Introduction

“The Grandest Thing in the World”

My first assertion is one that I think you will grant—that everyone in this room is a judge of character. Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practiced character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help. And now I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that on or about December, 1910, human character changed.

—Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown”

When I was a young man, we talked much of character. . . . It is typical of our time that insistence on character today in the country has almost ceased. Freud and others have stressed the unconscious factors of our personality so that today we do not advise youth about their development of character; we watch and count their actions with almost helpless disassociation from thought of advice.


Bodies of Reform studies what was perhaps the most coveted object of nineteenth-century American culture, that curiously formable yet often equally formidable stuff called character. So much more than simply the bundle of traits that distinguish and define an individual’s identity, character was to many nineteenth-century Americans, as Orison Swett Marden somewhat gleefully put it, “the grandest thing in the world.” The impact of the concept of character on the culture of the nineteenth century is hard to miss, its influence difficult to overstate. A pervasive and defining keyword across a range of nineteenth-century political, literary,
philosophical, scientific, and pedagogical discourses, character was a concept that mediated understandings of the most fundamental relationships between individuals and their bodies, bodies and civil society, and civil society and the state. Conceived at the intersection of literature and politics, the concept of character connected the literary work of novelists to the ideological work of cultural nationalists in the nineteenth century and played a pivotal role in the articulation of national, racial, and gender identities in the United States. Character was a central category as well in the broader liberal tradition out of which the United States emerged and has long been a key term for imagining the reach of the public over the private sphere as well as the reach of the nation over and into the citizen. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine another concept that has done so much hard and politically charged work throughout the history of the United States. From the patricians of the early republic to post-Reconstruction racial scientists, from fin de siècle progressivist social reformers to postwar sociologists, character has had a very long and checkered career articulating national identity in the United States. It is thus surprising that, at a time in which postnational critiques of the intersections of race, gender, and class in the ideological construction of “American character” have so invigorated U.S. literary and cultural studies, few have asked why “character” itself emerged as such a privileged mediator of national identity and public culture in the United States.

Bodies of Reform closes this gap in U.S. literary and historical studies by charting the development of character as a central object of literary representation and social reform in the fictional genres, reform movements, and political cultures of the United States from approximately 1850 to 1920. The book’s first aim is to make visible a unique archive in which the cultural practices of reading and representing character can be seen to operate in relation to the character-building strategies of social reformers by reading novelists such as Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Pauline Hopkins, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in relation to a diverse range of historical documents also concerned with the formation and representation of character, including child-rearing guides, muscle-building magazines, police gazettes, libel and naturalization law, benevolent society publications, psychology textbooks, Scout handbooks, and success manuals. In these readings, I delineate the ideological formulation of what I call the “rhetoric of character” by elucidating the various yet interconnected meanings of character across this diverse range of political, popular, scientific, and literary discourses. More importantly, I examine the practices
of individual and collective embodiment through which such meanings were used to negotiate the structural relations and symbolic practices that organized literary culture and national life toward the end of the nineteenth century. In so doing, Bodies of Reform revises our understanding of this familiar, influential, yet surprisingly underexamined category of nineteenth-century literary and political practice by resituating the study of character within a broader cultural politics of embodiment, a politics that shaped the most important debates over the cultural meaning, social mobility, and political authority of the raced and gendered body in this tumultuous period of American history. Such a perspective hopes to make visible the critical role the rhetoric of character played in redefining the legal and cultural meanings of citizenship and personhood in the shifting economic order and expanding imperial enterprises of the United States as it expanded the domestic and international reach of state power in the first decades of the twentieth century.

In recovering character’s importance to the politics of embodiment that shaped the literature and culture of the late nineteenth century, a period usually associated with character’s cultural and ideological decline, Bodies of Reform offers a critical revision of traditional scholarly perspectives on the rhetoric of character. The rhetoric of character has been commonly understood as a theory of self-formation, cultivated by the novel form, whose ideological function was to inculcate those forms of economic agency and social discrimination essential to the formation and regulation of a liberal, democratic public sphere in the United States. As many scholars have argued, this regulatory model naturalized forms of social, political, and economic exclusion by obscuring the role of the body—particularly the white male body—in defining the universal, disembodied “character” of the democratic citizen-subject. Character has come to be identified with an interior, private self whose social and civic value is measured by its subjection of, and liberation from, the impulses and social particularity of the physical body. The history of character has thus been emplotted within a narrative of decline in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this narrative, character’s increasing obsolescence as a cultural and regulatory ideal is ascribed both to the gradual recovery of the body as a site of political contestation in, for example, the abolitionist and women’s rights movements and to the emergence of the mass-mediated, consumer culture of modern industrial capitalism in its “Gilded Age,” a culture increasingly regulated through the elicitation and organization of a theatrical, expressively embodied “personality” rather than through the internalized self-restraint of “character.”
Introduction

_Bodies of Reform_ challenges this period-defining myth in U.S. literary and cultural history by arguing that such stories of character’s devaluation in the social and visual economies of the Gilded Age, like the laments over character’s presumed decline, are what enable and extend its cultural work and regulatory function. I develop this argument by first elucidating the performative logic of embodiment and disembodiment through which character had long carried out its cultural work. I then trace the influential role that this logic of embodiment played in the cultural transformations said to cause character’s demise. My aim is to make visible the centrality of the rhetoric of character to the disciplinary forms and regimes of cultural representation that defined the culture of modern commodity capitalism in terms of a democratized vision of middle-class character. But I also aim to make visible the “eccentric characters” who haunt both the center and the margins of the liberal democratic imaginary, by charting the destabilizing effects of the cultural identification of character with white masculinity, as well as the alternate forms of political agency such instabilities make possible, particularly for those who are most vulnerable to its discriminatory function.

_Bodies of Reform_ thus makes visible the central role that the rhetoric of character played in both sustaining _and_ challenging the forms of racial and gender discrimination, economic inequality, and cultural imperialism that dominated the concerns of late nineteenth-century novelists, social reformers, and cultural nationalists alike. The rhetoric of character destabilized the conventional signifiers of race and gender by detaching the materiality of race and gender from the indexicality of the physiological body and lodging it in the performative acts of character, acts through which character settled as lived experience and social fact. And yet, while this meant that the signifying traits of race and gender could be rewritten, through character building, as the self-authored traits of the well-formed, “successful” character, the rhetoric of character also provided an expanded and more flexible hermeneutics of the body, gesture, and visage that could be more effectively used to defend the discriminatory classifications of race, class, and gender by racial scientists, cultural nationalists, educators, and policymakers. The promise _and_ peril of the rhetoric of character that emerged at the end of the nineteenth century was that it provided a powerful resource for challenging the social and legal delimitations of race and gender while also articulating a newly elaborated and delimiting taxonomy of race, class, and gender “types.” Character’s broad and frequently contradictory appeal to a diverse range of writers and
reformers, such as William Dean Howells, P.T. Barnum, Anna Julia Cooper, Luther Standing Bear, W.E.B. Du Bois, G. Stanley Hall, John Dewey, and Theodore Roosevelt, thus lay, I argue, in its promise not only to make legible the social and economic forces of a rapidly developing nation but also to provide a seemingly concrete mechanism for managing, challenging, or transforming those forces.9

What I argue in the chapters that follow is that the reversibility of the relationship between the sign and referent of character was what made the rhetoric of character such a powerful instrument of social control and of self-empowerment in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. culture. Character's cultural importance is most often located in its value as a referential origin and grounding substance to the shifting cultural signs, performed identities, and manufactured values of the “society of the spectacle” that has come to define late modern capitalism.10 As its etymological origins suggest, however, character has long been conceived as a “substance” that is not only indistinguishable from but also the product of those forms of manufactured symbolic value that it presumably challenges. The essential properties of character have been defined, at least since the ancient Greeks, in terms of a unique conjunction of textual meaning, monetary value, and manufactured form. The Greek word χαρακτήρ (kharacter), for example, was originally defined as “a mark engraved or impressed, the impress or stamp on coins and seals” and was metaphorically extended to include “the mark impressed (as it were) on a person or thing, a distinctive mark, characteristic, character.”11 Drawing on this original conception of character as simultaneously a product of publication, minting, and manufacture, Noah Webster similarly defines character in his first American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) as “a mark or figure made by stamping or impression, as on coins” or “a mark or figure made with a pen or style, on paper, or other material used to contain writing,” a definition that also included “the peculiar qualities, impressed by nature or habit on a person, which distinguish him from others.”12 Rather than referring to an originary essence or origin, character thus refers, as J. Hillis Miller has argued, to the act of figuration itself, the act of inscription through which meaningless materiality is transmuted into linguistic form and commercial value.13 Like the mass-produced characters embossed on coins or the reproducible alphabetic characters struck on the publisher’s metal “types,” character names the transmutation of material substance into both linguistic form and commercial value. Character has thus come to name a process identified not
only with the production of the commodity form and the published text but also with the impression of identity on the mind itself, a mind whose original state, as John Locke famously put it, was most like that of a sheet of “white paper, void of all characters.”

