

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Loredana Polezzi, Charlotte Ross, eds. *In Corpore: Bodies in Post-Unification Italy*. Madison and Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007. 284 pp. \$57.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8386-4164-4.

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## History, Literature, and (Bodies)?

Subtitles, when they are well chosen, can say a lot about a book. *Bodies in Post-Unification Italy*, the subtitle chosen for this collection of essays edited by Loredana Polezzi and Charlotte Ross, is probably even too revealing of both the strengths and the weaknesses of this project. The use of the plural “bodies” provides a good representation of the plurality of themes, methodologies, and disciplines collected in the volume. The same plural synthetically suggests, thanks to a well-established code, the editors’ refusal to force the plurality of bodies and their representations into a totalizing (essentializing? ), unitary perspective. The second part of the subtitle, however, *in Post-Unification Italy*, reveals what is left of a collection of essays when the effort to theorize is not pursued satisfactorily: chronology takes the place of history, and unquestioned geographical and political determinations replace theoretical reflection. The resulting effect, at least for me, is closer to the experience of shopping in a big supermarket than to having a pleasing meal: the ingredients to prepare dinner are there, but they should not be presented to the guests still in the shopping bags.

And good ingredients are indeed present in the book, both in the first section, devoted to the “social sciences,” and in the second section, which collects the essays in literary criticism. David Atkinson discusses with skillful precision the Fascist racialization of colonial subjects’ bodies in the face of the practical and theoretical challenge posed by the nomadic population in Cyrenaica. Giorgio Agamben’s reflection on the “state of ex-

ception” and on the *homo sacer* provides the underlying theoretical background for Atkinson’s historical research on Rodolfo Graziani’s representation of the nomad, while the historiographic debate on Fascist colonialism and colonialism in general provides the historical background. Simon Martin traces an equally thorough account of the role that soccer came to play in Fascist Italy, after the regime reorganized the sport with the *Carta di Viareggio* (1926). The impressive series of international successes achieved by the Italian national soccer team in the 1930s contributed to the increasing role that soccer played in the regime’s propaganda and in its eugenic and racist efforts. Martin also highlights the lack of a single, unifying image of the Italian soccer player as the result of the regime’s inability or unwillingness to choose among competing idealized bodies. However, Martin’s attempt to connect the “battle of births” to the regime’s encouragement to “participate, spectate, or merely be interested in sport” is not really explored in his essay and one has to wonder about eugenic efforts based on “spectat[ing] and merely be[ing] interested in sport” (p. 81). If it is true that the adjective “sportivo” can refer, in Italian, to both those who practice and those who only watch *calcio*, nobody, not even the Fascists, could think that the bodies of the second group approximate the bodies of the first. Loredana Polezzi’s opening essay on Gustavo Bianchi’s and Lidio Cipriani’s travel writing about Africa, and Jeffrey David Feldman’s essay on the use of x-rays to racialize *italiani illustri* and Catholic saints beyond their external, phenotypic appearance offer equally interest-

ing examples of the continuities between liberal Italy and Fascism. Feldman highlights the difference between, on one hand, the autochthonous Italian racism and, on the other hand, American and German racism, because, he claims, Americans and Germans placed a much greater emphasis on “somatic characteristics” than their Italian counterparts (p. 122). However, this opposition is more stated than explored in Feldman’s essay and no footnote is there to help a reader who might be curious to know on which studies of American and German racism he bases his assertions. Polezzi’s essay would equally benefit from a more accurate bibliographical apparatus to guide the reader to the source of some of her claims. When she writes that “contemporary scholars of Italian Fascism are also stressing how Fascism’s totalitarian nature aimed to produce the sublimation of the individual within the Fascist ideal,” a reader might want to know who these scholars are (p. 49). Similarly, when she writes: “A second phase is usually identified with the Fascist period, though some scholars prefer to mark its inception only with the war against Ethiopia” (p. 31), I expected to find, in the corresponding endnote, a reference to who those scholars are and not only a reference to Barbara Sòrgoni’s *Parole e corpi* (1998). Helen E. Beale’s analysis of Giacomo Manzù’s *Monumento al Partigiano* (1977) provides a very convincing discussion of the genealogy of Manzù’s sculpture, its meaning, and its intended creation of an affect for the viewers, but seems an orphan in the collection, because the author seems to be looking for a dialogue with other specialists of Manzù’s work rather than with the other contributors to the volume.

I could probably make a similar comment about all the essays that make up the second part of the volume, but they at least have in common the fact that they are literary studies. The range is breathtaking, going from Luisa Carrer’s analysis of Giovanni Verga’s *Eva* (1869) and its relation with other representations of “modernity,” particularly with Degas’ paintings, to Lorenzo Chiesa’s convincing discussion of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s reflection on the bodies of the lower classes and their transformation under the pressure of late capitalism; from Liz Wren-Owens’s Lacanian discussion of the absent bodies in Antonio Tabucchi’s work, to David Best’s discussion of Carlo Cassola’s *Paura e Tristezza* (1970), from Lindsay Myers’ article on “Antonia Pozzi’s

Writing of the Female Body” to Charlotte Ross’s closing essay on Isabella Santacroce’s work. Anyone interested in the works of the authors covered by the essays in the second half of the volume will find her/his specific topic covered with professionalism and intelligence, but the book still fails to work as a unitary enterprise, and I have to confess that it would be difficult for me to recommend the book to a reader who wanted to understand synthetically the images of the body in Italy in the past two hundred and fifty years or so.

Perhaps this is actually the key to understanding why, despite the individual essays, the book does not seem successful to me. As it emerges from the very first paragraph of the book, the project was courageous but overambitious, and this led to problems of synthesis. Polezzi and Ross start their introduction by posing a relation between bodies and the cultures in which those bodies exist and are represented (p. 9), but they are then forced to admit that neither “bodies” nor “Italian culture” are stable terms that can be used to guide an analysis. After questioning the very existence of Italian culture (“Should we talk of a unified culture or of multiple, perhaps, hybridizing cultures?” p. 9), they embrace the “Canon” and reach the conclusion, at the beginning of the next paragraph, that the body occupies a position in “Italian culture” that is “at once undeniable and problematic” (p. 10). Thus, we are asked to accept a literary and cultural canon, Italian culture, which the editors of the book know to be an old ideological fiction, so that we can contest it and problematize it again in the essays collected in the book. It is therefore not surprising that the editors have to claim as a merit the “wide range of critical instruments,” disciplines etc., but are not really followed by the authors in the volume when they try to create a more unified theoretical approach (p. 11). Thus, Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, who are claimed to be at the center of “the theoretical framework of the volume” (p. 11) are, in Butler’s case, never mentioned except for the introduction, and mentioned only by two authors (Atkinson and Chiesa) in Foucault’s case. In conclusion, this book should serve more to start a discussion on bodies and cultures in Italy than as a conclusion, even a first conclusion, on the subject. And this is possibly a good thing.

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