’s society speaks to the need for this book now.

*The Body is Not an Apology* interested me because of my research on the concept of holding space. Multiple definitions exist for holding space. According to transnational Black feminist, Farah Tanis (n.d.):

To hold space is to be present and contain the immediate and continuous energetic shift created when another breaks with silence. It is being there, present for another. It is to act as a stand, bear witness, create and sustain physical and emotional safety, and to nurture trust at the same time.

This definition, which comes from a transnational Black feminist perspective, speaks to the space that is held for healing. Another definition of holding space is “walking alongside another without judgment or attachment to the outcome. We don’t try to fix or control we just are in the moment with them” (Plett, 2015). It is creating an energetic container for emergence, growth, development, expansion, healing, transcendence, and manifestation of ideas to occur. Holding space is a needed element in all healing. When we engage radical self-love, we are increasing our capacity to love others, which in turn increases our capacity to hold space. This can help create transformation in individuals and organizations, but to hold space for others we must first hold space for ourselves, and that begins with loving oneself. I looked for books on loving the self before, but they did not feel transformational to me. Reading about radical self-love in *TBINAA*, it hit me like an epiphany. I needed to re-evaluate my self-concept and how to engage my body. It brings me back to my work in holding space. As I answered the Unapologetic Inquiries and unpacked my body shame, it increased the capacity for holding space within my own body. This book, by working on an individual and systemic level, gave me tools for my research around holding space. It also brought me back to me something that was elusive, that “we know that the answer has always been love” (Taylor, 2018, p. xiii). *TBINAA* is a tool to use love within my own research and work and I believe this book will help any reader to do the same.

## References

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