The anthology The Body in Parts presents itself as a kind of critical blazon of the early modern body, each essay focusing on some body part which, in its negotiations with the whole, frustrates and suspends attempts towards a corporate unity. The net effect is to produce "a new aesthetic of the part" which does not "rely upon the reintegration of the part into the whole" (xiv), as David Hillman and Carla Mazzio put it in their introduction. This is, I think, what is least interesting about the anthology. Rather, to my mind, the critical value of The Body in Parts lies in the attempts of a number of its quite intelligent and probing essays to confront the problem of how a cultural studies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries might address historical change and its embodiment. That the body and various corporeal parts serve as an archive which sustains layered cultural memories is an argument so familiar as not to need any rehearsal here. But, insofar as this argument focuses solely on corporeality as an archive of cultural tradition--no matter how quirky or interesting that tradition, and no matter how critical one might be of that tradition--it affords no place for change: how history might impinge on culture, fracture it, render it incoherent; how culture might capture, display, and embody historical change as such.

Confronting these questions through an analysis of the joint, Marjorie Garber considers how a gesture that purports to enact, secure, and embody continuity turns against itself to posit discontinuity as a mode of being. Beginning with the political gesture of kneeling, Garber discusses how the bending of the knee is a physical act whose ritual significance can be "bent" to mean something other than what it is supposed to mean: "the knee as body part does not always connote homage or prayer. Although it is metaphorically a sign of linkage and thus obeisance, metonymically the knee rebels" (27). The cultural trope for this bending of meaning, she proposes through references to Shakespeare, is the bending of the joint. This relationship between gesture and trope allows Garber to imply that the phrase "out of joint" abstracts the failure of the knee's metaphorical capacity to express fealty and historical continuity. With reference both to Hamlet and to Slavoj Zizek's reading of F. W. J. Schelling, Garber argues that "out of joint," a philosophical statement about being in a time of discontinuity, is itself an abstraction of the failure of the gesture of kneeling to secure homage, obeisance, and thus continuity. Finally, Garber concludes by positing dismemberment as a particularly theatrical aesthetic phenomenon which she pits against the fascist aesthetic of the body without joints--a body whose main emblem is, for Garber, the Nazi goose step and salute. Throughout, Garber refuses to limit her analysis to the "writing" of culture on the body. Instead,...