

**Stony Brook University
The Graduate School**

Doctoral Defense Announcement

Abstract

The Hypochondriac: Bodies in Protest from Herman Melville to Toni Morrison

By

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This project examines hypochondria as a paradigmatic discourse in late-nineteenth and twentieth century literature, illuminating somatic anxieties and obsessions that attest to sites of resistance within mainstream culture. Engaging closely with Freud and his precept that the ego is “primarily a bodily ego,” I define hypochondria as a preoccupied insistence on reading the body’s legitimacy and its failures. The discourse of hypochondria thus reveals an anxious subtext in which the body becomes an allegorized site. From the “bachelor hypochondriac” in the works of Henry James and Herman Melville to “assimilative hypochondria” in contemporary ethnic writing, I trace literary instances where the weight of social expectations expresses itself symptomatically. The body in these cases betrays itself, becoming a contested site of battle and expressing ambivalence toward heteronormative demands. A rebel of sorts, the hypochondriac proves to be on strike against his surroundings, unable to comply with what is expected of him.

Each chapter of my dissertation reflects a different way in which the body protests and struggles against normative ideology, whether resistance appears at the level of the family and home in Kafka, or at the level of modernity and culture in Huysmans. Hypochondria offers a discourse of resistance that occurs outside of language, the body betraying its complaints when the demands of societal expectations grow onerous. If ideology and culture operate through a consumptive process of being taken in, hypochondria presents a place of digestive trouble. It embodies a crisis of sociability and stages a renunciation which, I argue, demands critical attention.

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Dissertation Advisor: Robert Harvey