
Yellow fever challenged the United States as no other disease during the long nineteenth century, causing “the most fatal epidemic outbreaks” (Gessner 36) that the young nation state ever witnessed. Losing thousands to a disease whose cause remained unknown constituted several health crises in the United States. But well beyond these immediate crises, yellow fever was established as a cultural event through which the intersections of race, class, and gender, as well as religion and democracy, were negotiated as part of building the nation. Ingrid Gessner’s *Yellow Fever Years: An Epidemiology of Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Culture*, which received the Peter Lang Nachwuchspreis 2015, investigates these entanglements through readings of a wide selection of narratives, illustrations, and photographs, analyzing the strategies and aesthetics that writers and visual artists employed to give the nation’s anamnesis and tell tales of recovery from both yellow fever and political turmoil. The disease and its epidemics thus provide Gessner with an opportunity to demonstrate that protecting the health of the nation interweaves humanitarian and economic goals, and that this process can result in xenophobic scapegoating when the causes and origins of diseases remain unknown.

Yellow fever is a viral infection transmitted by the *aedes aegypti*, a tropical mosquito. For most of the nineteenth century, the causes of yellow fever were not identified, and vaccination only became available in the 1920s. What remained unknown during the epidemics was that the disease was introduced to the United States via slave ships, and was thus “linked to imperialism, colonial expansion, [and] commerce” (41). Although yellow fever was not a specifically American disease, it was constructed as such, as Gessner argues, and American physicians sought “interpretative sovereignty,” arguing that the disease could only be cured through firsthand experiences and that therefore they had a distinctive advantage over British medical researchers. This “U.S. disease exceptionalism,” as Gessner calls it (47), encouraged a flourishing of American medical literature and fostered the “creation and development of public health institutions” (47), including the Marine Hospital Service: yellow fever was regarded as an enemy that the young nation did not know how to fight. The strength of Gessner’s *Yellow Fever Years* lies in her interweaving of the many socio-political and cultural aspects of the disease into a single coherent narrative: she makes clear the significance that yellow fever held as crisis and as event, on the one hand, and as a concept or trope that reinforced national myths and (unwittingly) revealed the substrate of its economic success, on the other.

Gessner’s focus in *Yellow Fever Years* lies on narrative and fictionalized representations of yellow fever and the socio-cultural constructions and reconstructions that the years of crises demanded and enabled. Chapter 2 turns to medical and political disputes that surfaced in prose narratives. The earliest texts that Gessner analyzes are direct responses to the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, then the capital of the United States. Her discussion covers political debates of the time that were exacerbated by the yellow fever epidemic, such as the debate over the rural versus the urban (e.g., in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Arthur Mervyn*), religious freedom and interreligious marriage (e.g., in S. Weir Mitchell’s *The Red City*), and forms of “exclusion and agency” at the intersection of race and class that yellow fever reinforced (e.g.,
in Matthew Carey’s *Short Account* and Absalom Hones and Richard Allen’s *Narrative*).

Gessner’s longest chapter, chapter 4, focuses on the “transformative potential” (190) that yellow fever narratives offered for re-conceptualizing the role that women played in the postbellum period when the nation was in need of healing but was threatened by yellow fever (136). Whether it was through sentimental romances, domestic novels driven by the marriage plot, or realist fiction, Gessner shows how writers such as Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Mary Floyd, and Wesley Bradshaw employed traditional strategies that spoke to contemporary readers and yet departed from traditional gender roles in their depictions of caregivers and infected patients. Gessner argues that exploring alternative relations between the sexes/genders in the fight against yellow fever also enabled these authors to imagine a process of healing between North and South, as female nurses and doctors from the North traveled South to help the infected.

Chapter 5 turns to the issue of racialization in cultural and medical accounts of yellow fever. African Americans were stigmatized as carriers of the disease but, at the same time, they were thought to be less prone to suffer from it. In actual fact, as Gessner shows, “African Americans suffered equally from yellow fever and probably even more than whites from its economic effects,” which “stirred xenophobic tendencies” (194). For many white and Black anti-slavery writers, yellow fever thus “serve[d] as an allegory for the aberrations of slavery to those looking in upon it from outside” (214). In the second half of the nineteenth century, when yellow fever became predominantly a Southern disease, it was interpreted by some as “divine punishment” for the crimes committed in the slave trade and on the plantations (193). Via yellow fever, Gessner argues, both classic sea novels (e.g., Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper) and abolitionist and activist writing (e.g., William Wells Brown, Alice Dunbar Nelson, Ida B. Wells) were able to indirectly criticize the system of slavery and segregation along the lines of race and class.

Chapter 3 stands out from the other chapters in that it offers an account of visual representations of yellow fever, focusing primarily on images printed in *Harper’s Weekly* and *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*. The chapter includes a brief discussion of the new technology of production and the new opportunities for representation and interpretation that photography offered illustrated magazines, but its emphasis lies on the ways in which the immediacy of visual storytelling fostered a “sensationalist formula with regard to medical concerns” (Gessner 106). It shows how illustrations and photographs were employed to foster empathy by catering to sentimental reactions, demanding from their readers a “political rather than aesthetic response” (128). Gessner organizes her material chronologically to emphasize the ways of distribution and representation that turned yellow fever into a significant cultural and political event. While this makes a lot of sense, the position of chapter 3 also slightly disrupts the flow of the discussion of literary yellow fever narratives. But the chapter demonstrates Gessner’s expertise in visual studies and offers valuable insights into the representation of yellow fever that complement the work she presents in the other chapters, showing how new technologies (e.g., the woodblock printing technique) and forms of distribution imprinted images of localized yellow fever crises into the national consciousness.

*Yellow Fever Years* is a rich work of scholarship and analysis that demonstrates the significance that yellow fever played for the early U.S.-American republic, during the formative years of the Civil War and Reconstruction,
and after. Gessner engages meticulously with previous research on the allegorical use of the health of the nation and of its citizens, organs, and limbs, and complements her readings of classic yellow fever narratives by authors such as Charles Brockden Brown, Herman Melville, and James Fenimore Cooper with readings of a plethora of lesser-known sentimental and sensational texts, often penned by women, most of which have hitherto received little or no scholarly attention. This allows Gessner to paint a nuanced picture of the ways in which yellow fever challenged the medical community, political administration, and civic crisis management, as well as American communities’ social and individual commitment and sense of civic responsibility. Gessner thus concludes that yellow fever was “both constituted and experienced within social, political, cultural, economic and representational contexts” (28), and argues that yellow fever narratives constitute symbolic actions (cf. Kenneth Burke and Fredric Jameson), that is, “strategic response[s] to historical situations and conditions” (26). As such, the narratives and visual representations that she discusses responded to and continue to provide valuable insights into the many socio-political changes that the nineteenth century witnessed, among them immigration, abolition, women’s struggle for emancipation, and the colonial practices in the West Indies. Throughout, Yellow Fever Years successfully reads the medical history of yellow fever alongside the national history of the United States and its creative literary and visual output. It will be of great interest to students and scholars of nineteenth-century U.S. American cultural history, and to anyone interested in the crossroads of politics, colonialism, literature, and medicine.

Johanna Heil (Marburg)