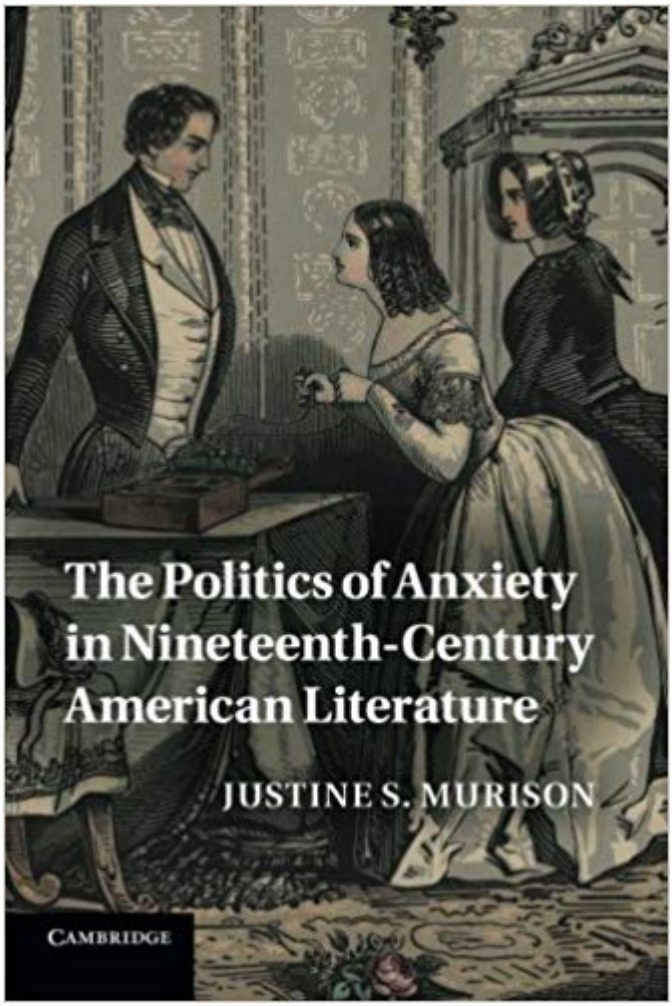
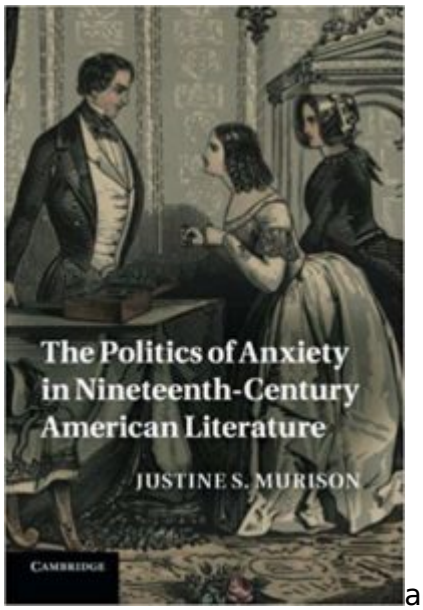
Nervous Americans



Justine Murison's elegant study of nervous physiology in nineteenth-century American literature and culture enlarges our understanding of the psychological assumptions that underpin both classic and neglected nineteenth-century American fiction. Uniting authors who are rarely examined in conjunction, such as Edgar Allan Poe, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Murison offers a new anatomy of American literature, one that invites readers to experience the shivers and tingles of an embodied mind open and receptive to the world, with all its delights and oddities. Murison is at her best in the chapters with race at their center: the analyses of Robert Montgomery Bird's *Sheppard Lee*, Poe's satires, and Stowe's *Dred*. Her insights are fresh—often startlingly so—and her trenchant arguments make these less-familiar texts accessible without taming their weirdness. The first two of these chapters reintroduce fertile concepts—hypochondria and the reflex arc—that were influential in the nineteenth century but have since dropped out of the study of medicine and literature, while the latter chapter reconsiders religious enthusiasm as a nervous pathology. The two chapters on mesmerism and spiritualism cover more well-trod territory and, while cogent, are less exhilarating than Murison's path-breaking work on Bird, Poe, and Stowe.

Murison's efficient epilogue harnesses the power of her examination of nineteenth-century "somatic nervousness" to sketch a new methodological openness or "susceptibility," which Murison contrasts with symptomatic reading or the "hermeneutics of suspicion." Murison's call for a more embodied reading practice, one that does not hold the text at arm's length but rather "affirm[s] the way culture 'hits home' in the very fibers of the self" (178), echoes and complements the recent critical turn to affect, as well as the resurgence of



interest in aestheticism, placing Murison's work at the forefront of an exciting new movement in nineteenth-century studies.

