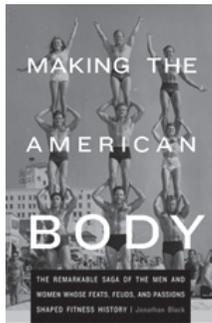
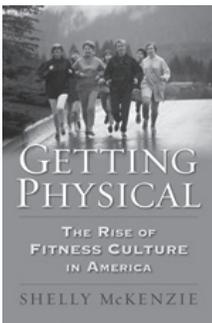


Review Essay

American Body: Fitness and the Commodification of Exercise

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GETTING PHYSICAL: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America. By Shelly McKenzie. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas. 2013.

MAKING THE AMERICAN BODY: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History. By Jonathan Black. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press. 2013.

There are few, if any, places in the United States today where fitness is not a major pursuit. Whether Americans are actually engaged in arduous regimens for rapid weight loss or training for taxing contests of human endurance is almost beside the point. Fitness has become part of our built environment as gyms, martial arts, yoga, Pilates, and cross-training facilities, and their brightly-lit signs, are now cornerstones of strip malls, gentrified downtowns, and the “lifestyle centers” that mix commercial and residential use. The reflective tape of running shoes glinting in one’s headlights is a familiar feature of night driving.

Television, whether traditional network channels or new streaming services like Hulu, relentlessly advertises weight-loss products, fitness training programs, and celebrity exercise DVDs. Smartphones carry apps that allow us to track our fitness progress while national political discourse is periodically marked by support for, or outrage against, organic vegetables in public school lunch programs, calorie listings on franchise menus, and restricting the size of the Big Gulp. Meanwhile an “obesity epidemic” is the tagline on many a news story and a source of concern among feminist critics who worry that such increased surveillance and medicalization of the body is a sanctioned way to “fat” shame and reify sexist, racist, and class hierarchies.¹ American attitudes toward the regulation of food and diet are complicated and political but they generally boil down to whether or not fitness is a private or a public concern. While the books under review here point out that today’s obsessive interest in fitness is nothing new, I would suggest that its intensifying significance on the national cultural and political stage is closely related to contemporary debates over healthcare and whether or not access to modern medicine is a privilege of status or a right of citizenry. As such, the American body plays a bigger role in the body politic than ever before.

Meanwhile, there is surprisingly little medical consensus on what fitness actually means. Is it having a body mass index (BMI) that falls within accepted norms? Is it living a long life? Is it being free of major disease? Does it mean being able to run one mile or twenty? Is fitness the same as having visible muscle tone? Does it simply mean being happy? What is the difference between fitness and health? What is “wellness”? Debates rage throughout the medical community and even a cursory search through the major academic American medical journals will show little agreement between kinesiology, nutritional science, neuroscience, clinical psychology, biology, gastrointestinal science, internal medicine, or any of the myriad subfields contained within, as to what a general definition of fitness is or what our dietary goals should be. Should we be eating fat or not? Will gluten melt our brains? Should our raw vegetable intake be 40 percent or 90 percent of our diet? Is twenty minutes of cardiovascular exercise every day enough? Or is ninety minutes three times a week adequate? It quickly becomes clear how a charismatic personality with a spectacular six-pack and a media-friendly face—who offers a step-by-step, pay-as-you-go training program to the better body that equates a better life—can attract millions of Americans with access to credit. It is much easier to buy the promise of fitness and happiness than to figure it out on your own and is preferable to not doing anything at all. There are obvious reasons why fitness is consistently a multibillion-dollar industry in the United States. And yet it is also remarkably capricious; the megastar of exercise infomercials today may overnight find him or herself tossed on the fitness dust heap alongside a million unwanted Tae Bo videos.

In *Making the American Body: The Remarkable Saga of the Men and Women Whose Feats, Feuds, and Passions Shaped Fitness History*, Jonathan Black traces the origins of American fitness culture to the immigrant athletic clubs and the “muscular Christianity” of YMCAs, which opened in urban areas

in the mid-nineteenth century. In the decades following the Civil War, celebrity weight lifters and musclemen made national headlines. Foreshadowing Charles Atlas's fame of the 1930s, George Windship and Dudley Allen Sargent shaped their bodies and reputations as Herculean tough guys with dumbbells and primitive exercise machines. As other scholars have noted, Black argues that the focus on the body that followed industrialization had much to do with the fact that machines were replacing human labor. As such, physical strength was less significant in the new urban industrial economy than it once had been; muscular bodies, especially male ones, became a sought-after commodity in the modern age. In his sections on early body culture, Black draws on previously published scholarship to make the case that three main factors drove the American fascination with fitness: a cultural shift away from Victorian social mores that pushed public interest in sex into the mainstream; the new technologies of photography and film that enhanced the visuality of the body in modern society; and growing concerns that "nature" was being lost in the swell of progress.² Thus, along with bodybuilders like Eugen Sandow, who thrilled women with a touch of his biceps, came the health seekers like Horace Fletcher, the "Great Masticator," John Harvey Kellogg, and Charles W. Post who built reputations and fortunes on "natural" cures for a variety of modern health problems. As Black puts it, "the cereal boom was merely one indication of an invigorated fit-minded America as the century drew to a close" (9).

