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Material Bodies: Biology and Culture in the United States

Rüdiger Kunow. Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018

Material Bodies: Biology and Culture in the United States by Rüdiger Kunow is a book that diligently interrogates the space and fusion between individual embodiment and wider culture in the United States of America, highlighting how the biological human being informs the culture within which it exists, and how cultural, scientific and political thought come to determine biological normativity. The crux of Kunow's investigation lies in the relationship between public and private experience, and in our understanding of the body as both 'the core of our innermost self and an intimate Other' (Kunow, 428). Whilst the cultural, and indeed political, identity of the United States has historically been defined by conceptions of liberty and self-determination, Kunow points to biology as an innate facet of human experience that people 'can call their own but cannot control' (Kunow, xvii). Kunow conducts a clear, case-study based exploration that examines the biological alongside the cultural, illustrating how 'in matters biological, the individual is an inescapably porous being, never wholly by him- or herself.' This porousness becomes integral to Kunow's claim that 'the biology of human life' is 'a *figure of intervention* which disrupts human designs, social conventions and cultural performances' (Kunow, xviii).

Material Bodies is structured into three sections; 'The Materialism of Biological Encounters,' 'Not Normatively Human: Cultural Grammars and the Human Body' and 'Corporeal Semiotics: The Body of the Text/the Text of the Body.' In the first section, Kunow outlines the relationship between mobility and biology, exploring how mobile biological matter creates moments of 'emergence and emergency' (Kunow, 45) before examining how these moments of 'emergence and emergency' are embedded into larger cultural narratives through mass media. Kunow uses this section to introduce a key moment

in his argument; 'that biology and mobility are strategic phenomena, located in the contact zone between the collective and the individual' (46). Kunow goes on in the second section to further explore this 'contact zone,' looking in particular at how medical science has prescribed a set of norms to the human body that inform cultural understandings of normativity. Kunow argues that these norms create experiences of inequality, particularly in relation to ableism. He notes that "Aging," "old age," "disability" are personal experiences, but also experiences where socio-cultural norms resonate within the embodied lives of individuals' (321), stating that 'there is thus a performative dimension attaching itself to late or disabled life' (322). At this point, Kunow's argument aligns with Barbara Ehrenreich's assertion in her 2018 book, *Natural Causes: Life, Death and the Illusion of Control*, that the biological certainty of old age and death is being fought against in American culture through over-diagnosis and well-being movements. Both Kunow and Ehrenreich suggest that it is now the cultural norm in United States culture to resist the biological norm of the aging process. Lastly, Kunow turns to the relationship between the somatic and the semantic. He explores how the biological body has become, especially in light of the scientific developments in genomics, a text to help understand human life. However, he also explores the ways in which the semantic can express somatic experience, looking in particular at how experiences of pain and cancer are expressed in written language.

Rüdiger Kunow is a Professor Emeritus in American Studies at Potsdam University. Clearly, *Material Bodies* is a study that engages directly with conversations in the field of American Studies. Kunow's argument that 'biology is a *figure of intervention* that disrupts human designs' has interesting implications on discussions of American liberalism and self-determination. However, Kunow acknowledges the universality of the concepts that he approaches in his monograph. Whilst some might deem Kunow's focus on the biological as a clash between the disciplines of the Sciences and the Humanities, it is this interdisciplinary

approach that forms one of the most notable strengths of Kunow's argument. By choosing to invoke 'biological' as the term upon which he bases his claims, Kunow is able to navigate the tangled relationship between the human body as a site that determines individual selfhood and is thus self-governed, yet also as a site, that in times of biological intervention, becomes ungovernable, shifting and realigning an individual's place within society. Crucially, by thinking about the human body in terms of biology, Kunow is able to explore human experience on a molecular level. He is able to explore moments where individual biological matter collide with material external to the body, for example the case of Typhoid Mary, and, importantly, trace the cultural response to such biological collisions.

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