

“WHAT’S A BODY TO DO? THE ROLE OF ‘BODY STUDIES’ IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM”

Mark DeStephano, Ph.D

Saint Peter’s University, Jersey City, N.J.

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Are we human beings just a chunk of flesh, a piece of meat staggering about on the face of the planet until death strikes us and drags us into the grave? Are we spiritual beings who long for eternity, suffering now in this worldly muck and mire, merely awaiting the freedom of another world? Is it necessary that the human person be one of these or the other? Is it not possible for both the flesh and the longing for something eternal to meet within us, a constant interplay of the body, the world, and the spirit? Which of us has not considered these issues, perhaps upon the death of a loved one, or after having “brushed death” in an accident or an illness, or coming face-to-face with individuals who are differently-abled – less than whole in the eyes of a world that often prefers to judge people as if they were merely chunks of meat? As we watch the news, which of us is not struck by the tensions in Ferguson and Charlottesville that force us to question our true feelings about the “Other”: the person of another race, culture, language, gender, sexual orientation, social class, political ideology, or religion? It cannot be denied that we all face these realities on a moment-to-moment basis, confronting these jarring questions in the form of markings that we all bear: skin color, tattoos, mohawks, nipple rings, green hair, pimples, mini-skirts, scars, buttons, bracelets, crosses, earrings, ripped jeans, spiked boots, warts, colored contacts, hats, ripped T-shirts, crew cuts, purses, ties, fat, and eye glasses, to name but a few. How can it be denied that the body is the centerpiece of our attention? And yet, scholars, students, and everyday men and women alike rarely discuss the body, at least as a topic directly unto itself.

There is no doubt that all of the aforementioned facts are of extreme importance in our current culture, yet, given their great significance, how would one approach a more

detailed examination of them under the guise of one field of study? Is it even possible? In many ways, such is the intention of Body Studies as a discipline, despite the seemingly over-vast content area that it would need to subsume. If we were to establish such a discipline – and we have – how do we set parameters for it? Indeed, can we and/or should we set limits on Body Studies? In one way, we must, if we are ever to define our discipline. On the other hand, can we limit the presence of the body in human experience? Without the body there is no human experience.

Increasingly over the past three decades, academic studies and conferences have emerged surrounding inquiry into the nature and function of the body from practically every academic viewpoint. Yet, as is often the case in academia, there have been few attempts to unify these studies into one disciplinary field. Just as it took decades for Women’s Studies, Chicano Studies, Latin-American and Latino Studies, Queer and LGBTQIA Studies, Native-American Studies, and Asian and Asian-American Studies, among many others, to emerge as recognized areas of academic investigation, so now there is enough interest in studies about the body to warrant more serious consideration of “Body Studies” as a discipline that encompasses any and all studies which are related to the body. Admittedly, this is something of a challenge. If the strength of Body Studies as a discipline is its inherently unitive nature, its most daunting challenge is isolating and identifying what specifically constitutes the discipline. To say that the concern of Body Studies is anything having to do with the body is impractical. Such a lack of definition would force us to deny the existence of Body Studies as a unitive field, and to revert to the divisions of our individual disciplines, if nothing else simply to make it possible to deal with the massive amount



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of information that has been garnered about the body. This, of course, is necessary in the Information Age, when we are consistently bombarded with more data than we could ever possibly process. Nonetheless, how might we go about defining the field of Body Studies?

It is helpful to recall that academic interest in Body Studies is not new, nor is the question as to which discipline it belongs. Although research on the body was conducted over the course of centuries, when it was finally labeled it was dubbed “Body Culture Studies,” and was conducted as branches of philosophy, history, sociology, and anthropology. I believe that as a discipline, Body Studies should be understood as encompassing any work or discussion in which the human body is the central focus of our concern. Admittedly, this definition does little to narrow our field of inquiry, and seems to place us in a limitless realm of vague judgments. How does one determine if a work’s central focus is the human body? There is no scientific measure by which to make such a determination. The same may be said of most other disciplinary work, which oftentimes claims to be focused on its own subject of inquiry, but which in fact is always interdisciplinary at some level. This brings us to what I believe to be the other essential element of Body Studies as a discipline. Our work *must* be interdisciplinary to be considered part of the field. This might seem to be prejudicial towards mathematics and the natural sciences; in my estimation, however, immersion in Body Studies requires a commitment on the part of the student and the scholar to the task of drawing the connections between the body as an entity and how that body interacts with the world around it.