Bodies of Reform thus studies those principles, practices, and institutions of reform—those “bodies of reform”—that sought to render the body as the site of character’s appearance and intelligibility. It studies, in other words, those practices of reform and representation that sought to derive from the mute materiality of the body the elemental characters that were essential to the social and symbolic language of the public sphere. Character’s unique constitution in these many nineteenth-century bodies of reform—and the vexed politics they occasion—is perhaps most succinctly illustrated in two images drawn from opposite ends of the nineteenth century. The first image (fig. 1) is of a figurative alphabet, The Comical Hotch-Potch, or The Alphabet Turn’d Posture Master, an alphabet that taught children the different characters of the alphabet not simply by repeating the rhyming phrase that sounds them out but also by forming these characters out of their very bodies, just as little “Demi,” one of the first March grandchildren in Alcott’s Little Women, “learned his letters with his grandfather, who invented a new mode of teaching the alphabet by forming the letters with his arms and legs,—thus uniting gymnastics for head and heels.” The alphabet thus makes visible the ways that children were encouraged to imagine the formation of character as a process of reforming their bodies into the socially intelligible “characters” that comprised the orthographic and grammatical elements of a larger social language. The second image (fig. 2) is from the cover of The Chicago Times Portfolio of Midway Types, a souvenir booklet of photographs of the ethnological exhibits at the Chicago World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893. Visually citing in the figurative characters of the word type the photographs of different ethnic and racial types within the portfolio, the cover illustration represents and distinguishes each ethnic “type” by giving it the form of a distinct letter—from the Asiatic “E” to the Pacific Islander “P” to the Turkish “S”—thus offering not only initial examples of the character “types” displayed within but also a statement of the theory of character itself in its visual conflation.

Fig. 1 (opposite page). “The Comical Hotch-Potch, or The Alphabet Turn’d Posture Master,” created by Carrington Bowles, 1782. (The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation)
rather than figuring the body as the vehicle for the formation of the child’s character and expressive capacities, in this image the body is constrained within the particular characters of delimited ethnic and racial “types.” Thus, these two images together foreground the possibilities and the dangers of character’s grounding in the signifying capacities of the body.

My study thus centers on the Gilded Age because the problem of false appearances and counterfeit values that such a name suggests, I argue, is central to the disciplinary and cultural work of the rhetoric of character. Character is commonly invoked—both then and now—as antithetical to, and protection against, the seductive displays and superficial social performances said to govern the mass culture of modern consumer capitalism. Grounding ballast in the shifting winds of a mass-mediated culture, orienting compass in the circulating seas of commodity fetishism, the substance formed through character building promised a kind of
authenticity and self-possession that could liberate one from the corrupting influence of social conventions, seductive commodities, and dissembling others. Taking my cue, however, from Ben Halleck, who wryly notes, in William Dean Howells’s *A Modern Instance*, that “character is a superstition, a wretched fetish,” I argue that character was the most gilded of objects in a mesmerizingly Gilded Age and thus read the late nineteenth century not as the period of character’s decline but rather the period in which character’s own spectacular constitution was recognized and remobilized as a critical instrument of social reform and literary representation. Thus understanding the fetishistic logic that had long governed the rhetoric of character is, in my view, essential to understanding the culture of spectacle and commodity capitalism taken to define this period in U.S. history.

Which is not to say that character was not perceived to be in decline by writers of the Gilded Age. Indeed, it was the common lament over character’s perceived decline that most animated the character-building activity of the period. As Brook Thomas has put it, “the perceived disappearance of character actually created a nostalgia for it.” Many of the character-building movements of the Gilded Age, such as the Boy Scouts of America, were explicitly conceived as responses to the decline in character—and therefore questionable gender—of America’s youth brought about by urban industrial capitalism. In showing how character was an object of such intense interest precisely because of its own unavailability, precisely because it was in essence always at the brink of its own decline, my project thus aims to make visible the ways that the rhetoric of character continues to operate through the very lament of its decline and disappearance and aims to point the way to understanding the continued legacy of the rhetoric of character today.

*The Culture of Character*

The concept of character has had a somewhat ghostly presence in studies of nineteenth-century U.S. literature and culture, both ever-present and yet never quite seen. Studying the unique traits and defining features of the “American character” has of course been a favorite activity of writers and intellectuals from J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur and James Fenimore Cooper to Sarah Josepha Buell Hale and Alexis de Tocqueville to Walt Whitman and Henry James. With the cold-war rise of American
Studies as a discipline in the mid-twentieth century, the “pursuit of the American character” took on renewed prominence as a field of academic study, but largely as an assumed object rather than as a historically constructed category. Although early works by Constance Rourke, David Riesman, and Christopher Lasch began to reflect, albeit obliquely, on the genealogical origins and ideological function of the concept of character in American culture, Karen Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982) and Warren Susman’s brief but influential essay in *Culture as History* (1984) were perhaps the first studies to assess critically the concept of character within a broad historical framework. And yet, though scholars have since considered the cultural significance of character in works largely devoted to other topics, character, as Alan Trachtenberg once pointed out, still “has not received the critical attention that it deserves.”

My study takes its initial bearings from Warren Susman’s argument that nineteenth-century American culture was “a culture of character.” Susman’s claim that “a popular vision of the self defined by the word ‘character’ became fundamental in sustaining and even in shaping the significant forms of the culture” is based on his observation that “such a concept filled two important functions. It proposed a method for both mastery and development of the self. But it also provided a method of presenting the self to society.” Susman’s distinction between character’s formation and its appearance—a distinction reflected in Noah Webster’s 1828 dictionary entry on character—makes clear the two seemingly distinct definitions of character and the kinds of cultural processes these different meanings governed. Character was, on the one hand, defined simply as that unique combination of particular traits or “qualities” that differentiated the identity of one individual from another. On the other hand, character was defined as the material product of a process of self-mastery and self-formation and thus the achievement of those esteemed and exemplary individuals who were thereby distinguished as “possessors” of character. Character was, in other words, both a descriptive and an evaluative term, a term that designated both difference and distinction. It differentiated the particular identity of individuals from one another but was also that which ranked individuals within a hierarchical scale of social value legitimated by the attribution of “merit.”

