

**A BODY OF TEXT: *PHYSICAL CULTURE* AND THE MARKETING OF MOBILITY**

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# **A BODY OF TEXT: *PHYSICAL CULTURE* AND THE MARKETING OF MOBILITY**

**Andrea Dale Lapin, PhD**

**University of Pittsburgh, 2013**

Drawing on Althusserian notions of ideology and Bourdieu's understanding of bodily hexis, *A Body of Text* seeks to reframe *Physical Culture* as an artifact worthy of serious study, more complex and less reactionary than its beefcake-and-sentiment reputation might suggest. This dissertation addresses the story of *Physical Culture* magazine from three different perspectives, reading the magazine through lenses of media history, medical history and social context, in order to understand the ways in which class operated on and through the body. In contrast to nearly every other publication in the early twentieth century, *Physical Culture* suggested that class mobility was possible, and that success would naturally follow improvement of body and health. Whereas the idea of "fitness" in the eugenics movement very clearly indicated an essential condition, consequent to the quality of the germline, *Physical Culture* initiated the idea that fitness was obtainable – and commodifiable – through diet, exercise and "lifestyle."

Much of this argument is constructed by contrasting *Physical Culture* with *Hygeia*, the health magazine created by the American Medical Association for a lay audience, and by contrasting *Physical Culture* impresario Bernarr Macfadden with his counterpart at the AMA, Morris Fishbein. Whereas Macfadden's story has been told, Fishbein's story has yet to be the subject of a responsible biography. First gestures in that direction open the door to further work on Fishbein as a subject, and to deeper studies of the relationship between medicine, marketing and modern consumerism. Far from suggesting that Macfadden is ipso facto a liberatory force or a sophisticated theorist, the likeliest explanation for the complex, unstable and evolving

constructions of body politics in *Physical Culture* are twofold: first, coming himself from “unfit” germlines, Macfadden needs to enrich contemporary thinking about the body to make sense of (and room for) his own success; second, and more importantly: you can’t sell a bloodline.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

### VAUDEVILLE ARCHAEOLOGY: READING PHYSICAL CULTURE IN THREE ACTS AND SEVERAL VIGNETTES

This is an introduction to a dissertation. Like any dissertation, this one is incomplete, rough in places, but imbued with a profound belief in its own importance. The dissertation that follows this introduction is also, in some unusual ways, a performance -- and not only of the intellectual acrobatics that mark advanced work in the humanities. This dissertation embarks on a performance of reading a lost object in a series of contexts, telling its story from different perspectives and through different lenses. It is about a magazine, but also about the acts of reading that we perform as scholars, the acts of reading that magazine consumers perform as part of an audience, and the acts of reading and counter-reading that occur as conflicting truth claims vie for legitimacy. It is about the making of a market, and the marketing of self-making. In what follows, we will try to take the magazine *Physical Culture* seriously and on its own terms, and to track the estrangement of those terms over time.

Indeed, the familiarity of many of the terms and subjects *Physical Culture* purports to address makes it easy to miss the innovation marked by their presence in this strange magazine. In many cases the changes that have happened to the language of marketing, medicine, and mobility in the U.S. in the twentieth century came as a direct result of the influence of *Physical*

*Culture* on our culture and on its market. The impresario at the helm of *Physical Culture*, Bernarr Macfadden, was such a showman that he frequently upstaged his product. In the end, his outrageousness overshadowed his legacy, and he has mostly been forgotten, except as a subject of humor or derision. Yet his impact on mass media, health culture and the discourse of class mobility (troped by turns as success, vitality and self-improvement) has been significant – and enduring.

If we were to think about this as a project of archeology in a Foucauldian sense, we might want to address these tropes as discursive formations, and to engage with them as clues to a complex constellation of power circulating through and around the body. Such an approach to this material might offer us one set of tools through which to locate this discourse in culture, but it might also allow us a little too much distance from the material object, the magazine itself. A materialist approach might allow us to locate the object within the structures that shape and enable it, and to some degree that is what this text will do. Profoundly influenced by Louis Althusser's thinking on ideology as a material practice, as a force which shapes our experience on an unconscious level and forecloses the possibility of ever performing an "innocent" reading,<sup>1</sup> coming to *Physical Culture* as an Althusserian means that we understand it both to be shaping and shaped by the ideology in which it swims; this approach will also ask us to attend to the "hail" of the text, noticing who and how it is calling, and how that call shapes the subject it addresses.

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<sup>1</sup> "As there is no such thing as an innocent reading," said Althusser, "We must say what reading we are guilty of" (14). The obligation to declare one's reading practice, like calling one's pocket in a billiards game, means being candid from the beginning about our investments and concerns as readers.

Constellating this odd artifact within several of the intersecting discourses that comprise its cultural moment is the project of this dissertation, undertaken in the belief that constellation tells us something significant about the magazine, its moment, the project of reading, and the continuing importance of uncovering and recovering texts, even when it seems like we might disappear under the weight of the past.

## 1.1 PICKING THROUGH THE DUSTBIN OF HISTORY

Across Appalachia and the Midwest, in little towns decimated by more than a generation of decline, the contents of old family houses have spilled into antique malls, curiosity shops and flea markets. Even though the most collectible treasures have retreated to contextless online markets, these dusty little shops, estate sales and white elephants still offer a sense of habitus turned inside out – the artifacts of a life, a subculture, a history spill over each other, waiting to be discovered, retrieved, decoded. In the dustbin of history rest some of its most telling clues.

I was in a thrift shop in Canonsburg, PA when I stumbled on my first issue of *Physical Culture* magazine, from June 1931. It was beautiful: the large format cover was divided vertically into red and white, and a lovely blonde woman seemed to peer out from the divide, her green cloche setting off the roses in her cheeks. The overall effect was radiant. Against the heavily saturated red panel, the headline, in white, fairly jumped from the page. “Mussolini and Cornelius Vanderbilt, Jr. Write Signed Articles in This Issue.”



Figure 1: Physical Culture, June 1931

My background was in gender studies, and I was interested in the ways ideology operated in the United States between the World Wars. I had been picking up advice and marriage manuals for some time, looking for clues about how people situated themselves and their bodies in relation to one another – in other words, the stress points on habitus, the places where education, negotiation and reconciliation were proving necessary. The magazine I had stumbled upon was a kind of signifying train wreck. The fact that these figures, ordinarily associated with money and power, came together in a fitness magazine articulated simply what words seem only to complicate: that these discourses converge at the site of the body, and work on the body, whether physical or intellectual, had consequences for both capital and the state.

Sixty years after Marx and Engels wrote their famous ghost story, there was more than one spectre haunting Europe and the United States: communism rattled its famous chains at fascism and imperialist democracy; eugenics had taken on increasing importance such that some

of its basic tenets had come to seem like common sense. And at a time of technological change, economic instability and migration, lifeways were in transition and a sense that things were changing rapidly and for the worse was endemic.

It has been enormously reassuring, as the millennium has turned and the economy has potted, to find that this has happened before and that then, too, it felt like the end of the world. The prevalence of deep pessimism resounds interestingly with the depressions of the 1890s and 1930s. Whereas the present flashpoint is articulated as a crisis of environment (we are murdering our planet, heading for a tipping point after which environmental collapse will be inevitable and ghastly) the crisis a century ago was read in terms of identity and of species-being; the notion of degeneration or “race suicide” was predicated on the feeling that people were in decline, not in terms of numbers but of quality. Population displacement coupled with new media to present people with more strangers than ever before, and fascination with the exotic Other provided a kind of sideshow entertainment (literally and metaphorically) through which the spectre of animality was returning to humanity through the mechanisms of atavism and degeneration. The crisis of the (white) body – troped by turns as syphilis, degeneration and race suicide – was a matter of international concern and extensive scientific inquiry.

In earlier incarnations, this dissertation focused much more heavily on that history, particularly as regards the intersections of anthropology and the social sciences around questions of defining and delimiting the human. The work of Stefan Kuhl and Marouf Hasian, in particular, highlight the degree to which totalizing narratives of human-ness and fit-ness laid the foundation for totalitarian catastrophe later in the century; and demonstrate the degree to which this discourse took shape not only in the popular press but in legislative code and juridical reinforcement, from laws against miscegenation to those mandating sterilization. That the

necessity for such restrictions was horrific was (regrettably) not in question, but its necessity – that “we must, with Spartan firmness” carry out extreme actions from infanticide to immigration restriction – was understood by many as essential for survival of the state (Hasian 20). Within and through the intellectual movements we now sometimes cluster as “scientific racism,” increasing panic gave way to grim certainty that degeneration was a very real crisis. Parsing the colloquy on evolution, race and progress has nearly overtaken this project a number of times, but in what follows we will outline this development as briefly as possible, and focus instead on its consequences for physical culture as a movement and *Physical Culture* as a magazine as one site among many wherein care of the self became metonymic for husbandry of the racialized nation. If, as Bernarr Macfadden declared on his magazine covers, “Weakness [was] A Crime,” it was a crime against the state, a national affront that was seen as creating harm for generations to come.

The period David Roediger describes as “the long early twentieth century” – from about 1890 to 1940 (Roediger 9) -- had captivated me as a site at which to read our relationships with and through gender, race, class and the embodied self. That first issue of *Physical Culture* presented itself as a kind of nodal point, a locus at which these discourses and questions came together, an artifact which illustrated the connections between class, politics and the body in primary colors. What I did not know that day in Canonsburg was how important this magazine had been in its moment, how enormous its audience had been, or how much it reflected and reworked the arguments of its time into a discourse on and about the body in popular culture. I was also to learn how deeply imbricated the discourses of self-help, self-making and health were – not only with each other, but with larger political conversations of their moment.

In what follows, we will address the magazine through three different lenses: media history, medical history, and social science – always with reference back to biography,

sometimes with gestures at close reading or textual analysis. Taking the object on not as “high literature” or as a repository for same (although there are stories and articles by some remarkable writers in the archive, waiting to be discovered) but as a text in itself, an object in culture whose crosscurrents and contradictions, taken together, allow us insight into practices of reading and production – in other words, how meaning was made, in this publication and in the context from which it emerged.

Ultimately, this project seeks to take on the act of translation in an effort to position *Physical Culture* as a text negotiating questions of agency and subjectivity at a time when both were being called into question, and to suggest that this lost artifact, this magazine relegated to the status of ephemera, is actually of critical importance in understanding media history as well as the epistemology of fitness. To read *Physical Culture* now seems at first to require no translation at all, insofar as the basic ideas of better living through regular exercise and good diet have become part of the commonsense of our time. But as we get closer to the object and set it in context, it becomes clear that the language of the body in culture has changed in some ways that are so stark as to seem comic, and in others so subtle that unpacking them will take some time. Reading *Physical Culture* as a serious text will allow us access to discussion about the body in culture, the construction of the self in the market, and the most fundamental practices through which the self takes on the care and management of the body within which it is housed.

## 1.2 A TABLE OF CONTEXTS: PHYSICAL CULTURE AND MEDIA HISTORY

The first chapter, “I Write For The Fellow Who Works For a Wage: Making a Market of the Working Class,” uses three texts to ground the reading: Thomas Pendergast’s *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950*; Matthew Schneirov’s *Dream of a New Social Order: Popular Magazines in America 1893-1914* and Maryellen Zuckerman’s *History of Women’s Magazines in the United States 1792-1995*. Each approaches the history of magazines from a different angle, and as we begin to examine our artifact it seems prudent to begin by setting it in context with like objects. Establishing its location within the magazine industry and within the markets that magazines constructed and by which they were shaped harkens back to the work of Richard Ohmann; in contrast to the catalogic work of Mott and Presbrey a generation previous, Ohmann set a new standard for the study of magazines in culture. Yet the Ohmann project of establishing the Professional Middle Class (PMC) as the heart of mass media corroborates with larger cultural pressures to establish the PMC as the heart of the American experience, holding under erasure experience that falls outside this mythical norm.

Macfadden proudly averred that “I write for the fellow who works for a wage,” and established that fellow as an audience, a powerful force in culture and in the market. This was a significant contribution of Macfadden Publications, an empire that began with the iconic fitness magazine but expanded to include a wide variety of publications, from *Physical Culture* to *Liberty* magazine, a variety of regional newspapers and scores of books, all written in plain English and combining a passion for self-improvement with a pleasure in the visuality of text (and racy pictures). From the scandal-mongering *Evening Graphic* to the confessional bodice-

rippers of *True Story*, Macfadden Publications maximized readership, scandalized censors, and changed the face of print culture.

Locating *Physical Culture* in context helps us to identify what is exceptional about the magazine, and what is not; what distinguishes the publication from its competitors and what curiosities distinguish the landscape itself in which *Physical Culture* is located. Some of the salient features of that landscape – including the ubiquity of eugenics discourse, persistent anxiety about establishing habitus and articulating class, and the fascination with the truth value of scientific language – are so striking that each time they appear it is tempting to dismiss them as anomalous. Recognizing them as part of their contemporary commonsense allows us to read the texts in which they appear as indicative of larger cultural conversations in which they intervene.

### **1.3 WELL, WELL, WELL – PHYSICAL CULTURE AND MEDICINE**

The conversation about health and wellness in which *Physical Culture* intervenes is important not only for its relation to the magazine, or for its insufficiently-explored connections to media history, but because it was a turning point in the history of medicine. Chapter Two, “Dreams of Unlikable Men: *Physical Culture*, *Hygeia* and the Battle for Hearts and Minds” attempts to frame this turn with the stories of its protagonists – Morris Fishbein, who transformed the AMA and its publications into an unprecedented public relations machine, and Bernarr Macfadden, who fought the medical juggernaut with the passion of a crusader and the tools of a muckraker. The story spreads out behind itself like a peacock tail: the history of medical practice and medical marketing occupies the bulk of this chapter because this context is essential to understanding

what is at stake in the conflict between Fishbein and Macfadden – and to see the degree to which these two men represented larger movements, and greater interests than their own. Ultimately each of them made history – changing the terms and conditions of practice for healers, vendors and patients – in their own historical moment and forward to the present.

It is alarming, given the development of alternative medicine in the last thirty years, how little responsible history work has been done on the hegemonic development of “regular” medicine (James Whorton, one of the few who has done this work wisely and well, gently reminds us that “allopathic” was a coined as derisive term; “homeopathic,” literally, “same as the disease;” whereas “allopathic” meant “treats something other than the disease” (18).) Histories of regular medicine from within its own ranks tend to construct the story in the mode of histories of science, shaping the narrative around particular scientific developments and the characters who drove them, whereas proponents of alternative medicine seem to tell the story as if they had just found it under a rock. So much breathless scandalmongering makes it easy to disregard those parts of the story that they get right, and we were fortunate to find many of the primary source materials we were seeking reprinted or excerpted in publications that were barely more than advertisements for particular practices or systems of medicine.

The story of modern medicine has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in the form of a solidly interdisciplinary cultural study in which the relationship of medicine to the development of modern mass markets, including advertising, concentration of capital, and uniform standards of care is really untangled, nor have the relationships between medical organizations and political development, including public hospitals, the FDA and local health boards been more than gestured at. I have seen passing references, for example, to a high correlation between local health board officials and Klan membership in small towns, but have not found sufficient

corroboration to work with that datum responsibly. Likewise, although the figures of George Simmons and Morris Fishbein are central to the development of the AMA (and therefore of modern medical practice and politics) neither man has been the subject of a responsible biography.

This chapter has elements of a story, or perhaps a screenplay – not only because the characters are interesting enough to merit some development, but because the degree to which they mirror and parallel one another suggests that there is something larger afoot – that not only the texts they produce but the production of these men themselves is consequent to the time and place at which they emerged. Each of them produces text, but is himself a production, a persona that can be read into the historical moment and that serves to tell us some important things about their moment. The rivalry between Macfadden and Fishbein offers a real-life drama and a convenient fiction, as each man is allowed, in some ways, to stand for the social/political position he represents.

In *Hygeia*, the AMA magazine for the general public, we find the perfect foil for *Physical Culture*: addressing analogous issues and audiences at different class valences, the magazines do parallel work which is ultimately and importantly opposed: close reading of articles within each text allows us to see exactly the kind of literary performance which constructs a class address, and some ways in which they construct the human, as well. The project of constructing and delimiting the human, and establishing the limitations and possibilities for the human subject to effect change in his own life, is central to the project of both these magazines – and to the social sciences as they evolved. It is to this subject that the next chapter turns.

## 1.4 ORANGUTANS AND INDIAN CLUBS: PHYSICAL CULTURE AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

The developing social sciences in the early twentieth century were preoccupied with questions of species-being – that is, what constitutes the human, and what forces advance or retard its development. These questions, whether constructed in terms of race, in terms of differentiation from lesser animals, or in terms regarding adaptation to the dehumanizing conditions of modernity, permeate discourse from academic science to books of etiquette and deportment. The ubiquity and importance of these conversations are tracked in particularly interesting ways in two texts, Dana Seitler’s *Atavistic Tendencies* and Christina Cogdell’s *Eugenic Design*. Interdisciplinary in approach and thoroughgoing in research, both offer unusual perspectives on the language of eugenics and the effects of that language on representation and on lived experience. The more traditionally constructed cultural histories offered by James Whorton, Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen, and Sander Gilman help us to fill in some of the linear narrative that we might otherwise lose to a kaleidoscope of tropes and images (a kaleidotrope?). The struggle against losing the centrality of *Physical Culture* to the hypnotic pull of this history produces tensions in this chapter; it might be easy to lose our Vaudeville thread, unless we follow Christina Cogdell back to the midway of the Chicago Exposition. Returning to the midway and the magazine, we return to the vexed project of delimiting and improving the human as always overdetermined by the strongmen and freaks that populate its sideshows.

In contrast to the contradictory arguments put forth by the social Darwinists that “fitness” was best exemplified by social position, but that the unfit were reproducing at double the rate of the fit and threatening the wellbeing of the entire species, *Physical Culture* insisted that fitness

was a trait better acquired than inherited, and that the capacity to change one's status as "fit" or "unfit" was within nearly every man and woman. This was a radical move, disrupting not only a scientific consensus but a political one, which was increasingly coalescing around the need to contain the encroachments of the unfit and feebleminded by any means – including but not limited to containment, sterilization and extermination. The third and final chapter of this dissertation, "Weakness Is A Crime: Strong Bodies and Weak Arguments in the Struggle for Agency" tracks this argument in *Physical Culture*, and seeks to set it into the larger conversation about human improvability. It is possible that *Physical Culture* forms a missing link from the preoccupation with eugenics in the first half of the twentieth century to the obsessional concern with "physical fitness" in the second half (and into the present).

The conversion narrative embodied in *Physical Culture* contravened even the "reform" eugenic argument that environment and genetics were cofactors in outcome – because according to *Physical Culture*, even the offspring of unfit parents raised in unfit circumstances (like Macfadden himself) could remake himself into the picture of health. The idea that "fitness" could be an acquirable trait was so radical as to be almost unthinkable at the time Macfadden proposed it; at this point, in 2013, the notion that "fitness" would be a birth trait and not a reflection of life habits is almost equally unimaginable. It has been easy to lose the depth and significance of Macfadden's contribution because the shift to his way of thinking – or at least, his way of talking about the body - has been so complete.

## 1.5 FROM “THE NATIONS ATTIC” TO JSTOR: HOW DO WE DISCOVER, USE, AND READ EPHEMERA?

The Smithsonian Museum of American History sometimes calls itself “The Nation’s Attic.” A remarkable array of ephemera, from the ruby slippers Judy Garland wore in *The Wizard of Oz* to jarred gallstones from a Victorian cabinet of curiosities, is displayed in carefully engineered chaos. Thousands of objects are grouped in roughly chronological order, and a sense of story emerges from the accretion. Of course, there is nothing accidental about the arrangements, and the story it tells is very particular: it is a narrative of national progress, technological and ideological, bringing us to an ongoing present of egalitarianism, innovation and possibility. The story is about freeing up the American Dream. But it is also about curating – about the work of the museum itself to collect, sort, and make sense of an infinity of objects that create and are created by consumer culture.



