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The Body *Is* History

"The body," writes one historian of the human anatomy, "is not just a thing."[1] It undoubtedly constitutes the most material of the planes of our existence—the body is, in a way, our claim to *thinginess*—but it is also the means by which we gain access to the physical world around us. Perhaps the only means: the brain, where so much of the immaterial stuff of our lives happens, is, after all, still just an organ, a mass of a specific type of flesh.

Not objects then, but agents: our bodies anchor us in time and space, in the very moments through which we are living. In their seminal *The Body in History*, editors Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb acknowledge this fundamental function of the body early on, thus grounding and orienting the discussion that will follow and take the reader across some forty thousand years of European history. "[T]he body is central to how we conduct our lives on a daily basis,"[2] they write, and further argue that "[o]ur bodies carry [...] histories with them, in the way we move, exercise, sleep, eat and act in general. The body is [...] something *emergent through history*. The body is in history; indeed, the body *is* history."[3]

[1] Hugh Aldersey-Williams, *Anatomies. A Cultural History of the Human Body* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2013), p. xxi.

[2] Oliver J. T. Harris and John Robb, "O Brave New World, That Has Such People in It," in: *The Body in History. Europe from the Paleolithic to the Future*, ed. John Robb and Oliver J. T. Harris (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 2.

[3] Ibid., p. 4. The first emphasis is added; the second emphasis is in the original.

This proposition has multiple consequences for how we understand the relationship between the human body and history. First of all, if the body is something of a contact zone between us as "embodied beings"[4] and the physical reality that surrounds us, then the thesis that "the body is history" is of even more radical importance: in this view, history itself must be seen as constituted by the human body. But we should break this argument down further. On the one hand, history unfolds precisely through "how we conduct our lives," and so to understand the first we must primarily understand the latter; particular histories are knowable, in other words, through learning what people did with their bodies and what was done to them. Tracing the histories of marginalized groups, for example, more often than not involves studying how the bodies (and bodily acts) of their members have been subjected to power and control, how they have been Othered, constrained, criminalized, punished, and annihilated.

On the other hand, somewhat paradoxically the practices just enumerated (or any social, political, or cultural practices to do with the body, for that matter) also mean that the human body is always, inescapably, enmeshed in the contexts and realities of its particular historical circumstances. To keep to the same example, to better understand the fates of those marginalized bodies, the discourses and ideologies that marked and oppressed them—as well as their roots—must first be understood.

This is not necessarily a conundrum, but the consequences of this duality of the body as *something* in history are significant for the historian. Firstly, there are no universal methodologies for studying the body in history. A historian who selects the body as the object of their interest must in fact treat it as a *perspective*, or perhaps as a point of departure: the body, situated at the intersection between its "ways of conducting life" and the culture that dictates them, is a contact zone also between the experience once lived by actual people ("in the past") and the history that can later be reconstructed.

All this is partly because the body demands recognition of its individuality, as well as recognition of the individual person who inhabits it. The body is either too full of life or too horrific in death to sit comfortably within the constraints of theory, as it always pulls us down toward the real, the palpable, and the lived, or in other words toward the ground—where one, in one of the many metaphors human language constructs around the body's interaction with the physical world, will do well to keep their

[4] Fay Bound Alberti, *This Mortal Coil. The Human Body in History and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 212.

feet. But this, too, can be problematic for the historian, since the individual body is a difficult, even elusive thing to access, and for that it needs a careful consideration of context—and yet so often the understanding of the context is dependent on the understanding of the body. It is always a painstaking balancing act, therefore, to move, methodologically, between the body as inhabited by someone, the living flesh of a person entangled in their historical moment, and the social/political/cultural reality in which the very same body is embroiled. Both are discoverable only in tandem.

The current volume is, most simply put, a collection of essays concerned with the body in history. The authors undertake to tackle the subject not only in the contexts of various historical periods, but also by applying different perspectives and using different methodologies. The body is thus studied here as both a material form of being participating in history and in possession of its own history(-ies), and as an object of historically-entangled literatures, discourses, and ideologies. As a heterogenous whole, the volume strives to ask important questions about the role of the body as a useful and productive category of historical analysis,[5] as well as about the ways of writing histories of the body.

In the volume's opening article, Alicja Bemben writes of bodies in the figurative sense, understood here as a multitude of conceptualizations of time, cultural distance, a/historicism, agency, historical knowledge, causality, objectivity, scriptocentrism, a mode of writing about the real, and space. The aim of her text is to prove, through an exhaustive analysis of Peter Burke's ten theses on Western historical thinking, the assertion that British classical historicism and modernist historiography are in fact not disparate but two interrelated, co-dependent bodies of ideas.