Admirable steps have been taken towards classifying Body Studies as a discipline, such as those by Mariam Fraser and Monica Greco in their 2005 book *The Body: A Reader*, and Margo DeMello in her recent work *Body Studies: An Introduction* (2014), which, among all the works currently available, most resemble textbooks. Bryan S. Turner’s classic introduction, the *Routledge Handbook of Body Studies* (1984), and Alexandra Howson’s *The Body in Society* (2004), have contributed greatly to the recognition of the discipline, yet the field remains little-charted.

Susie Orbach’s landmark text, *Bodies: Big Ideas/Small Books* (2009), did much to draw public attention to the significance of body issues in contemporary society, and greatly contributed to raising awareness of the need to expand Body Studies. The crux of the issue is not whether Body Studies are of importance, as they clearly are, but rather, how to organize the countless interdisciplinary studies that already focus on the body. How can we best link the many approaches to the study of the body?

Over the past decade, scholars have attempted to make Bodies Studies as a discipline more accessible by producing what might be considered concise primers of the field, such as we find in Lisa Blackman’s *The Body: Key Concepts* (2008) and Niall Richardson and Adam Locks’s *Body Studies: The Basics* (2014). For those seeking more advanced studies in various areas of the field, Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut’s *The Body Reader: Essential Social and Cultural Readings* (2010) offers more detailed essays which might be used in second-semester introductory or in intermediate-level Body-Studies classes.

Although we do continue to examine the body separately, in each of our individual disciplines, there are ways in which Body Studies can be systematized so as to more efficiently direct scholarly investigation. General works that are focused on individual disciplines but which still present a unitive vision of the body may be found in Desmond Morris’ two studies, *The Naked Woman: A Study of the Female Body* (2004) and *The Naked Man: A Study of the Male Body* (2008), as well as in Susan Bordo’s *The Male Body: A New Look at Men in Public and in Private* (1999). Equally significant is Anne Fausto-Sterling’s groundbreaking study, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* (2000), which challenges many traditional understandings of gender roles, especially as these have become political footballs in the Culture Wars.

Interesting works have also appeared which address religious understandings of the body and its function in the discovery of the meaning of life. Among these may be included Pope John Paul II’s landmark encyclical, *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* (2006),



which offers a comprehensive view of Roman Catholic doctrine regarding the body. An important contribution to the understanding of the body from the Evangelical-Christian perspective is Nancy R. Pearcey's *Love Thy Body: Answering Hard Questions about Life and Sexuality* (2018). In an Eastern mode, Kristofer Schipper discusses the centrality of the body in his study *The Taoist Body* (1982), and Yuasa Yasuo presents various dimensions of Eastern philosophical and theological thought in his *The Body: Toward an Eastern Mind-Body Theory* (1987).

Perhaps more important for our purposes, how can we organize Body Studies as a discipline in such a way as to introduce all undergraduates to essential questions about the centrality of the body in our everyday human experience? What is it that hinders the development of Body Studies as a discipline and keeps them from being introduced into the core requirements of undergraduate programs? How is it that a basic and truly introductory textbook for undergraduates has not been produced? How is it that so few Body Studies programs and curricula have yet to appear in institutions of higher learning the world over? For answers to these questions, we must turn to the very foundations of our traditions, Western and Eastern, Northern and Southern. One of the foundational thinkers of the West, Plato viewed the body as nothing but an unwanted appendage to what was, to him, the essential element of existence — the soul. "I will explain," he writes in the *Phaedo*, "every seeker after wisdom knows that up until the time when philosophy takes over, his soul is a helpless prisoner, chained hand and foot inside the body, forced to view reality not directly but only through the prison bars and wallowing in utter ignorance" (82e). With this simple statement, Plato provides the foundation for his affirmation that the body is the "prison house" of the soul, and, since it formed the bedrock of much of the philosophical and theological tradition of the Roman Catholic Church, this Platonic attitude thereby condemned the body to centuries of scorn.

