



Facing America: Iconography and the Civil War

Shirley Samuels

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Facing America: Iconography and the Civil War investigates and explains the changing face of America during the Civil War. To conjure a face for the nation, author Shirley Samuels also explores the body of the nation imagined both physically and metaphorically, arguing that the Civil War marks a dramatic shift from identifying the American nation as feminine to identifying it as masculine. Expressions of such a change appear in the allegorical configurations of nineteenth-century American novels, poetry, cartoons, and political rhetoric. Because of the visibility of wars assaults on the male body, masculine vulnerability became such a dominant facet of national life that it practically obliterated the visibility of other vulnerable bodies. The simultaneous advent of photography and the Civil War in the nineteenth century may be as influential as the conjoined rise of the novel and the middle class in the eighteenth century. Both advents herald a changed understanding of how a transformative media can promote new cultural and national identities. Bodies immobilized because of wars practices of wounding and death are also bodies made static for the cameras gaze. The look of shock on the faces of soldiers photographed in order to display their wounds emphasizes the new technology of war literally embodied in the impact of new imploding bullets on vulnerable flesh. Such images mark both the context for and a counterpoint to the look of Walt Whitman as he bends over soldiers in their hospital beds. They also provide a way to interpret the languishing male heroes of novels such as August Evanss Macaria (1864), a southern elegy for the sundering of the nation. This book crucially shows how visual iconography affects the shift in postbellum gendered and racialized identifications of the nation.

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