**Figure 2: From the Smithsonian Collection: The Ruby Slippers; shoes worn in the 1965 Freedom March; an eighteenth-century apothecary that had been displayed at the 1933 World's Fair.**

The studied hodgepodge of the museum stands in contrast to the carefully ordered collections of the Library of Congress, but the process of cataloguing is much the same and the

intent, too, is similar: to collect everything of importance in creating a record of our culture, and by extension, to establish what is important -- and what is not. This notion that there is a complete or complete-able cultural archive serves to hold under erasure not texts which undermine the dominant discourse – for certainly there is a wealth of materials documenting dissent – but those that threaten to complicate that discourse, to enrich it to a point of unintelligibility. Of the amalgam comprising the American History Museum’s renovated displays, museum critic Edward Rothstein complained, “the objects fascinate, but the miscellany is so deliberate, it is as if variety itself were the subject” (C25). In amongst all that variety, what is hardest to identify are the lacunae: so overwhelming is the variety that the gaps in the assemblage (almost) disappear.

Here it might be fair to mention an important fact about the *Physical Culture* archive: it doesn’t exist. Or, not in any form that one might expect from a magazine that was so popular and so influential in its time. The Library of Congress didn’t see fit to save it. A number of libraries claim to have some issues in their archives – University of Texas at Austin among them – but they are not readily available or accessible; the New York Public Library has microfilm, but it has degraded to the point of illegibility. Recently, Ball State University has posted 61 issues of *Physical Culture* online, and this has been a godsend – although, again, it’s in a format that is difficult and slow to work with. My own project started in a thrift store and ended on EBay: most of my archive (about the size of Ball State’s, but not a direct overlap) has come to me via serendipity and assiduous shopping. Mark Adams, who wrote the most recent biography of Macfadden, was able to do some really extensive archival work in his pursuit of the subject; for his research, I am particularly grateful. There are some Macfadden fansites that have useful

resources and links, but for the most part he has been forgotten – though his influence is palpable in every form of mass culture we enjoy (or deride) today.

The decision to focus on an ephemeral text has advantages as well as disadvantages. On one hand, the incompleteness of the archive prevents us from conclusively proving some arguments. On the other, the relative obscurity of the document means that the work of bringing it forward, even in a preliminary form, as meriting additional study, is itself significant. The project of assembling and studying the archive as a whole would require far greater time and resources than I have had. But the hundred or so issues I have been able to read, as well as the many covers, advertisements, and Macfadden biographies have provided enough material that there are some things we can establish about this magazine as a whole, and about particular articles or images.

To work with ephemeral texts is to acknowledge the ephemeral nature of the work itself; it is also to suggest that our archive is incomplete in a larger sense, that our understanding of self and culture may be based on valid but insufficient premises. The fact of the work, as much as the work itself, is an assertion that there can always be more – that the archive will never be, can never be, fully indexed. I'm thinking, of course, of the Borgesian map – so complete that it covers the whole kingdom, now falling to tatters in the wilderness. If, as Borges suggests, documentation ultimately defeats itself by its thoroughness, still we are well away from that point. Density of information belies our ability to read constructively, critically and completely – in fact, that density sometimes makes it difficult to read at all. Reading lost texts back into the archive is an act of cultural cartography that allows us to reorient familiar landmarks in a more fully articulated landscape.

For many years, popular culture scholars and literary historians read back through the magazine archive in search of stories – lost stories by familiar authors as well as critically or historically valuable stories by writers we’d never heard of. Much of the work that went into rupturing canonical notions of what constituted “important literature” or even literature worthy of study was the consequence of scholars reading magazines, combing library sales, rummaging in attics and curiosity shops much like the one in which I discovered the subject of this thesis. That work had the tenor of a rescue mission: readers diving into the wreck, retrieving stories or articles or writers, and re-issuing or anthologizing them as if their original context was irrelevant to the stories themselves, as if these textual productions existed as things apart from the means or conditions of production under which they came into being. That initial work of retrieval opened up the notion of what matters in literary study, and in historical work. This text continues the project of re-visioning that context, taking seriously the throwaway texts that circulated in and through people’s lives. The intent is to allow us to think again about the assumptions and ambivalences that shaped readers’ experience of text and of the reality these texts shape and represent.

If, as Lacan suggested, “everything serious is serial” (19), perhaps there is something worthy of study in the serial nature of a magazine’s run: repetition and difference coexist, creating a predictable identity for the publication. The frame of the publication supports a vision for the magazine and for the world in which the magazine exists; the identity of the text and its ideal reader take shape and evolve as extensions of one another, and the dialogic process by which they create one another becomes clear as we observe their development over time.

## 1.6 GETTING ON WITH IT

Although others have written about *Physical Culture* and about Bernarr Macfadden, this dissertation focuses more on the significance of Macfadden's contributions than the challenges presented by his persona or his character. And that is no mean feat. R Marie Griffiths has written about *Physical Culture* in terms of religious movements – particularly New Thought – that addressed the body as an object of engagement, but there has remained a sort of force field around our protagonist that has made it very difficult to see him as a serious innovator, much less as a critical figure in the development of American mass media. I am certain that no little of that derives from classism, even embarrassment. Mark Adams noted that when Macfadden's third wife Mary published her scandalizing tell-all memoir late in his life, Macfadden wept (Adams 224). His genius for the zeitgeist had always been remarkable; I strongly suspect that he knew, at that point, that his legacy was lost. The degree to which he has been forgotten – or overlooked – by historians of culture is certainly remarkable.

*Physical Culture* exists not only in the context of its market. It developed in response to a changing zeitgeist and was informed by the many writers who contributed their names and viewpoints to its quirky reputation. But the magazine is bound up with the story of its creator, and it is impossible to tell its story without telling at least some of his. It is the goal of this work to relocate Macfadden as a bridge – a transitional figure through whom many of what we consider conventions of modern mass media originated. At the same time, it exceeds the bounds of biography in important ways. Locating the magazine first in the auteurial context of its creator and subsequently in relation to some of the political and self-help movements with which it has

been associated will allow us to see it in a new light – deserving of preservation and study, complex in its own ideology, and rich in its ability to reveal the contradictions of its moment.

The first academic biography of Macfadden, *Body Love*, was written in 1989 by Robert Hunt and was a standard sort of production for Bowling Green Press at the time: an archival project, unearthing and assembling the details of the life in broad terms, retaining always a sense of bemusement at its subject. While it is clear that Hunt was particularly interested in the relationship of *Physical Culture* to censorship – the details of the Comstock case are focal here – it does not deviate from the conventions of biography. This kind of work was endemic following the influence of the Birmingham School on the development of cultural studies. Conventional tools of literary and historical study were applied to new subjects and new kinds of objects. Since that time, and particularly in the last ten years, a different kind of cultural studies has burgeoned, exemplified by work like that of Seitler in *Atavistic Tendencies* or Cogdell in *Eugenic Design*: deep, sophisticated studies circulating around an idea or phenomenon – what we might now be tempted to call a meme - rather than a single figure, object or group. They are intertextual, transdisciplinary readings of cultural tropes. In each case, the tools of literary study, art history, materialist history and critical theory are brought to bear in an effort to reveal patterns and connections that inflect culture at every level.

While this study is in no way as broad or ambitious as these new cultural histories, and remains in some ways tethered to its Birmingham roots (returning always to the visual, textual object and what it can tell us about structures of thought, systems of power and the relationship between the subject and culture; considering always the construction and constriction of subjects striving for agency, autonomy and mobility), it draws on these newer studies for a kind of liberty in the practice of analysis, an opening of possibility in study and in language as it seeks to

describe a dual subject – a man and a magazine – within a multiplicity of contexts, complicating an apparently simple object in an effort to crystallize some complex social and intellectual engagements.

The map is beginning to cover the country. It is time to bring down the lights on this introduction, and cue the overture: behind the curtain, an old wooden newsstand is rolling into place at center stage. Reading the titles one after another as they agglomerate, thumbing through until something holds us – these are important, and ubiquitous, reading practices. In the early days of mass media, the visual carnival of the newsstand offered a vision of the world in gay profusion. Starlets and headlines vied for reader attention against variety magazines and, yes, *Physical Culture*. And so our show begins...

## **2.0 I WRITE FOR THE FELLOW WHO WORKS FOR A WAGE: MAKING A MARKET OF THE WORKING CLASS**

### **2.1 A TRIP TO THE NEWSTAND**

Early in the twentieth century, mass culture was rising – not from thin air, but from the alchemy of industrial production, capital flow, and a transient, transforming population in need of entertainment, instruction and a sense of identity. Before radio and television began mediating culture across multiple senses, mass culture emerged in the form of the magazine. America had always been a nation of newspapers, but for the most part they were local productions, part of the distinctive character by which cities and towns defined themselves. But the coming of the train and the high-speed press allowed national magazines to find large, timely, inexpensive distribution across the country (Ohmann 13). Development of postal codes enabled subscription mailings, and changes in the tax code facilitated the burgeoning of corporate advertising. Speculators, spectators, commentators and illustrators collaborated in creating hundreds of magazines – some famous, others now forgotten, some lasting decades and others running only for a few issues or a few years.

In 1899, at the height of the “magazine revolution” and at a moment when there was room in the expanding economy for a creative entrepreneur to make a place for himself or his product, exercise enthusiast Bernarr Macfadden began to write *Physical Culture*. With a

publication run of nearly fifty years, *Physical Culture* was the centerpiece of a publishing empire that, by 1935, outsold Hearst, and which gives lie to many assumptions about what it takes – and what it means – to succeed in business. Within the pages of *Physical Culture* itself, more is negotiated than the business of magazines. The relationship of the self to the body, of the body to the market, and the connections between public policy and private ablutions are all made explicit in the pages of the magazine. If they were not worked through, these issues were certainly worked over in complicated (and sometimes contradictory) ways that changed over the course of the run.



**Figure 3: Berenice Abbott, New York City Newsstand, 1935**

Against the grainy grey midtones of a fading black-and-white photo spring bright powdery daubs of gouache color: from the dustbin of history, an old newsstand emerges. On an ordinary city newsstand there were dozens of magazines -- sometimes upward of a hundred -- arrayed according to the whims or instincts of the merchant. There might be two or three consecutive issues of weeklies, and multiple copies of popular magazines. Some larger stands displayed three or four vivid issues of a popular title at each corner of the kiosk; some grouped magazines by subject or interest, where others assorted them in an effort to attract readers to

unfamiliar titles. Story papers and pulps, news magazines and hobby journals, celebrity gossip-and-photo publications; household advice, fashion, lifestyle and comic magazines overlapped and stacked one atop the other, all striving with every issue to attract and retain readers, to draw advertisers, to define and elaborate its specific market and to maximize readership within that group.

The newsstand is a vitally important landmark on the map of twentieth century culture; as *Physical Culture* comes into focus, it allows us to see that newsstand differently. In what follows, we will endeavor to place *Physical Culture* back on the newsstand from which it sold as many as 343,000 copies a month – surrounding it with the magazines of its long moment, rummaging also through the stacks of those publications that preceded it and shaped the market in which it evolved. I have been unable to locate any photos of this particular magazine in situ, although numbers suggest it was heavily sold at newsstands. *Physical Culture* is important in itself, and at the height of its run particularly, but it needs to be read in the context of its sister publications, including *The Evening Graphic* and *True Story*, on one hand, and in the context of its rival *Hygeia* on the other. And, in turn, we ought to place it in relation to the pulps and men's magazines flooding the market at this time. If we could see its location on the newsstands – how the magazines were arrayed, and next to what *Physical Culture* was displayed – we might have some literal sense of its location within that market. By narrating the histories that constellate around the object of our gaze, I hope to reconstruct in layers what cannot simply be revealed in a physical image.

## 2.2 READING MAGAZINES

Tycoons and hucksters, salesmen and writers, literati seeking to shape a culture and ambitious capitalists seeking to shape a market: the magazine industry at the turn of the century is shaped by such overly drawn characters that the story almost runs away with itself. It is remarkable that its discovery as a fertile site for cultural study has been relatively recent. Work on the rise of magazines as mass culture began to open up in the 1980s; although there had been some work prior to that time, it was constitutively different in approach. Nearly fifty years ago, Frank Luther Mott had set out to catalog the magazines that had circulated in the United States; Frank Presbrey gave us a first pass at the history of the advertising therein, and a scattering of biographers have taken leading editors and magazine writers as their subjects. Matthew Schneirov, in his 1994 study *Dream of a New Social Order*, suggests that the work of Jackson Lears, Jan Cohn and other initial studies of turn-of-the-century magazines “focus on the popular magazine as actively shaping the consciousness of Americans... [T]here is some attention paid to the properties of the magazine as a cultural form... but there is a clear impression in this body of work that magazines functioned as an agent of... ideological domination” (8). Although it is possible that Schneirov’s appraisal is somewhat harsher than is necessary, certainly it is the case that these earlier studies do not take a dialogic approach to the relationship between magazines and markets.

Richard Ohmann was among the first to address the magazine market as a whole as a primary subject within the larger study of culture. His landmark *Selling Culture: Magazines, Markets, and Class at the Turn of the Century* posits that the major ten-cent monthly magazines – particularly *McClures*, *Scribner’s*, *The Ladies Home Journal* and *Cosmopolitan* – emerged and developed dialogically with the rise of what he calls the “professional middle class” (abbreviated

throughout his study as PMC). This new class of modern workers – simultaneously striving but complacent, modern and suburban, professional and plain-spoken, would serve as a cultural norm for the next century. Ohmann’s insightful study focuses on these several magazines in the years 1894-97, and again in 1903-05, demonstrating how the magazines developed in response to that market and how the market came to know itself as a class through the magazines. But like too many studies of the American “middle class,” the keenness of the focus tends to elide what falls beyond its scope. The method of Ohmann’s study is beyond reproach, but one consequence of his tight focus is that the magazines that served audiences outside the PMC can seem, in the shadow of Ohmann, to be unimportant – or certainly less important than the group that he studied. Given that the hegemonic nature of the PMC in the twentieth century has sometimes led every other class to seem marginal, it has been easy to generalize from the results of his study to magazines in general at the turn of the century, to think that the PMC magazines were ultimately all that mattered out of the magazine/mass-cultural revolution.

In any case, when I began this work more than a decade ago, comparatively little had been written about the magazine market at the turn of the century. With the turn of another century, however, historians have been paying a new kind of attention to the industry that, as Ohmann suggested in 1996, launched mass culture as we know it. Hand in glove with the professionalization of advertising, national magazines served to create a national mass culture and to shape and reflect identities that helped to define what it would mean to be American in the twentieth century. In the years since Ohmann established that magazines were part of how the emerging “professional middle class” defined and recognized itself, and that they served a critical role in creating the middle class and suburban identities that became dominant over the

course of the twentieth century, work on the relationship of magazines to identity construction has been lively.

Three texts that address the relationship between magazines and identity form the backbone of this chapter. In *Dreams of a New Social Order*, Matthew Schneirov suggests that the relationship of magazines to culture, or of mass culture to individual subjects, was not unilateral – that is, was not a simple matter of magazines “acting on” passive readers to shape them into markets (his study briefly preceded Ohmann, but Fox and Lears came in for quite a drubbing). In spite of the fact that the relationship between readers and magazines were complex, the editors of the early “major” magazines – *McClures*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Vanity Fair*, *Scribner’s* – were, in fact, imagining a new relationship between the middle class, culture, and consumerism that would (and did) reshape the American landscape.

Thomas Pendergast, in turn, studied the relationship between magazines and masculinity in *Creating the Modern Man: American Magazines and Consumer Culture, 1900-1950*, highlighting the transition from the Victorian notion of “character” (an internal moral sense) to “personality” (an outward presentation of self) as the key to success. Looking at “men’s magazines” including the *American Magazine*, *Esquire*, *Argosy* and *Cosmopolitan*, as well as magazines in which African-American identity was addressed, beginning with *The Afro-American* and ending with *Ebony*, Pendergast provides a way to “read for” identity construction (and the difficult reconciliation of masculinity with consumerism, which had early been ceded to the domestic sphere). In contrast, Maryellen Zuckerman’s encyclopedic *History of Women’s Magazines* might have more in common with earlier catalogic studies of the magazine, but offers a great deal of useful information on the way the business of the magazines shaped their content

and appearance; her catalogic approach belies deep familiarity with the theoretical and historiographical work underpinning more colorful studies.

Just as the magazine has come to be understood as an aggregate text in itself – that the whole magazine ought to be addressed as a text rather than simply or exclusively teasing out individual stories or ads and reading them each as freestanding, unaffected by the material surrounding it – so it could be said that magazines as such need to be read in a larger context, in terms of their run, the other publications in the publisher’s “stable,” and the publications among and against which they are situated. By taking as an object of study one magazine, too often considered a throwaway, with a long run and a clear agenda, I hope not only to invite reconsideration of this particular text but to suggest that other “light” magazines, lost or nearly lost in the *Anschluss* of text under which the twentieth century lies buried, might offer equally useful and informative clues about the mechanisms of culture and the strange workings of modernity.

“The first step,” says Cary Nelson, writing in *Repression and Recovery* about the period 1910-1945,

in reconstituting a story of the poetry of the period... is to work as closely as possible to the actual publications of the period – the periodicals that poets published in, the individual books in which their work (in some cases) was collected... the way in which individual volumes can constitute acts of cultural intervention is sometimes even signaled by their jackets (181).

While his argument may at first seem like a bizarre twinning of a Benjaminian concern for aura and the perverse glee of an English professor suggesting that one can, in fact, judge a book by its cover, I think Nelson might be on to something. His odd text proposes a project for literary archaeology: if its first step is taking context seriously, as above, then its culmination is

sorting: cataloging, if you will, a table of contexts. While Nelson is absolutely correct in his insistence that we look at ephemera, I think we must make clear that that this call cannot apply only when high art is at issue, or only to one “cultural front.” The cultural history of the twentieth century in the United States has been repressed, in Nelson’s sense, across ideological and generic spectra. In some sense the twentieth century is buried under its own overproduction of text in high and low cultural forms. Given new tools for production and distribution of print materials (and, later, of sound and image as mass culture) text has been generated to the point of blindness. Much postmodern theory wrestles with this problem of oversaturation; it may seem strange, then, to call for analysis of even more text in the salvaging and reconsideration of lost and dismissed publications. The “ephemera” that Nelson insists that we save (or at least have a look at, before it is lost again) provides important clues for us, as readers, as to presentation and reception of texts more generally. These materials – particularly, I will argue, the periodicals – also provide important views into the representations and intersections of apparently disparate or competing rhetorics.

At this moment, I am holding a text I suspect even Nelson might have discarded, were he the curator in our cabinet of textual curiosities. The magazine crumbling to dust, smelling like warm memory and making me sneeze, is the June 1919 issue of *Physical Culture*. It contains, thankfully, no poetry. I can imagine no way to renarrativize the text or its contents as “high art,” then or now. But this particular issue of a fifteen-cent magazine – a surprisingly hot seller in its time, and which reconceived the magazine mass market – offers us a place to begin weaving together a series of discourses whose connections, undertheorized and overdetermined, continue to guide the workings of culture on the body, and of the body in popular culture.

On this magisterial cover, a stunningly powerful and beautiful man towers over the factory from which he seems to have sprung fully formed, like Aphrodite on her seashell. The erotics of industry, and the business of erotism, here conjoin in an image of remarkable vigor. In his hands are golden cables: he seems literally to be pulling the strings on the industrial world at his feet. His modesty is protected by a wisp of smoke from one of his mighty chimneys, and as he looks off into the future the headline reminds us that “HEALTH & ENERGY” are “the Driving Force Behind Business.” In finer print, above the title, the reader is admonished that “we must cut out The National Cancer – Venereal Disease.” Indeed, we hardly have to open the cover to make some initial connections: here meet discourses of conduct, medicine, eugenics, and, well, skin – all under the (literal and metaphoric) signature of Bernarr Macfadden, the Barnum of Brawn.

