

Introduction: Making the Body, Making America

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[T]here are no bodies *without* culture, since the body as a kind of material composition requires a cultural *grammar* of embodiment.

Eva Cherniavsky, “Body” 29.

Recent literary and cultural criticism has extensively explored the relation between concepts of the nation and what can be termed ‘aesthetics of the body.’ “Bodies, individual and collective,” Vera M. Kutzinski observes, “stabilize not only political ideologies but also literary representations and ways of reading them” (57). In this view, the ‘national’ and the ‘corporeal’ seem eerily intertwined, evoking a sense of near-identity of culturally and individually shaped identities. Many studies have critically targeted the specific modes through which this “cultural *grammar* of embodiment” (Cherniavsky, “Body” 29, emphasis in the original) operates, exploring the aesthetic techniques by means of which this “grammar” engenders itself as a dominant force in social and literary practice. The performative character of such literary and cultural operations has enabled the construction of a narrative in which ‘America’ and ‘Americanness’ are indelibly tied with notions of corporeality and organism. In her recent work, *Incorporations: Race, Nation, and the Body Politics of Capital*, Eva Cherniavsky has demonstrated how the discourses of nationalism and embodiment merge in cultural representations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to substantiate persistent ideologies of race and gender (cf. Berlant).

This volume of essays contributes to this academic dialogue by addressing discourses of the body and the nation in another crucial period of American history – the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary era. During these constituting years of American democracy, life in the young nation was marked by innovation in politics, cultural formation, and immense social changes. Industrial technology and increasing urbanization reshaped the contours of domestic labor. The Revolutionary war and the struggles over the Constitution further contributed to a re-ordering of society. The outbreak of the American Revolution had brought change to the social structure of the young community. Indeed, the building of the moral foundation of a republic that had severed the ties with political and religious authorities became the central concern of the ‘Founding Fathers.’ While the American Revolution required a demonizing of British culture and the British, post-Revolutionary Republicanism was eager to establish an “Anglo-centric and monolithic image of the new nation” (Watts 6). As Malini J. Schueller and Edwards Watts have shown, the construction of the U.S. resulted from unstable negotiations of the idea of ‘nation.’ In the early years of the Republic, the imaginary, the rhetorical, and the symbolic were employed for the making of the new nation. Reading and writing, as Michael Warner has stressed, were employed to consolidate the authority

of the new Republican elite. These struggles that sought to achieve a Republican culture affected the status of the body, which came to serve as a site for the demand for social codification and, possibly, revolutionary, ‘transgressive’ behavior (cf. Hoffer 189-251).

The trope of the body gained particular importance during this era of emerging nationalism, especially when the ‘body politic,’¹ the collective body of the state with all its weaknesses and strengths, was seen and negotiated in terms of bodily functions; ‘infection,’ ‘virtuousness,’ and ‘purity’ became key concepts in the description of the nation. At the same time, the desire to establish and defend political authority necessitated new distinctions in the rhetoric of the body. ‘Political bodies’ such as parties and institutions were gradually valorized at the expense of sensational forms of corporeality. A by-product of this shift in language was that the bodies of government were more and more seen as abstractions. During the Revolutionary age, Eva Cherniavsky explains,

political bodies were *not* conceived as the practical means to reproduce the *agora* of the ancient Greek democracies in a modern state [...]. Rather than an abridgement of this embodied totality of citizens thronging the *agora*, the representative bodies arrayed in the U.S. Constitution were envisioned as different sorts of ‘bodies’ altogether, purged of the mass physicality of the crowd. (“Body” 28, emphasis in the original)

The current abundance of work on the body in the eighteenth century (by Michel Foucault, Thomas Laqueur, Londa Schiebinger, and Dorinda Outram) shows the various ways in which that particular time period has become crucial to modern understandings of the body. The eighteenth century has come to be understood as the period in which the body was first subjected to ‘modern’ forms of analysis, with the emergence of a number of ‘disciplines’ – medical discourse, anatomy, biological theories – and categories of social and cultural description which granted the body discursive centrality while making it newly problematic. No longer one of the many phenomena ordered through pre-existing political, ethical, and theological systems, the body “became the noumenal grounding of existence itself – a point of origin upon which political, ethical, and theological systems are then erected” (Burgett 15). While historians have examined how scientific practices and ideas have produced anatomical and biological knowledge that was crucial to the alignment of femininity with nature and the body (cf. Jordanova, *Sexual Visions* and Schiebinger, *Nature’s Body*), they have also described the ‘discovery’ of the new biological reality of the female body as a construction enmeshed in the political and social pressures of the time.

