

A CULTURAL HISTORY OF THE HUMAN BODY IN THE AGE OF EMPIRE

EDITED BY MICHAEL SAPPOL AND
STEPHEN P. RICE



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SERIES PREFACE

A Cultural History of the Human Body is a six-volume series reviewing the changing cultural construction of the human body throughout history. Each volume follows the same basic structure and begins with an outline account of the human body in the period under consideration. Next, specialists examine major aspects of the human body under seven key headings: birth/death, health/disease, sex, medical knowledge/technology, popular beliefs, beauty/concepts of the ideal, marked bodies of gender/race/class, marked bodies of the bestial/divine, cultural representations and self and society. Thus, readers can choose a synchronic or a diachronic approach to the material—a single volume can be read to obtain a thorough knowledge of the body in a given period, or one of the seven themes can be followed through time by reading the relevant chapters of all six volumes, thus providing a thematic understanding of changes and developments over the long term. The six volumes divide the history of the body as follows:

Volume 1: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in Antiquity* (750 B.C.E.–1000 C.E.)

Volume 2: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Medieval Age* (500–1500)

Volume 3: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Renaissance* (1400–1650)

Volume 4: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Enlightenment* (1650–1800)

Volume 5: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Age of Empire* (1800–1920)

Volume 6: *A Cultural History of the Human Body in the Modern Age* (1920–21st Century)

General Editors, Linda Kalof and William Bynum

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Introduction

Empires in Bodies; Bodies in Empires

MICHAEL SAPPOL

THE ANATOMICAL PUZZLE

An illustrated theatrical flyer from 1886 tells something about the empires that were constructed out of bodies in “the age of empire,” and the bodies that were forged within them. “Marinelli the Anatomical Puzzle,” on a tour of the United States after a season or two on a European circuit, is shown striking a characteristically impossible pose (see Figure 0.1). Like an X-ray *avant la lettre*, an anatomical figure of his skeletal structure is overlaid by an outline of his naked body. His back is curved 180 degrees behind him. His head, placed behind his buttocks, seems poised to make an incredible journey up his ass, almost an Ouroboros. The small print explains that “this human marvel has appeared before all the leading continental physicians,” including Rudolf Virchow, the celebrated German pathologist. The doctors have testified: The rearrangement of body parts, the “anatomical puzzle,” is real. To further bolster its claims, the flyer boasts that its image was “taken from a photograph.” All are part of the rhetoric of authentication.

In a small accompanying printed note, theater owner James L. Kernan invites the “Physicians and Surgeons of this City [Washington, D.C.]” to see the “world-famous Herr Marinelli, whose scientific and wonderful Performances have astounded the leading Professors of Anatomy throughout . . . Europe.”¹ This “private exhibition” before Washington’s medical establishment would bolster the credibility of Marinelli’s claims and reassure a skeptical public that

