

ETHNIC AMERICAN LITERATURE  
AND ITS DISCONTENTS:  
**REFLECTIONS ON THE  
BODY, THE NATION**  
AN ESSAY

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Historians long ago began to write of the body. They have studied the body in a field of historical demography or pathology; they have considered it as the seat of needs and appetites, as the locus of physiological processes and metabolisms, a target for the attacks of germs or viruses; they have shown to what extent historical processes were involved in what might seem to be the purely biological base of existence; and what place should be given in the history of society to biological "events" such as the circulation of bacilli, or the extension of the lifespan. But the body is also directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks to perform ceremonies, to emit signs.

Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punishment*

"If the skin were parchment and the blows you gave me were ink. . ."

*Dromio the slave to Antipholus his master*  
William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*

**B**odies are manipulated to produce meaning and purpose. They accumulate meaning by way of attribution, designation, authorization, and naming. But bodies are just as often made to be social and symbolic markers in life. The import of a live body is encountered in the world by way of the dynamic combination of both inscription and self-determined expression. As impressions of life are continually inscribed on flesh, living bodies make present the passing of time. Such a fact contributes to the daunting and complex realization that our bodies are actually living texts, texts that are constantly bearing and transforming meaning. But how might we understand what it is about our bodies that is "natural," and what it is that is cultured? The nature versus culture debate is at the center of any contemplation of how we might read bodies. Is the body, in any final sense, "natural" or "raw" (i.e. non- or pre-social)? On the other hand, can the body itself be regarded as purely a social and signifying effect lacking in its own weighty materiality? The interaction and engagement of "the natural" with "the cultural" needs careful consideration. It is not adequate to simply dismiss the category of nature outright, but in turn the cultural too must be seen in its limitations, as a kind of insufficiency that requires natural supplementation.

When we look at bodies we don't just see biological nature at work. We see values and ideals, differences and similarities that national culture has "written." How can we understand the contributions of the body to the production of knowledge systems, regimes of representation, cultural production, and socioeconomic exchange? Bodies are necessarily interlocked with cultural, racial, and class particularities, and such "interlocking" is by way of mutual constitution. Subjectivity cannot be made to conform to the universalist ideals of humanism if there is no concept of "the human" that includes all subjects without violence, loss, or residue. Humanism, the intellectual/philosophical/metaphysical line of inquiry that has dominated (Western) thought since the eighteenth century, posits humankind as the measure of all things. Consciousness of the self has become the measure whereby humankind posits its existence (as opposed to God's authority) and has allowed us to invest in a celebration of humanness. But the trouble is, not everyone has been accorded the same "human" status (i.e. slavery). Furthermore, different social practices have led to bogus theories of "stages" along an evolutionary "human" trajectory (i.e. colonial inscriptions). It follows then that the whole of cultural life, including the formation and evaluation of knowledges themselves, must be questioned regarding the sexual, racial (and cultural) specificity of subject positions. Ultimately, the body is not only symbol, but materiality situated within the contingencies of history.

Considering bodies as living texts lends itself to Roland Barthes' well-known commentary on the limits of authorization. The debate over a text's determination in the hands of an author or reader sheds light on the reception of bodies in the world. Any text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation. But there is one place where this multiplicity is focused, and that place is the reader, not the author (Barthes 148). Live bodies never function as a single "theological" meaning (the message of the Author-God). Rather, they are multidimensional spaces in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash. Yet the idea of the human body as "open" text yielding a multiplicity of readings is at odds with the predominant impulse to authorize bodies, to limit and furnish their meaning with a final signification. In what ways has the body's representative power been interpreted, especially in terms of nation and citizenship? It is in this interminable process of lending bodies metaphorical and figural meaning that literal bodies have often been violated. In the context of nationalism, literal bodies have

become a powerful metaphor or symbol for/to the nation, yet such figural appointments customarily result in the very real violation of the person inhabiting such a designated body. The material body often suffers under the sway of the figurative regime.

Citizenship (as an ideal) stands for the autonomy, self-legislation, and sense of civic solidarity that members of a group extend to one another. At the heart of the concept of citizenship is the question of the individual—both dependent and independent, always and yet never alone in the modern world. Considered as an ideal and practical identity, citizenship supplies both moral value and pragmatic institution. But by revealing "the citizen" as abstracted and yet embodied and gendered, we can detect the underpinnings of a national symbolic that has worked to make "America" recognizable and intelligible. Passing into citizenship through inscription in a national symbolic of the body politic, the citizen reaches another plane of existence as a whole unassailable body, whose translation into totality mimics the nation's permeable yet impervious spaces. A notion of an abstract citizen-subject underlies democratic universalism or what Lauren Berlant calls the "fantasy of national democracy...based on principles of abstract personhood" (18). How have citizens been positioned and explicated within a collective/national domain, through regulation of the body and the coincident conscription of subjectivity? Can we ascertain a narrative of national corporeal imaginings when reckoning with the American body politic? The democratic ideal presupposes a connection between citizenship and impartiality. Such impartiality, as Iris Marion Young writes, "requires constricting the idea of a self abstracted from the context of any real persons." The advancement of collective interests presumes a citizen who "is not committed to any particular ends, has no particular history, is a member of no communities, has no body" (60). Citizenship thus depends on the projection of uniformity and equivalence. And perhaps more significantly, citizenship rests on a fundamental disavowal of difference. As Leslie Bow has written, "the necessity of projecting homogenous national citizens erases embodied difference as a predicate of uninterested civic participation and the promotion of the common good" (40).

