

Afterword

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The History of the Body: Binaries and Embodiment

Since the 1990s the “bodily turn” has impacted social, economic and political history. Initially developing from gender history and the history of medicine, often in Europe or the Global North, body history is now encompassing more fields and more geographical areas as well. This edited volume *Bodies Beyond Binaries in Colonial and Postcolonial Asia* not only expands the history of the body geographically, it also aims to open up the binaries in which the body is often thought, such as the dichotomy between body and mind or between colonized and colonizer.

Binary thinking was prominent in structuralism but could also be found in the first body histories that were strongly influenced by poststructuralist approaches aiming to deconstruct discursive dichotomies such as man-woman, heterosexual-homosexual, or sane-mad. These histories of the sexed, raced, classed or disabled body aimed to show how discourses that purportedly addressed a biological body actually forwarded cultural, hegemonic norms on gender, race, class or ability and thus performed these norms rather than accurately describing some natural body.¹ In regard to colonialism, Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), influenced by Michel Foucault’s ideas on the connection between power and knowledge, as well as by Jacques Derrida’s notion of deconstruction, is a good example of this approach, even though this book is not generally regarded as part of the history of the body. Said laid bare how Orientalist discourse opposed the indolent, depraved and sensuous native’s body to the Western colonizer’s rational and logical mind.²

While much of the early work in body history was therefore informed by the deconstruction of essentialist discourses on the sexed, raced or disabled body, other approaches can be found as well. Phenomenological approaches, for instance, focus more on how our life worlds are experienced from a first-person point of view. French phenomenologist philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) regarded the body as the primary site of knowing the world: our bodies are our

¹ For an overview of theories used in the history of the body see Willemijn Ruberg, *History of the Body. Theory and History Series* (London: Macmillan International/Red Globe Press, 2020).

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003 [1978]) 38–40.

way of being-in-the-world. Dismissing the traditional Cartesian separation of body and mind, Merleau-Ponty located subjectivity in the body.³

Psychiatrist and postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), born in the French colony of Martinique, criticized and built on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology when he described the mental and bodily experience of being a black man in a colonial world, particularly in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). Fanon argues that it is only in the encounter with the white imagination and white gaze that a phenomenology of blackness, including the experience of skin difference and of being the black Other is revealed. The body is *made* black and its free movement in a colonized and racially oppressive world is restricted by the white gaze and invisible racial boundaries.⁴

Fanon thus demonstrates how cultural conceptions of race work in daily life, experienced in the lived body. Phenomenological approaches highlight embodiment –or the lived body– surrounded by a life-world that is suffused by cultural norms. The notion of embodiment forms another powerful strand in the history of the body: rejecting Cartesian dualism, embodiment rather encompasses the body's relational experiences: with other people, other things and the environment. In chapter 2 of this volume, Samiksha Sehrawat applies Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology as one of three theoretical approaches to explore colonial medical authority in colonial South Asia. Sehrawat's focus on the patients' "lived body" exposes these patients' agency in seeking or leaving biomedical therapy.

Although it remains difficult for historians to describe the lived body from a first-person perspective, since primary sources on these individual experiences are often lacking, the notion of embodiment can still be used to explore how cultural norms are incorporated by the individual body or resisted. In this volume, this becomes particularly visible in chapters that address clothing or hair. In her chapter, Laura Diaz-Estève describes how Filipinos around 1900 showed their political credentials through their dress: "elite men in colonial societies across the world adopted sober and formal European wear to express trustworthiness, responsibility, self-discipline, and respectability". The chapter by Sara Legrandjacques, in turn, identifies how in the 1900s Chinese students were separated from their Indochinese classmates, a separation facilitated by their unusual clothing and hairstyle (shaved heads except for a long tail and their long Manchurian dresses). Legrandjacques argues that students' bodies were politicized and could be used both to rebel against national Chinese or the colonial French enemy. Dress and hairstyle could

³ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Colin Smith (London, [1945]) part I.

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, translated by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, [1952] 2008).

both affirm and reject modernity. Legrandjacques emphasizes that these strategies of dressing reveal multiple meanings associated with westernization.