My aim in this study, however, is not simply to trace these two different meanings of character, these two sides of character’s semantic coin, in the cultural and political discourses of the period. Rather, I examine the
two distinct yet interrelated sets of cultural practices this semantic split shaped and inspired—practices of “character building” and of “character representation”—and the critical role these practices together played in shaping the political culture, literary forms, and social and economic practices of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture. My aim is thus to sketch a kind of cultural history of character by focusing on what I call the rhetoric of character, a formulation that is meant to foreground the importance to character’s cultural work in the nineteenth century of both individual, collective, and institutional practices of self and social reform, on the one hand, and literary, social, and political forms of reading and representation, on the other. Character was not only a theory or concept of the self; it was also a way of performing and practicing the self. And so in focusing on the rhetorical dimensions of character’s cultural work, I mean to delineate character’s meaning within a diverse range of cultural discourses but also to elucidate the many personal and social practices those meanings shaped and inspired. What such a focus makes visible is the formal contradictions and expressive incongruities that many character-builders, such as Edwin Whipple, recognized and affirmed as an inherent feature of character’s irreducible rhetoricality: “Men communicate themselves when they produce from their vital activity, it follows that their productions will never square with the abstract opinions of the understanding, but present a concrete, organic whole, compounded of truth and error, evil and good, exactly answering to the natures whence they proceed.” My emphasis on the rhetorical dimensions of character is also meant to underscore the longstanding place of the concept of character—or ethos—within the classical rhetorical tradition itself by reading the rhetoric of character, and the many published manuals and guides to building, reading, and representing character, as taking up the cultural work of the classical rhetoric manual whose death at the hands of late nineteenth-century modernity has perhaps been too prematurely announced. I read the rhetoric of character as not just a defining “discourse” of the nineteenth century, in other words, but an important yet unrecognized chapter in the history of rhetoric itself.

I take this semantic distinction between building and representing as my point of departure because it also points the way toward a broader genealogy of the rhetoric of character, a genealogy that makes visible the multiplicity of its origins and the diversity of practices it inspired and governed. What follows are some introductory remarks toward such a genealogy that will I hope help to clarify the subject as well as the method of
Introduction

this study. It is a genealogy that aspires neither to completeness nor comprehensiveness. Its purpose, like the subsequent chapters, is not to chart a single genealogical arc of development in the history of character but rather to point to some of the many origins of the rhetoric of character and to the overlapping “residual” and “emergent” historical forms, to borrow Raymond Williams’s terms, that it takes in the nineteenth century. The rhetoric of character has a complex history rooted in an array of cultural traditions, social practices, and specialized discourses, including natural science, moral philosophy, liberal political theory, Protestant theology, legal argumentation, portraiture, drama, the literary sketch, and the modern novel. It is thus a history with many overlapping and diverging strands, some bound up with the history of specific institutions or specialized academic and professional disciplines, others more loosely evolving in the more popular practices and discourses of the public sphere. Character was a term that also meant and did many things; it was at times a topic of debate and disagreement and at times an assumed term, at times a practice of critical revelation and at times a practice of ideological erasure. So while it is a central assumption of this study that, as one educator put it in 1914, “sometimes there is more history in a word than in the written annals,” I follow Raymond Williams in treating character as a “key word in which both continuity and discontinuity, and also deep conflicts of value and belief, are . . . engaged.” The task of this study is thus to attend to the ways that the rhetoric of character provides a site for the extension and operation of power but also for exceeding, undoing, or challenging the reach of power. As Amanda Anderson has put it, “any genealogy of character should, of course, acknowledge the ways in which the concept functions to create and enforce social distinctions. But like other complex cultural forms, the category of character is neither exhausted nor fully defined by its complicity, in various writings or historical transformations, with exclusivity and power.” In the overview that follows, I provide an initial sense of these complex functions by charting some of the points of intersection and divergence between the two most important, and overlapping, strands within the broader history of character in the nineteenth century—those of character building and character representation.
Building Character, Building Nation

This book considers, in the first instance, the discourses and practices of character building common to so many of the diverse projects of social reform and nation building across the nineteenth century. Character’s emergence as a key term in the nationalist discourse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries derived from its ability to name the underlying substance or material of the nation itself, a substance that, as scholars such as Gillian Brown, Karen Sánchez-Eppler, and Caroline Levander have underscored, was often modeled on the figure of the malleable or “impressionable” child. Indeed, as its root, natio (or “to be born”), indicates, the concept of the nation, as Levander puts it, “derives from the idea of the child, and the concept of the nation continues to be understood within the founding context that the child provides.” Character thus emerged in the early national period as a concept that linked the pedagogical discourses of child rearing to political debates over the formation of a democratic society in order to articulate what Homi Bhabha has referred to as the “nationalist pedagogy” of the self-governing citizen-subject. Legislators and educators in the early national period founded the project of producing a unified citizenry bound by a common national identity and capable of self-governance on the project of “building character” in the nation’s youth. Early education reformers such as Benjamin Rush, Noah Webster, and Horace Mann, for example, argued for the establishment of a national school system on the grounds that, as Webster puts it, “the education of youth is, in all governments, an object of the first consequence. The impressions received in early life usually form the characters of individuals, a union of which forms the general character of a nation.” Conversely, popular authors of child-rearing manuals, such as Lydia Maria Child, would emphasize the nationalist implications of their domestic treatises by arguing that “the safety and prosperity of our republic” hinges on the capacity of “American Mothers” to shape the “future dispositions and characters” of their “young babes,” a capacity commonly ascribed to the mother’s ability, as Fanny Fern puts it in Ruth Hall, to “inscribe, indelibly, on that blank page, characters to be read by the light of eternity.”

As a term that sutured together the categories of child and citizen, character was the subject of a diverse range of popular texts and discourses in the early national period. The many child-rearing guides, pedagogical treatises, and character-building manuals produced in increasing numbers in the three decades before the Civil War by authors such as Child,
John Todd, Amos Bronson Alcott, Catherine Beecher, Rufus Clark, and Henry Ward Beecher became prominent cultural sites for the articulation of “biopolitical narratives” of national identity, narratives in which the development of individual character and national character were conceived as not simply reflective or “analogical” measures of one another but rather as inextricably bound together in their very formation. These manuals sought to guide the nation’s youth through a process of character building founded on a regimen of self-discipline, emulatory and sympathetic identification, and the cultivation of good habits whose purpose was to protect against the broad array of “influences” that might conspire to “stamp” the youthful character. The aim of character building was thus not simply to inculcate a set of good traits while extirpating potentially bad traits but rather to build up, by mastering and consolidating the loose assemblage of traits into a coherent, self-possessed “orientation,” a strength, solidity, or energy of character that would provide a shield against the external and internal influences that could impinge on one’s liberty. Such a well-formed character was thus “liberated” from the undue influence of, and dependency on, other people, as well as from the instinctual drives and overwhelming passions that enslaved one to the body and from the particularized interests that arose from the body’s contingency of origins and experiences.

As guides as well to the formation of self-governing and independent citizens, these character-building manuals imagined the child not simply as the “plastic” material on which the particular traits, values, or customs of an indigenous national type might be “impressed” but also as the kind of self-founding, antigenealogical national subject who—as embodied by Thomas Paine’s figure of the parentless child in Common Sense—was defined by the term character itself. In the early formulations of nationalist discourse that developed across a range of print genres, citizenship was thus formally equated with the cultivation of the forms of self-governance and socially calibrated self-interest that distinguished “having” character from merely “being” a particular type of character in the republican framework. This form of “good moral character” was thus enshrined by the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1795 as a formal requirement of acquired citizenship status and is still employed today to deny citizenship applications or to deport “resident aliens” from the United States. Character building has thus been seen as a resolution to the problem of “self-governance” that plagued both the citizen and the state in liberal democracy—the problem of how to maximize liberty while also maintaining the social
order—by internalizing the regulatory function of state institutions so that, as Christopher Castiglia concisely puts it, “citizens became administrators . . . of themselves.”

The rhetoric of character that was developed in early nationalist discourse became foundational in many of the reform movements of the nineteenth century as well. Social reformers focused not only on the “formation” of the waxen, malleable character of the impressionable child but also on the “re-formation” or strengthening of the insufficiently formed adolescent or adult character, particularly in the latter part of the century. Offering protection from the fate of individuals such as the title character in Walt Whitman’s early novel Franklin Evans, or The Inebriate (1842) or of Vandover in Frank Norris’s Vandover and the Brute (1914), whose congenitally formless and “pliable character” ultimately leads to degeneracy and brutish insanity, temperance reformers throughout the century saw character building as the primary technique for fortifying the will’s capacity to resist not only the temptations of strong drink but also the temptations of consumer culture and its “addictive” popular and literary entertainments. Organizations such as the YMCA and YWCA and the “muscular Christianity” movement more broadly focused their attention on rehabilitating the character of the nation’s youth through the development of physical strength and the “hardening” of their bodies. Physical-culture activists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Jane Adams more radically saw in muscle building the promise of a transformation in the very meaning and experience of gender. Such an emphasis on bodybuilding was also pivotal to the projects of nation building pursued by late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century character-building “agencies” such as the Boy Scouts of America, which received explicit congressional sanction for its efforts to “inculcate character” and thereby “insure good citizenship” in the nation’s youth. As one champion of the Scouting movement, Theodore Roosevelt, proverbially put it, “character is the decisive factor in the life of an individual and of nations alike.”

