
At the heart of Born Again Bodies lies R. Marie Griffith’s concern, “for the multiple ways in which body type, among assorted possible signifiers, has come to seem a virtually infallible touchstone of the worth of persons about whom one knows nothing else, as well as the value – indeed, the deepest truths – of one’s own self: a vital component of subjectivity” (7). Griffith argues that in the United States religion is central to the creation of bodies that are meant to signify health, prosperity, and faithfulness. This argument is an important counter to several contemporary works on the body that understand body obsession to be rooted in consumer culture. Rather, Griffith resists this secularization argument and contends instead that the ideological mappings of bodies reveals so clearly the intimate link between bodies, religious beliefs and practices, and the creation of American subjectivities.

Griffith begins her work with a historical account of the early modern American Protestant practices of body reading and regulation. She charts the rise of the medicalization of the body, the role of Methodist perfectionism, and the sexual regulations of the Shakers and the Oneida community, arguing that each helped to shape early American approaches to the body. Griffith argues that phrenology, although later dismissed as a science, played a particularly crucial role in Christian understandings and readings of the body because it fit so well with American ideals of perfectionism. In fact, phrenology as it was linked to perfectionism thrived thanks to the success of New Thought. In the second chapter Griffith traces the influence of New Thought on American understandings of the body between 1890 and 1910. Griffith emphasizes the racism of some New Thought attempts to create ideal bodies and ideal civilizations. Griffith importantly notes that “While New thought writers often seemed to be saying that personal power was accessed by means of mind energy alone, for many the body was the real source of might, site of potential transformation, and basis for revealing the inner truth about the human self” (108). In what appears to be a great irony, New Thought was foundational to American ideologies of the embodied self.

Griffith’s third chapter traces the various divergent paths of New Thought perfectionism. She maps the rise of male fasting as a path to increased virility between 1890 and 1930, led by individuals such as Bernard MacFadden and William Sadler. She also notes that during the 1930s and 1940s William Sheldon, who was a clear heir to phrenology, created an influential system of typing bodies that had a clear metaphysical underpinning. In the final part of this chapter, Griffith discusses two different approaches to African-American bodies that emerged with Father Divine’s Peace Mission Movement, in which fat was a sign of prosperity and health, and Elijah Muhammad’s dietary regulations for Black Muslims that guarded against “White” foods. Griffith’s historical mapping of the New Thought influences on ideologies of the body is an important contribution not only to scholarship on the body, but also to scholarship on Evangelicals that often dismisses the links between Evangelicalism and New Thought perfectionism.

The final two chapters focus on the New Thought roots of the Christian diet culture that emerges in the United States. Griffith provides a survey of Christian diet books and blends this survey with ethnographic accounts of women and men who participated in Christian diet groups such as the Texas-based First Place and the Gweneth Shamblin’s Weigh Down Workshops. She also broadens her analysis by tracing the emerging emphasis on thinness among Seventh Day Adventists and Latter-day Saints. Griffith argues that weight reduction in all of these movements should not be understood simply as avenues toward beauty, as several scholars and media outlets have suggested. Rather, “Far more important is the certainty of a familiar, influential relationship with God, the closeness of
which may be taken as divine approval for other agendas, personal and political” (205).

In both the final chapter and epilogue Griffith provides her own critique of the Christian diet culture. She points toward the problematic notion that fat is equal to sin and the disturbing portrayals of women as both temptress and weak in the diet books and workshops. The gem in Griffith’s critique is her sharp criticism of the racism and classism that is the undercarriage of the Christian diet industry. Griffith concludes that Christian mandates, which have powerfully and persuasively tied thinness to salvation, have undoubtedly helped to bring about a culture of body perfection in the United States.

The rich historical and ethnographic work in Born Again Bodies substantiates Griffith’s argument that “religion – as a strategic network of emotions, practices, and social alliances – has held a vital historical role in American body politics: a system making some bodies healthier, more beautiful, more powerful, and longer lived than others” (249). This work is undoubtedly an important contribution to the scholarship on both consumerism and religion in the United States as it challenges scholars to attune themselves to the intricate relationships between religion, bodies, and consumer culture in the formation of meaning-laden embodied American subjectivities.

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