
Rachele Dini
Body and Nation: The Global Realm of US Body Politics in the Twentieth Century brings together an impressive range of essays, thus delivering on its promise to “interrogate the connections among the body, the nation and the world in twentieth-century US history” (1). Through twelve elegantly written chapters that build on the so-called “bodily turn” in the humanities and social sciences, the book re-examines events in US history by attending to the bodies involved in them. These include the bodies of President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Cuban and Mexican immigrants; Filipino sex workers forced to undergo medical health inspection during the American-Philippine War, and shell-shocked American soldiers; Circus performers, and body-builders; Japanese-American film star Anna May Wong, and Korean-American diver Sammy Lee; the mixed-race children of African-American soldiers stationed in Germany, and the bodies of Vietnamese casualties of war. Together, the essays explore the role of physical and symbolic bodies in areas as disparate as international warfare, propaganda, health legislation, race relations and the construction of gender and beauty. The authors show these different topics to be closely related, while the treatment of recurring themes (masculinity, physical fitness and national power; disease as a metaphor for otherness; torture as a means to stamp it out) in the individual essays complement rather than replicate each other—an impressive accomplishment in itself.
In the opening essay, Paul A. Kramer shows how the inspection of Filipino and Japanese prostitutes’ bodies by US military personnel was intended to prevent the “contamination” of soldiers, and by extension, the US body politic, by a “mongrel” populace assumed to be riddled with sexually transmitted diseases. The regulation of these women’s bodies became part of a wider debate about US military occupation, colonialism, and the nation’s “own sovereignty and purity in a globalized world” (37). While doubtlessly placed at the beginning for reasons of chronology, Kramer’s essay provides a useful way into the book as a whole: the US’ long-standing anxieties about the effects of miscegenation, the perceived links between foreign bodies and disease, and the synecdochic relationship between bodily health and national security form important strands of all the chapters. In most instances, moreover, they overlap: in their very different ways, each essay shows the extent to which racial segregation, immigration quotas and eugenics have been promoted through lexicons of self-improvement and physical wellness. Indeed, Shirley Jennifer Lim’s account of the cultivation of Anna May Wong’s transnational image (Chapter Five), and Mary Ting Yi Lui’s analysis of Sammy Lee’s role in disseminating goodwill during the decolonization of Asia (Chapter Ten), both show how mixed-race bodies have been deployed to promote a vision of America as multicultural, inclusive, and benevolent, while obscuring the endurance of racist policies.

The originality of the individual authors’ approaches to their subject is to be commended. As the editors themselves note, studies of history and international relations from a bodily perspective have proliferated in recent decades: these essays show the topic to be far from exhausted, and the very different narratives their investigation might elicit. For example, Janet M. Davis and Shannon Fitzpatrick both examine how physical fitness was used to promote America’s strength internationally, as well as to equate physical fitness with “Americanness.” Davis shows the “inextricable link” between the American circus’ transformed image, at the turn of the century, into a site of athletic vigor and upstanding morals and a “larger symbiotic process of bodybuilding, nation-building, and empire-building in which the vitality of the child and that of the nation were mutually dependent” (43). Once viewed as the home of myriad “subversive bodies”—freaks, thieves and sexual deviants—the circus came to be known as “an essential building block of patriotism and citizenship, and a powerful form of international influence” (43). Intriguingly, Davis relates this transformation to the aims of the Playground Association of America, which sought to “create fit American citizens out of immigrant children through structured and well-supervised play” (45). Equally fascinating is Fitzpatrick’s account of the role health and fitness magazine Physical Culture played in globally disseminating an image of American athleticism “fit to regenerate and lead an ailing ‘Anglo-Saxon’ civilization” (85). While the magazine’s ethos bore strong eugenicist undertones, Fitzpatrick argues that these were
countered by the publication of contributions (confessional letters, photographs, and accounts of self-transformation) from its multi-ethnic and immigrant working-class readership. The publication of photos of non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon readers “may have operated to destabilize exclusionary projections of the US body politic and racialised notions of fitness and modernity” (97). She calls this phenomenon “transnational participatory pastiche”—a term that can be easily applied to the gender bending and racial mixing discussed in the other essays. It can be seen, for instance, in Frank Costiglia’s account of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s fluid self-presentation as both a body capable of surmounting illness (and thus leading the nation’s own economic recovery), and possessed of a flexible masculine identity that lent itself to “flirting” with other heads of state.

