

Stefan L. Brandt, Astrid M. Fellner (eds.)

## Making National Bodies

Cultural Identity and the Politics of the Body  
in (Post-)Revolutionary America

Bernd Engler, Michael Hochgeschwender, Jörg Nagler,  
Udo Sautter, Oliver Scheiding (Hg.)

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and the Politics of the Body in (Post-)Revolutionary America /**

Edited by Stefan L. Brandt, Astrid M. Fellner. -

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The shape of this book emerged from a series of conversations that followed the 2006-EAAS conference in Cyprus. For this conference, Astrid M. Fellner and Markus Heide had organized a panel entitled “Making National Bodies: (Non-)Conformism and the Early Republic.” After the conference, Stefan L. Brandt expressed his interest in the idea of co-editing a collection of original essays on the role of literary and cultural texts in the processes of discursive ‘nation-building’ and the making of ‘the national body.’ While some of the articles published here were presented as conference papers in Cyprus, others were written specifically for this collection.

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Astrid M. Fellner and Stefan L. Brandt





# Introduction: Making the Body, Making America

Stefan L. Brandt and Astrid M. Fellner

[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,’<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.