The appeal of the concept of character to many social reformers was that it recognized and even critiqued the structural role that environment or “influence” played in the formation and degradation of character. And yet, the overwhelming emphasis on character as the primary instrument and agent for transforming the very social, political, and economic conditions that produced it functioned to reinscribe the power embedded in those structural conditions as the misrecognized “power” of character itself. Such a conceptualization of character thus frequently aligned it
with that unique form of material value that seemed magically endowed with the power of self-creation—the power of capital itself. Character was thus most commonly described by the midcentury in terms of the common catchphrase “character is capital.” The term capital was not simply a metaphor used to describe the benefits of character building but rather was a theoretical declaration of character’s ontological status as itself a fetishized form of value that, like capital, was generated through its own “mysterious self-generating circular movement.”

Charity and benevolence-society workers, in their “friendly visits” to the poor, for example, frequently sought to distribute to the poor not cash but the more ameliorative “coin of character” through the sterling example of their own exemplary middle-class character. This paradoxical formulation of character as a form of capital found more troubling expression not only in texts such as William Wells Brown’s 1853 novel Clotel, which depicts “a Southern auction, at which the bones, muscles, sinews, blood, and nerves of a young lady of sixteen were sold for five hundred dollars; her moral character for two hundred,” but also in the accounting books of midcentury credit agencies, which similarly began appraising character’s value as capital in their reports to banks by classifying the character of loan applicants with evaluative designations such as “A number 1” or “second-rate.”

Building up one’s fund of character’s “capital” was promoted in the “self-help” literature of Benjamin Franklin and later of Horatio Alger, P.T. Barnum, and Booker T. Washington, as well as in the massive number of best-selling “success manuals” published after the 1870s (manuals with such titles as Capital for Working Boys: Chapters on Character Building), as the key to economic and professional “success.” Character was prized in these manuals as above all a kind of “accumulating fund—constantly increasing in value, and daily acquiring to itself fresh accessions of stability and worth.” By century’s end, these visions of character were also frequently criticized by figures ranging from W.E.B. Du Bois to Henry James for their ultimate devolution into a defense of “money-getting,” practices that threatened to impoverish the more enduring and “richer” character derived from the pursuit of “culture.”

Drawing on these many diverse associations of “success” and social value with the possession of character, writers and activists ranging from Frederick Douglass to Luther Standing Bear, José Martí, and Charles Chesnutt nonetheless embraced, in different ways, the broader value of character building as a central component of the struggle for civil rights, political recognition, and economic opportu-
nity in the nineteenth century. As Douglass succinctly put it, “there is
gold in the earth, but we must dig it”—so with character.

The Private Properties of Published Character

As these identifications of character with capital suggest, character’s value
did not derive from the properties inherent within individuals themselves
but rather was constituted in the social, cultural, and economic exchanges
in which they circulated. Nineteenth-century character builders thus rec-
ognized in practice what in theory they often disavowed, namely, that
the public self constituted through acts of social and self-representation
was just as important as the private self formed by acts and institutions
of character building. Indeed, what made character into an object of such
profound cultural anxiety throughout the nineteenth century, I argue,
was the constitutive dependency of the private self formed through char-
acter building on the public self circulating in, and legitimated by, the field
of representation. I thus read the extensive discourse on the formation of
color in relation to an equally diverse range of writings devoted to the
representation of character.

The practices and discourses of character representation have a his-
tory that both is distinct from the history of character building and yet
also intersects and overlaps with it in many important ways. This is no-
where more apparent than in the history of one of the most significant
cultural forms of character representation, that of “reputation”—or what
Noah Webster’s American Dictionary would define as “character by re-
port.” Reputation’s importance as a representational form has its origins
in a number of legal and political conundrums posed by its socially con-
stituted character. Although often dismissed either as a superficial and
frequently unreliable social measure of a person’s “real” character or as
a relic of the antiquated culture of “status,” reputation came to be seen as
a democratizing force in the “culture of contract” that marked the emer-
gence of modern democratic capitalism. Rather than the artificial social
value or cultural capital predetermined by one’s inherited status within a
relatively fixed social hierarchy, reputation was refigured in the republi-
can discourse of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as the
measure and reflection of the inner character that constituted a person’s
true “merit,” a character revealed in the particular assessments of one’s
public acts and expressions that accrued in the form of quasi-biographical social narratives and letters of reference.\footnote{51}

This revalorization of reputation as a democratic measure of social value is indicative of the broader representational dilemma that the concept of character both produced and promised to resolve. Like the Calvinist theologians of the colonial period, who vested political authority in the “invisible” character of an “elect” that was, however, only indirectly discernable through the unreliable expressions of its “visible” character, nineteenth-century Americans defined character within an expressivist theory of the self wherein the public signs or representations of character were taken to have an indexical, yet frequently illegible, relationship to the private, inner self that was their source and origin.\footnote{52} Such a relationship was frequently expressed in terms of the commonplace—here expressed in the words of Abraham Lincoln—that “character is like a tree and reputation like its shadow. The shadow is what we think of it; the tree is the real thing.”\footnote{53} The problem plaguing this representational logic, as Walter Benjamin has observed, is that character is presumed to be “apprehended only through signs, not in itself” and hence necessarily entailed its own unverifiability.\footnote{54} Because character was ultimately knowable only through the manners, behavior, and bodily indicators through which it appeared, it was vulnerable not only to errors of interpretation but also to the misrepresentations of the skilled manipulator of signs, making character into the site of a profound hermeneutic anxiety.

It was the project of character building, however, that promised to resolve the problem of character’s unverifiability. In its formulation as an element of liberal ideology, character came to name not just the unique traits that distinguish and identify an individual in the public sphere; it was more importantly the term that distinguished the person who has taken possession of those traits through a process of self-formation. “Character” denoted not simply who one “is” but also what one “has,” or, to be more precise, character denoted the product of “having” what one “is.” Thus, in John Stuart Mill’s formulation of the liberal concept of character, “a person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture, is said to have a character.”\footnote{55} In the motivational psychology of character builders, character named the ideal of a vertically integrated and self-possessed will, a will that was no longer determined by the automatic impulses of animal instinct, the dumb repetitions of routinized habit, or the predetermined behavioral scripts of social conventions, and thus whose
actions could be taken as an authentic manifestation of its own determinate intentions. Such an individual who was seen to “have” character was thus one who reliably was just what he or she appeared to be.

Because having character meant taking possession of the motivational mechanism of action and appearance itself, one proved one “had” character, in this retroactively circular logic of character, simply by forcefully and “distinctly” making one’s appearance through acts of will in the public sphere. As Webster puts it in his dictionary entry on character, “we say a character is not formed, when the person has not acquired stable and distinctive [i.e., distinguishable] qualities.” Integrity and “honesty” were thus the conventional indicators of such an ideal character not because they were socially useful or morally idealized traits but because they named the structural integration and transparency of expression that was achieved through the will’s calibration of action and intention. Character marked in its ideal form, in other words, not just the reliable origin of social identity but the securing of the relationship of referentiality itself. What legitimated reputation in the public sphere was thus that its appearance was itself taken as the sign of the well-formed character, of having undergone the labor of self-negation and universalizing abstraction that was the aim of early character building, a form of disembodied, impersonal authorship or “publication,” as Michael Warner terms it, that legitimates one’s participation in the public sphere simply by one’s predetermined presence in it.

