

inscribed between the hooklike arms of a shadowy anchor” – on the upper arm of Classics professor Coleman Silk, whose biography Zuckerman will piece together (and concoct) over the course of the novel. The tattoo is a “tiny symbol,” Zuckerman writes, “of all the million circumstances of the other fellow’s life, of the blizzard of details that constitute the human biography – a tiny symbol to remind me why our understanding of people must always be at best slightly wrong.”³

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Natalia Mehlman Petrzela, *Fit Nation: The Gains and Pains of America's Exercise Obsession* (Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 2022, \$29.00 cloth, \$28.99 ebook). Pp. 443. ISBN 978 0 2266 5110 1, 978 0 2266 5124 8.

How and why did a practice once considered marginal, dismissed to the spaces and the media of American counterculture, ultimately transform into a central and dominant element of the US nation’s cultural fabric? In her chronologically structured book, Petrzela delves into the evolution of the moral conceptions surrounding fitness in the USA, tracing its journey towards complete normalization and integration within the political ideals fostered by and within modern American society. She places the body at the core of its political history and explains how the American fitness industry has developed nationwide. In doing so, she discusses the socio-economic and political factors that contributed to its historical success and examines the resulting cultural influence. By chronicling the successive emergence of body-building in the Californian public sphere, the mainstreaming of yoga, and the proliferation of sports practices that value self-performance like CrossFit, Petrzela situates the history of the US nation within the context of the growing individualism in America.

Given her emphasis on the body as a means to examine the socioeconomic foundations of the US nation, it came as no surprise to me that California was a recurring example throughout the book. Drawing on contemporary research conducted on California, Petrzela demonstrates how the historical development of fitness culture is intricately intertwined with the construction of American national identity and territory. This research aligns with Petrzela’s cultural perspective, as it examines the construction of America’s national ideology by analyzing bodily representations and practices that originate from a territory often regarded as the laboratory of the American Dream. The ideals of the Fit Nation are indeed shaped within the influential spaces and locations of the USA. As fitness became increasingly industrialized, those ideals transformed into products of the discourses and practices that originated from private media outlets and fitness-related venues where they were promoted and pursued. Petrzela’s account captures the progressive assimilation of the ideals crafted by consumerism into the fabric of the American national narrative. She elucidates how the pursuit of spiritual and physical fulfillment, as prescribed by the fitness industry, has progressively evolved into both a right and a duty of the American citizen

³ Philip Roth, *The Human Stain* (London: Vintage, 2000), 22.

within their lifestyle. The economic prosperity of such citizens is consequently interpreted as a result of their moral and political responsibility, and therefore of their dedication to the civic cultivation of their physically fit body.

The book challenges the notion that the Fit Nation represents a history of progress, which would be characterized by democratic access to good health and personal fulfillment. Petrzela asserts that privatized access to fitness and the commodification of the civic ideal of a beautiful, fit, and healthy body gives rise to concerns regarding social justice. She appropriately questions whether the moral and cultural acceptance of both women's sports and the inclusion of racial and sexual minorities in dedicated spaces have genuinely made fitness culture as fair, inclusive, and egalitarian as its contemporary marketing and advertisements purport. While acknowledging local initiatives that have brought sports to communities facing cultural, political, and socioeconomic barriers to accessing good health, Petrzela exposes the hypocrisy embedded in the marketing strategies of the fitness industry. She examines their role in perpetuating the material inequalities that shape contemporary American society, including the impact on the fitness industry and its vulnerable workforce.

Can a consumerist industry like fitness, which has deep structural and historical ties to racial, class, and gender-based inequalities, effectively address the political challenge of unequal access to health and exercise? In the book's seventh and final section, "It's not working out," Petrzela demonstrates how the moral values cultivated by the cultural marketing of the fitness industry are deeply intertwined with the modern ideals of the American nation and its individualistic, consumerist economic framework. Petrzela compares her observations on the emergence of a high-end fitness market, including boutique fitness, and its connection to the commodification of health, with her critical analysis of the political discourses surrounding the national push for fitness democratization. In Part 25, she highlights the limitations of Michelle Obama's Let's Move campaign, showing how "the individualization of a public health issue" (324) has led to the growing privatization of Fit Nation. The contemporary national ideal of a fit, beautiful, and healthy body has become a commodity accessible only to "those who can afford to participate in its mostly private forms" (339).