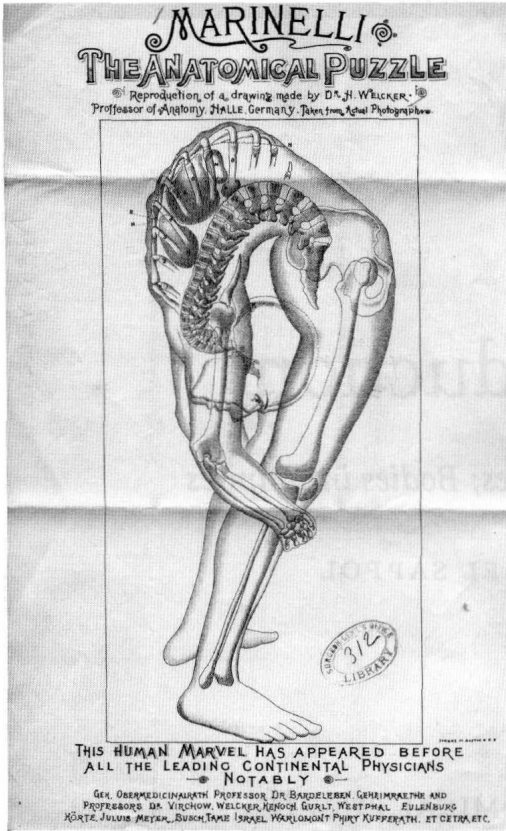


FIGURE 0.1: *Marinelli the Anatomical Puzzle* (Boston: Forbes Co., 1886). National Library of Medicine. Top caption: “Reproduction of a drawing . . . by Dr. H. Welcker, Professor [sic] of Anatomy. Halle, Germany. Taken from actual photograph.” Bottom: “This human marvel has appeared before all the leading continental physicians, notably . . . Professor Dr. Bardleben, . . . Professors Dr. Virchow, Welcker, Knoch, Gurlt, Westphal . . . etc.” National Library of Medicine.

the Anatomical Puzzle was not a cheap hoax. After the medical preview, the show would open to the ticket-buying masses.

This volume is about the cultural history of the body in the age of empire, here defined as the period from 1800 to 1920. Although other ages were also ages of empire (including our own), this period was very much an era of state formation and expansion, geopolitical rivalry, and colonial and imperial wars and conquest in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas. It was also an era in which empires were constructed in railroad, steamship, and telegraph monopolies; political parties; familial patronage networks; universities; prisons; academic disciplines like medicine, physics, art, and engineering; publishing houses; hospitals; mining; pedagogy; steel; tobacco; asylums; museums; bananas; patent medicines; fashionable dress; and electricity. Empires within empires.²

Since Michel Foucault, Alain Corbin, Thomas Laqueur, Mary Poovey, Roy Porter, Carolyn Walker Bynum, Catherine Gallagher, Judith Butler, and other scholars opened up “the body” as a field of inquiry several decades ago, the field has grown enormously in scope, covering an astounding number of body practices, historical moments, institutions, social settings, and geographical

locations.³ The scholarship in many disciplines—history, history of medicine, literary studies, art history, anthropology, sociology, architectural history, cultural geography, theology, feminist studies, and so on—using many different theoretical and pragmatic approaches—has proliferated. This volume therefore makes no claims to be a comprehensive survey. Our intention is, instead, to present a sampling of current historical work on selected aspects of the body in the period 1800–1920. Given the burgeoning diversity—even fragmentation—of scholarship, in this introduction I will read an idiosyncratic set of images (like Marinelli’s theatrical flyer) to raise some of the larger issues at stake in current research on the body.

So, in what empires was the Anatomical Puzzle deployed?

There was a sprawling transnational empire of theaters, museums, tent shows, circuses, and so forth, where men and women flocked to see a diverse assortment of body performances: freak shows featuring people with congenital deformities, tattoos, and disfiguring diseases; displays of cultural exotics; and exotica. These featured amazing bodies of different sizes, shapes, and textures but also more normative bodies doing amazing things and amusing things: acrobatics, dance, gymnastics, boxing, slapstick, glass blowing, and so forth—and, at the most respectable end, dramatic and comedic stage plays with elaborate sets and star players.⁴ Such shows were highly responsive to consumer demand: there was a diverse and growing public of various classes and social types who increasingly lived and congregated in burgeoning cities organized around the manufacture, sale, and transportation of goods and services—and who looked for diversions on which to spend their disposable cash.

Within the amorphous domain of popular entertainments there developed smaller structured empires. In 1886, James L. Kernan, the owner of the theater where Marinelli appeared, was just beginning to assemble a chain of burlesque and vaudeville theaters that would eventually stretch from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and Buffalo, New York, to Baltimore, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. In succeeding decades he would join cause with a select group of theater owners in other North American cities and form a powerful “burlesque wheel,” a monopolistic syndicate that tried to control the booking of performers in the eastern United States in order to dominate theatrical agencies and drive independent operators out of business.