The rhetoric of character thus promoted a democratic vision of self-governance and upward mobility that legitimated and secured existing social hierarchies through the very gesture of overcoming them. Persons of character were recognized as authentic, as reliable expressions of their inner character, not because that character has been verified outside the field of its appearance but rather because of the way that they clearly and distinctly appeared in the public sphere itself, an appearance that was itself culturally conditioned by the regulatory, embodied social grammar of race, class, and gender. Thus while character was defined in terms of its liberation from, or negation of, the particularity of the body’s passions and instincts as well as its socially determined meanings, it was a designation that was “available only to those participants whose social role allows such self-negation (that is, to persons defined by whiteness, maleness, and capital).” Thus an individual’s legibility within the public sphere retroactively corroborated a process of character formation as the origins of that legibility, thereby rewriting the terms of race, class, and gender difference.
not simply in terms of different kinds of character “types” but as differences in the coherency and legibility of character, a difference marked, for example, in such culturally prominent tropes as the “inscrutability” of the Asian, the “dissembling” of the African, or the “masquerade” of women. The referential distinction between the “real” substance of inner character and the representations through which it appeared, moreover, functioned to occlude its regulatory function by disavowing the role of cultural representations and social norms in constituting what comes to count as character. Thus the rhetoric of character performed its regulatory work by, on the one hand, legitimating and securing existing social hierarchies as the meritocratic product of character building while also subjecting those persons excluded from the public sphere, on the other hand, to an unending process of self-discipline on the unrealizable promise of upward mobility and social and legal equality.

Reputation thus acquired by the nineteenth century an important yet peculiar legal status. Reputation was defined, as Webster puts is, as “a valuable species of property or right,” a property right that E.L. Godkin similarly defends in his 1890 essay as “The Rights of the Citizen to His Own Reputation.” The paradox of reputation, however, was that it was situated within a domain of legal protections afforded not to the classical liberal subject invested with certain inalienable rights but rather to a form of legal personhood that confounds the distinction between person and property. Such an ambiguous status is reflected, for example, in the development of nineteenth-century copyright law, which, on the one hand, sees literary characters as simply textual artifacts owned, like the text they are indissociable from, the author who produced them, but also, on the other hand, recognizes literary characters as independent entities who might wander away from their authorial owners and take on new lives in other works. By the end of the nineteenth century, a similar paradox is reflected in Samuel Warren and Louis Brandeis’s landmark argument for the modern “right to privacy,” which describes public representations or reproductions of one’s character not as an externalized possession vulnerable to theft but as an “injurable” extension of the human body.

It was, however, in the broader tradition of defamation law that these paradoxes within liberal conceptions of character were most pronounced. Although defamation—whether in the spoken form of slander or the published form of libel—is now largely adjudicated in, and viewed as, a private, civil dispute between two individuals, the legal protections afforded
to character in defamation law were originally conceived in terms of the criminal act of “seditious libel” codified in English common-law tradition in the seventeenth century and thus originally defined as “crimes against the state and society.” Reputation was legally recognized in and protected by defamation law as a material form of personal property of which one could be “robbed.” And yet reputation was not, as Cheryl Harris has famously argued, a demarcated thing, “alienable” from its owner and hence exchangeable for other goods in the way that other forms of property were. Reputation was, rather, something that, like capital itself, was inherently capable of creating value and therefore something to which an individual had the legal “right of use and enjoyment.” Reputation thus named a kind of second, supplemental self with a rather ambiguous and frequently contested jurisprudential and ontological status. Reputation was a commodity form that, as inalienable, distinguished its owner from other forms of human property in that it could not be owned or possessed by another. And yet, reputation was a possession that also dispossessed its owner by remaining forever out of reach in the disseminated representations in the public sphere.

Reclaiming the Question of Character

The antebellum period has commonly been described as a period in which the ideological assumptions and representational forms that governed character’s regulatory function in the early national period were increasingly undermined by a particular set of political, economic, and social transformations, transformations that rapidly accelerated in the decades following the Civil War. Most importantly, this period was one in which the discriminatory effects of character’s implicit yet disavowed identification of citizenship with the presumptive body of white masculinity were increasingly called into question by social reformers and in particular by abolitionists and women’s rights activists, who made character into the contested site of what Bruce Burgett has termed a “politics of the body.” As Karen Sánchez-Eppler has put it,

Assumptions of a metaphorical and fleshless political identity were disrupted and unmasked through the convergence of two rhetorics of social protest: the abolitionist concern with claiming personhood for the racially distinct and physically owned slave body, and the feminist concern with
claiming personhood for the sexually distinct and domestically circumscribed female body.\textsuperscript{66}

More broadly speaking, the antebellum period has also been described as a period in which a consumption-oriented mass culture, increasingly organized around the conspicuous desires, affective sentiments, and embodied performances of a salaried middle class, began to eclipse the more localized, production-oriented economy centered on the thrift and hard work of the property-owning bourgeoisie of the early national period. It was this second “transformation of the public sphere,” to borrow Habermas’s language, that rendered obsolete the regulatory value of the rhetoric of character and its “repressive” modes of social control.\textsuperscript{67}

The middle decades of the nineteenth century have thus commonly been described as a period that inaugurated what Karen Halttunen refers to as the “decline of the character-ethic,” as the epistemological and representational assumptions behind the rhetoric of character were increasingly called into question and its modes of public validation simultaneously undermined.\textsuperscript{68} While I similarly read this period as one in which character’s reliance on, and reproduction of, existing social hierarchies and their cultural expressions was called into question, such a critique did not simply reject or abandon the rhetoric of character but rather was part of a broader and more diverse appropriation of the rhetoric of character, as a practice and discourse of embodiment, in the culture and politics of the Gilded Age. Rather than reading these transformations as marking a historical shift from an “inner-directed” paradigm of character to an “other-directed” paradigm of personality, I read them within a broader and more diverse genealogy of character, one that makes visible the public forms of embodied publication that had not only long governed character’s cultural work but that continued to play a pivotal, yet shifting, role in shaping and negotiating the deceptively “gilded” cultural forms said to bring about character’s demise.\textsuperscript{69}

Abolitionists and women’s rights activists, for example, challenged the discriminatory work of the rhetoric of character not by simply exposing and repudiating its mystifications and reifications of the body’s particularity but rather by reappropriating that power to refigure and revalidate the cultural meaning and lived experience of the raced and gendered body. Abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, for example, critiqued the racializing assumptions behind the rhetoric of character through an evaluative decoupling of character from whiteness, particularly in the
last edition of his autobiography, which is organized more as an episodic series of sketches, such as the chapter “A Slaveholder’s Character,” of the varying characters of his different slave masters. Rather than repudiating the rhetoric of character altogether, however, Douglass famously lays claim to its legitimating logic both by establishing himself through these readings as “a good judge of character” and by establishing in classical terms the development of his own exemplary character, first through the acquisition of literacy and finally by publicly demonstrating an unshakeable resolve in his fight with the overseer Covey.

Indeed, in demonstrating how “the hardships and dangers involved in the struggle [for freedom] give strength and toughness to the character,” Douglass establishes the fugitive slave as model for the kind of exemplary character that is formed only in the crucible of adversity. Douglass thus articulates the discourse of adversity that was enshrined in many character-building manuals as “a special asset available only to those lucky enough to have been born into poverty or difficulty.” We might thus see figures such as Douglass as making visible and reappropriating the paradoxical logic of “dehumanization” central to the forms of egalitarian exchangeability and universalizing self-negation that constituted the exemplary character of the liberal citizen-subject. As Helen Jun has put it, “this paradox, in which the systematic dehumanization of racialized populations is the condition of their entry into the ‘civilized world’ to become modern subjects of democratic freedom, is the contradiction endemic to the project of modernity itself.”

