

A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY ON THE BODY

Jeffery D. Tatum

Jeffery D. Tatum is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at the University of Virginia. His dissertation focuses on the assisted suicide movement in law, public discourse, moral order, and social change.

SINCE THE 1970S, THERE HAS BEEN A PRECIPITOUS rise in popular interest in the body. Magazines and newspapers are filled with pictures of beautiful, thin, muscled, youthful bodies, along with products that will build “abs,” reduce weight overnight, make hair shiny, brighten teeth, and so on. Television and movies are densely populated with people who apparently use these products with spectacular results. Media stars and models set the standards for beauty and fitness, and openly enjoy the benefits of their bodies both on and off screen. Commercial media package bodily images of men and women and promote them as commodities to be produced, modified, and consumed. The implicit and explicit message given is that the benefits of the desirable body are multiple and far-reaching. They include emotional (less stress, more peace and confidence, higher self-esteem), relational (more relationships with better people), financial (beauty and fitness yield better jobs, sales, pay, and promotion), and spiritual (getting in touch with one’s “true self” or becoming who you were “meant to be”), as well as political, benefits.

New medical technology has given us the ability to repair and sustain bodies and keep up youthful appearances. Surgery now allows us to modify “flaws,” whether they be orthopedic or cosmetic. Geneticists and embryologists engineer and reproduce bodies in amazing new ways. New communications and information technologies extend the reach

of our bodies across time and space, in ways inconceivable only a century ago. The times are exciting.

But the times also are burgeoning with new questions. As Chris Shilling observes,

We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of what bodies are and how we should control them.¹

A myriad of questions now challenge society. For example, debates currently rage over whether or not the United States federal government should support stem-cell research. Is a cluster of eight embryonic cells maintained in a Petri dish “human,” a “human product,” or simply biological research material? Bioethicists are discussing the ethical implications of the sales of organs for transplants. Many question the impact of the internet and chat rooms upon our “embodiment.” Others debate the extent to which, if any, the forms of our bodies dictate gender identity, consciousness, and capabilities. Philosophers argue about whether the dichotomies such as mind/body and male/female are useful or harmful and oppressive. Finally, the self itself is called into question. What is the “self”? Is there a core self or only a “subject” molded by society? Or is there only an organic mass that acts in accordance with biochemical determinism?

As the books in the following sections reveal, the study of the body is rich, fertile soil for a wide variety of scholarly disciplines, including history, sociology, literature, medicine, psychology, philosophy, theology, bioethics, public policy, and others. With such broad interests and so many foundational questions at stake, the newfound interest in the body shows no signs of slowing down in the near future.

¹ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage, 1993) 3.

For reasons of economy, the sources cited in the following lists will be limited to books written in the last four decades. Earlier classics can be gleaned from the summaries of theory provided in many of the books. All of these sources address the following two questions in one way or another: How are our views of the body changing? How do these changes affect what we think it means to be human and embodied? There is a great deal of overlap in the different problems that the sources invariably touch upon when analyzing conceptions of the body. For the sake of utility, though, each book is listed under only one category.

Society and the Body: General Theory

Interest in the interplay between body and society has a long history. At the turn of the century, Freud proposed theories about how civilization, body, and psyche interact to produce repressed sexual desires, hysteria, and neuroses.² Although classical social theorists such as Marx, Engels, Weber, and Simmel did not propound explicit theories of the body, they addressed bodily issues in ways foundational to their theories. Marx and Engels observed, “But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing, and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself.”³ Engels later catalogued the impact of factory work upon the workers’ bodies. Weber studied the rational disciplining of bodily efforts and desires in accordance with neo-Calvinist doctrines, and the consequences for capitalism. Simmel analyzed fashion, the glance, and the gesture as foundational for public order.⁴ But few studied the body as such.

² See, for example, Sigmund Freud, “Civilized Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness,” *The Collected Papers of Sigmund Freud; Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Phillip Rieff (1908; New York: Collier-Macmillan, 1963).

³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, “The German Ideology (Part I),” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (1932; New York: Norton, 1978) 156.

⁴ Simon J. Williams and Gillian Bendelow, *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues* (New York: Routledge, 1998) 12-16.

