book review

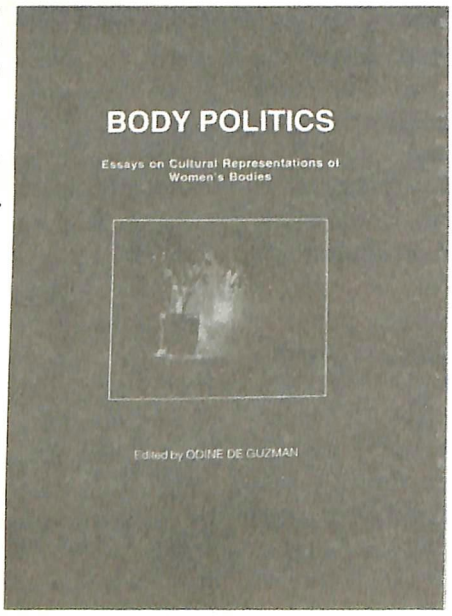
Women's Bodies—The Disjunct Between Social Standards and Personal Stakes

de Guzman, Odine. *Body Politics: Essays on Cultural Representation of Women's Bodies*. UP Center for Women's Studies and The Gord Foundation, 2002

reviewed by Andrea Burris

The body is a contentious issue for most women. The idea of having one's body discussed and judged is enough to make some woman anxious to the point of self-starvation. From a young age, women receive confusing, mixed messages about their bodies. Fairy tales try to tell us that our bodies are an extension of our morality by always making the heroines attractive and the villains ugly. Our matriarchs try to turn our bodies into icons of good breeding by training us to carry ourselves so that we will look respectable. Our husbands and partners use them as fashion accessories to be flaunted at social events where they hope to be the envy of all their peers. Governments use them as tools for public policy by telling us how many children we should have, sometimes punishing us for having more than they think we should. Religious institutions threaten us with eternal damnation if we don't propagate the religion by default by having as many children as we can in our lifetime. Even our peers use them as yardsticks by which to measure their own desirability. Everybody seems to be able to lay a claim on our bodies, leaving us frustrated and bewildered by the conflicting beliefs around us.

This is the milieu in which Odine de Guzman put together *Body Politics: Essays on Cultural Representation of Women's Bodies*, an eclectic collection of essays that are so thought provoking that it is hard to write a short review of it. There is so much to say about women's bodies because so much anxiety surrounds the topic, both on the academic level and the personal. Even though the physical aspect of our identity is ideally only secondary to our personality, it is our bodies that precede the rest of us and it is by our bodies that we are first judged. These judgements in turn shape our personalities by the way they make us respond. If we are always judged beautiful, then we will play up to it and the reaction we get will give us confidence, drawing even more people to us. If we are always judged ugly, the opposite happens. If we are always treated as objects and the judgement does not go beyond our body and its uses, then we respond in a way that diminishes our self-esteem. Any discussion of the body must therefore involve a discussion of identity because these two are so intricately bound. Beauty, although only skin deep, becomes us, and we become our skin.



This injustice of superficiality allows further injustices to the woman. Policies, beliefs and behaviour that we take for granted have severe implications on women and the way they view themselves. Cultural representations affect society and individuals at a deeper level than most people realise. It is this unfair imbalance between the effect and cause that Neferti Xina M. Tadiar refers to in the first essay, "Filipinas Living in a Time of War." Her war is not just a literal war, although with the current global climate, her arguments could well apply. The war she discusses is the environment of chaos and disorder that women find themselves in because of the expectations they have to live up to, especially under circumstances of poverty. Overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) are a case in point. Women who have graduate qualifications have to go overseas as domestic workers in the name of gross national product (GNP), yet are treated as mere objects despite their sacrifice. Tadiar quotes an OFW, "...the worst thing I've experienced here is the look of fellow Filipinas—as if you weren't human, as if you were nothing." It is this lack of humanity that puts her in a war. Although she may not be at war and there is no fighting going on, she is like a war

victim because the disregard for her life in the face of broader national interests is the same disregard that women living in a literal war have to put up with. Although women who go overseas as domestic workers are such an important source of income for this country, there are no official regulatory bodies to protect them. Anyone can set up an "overseas employment agency" and put women in dangerous situations without fear of repercussions. This does not deter women however, because the "fear which stems from a woman's future resting in the hands of men is linked to the cruelty of poverty ... that presides over her home and her country." This fear is greater than the fear for her own safety.