Women’s rights activists of the early nineteenth century similarly challenged the role of character in sustaining yet obscuring the presumptive masculinity of citizenship. Women were paradoxically figured within the rhetoric of character as primary formers of a character that, in theory, they did not themselves possess. While it was commonly held that “human character, in all its interests and relations and destinies, is committed to woman, and she can make it, shape it, mould it, and stamp it just as she pleases,” women were not usually seen as having the attributes of character they were entrusted with instilling, since having character was invariably to evoke masculine-coded attributes associated with willing in the public sphere. The forms of sympathetic understanding, or of what Richard Brodhead calls “disciplinary intimacy,” that presumably qualified women as stewards of character, in other words, were often difficult to square mimetically with the self-reliant qualities that marked the possessor of true character itself.
And yet, while many women’s rights activists embraced the celebrated and principal role of mother and wife as the maker of character within the family—and thereby endorsed the presumption that such a role derived not from a woman’s possession of character proper but rather from her more circumscribed possession of a specifically feminine character or “virtue”—others more radically laid claim to the universalizing rhetoric of character itself. In *Woman in the Nineteenth Century*, for example, Margaret Fuller argues that “the only efficient remedy [to social problems] must come from individual character,” and so true social reform is foreclosed by the theoretical and practical exclusion of women from the benefits of character, for “bad institutions . . . prevent individuals from forming good character, therefore we must remove them.” Thus Fuller, like many women’s rights advocates, claimed not only that “the standard of character is the same for both sexes” but that such a standard encompassed those particular attributes of both masculinity and femininity that only together gave shape to the “whole character.”

The formal and social dynamics that made the rhetoric of character so appealing as a strategy of embodied publication can perhaps best be seen in the rise of one of the most popular movements of the nineteenth century: phrenology. The emergence of phrenology as a popular practice of reading and representing character in the 1840s and 1850s was in many ways a response to the historical transformations of the antebellum era that made traditional indicators of character such as reputation both practically unreliable and ideologically suspect. As the traditional representational forms of locally accumulated reputation became unreliable or irrelevant in the far-flung and expanding commercial, communication, and transportation networks through which an increasingly diverse, and anonymous, population of regional and global migrants flowed and transacted, a new hermeneutics of character emerged that was reliant on the character discernable at a glance, on the capacity incisively and immediately to “read” the character of strangers in the shape, movements, and gestures of the physical body. Although most well known for their practice of reading character in the bumps on one’s head, phrenologists developed a range of character-reading strategies that scrutinized many different aspects of the body, from its skeletal proportions and muscular development to its colors and textures to its most subtle gestures and expressive energies. Although this emphasis on the body has often been critiqued as a form of biological determinism, phrenology’s popularity in the United States was grounded in its recognition of the physiological body as not
merely an archival index of fixed character traits but more importantly as a powerful mechanism for transforming and rewriting one’s “inherited” or biological character.

Phrenologists such as Orson Squire Fowler and Samuel Wells, who re-packaged and popularized the theories and methods of earlier European physiognomists in the United States, as well as an increasing number of social reformers, saw character reading not simply as an instrument of social surveillance but more importantly as a guide to “self-improvement.” These methods of self-improvement, moreover, repudiated the traditional emphasis on moral, introspective reflection and focused instead on ex-trospective practices of reading, representing, and performing the body as the mode of character’s formation. Or as one later manual writer put it, “every human body shall register personal history, publishing a man’s deeds. . . . [T]he fleshy pages of to-day show forth the soul’s deeds of yesterday.”

Character was fundamentally formed, in other words, through the regulation and manipulation of its embodied modes of public appearance. Like Blaise Pascal, whose “wonderful formula,” as Louis Althusser famously summarizes, “says more or less: ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe,’” character builders similarly saw character not simply as the origin and cause of its public expressions but also as a product of those expressions, as a product of those public performances that had the power to materialize the character they signified. As Samuel Wells put it, “Temporary expressions have a tendency, by means of frequent repetition, to become permanent. A scowl or a frown constantly recurring, finally assumes the character of our essential traits. . . . By continually assuming a particular character, we may, in the end, make it our own; and the expression at first put on at will can not be so easily put off.”

Falsely signifying that one had character was thus the first and most important step in the formation of character itself. The problem of false appearances that character building was meant in theory to overcome, in other words, turned out to be in practice essential to the most significant methods of character building.

The example of phrenology thus shows how early social reformers, in their critical appropriations of the rhetoric of character, did not simply critique and condemn the cultural scripts and bodily signs that determined what counts as the well-formed character, but embraced strategies of bodily performance and interpretation as an inherent principle of character building. What made character an object of such profound cultural fascination was thus the fact that its inner or private reality was not simply
dependent on those strategies of self and social representation that comprised its public character but rather was an interiority that was inextricable from and only known through its publication in and as the expropriated properties of the body’s public legibility. Indeed, this reversal of the relationship of sign and referent, I argue, was what had long constituted character’s powerful appeal not only in the Gilded Age’s culture of attractions but also within the republican culture of the early national period against which it is defined. Even in such classical models of character formation such as that depicted in John Locke’s early treatise on education, for example, it is the child’s ability to externalize and socially mediate its relationship to itself through the “reputation” it perceives in the faces of others that is critical to the reflexive interiority that is the hallmark of the liberal character. The dramaturgical, externalizing dimensions of the citizen were similarly recognized in the standard legal formulation, “assuming the character of the citizen,” that was regularly used in naturalization law and international treaties to emphasize, in contrast to the “inalienable” rights recognized in and protected by the Constitution, the more contingent “clothing” of citizenship that, for example, could be stripped from Dred Scott and all persons of African descent in the famous Dred Scott v. Sandford case of 1856.

Although phrenology quickly waned as a popular movement after the 1850s, the underlying physiognomic premise out of which it grew—that character could be read in the physical form and details of the body and could also literally be re-formed through the performances and representations of the body—continued to shape many of the most important literary, scientific, and social practices well into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Character-reading manuals such as How to Study Strangers (1895), Character Analysis by the Observational Method (1915), and Character Analysis: How to Read People at Sight (1923), as well as more general treatises such as The Philosophy of Character (1924), Character and the Conduct of Life (1927), and Physique and Character (1925) remained popular well into the twentieth century even as they incorporated statistical methods, modern psychology, and a more commercial, market-oriented framework. Photography also emerged as a particularly valued technology of character reading, as photographers such as Thomas Eakins and Francis Galton sought to exploit photography’s power to fix and capture otherwise indiscernible aspects of the visual field, and in particular aspects of character in the visible body, which the naked eye had difficulty detecting. By the end of the nineteenth century, the
field of “characterology” emerged as a distinct “scientific” discipline that combined the principles of physiognomy with the documentary power of photography and archival metrics of criminology in a comprehensive “science” of character “types,” a science that also played a significant role in the development of the emerging “social sciences” of sociology and anthropology. Sociologists, anthropologists, ethnologists, and criminologists thus together developed increasingly sophisticated interpretive methods for discerning and categorizing character types, methods that were important as well in the “civilizing missions” of U.S. imperialists and the projects of social engineering that marked the advent of the Progressive era. These interpretive methods, in their delineation of character from the subtle signs of the body’s form, manners, and behaviors, also provided a theoretical foundation for the system of “racial science” that was increasingly influential in the discriminatory legal codes, social practices, and policy debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These methods also underwrote the production of racialized character types as major consumer and entertainment commodities in, for example, the ethnological displays of world fairs, expositions, midways, and carnivals. The rhetoric of character thus played a key role in structuring and underwriting the emerging modes of surveillance, technologies of seeing, and archiving imperatives that have been identified by scholars such as Michel Foucault, Jonathan Crary, and Alan Sekula with modernity itself.

Learning One’s Letters

The arena of cultural production in which reading and representing character has figured most prominently is of course that of literary fiction, and it is in the history of the novel form that the overlapping histories of the rhetoric of character come most plainly into view. The nineteenth-century novel has been described not only as a print genre where readers encountered a new range of fascinating and often quite moving characters but also as a place where the character of readers themselves were transformed as they learned from their novels the social and psychological workings of character itself. The establishment of the novel as a popular yet controversial commodity in the early to mid-nineteenth century has in particular been tied to the role novelistic character was imagined to play in the building of character itself. As Jane Tompkins has famously argued, the popularity and cultural significance of novels in the first half of
the nineteenth century derived not from their aesthetic appeal as “objects of interpretation and appraisal” or from their mimetic capacity to reproduce actual historical events or personages but rather from their didactic value as “agents of cultural formation.” And one of the most important aspects of the “cultural work” performed by early novels, as Glenn Hendler has more recently argued, was the work they performed as “agents of character formation.”

