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Jim Egan's study of key seventeenth-century New England writers contributes to the ongoing debate over the nature of Americanization and the theorizing of American national identity. He begins by engaging with the foundational work of Sacvan Bercovitch, while nodding in the direction of Perry Miller's earlier work in the field. Egan's contribution to this area of inquiry is situated in terms of early American cultural studies, and he is careful to locate his own work in terms of the contribution of Philip Gura, Andrew Delbanco, Myra Jelen, and others in revising the paradigm for the study of early American literature. Egan looks to dominant scholarly interpretations of the exceptional nature of American culture and national identity to identify the primacy of experience over ideology as a dominating national trait. Experience, seen as a national characteristic, is used by Egan in order to analyse the ways in which early American writers used this concept of experience to imagine the relationship between the individual and the community. These rhetorical strategies, according to Egan, became distinctive to the New England colonies but have been recognized as such only in modern cultural analyses such as Bercovitch's; he argues, 'The colonial British-American writers had to argue for the very authority of experience that Miller, Bercovitch, and American literary scholarship in general now take as given' (p. 7). Egan's subject is the body of writings that tell of the nation's founding and subsequent explanations of America's distinctive cultural features; consequently, he focuses his discussion upon the relationship that developed between this emerging rhetoric and colonialism; specifically, the relations between the colonies and England. Egan shows how the writers John Smith, William Wood, John Winthrop, Anne Bradstreet, Benjamin Tompson, and William Hubbard were aware of the challenge posed by the value attached to experiential authority to the inherited patterns of social hierarchy that characterized contemporary English thinking. In his account, this rhetoric of experience enabled colonists to deal with the uncertainty and danger of their position in the New World while at the same time allowing them to reconceive the notion of Englishness in order to regulate the colonial populations (English and native) by embracing a new understanding of national identity.

In a series of chapters, each devoted to the work of one writer, Egan deals with each of his key writers in turn, looking at the uses to which important rhetorical figures such as the body politic are put. He begins with the promotional tracts written by John Smith and William Wood to highlight, first, the debate over experiential authority versus the authority of rank and, then, the place of Englishness within these alternative conceptions of authority. He then turns to the role of gender in rhetorical play of these figures and uses the Antinomian controversy to show how notions of the body politic were used to regulate internal as well as external (colonial) social relations. From John Winthrop's account of Anne Hutchinson's infection of the community with her Antinomian heresy, Egan moves to Anne Bradstreet's employment of an earlier, sexless model of the body politic which rejects both the Preparationist view of bodily experience as passing through a series of stages that prepare the unregenerate body for salvation and also rejects the opposition between masculine and feminine bodily experience from which both communal and individual subject formation develops. He concludes with a discussion of the latter half of the seventeenth century and writings that focus upon the differences between the English communal body and colonial self-government that are grounded in the particularities of colonial New England experience.

Puritanism does dominate Egan's discussions and his analyses do tend to highlight the now discredited notion of New England as the cradle of the Republic. Egan is clearly aware of these issues and he counters with the point that in order to provide a coherent and detailed narrative of the rhetoric of experience he has had to confine his analysis to a single discursive community. Within the methodological and chronological constraints of his study, Jim Egan has produced an intelligent and compelling account of one important aspect of the early foundations of American cultural identity.