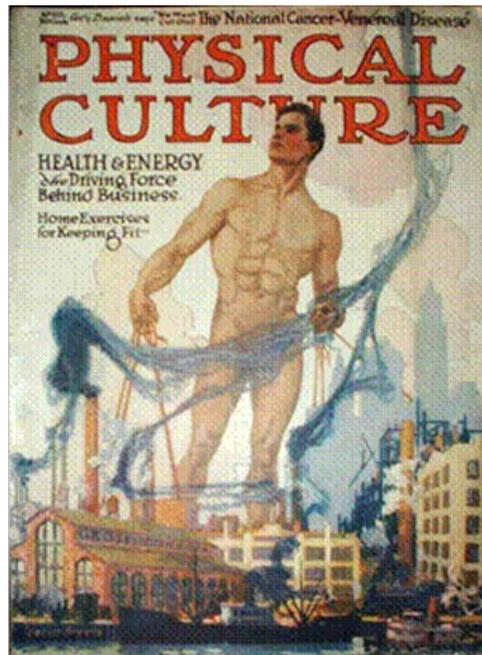


Figure 4: *Physical Culture*, June 1919

*Physical Culture* had, in all, about a fifty year run: remarkable for any magazine, but astonishing for an enterprise run by and centered on one man. Beginning in 1899, Macfadden would experiment for some time before he found a formula that “took” – with a high-water mark at about midpoint – from 1925 to 1935, when the magazine’s circulation peaked at about 500,000 copies a month (Pringle 664). After the advent of the Second World War, the magazine’s popularity diminished sharply -- in part, I believe, because the audience for such advice dwindled as the economy picked up. After financial straitening forced the Macfadden Publications board of directors to take a hard look at spending, Macfadden’s personal expenses (notably but not exclusively a consequence of his unsuccessful runs at political office) were simply untenable. In 1941 he was fired from his own company; he was able to take *Physical Culture* with him when he went, and tried repeatedly to re-launch or “re-vitalize” the magazine nearly until his death in 1953. Macfadden Publications, the firm he founded, merged in the 1990s with Sterling Publications and continued to produce trade and commercial magazines – and of course, *True Story*.

To study a magazine as singular in focus as *Physical Culture* is also, in some ways, to study ideology: it has within it the components of the history of an idea, as well as the history of how a set of ideas come together in a way that feels natural in spite of massive internal contradictions between them. But this set of ideas is so deeply inflected by the market and by the agenda of its publisher that it cannot escape its particularity. This particularity, in turn, is as much the product of its moment as of its author.

### 2.3 MASS CULTURE TAKES SHAPE

Although magazines had formed a market even before the Civil War, radical changes happened at the end of the nineteenth century that transformed the conditions of their production and distribution. Earlier magazines tended to be very sharply delineated regarding audience, and to attend to that audience as their primary source of income. The best known magazines, including *Harper's* and *The Century*, directed their address toward gentlemen of distinction: the audience was presumed to be educated, cultured and male, wishing to be *informed* rather than *educated*; the address tended to be peer-to-peer, but without the “chumminess” we find in later publications (John H Siddal’s editorials for the *American Magazine* in the 1920s were “from his easy chair” and signed, “Sid.”) (Pendergast 14). *Godey's Lady's Book*, by far the best remembered of the nineteenth-century genteel periodicals aimed at women, was more didactic than the men’s magazines, but still adopted a tone of intimate acquaintance with ladies of some means and privilege; these “mainstream” magazines were “mainline” in their class address, assuming cultural capital, leisure, and interests concomitant with at least moderate wealth. They were also at least moderately expensive, and carried little advertising to speak of.

The contrast between these genteel magazines with their lovely poems and etchings and the “penny papers” whose stories, in whole or in serial, were designed to entertain rushed, rough, and relatively uneducated workers, could not have been more stark. Printed in close columns on cheap stock, these story papers circulated more widely than some critics assumed (or hoped). Many members of the literary and political elite recalled having read in secret the stories of adventure and romance; the pulps formed a crucial (and fondly remembered) part of elite boyhood as well as working-class adulthood. Even as the penny papers of the nineteenth century

evolved into the “pulp” of the twentieth, certain conventions remained: the close print on lousy stock, small ads stacked on top of another at the front and back of the publication; the uninterrupted text inside. The cover price was as low as the quality of production, and whereas the genteel magazines were mostly subscription affairs, the story papers made their money at the newsstands. In both cases, however, the reader was the source of profit, and while advertising was present it was secondary as a source of income and as a priority for the publisher.

Two things happened to change the face of the American magazine market. In 1879, the advent of second-class mail made subscription sales viable for less expensive publications (Schneirov 67); in 1893, Frank Munsey took a gamble that this new subscription market could shift the priorities of his business as a whole and began selling *Munsey’s Magazine* for less than the cost of production (Schneirov 92). His idea – that advertising, rather than unit sales, could be the profit center in a magazine – upended the industry.<sup>2</sup>

Bear with me now as I run some numbers. Although this is in no way a quantitative study, getting specific will help to understand the degree to which the market “broke open” in a very short time. In 1890, circulation of all newspapers and periodicals was 68,147,169 issues. By 1900, 106,889,334 issues were sold; this marked a 58% increase. The rate of increase continued to rise, such that 5 years later, 139,939,229 issues of periodicals – newspapers, magazines and so forth – found a market. Among monthly periodicals, where our focus lies, in 1890 18,632,728 issues were sold; by 1900, 37,869,697; and by 1905, 64,306,155 – more than triple the volume,

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<sup>2</sup> A number of historians have pointed out that although improvements in printing technology were marked, and certainly eased and cheapened magazine production, these technological shifts were in many ways driven by the demands of increasing production, rather than the other way round; in other words, technological improvement was significant but not causative in “the magazine revolution.”

or three magazines for every four people in the United States at that time (Sloane 78).<sup>3</sup> “Simple demographics aided magazine sellers” as well, Zuckerman reminds us. “Between 1890 and 1920, the total US population jumped from almost 63 million to 105.7 million... [T]he literacy rate continued to climb, reaching 94 percent for the total population in 1920” (Zuckerman 33). Between the wars, magazine sales rose even more, fueled by increases in education, income and leisure. The periodicals market dipped during the depression – enough to send many major houses, including Macfadden and Hearst – into financial tumult. And yet, by the early 1940s, magazine sales had increased 41 percent from 1929 (Zuckerman 103).

Following Theodore Greene’s periodization, Schneirov suggests that from 1893-1914, magazines were run by “journalist-entrepreneurs” – writers who became editors and publishers, and who saw the business from that perspective. Advertising agencies were present but their influence was limited, “and efforts to reach a specialized market were sporadic and haphazard,” he says. But after World War I, magazine publication was organized on a much larger scale, and both formatting and content were driven by advertisers and their brokers to a far greater degree (Schneirov 12).

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<sup>3</sup> Schneirov cites these numbers on page 5 of *Dream of a New Social Order*, but his numbers for 1900 are out of alignment with the numbers in *Inland Printer*; I suspect that his attribution of the 1905 figures to 1900 is simply a typo. All the same, these figures are significant: they point not only to a burgeoning market, but a highly lucrative one. The ratio of magazines to Americans indicates that many magazine readers did not feel restricted to a single publication; we could even say it’s likely that if a reader took one magazine, s/he was likely to read more. This is interesting for another reason that may be ancillary to this study, but would seem to merit a mention nonetheless – the fact that neither readers nor advertisers were likely to choose only one magazine to patronize suggests that while competition was fierce among publishers, it was not in fact for a finite readership; the proliferation of publications served only to broaden the market and increase the likelihood that more readers would continue to read more publications. It is more likely, however, that subscribers would not choose more than one magazine in a category; thus a household might subscribe to the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *Sportlife*, but would not be as likely to subscribe to *Ladies’ Home Journal*, *Woman’s Day*, and *House Beautiful*.

Once advertising, rather than issue sales, became the primary source of income for most magazines, magazines became, above all, vehicles for the viewing of advertising. Giving readers what they wanted was of course critical to garnering circulation numbers – and giving advertisers what they wanted meant not only generating circulation but also running stories that were compatible with consumerism, or at least with the products their advertisers were selling. This is not to say that readers were passive or victimized by this strategy, but rather that time and energy were devoted to making magazines commercially viable by making them attractive to readers and advertisers alike. While Pendergast argues that “no charge is harder for the historian to prove than that a magazine acts in collusion with its advertisers” because “no editor left a record admitting that he shaped his magazine’s editorial policy to best present certain products, and no advertiser confessed to planting editorial material suitable to their interests” (131), other historians don’t have the same reservations about making explicit the symbiotic relationship between advertising and content. To some degree the issue is one of language. You won’t find editors “confessing” to “collusion” because they didn’t see it as a problem. Indeed, Richard Ohmann cites Edmund Bok of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, who in the trade publication *Printers’ Ink* “insisted that an editor must be a businessman, must work with the magazine’s business manager ‘like the blades of a pair of shears...; sometimes, I may say, *sotto voce*, -- I think the business office is the biggest blade” (Ohmann 105). Publishers were selling space, not “selling out,” and from the early days when magazines designed advertising in-house for their customers to much later programs of selling space in a series of publications to a single advertising agency to be distributed among its clients, magazines and advertising developed in symbiosis, informing and inflecting one another over time.

Zuckerman notes that some of the first market research studies were conducted by women's magazine publishers, "probing the lives and preferences of readers and aiding advertisers in their investigations of ways to most effectively promote to women. By seeking out advertisers and describing readers in terms of their potential as consumers, women's journals also played a crucial part in... reinforcing women's role as consumer" (Zuckerman 60). Stories differ widely on the origins of market research: the *Journal of Marketing* attributes it to advertising agent WH Ayer, in 1879 (Lockley 733); The American Advertising Hall of Fame credits Charles Parlin of the *Saturday Evening Post*, beginning 1911 (AAF website). Zuckerman suggests it was Curtis in the late nineteenth century (169), and others have pointed to J. Walter Thompson. In any case, it would be fair to say that around the turn of the century the utility of market research became apparent to many people in the industry. Zuckerman guides us to the work of Daniel Pope, who estimated "that total advertising dollars spent in the United States rose from \$190 million in 1890 to \$682 million in 1914" (Zuckerman 60), which is to say that spending on advertising was rising even faster than circulation in these heady years.<sup>4</sup> With such

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<sup>4</sup>Adding to this momentum was the 1917 Excess Profits Tax, which encouraged business to invest rather than report income; advertising was a deductible expense on which businesses leaned heavily. By the time of its repeal in 1921, the value of heavy investment in advertising was undeniable and the relationship between advertising agencies and corporations selling goods and services was firmly cemented (Pendergast 281). This multilateral relationship between government regulation, business, advertising and the media has come to define culture in late modernity; at this moment, as mass culture is just coming into being, we can see the origin story of what seems an ineffable presence, "everywhere and nowhere," as Pendergast says, that has permeated our lives (131). To call it an "ideological state apparatus" seems at this point too limiting and too rigid; Steve Martinot's notion of "ICS" (intermediary control stratum) comes closer to describing the phenomenon, but seems in some ways too conspiratorial to operate effectively for us (Martinot 161). At any rate – in this long moment of transformation, the age some would care to call "Progressive" – systems were coming together for the first time, like the teeth of new gears, to bring into operation a machine in which we have come to live so completely that we can hardly recognize its existence.

heavy investment in advertising, and so much money up for grabs in that burgeoning market, magazine publishers and advertising brokers alike were eager to make a case for themselves.

WH Ayer, J. Walter Thompson and other advertising specialists began in the nineteenth century by seeing advertising as an opportunity and ended, in the twentieth, by seeing it as a science. The market research they and other companies have done has given us perhaps more information about readership than any other single tool. Sorting readers by demographic meant not only steering advertisers to particular magazines. Some magazines, Zuckerman showed, redlined whole neighborhoods from subscription sales in order to preserve the appearance that their audience was entirely professional-middle-class (169). Even so, it would have been impossible to “redline” those audiences at the newsstands – again, we know more about publishers’ intentions than about actual audience. Demographics were not the only axis on which advertisers sorted, however, and we see the consequences in the twentieth century as magazines sought more and more specific niche audiences. Magazines both tap into and create the subcultures they serve, and the work of identifying those cultures, their preferences and antipathies, and really “getting it right” is critical in a business that is as fickle as it is lucrative.

Magazines sought input from their readers by soliciting letters, initiating contests and staging the editor’s column as one side of a dialogue with readers. In part, these solicitations invited readers to feel a sort of membership or camaraderie with the magazine, in order to win and retain subscribers. But editors were also seeking input on how readers received and responded to particular stories, columns, formats or sections.

For the most part, editors and publishers did not use their magazines simply as bully pulpits for their own particular philosophies. “While Walker’s editorials [in *Cosmopolitan*] expressed a clear political opinion,” says Schneirov,

this was not always represented in the pages of the magazine...Articles by Hamlin Garland on 'Homestead and its Perilous Trades' (published shortly after the Pullman strike), were published along with laudatory biographical sketches of Philip D. Armour and the Pinkerton overthrow of the Molly Maguires (December 1894). But perhaps even this inconsistency contributed to *McClure's* popularity (Schneirov 117).

Indeed, ambivalence and contradiction are inherent in the fabric of magazines at this time, marking, as Schneirov notes, a significant departure from the genteel magazines of the nineteenth century.

There seems to be consensus among historians that these magazines were seeking to shape or reshape ideology in a period of transition. Ideology, as an abstract but very present force that naturalizes social relations, exists not in one story or one idea but in arrays of thought, patterns of perception. Because it is not rational, ideology need not be free of contradiction in order to function. In fact, its ability to float atop contradiction (or to weave itself from the tangles of contradiction) is part of its naturalizing function. The new ideology sought to locate identity in the act of consumption rather than in some innate sense of self-constructed morals and behavior, and Pendergast is not alone in positing this as a transition from an ideology of character to one of personality. The new consumerist identity was "highly subjective and malleable," expressing itself through purchases and presentation (Pendergast 140).

Thus, while magazines supported their advertisers, inconsistencies between ads and feature articles were commonplace. Zuckerman pointed to an issue of the *Women's Home Companion* which "carried an article on the dress needs of women, warning against the ill effects of wearing a corset. In the same issue, numerous corset ads appeared. The food editor's column discussing diet and nutrition was surrounded by ads for tempting, high-calorie foods" (Zuckerman 65). This inconsistency was present across the magazine industry, but came in for

special approbation when Macfadden Publications did it. It is precisely this kind of “wobble” that Morris Fishbein of the American Medical Association and others pointed out in trying to paint Macfadden as a greedy hypocrite (Hunt 33). In fact it was the nature of the industry at this point, and came in for little reproach when it occurred in the *Women’s Home Companion* or *Esquire*. The *Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval* and other such gimmicks were created precisely because readers were aware of this discrepancy, and publishers realized that both the product and the magazine could be devalued by it. Without this credibility crisis, such guarantees would not have been necessary. But the fact of this inconsistency did not render the magazines unreadable or even unpalatable, and readers seem not to have been passive consumers of advertising, even in the earliest days of manufacturing desire.

## 2.4 HOW TO LIVE

At a moment of profound social, demographic, technological and psychological transition, magazines played a critical role in generating a sense of community, identity and market. A glimpse at the social landscape at the turn of the century is startling: mass immigration and internal migration; industrial consolidation leading to the proletarianization of artisanal workers and rapid changes in technology – including food production and distribution – all color our backdrop. In 1920, half of Americans were either immigrants or the children of immigrants, and

a significant percentage of those outside that category<sup>5</sup> were geographically or socially displaced. Older answers to the question “how to live” were either unavailable (as kinship networks and village structures were dismantled) or made irrelevant by changing modes of life. How to live and how to make a living were open questions.

It will be important for us to let go of the illusion that the relative prosperity of the first years of the new century reflected some kind of stability. More useful will be to think of the periods from 1897 to 1914, and from 1920 to 1929, as relatively functional periods between depressions – or, more accurately, as periods of expansion punctuated by abrupt contractions. The pressing nature of reader concerns regarding how to live and make a living increased when the economy dampened, but it did not go away – then or now.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Pendergast told the following story, which he in turn read in John Drewry’s 1924 study *Some Magazines and Magazine Makers*:

In 1911, [*American Magazine* owner Joseph] Knapp... offered the editorship of the magazine to the staff member who could come up with the best idea for saving the magazine. The winner of the “contest” was John M. Siddal. His idea, a friend later recounted, “was that people are more interested in themselves than in anything else in the world, that personal problems mean more to the average man and woman than social or community problems.

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<sup>5</sup> “NWNP,” or “native white with native parents,” was an important sociological category at this time (Roediger 78), but clearly disregarded “native” communities of color, including Black, Latino and many southern and Eastern Europeans, who were not catalogued in a way that makes them easy to track in the strange taxonomies of American eugenics, on which more in chapter 3.

<sup>6</sup> In his excellent historical overview beginning *Selling Culture*, Richard Ohmann points to “roughly the middle years of each decade from the 1870s through the 1890s” as marked by severe depression; “fourteen of the twenty five years from 1873 to 1897 were years of depression or recession,” he continues (55), and it’s important to note that these were non-consecutive. While his study stops at the turn of the century we can find numbers corroborating continued instability – albeit mitigated by war trade and other foreign adventures – that made the first part of the twentieth century nearly as unstable as the decades preceding.

That the question, “how to make a living” is more vital than the question, “how to regulate the railroads.” (Pendergast 113, citing Drewry, 151).

There is no question that the question of how to regulate the railroads has consequences in the lived experience of the worker. But to be interested in railroad regulation is to believe that one has some kind of power to make a difference in the circumstances in question. And I think the sense of powerlessness, even despair, among workers has too often been underestimated (and certainly under-recorded. It doesn't make very interesting history, as a rule). Certainly belief in the ability to affect the “big questions” of the day – any day – has everything to do with belief in one's own significance in a bigger picture.

*Physical Culture* takes on the question of “how to live” from the most fundamental level: how do we live with our bodies? Questions about food, sexuality, general health, hygiene, child rearing and exercise – whether to leave the windows open or shut, how much or little physical activity is appropriate for a person at one or another stage of life, even what one's defecatory habits should be like – these issues, and more, are the bread and butter of *Physical Culture* (assuming that the bread is whole grain, and the butter fresh and sweet). From 1899 to the early 1950s, *Physical Culture* brought its readers advice on how to live. This basic premise allowed the magazine to address issues as broad as the health of the nation, along with the health habits of the stars of screen and business, beauty secrets of the well-preserved older woman, and the nature and pursuit of happiness.

The diet advice in *Physical Culture* offered suggestions for healthy eating on a budget and made recommendations for growing, reducing, healing, and revitalizing using food. In big cities and factory towns the availability of fresh and healthy foods was even more limited in the

early twentieth century than it is today. For immigrants and internal migrants alike, there may have been few familiar ingredients available with which to cook. Settlement houses took on the most basic issue of homemaking by teaching methods to “Americanize” a family’s diet, but this left aside the notion of food as medicine. The traditional chicken soup cure may have survived assimilation, but cabbage poultices, herbal teas and tinctures, food combinations or limitations for particular conditions – these were left by the wayside or dismissed as “old wives’ tales”. Beyond Macfadden’s seemingly endless advice about proper eating, as well as his focus on fasting as a tool for healing cannot be overstated. Abstinence is one of the most powerful tools in the Macfadden arsenal, and perhaps the best thing about it is – it’s cheap! Anyone can afford to fast.

## **2.5 THE FELLOW WHO WORKS FOR A WAGE**

But of course *Physical Culture* didn’t stop there. Macfadden offered his appraisal of his audience as “the fellow who works for a wage,” and we read that as “worker,” of course. But we make the very short step from “worker” to “laborer” at our peril. Both the articles and the advertisements in *Physical Culture* offered remediation from the damage caused by a sedentary lifestyle – not a problem for miners, steelworkers, or bricklayers. The sad sacks that peopled the stories of salvation in *Physical Culture* were not injured assembly line workers; they were men who had been rejected by the military as “unfit for service” because they were weak or had flat feet. They were the little guys on the beach, or the fat guys at the dance. We know they were not Ohmann’s

“Professional Middle Class,” because although Macfadden was not above telling the PMC what’s wrong with them (or entertaining them at his health resorts) his penny restaurants and regular features on making healthy eating affordable and how to exercise without equipment, directly challenge the idea that good health was necessarily expensive, or that self-care was a luxury. I would suggest that Macfadden’s audience, the fellow he was talking to and about, worked for a wage not in a factory or a mill, but more likely behind a counter or at a desk. I suspect he was addressing, as much as anyone, the fellow who was neither fully professional nor fully proletarian – the low-wage, white collar worker, whose ranks were rarely organized, whose aspirations and allegiances were with a middle class they would likely never join; who were insufficiently hailed by the left and who often heard that hail as addressing some other guy.

