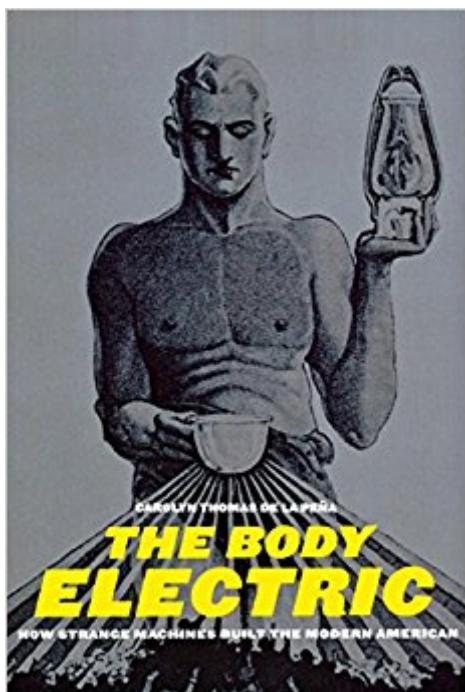


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# The Body Electric: How Strange Machines Built The Modern American (American History And Culture)



## Synopsis

Between the years 1850 and 1950, Americans became the leading energy consumers on the planet, expending tremendous physical resources on energy exploration, mental resources on energy exploitation, and monetary resources on energy acquisition. A unique combination of pseudoscientific theories of health and the public's rudimentary understanding of energy created an age in which sources of industrial power seemed capable of curing the physical limitations and ill health that plagued Victorian bodies. Licensed and physicians alike promoted machines, electricity, and radium as invigorating cures, veritable "fountains of youth" that would infuse the body with energy and push out disease and death. *The Body Electric* is the first book to place changing ideas about fitness and gender in dialogue with the popular culture of technology. Whether through wearing electric belts, drinking radium water, or lifting mechanized weights, many Americans came to believe that by embracing the nation's rapid march to industrialization, electrification, and "radiomania," their bodies would emerge fully powered. Only by uncovering this belief's passions and products, Thomas de la Peña argues, can we fully understand our culture's twentieth-century energy enthusiasm.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Transforming archival research into sparkling prose, *The Body Electric* explains how

Americans learned to use machines to seek health, sexual rejuvenation, and physical transformation. This innovative book is both an entertaining history of fads and foibles and a groundbreaking cultural critique of the continuing obsession with achieving physical perfection. —David E. Nye, author of *Electrifying America* and *America as Second Creation* “Not only provides a richly detailed and surprising account of long-forgotten artifacts, but also fleshes out the longer history of some still-familiar attitudes toward health and vitality.” —Journal of Social History “This provocative exploration of the concept of energy in American medicine deftly ranges across medical theories, exercise machines and their inventors, early human potential movements, popular fads of electricity and radiation, and the national mood at the turn of the twentieth century. The author writes with wit and sympathy about medical theories and devices that may now seem like outright quackery but that formerly appealed to the educated as well as the gullible in their elusive search for good health. Building upon a vast and vastly entertaining literature of medical pamphlets and ephemera, Carolyn Thomas de la Peña brings a discerning intelligence and an energetic analytic style to the cultural history of medicine, faith, science, and technology.” —Jeffrey L. Meikle, University of Texas, Austin “The Body Electric is the so-far missing puzzle piece in our nineteenth-twentieth century knowledge of the social history of the human body and technology.” —a richly illustrated study showing two centuries of technologizing the human body against fears of weakness, enervation, sexual depletion. —Cecelia Tichi, author of *Shifting Gears: Technology, Literature, Culture in Modernist America* “Covers its subject well, provides useful context, and makes lively reading for anyone interested in the history of technology, the social context of electricity and radioactive materials, or the history of alternative medicine.” —Technology and Culture

Carolyn Thomas de la Peña is Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of California at Davis.

Carolyn Thomas de la Peña has written a masterful book. In exploring the ways Americans have used their bodies to understand new technologies, she sheds light on the origins of our own interactions with modern machines. The author supports her findings with meticulously researched facts, and it is clear she spent exhausting hours in the archives, combing through newspaper articles, advertisements, and product materials. She does an equally thorough job of contextualizing her conclusions. By linking her findings to social and cultural shifts taking place at the same time

people were drinking radium water or experimenting with electric belts, she strengthens her argument and is able to draw new and important conclusions about the ways Americans were using technology around the turn of the twentieth century. Her clear and concise writing style make the book a smooth and enjoyable read, besides being one that is extremely relevant to our modern lives.

As I read this book, I marveled at the way in which Ms. Thomas de la Pena explained in detail the obsession Americans have had for so long with physical fitness and weight loss techniques; the belief by many Americans that their bodies, after use of some of these documented, extreme -- to us -- measures, would emerge greatly improved. This book helps us energy-bar-eating, aerobically-charged, iron-pumping 21st-Century individuals understand how it is that we got this way!

This book shows that our current obsessions with our bodies and machines have roots as old as the rise of consumer electricity. Technology in America takes on religious forms. And Professor de la Pena shows the extent of influence of such ideas as "electricity as therapy." This is so well written you won't be able to put it down. It explains complex technological details in clear and precise terms. Its influence should last a long time.

A delightful history of our American obsession with self-improvement and reinvention, our love affair with gimmicks and gadgetry, and our unshakable devotion to the promise of the quick fix. A font of well-researched information treated with humor and insight, this book provides a rich context for the ongoing body-image debate in present day American culture. Highly recommended!

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