Further legitimacy was conferred upon the attack on the body by words which were incorrectly attributed by the German psychologists Josef Hyrtl and Sigmund Freud to Saint Augustine of Hippo (354-430 A.D.), the brilliant

Christian theologian, polemicist, and Doctor of the Roman Catholic Church and one of the greatest pillars of the Western Tradition, who supposedly observed that, "We are born in the midst of feces and urine" (Hyrtl 820; Freud 25). Influenced greatly by the thought of Plato, Augustine recognized that the body was a creation of God but believed that it had been corrupted by Original Sin, dooming it to concupiscence and unfulfilled desire all of one's earthly days. These monumental thinkers would determine the tenor and tone of Western discourses about the body until the Renaissance, when, with the rebirth of the Classical world, attentions once again turned to the untroubled pleasures of the body in something of a suspension of Catholic moral thought, at least as this was dominated by the patristic and medieval belief that the body, and anything associated with it, was shameful in the eyes of God.

More concerned with the relationship between matter and living beings, Aristotle sought to resolve the problem of the apparent duality in the human person by creating a simple equation. Matter was inanimate. What allowed for movement and intellect in human beings was another principle beyond matter, form, which was a soul that was inherent and unique in every person. Intellect, a part of the soul, was capable of surviving without the body, in Aristotle's view, although the thinker never indicated how this was achieved. Yet, "the Philosopher," as Aristotle was called, did not draw the negative conclusions about the body that Plato did. Rather, he viewed the body and the soul as acting together for the good of the human being, even though he rejected the idea of an eternal soul.

Renaissance thinkers, refusing to deny themselves the pleasures of the body, sought new ways of understanding it. How could it be possible not to rejoice in the beauty and the joys of the body, while also accepting its frailties and limitations? Indeed, human beings were sinners, and yet, as Michelangelo explained, God's creation was more magnificent than the creations of the human beings: "What spirit is so empty and blind that it cannot recognize the fact that the foot is more noble than the shoe, and skin more beautiful than the garment with which it is composed" (as quoted in Blech and Doliner 248). Despite this brief Renaissance



orientation of Western aesthetics towards the glorification of the body, the stigmas of traditional Christianity still held sway, not only in the Roman Catholic tradition, but also in the thought of Protestant reformers like Martin Luther (1483-1546), Huldrych Zwingli (1484-1531), and John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvin, like Plato and Augustine, held a negative view of both the body and life itself:

If to be freed from the body is to be released into perfect freedom, what else is the body but a prison? If to enjoy the presence of God is the summit of happiness, is not to be without this misery? But until we leave the world “we are away from the Lord.” Therefore, if the earthly life be compared with the heavenly, it is doubtless to be at once despised and trampled underfoot. (*Institutes* 1:716; 3.9.4)

These views, hallmarks of Protestant theological and aesthetic doctrine, along with their Roman Catholic counterparts, were eagerly integrated into the social fabric of the nations of Europe, especially as emerging nation-states sought to consolidate their power both domestically and abroad.

As Michel Foucault has so thoroughly demonstrated, ever since the Classical Age in the West, the body has been recognized as both an object and a target of power (*Discipline* 136). The functions of the body, thus, far surpass their physical operations; for much of human history in the West, the body must also be recognized as having been an ideological battleground for society, as well as the seat of an individual’s identity. As discourses about sexuality proliferated during the Enlightenment, it was the nineteenth century that especially saw the establishment of civil judicial action against all those whose sexual practices spilled beyond the borders of sacramental marriage between a man and woman, that form of love-making that produced offspring, a useful product for advancement of the power and control of both Church and State. “Aberrant” sexualities, Foucault notes, simply provided the medical profession, as an organ of the State, with more opportunities to extend its reach, not with the aim of eliminating deviancy, but as a means of further “penetrating” every nook of society. Speaking of the increased monitoring of sexual

practices in the nineteenth-century household, Foucault describes the multiplicity of levels of sexual expressions:

