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Introduction

The land of hyperbole, optimism, and expansion – American culture in the nineteenth century has often been represented as obsessed with manifest destiny and the righteousness of its republic. By the end of the century, the "infant" nation of the revolutionary period had become a nation-state with an industrial, capitalist economy. The national boastfulness was visible throughout society from the virtuous, entrepreneurial spirit of merchant magazines and the political boosterism of the "common man" advocates, to the evangelical vision of a national Protestant church. Literary artists were not immune to the "greatness" of the age. The democratic bravado of Walt Whitman, the new-age idealism of Ralph Waldo Emerson, and the awakening patriotism of Susan Warner's popular heroines established a resonance for the period that has resulted in the widespread belief that the "national" culture was indeed "born" during this period. Detractors like Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Herman Melville in *Moby-Dick* were merely enacting a sophisticated form of the jeremiad, prophesizing doom in order to wake up their American neighbors to their true path of heroic greatness.[1]

There is little doubt that enormous effort went into inventing American nationalism, and even less that many were excluded from its process of representation. Slaves, free blacks, newly arriving immigrants, and the economic underclass were often either rendered invisible and summarily excluded from the ethos of nationalism or made into banal, moral examples of conversion and citizenship. In contrast, the hegemonic middle class with its roots in Northern European Protestantism busied itself crafting narratives of American life and American destiny that not only attempted to represent the complexities of their lives but also provided a guide for the nation and its citizens. In the lives of these "representative men" and "republican women" the tales of the new nation emerged.[2]

What the new republic promised to its citizens was not only political

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freedom and economic opportunity, but also a secular version of salvation. Like other reformist movements on the Continent, the republican fervor and democratic vision of the nineteenth century also produced in America major social movements that represented the healthy body as a goal of the great republic. Everything was possible for this new middle class. Phrenologists, lay healers, domestic physicians, and even literary artists published guides on health for the common man and woman that would usher in a new age of well-being and vigor. Like Melville's herb-doctor on the fictional ship *Fidele* in *The Confidence-Man* who promises to assuage all human suffering, the nineteenth century created the image of a healthy body comparable to the democratic greatness of the times.

Many narratives of health written during this period provide, however, only a thin veneer of optimism for the age. One finds in these writings enormous cracks in the bravado of democracy which display the fears and anxieties the new order had evoked. Instead of expansion one finds chaos and disintegration. The new republic is represented as a social monster fed by excitement and debilitation, and its citizens are unable to control their lives. Not merely an agrarian world rushing to industrialize and offer up its wilderness to railroad magnates and real-estate speculators, the nineteenth-century world appears curiously unhinged, almost unprepared to accomplish its daily tasks of work, love, and relaxation. In this language of the body and its quest for health is found the disturbed and doubting side of the democratic voice. The hegemonic middle classes did not rest easily in their vision of the society they were inventing. Their culture of nationalism suffered not only from the strains of invention, but from nagging doubts about its own principles. What would hold the society together? What forms of authority and legitimation would create order? How inclusive could a democratic state be without destroying the unquestioned norms of social relations that held together family and community? Public tranquility becomes an illusion, and the conditions of democracy make increasingly impossible its attainment for the "people." Instead, frenzy, restlessness, and disorder are imagined as the gears that drive American society, making the issues of control and authority even more painfully enacted on the battlefield of the body.

This study interprets a series of narratives of health written between 1820 and 1880 by physicians, lay healers, reformers, and literary artists that fuse the dream of a healthy body with the rhetoric of nationalism. Read together these narratives reveal the cultural tensions that democracy caused for many middle-class Americans, and how the issue of control and subordination competed with and often dominated the public language of freedom and individualism. Cultural critics like Barbara Novak have pointed out how the language of nature helped to forge a

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new, egalitarian rhetoric for Americans.[3] All are born into nature and the image of a "natural Church" provided a synthetic, nonsectarian language of values for a people riddled with sects and divisions. The beauty of the natural landscape with its infinite vistas reflected a sense of national optimism and a delight in endless possibilities. In some ways, the language of the body can also represent the commonality of human experience. Since each human has a body, the shared common life must be grounded in the flesh. But how? If the new republic offered its citizens a better life in the present, then how did this promise affect the daily life of the body? In a significant way, disease and death become affronts to the glories of the new material life. Only the body's health can index how well the republic is functioning.