The Politics of Anxiety moves chronologically from the 1830s to the 1880s, but focuses primarily on the antebellum period, devoting only the final chapter and the epilogue to postbellum authors. Each chapter examines a facet of nervous physiology in medical, political, philosophical, literary and other discourses. Murison's historical research is impressive; in most chapters she binds the literary tightly to her archive with careful formal readings of fictional and nonfictional texts. The resulting arguments are sophisticated and layered, as Murison explicates the way nervous physiology operates within a novel and contextualizes that local meaning within nineteenth-century debates about the body politic. The nervous system, in the nineteenth-century imaginary, was the point of contact between the mind and the world, and this understanding of the nervous self produced an image of a highly "susceptible subject," vulnerable to environmental stimuli (2). Murison calls this embodied subjectivity the "nineteenth-century 'open' body," as opposed to a Freudian "deep" self. Since the open body functions as a hinge between inner experience and social experience, nineteenth-century psychological insights had political ramifications, and Murison deftly traces these repercussions in struggles such as the abolitionist movement and the Young America debates.

In the first chapter, perhaps Murison's most ingenious, she restores to hypochondria its full nineteenth-century pathology, when symptoms would have encompassed both psychosomatic illnesses as well as the belief that one was transforming into inanimate and nonhuman forms such as coffeepots or dogs. As a

disease associated with white males, and particularly with the debility of indolent white slave owners, hypochondria would have evoked race and slavery for nineteenth-century Americans. In Bird's novel, *Sheppard Lee,* Murison traces how a white, slave-owning hypochondriac who believes he is turning into a series of objects and animals inverts the vexed status of African American chattel slaves—persons who are converted legally into things. Abolitionist rhetoric, which sought to transform "things" back into persons, mimics the cure for hypochondria, yet abolitionists also encouraged sympathy in white readers, asking them to dissolve their personal boundaries in connecting with others. Bird exploits the confusion among physiological and intersubjective sympathy, hypochondria and abolition, to expose the limits of sympathy and the precarious nature of the "open" body.

The second chapter reads Poe's 1840s political satires of Young America through the recent discovery of the reflex arc. The reflexes, British physiologist Marshall Hall determined, operate independently of consciousness, and can be stimulated by electrical impulses even after death. This frightening specter of sensation that exceeds cognition provided a powerful metaphor for Poe's fears of mobocracy. Poe's Hop-Frogs and mummies warned readers that reflexive responses undermine the democratic ideal of self-government. In the third chapter, Murison reads Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and two of George Lippard's novels as explorations of the overlap between mesmerism and utopianism. Both authors demonstrate that utopian projects are incompatible with the open mesmeric body, but whereas Hawthorne rejects mesmerism's cold empiricism in favor of the nimbus of romance, Lippard awkwardly forces his novels into a conventional marriage plot that domesticates the mesmeric subject.

Turning to Stowe's anti-slavery novel, *Dred,* in the fourth chapter, Murison notes that the "affect of choice for discussing antebellum religion and politics has been, of course, sentimentality," which emphasizes the "domestic and private" nature of religion (108). Religious enthusiasm, by contrast, is a nervous state that, because it is public, has potential political effects. While doctors understood religious enthusiasm as pathological, Stowe recuperates it by highlighting its ability to spark conversions of heart and mind in people whose faculties have been deadened by the constant stimulation of modern life. These conversions allow groups to coalesce and effect political and social change. In the final chapter Murison argues that postbellum neurologists attempted to shore up their professional status and distance themselves from spiritualists by advocating a deductive method. While we now associate spiritualism with hoax, its practitioners understood the movement as a scientific demonstration of Christianity through empirical evidence. In contrast, neurologists including S. Weir Mitchell and George Miller Beard insisted on controlled experiments superintended by a scientific expert rather than a mere amassing of unverified reports. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps's *Gates Ajar* trilogy refutes neurology's presumption of sterile expertise, Murison asserts, by re-enshrining the spiritual aspects of nervous physiology as well as the sensual aspects of the supernatural.

Despite the title (“Nineteenth-Century American *Literature*“), Murison excludes poetry from her study, but her conclusions illuminate Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Herman Melville, and other poets. Dickinson’s work, in particular, seems ripe for a reading informed by the frameworks of hypochondria and the reflex arc. What are “The sun kept setting—setting—still” or “I heard a fly buzz—when I died,” after all, if not a catalog of the gradual cessation of involuntary bodily reflexes as one approaches death. More generally, Murison’s thoughtful suggestions about methodology—what we might call a hermeneutics of susceptibility—are valuable for nineteenth-century studies. By taking these nineteenth-century conceptions of nervous physiology seriously, rather than mocking or dismissing them as pre-Freudian pseudosciences, Murison practices this methodological openness, and her first-rate work testifies to the worth of this innovative methodology.