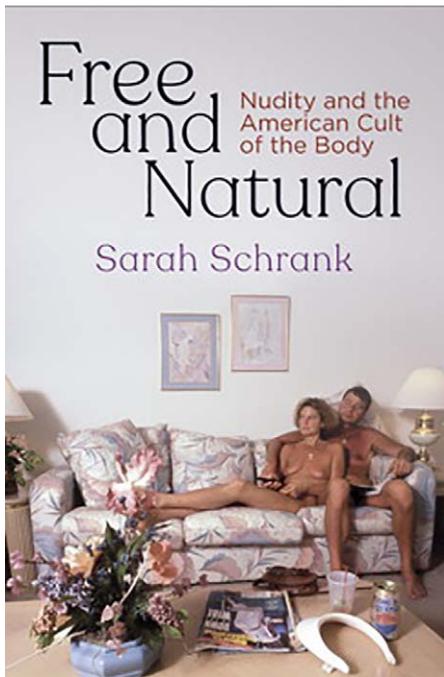


BOOK REVIEWS

FREE AND NATURAL: *Nudity and the American Cult of the Body*. By Sarah Schrank (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019, 288 pp., \$39.95 hardcover). Reviewed by Stephen L. Harp.

This excellent book examines nudity and changing American notions of the body from the early twentieth century to the present. Schrank uses the notion of “free and natural” nude bodies to unify a careful analysis of nudism, nude resorts, swinging, pornography, nude beaches, and the ever-increasing commercialization of the twentieth-century American body.



Schrank begins with an extended description of early nudist camps, particularly in Southern California. Inspired by developments in Germany, nudist groups proliferated in the interwar years, as Frances and Mason Merrill, Maurice Parmelee, and others shared their experiences of nudism in Europe. Arguing that nudity did not need to be sexual, early nudists focused on outdoor exercise, sunshine, healthy eating, and avoidance of alcohol and tobacco in order to improve their own individual bodies and the imagined national bodies of their respective countries during this heyday of eugenics. Nudist camps faced opposition in the U.S. as soon as they were founded. After the Nazi

seizure of power in Germany, Americans opposed to nudism got a hand from suspicion of nudism as Nazism, and Los Angeles County and other locales shut down nudist camps.

As a result, during and after World War II, nudist practices moved into suburbia, where architectural norms in Florida and Southern California made space for

Southern California Quarterly, Vol. 102, No. 4, pp. 459–469. ISSN 0038-3929, eISSN 2162-8637. © 2020 by The Historical Society of Southern California. All rights reserved. Request permission to photocopy or reproduce article content at the University of California Press's Reprints and Permissions web page, <https://www.ucpress.edu/journals/reprints-permissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/scq.2020.102.4.459>.

private, backyard, and interior nudism, fundamentally altering nudism's original connection to nature. Mostly limited to white, nuclear families that could buy into suburbia, this newly privatized nudism was consumerist; nudism was made possible by individual homes, pools, patios, decks, fencing, and even fiberglass panels affixed on top of fences to screen yards from prying eyes. Schrank also undertakes an analysis of postwar therapeutic nudist retreats, especially Elysium, again in Southern California. As sexuality became an important topic of discussion and treatment, nudist retreats like Elysium not only further commercialized nudism but also explicitly connected nudism and sex. Schrank then shows how the explicit connection between nudism and sex developed in suburbia in the 1960s and after, notably in the form of sex parties and swinging.

Simultaneously, the postwar years witnessed forceful efforts to "free" beaches for nude bodies, as the push for nude beaches called itself the "free beach" movement. Most of these beaches were in Southern California. By the 1960s, anti-war and counter-cultural sentiment pervaded advocacy for free beaches. Schrank offers a wonderfully detailed analysis of the conflicts between the police, municipalities, and the state on the one hand and thousands of nude beach goers on the other. The United States still has very few beaches where nudity is legal, as opposed to tolerated, and Schrank uses that fact to explore the politics of the nude body in contemporary America. She concludes with an interesting analysis of what she calls "naked lifestyle consumerism," such as naked yoga and (expensive) nude resort tourism in the United States today, thus the culmination of the commercialization of the supposedly "free and natural" body that nudists had hoped to liberate a century ago.