Petrzela's deliberate selection and arrangement of examples, which involve a dialectical exploration of political and industrial history with a central focus on the body, lay the foundation for an unequivocally materialist political critique of cultural marketing employed by the contemporary American fitness industry. Through astutely selected examples, Petrzela effectively showcases the detrimental political ramifications resulting from moral discourse propagated by the contemporary fitness culture. "The fetishization with individual self-fashioning" (335) – analogous to the national democratic ideal – is inherently linked to the establishment of a moral justification for the commodification and consumption dynamics of fitness, perpetuating and reinforcing the injustices they generate. Nevertheless, the author's critique could have been more insightful had she explicitly articulated the epistemological foundations that inform her work as a historian.

The author does not explicitly introduce the epistemological traditions from which she derives her ideas, thereby avoiding the establishment of a critical analytical lexicon. I found it particularly surprising that there was a complete absence of any reference to Foucault, whose work is canonical in the fields of both body studies and the critique of neoliberalism. In fact, the book lacks a dedicated section wherein the author explicitly recognizes and underscores the linkages among the concepts and theories employed,

despite drawing inspiration from the research conducted by neo-Marxists, materialist–feminist and queer theorists, and historians of racial capitalism. As a consequence, Petrzela does not provide a defined theoretical framework for understanding the connection she makes between consumerism and the US nation. Such a clarification would have facilitated the recognition of the discourses and practices emerging from the American fitness industry and the American political elites as interconnected components of the political history of American capitalism. By not establishing a more overt dialectical relationship between the industrial and the political logic of American nation building, the author inadvertently mitigates the level of radicalism in her analysis. I personally identify Petrzela's reluctance to explicitly recognize fitness culture as a constituent element of the socioeconomic and political production of the nation as a consequence of her epistemological omission. Does this omission subsequently expose her cultural history to the potential inclusion of certain culturalist explanations? I leave this question open for future readers, as the author's book serves as an ideal platform for engaging in sharp critical thinking regarding contemporary American capitalist and national culture.

The presence of a few critical ambiguities and vagueness in Petrzela's work also mirrors the potentialities and possibilities inherent in her book. The author's insightful and relevant analyses can be fully realized through a politically engaged reading of the *Fit Nation*. Therefore I encourage readers to approach the book with a discerning critical eye, allowing them to interpret Petrzela's analyses through their own lens. The author's selection of relevant and rich examples provides readers with an opportunity to engage in critical thinking, ultimately enriching their own perspectives through Petrzela's undeniable intelligence, fascinating insights into the cultural history of the American nation, and erudite mastery of the chronology of fitness. Infused with humor and self-reflection regarding her fascination with the ideals of fitness culture and her involvement in its exclusive spaces, the author presents an embodied and situated history of the political impact of the American fitness industry. Petrzela wittily and skillfully avoids the pitfalls that often accompany the writing of history centered around a seductive theme, one that is characterized by the fluorescent Lycra jumpsuits of the *Jack Lalanne Show* and the questionable exoticism of California's New Wave movements. While acknowledging the allure of the kitschy, entertaining, and prosaic aspects that these objects hold for both the author and the reader, Petrzela engages in a serious discussion about the underlying structural political injustices within the commercial consumerism of the American fitness industry.

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John Ernest (ed.), *Race in American Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022, \$39.99). Pp. 452. ISBN 978 1 1084 8739 9.

The existing scholarship on the dynamic of race in American literature and culture, broadly speaking, focusses either on transcultural or interracial dynamics or on the variety of literary traditions that have emerged from the complex history of race in the trajectory of American society. As an illustration of the first type of scholarly