Nevertheless, the symbolic process through which the U.S. constitutes its subjects (*how Americans are made*) is explicitly related to the internal categories of race, gender, and ethnicity. Furthermore, these "internal" categories are inexorably linked to the global dynamics of empire building. The multiple histories of continental and overseas expansion, conflict, and resistance have shaped U.S. national identity. Those cultures

that the United States has dominated beyond its geopolitical boundaries have been (and continue to be) as formative to American identity as those cultures that have been recognized as "from within." That which has been rhetorically understood as "exterior" has continued to produce interior meaning. Although there has been a marked denial effectively sweeping under the proverbial rug the reality of the American empire, American imperialism must be recognized—not only within the context of international relations, but in terms of consolidating *domestic* culture.

As long as American imperialism is perceived as a matter of foreign policy (conducted by diplomatic elites) or a matter of economic necessity (driven by market forces), America will continue to be self-conceived as "independent" of the global stage. At length, "America" has been disciplinarily and historically understood as a domestic question, one that can afford to be isolated, unique, or divorced from international conflict. The result is a binary opposition of the concepts "foreign" and "domestic," further encouraging a discourse that identifies *outsider* difference. Hence, a historicized anxiety about those people and cultures that have been represented as the "exterior." Asian American Studies scholar Lisa Lowe points out that in the last century and a half, the American citizen has been defined "over and against" the Asian immigrant in legal, economic, and cultural terms: "These definitions have cast Asian immigrants both as persons and populations to be integrated into the national political sphere and as the contradictory, confusing, unintelligible elements to be marginalized and returned to their alien origins" (4). Furthermore, as the concept of the "immigrant" in American sociology and public policy has historically signified "European immigrants," it is telling to track the changing contours of such a category. In the last several decades, this concept has been redrawn in an effort to universalize the temporality of assimilation—an assimilation earlier attributed to Irish Americans and Italian Americans, and extended more recently to ethnic minority groups from the "third world." This conceptual inclusion effaces the heterogeneities and hierarchies that are the reality of a vast (and vexed) history of American immigration. It also obscures the technologies of racial distinction that the immigration process substantiates (Blauner 45). American nationality is still posed as a monolithic and self-contained whole, no matter how diverse, dynamic, and conflicted.

There is no doubt that the legacy of the racial history of the United States is at once complex and vast. By highlighting the layered referents, ironies and ever-shifting bound-

aries of "America" and its colonial others, Ethnic-American literature does play a role in disclosing the occlusions of America's self-image. It is through the terrain of national culture that the individual subject is politically formed as the American citizen: a terrain introduced by the Statue of Liberty, discovered by the immigrant, dreamed in a common language, and defended in battle by the independent, self-made man. The heroic quest, the triumph over weakness, the promises of salvation, prosperity and progress: this is the American feeling, the style of life, the ethos or spirit of being (Lowe 2). But in being represented as citizen within this political sphere, the subject is "split off" from the unrepresentable histories of situated embodiment that contradict the abstract form of citizenship. The general iconicity of the national body veils how historically contingent body typologies really are. Whenever citizenship comes to look like a question of the body, a number of processes are being hidden (those ideal and pragmatic aspects entailed in the figural determination of national identity).

As a professor of Ethnic American literature, I interrogate the cultural compass of imperialism in the consolidation and expansion of United States national identity. How do these literary texts investigate the technology of collective fantasy and the effects of the nation's semiotic practices on the unstable material it uses? The texts chosen in my syllabi (egs. Hagedorn, Alexie, Yamanaka, Morrison, Cisneros, Lahiri, Hughes, Santiago Baca) lie at the geographic and political margins of American national identity, and they consider the complex mechanisms of national identity.

How has America's role on the global stage affected the teaching of American literature? How do we teach American literature with regard to the changing face of New Jersey (and American) classrooms? How should literature teachers address pluralism and culture effectively through literature? In the recent past, many English teachers have incorporated pedagogies influenced by theories of cultural nationalism and identity politics in order to create a "multicultural" curriculum in their classrooms (eg. teaching a text like *The Joy Luck Club* in order to understand the Chinese). But I believe it has become painfully apparent that these strategies often reify difference for students and in the process, essentialize ethnic minorities. In response to this concern, my own efforts in teaching Ethnic American literature are grounded in an understanding that our bodies are always somehow drafted in history. The body is always narrativized in discourse, and is always situated within cultural memory and within the seamless folds of the social. No matter how distant, removed, and powerless human beings feel in rela-

tion to the complexity of modern life, they bear the structures of cultural knowledge marked on their very flesh. A consideration of the power of narrative, the complexity of representation, the construction of history, and the formation of communities at work in such literary texts will hopefully contribute to an understanding of our dynamic pluralistic society. America has taken on many faces in the American literary "tradition," from that of the utopian space of possibility, to the fantasy of wealth and privilege projected on the movie screen. It has been portrayed as a violent exclusionary society, the center for faddish consumption, and the site for a series of assimilationist narratives. The America on which some Ethnic American writers have chosen to ruminate is complex, contradictory, and ambivalent. These varying representations could never be reduced to a single unified response. But what is consistent is the way in which considerations of the human body (and its possible constraints) continue to complicate our understanding of "America." This consistency critically implicates the heart of a totality presumed to inhere beneath the signifier "American."

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