Tadiar prescribes art as a remedy to this state of affairs, but warns that it must be done right. Rather than pandering to the "demand for the representation of Filipina identity," producers of art should "probe into the historical experiences out of which dominant images of Filipinas have been produced." Hers is daunting challenge indeed for the artist, but one that is potentially rewarding without measure as it will help both audiences and artists to understand how the crippling representation of women's body came about and thereby break the spell it has over them. As a sounding board for contemporary society's concerns, the art industry is a powerful driving force in its evolution. If local artists can empower themselves by controlling the gaze, thereby controlling how they are perceived, they will have more control over what they become, what their identities are and what they will evolved into. The audience will take their cue from artists in the cycle of art imitates life imitates art. However, it is up to artists to make the cycle a positive rather than a negative one as they have the power to create the models presented to the public.

The urgency of this task is supported in Maria Josephine Barrios' essay "Staging/Upstaging Globalisation: The Politics of Performance," where the author compares and contrasts the internationally renowned musical *Miss Saigon* with local, Southeast Asia productions. She equates the grand musical to an international trade item where raw materials taken from the developing world are modified for western tastes, homogenised for the producers' convenience, and sold back to local consumers at an inflated price. Barrios promotes local productions over the "mass produced" commodity that is *Miss Saigon*. However, it would be a mistake to put her in the same category as those advocates for local goods who promote 'buying local' to keep the money in the country. While most of these 'patriots' use national pride to sell something else, for Barrios, national pride, or rather, personal pride is the end in itself.

Take the Bayo advertisements for instance, where Lea Salonga, the Filipina lead in *Miss Saigon*, models the goods of an exclusive Filipino chain of boutiques. "Proud to be Filipino" becomes a selling point for an image that is neither entirely Filipino nor for Filipinas. The owners might be Filipino, the designers might be Filipino, the fabrics might be produced here, and the end product might have been assembled here, but the designs follow the trends set in the west on western runways. This is fair enough, as every company set up needs to make a profit and has to sell what people want to buy, but the profits go to a Filipino elite that probably spends a lot of it on expensive imports and overseas holidays in exotic locations, inaccessible to ordinary Filipinos. The success of the model, Ms. Lea Salonga, comes from the west and is not based on her being Filipina but on her talent. Her ability to sell her talent is also based on access to western recruiters and western training. Bayo's selling point really, is "proud to be a Filipina of the elite class." Barrios does not advocate that. What she promotes is far more personal and much more empowering. She introduces local productions that present realities about the experiences of Southeast Asian women and urges her readers to explore them so that they can become proud of who they really are and who they can become. Instead of wasting time in the frustrating pursuit of an impossibility presented in the airbrushed advertisements of the multinationals, women who are freed of mass-market brainwashing can put their personal resources to better use and in the meantime, become empowered.

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The third essay, "Philippine Literary Nationalism and the Engendering of the Revolutionary Body," takes the discussion into the relationship between women's bodies and patriotism. Caroline S. Hau compares Jose Rizal's representation of women in his nationalist text, *Noli me Tangere* with Zelda Soriano's narrative, *Kung Saan Ako Pupunta*. Although the essay derives from Filipino texts, it makes a universal point: Patriotism requires personal sacrifices from the individual. The literature presented by Hau reveals a difference between men and women's ideas of sacrifice. In *Noli me Tangere* we see that men's idea of sacrifice involve the sacrifice of relationships, love and women. For women it is more a personal sacrifice that involves the sacrifice of their body. The patriotic man suffers a kind of second-party schizophrenia in that he doesn't know how to juggle his commitment between the state and the

woman he loves. She represents his motherland as well as a distraction from his duty to his country and is at once inciter, muse, trophy, property and burden. The sacrifice he makes when he decides to fight for his cause is her, but ironically, she also represents the cause he is fighting for.