Indeed, the broader story of “the rise of the novel” form itself has been described at least since Ian Watt in terms of the novel’s role in the formation of the “modern individual,” an individual whose ability to distinguish and mediate the relationship between the private and public has come to define what it means to have character itself. Frequently drawing in particular on Jürgen Habermas’s genealogy of the public sphere and Benedict Anderson’s theory of “imagined communities,” more recent histories of the novel in the United States often imagine the two poles of literary and readerly character as forming an identificatory axis around which the modern nation was forged. By experiencing the private thoughts and feelings that lie behind the public lives of fictional characters, these accounts argue, readers cultivated a sense of their own private interiority, as distinct from, yet oriented toward, the social forms and economic transactions of the public sphere. Or as Mr. Bhaer counsels the aspiring writer Jo March in Louis May Alcott’s *Little Women*, “the study of character in this book will help you read it in the world, and paint it with your pen.”

Such an articulation of the public and the private in novels thus not only facilitated the formation of a democratic public sphere in which public affairs could be deliberated on independently of the machinery of the state, but novelistic characters also provided an emblematic site of sympathetic identification and “shared feeling” around which a national “imagined community” could be formed.

Essential to the formation of the “modern individual” within such a model was the realist imperative of novelistic representation to construe the privacy and particularity of individualized characters. How exactly that particularity was best conveyed, of course, was a matter of great debate, and critics such as Watt locate the genesis of the novel in the resolution of the conflict between “internal and external characterization” and in particular in the novel’s ability to absorb the traditional typological form of the character sketch within an expanded narrative strategy of character depiction. As Deidre Shauna Lynch has argued, however, this account of the novel has resulted in a hierarchizing critical distinction between “flat”
characters, who exhibit the conventional traits and predictable behavior of generic social “types,” and “round” characters, who exhibit the cognitive and emotional depth, reflective agency, and behavioral complexity of the fully realized individual. Such a distinction between flat and round character has, more importantly, shaped a historical narrative of the development of novelistic genre in the United States that, like the claims of prominent realists of the time, figures the formal innovations of realism and its ability to characterize the complexities and particularities of fully rounded characters as the logical culmination of the novel form in the late nineteenth century. As Amy Kaplan has put it, “character-painting,’ not ‘story-telling,’ is the hallmark of realism.” Conventionally defined by the compositional methods associated with late nineteenth-century authors such as Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, and Henry James, realism’s concern with the regional and cultural specificities, social negotiations, and psychological complexity of character is often figured as a reaction against the unusual or fantastic characters of romance and sensationalism and, more importantly, the stock character types and conventional narrative formulas of the popular sentimental genre. As Howells’s put it, “it is one of the hard conditions of romance that its personages . . . can rarely be characters with a living growth, but are apt to be types, limited to the expression of one principle, simple, elemental, lacking the God-given complexity of motive which we find in all human beings we know.” Many realists thus sought to portray the particularities of the individual “specimen,” as Isabel Archer fondly terms it in James’s Portrait of a Lady, rather than the generalities of the abstract “type,” a strategy that for Howells meant not “heap[ing] up facts” but rather presenting every fact as an indication of character, for “nothing [is] insignificant; all tells for destiny and character.”

Such a history of the novel form in the United States—one first promoted by realists themselves—thus replicates, in its account of the emergence of the individualized, realist character over the typological characters of earlier fictional forms, the broader humanist story of character’s historical emergence as a challenge to the reductive, dehumanizing discourse of social types, whether it be in the antiquated culture of status or its modern recapitulation as the standardized and mass-produced “stereotypes” of commodity capitalism. Realists frequently defended their strategies of characterization, for example, not simply in terms of their aesthetic superiority as representational forms but because of their power to revise and reorient the traditional character-building function of the novel.
form around a properly “aesthetic” reading experience. Rather than the exciting plots, fantastic narratives, and moving characters of sentimental, sensational, and romance fiction, whose “addictive” yet superficial properties were identified by many realists, as Nancy Glazener has detailed, with the “addictive consumerism” of “a profit-driven culture industry that benefited from the public’s dependency on vicarious emotions and excitements,” realists frequently emphasized the plain wholesomeness of their literary fare and the deeper aesthetic nourishment of their more complexly drawn characters. Rather than appealing to the base pleasures and imitative modes of sympathetic identification, realists thus sought to appeal to the more elevating, interpretive faculties of aesthetic judgment as a way of cultivating character.

Such a historical narrative positions realism as a final fleshing out of the complex interiority of character, a method of characterization that has been either celebrated for its ability to challenge the racial, gender, and class “stereotypes” through which the rhetoric of character had long sustained its discriminatory work, or condemned as a liberal fantasy whose function is to obscure the disciplinary work of modern commodity capitalism. In late twentieth-century literary studies, as Deidre Shauna Lynch has argued, the latter view has tended to prevail, as the plentitude associated with the realist character has been viewed by critics, particularly those influenced by structuralist semiotics, Althusserian Marxism, and Lacanian psychoanalysis, as a textual effect that enables readers to “misrecognize themselves as free subjects” by identifying with an autonomous liberal subject despite their subjection within the modern capitalist order. Such an identification of literary character with the realist plenitude of the self-constituted subject has thus resulted in an overall disinterest in character as a category of analysis because of a more general “skepticism toward the self-authorizing subject.” While such a skepticism animates many of my own concerns in this study, however, I also aim to make visible the ways that character was conceived as a historically contingent, formally incomplete, and performatively constituted mode of subjectivity whose political efficacy was seen to lie in its ability to decompose or disembody the fixed identity categories that governed the public sphere. In so doing, I look beyond the conventional Foucauldian framework that sees such performances of embodiment as necessarily bound up with or captured by the disciplinary aims of a culture of surveillance while also resisting the liberatory rhetoric so often associated with character. I also hope to make clear not only the importance of the category of character in
literary history but also its continued relevance to the concerns of contemporary literary and critical theory. As Amanda Anderson has put it,

[A]s concepts allied above all with habitual practice and self-cultivation, character and ethos need not evoke or consolidate mystified notions of autonomy or individuality. Indeed, these concepts might be seen as fully pertinent to a theoretical field obsessively occupied with naming and delineating the subjective effects and potentialities of its more general, transsubjective claims. The subjective forms that currently prevail in literary and cultural studies—identity, hybridity, performativity, and so on—all imagine various ways in which one might enact, own, or modify one’s relation to the impersonal determinants of individual identity.

Thus while my study is concerned in part with the ways that late nineteenth-century realism—in its many diverse forms—was used both to extend and also to challenge the cultural work traditionally performed by the rhetoric of character, my aim is also to look at the many diverse and hybrid literary forms obscured by the critical and historical emphasis on realism in the late nineteenth century and at the public forms of embodied self-publication they figure. Rather than documentations of character’s interiority and singularity, I read late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literary texts as explorations of character’s origin in the social practices, cultural representations, and embodied performances of the public sphere, as texts fascinated with the public forms through which individuals could glimpse “the reflection of themselves, the photographs of their own characters.” My emphasis on a politics of embodiment is thus meant to push beyond culturalist approaches to the body that consider it simply as an instrument of self-expression and cultural inscription. Instead, my project illuminates the ways that character was understood as a form of embodiment that was produced by its expressive forms and that was itself a form of culture rather than the pliant recipient of the impressions made by culture. Like recent work that challenges the dominance of “privacy” as a central category of literary analysis, I consider the public forms of character that were explored in literary texts, as Stacey Margolis has put it, as “not a tool of social discipline but, surprisingly, a kind of heuristic device, a way of placing oneself in relation to the world” that recognized the partial, compromised forms of agency that were possible beyond the discourse of self-determination and the narcissism of the self-founding subject. Thus, for devoted readers of character, such as the
protagonist in S. Weir Mitchell’s novel *Characteristics*, the study of character yields knowledge not of one’s inner life but rather of the destiny of one’s public “conduct”: “My favorite amusement was to recall men I had known, and to construct for them in my mind characters out of what I had seen or heard of them under the varying conditions of camp, battle, or wounds. This would lead me to anticipate what their future lives would be and how in certain crises of existence they might act. I did this also for myself over and over, until it seemed to me that I could be sure of my precise conduct under any and almost every variety of circumstances.”