In the next article, Paweł Rutkowski outlines the history of chiromancy in the 17th century, with particular attention paid to the physicality of palmistry. Since the practice allowed exclusive access to insight unattainable otherwise, Rutkowski argues, chiromancy was used in support of the belief that knowledge of the world and of man could—and should—be obtained through the human body.

Nina Augustynowicz, in the volume's third part, considers the poetry of American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman against the backdrop of 19th- and early-20th-century foodscapes. She shows the prominent place that food—its production, health aspects, and so forth—had in Gilman's work, among other pressing issues of the day explored by the progressively-min-

[5] Steffan Blayney, "Making the Body Productive/Making 'the Body' Productive," in: *The Body in History, Culture, and the Arts*, eds. Justyna Jajszczok and Aleksandra Musiał (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp. 55–68.

ded author. In particular, Augustynowicz examines the metaphors in Gilman's poems, arguing that the poet forged new "metaphorical correspondences" that allowed her to extend the traditional Victorian food-related vocabulary of metaphor to other social concerns.

Also exploring a Victorian discourse related to bodily concerns, Justyna Jajszczok traces the military language of invasion and battle as it was applied to explanations of microbial infections and spread of diseases, a field of scientific study which was gaining traction at the time. Jajszczok looks at both scientific writings and popular fiction of the period in order to analyze the ways in which war-derived similes and metaphors were used to elucidate and simplify complex medical findings, but she also shows how these shortcuts eventually reinforced racial and ethnic stereotypes and prejudices.

Next, Sonia Caputa examines the representations of immigrant bodies in the works of a number of Polish-American authors, in the context of the history and discourse of American eugenics. Caputa argues that in many of the works that she analyzes the immigrant body is shown as defective and unhealthy, in a curious imagery that seems to parallel the views of eugenicists, and she attempts to answer the question: why would these authors present their own communities in this way?

In her article, Marta Gorgula analyzes the art of Henry Tonks, a First World War British surgeon, portraying the horrific facial wounds and disfigurements of his patients, veterans of the conflict's battlefields. Applying certain tenets of memory studies to her analysis, Gorgula argues that Tonk's surgical portraits are being reintegrated into the canonical imagery of the Great War, and thus they come to serve as a repository of cultural memory of what these men endured.

Patrycja Sokołowska sets out to discuss the celebrity, or even cult, status "enjoyed" in the United States by many of the country's serial killers. Looking at the overall cultural narratives that are constructed around these murderers' crimes, she also considers the media coverage associated with the victims and their bodies, both before and after death. Sokołowska argues that victims of serial killers are in fact victimized thrice, since after death they are objectified as both *evidence* (as cadavers) and as elements integrated into the "murder industry" that commodifies crime—and so, in effect, commodifies their deaths.

Agnieszka Podruczna's article examines the notion of the Othered body, regarded here through its corporeality, and its relation to culture and history. She analyzes Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl*, Suzette Mayr's "Toot

Sweet Matricia," and Andrea Hairston's "Griots of the Galaxy" in order to show the relation between the body of the Other and collective memory, and argues that the body acts here as a tool of recording the past, as well as transmitting memory and thus is a fundamental component of colonial and postcolonial historical narratives.

The focus of Sabina Sweta Sen-Podstawska's article is the dancing body. She investigates the body of the Odissi dancer, or the "Odissi body" in terms of its shifting ideals as perceived by the social eye, as well as the role and significance of Odissi dancers in history. At the core of her argument lies the conviction that the dance and the body that channels and embodies it are in constant flux, being re-modelled and re-shaped by the ever-changing ideological and economic factors.

In the volume's first review, Barbara Braid considers Marie Mulvey-Roberts' *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (2016), a book which focuses on the body in gothic texts as embedded in histories: the dominant narrative of the past, as well as personal narratives presented through personal accounts, biographies, and familial accounts. This, Braid asserts, complements and expands the conventional perception of the Gothic body.

The second review, which also closes the volume, authored by Anna Kisiel, looks at *Talking Bodies: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Embodiment, Gender and Identity* (2017), a collection of essays edited by Emma Rees. The volume undertakes to look at various body-related topics, spread across the last two hundred years or so of history, the author of each chapter approaching their topic from a different research perspective or employing a different methodology—a "polyphony" which Kisiel considers the book's "great success."