

Susana Rocha Teixeira (Bielefeld University)

Introduction: Bodies in the Americas

Keywords: human bodies, bodies in the Americas, modifications, discussions, cultural studies

In the last few decades, the body has increasingly taken the center stage in various countries in the Americas. Bodies are modified, improved, discussed, and displayed in forms of media such as Instagram, TV-shows or magazines. Progress in the field of medicine contributed to this situation. Amongst others, new forms of surgery and developments regarding prosthetics allow humans to replace missing or dysfunctional limbs, and offer patients 'normal' bodies. At times, particular measures and prosthetics result in bodies which are better than 'normal', as the case of the South African sprint runner Oscar Pistorius has shown. His running blades caused a controversy when he participated in the Olympics in 2012. Some claimed that his special carbon-fiber-reinforced polymer prosthetics gave him an unfair advantage in comparison to the other participants without prosthetics. Similar holds true for progress in the area of pharmacology, in particular psycho-pharmacology. "SSRIs, hormones, brain boosters, neurotransmitters" not only make people feel better but also improve their mental capacities and can replace other recreational, or brain- and/ or mood-enhancing drugs such as cigarettes, alcohol or illegal substances. [1] Developments like these allowed critics to add new perspectives and angles to past discussions on the Cyborg or the Posthuman as, for example, to Donna Haraway's well-known "A Cyborg Manifesto" (1984).

For years, psychologists and advertisers among others propagated that 'good looks' offer a competitive edge in the tough competition for jobs or in the dating market. Statistics and surveys seem to 'prove' that 'good-looking', healthy, young, 'white' males and females seem to do better in many areas. Unsurprisingly, scholars such as the historian Sander L. Gilman pointed out that plastic surgery had already been used in the nineteenth century to remove 'racial markers' such as the 'Jewish nose', or the 'Irish pug nose', [2] and thus to remove grounds for discrimination. In the course of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, plastic surgery, i.e., cosmetic and reconstructive surgery, but also other non-invasive forms of self-improvement or beautification, increasingly seemed to offer new and almost endless opportunities for those who felt a need for improvement, an effect that some critics called "democracy of beauty." [3] However, while some feminists such as Kathy Davis (*Reshaping the Female Body*, 1995) also see some potential in these developments, and forms of beautification such as cosmetic surgery as a possible source of empowerment for women, other feminists believe it to be strictly a form of oppression, the result of the male gaze and white male beauty ideals imposed on women. They believe that procedures such as cosmetic surgery and other forms of beautification perpetuate and reflect strict, very specific beauty ideals which further marginalize women's bodies that do not conform to these 'ideals'. These ideals are particularly oppressive and exclusive for women who are in various ways categorized as 'other' as it is the case for women who 'lost' their breasts due to mastectomy, or (regarding 'race') for female, colonialized bodies.

From the twentieth century on, academic fields, such as cultural studies, sociology, philosophy, and history, also increasingly ‘discovered’ the body as a potential object of research. Notable critics such as Marcel Mauss, Norbert Elias, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Mike Featherstone, Bryan Turner, Susan Bordo, Robert Gugutzer and Nina Degele (to name just a few) explored various aspects of the human body. They explored its relation to society and power, the importance of patriarchy, its role regarding (personal and collective) identity construction, and the body as a medium of communication. Literature and other forms of cultural productions have also reflected on the human body and created representations which reflect societal values, expectations, fears, hierarchies and forms of oppression. They also created rebellious and disturbing bodies and offered possibilities to liberate female, colonized and other types of ‘other’ bodies, and to (re)create personal or collective identities. [4]

However, despite the seeming ubiquity of the body in many fields and areas, when it comes to the Americas, much of the research on bodies has focused on the United States of America so far. Of course, this doesn’t mean that no research has been done regarding bodies in other countries in the Americas. On the contrary: Various scholars such as Alexander Edmond (e.g., *Pretty Modern: Beauty, Sex and Plastic Surgery in Brazil*, 2010) and M.M. Adjarian (*Allegories of Desire. Body, Nation, and Empire in Modern Caribbean Literature by Women*, 2004) also explored aspects of the body in other parts of the Americas. However, various critics seem to believe that there is still a lot more of research that can be done regarding other countries in the Americas. Furthermore, publications tend to focus exclusively on the United States or on Latin America, or the Caribbean. Thus, the aim of this issue is to offer an integrative approach, which explores various aspects of human bodies in a number of countries in the Americas. It explores disturbing, oppressed, and traumatized bodies; it explores beauty and body ideals; the body as source of identity, insecurity and form of communication; it explores the empowering or exploited body, and the opportunities (e.g. for liberation or new beginnings); and it explores places and countries such as Peru, Bolivia, the Caribbean and the United States. The aim of the diversity of contributions is to show a range of different (and at times similar) views on and issues regarding the human body across the Americas.