The image of this reader is easy enough to assemble (like an *Evening Graphic* “composograph”) from the stories in the magazine and its advertising, but it is perhaps made most clear by a January, 1926 feature on Bernarr Macfadden himself – “Fit and Happy at 58.” (It is remarkable, and a powerful argument for the strange remedies he promotes, that Macfadden was not a young man at the peak of his success – indeed, he worked in his sixties the way one might expect of a striving entrepreneur twenty years his junior.) Macfadden recounted his “story” in brief, and in this version of his biography (he commissioned two book-length versions, and of course told and retold his story many times across his long career) he re-narrativized his origin story, marking his weakness from his time as an office boy, rather than the consumptive childhood in which he was thrust into foster care after the deprivations of orphanhood and orphanage, years prior. By locating the “scene of the crime” as his sedentary, friendless, indoor life of urban office work, he created an image with which it was easy to connect, and a problem that was easy to solve. On return to farm life, he recounted, he was immediately healthier, but the

farm diet “of bacon and white flour” was not to his advantage; here he pointed to profuse quantities of fresh milk as compensatory and healthful. (Later in the same issue, another article called for towns and villages to provide milk co-ops and programs to ensure that even poor children could receive the fortifying benefits of milk.) His return to the city years later was feasible only because he had learned to apply the principles of physical culture wherever he went.

Physical culture was not play; it was about survival, and secondarily about success. It was a matter of how to live. The *Physical Culture* man emblemized by Macfadden was not a team player. He was not involved in organized sports; he worked out in solitude or at a gym. Ideally, he walked for miles. He was not a union member, although he may have been a family man. And I suspect this reflected the reality of many working-class men at this time; the movements agitating for improvement of their conditions simply did not address them in a way that they could hear -- or, more to the point, did not address the day to day, short term, individualized stressors which the worker was spending most of his time negotiating.

Whether the “therapeutic culture” inaugurated by the literature of self-improvement served to siphon off energy that might otherwise have been used in collective efforts at disrupting an increasingly alienating and exploitative culture is an open question. But I would argue instead that the energy taken up by self-improvement projects was already not a part of larger organizing movements – that the aspirations in particular of the white-collar working class, those derisively referred to as “the striving classes,” were already seen as lost to the left, and beneath the contempt of the privileged.

In contrast, the Labor Man, the figure of the worker in socialist art and fiction, tended to be hyper-masculinized, heavily muscled and large-pawed, moving the world with his great, silent

brawn. The scrawny little man has no place in that image; indeed, in literature and film, he is often characterized as the soulless henchman of faceless capital. Rather than address that man as a villain, *Physical Culture* takes him on as a project. With willingness and hard work, he can be transformed – and the physical transformation will lead, naturally and inevitably, to a transformation in the circumstances of his life.



Figure 5: Thomas Hart Benton, *Steel*, 1928

Just as Pendergast fretted over his inability to prove conclusively what so many readers know to be true about the relationship between advertisers and editors of magazines, we cannot conclusively establish, even if we wanted to, that real *Physical Culture* readers were not union members, or were not solicited by or interested in leftward social movements or even left publications. But it seems neither irrational nor implausible that they formed a welcome audience for the message that any sort of radical change must begin with change of the self. When no

specific information on readers is available, advises Ohmann, “we are left with conjecture based on content, and (perhaps better) on what readership the editors were trying to reach, and what readership they thought they had succeeded in reaching” (222). We know that the popular magazine audience in general was mostly middle-class, but included working-class readers, and particularly the literate, low-income white-collar worker. “These increasingly literate readers were hungry for information... on how to cope with the consequences of ‘progress,’” suggests Schneirov (124), but the project of identity construction was equally important for them, and shaped the magazine market in critical ways. That identity construction would end in the marketplace is an argument made by most of the writers thinking about the rise of the magazine market – but that it would begin with the body was a *Physical Culture* innovation whose importance cannot be overstated.

## **2.6 DISCOVERING WHAT WOMEN WANT – A *TRUE STORY***

The scrawny subject of so many *Physical Culture* stories is not the only audience addressed by the magazine, however. Macfadden’s guest articles and reform-minded editorials often aimed at an audience with greater cultural capital (though, all things being equal regarding both Macfadden’s persona and critical reception of the magazine, he often missed that mark – he was a target of disdain and parody in the contemporary press and historical writings alike).

Women were also sought after as an audience for *Physical Culture*, but then women were a sought-after audience in general. Two contradictory impulses in magazine publishing operated simultaneously: on one hand, the advertising revolution, increasing refinement in market

research, and a proliferation of magazines in the growing market led to increasing specialization of publications, both in terms of increasingly focused interest groups and in terms of targeted demographic address. On the other hand, the desire to cement subscriptions led many specialized magazines to include sections for family members – such that women’s magazines might have a games page for children and a “men’s column,” and magazines aimed at primarily at a male audience would carry a “women’s section.” Women’s magazines thrived in the early twentieth century, and as women were increasingly understood to be the primary consumers in a household, addressing them as an audience became a priority for advertisers, as well (Zuckerman 40).

Macfadden’s persistence in courting a female readership was twofold in its purpose. First, of course, his sense of mission: he was serious about the importance of physical culture, and understood that the homemaker was the key to ensuring that principles of good health would be followed in diet and behavior for all members of a family. Macfadden was in earnest about his cause, and could hardly be accused of prevarication on this front. However, it would be foolish to deny the financial motivation of reaching out to women as an audience for the magazine. Billing *Physical Culture* as a family publication justified the publication of photos of women engaging in strenuous endeavors in varying degrees of undress (a policy which certainly attracted attention in the fight against obscenity). And advertising addressing women was a significant segment of *Physical Culture’s* income. Winning women was winning both the family and the market.

It is interesting to track the progression of the magazine’s “voice;” whereas in the beginning, Macfadden created a number of pseudonymous contributors who spoke with an overbearing pomposity, the magazine gained popularity when Macfadden started writing in his

own voice and inviting readers to do the same. There were always widely known and highly regarded guest contributors – from sexologist Havelock Ellis to socialist Upton Sinclair – but their actual space in the magazine is negligible. The bulk of each issue was plain-spoken text, often credited to the publisher, written by staff unfettered by bylines (or writing under multiple pseudonyms, but growing increasingly uniform in tone) or credited to readers (Hunt 27). We see attempts at different moments to shift the address of the magazine; sometimes billing itself as “The Personal Problem Magazine” and at others “The Magazine of Efficiency, Personality and Mentality.” The various subheadings and cover illustrations point to a variety of hails, sometimes contradictory. The endlessly variable cover price, too, indicated uncertainty about audience and address.

In 1919, Macfadden Publications launched a new magazine derived, according to its publisher, from the popularity of the advice columns and reader letters in *Physical Culture*. Shifting the focus from seeking advice to telling one’s story for the edification (or titillation) of others – from interaction to spectacle – reader contributions made up the whole of *True Story*. The degree to which these stories were solicited, edited or otherwise “tweaked” to suit a growing audience is unknown. What is certain is that *True Story* magazine, pitched to and supposedly written by women, made Macfadden’s fortune and changed the magazine market – and indeed, mass media – forever. The very different focus of *True Story* meant that it did not “siphon off” the female audience for *Physical Culture* – this was not a rival publication by any means – but rather capitalized on a form of address that *Physical Culture* had found to be attractive.

Although the story told and retold about the origin of *True Story* is the marital dispute that followed – Mary Macfadden claimed in the divorce that the enormously successful publication was her idea, whereas Macfadden Publications editor-in-chief and Macfadden

biographer Fulton Oursler averred that Macfadden had first floated the idea for the magazine years before, when the Macfaddens were still courting (and before Oursler knew either of them) – really, this comes down to unverifiable gossip (Adams 105). What is interesting about the origin of *True Story*, regardless whose idea it was, is the level of sophistication involved in “reading” the audience of *Physical Culture*. Someone – it may have been Bernarr or Mary Macfadden, or a clever staffer – was able to discern from the letters received, and the primitive indications of reader response in surveys, contests and mail not only that the letters were popular, but what it was about the letters that made them “work” for readers.

This intuition for what would work – and an uncanny sense of the zeitgeist – marked the career of the remarkable fitness impresario who claimed never to read anything he didn’t publish himself<sup>7</sup> (Fabian 54). The letters in *Physical Culture* tend to be very much of the “problem-solution” school – people writing in about their success on their new diets, or their problems with piles – but what Macfadden Publications recognized was people’s interest in each other – in the “real life” stories of heartache and romance, of missteps and redemption. In addition to the debt *True Story* owed to the romance pulps and story papers, the magazine responded to the Siddal formula of informing its readership *how to live*.

Heir to the voyeuristic impulses of the *Physical Culture* reader and precursor to the reality shows currently clogging our airwaves, *True Story* managed to avoid undue attention from the censors by hiring an advisory board including teachers and clergymen, and ending its

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<sup>7</sup> Fabian is following Mary Macfadden and Emile Gauvreau in this claim. The evidence is otherwise, but this characterization is compelling and consistent with classist caricatures of Macfadden. It is not unlikely that he made this claim himself in hubristic moments, but he regularly references authorities in his editorials and his books even if he does not cite them in any formal or scholarly way.

scandalous stories with a moral or a redemption. But it wasn't the endings its readers were after – the racy stories carried a powerful emotional charge packaged in romantic adventure, fall and redemption stories whose repetition was apparently part of their draw. 3.5 million readers, at the height of its popularity, mostly female and mostly working-class, proved that there was a strong market among those women who had previously been written off as economically uninteresting.

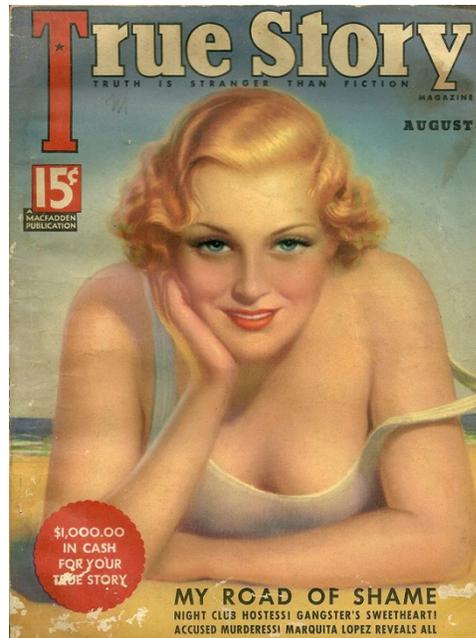


Figure 6: True Story, August 1935

Although *True Story* made Macfadden's fortune, it was never his favorite publication, and he seems to have given it relatively little thought. One thing Macfadden was very good at (in fact, this may be the heart of his genius) was delegating tasks to the right people. The history of *Physical Culture* itself, and Macfadden Publications more generally, is littered with notable names and long-tenured employees. Macfadden made it worthwhile to tolerate his shenanigans and the dubious reputations of his various publications not only by rewarding workers financially

but by giving them the autonomy to do their jobs creatively and well. At *True Story*, the editors worked with their “advisory board”<sup>8</sup> but were otherwise virtually free to do with the publication what they would. Fulton Oursler, Editor-in-Chief of Macfadden Publications, worked almost entirely from home (Adams 179), and was given leverage to buy, create and shut down publications according to his desires. (*Liberty* magazine, a later acquisition, was almost entirely Oursler’s baby. The few visible Macfadden touches included the addition of estimated reading times on the stories, such that even perusing a magazine could be made into a workout, and occasional articles on the importance of healthy lifestyles.)

The creation of the *Evening Graphic*, a tabloid so yellow it might have made Hearst blush, has been attributed to many motives. Interestingly, it’s often associated with Macfadden’s political aspirations, although the reality is that the *Graphic* was so scandalous that it could not possibly have helped Macfadden’s reputation. Although it is remembered as a spectacular failure, neither turning a profit nor contributing to Macfadden’s ambitions, in fact the *Graphic* was innovative not only in its approach to visual media (pioneering use of the “Composograph” — the partly staged, heavily collaged photo – to draw an audience) but also in its discovery of journalistic talent: among the figures who started at the *Graphic* are Walter Winchell and Ed Sullivan, two powerful doorkeepers of mass culture later in the twentieth century. In its eight

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<sup>8</sup> The *True Story* advisory board, composed of clergy and other community leaders, served to quell the worst anxieties of the censors and to provide at least a veneer of respectability over a magazine that might at first blush appear to be entirely lascivious. The notion that *True Story* was a didactic or moralizing publication was barely supported by its content but broadly substantiated by its structure.

year run (1924-1932) it managed to lower the bar on news coverage but to set the stage, as it were, for entertainment and gossip coverage for decades to come.<sup>9</sup>



Figure 7: Infamous “Composographs” from the *Evening Graphic*: Valentino and Caruso together in heaven; dramatic moment from the 1925 Rhinelander divorce trial in which the spurned bride, accused of “passing,” was ordered to show her breasts to the jury as proof of her race.

## 2.7 WEAKNESS IS A CRIME

Whereas Richard Ohmann’s work on magazines at the turn of the century established the importance of media in creating an identity specifically for the professional middle class – and, dialogically, the importance of that class in shaping the magazines that served them – David Roediger points out that class identity across the spectrum is defined by the media that it helps to shape. And these subcultural identities became increasingly important in the twentieth century,

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<sup>9</sup> The story of the *Evening Graphic* is recounted in the Macfadden biographies by Hunt, Ernst and Adams with little variation. All three point to the groundbreaking disreputability of the production, even as they attribute Macfadden’s motives in creating it to his political ambitions. Whether this dissonant reading is consequent on the biographers’ reliance on one another’s work, a belief in Macfadden’s tone-deafness regarding the populace to which he sold, or a misreading of him as trying to emulate, rather than compete with Hearst, it seems regrettable.

as prior notions of community and kinship networks were steadily eroded. Building identity through consumerism and image construction was critical to the project of the early men's magazines, according to Pendergast, and by the end of the twentieth century the notion of identity was totally subsumed into the consumerist project. It's Schneirov who was able to parse these ideas into a useful construct when he reminded us that the popular magazine was "multivocal," "in some aspects [seeking] to blur cultural boundaries that divided men and women, middle class and working class, native-born and immigrant, while in other ways they reinforced the prejudices and sense of cultural hierarchy of their readers" (261).

Schneirov asserts that mass culture in the early twentieth century built on a core ideology of "abundance, social control and social justice." Citing Henry Adams' writing on the dynamo, he suggests that "underlying all three dreams was an emphasis on activity, motion and energy... to be found in electric power, in the body... in the department stores, skyscrapers and immigrant ghettos; in the fast motion of trains, planes and automobiles; and in the depths of the psyche" (Schneirov 258). This dynamism of the body is nowhere more enthusiastically celebrated than in *Physical Culture*. The notion of body as machine is not unique to this magazine, nor is the notion that wellness is a moral obligation. Macfadden manages to encapsulate multiple popular discourses into a single, simple message: "Weakness is a Crime: Don't Be a Criminal." This slogan, broadcast on the covers of many *Physical Culture* issues, brought together the moral imperative of fitness with the belief that readers had more control over the condition of their bodies than they knew -- or than others believed.

Of course, the term "physical culture" was in wide usage well before Macfadden named his magazine after it. Beginning in the 1860s, physical culture generally entailed some connection between education and exercise, whether that meant exercise programs in schools,

gymnasia or as a form of health care. Countless experts in health and hygiene offered advice, opened sanitariums, wrote books or pamphlets or magazines, and lectured to a variety of audiences, all hungry for instruction on how to live. A combination of factors brought physical culture into vogue, and we'll talk more about this movement in Chapter Three. But its relation to print culture is grounded in the increasing popularity of "the strenuous life," as Roosevelt would have it; the increasing presence of athletic programs in schools and colleges (and the increasing presence of the middle class in college; more and more, the additional education, certification and networking that colleges and universities provided was one of the ways in which the middle class perpetuated itself, and "the sporting life" was increasingly a part of the college experience). For Macfadden, body mechanics were inseparable from body politics, and one reason he has been so dreadfully mis-read over the years, I believe, is that his commitment to body politics and a powerful rhetoric of agency was remarkably out of sync with his cultural moment.

Although physical culture existed at the time the magazine was created, Macfadden laid claim to that name by creating an idea of physical development that needed neither equipment nor institutional support to succeed. It was a very individual endeavor. And in this, it differed from many of the fitness movements – and athletic publications – of its time. *Physical Culture* also differed from sporting magazines which, then as now, addressed an audience of the already involved, whether as observers or participants; rare is the football magazine which tries to teach its readers the basic rules of the game. But *Physical Culture* was constantly teaching how to walk, how to eat, how to exercise properly, how to raise a family – it intended to reach those who were not yet fluent in the discourse of physical culture, as well as those who were already shaping their lives according to its principles.

## 2.8 “DAMAGED GOODS:” SYPHILIS CRIPPLES *PHYSICAL CULTURE*

Macfadden wasn't the first or last magazine publisher to run a story on venereal disease, but the story in an early issue of *Physical Culture* was specific enough in its details that the crusading postmaster Anthony Comstock could finally make the case he'd been trying to build against Macfadden; he charged the publisher with the circulation of “lewd, obscene and lascivious materials” (Adams 81) and promptly banned the circulation of any of his books or materials through the mails.

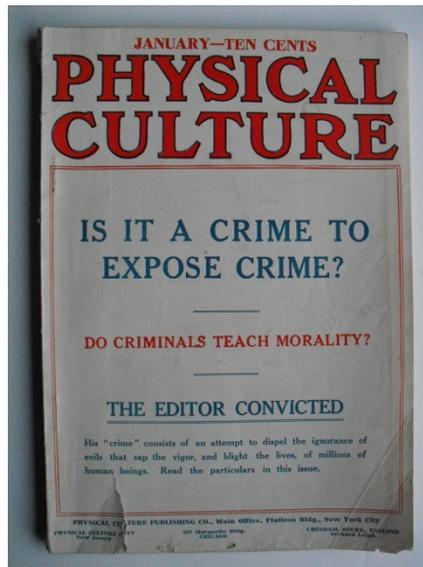
Like Macfadden, Comstock the postal inspector was on a crusade, and like Macfadden, he loved his cause only a little more than he loved publicity. In some senses, they were made for each other. Whereas Macfadden was certainly committed to his own success as entrepreneur, it could be argued that he was even more committed to evangelizing his message about the benefits of physical culture as a lifestyle: more than once his determination to carry stories on venereal disease or to celebrate the body in pageants and contests ran afoul of the obscenity laws that bore Comstock's name; more than once, he risked his personal fortune on expensive lawsuits defending his right to publish and mail materials regarding the beauty, pleasure and vulnerability of the human body.

Interestingly, *Ladies Home Journal* and other “respectable” publications found ways to run stories on the dangers of syphilis and the role of education in prevention without ending up on the wrong side of the obscenity laws. *Ladies' Home Journal* ran articles with an educational supplement for which readers could send away – without attracting the censure visited upon *Physical Culture*. Whether this was in consequence of Macfadden's precedent, and the other activists working to make sex education acceptable, or evidence that similar material could be

treated very differently depending on context is unclear. Likely, both are true: Macfadden's calamitous legal battles did, in fact, help to pry open the door to frank conversations about sexuality, and class was a significant factor in the determination of what constituted obscenity. The same subject was addressed in the stately *Ladies Home Journal* in 1906 without arousing the interest of the censors; editor Edward Bok is widely credited as the first to use the word "syphilis" in a popular magazine. For scrappy, scandalous Macfadden to address a working class audience in reference to this difficult subject was simply beyond the pale, as it were.

