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Maurizio Valsania. *Jefferson's Body: A Corporeal Biography.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017. 280 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8139-3969-8.

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Historians, students, and history buffs alike have long struggled to make sense of Thomas Jefferson and his conflicting philosophies, with egalitarian rhetoric clashing with patronizing sentiments toward nonwhites and women. Despite frustrations and a diverse multitude of heated opinions, we keep trying to untangle the Gordian knot that is Jefferson himself, for he resonates with Americans up through this day because his persona in many ways is an embodiment of the United States. It is both this figurative and literal embodiment that Maurizio Valsania takes as his focus in *Jefferson's Body: A Corporeal Biography*, examining Jefferson and all his complications through a somatic lens in an attempt to cut the knot. While this nuanced approach may not entirely solve the puzzle of the third president, Valsania uses corporeality to provide clarification to the enigma.

While the majority of Jefferson scholarship focuses on his intellect and philosophy, *Jefferson's Body* is devoted entirely to his corporeal understandings of himself and others. Through the reexamination of primary sources written by or about Jefferson, Valsania reveals how Jefferson's consciousness, beliefs, and deepest emptions were shaped by his corporeality and corporeal interactions, and how he in turn sought to comprehend and master his own and others' bodies in order to construct an ideal republican society. As an astute observer and Enlightenment devotee, Jefferson recognized the very paradoxes in his logic that twenty-first century critics chastise him for, but saw them as unavoidable consequences of the natural order. Jefferson's views of the body were ingrained in his belief in natural simplicity, but this "natural state" or status depended on an individual's sex and race. The author argues that Jefferson's dialectal perspective or idiosyncrasies emerged from a corporeal view of self, described in the appropriately titled first section, "Self," and how he applied notions of the natural body to others through both interaction and observation, detailed in the again appropriately named second section, "Others." As a result of this binary approach, the structure and content of the book reflect and demystify Jefferson's dualities. Yet the tables are now turned; rather than Jefferson observing corporeality, he is the one being corporeally observed, providing both context and deeper insight into eighteenth-century challenges and limitations that shaped his sphinxlike attitudes.

In "Self", Valsania discusses how Jefferson sought to command his mind and body, striking a balance between physical and mental exertion in order to obtain optimal corporeal and intellectual capacity. Jefferson looked to nature to find this equilibrium which he used to define his personal,

political, and philosophical ideals as well as his own body, for he believed balance imperative for both an individual and society to flourish. This moderation allowed Jefferson to become corporeally innovative and progressive. He snubbed the traditional stiff, militaristic, masculine European body, whose artificiality failed to adapt to natural bodily needs. Instead, he embraced natural simplicity of both the body and mind, achieved through flexibility and fluidity. Through this private endeavor, he came to understand republicanism as the ideal form of government, for he saw its adaptability as a counter to the unnatural rigidity of Europe's stagnant aristocratic societies that could not change to meet the needs of the people. In addition, the ways in which he moderated himself reflected how he wished to model the national identity of the United States, and as a leading figure in the nascent years of the nation, he consciously used his body and image to create the political ideology of the early American republic. Jefferson sought to advance civilization through his own personal progression and the innovations of those like him who he believed were naturally positioned to contribute to society: the virtuous, talented white upper-class males who, by moderating first themselves and then the body politic, could liberate society from "the strictures of history and circumstance" (p. 100). Yet his own personal experiences and demographics narrowed his views, and while he believed he and those like him could master their corporeality and take charge of their destinies, others could not do so in the same way given their natural limitations or handicaps. The "other," therefore, had to be mastered in order to be integrated into progressive civilization.

In "Others," Valsania explains how Jefferson's corporeal concepts led him to envision and interact with Native Americans, African Americans, and women, arguing that the key to grasping Jefferson's alienation of these groups is not to be found in terms of power, but in natural "science." Through his observations of these "others," Jefferson saw generalized physical and behavioral differences between these groups as rooted in inborn features rather than the result of subjugation. Like many other Enlightenment thinkers of the time, Jefferson understood whiteness and maleness not as a strategy of dominance but rather as the natural norm of humanity. Here lies the Enlightenment paradox, for progress and absolute truths were both present in nature but applied differently to various human populations. While white males were naturally able to change their circumstances and improve civilization, as history appeared to demonstrate, the natures of others were predominantly static and therefore not suited for pushing society forward. Jefferson's interactions with others put natural theory to the test, and, due to his privileged position within white Virginian plantation culture, "proved" such notions of natural hierarchy. These ideas of corporeality made Jefferson oblivious to factors restricting populations. Although it is clear in the twenty-first century that historical, cultural, and economic conditions led to such social controls that created and limited these "othered" populations, Jefferson's objective rationalism prevented him from making such connections. For Jefferson, it was nature that created power dynamics between populations and not power dynamics that created others' perceived natures.

