

Swarthmore College

## Works

---

History Faculty Works

History

---

4-1-2009

### Review Of "Dress, Undress, And Difference: Critical Perspectives On The Body's Surface" Edited By A. Masquelier

Timothy Burke

*Swarthmore College*, [tburke1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:tburke1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Let us know how access to these works benefits you

---

#### Recommended Citation

Timothy Burke. (2009). "Review Of "Dress, Undress, And Difference: Critical Perspectives On The Body's Surface" Edited By A. Masquelier". *Comparative Studies In Society And History*. Volume 51, Issue 2. 461-463. DOI: 10.1017/S001041750900108X  
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-history/3>

This work is brought to you for free by Swarthmore College Libraries' Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).

the market in basic foodstuffs in order to guarantee subsistence to all, and a laissez-faire idea of absolute, individual rights of ownership. The push and pull between these two positions explains much of the dynamic of economic development traced in the book and underlies many of its most interesting arguments, particularly as it examines the spatial implications of these two contending legal philosophies.

In places, the spatial thread Amith tries to weave through the entire study proves marvelously revealing. For instance, in an effort to turn the protections of the moral economy to its own advantage by guaranteeing low prices and a secure supply of maize, the urban mining center of Taxco attempted to absorb the agrarian region to its south into its jurisdiction, thus redefining the “locality” within which protective controls on the exchange of provisions would apply. The chapter on “Place Making and Place Breaking” delves into the meanings poured into spaces by their inhabitants and claimants.

Elsewhere, however, space seems a less incisive category of analysis than its frequent invocation would suggest. For example, the large-scale movements of population that the early chapters document, while unarguably transpiring across space, reflected the environmental, economic, and political possibilities of one place over another, rather than any notions of space itself. In fact, on many occasions space seems to work as the dependent variable, with its meanings and uses responding to other predictive factors examined so well in the book: class and caste, moral visions, disease and destruction, environment and climate, technologies of production and transportation, world markets and commodity exchanges. Space offers enormous promise as a theoretical point of entrance and novel mode of analysis, but keeping its promise on track proves inordinately difficult. Amith succeeds marvelously in fulfilling much of the ambition of the book, and if the focus on space occasionally blurs, that seems forgivable in pursuit of a grand goal.

———Valerie A. Kivelson, University of Michigan

Adeline Masquelier, ed., *Dress, Undress and Difference: Critical Perspectives on the Body's Surface*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005.

doi:10.1017/S001041750900108X

The subjects covered by these authors—nudity, the body’s surface, cleanliness, clothing, and various cultural formations and representations related to these topics—are important ones. The essays are excellent and provocative, both theoretically and descriptively, and present original arguments and material.

One expects, given the subject matter, that Mary Douglas’ work on purity and pollution would be given prominent place, but most of the authors instead adopt the position presented by Masquelier in her introduction: “The present volume makes a break with the anthropological wisdom that

dirt and disorder can be explained in terms of universal and unchanging structural patterns to illuminate the complex and nuanced strategies at work in local processes of dirtying and undressing” (p. 4).

This correction follows three paths. First, a theoretical and empirical argument is made in favor of historicity and specificity against universalism, in this case regarding bodies, sweat, and dirt. Second, it is claimed the specific history of colonial rule has created an epistemological barrier to understanding these (and other subjects) in properly historical, specific, and local terms. Third, it is asserted that universal claims about subjects like bodies, nudity, or dirt are actually local and particular to the history of the West, but that, as a consequence of colonialism and globalization, they have been integrated into non-Western practices and discourses. Specific, local studies are required to understand this process and its outcomes in any given society.

In many ways it is hard to quarrel with this approach. For example, who could disagree with Wiener’s argument that due to tourism and globalization “in Bali what once was merely naked now is nude,” and that Balinese bodies have been sexualized through a history of globalizing contacts and relations (88)? Parallel arguments in each essay strike me as straightforwardly factual accounts of real, complex transformations in the meanings and practices of bodies, clothing, and cleanliness now visible in contemporary societies.

I did find problems in Masquelier’s introductory framing of the volume. First, it casts this kind of analysis as an insurgent response to an established orthodoxy. I would argue that the basic scholarly strategies in this volume *are* the current orthodoxy, at least within history and anthropology. Second, it seems to me that we are still struggling with the residual force of a perspective that most of us disavow when it is made explicit: that modernity and colonialism have contaminated non-Western authenticities, and that the project of non-Western history and anthropology is to recover those authenticities on their own terms. All of the contributors here are far too smart and theoretically sophisticated to deliberately reproduce this view. But it lurks around the edges: in the insistence that the transformations of the colonial and the modern have always produced new instrumental forms of power over bodies and new kinds of possible masteries, and in the understanding of the move from there to here, from then to now, as one of loss and tragedy. In reality, bodies that become nude, or clean, or fashionable gain as well as lose, and in some cases they are transformed in ways difficult to notch on any sort of balance sheet.

I ended up wishing this account were more banal and universal. I mean this not in the sense that bodies, nudity, clothing, and cleanliness have single, fixed meanings in all human societies. Rather, I would argue that some of the transformations we are inclined to describe as unique consequences of modernity and colonialism are in fact more widely distributed in historical experience. If we are to “provincialize the West,” the modern colonial encounter cannot be understood as in every way unprecedented in human experience, as a

unique and exclusive epistemological nightmare sharing no parallels with other times and places.

For some of these essays, taking this approach would diminish their sense of analytic mission. But that might be a good thing, reminding us that in studying subjects like the body or clothing our project is partly descriptive. We can afford to be less reflexively antagonized by universalizing claims. Concepts like “modernity” make no sense without some sort of general or comparative baseline. Human bodies may mean and represent in very different ways across time and space, but in material terms, a sixteenth-century non-Western body has much in common with a twenty-first-century globalized body. Indeed, these authors make good use of both theoretical and empirical material from the work of scholars exploring very different societies and practices. So some kind of comparative, even universalizing yardstick is in use here, though it enters through the back door of disciplinarity.

None of this negates the great virtues of this anthology, nor is any of this critique confined to this book. I only suggest that it is time for the framing of the rich research it contains to evolve in new directions.

———Timothy Burke, Swarthmore College

Pei-Chia Lan, *Global Cinderellas: Migrant Domestic Workers and Newly Rich Employers in Taiwan*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.

doi:10.1017/S0010417509001091

In this dynamic study of domestic service in Taiwan, Pei-Chia Lan examines the creation of social and spatial boundaries. Between 1998 and 2003, she carried out ethnographic fieldwork with employers and guest workers in Taiwan, and also visited Indonesia and the Philippines. Lan makes an important contribution to the scholarly conversation about domestic service. This book fills a gap in the literature by providing detailed information on Taiwan, and also breaks new ground by examining transnational subjects and their use of space and space-impinging technologies, such as mobile phones and email. She explores the micro-dynamics of the employment relationship, analyzing how global inequalities play out in boundary maintenance activities in Taiwanese homes and cities.

Setting the global context, Lan considers Taiwan’s ambiguous place in the community of nations. Shadowed by China, the Taiwanese state uses its employment policy to forge political relationships with Asian labor-sending countries burdened by high debt and unemployment. She deftly illustrates how labor migration shapes and is shaped by identities of race, ethnicity, and nationality. Examining how job agencies recruit, train, and place domestic servants, Lan asserts that the use of ethnic stereotypes creates a segmented labor market justifying differential treatment of Filipinos and Indonesians.