For the woman, there is no such confusion, she IS the sacrifice and the one making the sacrifice. She endures a double role as object and subject. As subject, she does not choose to sacrifice her husband to the cause; rather, her husband or the state chooses for her. If she does decide to take part in the conflict and fight side by side with her male comrades, she still has to suffer the injustices imposed on her gender, which are amplified by the extreme circumstances. Apart from the fighting, she has to put up with her male counterparts' slurs on her gender, perform the manual chores and service her partner sexually, all the time trying to avoid capture. In *Kung Saan Ako Pupunta*, Zelda Soriano reveals the hardships of fighting a guerrilla war in the Philippines as a woman. Just like in all other areas of life, women suffer more than men do. The notion that it is harder for men because they have to go off and fight, risking their lives, while women stay at home and wait, is demolished. The civil war in Sri Lanka, for instance, has imposed curfew on the men and restricted their movements, so on top of all the duties that women had before the war, they now have to go out and perform the strenuous tasks previously undertaken by the men. It is the men who stay at home and wait now. As object, the woman is the trophy, or the "white flag" that the enemy has to capture and her comrades must guard. The clearest proof of the multiple vulnerabilities of women during war is the declaration of rape as a war crime. To say that rape is a crime against humanity, although valid, has the effect of separating a woman from her body.

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A dominant theme in the first three essays of the book is that society seems to treat women's sexuality as a public good or a national icon. The idea is so ridiculous that no sensible person would say it, yet our behaviour stems from exactly that belief. Women are constantly denying their sexuality because it has been denied to them by forces they perceive to be greater than them: institutions, culture and society.

The discrepancy between public expectations and women's desires is seldom discussed for precisely this reason, women dare not venture beyond the boundaries set for them. It seems absurd that society can set standards of right and wrong for such a private arena but it is true. In "Love, Desire, Sexuality," Sylvia Estrada-Claudio cheekily muses, "Why it is that (demographers) do not undertake the kind of statistical modelling that will tell us whether the encouragement of homosexual lifestyles might contribute to a decrease in fertility rates...?" There is an idea of wholesome and unwholesome sexuality entrenched in people's minds.

This entrenchment manifests in public hospitals in the most offensive ways, especially in the maternity wards. Florence L. Macagba Tadiar's exposé on the public health care system in "Improving Maternal Health Care Services in the Philippines" reveals widespread disrespect among medical staff who apparently feel it is within their rights to reprimand the women in labour for having had sex. A medical student pejoratively tells the patient *"Umayos ka ng higa! Pababayaan kitang duguin diyan! Kaya ka nabuntis kasi ang aga mong lumandi! Ang landi-landi mo!"* (Position yourself properly on that bed! I'll let you bleed right there! That is why you became pregnant because you flirted too young! You are such a flirt!) A doctor who has a reputation for threatening her patients has been heard to say to one of them, *"Kapag hindi ka nag-family planning at nabuntis ka ulit sa susunod na taon, hindi ka namin tatanggapin dito."* (If you don't practise family planning and you become pregnant again next year, we won't admit you.) Women are thus torn between the conflicting ideologies of the population control advocates and the church. The current medical establishment treats these women as mere objects, a portal for the baby's entry into the world, and very little concern is shown for their emotional needs. Tadiar makes wise and practical recommendations to improve the public system, prescribing accessible maternal health care that is responsive to local cultural norms, carried out by competent and non-judgmental staff. She asserts that patients should be involved in decision making and adequate follow up care and economic and social support should be provided. Moreover, public medical practitioners should have on hand all essential supplies and equipment, supplemented by training in proper usage. In the example described by Tadiar, the quality of the water for washing instruments and staff was questionable. The task is daunting however, given that its shortcomings are so rooted in the psyche of the medical practitioners and in

deep-seated cultural perceptions surrounding conception. Furthermore, the lack of political will on the part of those in power to source funding to improve maternal health care services creates a major obstacle. The general attitude seems to be that as women got themselves pregnant, they have to 'suffer' the consequences of letting their sexuality loose.