Macfadden and Comstock went a few rounds in 1905, Macfadden coming out the victor; but in 1907, Comstock finally had his win: a *Physical Culture* story that dealt frankly with the topic of venereal disease was found to be obscene. A series of appeals followed, all ultimately unsuccessful and very expensive. While certainly Macfadden published his share of cheesecake over the years, and railed against "prudery" as the cause of any number of personal and national ills, the legal fees incurred in some of these challenges might have been seen as one more cost of doing business. But for Macfadden, this engagement was a matter of principle, worth risking everything he had built. By the time it was over in 1911, Macfadden had spent all of his resources, lost his marriage, sold off sanitariums and restaurants – and needed a rest. After years of hearings, trials and appeals on the obscenity case, Macfadden's legal bills were far more punitive than the fines upheld on appeal. Macfadden left his magazines in place under the stewardship of his able managers, folded his beloved (failing) *Physical Culture City* and departed for a long tour of England, where he had enjoyed his first real success ten years earlier (Adams 83).

What is most interesting about all of this is Macfadden's endless experimentation: he was always willing to jiggle the formula, to start and end businesses, to open and close magazines.<sup>10</sup> His energy and willingness to reinvent himself or any of his projects is remarkable, and it makes tracking his oeuvre, and his adventures, very challenging.



**Figure 8: January 1907 Physical Culture cover: “His crime consists of an attempt to dispel the ignorance of evils that sap the vigor and blight the lives of millions of human beings. Read the particulars in this issue.”**

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<sup>10</sup> I have seen, briefly, an issue of a magazine *For Men With Fat Wives* in the hands of a Macfadden collector, which has never appeared in any of the bibliographies I've found; the magazine Eleanor Roosevelt was hired to edit, *Babies, Just Babies*, couldn't have lasted a year. An effort to fully reconstruct the Macfadden stable would be its own project, and I actually wonder if it would be possible at all. But after *True Story* came *True Crime*, *True Detective*, etc – along with a series of sporting magazines (including the once-formidable *Athletic World*), daily newspapers from Wyandotte to New Haven, *The Graphic*, *Liberty* and dozens more. Many were existing publications Macfadden purchased; others were created from whole cloth. Some lasted only for an issue or two, while others ran for many years. Remarkably, *True Story* is still in print, although it was sold in 2004. Macfadden Communications Group is still extant, publishing such doorbusters as *Pizza Today* and *The Pet Aisle*, along with a smattering of other business-to-business titles. The number and variety of publications under the Macfadden masthead at one time or another is truly staggering.

## 2.9 THE EVERYMAN AND THE *UBERMENSCH*

Macfadden sought reader participation in the many contests he staged for fit families, physical culture beauties, and strongmen. It was through one such contest – while in his self-imposed exile in England – that he met his wife Mary, and through another that he discovered the brawny young man who would become Charles Atlas. But it would be wrong to consider these exemplary readers – the contestants – to be “normative” in any sense. Of course it would not be realistic to imagine an audience of tens of thousands of *ubermenschen*. And neither would it have served Macfadden’s purpose, because he was most decidedly not preaching to the converted: above all else, Macfadden was an evangelist for his cause, and was determined to change lives. That did not (necessarily or primarily) mean breeding a race of supermen; rather, it was ordinary men who could most benefit from his instruction. Between the 98-pound-weakling and Charles Atlas lay a vast market of improvable, if not perfectible, bodies – in need of assistance and willing to part with fifteen cents to get it.

In considering Macfadden we cannot underestimate his true belief in his message, and his drive to promulgate that message, which subsumed all else – indeed, his financial demise in the ‘teens and again in the forties was largely a result of his monomania regarding his beliefs about health and vitality (his narcissism, infidelity and hubris may also have played a role in his final ouster). The genius of proposing or purporting readers as writers, and consumers as creators, was precisely the message conveyed regarding physical culture as a practice: that it was available to anyone, that everyone could benefit, that the results would be measurable improvement in all areas of life regardless where one began. What Macfadden seemed only partly to recognize was the degree to which the appeal of such a message was limited to those

who were near the bottom; for those with even a little bit of privilege, the desire to protect and naturalize their position precluded such a powerfully democratizing idea.

This analysis is, of course, at complete odds with most readings of Macfadden as a force of the hard right and a friend to fascism. The evidence certainly exists to support that image of him: he was a friend to Mussolini, even training some of his troops at one point,<sup>11</sup> and a bitter opponent of the New Deal. In order to make sense of any kind of political or ideological repositioning of Macfadden, it is essential to redraw some political lines. This is important not only in understanding *Physical Culture*, but to make sense of the larger politics of the historical moment in question and, to a certain degree, to make sense of the present.

What Mussolini and Macfadden shared was myriad: belief in the power of the individual as part of a greater whole; belief in physical strength as at the core of the nation; masculinity as a tool of salvation; and care of the self as husbandry of the racialized nation. And yet, to call Macfadden a fascist is to ignore the strongly individualist set of his theories. I would suggest instead that fascist ideologies and practices were popular across America in the 1920s and even moreso in the early 1930s. Macfadden was an uncanny weathervane; he reflected, rather than created, cultural trends – even as he averred that he read nothing, engaged with no

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<sup>11</sup> The story goes that Mussolini invited Macfadden to review his troops in 1930, when Macfadden was in Italy. “Well, what do you think?” Mussolini asked the physical culturist. Macfadden responded that he thought the Italian troops were fat, and subsequently trained a division of them at his boys’ school in Tennessee (Adams 164). The “cult of Mussolini” in America is under-reported and under-recognized. But even those who are aware of Mussolini’s US following (particularly among the business leaders of the time) are unaware of the fact that his troops were actually drilled (and slimmed down on a milk diet) on Tennessee soil. Eight years later, Mussolini would ally with Hitler – but prior to that fatal decision, Mussolini was absolutely not seen as a threat to United States security or interests. Still, the temerity of Macfadden to talk back to Il Duce – and to involve himself so directly in the welfare of the Italian military – speaks not only to his radical arrogance, but to the degree to which he simply ignored the rules of “polite society.” His political intuition was much less accurate than his sense of what would raise hackles – and draw press.

popular culture besides what he created, and cared not for the demands of polite society (Fabian 52).

And yet it must be noted that Macfadden did hire Sylvester Viereck, who was later arrested as a German spy, to write and consult on some of his magazines. It is unclear whether the connection between the two of them was either direct or ideological; William Hunt, in his biography *Body Love*, suggests that Macfadden dismissed Viereck's previous German sympathies (he had been arrested during the Great War, as well) as unimportant, "as did many other important men" to whom Oursler spoke (Hunt 182). In retrospect, Oursler blamed Macfadden, and Mary Macfadden blamed Oursler, for the decision to hire Viereck to advise on *Liberty* in the 1930s, but in any case it was here that Viereck published his notorious interview with Adolf Hitler. Nonetheless, Viereck was not prosecuted until the 1940s, and Macfadden was of course out of leadership at Macfadden Publications well before then. Affiliation with Viereck did not impact the reputations of Macfadden or Oursler at the time. But does it now tell us something crucial about their politics?

I think it is critically telling, not only about their politics but about the politics of the age: it was easier to ignore than to address such misalliances, and barring the overt hate speech of anti-Semitism and racism more generally, the basic principles of fascism were not unwelcome or unthinkable to many Americans at the time. The natural outcomes of eugenics, sometimes offered as "the dreadful implication" or "the terrible consequence" of such thinking, was nonetheless seen as a kind of collateral damage, a regrettable afterthought to the necessary, if difficult, demands placed upon a responsible society by the inevitabilities of progress. It is not unusual to see genocide discussed in these terms in the 1920s and prior: the notion that inferior

racism would simply “give way” to their conquerors and that the unfit genetic lines then disappear was seen as a part of the mechanism of human evolution.

Regarding the spectre of fascism with distaste or a belief that it was fundamentally, if undefinably, un-American was not unusual at this time, but fascism was not yet regarded with the horror and revulsion with which it met after the war. The fear of communism was much greater, and the fascists were positioning themselves not only as the antithesis of communism but as the force that would protect the West from its pernicious spread. So even an overtly fascist writer offering useful or interesting text repudiating communism might reasonably find a place in an American mainstream news publication --- viz., Viereck’s interview with Hitler. Whether or not Macfadden Publications was on board with the full Hitlerian program, the devotion of fascist movements to physical culture made them allies in at least that respect. Taken in 1923 but published in 1932, Viereck’s interview included this juicy morsel:

“What,” I continued my cross-examination, “are the fundamental planks of your program?”

“We believe in a healthy mind in a healthy body. The body politic must be sound if the soul is to be healthy. Moral and physical health are synonymous.”

“Mussolini,” I interjected, “said the same to me.”

Hitler beamed (Viereck 1932).

In the early years of the magazine, and to some degree throughout its run, a number of progressive and even socialist writers – including George Bernard Shaw, Upton Sinclair, Jack London, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman – published in *Physical Culture*. But particularly on issues of the body, the categories left and right don’t serve as usefully as they might, or as we might want them to. Indeed, it could be argued, those we might be most inclined to define as

vehemently “left” or “right” share some key assumptions regarding the relationship between the body, the subject and the state.

Left and right, conversations regarding the constitution of Man frequently assumed that some men were not created equal. Bernarr Macfadden would seem to fit squarely in the wrong category: born to an alcoholic and a tubercular, he was a sickly, underprivileged, unwanted child. His was exactly the kind of birth that crusaders like Margaret Sanger sought to avert, and exactly the sort of upbringing thought by eutheicists to “breed” criminality: undersocialization, undereducation, underutilization. That is to say, he was neither loved, nor taught, nor successfully farmed out as labor: he moved from one apprenticeship to another, from an uncle’s farm to an auntie’s boardinghouse to an office and back again to the farm, never thriving or, apparently, making much of an impression. That he found a way to restore his health – and made a fortune at it – seemed to him not the result of his own exceptional intelligence, or physical gifts, or even luck: it was simple determination, and a great deal of dedicated effort applied to a single goal.

The attraction of some individualist rhetoric is not simply an appeal to selfishness. On the contrary, it may be the only rhetoric which can offer hope to the subject whose position is outside the trajectory of traditional uplift or exceptionalist narratives, based as they are on an assumption of the fundamental soundness of the subject. The porousness of the class system, limited as it is, depends on a subject’s willingness to conform to its models of striving and its models of success. Macfadden unquestionably succeeded. He was for a time not only outrageously wealthy but also a very public figure – and yet he absolutely eschewed the trappings of bourgeois society. As a result, his simple presence disrupted some commonsense notions about success and class, and by extension about fitness and possibility.

## 2.10 (RE-)WRITTEN ON THE BODY

When the discourse of self-improvement is entrained with that of class mobility, a strange enthymeme follows: if class is written on the body, then changing the text of the body will change class. If this logic seems strange or incomplete, it is necessary only to refer back to historical context: in the economically tumultuous years before 1930, and the desperate decade that followed, any narrative that offered to increase one's control over his or her location in the shifting social order was welcomed. For many members of the "white" working class, subject production was not a passive process: embedded in the notion of self-improvement is a strange kind of agency: the notion that one can change oneself, not just at the surface but deeply, constitutively, and in doing so one can change his or her social and economic position.

An example might clarify this. The June 1930 issue looks a little different from others of that year, but this is not indicative of a real editorial shift. On the cover, rather than the usual specimen of physical culture in full flower (women in swimsuits, muscle men flexing, Macfadden in some state of undress) a series of gouache sketches of happy, healthy babies tumble down the left hand side of the page; a banner on the right proclaims a number of headline stories about healthy eating on a budget, a celebrity article by health-advocate-doctor Sir Arbuthnot Lane, and the following: "Walking Made This Milkman President of \$200,000,000 Business."

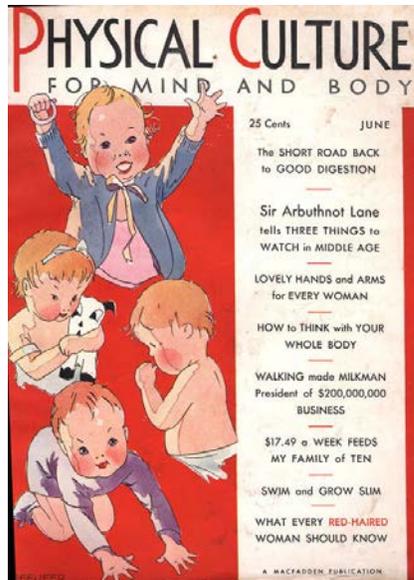


Figure 9: Physical Culture, June 1930

The two-page spread describes the career of Harry Cronk, president of Borden’s Dairy, as entirely owing to his practice of physical culture. “Says that He Owe his High Executive Position not to Unusual Ability but to his Exceptional Physical Fitness and Driving Energy by which He Is ‘Always On The Job’” reads the subheading (25). Deep in the article comes this description of its subject: “When you walk into his office... you see a man who is six feet tall, weighs 170 pounds, who is clear of eye, brisk of step and direct of speech – not an executive who rode to success on a spavined horse or sputtering automobile, but one who walked here on the sturdy legs of good health, and who finds his keenest zest in encouraging the ten thousand employees of the organization which he directs to participate in outdoor, health-giving exercise.”

In a very theatrical show of humility, Cronk explains his unexceptionality:

That’s all there is to it. I’m just an ordinary human being who was lucky enough to have built up a solid foundation of good health because it was necessary for me to keep out in the open with a lot of exercise when I was a boy, and who has been fortunate enough to keep it up since so the foundation wouldn’t crumble to pieces beneath me – that and the fact that I have always had

enough confidence in the product I have been handling all my life to drink a lot of it myself. As far back as I can remember I have always drunk at least a quart of milk each day... I always avoid rich foods and stick to the simple, plain diet of my boyhood days... So you see I'm still a milkman: I walk as much as possible each day, eat plain food, and drink a lot of milk (25).

At issue in *Physical Culture* is not the enormity of Cronk's wealth or success, but precisely its naturalness. He explains,

Success isn't an achievement – it's what a man does before attaining success that constitutes an achievement and success is just something that is hanging around waiting for him and that he can't possibly get away from if he works diligently for it (25).

Cronk's success is entirely due to his program of exercise – which is free (he is an avid walker) – and diet – which is very inexpensive (he eschews rich food and drinks milk). The preceding article in the issue puts the price of milk at about twelve cents a quart (23).

Over the course of the issue, articles describe how to feed a family on a budget, improve the appearance of the hands (a telltale signifier of labor/leisure, and a frequent subject in *Physical Culture*) and improve one's vitality. Advertisements are almost entirely for health or self-improvement products, but run as far afield as study courses that help to correct accented or incorrect speech: the audience, it is clear, seeks to change. *Physical Culture* readers are encouraged to think about ability and fitness: that is, not just questions of disease avoidance and correction, but of overhaul of the Self in order to make it a better product in a competitive marketplace.

This message – that good health is the root of success, and available to anyone regardless of origin or current condition – enormously broadens the field for class mobility, and it shifts the requirements for that mobility away from the acquisition of cultural or social capital, away from assimilation and imitation of the styles and lifeways of the ruling class, and back to fundamental

body practices: diet, exercise, elimination. This contrasts sharply with the dominant discourse in the magazines of the “professional middle class” – those Ohmann describes as in possession of a certain set of aspirations, not only of material success but also of a kind of legitimacy as members of the petite bourgeoisie.

In some magazines, aspirational literature – how to get ahead in business – is offered frankly. *The New Success*, for example, began in 1918 with the intention of reaching out to women as well as people of color – anyone, really, who might be striving for self-improvement and a place in the new business universe. But advertisers saw the magazine differently than its creators, and flooded the pages with ads appropriate to the striving, improving “business man” – thereby shifting its address. Shepherded by motivational writer Orison Swett Marden, *Success* ended abruptly with Marden’s death in 1924. But in its six-year run, it set a type which, like *Physical Culture*, shaped a market that would follow. In its pages, Marden expounded on “personality, appearance and self-realization” as the means to a new masculinity and a new viability in a shifting marketplace (Pendergast 123).

In other publications, lessons in the new rules for success in the transforming culture came in coded forms: home tours in *Ladies Home Journal* gave a sense of what a properly appointed domestic sphere included (and, as importantly, excluded); men’s magazines including *Vanity Fair* and *Esquire* taught proper forms even as they disavowed such teaching and learning as a practice. The attempts of the “striving classes” to better themselves were the subject of frequent derision, even though the audiences of these magazines were overwhelmingly the newly “arrived” or striving themselves. Pendergast cites a Robert Benchley review of Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* as a “trademark example” of this supercilious tone.

“Mocking Veblen for coming so late to the idea that consumption drives the culture of the upper class, Benchley writes,

It is the private opinion of the reviewer that Dr Veblen wrote this originally for *Vanity Fair*, to be used as the advertisement for the magazine which is usually run on the page immediately preceding the frontispiece. Or, perhaps Dr Veblen has been writing the *Vanity Fair* advertisements all along, who knows? Listen: The growth of punctilious discriminations as to the qualitative excellence in eating, drinking, etc., presently affects not only the manner of life, but also the training and intellectual activity of the gentleman of leisure. He is no longer simply the aggressive male – the man of strength, resource and intrepidity. *In order to avoid stultification he must also cultivate his tastes, for it soon becomes incumbent upon him to discriminate with some nicety between the noble and ignoble in consumable goods. He becomes a connoisseur in creditable viands of various degrees of merit, in manly beverages and trinkets, in seemly apparel and architecture, in weapons, games, dances and the narcotics.* The cultivation of the aesthetic faculty requires time and application, and the demands made upon the gentlemen in this direction therefore tend to change his life of leisure into a more or less arduous application to the business of learning how to live a life of ostensible leisure in a becoming way.” *A copy of Vanity Fair will do all this and more for you, is the logical ending to that paragraph.*” (Robert Benchley, *The Dullest Book of the Month, Vanity Fair*, April 1919, italics orig, cited in Pendergast 138).

Later, the Depression would reshape representations of masculinity, as the contracting marketplace for workers and goods meant that people could no longer measure themselves against the yardstick of success and consumption. The perseverance of the body mattered particularly at that point, inasmuch as there are times when it is all a subject has left. In physical culture as a movement and *Physical Culture* the magazine, the notion that the body is the site of making or unmaking success was fundamental. In a post-crash comic-strip style ad that ran in *Physical Culture* in June 1934, a man who has been laid off from his job morosely watches his wife cut biscuits and wonders what will be next for them. A flashback panel reveals that Bob was

fired because of his dreadful body odor; acquisition of Lifebuoy soap had him back at work – and his loving wife out of her Mother Hubbard. Consumption is key to remaking the body, and remaking the body is essential for entrance into the modern workplace.

Immigration and in-migration, the movement of so many people to urban environments, especially on the east coast – engendered a massive proletarianization of people who had previously worked in artisanal or farm economies, less dependent on money and appearance. This shift meant a change in the relationship to the body as well. Increasing numbers of men and women were employed as shop clerks, office workers, and others in the emerging service economy, giving appearance new importance even for low wage workers. For factory workers and skilled laborers, physical strength had always mattered, but the notion that the individual could change his fate not just as a member of a class or union, but by engaging with the new rhetoric of personality – meant likewise that appearance mattered, as well as actual prowess.<sup>12</sup>

In the pages of *Physical Culture*, the working class is not named explicitly; what is constructed is not a self-conscious class identity as much as a demographic, marked by a series of practices inside the marketplace and out of it. *Physical Culture* suggests that one’s practices in one’s most intimate moments determine one’s relationship to others and the market. Blood may or may not “tell” (viz., the notion that masturbation manifested as illness, endlessly repeated in

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<sup>12</sup>This is not to devalue or minimize the role of unionization in workers’ lives, or to suggest that this individualist rhetoric actually resulted in great change in the lives of many workers – but that it was the key not to improvement of conditions in a given workplace but to escape. The little porosity available in the class hierarchy at this point was tethered to the ability to appear to already be a member of the class one aspired to – as if one had been misplaced at the beginning, but were now restored to one’s rightful position. Thus the intricate rules of social behavior serve as litmus tests, at every turn, of class identity. The new magazines of which Ohmann writes are at once carefully teaching and instantiating the rules of the new professional middle class. That a character like Macfadden managed to bust through the social barriers and make a place for himself among his “betters” only reinforces the norms of the class by setting them in such stark relief.

conduct and health books) but *Physical Culture* takes this notion further through repetition as much as exaggeration. The link between body-practices and fungibility is much more overt than in other publications aimed primarily at men – though women had long been told that their practices would impact their value on the marriage market.