Things have obviously changed. Academic interest in the body has exploded, paralleling the changes in popular culture. Classical theoretical terms such as “cultural fetishism” and “commodity fetishism” have gained new power in being applied to the fetishism of bodies and gender.⁵ Many scholars wrestle with the problems of how and why the body has been problematized in so many ways, and why bodily interest is now so reflexive. Shilling summarizes a common line of explanation:

With the decline of religious frameworks which constructed and sustained existential and ontological certainties residing *outside* the individual, and the massive rise of the body in consumer culture as a bearer of symbolic value, there is a tendency for people in high modernity to place ever more importance on the body as constitutive of the self. For those who have lost their faith in religious authorities and grand political narratives, and are no longer provided with a clear world view or self-identity by these trans-personal meaning structures, at least the body initially appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world.⁶

Two scholars influential in this recent academic “bodily turn” are Mary Douglas and Michel Foucault.⁷ Both wrote accounts of how the body is socially constructed. Douglas studied bodily rituals and rules concerning hygiene and diet, in order to gain insight into implicit conceptions of wholeness, holiness, order, and being in cultural systems. She argued that the body is a receptor of symbolic meanings that can be read by social members and the anthropologist. Along different lines, Foucault argued that madness, sickness, and sexuality are discourses that constitute the body. The body is a nexus where power and knowledge are reflected and social currents are played out. Foucault’s examples range from rising sciences of the body, such as psychology,

⁵ See, for example, Jon Stratton, *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).

⁶ Shilling 2-3.

⁷ I am indebted to the very useful summaries of anthropological and sociological theories of the body in Shilling 71-76, and Williams and Bendelow 7-16, 26-36.

medicine, and criminology, to the ways that power and knowledge are manifested in state executions, imprisonment, or the organization and impact of the medical clinic. Both Foucault and Douglas helped usher in the recent heightened scrutiny of the body and its implications.

Bryan Turner was one of the first scholars to construct an explicit “sociology of the body.” He has argued that the body, as such, has been left out of social theory, with unsatisfactory results. His early work provides a good overview of the significance of the body to theory across many disciplines. Since then, a number of theorists have placed the changed significance of the body in the broader contexts of the search for meaning; the gradual desacralization of social life; the privatization of meaning; and the rise of biological science, medicine, and consumerism. For instance, Shilling reviews classical social theory and says we must study the body not only as an object of social construction, but also as a physical form with its own limitations, which give rise to many social institutions, conceptions, and forms of interaction.

- Douglas, Mary. *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. New York: Praeger, 1966.
- ————. *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology*. 1970; New York: Routledge, 1996.
- Ellis, Kathryn, and Hartley Dean, eds. *Social Policy and the Body: Transitions in Corporeal Discourse*. New York: St. Martin's, 2000.
- Featherstone, Mike, Mike Hepworth, and Bryan S. Turner, eds. *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1991.
- Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*. New York: Vintage, 1978.
- ————. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage, 1975.
- Gallagher, Catherine, and Thomas Laqueur, eds. *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century*.

Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

- Shilling, Chris. *The Body and Social Theory*. London: Sage, 1993.
- Synnott, Anthony. *The Body Social: Symbolism, Self and Society*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Turner, Bryan S. *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory*. 2nd ed. London: Sage, 1996.
- Williams, Simon J., and Gillian Bendelow. *The Lived Body: Sociological Themes, Embodied Issues*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

Body Image: Beauty and the Body

In the twentieth century, the image of the body became idealized and ubiquitous. Ranging from the archetypal Aryan body of Nazi propaganda to the “heroin chic” and waif looks of high fashion, bodies have been and continue to be on display and charged with new meaning, whether political, racial, or cultural. The objectification of the body recently reached a troubling extreme in the Summer 2001 display of whole and carved cadavers and cadaver parts as “art” in a Berlin exhibition entitled, “Body Worlds: The Fascination with the Real.”

Understandably, much of the literature on beauty has come from studies of the advertising, fashion, and entertainment industries, which teach us how to package ourselves for consumption. Through exercise, hard work, and dieting, or, if those fail, through editing or airbrushing photographs, or buying “glamour shots” of ourselves, we strive to present continually improved bodies to the world. Through the coupling of body image with production and consumption, and making the image one that can be purchased, the body, particularly the female body, becomes an object of commodity fetishism.⁸

⁸ Stratton 87-112.