In "Adolescent Reproductive and Sexual Health: Discussions among Adolescents and Gatekeepers in Metro Manila," Carmeli Marie C. Chaves traces the origins of this perspective to a group of adolescents and the adults regulating their knowledge (Gatekeepers) in a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) run by the Philippine field office of Save the Children/U.S. Perhaps due to the duration of the FGDs, the results yielded were somewhat superficial. The study found that "about 18 percent of Filipinos aged 15-24 have had premarital sex, and by age 20, 22 percent of married women with premarital experience have given birth to their first child," the incidence of teenage single parenthood seems to have been left out. Most of the participants seemed to have come from the more conservative section of society. Many of the Gatekeepers for instance thought that adolescents should not be taught about contraception as it might "introduce them the idea that they can have sex while avoiding pregnancy" and "become daring about things, such as sex," while adolescents thought virginity was clean, respectable and important for maintaining honour. Thus there seems to be a discrepancy between their answers and the statistics cited. Where are the adolescents who ARE having sex and their gatekeepers? Perhaps a follow up study would reveal much more. The study did however reveal the ignorance and naiveté of the adolescents and their gatekeepers that are behind much of the double standard surrounding women's sexuality. The opinions they voiced were not surprising, with the conditioning these youngsters received: A woman is soiled if she has sex before marriage; men can't help themselves; etc. Phrased in the innocent language of youth, these beliefs seem harmless enough, but it is disheartening when one thinks of the consequences these have on the way women are treated.

Ana P. Ebo's "Katawan... Katawan... Oh... Katawan: Sexism and Body as Reflected in Students' Emails" is an excellent continuation of the previous essay as it lends to the issue some optimism. In Ebo's essay, we get a peek into some very personal e-mails of young women growing into their empowerment. As they uncover the phallocentric fallacies surrounding women's bodies, they also break the oppressive spell that has trapped them in certain modes of behaviour. There is hope yet for the strong woman of the future.

If all women, as with the young people in Ebo's essay, recognise feminist issues as personal issues, we would be a much happier lot. The concluding essay by Roselle V. Pineda personalises the issue of body politics for the reader, taking it beyond dry academic analyses. In this way, it is perhaps the most powerful essay in the book. As we follow the author through her battle with her own body, we are reminded of our own hang-ups. If even the late Princess Diana, the most photographed woman in the world, had such a problem with her self-image that it gave her an eating disorder, what hope is there for plebeians like ourselves who cannot afford all the beauty therapy that money can buy? Our bodies are treated as an extension of ourselves, outsiders interact with our bodies, with we, through our bodies. It follows that we are judged by the way we look. Before I am a fat, thin, Asian, European, tall or short woman, I am a woman and my body is loaded with assumptions that I have to live up to. But if I am unfortunate enough to also be too fat or too thin or too Asian, then I also have the added struggle of having to justify this 'flaw.' The ideal set for us is so far-fetched that even if I am the right colour, the right size and the right height, I will still fall short of the standard. Any effort to meet this ideal is futile, the only thing that will free us is not in meeting these ideals but in our own recognition that we don't have to take on the standards set for us.

Am I my body? Do I own it? How much of my body am I? What rights do I have over it? These are questions that we know the correct feminist answers to, but still find difficult to accept intuitively. These are questions that we need to answer individually for ourselves, questions that we mature into. *Body Politics* helps us do just that by uncovering the immense impact that seemingly superficial and harmless beliefs have on women as individuals and as a collective. It is so filled with wisdom that anyone can get something out of it. In reviewing the book, I feel that I must make the qualification that I have done it entirely from where I am—on my own journey of empowerment. What I got out of it will be different from what a sixteen- or sixty-year-old woman gets out of it. One must read the book and experience this personally, perhaps read it several times at different stages of one's life. It has something to say to every (Southeast Asian) woman. It is a book that deserves wide circulation not just due to its empowering qualities, but because it can also heal many women who have been wounded by the inability to live up to the standards set for them. This book is a must for every feminist library.

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