Relations to others also constructed Jefferson's ideas about his personal self and Anglo-American culture. Valsania writes, "It is perhaps no mystery that such an 'invention of the other' enhances an individual's sense of possibility and control, while providing some kind of reassurance about personal status or capabilities [and] providing its inventor with an excuse for indulging in self-aggrandizement" (p. 5). This is precisely what Jefferson did, except he did not conceive of himself as an inventor of the natural order, but the inventor of himself and of a better society. Jefferson used his bodily self to demonstrate authority over the other through distance, reservation, and hierarchical display rather than "mili-

taristic" physical coercion. In so doing, he sought to gradually incorporate these groups into his ideal democratic society insofar as their natures allowed and so long as their integration did not risk civilization's progress and modernity. He treated each group according to their observed state of nature: Indians as children, Africans as inferior laborers, or women as subservient mothers. Jefferson was well aware of the contributions women and African slaves made to society through their work and thought such toils their natural duty, which resulted in their purest state of happiness. He believed the exertion of these groups allowed everyday life to run smoothly, thereby giving white men the leisure to do conceptual thinking that would advance civilization. At the same time, Jefferson came to believe that Native Americans and blacks could not peacefully coexist with white society, and sought to distance them corporeally from both himself (by keeping slaves at a distance) and the American population at large (by pushing natives farther west), thus highlighting the limits to which the other could be assimilated into his world.

Valsania's juxtaposition of Jefferson's corporeal views of himself to others exposes the factors behind his notions of (in)equality rather than rearticulates his shortcomings. The author situates Jefferson as a unique product of his physical and intellectual environment, defending him against presentism. "Historians and readers who think that Jefferson simply mistreated members of [the other] (which he certainly did), and that this must be the end of the story, miss an essential thrust of Jefferson's progressive and liberating message" (p. 100). Valsania argues that we cannot overlook Enlightenment sensibility in regards to the way Jefferson conceptualized both himself and others, for his progressive view of history worked in tandem with categorization and natural hierarchy. Jefferson tried to strike a balance (as he did in every aspect of life) between progress and natural restrictions. While he sought to improve the lives of many, he did not want to upset the social order in the process, seeking to achieve progress through pragmatism while working within the natural law. Instead of hurling our disappointments at Jefferson, Valsania argues we must recognize his innovations and visions without losing sight of his racial and gender attitudes that framed his complexity of thought. Jefferson's gradualist approach laid foundations for the future: people built on and expanded Jefferson's vision of progressivism, even if it was limited in his time, in his mind, and in his corporeal relations with others.

By defending Jefferson against presentism, it is tempting to assume that Valsania falls into the scholarly trap in which ideas of nature and progress constitute "free passes" for anything Enlightenment thinkers failed to achieve or perceive. However, the author firmly states that Jefferson was a willing participant in the brutal institution of slavery and does not excuse any of his offenses, stating that Jefferson "did not free himself from false natural hierarchies. What is worse, he did not free those 'others' on whom his own liberated identity depended for its whiteness, its maleness, and its centrality to the notion of progress" (p. 106). Valsania, much like Jefferson, seeks to strike a balance in discussing both the progressive and restrictive aspects of Jefferson's corporeal understandings, and tackling such dualities is perhaps this work's greatest strength. Unlike unabashed Jefferson defenders, Valsania refuses to sweep unsavory facts under the rug, yet unlike historical revisionists, he does not see such matters as negating Jefferson's ambitious Enlightenment projects. Hence Valsania deftly navigates among multiple dualities, heated contemporary debates, and Jefferson's own words. Notwithstanding others' attempts to place Jefferson on the right or wrong side of history, Valsania recognizes that Jefferson cannot be simplified into categories, and instead seeks to expose the various complicated dimensions of his thoughts and actions.