Clearly, the title of this book echoes Thomas Laqueur’s influential study *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*. In this study, Laqueur famously argues that sexuality as a “singular and all-important human attribute – the *opposite* sex – is the product of the late eighteenth century” (13), and the sexed body was

¹ The term *body politic* was a relatively fresh concept in the English language. The *Oxford English Dictionary* mentions the year 1634 as the first recorded usage of the phrase, following the antiquated *bodie corporate* from 1461.

transformed from “a sign of” to the “foundation for civil society” (157). *Making National Bodies* also evokes the title of Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur’s collection of essays, *The Making of the Modern Body*, and therefore aims at showing that the making of the American nation was enmeshed in the ideologies of the making of the body. While the emphasis on the notion of the body as the result of a cultural construction underlines the significance of progress and change, it also draws attention to a sense of becoming that is inherent in the term ‘making.’ The idea of ‘becoming’ dominated the climate of post-Revolutionary America. The emergence of the modern body was a process that was coterminous with the formation of an *American* identity. As Astrid M. Fellner has shown, the emergence of new ideals of the body, which entailed the becoming binary of sex/gender and the becoming heteronormative of desire, was constitutive of the becoming American of the nation (cf. *Bodily Sensations*). Stefan L. Brandt has argued in *The Culture of Corporeality* that the concept of the body was ritually foregrounded in those periods of American cultural self-fashioning which were marked by a sense of national crisis or fundamental social predicament.

This collection focuses on the particular role the human body played in various cultural texts that helped define the American Republic. As a physical ‘text’ written and read within a political context, the body in late-eighteenth-century America assumes new dimensions. Its physical integrity constitutes as significant a material vehicle for symbolic representation as the body’s evocative sensuality. The construction of the national body cannot, however, be studied in isolation from the ways in which gender and sexuality were conceptualized and constructed in the eighteenth century. The creation of the ideal Republican national body is impossible to understand except as a simultaneous exclusion of a domesticated female body. Writing about the virtuous female body, Smith-Rosenberg thus states:

We cannot fully understand the construction of a new sexual and domestic female in America unless we view it against the constantly changing construction of the male citizen – from the opening shots of the American Revolution, until he emerged as both ‘the common political man’ and ‘the self-made economic man’ of Jacksonian America. The political body is always gendered just as the gendering of the body is always political – and relational. (Smith-Rosenberg, “Domesticating ‘Virtue’” 161)

Hence, the following essays focus specifically on the metaphorical employment of the body in selected literary and cultural texts of the Early Republic. The main focus is placed upon the gendering of the democratic subject and the development of a rhetoric of embodiment. The first group of essays investigates how the Republic and the nation were invented in foundational fictions and epic poems. In “Foundling Father,” Timothy K. Conley explores the close affiliations between the foundational rhetoric of American patriarchs, particularly Benjamin Franklin, and eighteenth-century systems of family relationships, in particular the maternal role assigned to women in the early Republic. Franklin’s letters, essays, and public writings reflect both the emergence of the family as a focal point of state intervention in the eighteenth century and the attempts of American founders to justify their separation from Britain. Common tropes

such as ‘young America’ and ‘the infant state abandoned by its parent’ provided a fitting context for the leaders of the Republic to envision themselves at once as orphans and as fathers. In her contribution, Astrid M. Fellner analyzes the body as a site of contestation and rebellion in the Early Republic. She argues that there was a change in the conception of femininity in the Revolutionary period, which is registered in the iconographic tradition. Analyzing the ways in which personifications and allegorical forms were used as powerful instruments for imposing order on the new nation, Fellner shows that the incarnation of the Anglo-American nation acquired a name – Columbia. Columbia became the ideal Republican Mother: demurely garbed and unmistakably white, she served as an emblem for the new nation, standing for liberty and progress. In “Visions of Columbus,” Gabriele Pizarz-Ramírez examines the Columbian myth from yet another perspective, emphasizing the transnational context of processes of national identity formation. Her essay focuses on Joel Barlow and Philip Freneau as two authors who engaged with transnational spaces both to confirm and to question the new Republican discourse of the nation. While Barlow’s *The Vision of Columbus* (1787) is guided by the imperatives of post-Revolutionary nationalism and thus represents a conformist view with respect to the national project, several of Freneau’s poems divert from the entirely positive image of Columbus which dominated the early Republican period, presenting a view of colonial history that could be called non-conformist. Elaborating on the different uses Barlow and Freneau make of Columbus and the histories of conquest of the Americas, the essay accentuates the fissures within post-Revolutionary culture and its partial divergence from the necessities of a dominant national imaginary.