Alongside these accounts of fluid, and in some cases hopeful, self-fashioning however are harrowing analyses of bodies regulated, constricted, marked, tortured or killed. Natalie Molina’s essay about the inhumane treatment of Mexican migrant workers demonstrates how the lexicon of cleanliness as hygiene has been used to justify racial segregation and abuse. Outbreaks of typhus in the migrants’ living quarters were interpreted not as a sign of poor living conditions, but of the risk they posed of bringing disease into the country, and of their racial inferiority. Many Americans assumed that Mexicans would “eventually disappear in the Southwest because they were not as biologically fit as white Americans” (174). Kristina Shull recounts the Reagan administration’s role in creating a “highly racialized and lucrative private prison and detention industry” (258) that capitalized on the perceived threat of immigrant bodies. Both essays highlight the extent to which US history is a story about the valuation of some bodies over others (a theme that emerges, in a different way, in Wong and Lui’s explorations of the value placed on celebrities that projected the “right” kind of racial hybridity).

Similarly, Brenda Gayle Plummer’s essay on US and German policies regarding the social treatment and citizenship of “brown babies”—the children of black soldiers and white German women—and Emily S. Rosenberg’s examination of the emergence, during the Cold War, of an “American Look” embodied in a white heterosexual female, bring sharply into relief the extent to which bodies are never neutral, and never free from codification and judgment. That some bodies “count” more than others, finally, is made explicit in Marilyn B. Young’s assessment of the US Military’s quantification of Vietnamese casualties (both soldiers and civilians) as a means to calculate how “well” the War was going. The contrast between the Military’s treatment of Vietnamese bodies as markers of progress, and both governments’ subsequent treatment of American soldiers’ bodies, which were identified and returned to their families in an effort to restore relations between the two countries, makes clear whose bodies “count,” and whose are seen as disposable.
The recurring emphasis of these essays on the valuation of bodies adds a fascinating dimension to the collection. The title of Shull’s essay, “No one Wants These People,” which paraphrases Reagan’s own description of the refugees (257), and her citation of the State Department’s refusal to “permit our country to be used as a dumping ground” (245), are textbook examples of what Zygmunt Bauman terms “human waste”—that is, the categorization of migrants and asylum seekers as supernumerary, and disposable.¹ This idea re-surfaces in each of the essays, as the authors identify the ways in which health officials, military personnel, advertisers and media outlets have sought to place individuals in racial hierarchies. It is especially gratifying to see both the last essays in the collection and the epilogue grapple with the shape of biopolitics in the neoliberal era—for example, Young notes how private contractors hired in Afghanistan were issued quotas, giving a clear financial incentive to kill (238).

The book’s epilogue shifts track to attend to invisible bodies—bodies that “deemed dispensable, become obscured from view,” either by government authorities, or by citizens who cannot countenance seeing them and registering what they represent. The editors meditate on the invisibility of victims of nuclear attacks and disasters, as well of the Cold War casualties of US-supported terror and state-orchestrated violence in countries perceived to be vulnerable to communist takeover. They note, too, the methods used to first hide and then justify the torture of suspected terrorists after 9/11, and the emergence of a new rhetoric, in the news media, cinema and television, promoting torture as a justifiable means to vanquish an invisible threat. The discussion of invisible bodies and reluctant gazes seamlessly extends and builds upon the ideas discussed in the individual chapters, providing a dramatic and thought-provoking ending that also opens up new areas of enquiry. It is a testament to the skill of both the editors and the individual authors that the book itself reads not as a series of texts, but as one narrative composed of interlaced strands, each of which contributes to the reader’s understanding of how bodies and nations are constructed, and how these constructions mutually reinforce each other. And it is testament to the richness and complexity of the essays that this review can only cover the surface of the ideas explored: each piece succeeds in providing sprawling but detailed coverage of the topic in question. A compelling read, Body and Nation is a valuable addition to the expanding field of biopolitics, and will be a useful reference for undergraduates, postgraduates and scholars of American studies, history, comparative literature, and media studies.
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AUTHOR

RACHELE DINI

University College London