In his sweeping coverage of American fitness gurus and celebrities, Black emphasizes the innovations, both technical and entrepreneurial, as well as the regional differences in body culture. New York—with its Coney Island side-shows, long a steady employer of the "strong man," and its mass publication industry—emerged the early frontrunner of body culture in the United States. Bernarr Macfadden, the self-made master of all things health and fitness, founded *Physical Culture* magazine in New York in 1899 (17). The publication mostly promoted Macfadden but also included essays on bodybuilding, suggestions for weight loss, natural cures for any discomfort and illness, and suggestions for a more vigorous sex life. The wild success of *Physical Culture* led to the publication of dozens of sensational rags such as Macfadden's *Graphic*, *True Confessions*, and *True Story* (18). While promoting physical fitness as critical for a good and healthful life, the fact that *Physical Culture* was sold alongside sleazy tabloids could not have helped much initially to make exercise a respectable modern pursuit.

What *Physical Culture* did do was bring Charles Atlas (born Angelo Siciliano) enormous fame and perfect the fitness advertisement in the 1920s and 1930s. The strength of *Making the American Body* is Black's close attention to the impresarios and advertising geniuses behind each famous sculpted physique. Atlas may have had the brawn and beauty but it was the copyeditor Charles Roman who wrote all of the famous "97-Pound Weakling" ads that fit in perfectly with other advertisements for new products like toothpaste and deodorant. Within the visual culture of *Physical Culture* magazine, "the healthy body was the groomed

body ... In this new world so worshipful of the clean, coiffed gentleman, Charles Atlas was the perfect upstanding specimen—not a freak of nature from the fringe circuses and dingy sideshows” (23). Not only did Atlas and Roman together promote strength as the key to manhood but they also made cultivating a perfect body part of a broader health regimen. This helped foster another creature of the new modern age: the fitness professional. People who could help Americans monitor their physical selves through coaching, guidebooks, and exercise systems, such as Atlas’s own “Dynamic Tension,” paved the way for the celebrity trainers ubiquitous in American popular culture today.

While east coast gym culture was marked by weightlifting, big muscles, and “had built its stock on a population of the urban disenfranchised, men who had found themselves lost in the great melting pot,” the west coast offered a very different fitness aesthetic (30). In Southern California, at the original Muscle Beach in Santa Monica, men and women together performed outdoors on WPA-built equipment that included a tumbling platform, gymnastics bars and rings, and lots of sand. Black argues that the suntans, co-ed athleticism, and overall “California” look ultimately led to the concept of the modern gym; fitness could be more enjoyable than its early incarnation as a dank room full of grunting men and clanging barbells. Black goes into fascinating detail about the rise of Vic Tanny, Joe Weider, the introduction of metabolic steroids, and, ultimately, the infusion of major corporate money as gym culture took off in the 1970s and 1980s. He makes the point that it was the combination of celebrity promotion by actresses like Jane Fonda and the evolution of accessible exercise regimens like aerobics that would turn the grotty weight rooms of the first half of the twentieth century into the brightly-lit, mirror-covered, and sexy co-ed spaces of the workout studio.

While not fully developed in *Making the American Body*, Black weaves sexuality through his story as both a historical cause for sociological concern, i.e. the possible and probable homerotics of male bodybuilding, and as a contemporary feature of the fitness marketplace. From the late-Victorian ladies who tittered and squeezed Eugen Sandow’s massive arms to the unsubtle pitch of many a contemporary gym membership “consultant” who promises increased sex appeal if you “just sign here,” fitness culture is also an expression of sexual culture. Black writes:

The sexual appeal of bodybuilders (for those who found them appealing) was no big mystery. There was the physical allure: the visual treat of developed muscles. There was the appeal of what this conveyed: strength, the core masculine ideal, the suggestion of power and dominance. Finally, there was the erotic promise: these were men who were obviously consumed with the physical and, most particularly, their own bodies. They shaved them, oiled them, regarded them with admiration in mirrors, posed in the skimpiest possible briefs. Whether this obsessive self-regard made for a healthy attitude

toward sexual relations or resulted in actual performance was a matter of conjecture. Whether it supported a clinical case of narcissism depended on how one defined narcissism (105).