Free and Natural is a fitting companion volume to Brian Hoffman's *Naked: A Cultural History of American Nudism* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). Like Hoffman, Schrank has read the voluminous publications by American nudists. Nudism depended on print culture, both to spread the word about a practice not accepted by the mainstream, including information about specific camps, and to define and justify nudism for nudists and potential nudists. But whereas Hoffman's book makes an important link between nudist publications and the repeal of stringent censorship of the Comstock Laws in the U.S., Schrank explores the local legal cases involving the camps, retreats, and beaches. To do so, she has mined Southern California newspapers over much of the twentieth century, offering superb granular detail. Moreover, whereas Hoffman focuses on the nudist movement, Schrank's book is a history of the presumably "free and natural" nude body in the United States, not of nudism per se.

Long-time movement nudists and some historians of nudism might not always agree with Schrank's suppositions. For example, she repeatedly claims that there is something inherently sexual about the naked body (10, 22, 94). In doing so, she is no doubt reflecting American society generally. However, I am not as sure that early nudists were necessarily wrong in claiming that nudism is not inherently sexual. Schrank certainly gives ample evidence of how some people outside the nudist movement see a definite link between nudism and sex. She also provides description of swinging Southern California suburbia and pornography shoots there, including pornography that connects domestic nudism with fantasies of pool boys,

pizza delivery people, and so on. But the naked body is sexualized in pornography in other domains not tied to the nudist movement, notably fantasies of medical professionals and gay fantasies set in locker rooms. Naked bodies in neither medical offices nor locker rooms are normally held to be inherently sexual, so why would nudists' bodies be inherently sexual?

Free and Natural is so good at considering Southern California that I found myself wishing that Schrank had extended her scope as a way of putting her findings into relief. For example, given the conflicts of authorized nudity on California beaches, why does Oregon have two legal nude beaches along the Columbia, one at Rooster Rock State Park and another on Oregon fish and wildlife land at Sauvie Island? Perhaps the commercialism that Schrank describes is more pronounced in California than Oregon? I feel as though I could use Schrank's guidance to understand what might make California both emblematic and unique in the U.S.

Finally, I wish the book were situated in the international history of nudism. Schrank's chapter on the privatization of nudism in postwar American suburbia is terrific, as here the American experience diverged markedly from the European one. Cheap land and cheap transportation, not to mention government support, allowed a private alternative unaffordable to postwar European nudists. Such a privatization may have obscured the practice of nudism in the United States statistically, as normally the membership rolls of leading nudist groups have been an important measure of the movements. European nudists often point out that the United States has about the same number of nudists as the Netherlands, about 50,000. I suspect that the number for the U.S. is artificially low, and the reason is that nudism became less communal and more private in the United States—both in suburbia but also on isolated stretches of rivers, lakes, and oceans of this vast country. European nudists often refer to Puritanism as a reason for proportionately fewer nudists in the U.S. Schrank implicitly refutes that notion.

Well-researched, well-written, accessible, and fascinating, *Free and Natural* deserves a wide scholarly and popular readership.

Stephen L. Harp is Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Akron and author of Au Naturel: Naturism, Nudism, and Tourism in Twentieth-Century France (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014) and Marketing Michelin: Advertising and Cultural Identity in Twentieth-Century France (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001).

OPENING THE GATES TO ASIA: A *Transpacific History of How Americans Repealed Asian Exclusion.* By Jane H. Hong (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019, 264 pp., \$32.95 paper). Reviewed by Michael Yebisu.

Today, mainstream America mostly perceives Asians as intelligent and industrious, a so-called model minority. However, just a hundred years ago, Asians were almost totally barred from American citizenship and American politicians, newspapers, and academics framed Asians as a "yellow peril." Jane H. Hong's *Opening the Gates to Asia* helps explain this total reversal by tracking the shift in U.S. immigration