The most obvious way to promote oneself in a large, highly mobile society is through beauty, which can be apprehended immediately in a glance, and one of the most effective ways to achieve a desirable body type is through cosmetic surgery. Areas that have not responded to dieting, exercise, or dress can be dealt with directly. Cosmetic surgery is relatively permanent, goes to the root of the manifest imperfection or flaw, and ultimately requires less daily effort. In cosmetic surgery, science and rationality are used to remedy all deviations from the norm of beauty. In a visit to a private plastic surgery clinic in Nashville, patrons are paired with a “computer-imaging technician and health educator” who assesses their “problem areas” that can be addressed by cosmetic surgery.⁹ According to this perspective, the body has to be corrected in order to reflect the youthful essence of the person who occupies the body.

The impact of such marketing is reductionistic. One medical brochure placed by a group of plastic surgeons in a medical waiting room bears the heading, “Reveal the Real You.” Readers are urged, though not in so many words, to reconcile their faces with their perceptions of themselves, through laser skin resurfacing and other procedures. Their sense of “self” is reduced to the images projected by the visual body and its dressings.¹⁰ You are not a soul with a body. The body is you.

The story of these changes are told well in various texts. Ewen focuses upon fashion and style, Sanders looks at the body as a canvas in the tattoo parlor, and Gilman chronicles the rise of cosmetic surgery. Haiken compares the rise of cosmetic surgery as a profession with the “Miss America” beauty pageant, both of which started in Atlantic City in 1921. Stratton focuses upon the fetishism of the body as a commodity for consumption, particularly the female body, and Dutton’s book is one of the first of a group of books published in the last five years documenting similar changes for the male body.

⁹ Charles Siebert, “The Cuts that Go Deeper,” *The New York Times Magazine* (7 July 1996): 20-22.

¹⁰ Kenneth J. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (New York: Basic, 1991).

- Dutton, Kenneth R. *The Perfectible Body: The Western Ideal of Physical Development*. London: Cassell, 1995.
- Ewen, Stuart. *All Consuming Images: The Politics of Style in Contemporary Culture*. Rev. ed. New York: Basic, 1999.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999.
- Haiken, Elizabeth. *Venus Envy: A History of Cosmetic Surgery*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.
- Sanders, Clinton R. *Customizing the Body: The Art and Culture of Tattooing*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989.
- Stratton, Jon. *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption*. New York: Manchester University Press, 1996.

Marginalized Bodies—“Normal” and “Abnormal”

The inverse of beauty and perfection is the body that is marginalized, whether politically, psychologically, or culturally. With the new norms of perfection come the stigmas of the flaw. The overweight, the chronically ill, the sick, or the dying—all are rejected or penalized, to some degree, because they, too, can often be recognized at a glance. The self-surveillance of these individuals can be devastating, as they strive to work through whether and how “the body is you” applies to them.

Robert F. Murphy, a well-known anthropologist who contracted a tumor near his spine that led to paraplegia, chronicles his personal descent into disability with the calmed, trained eye of a professional, and serves as an excellent guide into the stigma faced by the ill-suited consumer. Goffman analyzes autobiographies and case studies of “spoiled identities,” including those of physically deformed people who are unable to meet the social norms of beauty, and gives great insight into their efforts to manage their “presentation of self.” Slattery applies psychological and literary theory to the problem of the “wounded

body” in literature, analyzing the body as metaphor and emblem in *Hamlet*, *Moby Dick*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and two Flannery O’Connor stories, among others.

- Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Goffman, Erving. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1963.
- Mitchell, David T., and Sharon L. Snyder, eds. *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability in the Humanities*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997.
- Murphy, Robert F. *The Body Silent*. New York: Norton, 1990.
- Slattery, Dennis P. *The Wounded Body: Remembering the Markings of Flesh*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2000.
- Thomson, Rosemarie G. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997.

Medicalization and Technology: Bodies for Study, Bodies for Sale

Academic interest has also focused on changes in how institutions of biotechnology and medicine regard the body. Here, the possibilities of producing and molding the body as an object raise profound questions about what it means to be “human,” and create both confusion and promise. Foucault noted, decades ago, how the body was objectified and made an object of surveillance in the medical clinic. The body is now monitored by a broad spectrum of medical or allied health professionals, ranging from psychiatrists, radiologists, and chiropractors, to speech therapists, dieticians, and hygienists. The patient is seen as a “case” and the body as an object for medical and pharmaceutical research.