In the opening essay “The US Breast Cancer Body in the Rising Age of the Mastectomy,” the linguist and filmmaker Bernadette Wegenstein (Baltimore), writes about six women whom she accompanied for her US-American documentary *The Good Breast* (2016), and who were not only diagnosed with different forms of breast cancer but also underwent mastectomies. At the same time, this essay also explores the female body’s possibilities for rebirth and the opportunities it offers at reconnecting with oneself, and creating better, ‘truer’ selves after the loss of the breast. Wegenstein also analyzes the roles of misogyny, patriarchy and violence against (and its effects on) the female body.

Natalia Lecca Silva's (Lima) essay "Cuerpos en Disputa. Reflexiones sobre Cuerpo y Género Desde los Discursos de Tres Mujeres Profesionales en Danza Contemporánea" discusses three Peruvian women who are professional dancers of contemporary dance. Taken from her research, which was based on qualitative interviews, she describes not only how these women left classical ballet and came to contemporary dance, but also how classical ballet's 'ideal' bodies reflect patriarchal beauty expectations and body norms. She also describes how these women used their unruly or disturbing bodies and selves, and situations they felt uncomfortable with in life as starting points to establish new senses of self, beauty and body.

In "Reduce Your Appearance instantly! Representations of the Female Body in Comic Books for Women and Girls," the historian and cultural studies scholar Katharina Vester (Washington, D.C.) explores representations of female bodies in US-American comics in the twentieth century. Some comics featured female bodies in very revealing dresses and at times even bordered on the pornographic. Other comics propagated normalcy, and seemingly created characters which represented 'ordinary' women as female heroines. However, these comics also represented body and beauty ideals and ideals of femininity of the hegemonic patriarchal ideology. Then when feminist underground comics entered the market in the 1970's, they offered alternative, 'disturbing' views on female bodies, and included topics such as "menstruation and women's desires," which resisted hegemonic female body and beauty ideals.

In her essay "El Cuerpo Como Evidencia: Etnicidad y género en los Andes," the historian Carmen Ibanez (Cologne) analyzes female bodies, body and beauty ideals in the Andes, and in particular of Indians and Cholas in Bolivia. In her essay, she not only explores various forms of oppression and marginalization due to ethnicity, class and gender that they face in their societies, but also forms of corporeal resistance. Not only do they challenge power structures by, e.g., refusing to stay confined in reservations and instead becoming visible in urban centers, but also by challenging homogenizing beauty ideals.

Nadia Celis Salgado (Brunswick), who is specialized in Romance Languages and Literatures and Latin American Studies, explores works by Hispanic Caribbean writers and representations of (female) bodies in their works in her essay "Las Niñas del Caribe y la 'Conciencia Corporal': Apuntes para una Descolonización Encarnada." The colonized, female, Caribbean body had to cope with numerous barriers, various forms of consumption and exploitation (labor, sexual), and its effects such as fear, trauma, paralysis, and speechlessness. However, in the works of Hispanic Caribbean authors, the body functions as a communicative agent, which enables the negotiation of issues of power and (female) identity, and contributes to decolonization.

Danielle Glassmeyer (Peoria), who specializes in American literature and culture, offers with "I'd rather push a guy out a window": Trauma, Abject Bodies, and the Unhomely in *The Catcher in the Rye*," an against the grain reading of JD Salinger's well-known novel. In her analysis

she focuses on the Holden character, and, seeing him as a trauma survivor and suffering from PTSD, she explores the various ways the novel explores the physical effects of his trauma. While she argues that it enables him (as he is put into an unhomely position) to also see “fault-lines and injurious patterns in a culture that others see as ‘normal,’ ” it is also disabling. His trauma affects the physicality of his body and not only causes intrusive memories and hyper arousal, but is also responsible for his push-pull behavior.

Endnotes

[1] See, e.g., Miller *Makeover Nation*, pg. 20 and 39 ff.

[2] See, e.g., Gilman, *Making the Body Beautiful*, pg. 16, 23 and 85 ff.

[3] See, e.g. Rosen “Democratization of Beauty”

[4] On body and identity see, e.g., Coelsch-Foisner and Fernández Morales (eds.) *The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English*

Works Cited

- Coelsch-Foisner, Sabine and Marta Fernández Morales, eds. *The Human Body in Contemporary Literatures in English. Cultural and Political Implications*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2009. Print.
- Davis, Kathy. *Reshaping the Female Body. The Dilemma of Cosmetic Surgery*. New York and London: Routledge, 1995. Print.
- Gilman, Sander L. *Making the Body Beautiful. A Cultural History of Aesthetic Surgery*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1999. Print.
- Miller, Toby. *Makeover Nation. The United States of Reinvention*. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, 2008. Print.
- Rosen, Christine. "The Democratization of Beauty." *The New Atlantis. A Journal of Technology & Society*. 5 (2004): 19–35. Print.

Suggested Citation:

Rocha Teixeira, Susana. "Introduction: Bodies in the Americas." forum for interamerican research 10.2 (Nov 2017): 5-11. Available at: www.interamerica.de