ABSTRACT

"The Body Electric" locates electricity and the body at the center of American literature from the Civil War to the Civil Rights era. Tracing the development of an embodied culture of electricity, the project reframes key texts in the American canon, from *Leaves of Grass* to *Invisible Man*, as interventions in the technology of the body. I examine the application of electricity to the human form in the writings of Walt Whitman, Margaret Fuller, Gertrude Stein, George Schuyler, Ralph Ellison, and Sylvia Plath, employing the historical mechanisms of the electrocardiogram, shock therapy, the vibrator, and other developments in electric medicine as cultural techniques for knowing the embodied subject. As an interdisciplinary project within the study of literature, "The Body Electric" seeks to move interpretations of canonical texts to alternative contexts of intellectual, scientific, theoretical, and historical understanding. I argue that the representation of the body in literature staged the changing meanings of electricity from the mid-nineteenth to the late-twentieth century, as technology worked to fashion the human body into an object of medical knowledge and naturalized form, through the sexual politics of reproduction and race. As electricity shifted from an object of wonder to an ordinary fact of daily life in the United States, developments in written culture both registered and resisted the changing norms for using electricity and healing the body. Examining the confluence of medical discourse and literary form, I argue that the body electric shapes the social and political modes of subjectivity available in US American modernity.