

Reviews

Janet Moore Lindman & Michele Lise Tarter (eds), *A Centre of Wonders: The Body in Early America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001. x + 283 pp., ISBN: 0-8014-8739-0; £13.50 paper.

Bodies are not simply physiological entities, but cultural constructions infused with social meaning and significance. They can be revered, celebrated, admired, or abhorred, marginalised and confined. In some cases they open up opportunities, while in others they close them down. The history of America is a particularly stark example of the enabling/disabling duality inherent in many ideologies of the body. From the earliest era to the present, bodies and the discourses defining them have had profound consequences for Americans. While white, male bodies have tended to experience generally favourable social attitudes, black, female, and Indian ones have frequently been the objects of discrimination and contempt. *A Centre of Wonders* attempts to illuminate this historical experience from the perspective of early America.

Covering the period between 1600 and 1830, this collection consists of fifteen essays and an introduction by the editors. Interdisciplinary in nature, and informed by the techniques of that most amorphous of fields, cultural studies, *A Centre of Wonders* purports to bring 'together scholars from different fields' (5), though in practice it draws primarily on the work of historians. As one would expect, the old chestnuts of American Studies are well represented, and most of the articles in the collection deal, in one way or another, with themes of race, gender or ethnicity. Thus, we find treatments of topics such as 'The Feminized Body of the Puritan Convert,' 'Blood, Race, and Sexuality in Spanish Louisiana,' and 'Domestic Violence and Colonial Male Identity in Cotton Mather's *Decennium Luctuosum*'. This is understandable given the highly significant structuring influence of these concepts on American society during this period and it is certainly a worthwhile and necessary academic endeavour to study them, but I was left with a sense of disappointment after reading *A Centre of Wonders*. Surprisingly for a book about the body, it does not include a single article on the ideologies shaping the lives of the biologically impaired. Physical disability would seem to be just as potent a marker of bodily difference as race, sex, or ethnicity, yet it does not even warrant a passing mention in *A Centre of Wonders*. This, in my view, is a serious oversight, and a neglect that cultural studies as a whole should seek to remedy. As David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have pointed out: 'The current popularity of the body in critical discourse seeks to incorporate issues of race, gender, sexuality, and class while simultaneously neglecting disability.'¹ Scholars of disability studies are beginning to correct this imbalance, but those outside this still infant field seem

1. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, 'Introduction: Disability Studies and the Double Bind of Representation' in Mitchell and Snyder (eds), *The Body and Physical Difference: Discourses of Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 5.

reluctant to mine these findings for fresh insights into their own particular specialisms. In many instances this is simply due to a lack of scholarly imagination and an inability to see the relevance of disability to the more traditional disciplines. For those interested in theories of the body, however, it is hard to explain why this is the case. *A Centre of Wonders* is a testament to this peculiar situation.

That is not to say, however, that this book is bad; its omissions merely reflect the omissions of the humanities and social sciences in general. What it does do, it does competently and in an engaging manner. As is always the case in collections of this kind, the assembled essays are of mixed quality. Disappointingly, the editors' introduction is all too brief. For a volume that covers a time-span of over two centuries and a variety of important cultural concepts, I would have hoped for an introduction much longer than nine pages.

Methodologically, most of the contributors adopt detailed textual analyses of pertinent documents to make their points. On the whole, this works well, though the volume could have benefited from a bit more methodological diversity. Todd D. Smith's piece hints at the use of paintings to the cultural historian, but he does not follow this line through. By concentrating on textual rather than visual representations of the body, *A Centre of Wonders* has a tendency to promote the view that cultural history can only be done by finding a suitable text.

Another approach common to many of the essays in this book is their use of vignettes. Kathleen M. Brown, for instance, looks at the case of Elizabeth Emerson, a white well-to-do woman hanged for infanticide in 1693 and argues that Cotton Mather's sermon at her execution was an attempt to re-establish ministerial authority after the Salem witch trials. Other contributors take equally fascinating episodes to explore their particular themes. For me, this was undoubtedly one of the most attractive aspects of the entire volume. By using specific episodes, or individuals to flesh out their arguments, these essays give a refreshing human element to the sometimes turgid and dense language of cultural studies.

At its best *A Centre of Wonders* establishes a meaningful dialogue between its essays. Trudy Eden and Martha L. Finch, for example, write about 'Food, Assimilation, and the Malleability of the Human Body in Early Virginia' and "'Civilized' Bodies and the 'Savage' Environment of Early New Plymouth' respectively. Both articles explore the influence of Galen's theory of the body on early Americans, particularly his view that bodies were malleable. 'This ancient theory remained vital in the early modern period' (31), and was readily taken up by those seeking to explain physiological change. According to Galen and his followers, the body was 'subject to internal and external change through six influences known as the nonnaturals: food environment, exercise, sleep, excretion and repletion, and the passions' (32). Of these, food and the environment were considered the most significant. A change in either of these could lead to noticeable changes in the body. For European settlers, therefore, the move to America, with its different foods and environment, presented them with what they saw as a very real challenge to their bodily integrity. Eden's piece examines how the food element of Galen's theory was played out in this New World setting, while Finch concentrates on the environment.

Through their strongly related contributions, they show just how important Old World theories of the body were in shaping the new continent and settler attitudes towards it. If more of the articles had such a direct connection to each other's themes then the entire volume would have made an argument.

Overall, however, the essays in *A Centre of Wonders* are generally persuasive and well written, illustrating the cultural significance of the body to early Americans. White, male authority during this period rested on notions of bodily difference, and without this the social, economic and political structure of colonial and early national America would have been much different. Black, female, and Indian bodies were essential to a society characterised by slavery, patriarchy and expansion. A history that fails to acknowledge this risks being too simplistic. In this sense, *A Centre of Wonders* is a worthy addition to the historiography of early America, and will serve as a useful introduction to the theories of embodiment relevant to the period. Its detailed bibliography and index are essential reference guides.

Finally, the historical interpretations contained in *A Centre of Wonders* are, on the whole, sound, but they are not particularly innovative. None of them pushes early American cultural studies in new directions. Instead, they mull over the same concepts found throughout most of the literature dealing with this period. To state, as Lindman and Tarter boldly do, that 'their diverse methodologies and insights offer a starting point for an enhanced and sophisticated exchange of ideas' (5) is rhetorical flourish. Certainly societies can view bodies through the lens of race, gender, or ethnicity, and frequently they do, but they can also be defined by other factors such as disability or age. Only when scholars of early American studies begin to realise this and look beyond the field's current conceptual framework can we start talking about 'a starting point for an enhanced and sophisticated exchange of ideas.'

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Benjamin Filene, *Romancing the Folk: Public Memory and American Roots Music*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000. xi + 325 pages, 22 black and white illustration, index; \$49.95 cloth (ISBN: 0-8078-2550-6); \$19.95 paper (ISBN: 0-8078-4862-X).

In recent years the scholarly study of American popular music has been well-served. From Cecelia Tichi's *High Lonesome: The American Culture of Country Music* (1994) and Robert Cantwell's *When We Were Good: The Folk Revival* (1996) via Greil Marcus's *Invisible Republic: Bob Dylan's Basement Tapes* (1997) to Brian Ward's *Just My Soul Responding: Rhythm and Blues, Black Consciousness, and Race Relations* (1998) and Richard and Joanne Reuss's *American Folk Music and Left-Wing Politics, 1927-1957* (2000), new studies of its diverse genres, movements, businesses, groups and individuals have added richly to the theoretical, biographical and documentary work of distinguished