Late nineteenth-century fiction thus functioned, I argue, not simply as the cultural site for the mimetic reproduction of a national or conventionally middle-class character but as the place where one learned the signs of character’s social legibility, where one learned which kinds of signs, which kinds of behaviors and social expressions counted as the reliable indicators of character itself. The “question of character” raised by these texts, in other words, was not the mimetic question of how best to reproduce human character in literary language but rather the social question of what counts as the appearance of character itself.

Each of the five chapters of *Bodies of Reform* is organized around readings of literary texts that critically reflect on one of the five main elements of the rhetoric of character—performance, habit, inheritance, exercise, and emulation—in relation to various popular, political, and legal discourses on character. In so doing, my study focuses on the specific literary and social practices that together determine the conditions of legibility through which a person comes to count as a well-formed character, while also bringing into view a more diverse range of cultural discourses on character formation. Although literary texts play a pivotal role, to varying degrees, in the chapters, my aim is not to privilege literary discourse as the most significant or influential cultural articulation of the rhetoric of character. Literary texts were, however, important cultural locations in which the formal dimensions of character’s public constitution could be critically examined through considerations of, and debates over, questions of genre and strategies of literary representation, debates that were often inflected as well in the more explicit commentary on the concept of character in the thematic concerns and representational content of the texts. I thus read the formal dilemmas of literary representation and debates over genre and literary form as moments within a broader debate over the structuring role played by the rhetoric of character in the politics of the public sphere.
Chapter 1 explores the racializing dynamics of the rhetoric of character in Herman Melville’s last completed novel, The Confidence-Man (1857). Situated within the uncertainties of value produced in the wake of westward expansion and its dislocations of social and commercial exchange, Melville’s text, I argue, conflates rather than confirms the distinction between personality and character by charting the logical and historical entailment of the abstract equality of the democratic citizen in the exchangeability of the commodity form. Moreover, The Confidence-Man interrogates, in its formal strategies of characterization, how racial fictions are transmuted into historical “facts” by the exegetical drive to read properly and to authenticate the performed traits of character. My reading of The Confidence-Man thus pays particular attention to the formal and literary strategies through which Melville fleshes out his mysterious characters, formal strategies that make visible the broader cultural and institutional strategies that I explore in more detail in subsequent chapters. Although The Confidence-Man is a text published before the Gilded Age, it nonetheless anticipates and encompasses in its literary form the cultural dynamics mediated by the rhetoric of character in the Gilded Age. Melville thus shows how racial character is a textual, interpretive effect of the philanthropy that sustains the confidence man’s own oddly self-reliant character, and he anticipates how the philanthropic democratization of character in the late nineteenth century installs and endorses an imperial allegory of racial difference.

Chapter 2 explores the pedagogy of “habit” through a reading of Mark Twain’s imperial allegory of national founding, A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur’s Court (1889). My analysis turns on the figure of the young page Clarence, who is the exemplary product of the “man-factories” founded to manufacture Yankee men out of Arthurian boys. In his portrait of such a figure, I argue, Twain turns his critical gaze back on the paradoxical figure of masculine identification on which he himself had established his literary reputation: the character of the eternally arrested boy. By tracing the novel’s formal inversion of the realist modes of readerly identification that defined the “bad boy” literary genre of the 1870s and 1880s, I demonstrate how Twain mimics and models in the allegorical structure of the novel itself the institutional practices of “boyology” that were taking shape at the moment of A Connecticut Yankee’s publication. In aligning these practices with the Yankee’s own brand of cultural imperialism, Twain’s novel implicates such character-building agencies as the Boy Scouts of America—and the forms of homosocial chumminess, “Indian”
identification, and military training around which they were organized—in the ideology of “Americanization” that increasingly dominated debates over racial segregation, Native American sovereignty, immigration policy, and overseas expansion in the 1890s. I then trace the cultural work of such character-building agencies to the broader discourse of habit as it was developed in the pragmatist psychology of William James, as well as in one of the most popular nonfiction genres of the period, the success manual. The ideological function of the complex pedagogy of will training and self-habituation articulated in such works, I argue, is to obscure the reification of class difference through a democratization of middle-class character.

Chapter 3 challenges conventional visual studies approaches to race and gender through an analysis of the historicizing function of muscle building in literary naturalism and the physical-culture movement of the late nineteenth century. The chapter begins with a consideration of Sojourner Truth’s famous baring of her muscular arm as a sign of her exemplary character and goes on to ask what kind of political promise was lodged in the transformations of muscle building. I pursue this question first through an account of the emergence of muscle as an emblem of national fitness in a variety of educational, phrenological, sociological, and political writings of the period and of its deeper roots in the rhetoric of character. I then turn to the spectacular display of muscular bodies and the rise of bodybuilding contests in the National Police Gazette and in the broader physical-culture media, focusing in particular on the ways that the muscular body destabilized the visual economy of gender and sexuality. Finally, I examine the writings of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, who was a physical-culture advocate and avid body builder, and the problematic role that muscle building plays in her utopian feminist politics and racial nationalism. My overarching aim in contrasting the visual economy of the Gazette with the narratives of Gilman is to look beyond the classificatory and disciplinary functions through which modernity’s visual culture of surveillance is frequently interpreted. I do this by reading the practices of muscle building not as a commodification of the body but rather as a rehistoricization of the body, a rehistoricization that transforms the body into the visible and kinesthetic record of its own reflexive exercise.

Chapter 4 considers the vexed role that the rhetoric of character played in articulating the physiognomic taxonomies of racial science but also in mobilizing challenges to the corporeal schemas of racial character and the policies of segregation and disenfranchisement they legitimated. The
chapter begins by studying the development of the rhetoric of character in both abolitionist discourse and in postbellum discourses of racial uplift in terms of its promise to reinscribe the racialized body with the socially legitimating signs of gender and class. The rest of the chapter is then devoted to a reading of Pauline Hopkins’s novel *Contending Forces* (1900) and her response to Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction-era debates over the role of character building in projects of racial uplift. In its portrait of the critical agency of the heroine Sappho Clark’s “sterling character” and queer sexuality, Hopkins’s novel, I argue, offers a critical rejoinder to both the scientific discourses of racial character and the liberationist discourse of the representative man by forwarding, in her transnational, intergenerational tale, a diasporic theory of character formation that centers on the labor of history, rather than the mechanism of inheritance, in the constitution of political agency and social critique.

Finally, chapter 5 takes up the problems of emulation and exemplification in the reform of character by examining Jane Addams’s critique and rearticulation of the character-forming effects of the class contact experienced in traditional charity work. In challenging the gendered assumptions of women’s work as philanthropic “stewards of character” and exemplars of middle-class character, Addams was able to capitalize on the power of the charity relation as a scene of interclass and interethnic contact while also extricating it from its emulatory function of character building and from the assimilationist practices of “Americanization” being enacted on Native American reservations and boarding schools and in the overseas territories of the United States after the Spanish-American War. Addams also stages her critique, forwarded in such works as *Democracy and Social Ethics*, through a complex refiguring of the literary dimension of her own autobiographical character in *Twenty Years at Hull-House*. In striking a performative middle ground between an understanding of character as either social inscription or radical self-determination, Addams makes a counterhierarchical notion of interclass and interethnic identification essential to a “Progressive” realization of a pluralist, democratic civic sphere.