When the body begins to be seen as that which society must confront and explain, ruthless attempts are made to differentiate bodies into hierarchies of sexual, racial, and class differences. The representation of the body becomes a battleground for competing groups and individuals to "objectify" their vision of society. Unfortunately, the language of the body, like the language of nature, usually rests its claims to authority on linguistic transparency. To represent the body is to represent what is, unalterably. Assaults against this transparency and its domains of facts and physiologies are frequently interpreted as whimsical or dangerous plays of subjectivity. But the language of the body is always a fiction of factual representation that attempts to establish authority on the basis of the flesh.[4] Recently, some cultural critics like Michel Foucault have revolted against this stance of the "natural" and have constructed their own "confessions of the flesh."[5] Others, like Mary Douglas in *Natural Symbols,* have urged alertness in reading "arguments couched in the bodily medium. Strongly subjective attitudes to society get coded through bodily symbols."[6] Language about the body is saturated with culture. To read the narratives of the healthy body is to begin to understand the relationships of power and subordination that societies attempt to render invisible.

This study assumes that the language of the body, no matter how adamant its claims to "facticity;" is already a "literature" of fact. Further, statements describing the body such as physiologies or pathologies are a cultural discourse with directives on control and authority. Finally, the language of the body is, like Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis of the sign, a "focus of struggle and contradiction." What is necessary is to investigate the language of the body and its "varied history, as conflicting social groups, classes, individuals and discourses sought to appropriate it and imbue it with their own meanings."[7] In the period between 1820 and 1880, the discourse of the body in American society expanded and fragmented, pitting voices against each other as they sought to establish

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authority for their visions of health and its implications for nationhood. The definition and shape of knowledge and the authority to speak about the body divided groups into hostile camps.

In nineteenth-century America, the cultural discourse of health involved intense ideological conflict as competing "authorities" on the body sought to establish legitimation for their prescriptions on health. Michel Foucault has reminded us that we must "set aside the widely held thesis that power, in our bourgeois, capitalist societies has denied the reality of the body in favour of the soul, consciousness, ideality. In fact nothing is more material, physical, corporal than the exercise of power."[8] He goes on to assert that power, however, does not operate merely by repression, "exercising itself only in a negative way." Of more importance, power is "strong" because "it produces effects at the level of desire – and also at the level of knowledge."[9] Although Foucault can be accused of discovering power in discourses so diffused throughout society that its shape becomes meaningless, his insistence upon its articulation through both knowledge and desire is essential to the particular discourses of the body that are to be examined in this study.

The discourse of the body that this book focuses on contains both of Foucault's elements that make power "strong," that is, desire and knowledge. Those who have knowledge of the body, that is, those in society who claim authority over its processes and secrets, often have the power to guide the everyday behavior of people, setting rules or enforcing certain taboos that affect the exigencies of everyday life. Further, desire for a healthy body is often an intoxicant, increasing the power of those who claim the position of knowledge because without this special knowledge the body faces the opposite of its desire, namely death. The imagined life of the body in a future of well-being, perhaps even free of pain, is a moment of desire so "strong," it often confers power on the thinnest face of knowledge.

A healthy body became a prerequisite of "proper" citizenship rather than an eventual result of living in the republic and provided an "objective" means to exclude people from the democratic promise. Which individuals and institutions would provide the guidelines to attain this healthy body was the subject of heated debate. To appreciate the extent of this debate, we need to realize that during the 1830s and 1840s a traditional voice of authority for the body, the practitioners of "regular" medicine, was under direct attack by the individual states. Quite startling to those of us who have lived with the authority of scientific medicine, the antebellum society fiercely debated who had authority over the body and its healing. Paul Starr in *The Social Transformation of American Medicine* writes that during this period claims to "privileged competence" were met with a "sharp backlash that crippled" the "ambi-

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tions" of the nascent professional class for the "next half century. State legislatures voted to do away with medical licensure entirely. . . . Lay practitioners, using native herbs and folk remedies, flourished in the countryside and towns, scorning the therapies and arcane learning of regular physicians and claiming the right to practice medicine as an inalienable liberty, comparable to religious freedom."[10]