“By the mid-1920s,” Pendergast tells us, “the cultural imperatives of youth, consumerism, personality and self-improvement echoed through the old magazines in odd ways” (112). The result is an amplification of discontinuity as a new ideology coalesced. This manifested in a series of imperatives, offered in advertising as well as editorial content. In 1915, Zuckerman tells us, Grace Mildred’s Culture Course insisted, “Beauty is a duty. Make yourself as Beautiful as Possible” whereas Dagget and Ramsdell suggested in ads for their Perfect Cold Cream that, “Beauty is an asset. Cultivate it” (Zuckerman 74). Each has the same syntax as Macfadden’s notorious masthead imperative: “Weakness is a Crime. Don’t be a Criminal” which, of course, alternated with the marginally softer “Sickness is a Sin. Don’t be a Sinner.” That the statement derived from a context in which advertising and promotional materials had yet to experiment with subtlety does not minimize the shock value of its declaration. Self-improvement was not just the road to success, not just a good idea – it was actually a moral obligation, and failure to honor it as such was criminal, sinful – a shame.

Schneirov interestingly suggested that the remedies for neurasthenia in the genteel tradition were “antimodern” – simplifying life, retreating to the private sphere or to rural domains; creating or trying to recapture a sense of community that was pre-industrial, low-impact and socially homogenous. In popular magazines, on the contrary, health could be restored through “therapeutically encountering new sources of abundant energy” (Schneirov 131). The extensive use at the turn of the century of vibrators and electrical current for such purposes

certainly seems to support this this line of thought. *Physical Culture*, however, brought the modern and antimodern approaches together, both supporting and subverting each in turn. On the one hand, the utopian Physical Culture City purported to “recapture” small town life in its planned community outside Spotswood, New Jersey,<sup>13</sup> but instead made a parody and a spectacle of it: tourists would come from miles around to gawk at the nudists, and Macfadden himself was living with his wife Marguerite, but carrying on a rather torrid affair during his time there. (Many tenants in the community found the high costs and hard labor of roadbuilding and construction abusive rather than restorative (Hunt 50); the rural idyll, it seems, was only healing when one had staff at hand.) At the same time, however, dynamism, pep, energy, vigor and power are all keywords throughout *Physical Culture*; the magazine was never nostalgic, though it sometimes looked back in history for remedies or protocols. It seems committed to the idea of human progress, although it saw in the medical cartel and certain techno-scientific innovations (particularly vaccines) dangerous, profit-seeking hubris.

Whereas the older magazines – including the “genteel” publications and older sports periodicals – emphasized the character-building aspects of sports involvement, and particularly team sports, the *Physical Culture* model was much more concerned with the medical/physical benefits of exercise than the social or “spiritual” advantages it might confer. It might be interesting to consider that these spiritual benefits were seen particularly to redound upon the upper classes, whether they were seen playing a rough and tumble game of college football or

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<sup>13</sup> It is totally irrelevant, but I cannot help but mention here that I lived for a year in Spotswood when I first went to Rutgers; it was neither pleasant nor convenient, but I was strangely drawn to it and the fleabitten, edge-of-the-barrens countryside thereabouts. There is hardly a less pleasant corner of rural New Jersey. I like to think that in our equally senseless and ill-starred adventures in Spotswood, Macfadden and I are somehow bonded.

sculling quietly along a glassy river. In 1919, Walter Camp explained in *Collier's* that, “as long as we are breeding youths with virile mind and body, youths to be the backbone of this nation, football will be played in deadly earnest... [N]o game so simulates the features of personal combat as does the sport of football” (Pendergast 118). Those who were not to be the backbone of the nation, on the other hand, had best worry about their own backbones – as there would be nothing else to support them. The notion of self-improvement seemed for one class of people to be a method of magnifying the competitive instinct and the bold, manly character of the player but was for another class simply a matter of developing the tools necessary for survival.

Bernarr Macfadden built a media empire on the ideology of physical culture, and tried awfully hard to construct that empire as a cult of personality. The cult of personality worked only insofar as his employees were obliged to play along with it; he seems to have won little personal love or loyalty from his readers or colleagues. But his message was powerful and plausible, and for thousands of readers it was worth the shenanigans that accompanied it. If Macfadden seemed a little buffoonish in his narcissism, this only underscored his message that it didn't take a special kind of person to achieve great things. In fact, he didn't succeed every time, and his spectacular failures – at building, among other things, a utopian city, a breakfast cereal and a political career – seemed rather to underscore his resilience than his limitations. If the many pictures of him that appeared in every issue revealed his shortness of leg and largeness of head as much as the virility of the body in between -- so be it. Again, this served to prove the message: one need not be born for greatness to achieve it; one need not be born “fit” to become fit. Vitality, virility, pep; these were the promises of physical culture as a lifestyle. That “pep” would naturally bring success was represented as almost too obvious to bear repeating – except, of course, that he and his advertisers could not repeat it enough.

In 1921, Macfadden hired Fulton Oursler as editor-in-chief of Macfadden Publications; although other publications within the Macfadden stable were much dearer to Oursler's heart, certainly *Physical Culture* benefited greatly from his savvy (Adams 115). Carl Williams, editor from 1916-1923, was a very capable man, but Oursler brought the magazine into the "modern age" with splashy layouts, high quality printing, and other techniques lifted from the "big six" magazines: breaking stories up and spreading them between the front and back of the magazine; burying celebrity stories deep in the publication; moving advertisement deeper and deeper into the body of the text. Oursler hired solid writers; like Macfadden, he had an eye for talent. But the updates to the physical appearance of *Physical Culture* went a long way toward pushing it – and its publisher – into the mainstream.

Although *True Story* had begun prior to Oursler's arrival, the empire expanded dramatically under his stewardship. Together he and Macfadden started a variety of *True* magazines, acquired a number of other publications, many minor but some as significant as *Liberty*; built a network of regional newspapers and launched the notorious *Evening Graphic*. From the single- issue experiments to the long-running satellites, Oursler had some managing role in everything. He even outlasted Macfadden at his own company. Even as he managed the huge stable of Macfadden publications, he still managed to churn out a series of mysteries as Anthony Abbot (Adams 167). After he left he penned a number of books, including *The Greatest Story Ever Told*, a reworking of the New Testament through the filters of early twentieth century success-and-scandal formulas.

Bernarr Macfadden's mark on American culture is indelible, even as his name and his larger-than-life persona have receded into virtual invisibility. Contemporary fads from yoga to the Paleo diet first found entrée into the US market through *Physical Culture*. Ideas that are so

much a part of the mainstream as to seem invisible, from fitness training in schools to physical therapy in hospitals to fasting for health, were novelties when Macfadden began his crusade. Macfadden Publications launched the careers of dozens of now-familiar names, including Walter Winchell, Ed Sullivan and Charles Atlas. Jack LaLanne was perhaps Macfadden's truest heir and most sincere imitator, but that is not to say that any modern fitness movements would be recognizable without Macfadden. At the same time, however, he is to be credited with the pseudo-confessional romance genre popularized by *True Story*; the gossipy news style of Winchell and Robert Harrison (who left Macfadden Publications to found *Confidential*) (Adams 235), and of the "composograph," which prefigures the hoaxing and "reconstruction" made commonplace by Photoshop. He quietly funded the work of Margaret Sanger, loudly staked his fortune on the principle that venereal disease must be a subject of public health discourse, and was an early client (and major supporter) of PR pioneer Edward Bernays.<sup>14</sup> Locating Macfadden within the entangled narratives of mass culture, physical culture, eugenics, racial science and self-making could be an endless project; then again, Mark Adams' précis sums it all up brilliantly: "Macfadden's great achievement was to take the oddball health ideas of a bunch of bushy-bearded nineteenth-century abolitionists and freethinkers and repackage them in a form that was palatable for a mass-media audience that didn't exist until after his death" (230).

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<sup>14</sup> Bernays' career broke open in 1913 when he promoted the play *Damaged Goods*, a cautionary tale about the dangers of syphilis to the middle class. Macfadden was so impressed with the play that he commissioned Upton Sinclair, with whom he'd seen the play, to write a serialized novel based on *Damaged Goods* for *Physical Culture* (Hunt 53). Interestingly neither Bernays' biographer nor Macfadden's note this early intersection; it is unclear whether the two men actually met at that time. Bernays' first enterprise, editing the *Medical Review of Reviews* and *Hygienic Gazette*, had begun only a year earlier. Although the record of their work together dates from 1927, it's clear that the two had long been familiar with one another's work and were concerned with many of the same issues: health, medicine, the dangers of prudery – and the art and science of creating publicity.

*Physical Culture* was the first of the Macfadden magazines; it began in 1899 and evolved, as it were, over the next twenty years into a remarkable production in and of itself. The magazine spawned a series of innovations, most notably in its first spinoff publication: *True Story* magazine is widely regarded as the original “reader confession” magazine, a genre which has maintained tremendous market share to the present. *True Story* was an outgrowth of *Physical Culture*’s very popular letters column, in which were shared readers’ testimonials, troubles and tips.

Although the role of real or supposed reader contributions has absolutely been acknowledged by those who have previously written about *Physical Culture*, I think the relation of this interchange to the mission of the magazine has largely been missed. In the world of *Physical Culture*, anyone can write a magazine, and every reader is invited to try. Anyone can find health and vitality, and use that to launch into the world with enthusiasm and ambition that will be recognized by others; this effort will be rewarded with vigorous success. Ann Fabian touched on these issues in her 1993 article on the career of Bernarr Macfadden, in which she suggested that “his greatest innovation was to offer readers a hand in the production of the artifacts they so happily consumed” (52). But the reasons for his innovation, and the reasons this might have been so attractive to his readers, is less obvious than Fabian implies.

Whereas Fabian and, to a lesser extent, Richard Ohmann would have us understand mass culture as created by a ruling class for the consumption and construction of a consuming/laboring class, Macfadden comes so directly out of the mass that he was not differentiated from it as a bourgeois subject, even as he acquired some pretty significant capital. Rather, Macfadden presented himself as a working man lucky enough to have found a voice and a message; this is

not to imply any humility on his part, for certainly he could never be accused of that; but rather a form of address that was, at its best, peer-to-peer.

The odd, sometimes unappealing means by which the *Physical Culture* message was presented (along with the cheesecake photos, there was plenty of material on subjects polite company might not care to discuss, from the activity of the bowels to the scourge of venereal disease); the imperfection of the writing and of the author(s) behind it serves actually to increase the credibility of the democratizing argument. This was of particular importance at a time when social position was in flux and economies were in crisis, as indeed was the case at the peak of the magazine's popularity, from 1925-1935.

*Physical Culture* addressed this insecurity and uncertainty in a few different ways, each important in its own right. First, it made class mobility a matter of inward focus – change of the self would effect change in circumstances. The temperance movement was an important predecessor in this thinking; certainly a wide array of health reform movements in the nineteenth century fought to link physical and moral health. Second, it made the body the center of its discourse – the one thing even the most transient of us always brings along. At a time of such great geographical and cultural upheaval, the body may have been the only thing that remained in the possession of the subject – not only possessions, but lifeways, affective ties, community and patterns of work were all subject to loss or transformation as people were moved around the literal and metaphorical map. In many lives, the body was the only constant; the only relationship that persisted was with the self. Third, *Physical Culture* marked a real shift in mass culture in these early years of its formation: it disaggregated the mass while creating it – or rather, it appeared to. It created a very personal, intimate address by which a mass audience was assembled precisely by generating a readerly sense that the opposite was happening.

Macfadden's message was unquestionably a conversion narrative: a reader, any reader, could find in its pages advice to live a healthier life. Healthier habits led to an increase in vitality; no one was too sick or too healthy to benefit; and no one was entirely without room for improvement. Macfadden's own story, told and retold, was that his birth as the unwanted child of unfit parents was offset in late adolescence by the acquisition of a set of Indian clubs. That purchase began a transformation that led him out of ill health, out of poverty, and out of the Ozarks to carry his message to all who might care to listen.

Like the testimonies or "witnessing" shared in evangelical churches, the reader letters reinforced the notion of transformation as universally available, a project one may begin at any time and for a variety of reasons; and they gave an opportunity to address in brief some challenges or reservations experienced by those undertaking the project. Transformation and conversion are closely linked, of course, but not every transformational narrative is a conversion story; etiquette books, for example, offer rules to live by but lack the kind of messianic fervor that distinguishes Macfaddenite text. Dale Carnegie was an incredibly important peer of Macfadden's in the literature of self-improvement and class mobility, but the suggestions that he offered didn't purport to change the essence of a man in the way that Macfadden's did.

In sharp contrast to other "fit family" narratives, in Macfadden's world any family can become fit, and any fellow willing to work at his fitness can support such a family. The ideology of *Physical Culture* does not, like so many others at this time, make a virtue of physical labor for its own sake; but it does absolutely suggest that without the "vitality" gained from physical exercise, success at any kind of endeavor is unlikely.

The notion of self-improvement in *Physical Culture* began from the premise that the human body could be transformed, and progressed to the notion that the whole self was pliable,

unfixed, in some ways fluid. This was in direct opposition to ideas of the self as pre-determined or overdetermined – particularly by outside forces, including but not limited to breeding and rearing. That so many publications were addressing, in one form or another, the project of re-making the self means that the moralizing importunings of *Physical Culture* were not as strange as they might at first seem. But what was up for negotiation – what parts of the self are changeable, and what the methods are for accomplishing this transformation – this is a larger question, with deeply political and ethical consequences. We will talk more about this in the next chapters.

### **3.0 DREAMS OF UNLIKABLE MEN: *PHYSICAL CULTURE, HYGEIA* AND THE BATTLE FOR HEARTS AND MINDS**

It's eight o'clock in the evening, and the members of the Knife and Fork Club in Kansas City – or Omaha, or Dubuque – are toying with their coffee cups, waiting for the evening's entertainment to begin. In “tuxedos and floor length dinner dresses” (Ferguson), the club members brought elegance and a sense of importance to banquet halls across the Midwest throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Once a month the pillars of local society gathered to dine, socialize and be edified by notable speakers on any of a variety of topics. These clubs lent an air of permanence, cultivation and civilization to communities that were, in reality, pretty new.

An indirect descendant of the Lyceum series of the nineteenth century (a sort of middlebrow stepchild, perhaps), and an antecedent to the sort of general-interest, current events programming around which NPR has built its following, the Knife and Forks established a common ground for conversation, culture and conviviality that helped cement the elite members of small towns into communities – even though they might well have been relatively new to one another in those years of geographic and social mobility. Philanthropic organizations and lodges, from the Freemasons to the Elks to the Ku Klux Klan, served a similar function in many communities, creating circles of membership and identity that helped structure class relations;

the Knife and Forks differed in their lack of overt political or philanthropic agenda and in their acceptance of both men and women as members. There was no ladies' auxiliary here, and consequently there were no bake sales, subcommittees or time-consuming projects to take on. An evening at the Knife and Fork Club was a monthly or bimonthly experience of leisure, pleasure, and effortless edification.

The speakers on the Knife and Fork circuit were columnists and magazine writers, experts in fields of popular interest, and celebrities of various stripes. Amelia Earhart, Will Durant, and Norman Vincent Peale were all regular features at Knife and Fork evenings.<sup>15</sup> So was Dr. Morris Fishbein. Accompanied by his lovely and clever wife Anna, Dr. Fishbein was a supper-club staple, handsomely rewarded for his skills as lecturer and raconteur.

Well-read and well socialized, the Fishbeins were popular dinner guests on and off the lecture circuit, and Fishbein claimed always to have lectures on half a dozen topics at the ready (Fishbein 168). For decades, Fishbein was on the road every month at the least, lecturing to a variety of groups. This “barnstorming,” as he called it (159), contributed mightily to Fishbein’s income – and to his popular profile. Fishbein was a household name by mid-century, when he was finally expelled from his rarefied position at the AMA. His *Modern Family Health Guide*, a largish book in which symptoms and treatments were catalogued into a sort of encyclopedia of maternal anxiety, was a steady seller from its initial publication in 1935 until well into the 1980s. But all that was still to come. On this night, it’s time to speak. At a cue from the club president,

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<sup>15</sup> To my knowledge, the Knife and Fork Clubs have yet to be an object of inquiry in themselves or within larger studies of American culture. However several of the groups – including Houston, Wichita, and Sioux Falls – have minutes or internal histories available online. From Carol Ferguson’s little history in the *Royce City Register*, Fishbein’s description and these records, an outline of the clubs comes into view.

Fishbein gracefully draws the conversation at table to a close, folds his napkin, and rises to the podium.

Morris Fishbein was the editor of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as well as the general-readership magazine *Hygeia* and a steadily increasing number of specialty journals from 1924 to 1949 (*AMA Timelines*). As such, he was one of the most powerful men in American medicine, at that time or any other. He was the third man to hold that position and the amount of power that had consolidated into the editor's chair is almost unbelievable. Also incredible is that a man so important in the history of medicine, magazines and popular culture has yet to be the subject of a responsible biography. Much of his story, as it will be told here, is cobbled together from odd and disparate sources. Before we can understand his story, however, and how we find ourselves in the midst of a supper club when, a moment ago, we were talking about the notion of self-improvement in popular magazines – we're going to have to go back yet another century. The rivalry between Morris Fishbein and Bernarr Macfadden that this chapter will seek to describe and contextualize has its roots well before the birth of either of its combatants.

### **3.1    LOOKING BACKWARD**

Although nostrums and curatives are perhaps as old as civilization, the story of medicine has various landmarks, significant figures and moments which have been marked as origin points. This version of the narrative sketches a timeline through which we can see some of the

movements “regular medicine” has made, and through which we can develop a foundation for the twentieth-century story with which this dissertation ultimately concerns itself.

Our story takes as its originary moment the cholera pandemic of 1832, a remarkable and ghastly event. A cholera outbreak in an unnamed Asian port was transmitted to a merchant ship, and within a very short time carried from there to England, France, Russia, Canada and the United States. In each city where an outbreak occurred, the experience was roughly the same; it came on fast and retreated slowly, and the death rates were staggering. Cholera is an evaculative disease; it rapidly dehydrates sufferers to critical levels. Death occurred sometimes within a day or two of infection. It is ironic, perhaps, that a disease which dehydrates so rapidly is transmitted by water, but this is the case; although cholera is communicable by other means, it is mostly through sharing an infected water source that a community would be devastated by the disease.

Port neighborhoods in most cities were impoverished and squalid. Overcrowding was made unbearable by the total absence of sanitary facilities. Cess fields were created in many places after this first pandemic; they were hardly sanitary, but at least kept sewage from flowing directly into streets, homes and wells. In 1832, however, sewage still pooled in the streets of many such communities, and water was distributed to many families from a single well or pump. In even marginally more prosperous neighborhoods, homes often had their own wells or wells shared with many fewer people, and waste was managed in a manner that was, if not pleasant, at least generally less appalling. Thus it was the poor who were disproportionately affected by the bacillus, and it killed them by the score.

Although it may have been heroic and appalling work, the doctors who arrived on scene in Montreal and New York, Moscow and London, Glasgow and San Francisco were generally armed with the same woefully inadequate medical tools. At the time, “regular” or laboratory-

based medicine was almost entirely evacuative in its approach: doctors treated a patient by bleeding, blistering, sweating, and purging using mercury salts (calomel). Although this sort of “heroic medicine” had its followers, and was reputed to be of some help during previous outbreaks of yellow fever as well as the ordinary run of diseases, against cholera this strategy was stunningly bad (Whorton 63). Patients died even faster with medical attention than without; the doctors, who continued to charge for their services in spite of alarming failure and who seemed to walk through houses of death with immunity and impunity, became targets of rage. In Liverpool there were riots triggered by the belief of many that doctors were deliberately murdering the poor in order to sell their bodies for dissection (Burrell 478).

