Recension
Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies / The Dutch Journal for Gender Studies
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Book details

Building Bodies – Transnational Historical Approaches to Sport, Gender and Ethnicities (2019)
Marjet Derks, Eveline Buchheim, Saskia Bultman, Marjan Groot, Marleen Reichgelt, Evelien Walhout & Ingrid de Zwarte
Hilversum, Verloren Publishers
226 pages
ISBN-10: 9087047568

Sports pushes the limits of gender

The players walk out of the tunnel. The national anthem of the U.S. echoes around the football stadium, and most players hold their hands over their hearts. Only one American player, Megan Rapinoe, does not make any traditional gestures. She just stares ahead vacantly and tries not to show any expressions – although, in fact, in doing nothing she actually addresses lots of things she stands for, such as race and gender equality. In an essay she wrote for The Players Tribune in 2016 already, she says, ‘There is no perfect way to protest’. In her speech after being nominated as the Best FIFA Women’s Player 2019, she concluded, ‘We have a unique opportunity in football different to any other sport in the world to use this beautiful game to actually change the world for the better’. Historically, the opportunity or football as a sport was not unique, but the powerful protest through sports was real in that moment and belongs to the long continuum that is highlighted and convincingly analysed in the sports issue of the Yearbook of Women’s History (Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis), which was guest edited by Professor Marjet Derks.

That moment during the FIFA World Cup 2019 captures the content of the yearbook Building Bodies: Transnational Historical Approaches to Sport, Gender and Ethnicities perfectly. While including the themes of transnationality, gender, and ethnicities, it first of all proves that ‘sport does not exist in a vacuum’ but rather ‘has always been a politically charged sociocultural manifestation’ (p. 171). As an edited book with twelve articles and two interviews, the yearbook offers different angles to look at how sports has played an important role navigating and negotiating changing
cultural meanings, mainly attached to gender, in different times. The articles in the first main section, ‘Femininities and Masculinities’, approach the topic via a specific sport (i.e. wrestling, horse racing, American football). The second main section, ‘Sporting Bodies’, does the same via different visual sports magazines. The third main section, ‘Ethnicities’, as well as the other sections, which include only one article, mainly serves to create a contrast and bring diversity to the yearbook. Derks underlines the importance of bringing gender and transnational history together, but the intersection between sports, gender, and society shines brighter in the yearbook while leaving ethnicities and transnationality still slightly in the shadow. Even though the yearbook involves studies of different times and places, the theoretical discussion about the significance of transnationality and ethnicities, either in the context of athletes’ identities or the nature of sports, could have been bolder.

If this yearbook had been written one year later, Rapinoe probably would have been mentioned. The major steps women’s football has taken during the past years are mentioned several times in the yearbook – and for good reason. The interview with Dutch football player Tessel Middag functions as a connecting piece between the past and present and concretises the historical changes women’s sports has undergone over the years and centuries. Even though Middag’s interview is not traditionally academic, it is a nice supplementary touch that makes the yearbook more fruitful as a whole. All in all, many of the articles (such as Holly Oberle’s article on women’s part in American football and Ines Braune’s on female parkour in the Arab world), as well as the interviews with Middag and the former Dutch table tennis player Bettine Vriesekoop, demonstrate the clear aim for the yearbook: ‘(to) inspire (our) readers to discuss the role that sports play in our society’ (p. 7). Sports, unquestionably, has its gendered past and helps us understand the mutual interaction that societies and sports have gone through and that has affected ideals, prejudices, and norms in terms of gender and ethnicities. The yearbook leaves us to ponder how sports has changed when it comes to ‘redefined and destabilised notions of gender and sexual “naturalness”’ (p. 15) but also suggests attention still needs to be paid to the unequal structures within our society.

The yearbook calls for the mobilisation of intersectionality in the fields of sports history, gender studies, and global studies, and shows that this is a highly valuable approach full of new opportunities. Intersectionality can sound simple as an ideal but turns out to be challenging when put into practice, and this is partly true for the yearbook as well. The theoretically excellent and paradigmatically conscious introduction by Marjet Derks sets high expectations, and although most of the articles meet these expectations, the application of intersectionality and a more theoretical
analysis could have been taken further. The first contribution, Olaf Stieglitz’s article on women’s hurdling, offers a great example of brave interpretation and historical contextualising by critically calling into question the intersection of gender, sexuality, and sports. However, the role of ‘life course analysis’ introduced by Samantha-Jayne Oldfield, Lisa Taylor, and Dave Day as ‘a valuable methodological tool’ (p. 51) is less clear: while the article discusses three interesting case studies of British sportswomen, their biographical stories do not, in the end, yield results that are more broadly applicable theoretically.