Even though other medical historians have pointed out that the nineteenth century witnessed the gradual establishment of professional medicine, clearly the physicians's claims to cultural authority over the body met at times with massive resistance. In this instance, cultural authority involved the "construction of reality through definitions of fact and value."[11] The struggle over cultural authority, however, was not only over the practice of medicine – although this struggle illuminates the cultural tensions of the period – but also over a myriad of discourses diffused throughout the culture. As Paul Starr reminds us, cultural authority as distinct from social authority "may also reside in cultural objects, including the products of past intellectual activity, such as religious texts (the Bible), recognized standards of reference (dictionaries, maps, mathematical tables), scholarly or scientific works, or the law."[12] Rather than examine this period, as social and medical historians have already done, through the lens of health institutions, the establishment of professional medicine, or the rise of social organizations connected with public health, this study focuses on a range of writings about health that extend beyond the debates over the authority of professional medicine and its institutions, and interprets instead a diffuse set of writings claiming cultural authority to represent the body. Fiction writers, lay healers, social reformers, as well as physicians represented the body and its relationship to the health of the nation. This study rests at the intersection between their language of health and their culture of nationalism. The fight over the health of the body was also a fight over the meaning of the nation. Artists, social reformers, lay healers, spiritualists, "professional" women of the domestic sphere, as well as "regular" physicians actively competed for a voice. These conflicts over who would have authority to represent the body in its quest for health occurred during a period of intense nationalism when the direction of the democratic state was undergoing questioning by its citizens. Prescriptions about health often became a way to critique the society at large, and to offer specific remedies that on the surface appeared less threatening to the stability of the nation since they were veiled in the language of the flesh.

Trying to articulate a culture of nationalism might be seen as an exercise in futility or, worse, a spurious quest for the "essential" America. From

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the start, I have no interest in tracking down the "real" America, unless it appears as a representation in someone's active imagination or some institution's discourse. Instead, the culture of nationalism seen through the language of health is a rich and often disturbing set of representations that overlap, conflict, and periodically collide with each other. The search for the unity of the past has often obscured the animating and violent conflicts the past offers its readers. Clifford Geertz has warned that cultural analysis is "intrinsically incomplete," the "besetting sin of interpretive approaches to anything – literature, dreams, symptoms, culture – is that they tend to resist, or to be permitted to resist, conceptual articulation and thus to escape systematic modes of assessment."[13] Culture for Geertz is often a set or "ensemble" of texts that never contain the culture but push us further into its depth. Even though I agree with Geertz that cultural analysis is an interpretive approach that always suffers from the melancholy of incompleteness, I do not share his vision that culture supplies us with a steady stream of texts to interpret, a wide-open frontier of expanding hermeneutical practice. Representations that attempt to "capture" the culture and get at its essence are deeply invested in versions of reality and ideology that have consequences for other representations. Culture is not merely an increasingly larger storehouse of texts, but more like a modern library in which the fight over censorship, availability, and access is indelibly part of the structure that houses and produces the texts.

The first section of this study examines several writings that are heavily invested in the authority of their representations of the healthy body and its consequences for the nation. Not intended as a survey of health writings, this section examines carefully the language of certain representative texts in order to clarify the ideological conflicts of the time. The nuances of the argument, the figures of speech, and the authorizing strategies of these writings get at the textures in which the battle over the representations of the healthy body were to be waged. These texts are not merely indexed as the voice of a particular social group, but are themselves often a conflicted voice over the direction of the nation. In their undoing, however, they further define the fissures in the culture of nationalism.

Basically, the first section discusses two competing discourses of health in nineteenth-century America: a language of *common sense* that establishes its authority with reference to the inherent power of the individual *in* community, and a language of *physiological law* that legitimizes specialized forms of authority over the "common" man and woman. In the language of "common sense," many Americans considered it an "inalienable right" to practice healing. Each citizen could become a "domestic physician," whose equal access to knowledge about

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the body ensured a concomitant political equality for the republic. Only through a diffusion of "useful knowledge" in the idiom of common sense could the republic guard against the limitation of freedom by manipulative elites. Clear descriptions of basic therapies regarding sickness, an understanding of the passions, and a form of living "simple and well in Nature," gave everyman and -woman the authority to heal themselves. Common sense, however, could become itself an object of parody, a stifling form of custom that encased the bodies of the citizens in unreflective behavior.