Was the nineteenth-century family really a monogamic and conjugal cell? Perhaps to a certain extent. But it was also a network of pleasures and powers linked together at multiple points and according to transformable relationships. The separation of grown-ups and children, the polarity established between the parents’ bedroom and that of the children ... the relative segregation of boys and girls, the strict instructions as to the care of nursing infants (maternal breast-feeding, hygiene), the attention focused on infantile sexuality, the supposed dangers of masturbation, the importance attached to puberty, the methods of surveillance suggested to parents, the exhortations, secrets, and fears, the presence – both valued and feared – of servants: all this made the family, even when brought down to its smallest dimensions, a complicated network, saturated with multiple, fragmentary, and mobile sexualities. (*History* 46).

In the minds of those who held power, the body and the desires associated with it, if left uncontrolled, were a center of potential rebellion against the family, the Church, and the State, as well as of the entire social order.

Returning to our topic, then, it must be asked: Why is it appropriate for undergraduates to engage in Body Studies? What is more essential, more obvious, and more immediate than the body? I would argue that there is perhaps no period of human development when Body Studies are more appropriate and more pressing than those years from eighteen to the mid-twenties, when young people are confronting – physically, psychologically, intellectually, and socially – those issues that are the stock and trade of Body Studies. Usually anxious to begin the process of establishing their independence, undergraduates have almost all attained the legal age of majority, and are now, quite literally, responsible for their own actions as adults. Thrust into a new world of responsibility, young adults of college age often move to new places, encountering people from all over the globe. Suddenly, and often almost alone, undergraduates begin the necessary exploration of



all of their deepest fears and desires: our craving for love and sexual fulfillment, our desperate search for acceptance and respect, our illogical fears about the “Other,” and our feelings of inadequacy, helplessness, and strain as we struggle against the forces of nature and the pressures of societal conformity.

At the same time, hundreds of millions of years of human evolution come to bear on the youthful body, which now sends urgent and seemingly irrational messages through the intense explosion of every hormone in the body. The body practically screams, “Go for it! Anywhere, anyhow, do it!!!” Body- Studies classes, while often construed as wild sallies into the freaky and hippyish world of “feelings,” are central to the concerns of traditional undergraduates who are wrestling with the very issues that Body Studies as a discipline should be addressing.

Yet, in very many cases there is a cultural resistance faced by those who would engage in Body Studies because of the intimacy of the topic. As we have seen, centuries of religious thought and prohibition have warned us not to mention, much less investigate, issues of the body that are often said to be “too revealing” (no pun intended!) or “inappropriate for public discourse.” Without exception, every major world religion, and, by extension, those civil societies that have formed their social mores and laws on the basis of those religious and philosophical concepts, have discouraged or forbidden outright the discussion of topics of a sexual nature. Just as they are beginning to mature intellectually, undergraduates are posing countless existential and behavioral questions to themselves which befit their coming of age: Who am I? What makes me do what I do? How should I interact with others? What marks me as both a member of society and yet also an individual? What is the relationship between my physical being and my spiritual being? What is the meaning of life? How can I learn to accept my imperfections and limitations as well as those of the rest of humanity? What uses of the body are appropriate and/or inappropriate? Body Studies clearly encompass all of these areas of inquiry, and countless others, which, as we have seen, are often discussed separately but are rarely treated systematically and as a unity. Lamentably, just

as undergraduates are fully confronting these questions they find that in the undergraduate curriculum, classes in Body Studies are rare and are usually among the most infrequent of our course offerings.