The relationship of body aesthetics, in this case bodybuilding, to shifting sexual mores is part of a larger conversation about gender politics that is cited in Black's book but not deeply engaged.³ The racial politics of fitness culture also is sidelined. The histories of fitness marketing, the competitive nature of the latest fitness craze, and the key players in the promotion of the body-as-commodity, however, are described here in fast-paced prose that merges the cult of the body with that of celebrity to offer a useful intervention into the history of popular culture in the United States.

In *Getting Physical: The Rise of Fitness Culture in America*, Shelly McKenzie is less interested in the personalities behind commercial exercise (although many do appear in her book) than the major economic and cultural shifts in post-World War II America that drove new fixations on the body, health, and diet. While Black does not overlook the influence of the Cold War, for example, and the concern that American youth were falling behind the Soviets in sheer physical might, McKenzie studies the broader political economy of the body in the postwar period more closely. The new "modern way of life" characterized by driving, suburban comforts, convenience foods, and television-watching, all hallmarks of white, middle-class success, was a lifestyle that was rapidly changing American bodies, and not for the better. McKenzie writes:

[P]arents, government officials, and physicians worried that the nation's citizens were becoming both less fit and heavier because of subtle environmental changes that, as an ensemble, decreased physical activity and encouraged sedentary recreation. In 1952, the National Institutes of Health declared obesity the nation's number-one nutritional problem. A year later, a research study revealed that American children were less fit than their European counterparts. Americans viewed such pronouncements as proof that school buses, widespread car ownership, television (not necessarily a part of suburban life, but often associated with it), and central heating had removed much of the physical activity from daily life. Even new one-story ranch houses—which lacked exercise-inducing stairs—were cited as evidence that life had become too easy (3).

The consumer culture encouraged by the government, the military, corporate interests, and real estate developers to stabilize the United States economy and produce good American liberal subjects was also producing soft bodies that, if unchecked, could lead to a political body that might be "soft on communism." Thus McKenzie focuses the first part of her book on the Eisenhower administra-

tion's establishment of the President's Council on Youth Fitness, which, during its 1956–1960 existence, “maintained a constant media presence that reminded parents and youth alike that it was their civic duty to get their bodies—and their minds—in shape” (15). It is here, in a specific Cold War moment, that McKenzie places the origins of the modern fitness practices that surround us today. While early physical culture may have had a distinct moralizing tone about American assimilation (indeed, Macfadden's guides to body-building were often couched between ads for language recordings to help one lose a foreign accent and mail-order courses on poise and public speaking), the 1950s marked a federal intervention into fitness culture that was bureaucratic, institutionalized, and explicitly focused on building fit citizen-subjects.

Along with immediate concerns about Cold War prowess, the postwar body also provided a useful vessel for other social anxieties, with physical fitness as the prescribed antidote. The “scourge of juvenile delinquency” that plagued American society in the 1940s and 1950s could be addressed with character improving exercise regimens for kids. New awareness about the effects of stress on the body, as well as the ill effects of smoking and alcohol, led to what McKenzie calls the “cardiac crisis” (85). In an especially interesting section, she explains how heart attacks emerged as a disease of epidemic proportions and one that had men in its sightlines. Doctors cited poor dietary habits, sedentary work, and lack of physical movement as potential causes of deadly heart disease. But McKenzie notes that the health panic surrounding escalating rates of heart attacks could also be attributed to social panics related to shifting gender roles and anxieties “that the American male was in decline. The emphasis on the nuclear family and ‘togetherness,’ women's growing power in the home and workplace, and corporations' need for workers who could submit to hierarchy unsettled long-established patterns of life in the United States. Men of the postwar era felt that their cultural dominance was being challenged and sensed a loss of individuality and independence” (86). Thus not only was the rhythm of corporate life deadly, but women and suburbia were conspiring to undermine men's physical health. McKenzie suggests that the success of the YMCA in the late 1950s and the beginnings of jogging culture in the 1960s could be tied to the postwar cardiac crisis. One could add to the analysis here that other physical activities were also suggested to these very men who felt suffocated by the femininity of suburban domestic space and the crushing monotony of the grey flannel life. And that, of course, was sex and the presumed exciting and masculine world of the big city. In her work on *Playboy* and male urban domestic space, Elizabeth Fraterrigo has written convincingly that easy and noncommittal sex became as much a part of male consumer fantasy as any other gadget or product. Exercise may have been part of the solution to male malaise but sex, real or imaginary, which Hugh Hefner capitalized on to great effect, may have been a bigger draw.⁴

If suburban life threatened men's hearts and souls, it also created concerns about the softness of women's bodies. If women were to be the sexually appealing mates postwar American culture demanded, then they better put some sweat into

it. This greatly explains the enormous success of Jack LaLanne, who combined television with at-home do-it-yourself exercise routines. By the 1960s, thinness had become the most critical symbol of a woman's beauty and as thinness became "both more extreme and totalizing, the body was no longer viewed as a fixed entity but as a malleable accessory, adaptable to its possessor's latest whim" (63).