Clearly, these analyses of Asian embodiment through dress and hairstyling are examples of how the body can be actively used to incorporate or reject political and cultural values. Often, this embodiment is strongly connected to gender. Julia Hauser, in her chapter on physical education in ashrams in India, remarks on gender differences expressed through dress: Hindu women were obliged to wear caps to protect their hair, despite utopian claims on gender neutrality in physical education. The entanglement of gender, power and surveillance also surfaces in the debates about veiling. Many postcolonial scholars have noted how “cultural difference” is perceived to be located in the practice of veiling and how Western notions of the meaning of veiling dismiss the voice of the subaltern, as well as geographical and class differences between practices of veiling.⁵ The woman’s body thus becomes a terrain over which influence is fought. As Samiksha Sehrawat notes in her chapter on medical practices, British female medical doctors disregarded any ethnic rules regarding veiling adopted by their South Asian female patients and showed no concern for their consent. Chie Ikeya, who in her chapter describes the female body of the Burmese Muslim as “a potent embodiment of difference”, blurring the binary frame of the Burmese Buddhist native versus Indian Muslim foreigner, also signals how readers debated the wearing of the burka for Burmese women, as part of the vexing question of how Burmese women should dress in public: modern or conservative? These chapters emphasize how important dress and hairstyle are for the analysis of embodiment.

The Individual and the Social Body as Symbols

The debates on dress and hairstyle do not only show how the notion of embodiment can be used, but also point to another approach to the body prominent in many chapters in this edited volume: to regard the body as symbol and to pinpoint the relationship between the individual and the social body. In the words of anthropologist Mary Douglas: “The human body is always treated as an image of society”.⁶ Douglas posited the existence of two bodies, the self and society or the social body and the physical experience of the body, and argued that “There is a continual exchange of

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *Boundary 2* 12/13 (1984): 333–58. <https://doi.org/10.2307/302821>. Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

⁶ Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*; vol. 3 of Collected works (London/ New York: Routledge, 2003 [1970]) Chapter 5 “The Two Bodies”, 70.

meanings between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other”.⁷ In this vein, Chie Ikeya compares “The spiritually, sexually, and physically exploited body of Burmese converts and wives of Indian Muslim men” to “the forced marriage” of Burma to India under British colonial rule, to be solved by a divorce, both on the personal and on the national level.

Similarly, several other chapters note the importance of physical education or a healthy body for a healthy nation. Elena Valdameri argues that in colonial India women’s bodies as reproducers were, just like men’s bodies, seen as vital for the strength of the nation and therefore concludes that certain sports “shaped not simply the physical body, but the political one”. And Laura Díaz-Esteve mentions how during the 1898 war, in the United States the Philippines were regarded as an “immature body politic” and the Filipinos represented as “a childish and uncivilized population unprepared for self-government”. In addition, the female body of the Filipinas was taken as a symbolic representation of the nation in the representation of female breasts as the country’s resources and their nudity as the savagery of the colony’s inhabitants. In short, the symbolism of the body in Asia, particularly the interaction and metaphorical relationships between the individual and the social or political body, is highlighted in this edited volume, in line with existing approaches in the history of the body which, influenced by work in symbolical anthropology, traced the parallels between the individual body and its representation in nationalist discourse.

Dynamic Bodies

Whereas this (symbolical) relationship between the individual and the social body, especially as it was conceived by Mary Douglas, seems to be static, the chapters in this volume highlight the importance of dynamic change that is a vital part of bodies. Historian Ivan Crozier rightly described the task of the historian of bodies to “consider them in action”:

Another aspect of considering bodies in space and time is an awareness that the “same” body differs according to locale. The body is not used the same way when it is sick, during sex, as it ages, for pleasure, for work, for sport, or when it is represented (according to art or fashion). Bodies may appear to be the one stable aspect of our identity, but when we look at their uses, and the experiences we have through the body, we find that they are malleable, fluid, adaptable entities that are the artificial stratum of life.⁸

⁷ Douglas, *Natural Symbols*, Chapter 5 “The Two Bodies”, 65.

