

[Beatty on Rizzo and Gerontakis, 'Intimate Empires: Body, Race, and Gender in the Modern World'](#)

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The following book review from H-Empire may be of interest to some H-Women list members.

Beatty on Rizzo and Gerontakis, 'Intimate Empires: Body, Race, and Gender in the Modern World'

Author:

Tracey Rizzo, Steven Gerontakis, eds.

Reviewer:

Aidan Beatty

Tracey Rizzo, Steven Gerontakis, eds. *Intimate Empires: Body, Race, and Gender in the Modern World*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 424 pp. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-997834-2.

Reviewed by Aidan Beatty (Concordia University) **Published on** H-Empire (June, 2018) **Commissioned by** Stephen Jackson (University of Sioux Falls)

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“The body” has been a popular subject of academic analysis for several decades now. Influenced by theorists such as Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, a rich and varied literature has emerged that understands bodies not as simple biological realities, but as socially constructed phenomena. The history of bodies is intimately connected to the history of racism, gender history, and the histories of imperialism and capitalism. Tracey Rizzo and Steven Gerontakis’s *Intimate Empires* is consciously situated within this historiography of bodies. The book does not break much new ground in this area. Rather, Rizzo and Gerontakis synthesize research from a truly global range of national contexts and in the process have produced a remarkably useful textbook from which even experienced scholars of bodies and gender, race and imperialism could learn much.

The book’s six chapters each have a thematic focus and each begins with an illustrative case study: “The Gender of Empire: Masculinities” (James Cook of Britain and the Pacific); “The Gender of Empire: Femininities” (Ahyssa of Senegal and Saint-Domingue); “The Institutions of Empire” (Emily Ruete of Zanzibar and Germany); “The Artifacts of Empire” (Mata Hari of Indonesia and Paris); “The Race of Empire” (Olaudah Equiano of Nigeria and London); and “The End of Empire” (Toussaint Louverture of Haiti and France). The case studies—Rizzo and Gerontakis call them vignettes—mix social history with the history of representations and attitudes. These case studies also act as a kind of unifying thread in each chapter, allowing the authors to draw out and elaborate on their six themes in readily accessible ways. Rizzo and Gerontakis also employ a wisely curated selection of visual material, including a photo essay that pictorially introduces the book. The images used throughout strongly buttress the book’s arguments and again add to its usefulness for the classroom.

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Across the six chapters, Rizzo and Gerontakis marshal evidence and examples from an impressive number of national contexts: European powers such as Belgium, France, Germany, and Britain, as well as the targets of their expansions: Sri Lanka, Laos, Burma, Japan, and China, and Kenya, Algeria, Uganda, Congo, Tanzania, and Ghana, as well as various parts of the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand. This is a work that truly fulfills a transnational remit, showing the global trajectory of various debates over race, gender, and bodies from the nineteenth century into the twentieth. The Middle East is somewhat absent; there are brief discussions of Lebanon and Syria and various parts of North Africa, but no mention of Israel-Palestine, Iraq, or Iran and thus no use is made of the rich literature on gender, imperialism, and nationalism in these regions. "Europe" is much discussed, but generally in imperial terms. Countries and peoples that complicate this image of Europe—Ireland, Greece, the continent's various Jewish communities—receive little or no attention. With such a scope as this book has, though, it might be pedantic to fixate on the few places and nations that do not receive attention.

A more serious criticism is that Rizzo and Gerontakis do sometimes overdetermine the power of bodies to make history. Understanding slavery as a somatic regime, for example, does much to explicate the cultural representations of enslaved men and women (pp. 41-45, 73-77). Yet this can easily slip into the assumption that this was a primarily cultural phenomenon rather than an economic one. Similarly, their claim that "whiteness was equated first and foremost to cleanliness" (p. 137) pinpoints the links between race and notions of bodily hygiene and sexual purity even as it downplays the greater importance of economics and raw political power in favor of symbolic and superstructural factors. W. E. B. du Bois's observation that "whiteness is the ownership of the earth," quoted early in *Intimate Empires* (p. 10), seems closer to the mark. As David Harvey has observed, "the body is not a closed and sealed entity" and scholars should avoid slipping into seeing bodies as "the measure of all things." [1]

Moreover, it is not entirely clear whether the authors understand race and gender as intertwining phenomena that are always implicit in each other and that are impossible to disentangle, or as conceptually distinct but intersecting forces. There is a subtle but important distinction here, one that raises questions about the origins and development of racism and gender discrimination. And class (the standard third element of the intersectional triumvirate) is never a central concern of the book and thus represents a major blindspot in an otherwise impressive work. With such criticisms noted, however, this is a remarkably well-constructed introductory textbook, well suited for educational use as well as enjoyable for reading outside the classroom.

Note

[1]. *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press), 98.

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