Given these criticisms, McKenzie is quick to point out that "for all the physical benefits it provides, exercise should not be viewed as an unassailable good" (7). Exercise and fitness regimens are closely tied to painful judgments; the pathologizing of the body; unnerving patterns of social surveillance; and, ultimately, a lot of controlling behavior from both within and without. To succeed at the fitness game is difficult because it is unclear where the finish line is. Today, for example, achieving physical fitness alone is inadequate. We need, instead, to achieve a more holistic state of "wellness" which, while delightful in theory, demands the leisure time and money of upscale lifestyle consumerism. McKenzie thoughtfully writes "the continued use of fitness to display our worthiness in the workplace illustrates how little value we attribute to leisure and relaxation, although the arrival of yoga on the fitness scene offers some hopeful signs. Fitness culture relies on the premise that the solution to the nation's physical inactivity can be found in the individual, even though it's apparent that sedentary lifestyles are a societal problem" (180).

Both books suggest that the combination of urban industrial life and consumer culture begat fitness, but in different ways. For Black, it was the ability of entrepreneurs to market products, spaces, aesthetics, and health combined with the cult of personality that built American fitness culture. In McKenzie's account, it was the lifestyle of suburban consumerism that both encouraged fitness and produced the medical need for it. There is scholarly work addressing the effects of consumer capitalism and commodity fetishism on the American body and both Black and McKenzie's texts may have benefitted from more theorization along these lines.⁵ Nevertheless, read together, and framed by the broader literature on body politics, these two works go a long way toward helping us make sense of what it means to be "fit" in America while complicating the place of physical fitness within our culture of body surveillance and rigid beauty standards.

Notes

1. See April Michelle Herndon, *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimizes Women and Children* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014); Kathleen LeBesco, "Neoliberalism, Public Health, and the Moral Perils of Fatness," *Critical Public Health* 21, no. 2 (June 2011): 153–164; and Lauren Rauscher, Kerrie Kauer, and Bianca Wilson, "The Healthy Body Paradox: Organizational and Interactional Influences on Preadolescent Girls' Body Image in Los Angeles," *Gender and Society* 27, no. 2 (April 2013): 208–230.

2. See Mark Adams, *Mr. America: How Muscular Millionaire Bernarr Macfadden Transformed the Nation Through Sex, Salad, and the Ultimate Starvation Diet* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009); Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880–1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); John Kasson, *Houdini, Tarzan, and the Perfect Man: The White Male Body and the Challenge of Modernity in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); Carolyn Thomas De La Peña, *The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built the Modern American* (New York: New York University Press, 2003); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford: Stanford University Press,

1991); Harvey Green, *Fit For America: Health, Fitness, Sport, and American Society* (New York: Pantheon, 1986); Hillel Schwarz, *Never Satisfied: A Cultural History of Diets, Fantasies, and Fat* (New York: Free Press, 1986); and Peter Stearns, *Fat History: Bodies and Beauty in the Modern West* (New York: New York University Press, 1997).

3. For a closer analyses of the relationships between fitness culture, sexuality, gender, and race, see Leslie Heywood, *Bodymakers: A Cultural Anatomy of Women's Body Building* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998); Chris Holmlund, "Visible Difference and Flex Appeal: The Body, Sex, Sexuality and Race in the *Pumping Iron* Films," in *Impossible Bodies: Femininity and Masculinity at the Movies* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002); and Pamela L. Moore, ed., *Building Bodies* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

4. See Elizabeth Fraterrigo, "The Answer to Suburbia: *Playboy's* Urban Lifestyle," *Journal of Urban History* 34 (July 2008): 747–774.

5. See Donald M. Lowe, *The Body in Late-Capitalist USA* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995) and Jon Stratton, *The Desirable Body: Cultural Fetishism and the Erotics of Consumption* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1996).



Tableau Vivante: Sherrie Tucker, editor, pays homage to Billie Jean King at Wimbledon, July 8, 1967.