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These Days of Large Things: The Culture of Size in America, 1865-1930 [Review]

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These Days of Large Things: The Culture of Size in America, 1865–1930. By Michael Tavel Clarke. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2007. 336 pp. Cloth, \$65.00.

In *These Days of Large Things: The Culture of Size in America, 1865–1930*, Michael Tavel Clarke examines the Progressive Era preoccupation with size. As Clarke argues with considerable evidence, largeness was widely interpreted in this period (and, indeed, in our own) to denote progress and advancement while smallness in turn signified degeneracy and unwholesomeness. This pervasive and enduring schema, Clarke shows, had its roots in American expansionism and imperialism, enterprises underwritten by the interlocking beliefs that bigger is better and that superiority must be physically manifest.

As Clarke argues, the American body quickly became the foremost emblem of American nationalist might, and, as a result, social reformers, scientists, and physicians sought to engineer American bodily stature through physical fitness campaigns, social hygiene, and eugenics. Just as the vertiginous American white male body was celebrated as the apotheosis of progress, so the smaller body—particularly the female, immigrant, or non-white body—was habitually regarded as a “living fossil” and thus made an object of fascination and infantilization. For example, several prominent figures of the period recommended to the U.S. Bureau of Education that smaller children be held back in school and that taller children be moved to higher grade levels, regardless of academic achievement. To be small in the Progressive Era was to be a social signifier of arrested development, parental neglect, and vestigial natural history.

In a study of impressive range and depth, Clarke shows how this fixation on size permeated Progressive Era culture, and he demonstrates its influence not only in such likely places as white supremacist colonialism and anti-immigration nativism but also in such surprising locales as the Gibson Girl and the skyscraper. Covering an admirable range of topics, Clarke’s book defies a neat enumeration of its many subjects, but the book is organized into three broad categories: race, the marketplace, and gender. In the first section, Clarke examines the national fascination in this era with the Pygmy, who was transformed into a grotesque spectacle so as to celebrate, by juxtaposition, the presumed physical superiority of the white male body. In this section, Clarke traces in detail how this preoccupation led to the creation of national height standards as well as the statistical model of the average American citizen. The second section examines how the culture of size likewise informed debates about mass production,

mammoth corporations, urban development, and labor. Clarke's discussion of the impact of the skyscraper on architectural design is particularly illuminating: the new aerial perspective afforded by the skyscraper ushered in designs that disposed of the blocky cornices of the turn-of-the-century building and instead showcased the new buildings' upward reach. The third section analyzes the zero-sum arithmetic of size; as popular images represented the New Woman of the late century as statuesque and physically imposing, the American man simultaneously became the Little Man, rendered powerless and disposable by big business and the consumerist demands of the New Woman. The book closes with an epilogue examining the belated impact of the culture of size on the 1950s and includes a fascinating discussion of the films *The Attack of the 50-Foot Woman* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*. Along the way, the book includes lively discussions of Henry James' *American Scene*, the 1893 Columbia Exposition, the Woolworth building, and Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*, among others.

As Clarke shows, the culture of size did not go unchallenged, and the book attends to several high-profile criticisms that saw menace in some of the era's giants. For example, Justice Louis Brandeis and the anti-trust movement sought to rein in the corporate colossus, while naturalist writers narrated the travails of the individual struggling to survive in the shadow of the corporate giant. Among the more vocal critics of the culture of size was Henry James, and Clarke elegantly reveals how James' aesthetic dislike for the skyscraper was fueled by worries about his own obsolescence in the early-twentieth century.

Though the book is impressively researched, it perplexingly treats the years between 1865 and 1930 as part of a uniform historical continuum. I wish that Clarke had either made a strong case for treating evidence culled over a sixty-five-year period as all of a piece or had attended more carefully to the significant cultural and historical contexts in between. In addition, all the book's chapters examine pairings—such as the Pygmy/the Columbia Exposition and New Woman/the Jewish woman—and on occasion this rubric can be awkward, as with the discussions of Mary Antin and architectural photography, respectively, in which the pairings feel forced and uneasy. That said, Clarke offers a fresh perspective on the Progressive Era and deftly interweaves literary analyses with cultural studies.

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