The interventions of medical and genetic technologies have been profound, far outstripping the current cultural resources to accommodate them and producing anomie. With the rise of transplant technology has come the problem of supply, and the body is seen now as an amalgamation of interchangeable parts that can be “harvested” and sold. Blood, organs, sperm, eggs, stem cells, corneas—the body is broken down and commodified in parts. “Cyborg” technology holds the promise of the marriage of human bodies and mechanical or electronic devices, which push the envelope even further as to what it means to be “human” or to have a “body.”

- Foucault, Michel. *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*. New York: Pantheon, 1973.
- Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999.
- Jones, Colin, and Roy Porter, eds. *Reassessing Foucault: Power, Medicine and the Body*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Kimbrell, Andrew. *The Human Body Shop: The Engineering and Marketing of Life*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Petersen, Alan, and Deborah Lupton. *The New Public Health: Health and Self in the Age of Risk*. Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996.
- Turner, Bryan S. *Regulating Bodies: Essays in Medical Sociology*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

How Bodies Think, How Thinking is Embodied

Another dichotomy now in question across disciplines is that between mind or reason and body. Psychiatry, in particular, with its century-long focus upon the substance of consciousness and humanity, whether mind, body, soul, or some other aspect, has provided a rich source of theory to use as a starting point in this area. The writings of Freud and

Lacan are commonly used by philosophers, literary theorists, sociologists, and others in the effort to unravel the mind/body puzzle. Scholars have recognized that bodies impact sensual and rational perception in extremely complex ways. How can we reconcile our new understandings of the body, language, perception, and the mind? What is the meaning of pain?

If the Cartesian mind/body split is too neat to be useful or an erroneous dichotomy, then scholars in psychology, psychoanalysis, cognitive science, and philosophy face the unenviable task of suggesting new ways of understanding the relations between thought, perception, sensuality, and the limitations or possibilities of the body. Many of these theorists borrow heavily from psychoanalytic accounts and phenomenology, but they have also turned to theology and the study of religious practice to better rethink age-old understandings of the interrelation of mind, body, and even soul.

- Coakley, Sarah, ed. *Religion and the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Csordas, Thomas J., ed. *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- Mellor, Philip A., and Chris Shilling. *Re-Forming the Body: Religion, Community, and Modernity*. London: Sage, 1997.
- Morris, David. *The Culture of Pain*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Scarry, Elaine. *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985.

The Body, Race, and Gender

Assumptions about the divorce between rationality and the body have in their turn influenced views of the male/female dichotomy that has had a wide-spread, pervasive impact on the assumptions of gender, psychology, and ability. How can we rethink the old dichotomies and see their impact with fresh eyes, in an effort to remove the prejudices and assumptions of erroneous essentialism, whether in gender or race? There are questions concerning the impact of older and current bodily understandings upon race, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural marginalization and oppression.

Many scholars have pursued their social constructionist understandings of the body. They have studied the ways in which bodily categories, such as race and gender, are used as a means of distributing power and oppressing groups. Others have a more limited view of the power of social construction, and argue about whether there is a “natural” body that precedes construction. Sociobiologists argue that perception, though malleable, is limited by the range of available human senses. Biology, they argue, imposes constraint or structure, though the strength of those impositions is in question. The problem is how to discern the extent to which bodies are socially constructed, the extent to which they are “natural,” and how an embodied and socially embedded scholar can discern this.

- Bennett, Michael, and Vanessa D. Dickerson, eds. *Recovering the Black Female Body: Self Representations by African-American Women*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001.
- Bordo, Susan. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Davis, Kathy. *Reshaping the Female Body: The Dilemmas of Cosmetic Surgery*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Diprose, Rosalyn. *The Bodies of Women: Ethics, Embodiment and Sexual Difference*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

- Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994.
- McNay, Lois. *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and Self*. Cambridge: Polity, 1992.
- Mohanram, Radhika. *Black Body: Women, Colonialism, and Space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999.
- Sawicki, Jana. *Disciplining Foucault: Feminism, Power and the Body*. New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Zita, Jacquelyn N. *Body Talk: Philosophical Reflections on Sex and Gender*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998.