In the process Kernan became a millionaire, a man of considerable social standing in Baltimore. Kernan owned an extravagant home, wore expensive clothes, and participated in social settings, where he displayed his wealth and performed his own set of calculated and uncalculated body performances before an elite audience of family, friends, business associates, and “society.”⁵ In retirement he became principal benefactor of Baltimore’s James Lawrence Kernan Hospital and Industrial School of Maryland for Crippled Children—a medical, educational, and philanthropic empire of disabled and contorted

bodies! Kernan's hospital-school, in turn, was but one of many new medical and educational institutions funded through the largesse of wealthy "great men" and "great families." In turn, these institutions were linked to voluntary charities, professional health and medical organizations, and the state (through funding, municipal courts, and social welfare agencies)—the empires and provinces of philanthropy and social welfare.

The Anatomical Puzzle also implicated another empire: the transnational, hierarchical domain of scientific medicine. This was the medicine of medical schools, hospitals, authoritative texts, credentialed professors, new discoveries, and interesting cases. In the nineteenth century, medical establishments proliferated in the major cities of Europe and North America and sent tendrils that reached out into the hinterlands and colonial periphery. Within these networks, medical knowledge was produced—and authority constructed—in dissecting rooms, lecture halls, clinics, laboratories, morgues, pathological collections, monographs, and journal articles. The prestige of the profession came in part from its ability to present, conceptualize, and explain the (living) clinical subject and (dead) anatomical subject—the human body and body parts to observe, cut into, and perform procedures upon; to display and circulate in glass jars and vitrines; to represent in models, photographs, drawings, engravings, and lithographs; and to describe in published and unpublished case histories. The guarantee of the doctor's expertise lay in his (and it was usually a he) mastery of clinical and anatomical subjects. Doctors conducted physiological research; contributed to a collective natural history of anatomical morphology, physiological function, and pathological dysfunction; and collected data, cases, and specimens for presentation. The spectacular case, the rare and freaky case, was particularly useful in dramatizing the itinerary of pathology in the body and advertising medicine's (and the individual doctor's) profound knowledge of it.⁶

In the 1880s, the highest medical authority emanated from Europe, especially Germany. There, Rudolf Virchow (1821–1902), the renowned author of *Cellular Pathology* (1858) and advocate of microscopy and standardized autopsy, was a venerated figure, the center of a large professional and political circle. Virchow was a major producer and collector of anatomical specimens.⁷ His name glowed with an aura that was useful even to the likes of Marinelli, thousands of miles away in America. The very title of Marinelli's freaky act, along with the illustration he circulated to advertise it (and Virchow's testimonial), played on the long-established medical practice of anatomical collection and representation. Marinelli was his own anatomical specimen, his theatrical poster his own anatomical plate.

Beyond that, the Anatomical Puzzle fitted inside congeries of larger empires. All of this activity by Marinelli, Kernan, and Virchow was made possible by cheap mass-produced print technology; steamship, railroad, postal, and telegraph networks (regional, national, international); and the state, corporate,

and financial monopolies and oligopolies that nurtured and harbored them. We know a lot about Virchow the German, less about Kernan the American, and still less about “Herr Marinelli,” the German-titled, Italian-named performer from “the continent,” who crossed borders and oceans to contort his body on European and American stages, and made a very good living doing so.⁸ On contemporary maps the national boundaries of the United States, Italy, and Germany were clearly demarcated, but relatively new. In the 1880s, all three nation-states were consolidating their territories and governmental administrations, and the identity of each was far from secure. After a series of wars and insurrections, Italy had only recently been unified under Victor Emmanuel II of Piedmont. The force of Prussian arms had forged the German Empire out of a mosaic of statelets. The United States, a dynamically expanding nation on Europe’s periphery, was divided into North and South, black and white, rich and poor, and multiple ethnicities and classes. It had grown to be an economic, industrial, and geopolitical giant despite nearly falling to pieces in its bloody Civil War.

So these were the empires in which the Anatomical Puzzle was forged, that structured his act and career. But what did the Anatomical Puzzle signify? What teeter-tottering cultural logic did it draw upon? What practices did it deploy?