I would argue that whatever is within the realm of the human should also be considered appropriate for academic discussion, no matter how “embarrassing” these issues might be for all of us or how uncomfortable they make us feel. Body Studies put our research and discussion squarely in the face of these major questions of life, especially as they assume burning urgency in the life of the typical undergraduate. I would further argue that Body Studies as an interdisciplinary field offers scholars and students unique perspectives that map the boundaries of humanity as a whole. It should be noted that my previous discussion was presented from the point of view of the Western Tradition. A truly effective Body-Studies curriculum would explore the nature of the body and human action through the prism of a diversity of cultures over a significant span of human history. In this way, Body Studies in the undergraduate curriculum would prepare our students to face the challenges of a world that is diverse beyond their wildest imaginations. Rather than refusing to discuss issues of sexuality, body image, the role of the body in religious thought, and contemporary expositions of the body in popular media, Body-Studies courses offer students an intellectually open and yet academically-rigorous forum in which to debate essential issues on a universal scale. It is my sincere conviction that these studies, like travel itself, break down barriers between ourselves and the “Other,” contributing to a deep sense of the contemporary world as a global village in which we are always willing to be exposed to the wonder of the diverse world. By engaging in such studies, one loses fear of those who are seemingly different but who share in the common desires of all humanity.

Sadly, our world is often not the community of harmony, love, and cooperation that all peoples have hoped for, and is assailed by threats of many stripes: environmental degradation, terrorism, the threat of nuclear conflict, economic stagnation, conventional war, cyberespionage, rampant disease, and many others. If undergraduates are



to understand these menaces to the progress of humankind, they must be given ample opportunity to question structures of power, social organization, and economic distribution. Failing to do this, students will find themselves poorly prepared to face the challenges of an ever-more complicated world, leading to a deep sense of frustration, anger, and helplessness. Should a Body-Studies curriculum be instituted, it must be interdisciplinary, comprehensive, research-based, and yet inclusive of popular culture as a prime area of bodily expression. No field could be more appropriate for the inquisitive, searching undergraduate than courses exploring bodies, identity, sexuality, the meaning of life, cultural behavior, and attempts by authorities of every strain to control and manipulate.

Finally, I must respond to the absurd assertion that Body-Studies courses are impractical and useless in attempting to procure gainful employment. Quite the opposite, those who fail to attend to the messages their bodies are sending them often suffer countless forms of alienation, ailment, and disillusionment that often end in sadness and tragedy, while those who are “body conscious” tend to be freer, happier, more open intellectually, and better adjusted to function in our diverse and ever-changing contemporary world.

Scholars across the disciplines and across the ages have made truly valuable contributions to our understanding of the importance of the body. It is now time for all of us who have been involved with Body-Studies research to draw our students – especially our undergraduates – more fully into the conversation. To do so, we need to make that research more available to them, first in the classroom, and then in projects that will challenge their minds, their comfort zones, their preconceived notions, their limitations, and their imaginations. As our Body-Studies conferences at Cabrini University have shown, our undergraduates relish the chance to study and discuss issues related to the body from an interdisciplinary and unitive perspective. If we in the academy can get beyond our own disciplinary parameters and avail ourselves of the opportunity to work collaboratively in an interdisciplinary mode, our undergraduates will likely follow our lead. By making Body-Studies courses more readily available to our undergraduates we will be fulfilling our mission of creating a true *universitas* – a connection, a whole in which we discover that the “Other” is simply a different facet of ourselves.

About the Author

Mark DeStephano, a native of Palisades Park, New Jersey, U.S.A., was awarded his bachelor’s degree in Philosophy and Spanish from Fordham University. He earned four degrees in Theology from Regis College of the University of Toronto: Bachelor of Sacred Theology, Master of Divinity, Master of Theology, and a Licentiate in Sacred Theology. Following these studies, he continued his education at Harvard University, where he was awarded his master’s and doctoral degrees in Romance Languages and Literatures, with specialization in Medieval and Golden-Age Spanish Literature. Since 1995, Dr. DeStephano has been Chairman and Professor of the Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures, and Director and Professor of the Asian Studies Program at Saint Peter’s University in Jersey City, New Jersey, U.S.A. His research focuses on medieval European literatures and on issues of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and identity in Asian and Latino cultures.



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