⁸ Ivan Crozier, “Introduction. Bodies in History – The Task of the Historian”, in Idem, ed., *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2010), 1–22, here 21.

Crozier calls this “the underdetermined character of the corporeal”.⁹ In regard to the place of the body in global history, Antoinette Burton made a similar remark when she wrote that the body “is an agent, a force” that is not static:

And in the context of world history, the body has the capacity to register circulation, mobility, processes of exchange and trade, political economies in all their scope and scale—to dramatize, in short, the very connective tissue of globality in its myriad micro and macro forms.¹⁰

As all authors in this volume show, there is not one “Asian body”. Several chapters underline the dynamic quality of the body by showing the role of the body in knowledge circulation and transmission as well as the processes, such as (physical) education, through which the body is shaped to strengthen the nation. Kate Imy’s chapter, by contrast, addresses the collapse of the body and the near disappearance of pre-war racial, gender and power binaries during soldier and civilian internment in the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore in the Second World War. These seemingly solid bodily identities became fluid over a short period of time. Similarly, Zhi Qing Denise Lim takes the case study of the European vagrant in Singapore and other Asian ports to reveal the “deterioration” of racial prestige in the eyes of the colonized, thus also unveiling how solid corporeal identities can fall apart.

The Body as Lens

More attention to the dynamics of the body and its role in processes of making and transmitting knowledge should be one of the aims of the field of the history of knowledge, as well as the history of the body, both in the global North and in the global South. Other new directions include using the body not as an object of study, but as a lens through which to view larger themes. Antoinette Burton already suggested we take “Recourse to the body—not merely as a subject but as a method for apprehending historical processes, vectors of power, capillaries of circulation and materialities of violence and struggle”.¹¹ In recent years, several historical studies have been published that used the body as a lens through which to view slavery, democracy, political theory or human rights.¹² As is noted in the Introduction to

⁹ Crozier, “Introduction. Bodies in History – The Task of the Historian”, 21–22.

¹⁰ Antoinette Burton, “The Body in/as World History”, in Douglas Northrop, ed., *A Companion to World History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012) pp. 272–284, here 276.

¹¹ Burton, “The Body in/as World History”, 275.

¹² Kathleen M. Brown, *Undoing Slavery: Bodies, Race, and Rights in the Age of Abolition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2023); Hedwig Richter, *Demokratie. Eine deutsche Affäre. Vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2020); Charlotte Epstein, *Birth of*

this volume, the body can be used as a “useful heuristic tool” and has already been employed as a “prism through which to explore ideas of imperialism, nationalism, colonial struggle, and modernity”.¹³

In addition, research on the history of the (Asian) body may be embedded more in the recently developed theories of new materialism. New materialism can be seen as a critique of the late twentieth-century dominance of the linguistic paradigm in the humanities, as well as a re-examination of the central place of the human being, focusing rather on the connections between humans and non-humans such as objects, animals, plants and the environment. It thus foregrounds “matter” and seeks to go beyond discourse analysis and binary oppositions such as nature/culture, biological/technical, self/other, female/male, body/mind, all dualisms that had contributed to the domination of women, people of color, nature, workers and animals.¹⁴ In this volume, Erica Wald unveils human-animal entanglements in her analysis of British colonial celebrations of pigsticking in India. More new materialist analysis featuring “naturecultures”, as Donna Haraway framed it, or the idea that “bodies and meanings coshape one another”,¹⁵ will bring the field of the history of the body more into contact with environmental history and environmental humanities, as well as with theoretical approaches connecting matter and meaning. The chapters that mentioned hair and dress, as I wrote above, already form an interesting starting point to address the material aspects of the body. Hopefully, these future historical studies will cover the human body’s frailty as well as its strength, including attention to diversity and disability, and at the same time capturing the networks of which these bodies are part.

the State: The Place of the Body in Crafting Modern Politics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); Giusi Russo, *Women, Empires, & Body Politics at the United Nations, 1946–1975* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2023).

¹³ Introduction to this volume.

¹⁴ For an overview of new materialist theories and their application to the history of the body, see Ruberg, *History of the Body*, chapter 6, 93–109.

¹⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Minneapolis, 2008) 4.

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