Marinelli’s act mobilized widely held and enduring structures of belief about mind and body, spirit and matter. The image in his flyer refers back to the centuries-old tradition of anatomical illustration inaugurated by Andreas Vesalius in the mid-sixteenth century. Vesalian anatomy employed dissection to open up dead bodies, and made profusely illustrated texts based on the observations of the anatomist, images that mapped an inner topography of rivers, canals, structures, and pathways. Such illustrations used illusionistic perspective to endow the interior of the human body with a highly articulated depth, as much geological as geographical, a stratigraphy of layers. And on these foundations, over several centuries, Vesalius’s successors developed the notion of the body as a bounded (albeit porous) political economy, which contained within it sites of production, distribution, and control.⁹

In the nineteenth century the anatomical idea circulated far beyond the domain of elite medicine. Popular lecturers argued that an anatomical conception of self was part of the civilizing process: educated men and women must think of themselves as anatomical beings, with internal boundaries and place names, an inventory of parts, ruled by the laws of reason and health. Anatomical knowledge was a kind of moral discipline, a way that mind could govern body. Women, savages, children, and uneducated laborers, like beasts, all lacked an anatomical conception of self, and were therefore prey to ungoverned impulse and ill health. But they could be brought into the moral order through education: advocates of public school education in North America added anatomy and physiology to the curriculum; Christian missionaries in

Burma, Hawaii, and southern India translated anatomy textbooks into native languages and taught anatomy alongside Bible studies. In an age when many people were trying to remake themselves into “refined,” “respectable,” and “genteel” persons—a condition that was signified by the possession of homes with drawing rooms, libraries, objets d’art, prints, pianos, flower gardens, and picket fences—William A. Alcott (the author of many Sunday school tracts) wrote a popular illustrated anatomy book for families, teachers, and schoolchildren that reconceptualized the body as “the house I live in.”¹⁰ In its pages, the viscous mess of interior organs and fluids—and the appetites it engenders—was given order and containment through its skeletal architecture. Representation in words and images on the printed page domesticated corporeality, mind governed body.

The Anatomical Puzzle inverted this order. His head did not sit atop the sovereign self; his anatomy was not posed like a classical statue. His contortions bared and deformed the osteological structure that should have kept the body in order. His anatomical self was worn almost at skin level (much like stage bodybuilders or the hunger artists who billed themselves as a “living anatomy”). His interior and exterior converged. While Marinelli used Professor Virchow’s testimonial to respectfully gesture toward high medical authority, he also travestied that authority. His body exceeded anatomical discipline. And this had a social dimension: the Anatomical Puzzle violated prescriptive ideals of masculine beauty, manliness, posture, even species. In the cultural logic of mind and body, the head was identified with regulation and control, humanity, the cultural and political elite, the text, the law, and reason. The rest of the body was identified with manual labor, the common people, the exotic, the beast, and impulsive desire. The image on Marinelli’s flyer pointed to the flesh’s perverse pleasure in contorting textual outlines and work discipline. The Anatomical Puzzle was unburdened by the requirement to live within his anatomical template, and he was thus joined to the exotic, the criminal, the effete, the working-class rowdy, and other wayward bodies—a lush and crowded assortment of social types. The body was a capacious signifier, a cornucopia of meanings, difficult to pin down, and impossible to fully domesticate, which was part of the fun of the fairground and stage-show attraction.

The case of Marinelli is instructive but opens up a host of problems. One is this: What relation does corporeal life have to the printed page of text and illustration? We can’t bring Marinelli back to life to perform for us, or to submit to interview or forensic analysis. All we have are paper fragments: his illustrated poster and circular letter, brief mentions in American newspapers, a chatty French article with a half-tone photograph (which tells us that Marinelli ended his career in Paris, where he had a school for contortionists). Based on these scraps, and accounts of similar performers and shows, we can imagine how things went, but we don’t really know who Marinelli was, what he did