Differentiating between Jefferson's thoughts and actions, however, is difficult. Although Jefferson could not envision ways to fully incorporate others into society due to their nature, Valsania boldly suggests that he would possibly have set his racist and misogynist ideas aside had he known modern science and philosophy. This notion, however, goes against renowned Jefferson scholar Annette Gordon-Reed's conclusions that Jefferson treated others the way he did not because he sincerely believed in their inferiority, but because it suited his needs and the needs of his society. "White supremacy does not demand deep conviction.... It finds its greatest expression, and most devastating effect, in the determination to state, live by, and act on the basis of ideas one knows are untrue when doing so will yield important benefits and privileges that one does not care to relinquish."[1] This self-interest is somewhat watered down in Valsania's discussions. He clearly demonstrates that genuine notions of nature and adaptability were central to Jefferson's thought processes, but there may be more to be said about social constructs than he alludes to. It is difficult to accept that Jefferson's notions of corporeality led to such a profound obliviousness to political, social, and economic constraints that "othered" people. Personal and societal motivations would have likely prevented Jefferson from eagerly embracing equal rights even if he were presented with evidence countering his conceptions of racial difference.

In a similar vein, Valsania mentions how Jefferson came to the conclusion that blacks and whites should ultimately stop living together in the same society, for he himself knew of the connections that could be made between the races (positive and negative) and tensions that inevitably arose. Again, this separation counters Gordon-Reed's conclusions, for she says that while Jefferson theorized that blacks and whites could not peacefully coexist and feared racial intermixing would cause black to stain white, he repeatedly proved that that was not the case through his relations with the Hemings and Granger slave families. With regard to Sally Hemings in particular, Jefferson was not concerned with defiling himself with her "otherness" since he perceived her to embody an ideal balance of white and black characteristics.[2] Valsania too discusses this dimension between Hemings and Jefferson and draws on Gordon-Reed's work for inspiration, but seems to falls short in his larger application. While Gordon-Reed's arguments about the relationships between Jefferson's self and others provides a fitting conceptual framework for Valsania to work within, he could have more closely examined what Jefferson said in comparison to what he actually did in regards to corporeality. This other layer of duality would have added rich discussion to the work.

Valsania concludes ***Jefferson's Body*** by stating that the American founder's "corporeal strategies and expedients ... are forever gone" (pp. 195-196). By articulating the disconnect between Jefferson's understandings of the body and our own, he once again urges readers to appreciate Jefferson's radical innovations rather than dwell on his limitations. He is right in a sense, for the days of racial thinking embedded in natural hierarchies are gone from the modern mainstream, yet he could have placed more emphasis on the far-reaching impact of Jefferson's indiscretions. Valsania superbly discusses the enduring influences of Jefferson's corporeal "successes," particularly his bodily model of American republican identity and political philosophy, yet he could have more deeply examined Jefferson's corporeal "failures" and how such regrettable experiences and notions also affect American history. Just as Jefferson embodied republican nature and human equality, he also embodied racial inequality. This painful and poignant legacy lives on and has allowed Americans to ignore civil rights abuses that undermine the democratic virtues they simultaneously embrace.[3] Jefferson is alive and well within the modern American body politic, for better or for worse, and today we must deal with the dualities

within the American condition begotten by the very republicanism Jefferson formulated. Instead of putting the Jefferson enigma to rest, Valsania brings to the fore another dimension of such captivating and concerning contradictions in which we seek to comprehend the successes and failures not only of Jefferson, but of the United States.

Notes

[1]. Annette Gordon-Reed, ***The Hemingses of Monticello: An American Family*** (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 119.

[2]. Gordon-Reed, ***Hemingses***, 124, 654. Jefferson viewed Sally Hemings as an exceptional woman corporeally given her mixed race. Although she was predominantly white and exhibited European feminine beauty, Jefferson believed she had enough African blood in her to make her submissive and passionate, the African traits he most greatly admired. Hemings was unlike the unruly white women Jefferson knew, and he did not see her as a threat to the social order. It should be clear, however, that Hemings appeared more docile due to her station as a slave rather than her physicality, while the white women Jefferson associated with were more defiant due to their comparatively greater freedoms. See Valsania, 193.

[3]. For more on Jefferson's duality in relation to American political culture, see Joyce Appleby, ***Thomas Jefferson*** (New York: Henry Holt, 2003), 134; Todd Estes, "What We Think About When We Think About Thomas Jefferson," ***Oakland Journal*** 20 (Winter 2011): 21-46; 44-46.

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