“Regular medicine,” as it was called at that time, was not the only alternative available to sick people.<sup>16</sup> In fact, in much of the United States doctors were in short supply, and licensing requirements were flimsy where they existed at all. Licensing of some sort or another had begun in 1790, but collapsed forty years later under popular antipathy for market regulation (and for “regular doctors” themselves). The cholera failure was serious, and in the years following this

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<sup>16</sup> James Whorton parses the different practitioners as “regular” and “irregular,” terms that were in use at the time with relatively little emotional freight or inflection. “Allopathic,” on the other hand, derives from the derisive neologism “allopathy.”

Coined two hundred years ago by Samuel Hahnemann, founder of homeopathy, it was taken from Greek roots meaning “other than the disease” and was intended, among other things, to indicate that regular doctors used methods that were unrelated to the disharmony produced by disease and thus were harmful to their patients. “Allopathy” and “allopathic” were liberally employed as pejoratives by all irregular physicians of the nineteenth century, and the terms were considered highly offensive by those at whom they were directed. The generally uncomplaining acceptance of “allopathic medicine” by today’s MDs is an indication of both a lack of awareness of the term’s historical use and the recent thawing of relations between irregulars and allopaths (Whorton 18).

catastrophe, a wide array of practices and schools of thought took on new credibility. A wide variety of practitioners answered to the title, “doctor.” James Whorton, Stuart Ewen and others suggest that the turn away from regular medicine was simply another symptom of Jacksonian anti-intellectualism, anti-elitism, and resistance to regulation - but the practical reality cannot, I think, be ignored: regular medicine was not living up to its reputation as the scientized, rationalized means to cure.

In the wake of this medical failure, “Thomsonianism” took on new importance and popularity.<sup>17</sup> In the late eighteenth century, Samuel Thomson began a practice as an herbalist and made several interesting innovations: to begin, he systematized his treatments and produced a sort of recipe book – along with standardized versions of his herbs singly and in combination. These were numbered and named, so a patient could know that for a particular system he would take some of the substance called Number Six, along with a tea made from a compound called “Composition.” This systematization made herbal medicine accessible without demystifying it at all. Second, he patented his system and several of his remedies – including simple Lobelia, a purgative weed that grew wild in New England. He was fierce about protecting his patents and his system in and out of the courts. After his death Samuel Thomson was widely remembered, but not fondly.

Thirdly, and most interesting, I think, is the Thomsonian method of distribution. Rather than selling individual herbs or recipes, Thomson hired agents to sell “Family Rights” to the

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<sup>17</sup> This account of Thomsonianism largely follows James Whorton, who points to Thomson’s innovative sales practices; nonetheless, it’s important for us to rehearse here in order to contextualize and understand “the business end” of medicine in the years that follow.

system. Each agent kept half of the twenty dollar cost and kicked the rest back to Thomson, making this an early version of a franchise or pyramid scheme. The agents operated with great autonomy, and had varying degrees of involvement in the lives and care of their clients. Like health insurance later on, each family who bought a “right” was entitled not only to the medicines but to the book and to access to a network of users and providers who shared their experience amongst one another. The Family Right was generally bought not in times of illness but in expectation thereof (Whorton 38).

The degree to which medical and pharmaceutical sales have driven and developed the consumer market has, I think, been underanalyzed in both historical and marketing literature. With clever, demeaning titles like *Toadstool Millionaires* and *The Nuts Among The Berries*, studies of patent medicine have mostly focused on the outlandishness of the cures on offer. Too little attention has been paid to the degree to which national branding and distribution, including logos and embossed glass bottles, patent protection and intellectual property litigation, sales techniques, advertising methods and the subtler marketing strategies used by those “too professional to advertise” have been developed and honed in the health care market. Indeed if we are bold enough to see licensing, regulation and restrictions on practice as – among other things – marketing strategy, then a picture starts to develop in which the evolution of health care at all levels, not just among “the nuts and berries,” is inextricably and dialogically connected to the development of modern consumerism.

The Thomsonian pyramid crumbled after the death of its founder in 1843; freed from commitments to exclusivity, the remaining practitioners and salespeople went on to study additional systems of healing, adding anatomy and physiology to their anecdotal experience. This work evolved into “eclectic medicine,” the closest thing to middle ground between the

drugless healers and their conventional competitors for many years to come. Indeed, it is arguable that today's holistic or integrative medicine is a direct descendent of this eclectic medicine; as with its predecessor, it is not quite laughed out of conventional circles, but neither is it quite approved of. Nonetheless, treatments find their way across that boundary with surprising, and as Whorton suggests, increasing frequency.

But Thomsonianism was not the only “irregular” form of medicine that came to the fore during and after the 1830s. Homeopathy, like Thomsonianism, originated in the late eighteenth century but was systematized into a *Materia Medica* in the 1830s and found a substantial following thereafter. Indeed, the homeopaths were quicker than the MDs to organize standard education and a national organization of practitioners; the American Institute of Homeopathy was created in 1844, and the American Medical Association in 1847. Osteopathy and chiropractic medicine developed later in the century; in the meantime, all sorts of practices meant to increase or facilitate wellness were developing, finding audiences, and falling in and out of favor. Over the nineteenth century, practitioners and consumers of health and wellness care experimented, sometimes dangerously and sometimes with great success. One thing can be said of this trend: it was profitable.

Whereas “regular” doctors were a fairly unified and mutually reinforcing group, the practitioners and merchants of alternative cures were disparate and often at odds. While the Thomsonsians, for example, were a powerful sub-group in the early nineteenth century, advocates of other modalities emerged, created systems of treatment (and sometimes systems of thought) and sought to create an identity for themselves. At the same time, merchants of patent remedies of varying levels of efficacy and toxicity flooded the market with tinctures, pills and

syrups. Health manuals and advice books proliferated. Almost every system, in the course of establishing its own legitimacy, sought to delegitimize its competition.

Hydropony, Grahamism, Fletcherism, vegetarianism, Christian Science, the gymnasium movement, the rest cure, steam treatments, cold treatments, magnetism, mesmerism, galvanism, radium, cayenne, bland diets, enemas and colonics, braces, straps, supports, corsets, no corsets, bloomers, celibacy, free love, the talking cure and temperance were all health or health-based movements that found footing in the nineteenth century. And of course this is by no means a comprehensive list – it doesn't even begin to address the numerous sanitariums and rest homes opening and closing around the country, each with a different program of diet, exercise and treatments geared to make the sick well again or to keep the well person from getting sick at all. The consequence was that whereas “regular” medicine presented a united front to the consuming public, the “drugless” alternatives (as they were called even when powerful herbs or aggressive treatments were involved) presented the patient with an array of choices that were experienced less as consumer autonomy than a sense of dangerous miasma.

The popularity of hydropony was striking almost from the moment it arrived in the US. Like the gymnasium movement, it came to the US with immigrants from Germany and northern Europe; in its American incarnation, hydropony was less harsh and more profitable than its old-world predecessor. The popularity of this body of treatment – which included long showers, heavy water drinking, enemas and soaks, and the wearing of wet undergarments for days at a time – was as surprising as the exoticism of regular bathing at this time. Indeed, an argument could be made that at least some of the success of hydropony was because simple hygiene was in such short supply that any practice which involved washing was a healthful improvement.

Gradually, as the hydropathy publications began to address other forms of what we would now call wellness practices, including diet, exercise, and magnetism, the titles of these journals changed to include the word “hygiene.” James Whorton tells us, “‘Hygiene’ derives from the Greek word for health, and historically, up until the last hundred years or so, it has been used to designate all the habits of life – food, exercise, sleep, dress, etc – that provide the basis for personal health. Not until the end of the 1800s, as the germ theory stimulated such anxiety about dirt, did ‘hygiene’ acquire the very specific meaning of attention to bodily cleanliness that everyone accepts as its definition today” (Whorton 85).

With increasing popularity came increasing anecdotal evidence of success for various lifestyle cures. Popularity grew, as did the variety of treatments available. The hygiene movement broadened and diversified until it overlapped both the most eclectic “irregular medicine” and the orthodox practices of traditional doctors. By the end of the nineteenth century it included teachings about breeding, behavior and exercise. Increasingly sports programs became a part of education, both for health and to develop gender identity – manliness through athletics, femininity through the study of poise, posture and dance.

Morris Bealle and others suggest that the patients who saw drugless practitioners from the middle of the nineteenth century until early in the twentieth outnumbered those who saw “regular” doctors, but verifiable numbers are hard to find. Still it’s clear that at the time the AMA was formed, doctors were facing formidable competition for patients and for respect. In 1847, a meeting of doctors from around the country voted to form itself into a society. Almost from the first, the AMA was as concerned with the competition as with its own practice; the first board it created, in 1849, was charged with the task of analyzing “quack” remedies. The genuinely dangerous substances that were sometimes marketed as nostrums validated the

doctors' crusade, and the more sinister or ineffective remedies they were able to bring to the attention of the public and elected officials, the more credible they seemed. That crusade has been a crucially important part of the AMA's work throughout its history; with the arrival of Arthur Cramp in the position of chief investigator in 1906, these investigations took on a new energy. "The Bureau of Investigation of the AMA," Cramp explained in the *Police Journal* in 1931, "is a later name for what used to be called the Propaganda Department," which Cramp had created in 1913. By any name, Cramp pursued his work with evident pleasure and enthusiasm, and like Fishbein had a keen sense of how to organize and present data. Cramp's work was published in *JAMA* and distributed widely to doctors, legislators and where possible, the consuming public.

With the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act and the creation of the FDA in 1906, the organization took action to ensure it would not lose direct responsibility for research and testing. That same year, the AMA began certifying particular drugs or nostrums as meeting their standards; whether this was the beginning of good legislative science or an enormous kickback scheme seems to be a matter of perspective. Validation and invalidation of treatments and providers have been critically important functions that the AMA retained both through its certifying procedures and through its publications.

In 1883, the *Journal of the American Medical Association* was founded by the same Nathan Davis who made the motion to form the AMA 35 years before. *The Lancet* had by then been in publication for sixty years, and its reputation did not just serve to validate and further the intellectual practice of medicine – it served also to establish England as the westernmost outpost of medical prestige. Having already established requirements for US doctors to hold the title, and new regulations for medical schools in terms of curriculum and training, the next step for US

doctors in pursuit of local and international respectability was creating a journal in which American doctors could publish and in which the name and decisions of the organization could be circulated – a mutually legitimizing function. It was not the first medical periodical in the country; it was the first with the weight and freight of a national organization behind it. Davis ran *JAMA* for sixteen years, handing the reins in 1899 to George Simmons (*AMA Timelines*).

Although Bealle<sup>18</sup> called Simmons “an advertising doctor” of dubious repute before he came to the AMA, there is not reputable biographical information available to corroborate that. (Surrounded as we are by advertising for medical treatments, products and procedures it may be hard to understand just how derisive Bealle’s epithet “advertising doctor” might have been at the time; advertisement was against the rules of the AMA and against fundamental ethical principles of medical practice from the late nineteenth century until it was deregulated during the Carter administration.) Certainly there are reproductions of some of his advertisements in Bealle’s book, but again – a central figure in modern medical history has gone largely undocumented in

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<sup>18</sup> In 1939, *Plain Talk Magazine* published *Medical Mussolini*, Morris Bealle’s 250+ page screed against the AMA as a whole and Fishbein in particular. Fishbein mentions this book in his autobiography, but gets the author wrong – he attributes it to Clement Wood, who he dismisses as a hack. Clement Wood wrote a biography of Macfadden, not Fishbein – it was an interesting misattribution. In any case, Bealle, speaking with all the moral outrage of his muckraking predecessors (and even more capital letters, boldface type and scathing illustrations – the whole production feels, at times, like an angry email) excoriates Fishbein, Simmons et al for their corrupt business practices in the service of creating a medical monopoly or “trust.” Although he does not always cite his sources, mostly his evidence has been verifiable – to a greater degree, regrettably, than Fishbein, who is perhaps a little casual with details in his *Autobiography*. In fairness, the former is building a case where the latter is leaving a legacy – quite different rhetorical tasks. Also interesting is the political bent of the publisher here: *Plain Talk* was the leading anti-Communist publication of its time, a reactionary rag given to incendiary fearmongering that would seem familiar to any follower of current politics. Since the AMA itself takes credit for its campaigns – spearheaded by Fishbein – to countermand socialized medicine in 1935 and beyond, this seemed a surprising source for such an attack. But for Bealle and his employers, it seems there is no moral difference between state monopoly and corporate monopoly – trusts are seen as functionally the same as communism, and the repeated references to the (Jewish!) Fishbein as “fuhrer” or “il Duce” are striking. Fascism is here understood as a far left phenomenon – socialism gone metastatic. Would that our current right wing could embrace this critique of corporate power.

the historical record. The omission is striking. What is available suggests that Simmons was hardly an estimable character. Divorce affidavits signed by his wife and a corroborating witness, circulated at the 1913 meeting of the AMA, suggest that he was an abortionist and a philanderer, and that his treatment of his wife was spectacularly awful. She alleged that he addicted her to morphine without telling her what she was taking; he maintained in the divorce decrees only that she would not stop taking it. She does verify that he graduated from medical school – a fact disputed by some critics. But the school she says he studied at was Hahnemann Medical College – the preeminent homeopathic institution in the country. At any rate, he does seem to have moved several times, repeatedly closing and reinventing his practice, before coming to Chicago to work at the AMA. His credentials from Rush Medical School in Chicago appear to have been largely honorary, a means of granting him credentials in keeping with his position.

The scandals pursuant to the Simmons divorce led ultimately to his ouster in 1924; what is remarkable is that it took that long. Apparently, Dr. Margaret Simmons was offered assistance with her appeal of the divorce by Abbott Alkaloidal (now Abbott Labs), a company which had advertised heavily in *JAMA* but which also had its own “medical journal,” the *American Journal of Clinical Medicine* – which presented direct competition to *JAMA*. In 1908, Simmons had apparently demanded a very large sum in exchange for a cooperative relationship with Abbott; when he refused, Simmons personally penned a screed in *JAMA*, in which Abbott and its publication were cited as definitive examples of pharmaceutical companies “flooding the market with advertising disguised as information” (Rodwin 807). (As an aside, Fishbein averred that Simmons was a tremendous editor but not much of a writer, and suggested that he never actually penned anything in *JAMA*, whether or not pieces were published under his signature (Fishbein 136).) Abbott assisted Margaret Simmons for a time, but apparently came to some agreement

with her ex; the war of words stopped abruptly (Bealle 84), and the aggrieved divorcee was left wondering what had become of the assistance that had previously been so generously forthcoming (McCormick 177). The myriad vague allegations of other “dirty tricks” campaigns by Simmons that have been reported in Bealle, Hale and McCormick and others seem more credible after verifying this exchange. Additionally, Abbott’s allegation that she should be entitled to “about fifty thousand dollars alimony” (McCormick 177), even if painfully optimistic, belies the five thousand dollar income that he was said to earn as an AMA functionary: somewhere in the background, money was moving.<sup>19</sup>

As a committeeman and new employee, Simmons worked with two other AMA members to rewrite the constitution and bylaws of the organization. In 1901, these new guidelines, approved at the national meeting at St Louis, consolidated the AMA into a single, national organization. An obituary in the October, 1937 issue of *California and Western Medicine* credits him with having “centralized recognition and authority vested in one single organization... [T]hat simple but far-reaching plan made for automatic demotion and elimination of many organizations which, up to that time, imagined themselves possessed of prestige and rank equal to that of the AMA” (218). This centralization had a number of interesting features, not least the consolidation of budgets into the office through which the most money flowed, both in terms of expenses and (advertising and subscription) income: the editor of *JAMA*. So it was

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<sup>19</sup> The affidavits were published in Charles McCormick’s 1919 nutrition textbook, published at the unaccredited medical college which bore his name; this might have seemed suspect were the story not corroborated in Bealle as well as Rodwin’s 2010 article on medical advertising. Rodwin, who does not seem to question Simmons’ version of the story, reports the 1908 screed against the Abbott Labs journal as the beginning of a campaign against what we might now call advertorial marketing. Again, the story comes together in fragments, but the picture that emerges is startling. It is hard not to want to pursue this further.

that within a very short time of his arrival at the AMA, Simmons had accumulated a startling power over the organization and its operations (Bealle 137).

*Time* magazine averred that circulation of *JAMA* increased from 8,000 to 82,000 under Simmons' leadership; what would be a long series of offshoot specialty publications began under his watch (critical to undermining the credibility of other, non-AMA publications) and advertising became a central stream of capital, credibility and power. Although state organizations objected to the notion that doctors were proscribed from advertising and the nostrums distributed through advertisement were condemned, still the publication that served them was underwritten in no small part by nostrum advertisements. In an effort to answer this complaint – and paralleling moves made by general interest magazines – the “AMA approved” label for advertisers was created. The notion of AMA-approved advertising was later the subject of attention inasmuch as it had been applied to particular brands and preparations of tobacco (Gardner 222). In any case, evidence certainly points to that label having been granted, at least in some cases, in exchange for substantial payment above (or more accurately, below – inasmuch as transactions under the table seem to have been part and parcel) the posted advertising rates. Bealle suggests that these kickbacks were euphemized as “green research” (Mullins).

In the same year that the Simmons divorce affidavits were circulated at the AMA annual meeting, Dr. Simmons' assistant, E.E. Hyde, died of leukemia. Simmons' friends at Rush Medical College recommended a young amanuensis for the position. Thus Morris Fishbein began his career at the AMA.

### 3.2 MORRIS FISHBEIN

Fishbein's tenure at the AMA began shortly after his graduation from medical school, when he was asked to take a temporary position as Simmons' assistant. The year was 1913. On his arrival at the AMA, Fishbein was a devoted assistant and an assiduous observer of the people and politics around him. Ten years later, when he moved into the editor's chair at *JAMA*, he took the reins like an experienced horseman.

In his autobiography, Fishbein has nothing but kind words for his predecessor and mentor, and if he seems occasionally to damn with faint praise he gives away nothing that could be construed as incriminating in his reminiscences of a man who left his position embroiled in scandal. He does mention that Simmons had so many enemies that he had to forgo any hope of a public social life, and spent most of his time at home alone. Between this isolation and his modest five thousand a year salary, Simmons lived quietly, according to Fishbein; his one indulgence was being chauffeured to work in a long black car – a notable echo of an early childhood memory Fishbein had of his father, and again a luxury not quite consonant with his purported income.

In his autobiography, Fishbein recalls that when he was a child his father bought a long black car, and hired “a young Negro boy” to drive it; that car hit and maimed a motorcyclist. According to his own memory, Fishbein was much more preoccupied with the possible consequences of the ensuing lawsuit than with the victim's grievous injuries or with the medical team attending to him (Fishbein 4). Fishbein's “Eureka story” of finding his calling in medicine is similarly telling:

I was walking down West Washington Street and saw a fight on the sidewalk in front of a saloon. One combatant was knocked into unconsciousness. A large crowd assembled. I tried to squeeze into the center but without success. Suddenly an ambulance pulled up to the curb. Out jumped a man in white – small for his age just as I was small for mine. He was carrying a little black bag. Despite his size, the crowd – which had not opened for me – opened before him as if by magic. He hurried to the unconscious man and performed a few simple examinations. Then he summoned two heavily muscled associates and ordered them to load the inanimate combatant onto a stretcher and into the ambulance. The little man in white was a doctor (Fishbein 10).

It was not compassion for the sick or the miraculous ability to effect a cure that reached Fishbein; he was not drawn to medicine by his kindheartedness. It was the power that was attractive. The doctor was no bigger than Fishbein, yet the crowd parted and he was ordering burly men around after only “a few simple examinations.”<sup>20</sup> The young student promptly abandoned his plans for a career in business and embarked on a medical education in Chicago. From the beginning he was more interested in administration than in the actual practice of medicine. It was his earlier business training – specifically his secretarial skills – that served to position him so auspiciously. Quickly he found positions as secretarial assistant to some of the leading doctors at Rush Medical School. Solicitous and organized, he was a hard worker with a keen eye for the flow of money and power. Clearly he loved to assist, not only in the production of text but in the facilitation and recording of committee meetings, selection of furniture for a hospital or appointments for an office; he enjoyed administration with unusual savor. His internship consisted of assisting his mentors in the establishment of an infectious disease hospital

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<sup>20</sup> There is a resonance here with the narrative in Charles Atlas’ advertisement “The Insult That Made A Man Out of Mac;” this was, perhaps, “the insult that made a medic out of Morris.”