As already mentioned, the intersection of gender and sports is committedly and successfully highlighted throughout the yearbook, whereas ethnicities could perhaps have been taken into account more. The brief section devoted to ethnicities (with only two articles) has a clear, political message: sports provide a unique arena for athletes to ‘have a prominent political voice’ (p. 177). The section even encourages athletes to use this voice for good causes, such as the pursuing of gender and race equality. In this sense, Scarlett L. Hester’s article on whiteness, neo-colonialism, and gender in the context of Ultimate Fighting Championship (UFC) is exceptionally meritorious with its well-argued critique of the ‘whitewashing’ and commercialisation of Brazilian jiu-jitsu (BJJ). The article acknowledges the status of original Japanese jiu-jitsu and its transnational travelling to the U.S. via Brazil, and the neo-colonial legacy within the history of the UFC. Besides the exquisite reading of transnationalism, Hester deals the gendered advancement within the UFC with scepticism, when it comes to the launch of a women’s division. She questions sharply whether the launch of the women’s division was merely a positive step for women’s sport. If the article had viewed the launch with only gender in mind, it would have missed the racial viewpoint and the white hegemony that American UFC-fighter Ronda Rousey’s win over Brazilian Liz Carmouche reasserted. Hester’s article reifies the profits that a truly intersectional approach can claim at its best.

Hester’s article is also a realistic demonstration of the notice that not every step forward in women’s sports is purely flawless or ‘emancipating’, which is a surprisingly common term in the yearbook. This issue could have been addressed with more care: the cultural and social structure behind women’s emancipation is not obvious in many historical cases. Women’s ‘emancipation’ is problematic because it often assumes that women have been under compulsory male oppression and have not taken any part themselves in the cultural construction or maintenance of those meanings that have construed the female body as fragile, unnatural, or unfit for sports. In the yearbook, emancipation is mentioned in relation to male oppression, male dominance, the position of women
within society (pp. 41–42, 112), or as a matter of fact (p. 148) instead of an interpretation. Sports are also represented as ‘a tool of female empowerment’ (p. 49) for sportswomen surrounded by men and operating in masculine domains, which basically includes the idea of emancipation.

The problem is not that the domain of sports has been masculine or that sports has offered new opportunities for women, because sports, as the yearbook suggests, has pushed the limits of gender. The issue is that the yearbook does not challenge the cultural or interpretative nature of ‘emancipation’ at all. Theoretically, when following Judith Butler, women’s ‘emancipation’ does not hold water because ‘[t]he female body that is freed from the shackles of the paternal law may well prove to be yet another incarnation of that law’ (Butler 1990, p.93). Thus, there is no state or body to emancipate to. What does exist are myriad possibilities for taking action and taking over the meanings that have kept women, in this case, away from sports and denied them physical and athletic self-expression. ‘The culturally constructed body will then be liberated […] to an open future of cultural possibilities’ (Butler 1990, p.93) – that is what ‘building bodies’ could politically mean in the field of sports instead of emancipation.

Finally, the yearbook followed the path Jörn Eiben and Olaf Stieglitz paved in the Special Issue of Historical Social Research in 2017: most of the articles included well-picked images, which were analysed carefully. In his yearbook article, Stieglitz himself proves how images add value to research and not function as mere illustration. Since hurdling had been described as a ‘visual sport’ at the turn of the 20th century, it made sense, as Stieglitz points out, for the article to present this visuality with images. Marjan Groot’s picture essay on the American magazine Physical Culture and Helena Tolvhed’s examination of visual representations in Swedish bodybuilding magazines are both wonderful proof of the power of images as well. Tolvhed also cautiously touched on the current ‘material turn’ (in the field of cultural studies at least) by considering the meanings of sport devices and clothing. The materiality of sports and embodiment is surely one major opportunity for research, but there is plenty to be done yet in the study of the intersectionality of gender, ethnicities, and sports. The yearbook Building Bodies serves as an inspiring opening for that.
About the author

Lotta Vuorio is a PhD student of History at the University of Helsinki, and her research focuses on gendered and embodied cultural history of physical education in the nineteenth-century Britain. She is curious about the way people moved and exercised in the past, and how that shaped one’s identity. As a main part of her dissertation research, she pursues the meanings of materiality, bodily performances, and spatiality of physical fitness and exercising.

References