The second group of articles investigates the material construction of the body in the discourses of medicine and sexuality. In his essay on “Rush, Foucault and the Making of Virtuous Bodies,” Thomas Clark challenges the Foucauldian reading of eighteenth-century physician and intellectual Benjamin Rush as a pioneer of liberalism whose ideal of the individuated body obscured an ideology of discipline and control. A close examination of Rush’s socio-political vision reveals him to be a committed Republican who *explicitly* subordinated and integrated the individual into an organic community and a network of virtue-inducing practices applied to body and mind in order to maintain the public body’s health and virtue. Rush’s program of internalized controls, external surveillance, and political containment, Clark demonstrates, proved too inflexible to be accepted in a society which, contrary to totalizing readings, teemed with a plurality of political factions, radical democratic challenges to elite stewardship, critical counter-publics, and the uncontrollable forces of the market. In “Hereditary Sin and the post-Revolutionary Phallacy,” Jörg Thomas Richter argues that Royall Tyler’s idiosyncratic work *The Origin of Evil* (1793) provoked a phallic discourse which was already contained in the national imaginary of the time. Spelling out what ‘Republicanism’ would mean if it were to be re-translated in biblical terms, Tyler openly rejected the notion of a sovereignty of the present as evoked in Jefferson’s and Paine’s appeals to the perpetual presence of the Revolution. Emptied of any genealogical

implications, *The Origin of Evil* seems to invoke the image of a present without past, and, thus, without future.

The third group of essays discusses the discourse of embodiment as a paradigmatic component of national self-fashioning in early U.S. literature. Zoe Detsi-Diamanti's "Ethnicity and the Republican National Body" offers insight into the powerful interplay between ethnic diversity and the new nation's ideological effort to create a homogeneous cultural identity. The essay elucidates how the popular stage stereotype of the Irishman betrayed a pervasive political ideology which sought to crystallize a specific kind of white citizenship in American society. In this view, the representation of the Irish in early American drama – like the representation of the other fearsome 'Others' in American culture (the *assimilated* or *eliminated* Native Americans and the docile and rootless African Americans) – aimed at dispersing the Anglo-Americans' latent fear that the Republican experiment might eventually fail and cause the ideal of national homogeneity to collapse. In "Bodies of Letters," Christian Quendler sets out to investigate how early American novels adopted and transformed communicative schemata established in eighteenth-century European fiction. In three case studies of early epistolary fiction – William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), Enos Hitchcock's *Memoirs of the Bloomsgrave Family* (1790), and Ann Eliza Bleecker's *The History of Maria Kittle* (1780/1797) – Quendler's essay outlines a repertoire of national, literary, and gendered strategies of contributing to the demand for national literary narrations on the proper construction of the self while keeping female embodiment and narrative enactment safely embedded within the realm of social control. In "Exploring the 'Heart of the Wilderness,'" Stefan L. Brandt discusses what he terms the "aesthetics of the body" in Brown's seminal novel *Edgar Huntly, or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (1799). In Brandt's reading, *Edgar Huntly* epitomizes a desire to construct the human body and its emotional fabric as aesthetic frames of reference for the process of national self-fashioning. Crafted as an analogy to the situation in the post-Revolutionary period and aiming at a "liberal and candid reader" as its addressee, Brown's novel encapsulates many of the idiosyncrasies and paradoxes of the time. Catering to patterns of narration deeply rooted in sensual experience and engaging its recipients in a strongly visceral fashion, *Edgar Huntly* becomes an example of what Brandt calls the post-Revolutionary epoch's "realism of the body."

The essays collected in this volume contend that the discourse of embodiment was indispensable for the construction of a stable national identity in post-Revolutionary America. The aesthetics of corporeal self-fashioning was instrumental in generating the basis for a rhetoric of 'making the national body.' In elucidating the common fantasies of incorporation celebrated in fictional and non-fictional texts of late-eighteenth-century America, the authors of this volume intend to initiate a dialogue with the past, thus bringing about a more thorough understanding of this founding period of U.S. history. If we can indeed manage to create a 'dialogue' with authors from the Early Republic and "speak with the dead," to pick up Greenblatt's memorable phrase (1), it might be possible to come to an awareness of the dynamic that has shaped the cultural

imagination during this time. Such “conversations between the dead and the living,” Vera M. Kutzinski maintains, can help to “challenge the body’s assumed integrity [so that] both human and textual bodies are ‘magically’ invested” (80). When this act of symbolic investment takes place in literary interpretation, Kutzinski adds, “national bodies can likewise ‘turn’ and surrender their consolidated fictions of unity to the equivocal openness of memory play” (ibid.). We hope to contribute to this academic dialogue by presenting a number of new and thought-provoking readings on the crucial interconnection of individual and national bodies.

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