Amidst these claims for common sense as an approach to health for the citizens arose a new authority for the body – systematically described "laws" of physiology. Recognizing the legitimacy of specialized forms of knowledge about the body, many writers insisted upon formulating universal dictates about the body that the educated citizen could understand and must obey. The authority of scientific categories imparted a new urgency to the control and regulation of the body. With sustained bravado, these writings grant the science of physiology the status of divine law that citizens can neglect only at their peril. Since this knowledge is available to citizens, particularly the middle class, it demands a vigilant obedience. This inflated form of authority claims to guide Americans to proper habits that promote "moral excellence" and sustain "intellectual progression" for the nation.

The second section of the book examines representations of four major parts of the body, each of which functions as the "key" to health during the nineteenth century, thus creating a fiction of the body politic. In general, the narratives of nineteenth-century health traverse a topology of the body that privileges either the brain, the heart, the nerves, or the eye. In privileging a specific body part, not only are certain values about the nation revered and cultural authority granted to specific individuals and groups, but conflict over these values and authority is exposed. For instance, when the brain is privileged, hierarchy and management become the dominant means to social order. Represented as a fragile and vulnerable part of the body that nonetheless contains the key to health, the brain needs constant supervision to ensure well-being. Manager-physicians, the regulation of the social environment, and demands for public tranquility become the means to maintain the health of the brain and its citizenry. Discussions of political freedom become inseparable from a language of management. The brain also provides a language of intelligence, ability, and affect that promotes the categorization of citizens. An individual's place in society becomes known through the qualities of the brain.

In contrast, the religio-medical language of the heart expresses a felt interiority of the body different from the "managerial" language of the

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brain. The narrative of health based on the heart advocates the building of a revitalized political state resting on sympathy and understanding. The heart represents a community of listeners who, once they hear each other's stories of suffering, are compelled to pursue the proper cure and forge the redeemed nation. The heart implies a social philosophy that reawakens the mission of republicanism, especially the place of woman as citizen through the metaphors of kinship and religious conversion.

With the language of the nerves, a general plea is made to the middle classes to transform their daily lives in order to secure calmness and tranquility or face the deterioration of their social and political power. Americans, particularly those of Anglo-Protestant descent, are seen as suffering from the national disease of "nervousness." Afflicted with debilitating strains on the nervous system, the middle class appears increasingly threatened, the perpetuation of its hegemonic powers through the generations undermined. Nervous conditions signal heredity and become the key to understanding generational strength or weakness of families who are presented as having special leadership roles within the nation. These "native" families are especially vulnerable to nervous diseases that are linked to their own efforts to perpetuate class distinctions and encourage symbolically incestuous unions.

With the language of the eye, health is represented by gazing on specific images that maintain and rejuvenate both American society and the individual viewer. The eye, however, is increasingly presented through specific technologies of perception such as stereoscopes, magic lanterns, and photographic images. Nature became a consoling, tranquil image to hang on a parlor wall, view through a stereoscope, or visit at a grand exhibition of scenes that display the solace of unpeopled space and the nationalistic grandeur of the American landscape. But these images for the eye were increasingly controlled and produced in particular social and political contexts that transform healing into an act of passivity and control antithetical to the dreams of the republic.

By focusing on the language of health, this study enters the webs of meaning that structure this historical period and describes a language of desire that exposes the national yearnings and fears of nineteenth-century Americans who had the power to represent themselves and the nation. Rather than rest on the hyperbolic language of the period or the stark realities that betray national posturing, this study pursues the cracks in the hegemonic rhetoric that expose the anxieties and fears of the middle class. Their representations of the nation have created the very language in which we perceive ourselves and our society today. They are a measuring stick for our personal and collective failures and successes – no matter how much we resist the language of their national narratives. To explore the conflicts in these hegemonic discourses is to

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understand the possibilities of the language of nationalism and to gain a small foothold on how this language can be reinvented to respond to the dynamic nature of a truly democratic social order.[14] Counter-hegemony never occurs by making invisible the hegemonic, but by knowing where the fissures are within the structures of domination in order to refigure the world we have inherited.

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Section I

Textures of Authority

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