(he credits himself with its furnishing) and with the entertainment of several nurses suffering scarlet fever as well as his blushing advances. Although he wrote up innumerable autopsies and dissections, those nurses were virtually the only live patients Fishbein ever reported treating (29).

His internship was abbreviated to eighteen months, perhaps as a result of an infection he contracted at the hospital (33) – shorter than was required for licensing at the time. In his recounting, he was on his way to a job in a pediatric practice when he got the call to interview with Simmons; in reality he was ill-prepared to practice medicine, but unusually well suited to the job with which he was presented. An accomplished writer, editor and speaker, his medical knowledge seems entirely to have been acquired from behind a desk. It is hardly the place of a historian to fault him for that, except inasmuch as he purported otherwise – but certainly many doctors and other critics did. He spoke with great authority on far more subjects than he could possibly have mastered.

This authoritative voice drew enemies as well as admirers; many years later, it was his refusal to back away from the podium that led to his ouster from the AMA.<sup>21</sup> Among practitioners of other forms of medicine, as well as the many doctors exiled from the AMA (who lost legitimacy, credentials and hospital privileges as a result of political differences with Fishbein) he was widely remarked as “The Medical Mussolini.” In reality, he was deeply invested in the idea of the AMA as sole arbiter of legitimacy in health care practice and politics.

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<sup>21</sup> In his detailed recounting of the breakup, he recalls a betrayal by a friend, Elmer Henderson; in Fishbein’s version Henderson directly tells him that he will win the AMA Presidency only if he capitulates to the demands of the Western Delegation that Fishbein “should be limited to editing *The Journal* and [be] forced to give up all your other activities” (Fishbein 308). Later, he says, other doctors approached him, offering him a doubled salary and a distinguished service medal if he would curtail his public presence (309). He refused all offers, then “generously” agreed to stay to the first of the year 1950 to train the successor he had chosen.

Although he avoids talking about the expulsions of dissident doctors in his autobiography, he repeatedly refers to “chiropractors, osteopaths and antivivisectionists” in one dismissive breath.

To bury this little Caesar is in some ways too easy a task – and one that’s been done many times. It’s not that the scandal-story isn’t there to be told; but somehow the tellings tend to be conspicuously in the service of an easily discreditable or dismissable agenda. Indictments of Fishbein, Simmons and the AMA as a whole are the stock in trade of many alternative health writers, and bits of the story are scattered, with varying degrees of accuracy, across a century of texts – though it has not been gathered into one responsible and well-documented study. Thus Dr. Margaret Simmons’ affidavits turn up in a book ostensibly about nutrition (McCormick), and the AMA financial statements in *Medical Mussolini*. The scandal is interesting (it would have been a great tabloid story in the *Evening Graphic*, complete with “composograph” illustrations) but also wholly of its time. In so many ways, the AMA was doing no more or less than other organizations at the time: consolidating power to control the flow of wealth. And that may be the greatest story never told – that in the early years of the twentieth century, in the climate of profound flux in which the whole economy and culture found itself, not only were new streams of capital emerging but new streams of power were being generated by the same dynamics. It was the ability to tap these new streams and to capitalize on them that made giants of men like Fishbein and Simmons (and Bernays) – not titans of industry or owners of capital, not intellectuals or creators, but strategists: men who could direct the flow of energy, ideas, production and resources without any direct involvement in their ownership or production.

Morris Fishbein was born in 1889 to a family of Indiana merchants. His father was increasingly successful as his family grew, and appeared to be very aware of the appointments of class; a chauffeur-driven car, as above; a large, visible library; membership in community

organizations; friendships with important people. Fishbein boasted of being bar mitzvah'ed in two synagogues – that is, even as a child he was at the center of the social and cultural life of his community (4). This matters not simply as evidence of the self-aggrandizement that is notable in Fishbein's autobiography but also for the ways in which Fishbein seeks to naturalize his location both as part of the social and cultural elite and as a leader in public life.

Whereas Fishbein and his educated, office-bound colleagues certainly would identify as “Professional Middle Class,” Richard Ohmann reminds us that the prosperous merchants preceding them in many way ways “set the tone” in new communities for establishment of new social classes and new social rules that could somehow be powerful enough to exude a sense of permanence. Community rituals and social events went a long way in establishing this sense of “always having been this way.” Organizations like the Knife and Fork Clubs were vital to this process (as were bar mitzvahs). This naturalized sense of social location is central to much of the thinking we find in *Hygeia*, though it is rarely articulated there or in the autobiography in any direct way. Fishbein marks his father's rise in prosperity incrementally, counting the books in the family library at different moments in his life, marking the purchase of that car and the increase in quality of goods his father sold. After a certain point he stops discussing his father's merchandise and begins cataloguing his dinner guests, including the rabbi and scholar Solomon Schechter (9).

Fishbein's own social life was of great importance to him. Although he tells us little of his relationships with schoolmates or romances before his long and loving marriage to Anna, he spends quite a lot of time telling us who was at dinner or at the regular lunch table of which he was a member. His anecdotes involving celebrities are frequent and random, and feature the moments closest to suggesting that he might be called in to consult on a patient interesting

enough to attract his notice. An avid bridge player, he recounts with relish particular games and scores. When at the end of his career he moved his office from AMA headquarters to his home, he tells us almost offhandedly that he gave his daughter the Steinway to make room (327). These casual mentions of luxury seem intended to create a sense of naturalness or entitlement.

Whether or not this naturalization deflects questions of how he became “rich as Croesus” (461) spending his life as a humble editor at a nonprofit is not really our concern; rather, we want to locate him at the intersection of medicine and media, and within a very specific class construction. Likewise, it is tempting to lose our original thesis in the wealth of information that presents itself on the evolution of the business of medicine and the pharmaceutical industry; the relationship of organized medicine to public health efforts and the degree to which those, in turn, had been turned to the political aims and interests of the doctors who were members of the AMA; and the nefarious characters that people that drama. Another project, perhaps, will want to take on this story, to write that missing biography of Morris Fishbein (or George Simmons), or to think about a history of conventional medical marketing apart from questions of what constitutes medicine or the critique that medicine should be a business at all. When we step away from the truth claims, from questions of value or validity of the particular practices addressed and focus on rhetoric, presentation and the characters at work in our little drama, the questions shift from who is more or less specious in their practice to what, exactly, these claims, practices, theories - and characters - served.

I digress. When Fishbein arrived at the AMA, Simmons was already 64 years old, and embroiled in scandal. Although some of his responsibilities had been removed after the debacle of his ex-wife’s testimony being distributed at the AMA convention (McCormick 179), Simmons still had much to do, and diminishing energy with which to do it. Fishbein suggests that from

early on, he was doing the editorial work at *JAMA*. Simmons was no writer, said Fishbein, but a very skilled editor; he implied that he was writing much of the editorial content almost from the beginning of his long tenure. But of course, we have no counter-narrative beyond his own assessment of that time. And Fishbein, blessedly free of the little insecurities that plague ordinary men, was not always the most reliable narrator.

At any rate, it is clear that Fishbein served his time in the second chair with grace and discretion, and his promotion on Simmons' retirement was unsurprising. At about the same time that he was moving into the editor's office, the AMA Council on Health and Public Instruction (Jackson 22) was moving forward with the notion of a magazine for a general readership. "We were reaching doctors, but we just weren't reaching the public," recounted Fishbein. Initially the magazine was to be directed and published from the Council, but soon it found its way under Fishbein's auspices. Oddly, although he does not take credit for creating the magazine *Hygeia*, he does take credit for having named it. In any case, in 1924 Fishbein had the editorship of the two major publications produced by the AMA, and de facto control over all the others. By this time, he tells us, he was already publishing with Mencken's *American Mercury* and the American Newspaper Alliance syndicate (Jackson 23); his belief in the importance of "reaching the public" marked a significant difference of opinion from his predecessor, and marked a critical shift in priority for the organization as well as its publications.

It was his personal relationship with DeWitt Wallace, founder of *Reader's Digest*, that led to a critical innovation: key articles from *Hygeia* were printed simultaneously in the much more widely read *Digest*. Wallace paid handsomely for the articles (whether to Fishbein, to the writer, or to *Hygeia* is unclear), but at any rate it served to increase readership for the articles in question (which were mostly on the subject of quackery), to increase legitimacy and name

recognition for *Hygeia*, and to create an increasingly coherent public message and public image for the AMA. Fishbein calls this practice “planting,” as if the term is new (Jackson 24), and brags in his autobiography that it was nearly fifteen years before he told the AMA leadership that he was engaging in the practice.

Newspaper syndicates had existed a long time, and as a columnist Fishbein participated in this market for many years. The idea that the same story would appear on the same day in a number of local newspapers across the country was commonplace by 1924. But the practice of planting stories differed on a number of levels: one, that these were not regular features or “columns;” two, that the stories were not marked as reprints; three, that the practice was covert. This marks the beginning of a practice that has broadened throughout mass media; if it is the case, as he suggests, that Fishbein pioneered this practice, his was indeed a major contribution to the evolution of consolidated national media.

In addition to its symbiotic relationship with *Reader’s Digest*,<sup>22</sup> *Hygeia* also benefited from the recent creation of the AMA Women’s Auxiliary, which distributed and publicized the magazine nationally, and from the practice of sending complimentary copies to doctor’s offices, druggists, etc. (Jackson 25). *Hygeia* also seemed to sell a lot of advertising, despite the absence of circulation numbers, interesting artwork, celebrity photos or guest writers. Whether companies were advertising for the purpose of having their ads seen by readers or to win the approval of Fishbein and his organization is an unanswerable question. But in spite of selling more

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<sup>22</sup> I had been under the impression that, after leaving *Physical Culture*, Fulton Oursler went on to the editor’s chair at *Reader’s Digest*. More recently I have been given to understand that it was his son, bearing the same name, who took that job; at this point I am uncertain. Certainly the senior Oursler published a profile of Macfadden in *Reader’s Digest*. But the location of *Reader’s Digest* as a bridge between the two publications seems too interesting not to mention.

advertising for better-known products than *Physical Culture*, its circulation was never more than 10 percent of that enjoyed by Macfadden's "bogus" magazine (Jackson 24).

Fishbein understood the importance of reaching the public, but understood that goal as always already about employing – and entwining – more than one point of access. In addition to the magazines he ran at the AMA, his syndicated newspaper column and regular articles in magazines including the *American Mercury*, Fishbein wrote numerous books – and encouraged many more – beginning in the years just prior to his promotion. "I've always been a believer in getting good material, planning it in advance, creating a series [and] publishing it as a book," he explained (21). Fishbein's *Modern Home Medical Advisor* went to press in 1935 – and stayed in print for nearly fifty years. (My mother's copy, bound in leatherette and embossed in gold, remained enshrined on a shelf in her kitchen many years after her last child was grown and gone).

Disdaining the transience of AMA presidents as spokesmen – seeing them thwarted by the temporary nature of their service and the necessity of being diplomatic<sup>23</sup>—Fishbein understood his position to the right of the throne as more powerful. And it is likely that he was correct: his position, and the way that he used it, ultimately allowed him to control credibility, visibility and the flow of information through a wide variety of publications and venues. Thus, although Fishbein was never the president or owner of anything, he was able to create both a publishing empire and a unified discourse that appeared, suddenly, to be coming from every

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<sup>23</sup> "In the years that have elapsed since my departure, a new president has been elected each year. He has been accompanied in his travels by a public relations appointee. Most of his speeches have been written for him by the public relations council. Since he is visible to the public only during the time when he is president-elect and later president, he is quickly lost to view unless, as occasionally happens, he is given a salaried position" (Fishbein 321).

reputable source at once. The power of this was such that MDs have been understood almost ever since as the only legitimate providers of health care.

### **3.3 HYGEIA AND PHYSICAL CULTURE: POPULAR HEALTH AT CROSS**

#### **PURPOSES**

In 1924, the American Medical Association began publication of a magazine not for professionals but for ordinary citizens – medical consumers, in today’s argot. *Hygeia* sought to promote the notion of professionalized medical care at the same time as it gave its readers a sense of what was new in medical thinking and what they needed to know to keep their families healthy. It was a decidedly modern publication, from its balance of copy and advertising to its editorial mission – calling to and shaping a consumerist middle class whose profound self-interest would manifest in part as fear of infection. This hail found its share of respondents; the magazine begun by a budding organization seeking monopoly has continued its run into the next millennium (The title changed in 1950 to *Today’s Health*; it was purchased by TimeWarner in 1991, and runs today as *Health Magazine*). Its mix of health hints and medical anthropology served importantly to define the body of the bourgeois subject, that which threatens it, and the characteristics of the Other that prove its Otherness.

*Hygeia* had two purposes, almost at odds with one another: the first was to convince a growing readership of the importance of professional doctors in their lives, and of the need for medical advice even in the daily lives of the ostensibly healthy; the other was to ensure that its readers not fall under the dangerous spell of greedy “quacks,” those practicing other forms of

medicine or healing. Fishbein, from 1924 editor of *Hygeia* as well as *JAMA*, the Journal of the American Medical Association, was also a prolific writer and remains one of the country's best known "anti-quackery" advocates. In books and articles, in *JAMA*, *Hygeia* and other publications, the astonishingly prolific Fishbein railed against chiropractors, osteopathy, homeopathy, snake oils, non-AMA sanatoria, fasting, fad diets and, yes, *Physical Culture*.

As the twentieth century took shape, *Hygeia* staked a strikingly neo-Calvinist position: to put it simply, blood tells. The new Elect (who seemed to share addresses with the old Elect to a surprising degree) would be determined by heredity, and in the rational world of Mendelian eugenics, the truth of a family germline was more powerful than the vagaries of the open market. Although this was sometimes addressed in articles directly dealing with the issue of "breeding" (and indeed, Macfadden also trod into these murky waters when notable eugenicists were willing to lend their names to his cover), the positions on these issues become clearest when approached from the oblique. It's not what they say about eugenics per se that is interesting, but what they say about risk, about hope – in short, about the possibility of change.

The difference between the two magazines is ultimately ideological. In contrast to the *Hygeia* position, *Physical Culture* is entirely about shifting the fundamentals of the self. The subject, says *Physical Culture*, may find not only success as the outcome of healthy living; advertisements also tell him he can learn, by himself, to speak proper English, play the piano, and open a business. (Here I must state again that the relationship of either of these texts to some objective Truth is irrelevant for the purposes of this study; at issue is what is seen as possible for the subject, not what is plausible or likely.) Physical, cultural, and economic capital are all within reach of the desiring subject; change is possible and obtainable with a little good advice and a whole lot of earnest effort. The relationship between this kind of discourse and what we now call

the “American Dream” is clear; but the degree to which this did not match dominant discourse at the moment of its production may not be.

Unsurprisingly, the interests of Fishbein and Macfadden were frequently at odds. What is too rarely discussed in the highly partisan histories of their positions is the degree to which class influenced the debate – especially in the United States, where medical care is privatized and therefore inaccessible to so many who need its services. Perhaps one of the key attractions of “alternative” medicine, from the “do-nothing” prescriptions of Jenner to the increasingly complex diets, fasts, and supplements that flooded the market from the nineteenth century to the present, is that even in their most usurious forms they are still generally less expensive than conventional medical care. And while both would agree that “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure,” they would clearly not find consensus either on what an ounce of prevention would look like – or what it would cost.

Month after month, *Physical Culture* and *Hygeia* published very different narratives of the relationship between success and circumstance. Whereas Macfadden’s message about the attainability of good health through good practice seemed always to end with the promise of economic improvement (if not class mobility), *Hygeia* was committed to bringing Social Darwinism to the people, and to reinforcing class in myriad subtle ways. To begin, the articles are longer, and the print is smaller, than in *Physical Culture*. Although many of the advertisements are the same, and the cover subjects virtually interchangeable (young athletes, happy babies) – there are notable differences. Although the artwork in *Physical Culture* was vastly superior for many years, and much more vivid always, the interior layout of *Hygeia* more closely resembled *McClure’s* or other elite magazines than *Physical Culture*.

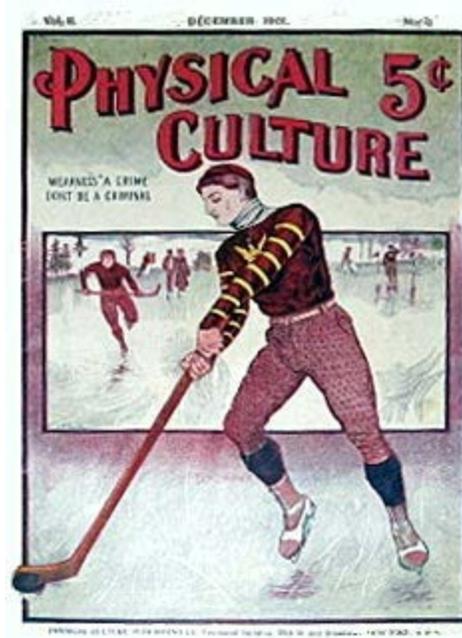


Figure 10: *Physical Culture* cover art from 1905 is nearly replicated in 1927 on *Hygeia*.



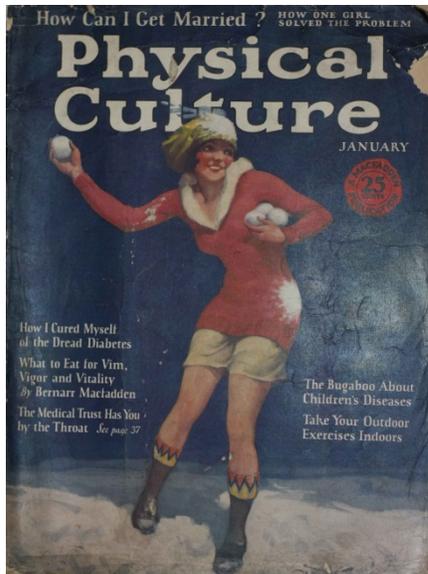


Figure 11: ....but the January 1927 issue of *Physical Culture* looks vastly different from the *Hygeia* of the same month: not only is the artwork more attractive and sophisticated, the layout more modern and visually interesting – but the heavy saturation of ink in the brightly covered painting indicates much higher production values (and costs) than its genteel rival. Note headline lower left: “The Medical Trust Has You by the Throat.”



Figure 12: By 1935, the quality of *Hygeia*'s cover art had improved, and four-color printing was used, though every effort seems to have been made to achieve maximum effect with minimum ink. The image is remarkable, and more so in as much as it corresponds to no stories inside. Note that our noble medical missionary has one needle for those many benighted natives.

A single issue of *Hygeia* uses many more words than *Physical Culture*; the font is smaller, as are the pictures; sentences are longer; and the writing style practiced and encouraged by Fishbein is no less idiosyncratic than that of Macfadden, though certainly they are as different from each other as they can be. Consider this opening sentence from a November, 1927 *Hygeia* article on sinus trouble: “Whenever one boards a public conveyance nowadays, it may be with confident expectation of overhearing an enlightening conversation regarding sinus disease” (Ashford 3). The words are long, the sentence rambling, the use of the formal “one” bespeaks a respectful address; and the use of such flowery language opening an article about runny noses bears within it a kind of self-conscious good humor; many of the feature articles in *Hygeia* bear this same tone of tight-lipped drollery as they bring the interests of the medical profession to an audience far too proper to seriously discuss such things.

The article goes on to describe the anatomy of the sinus in some detail, giving them their proper medical names (ethmoidal, mastoid) and explaining how they work; but the bulk of the text, like its introduction, suggests that sinus infections are the result of our increasing interaction with (inferior) others. Crowded together in public conveyances, movie theatres, eating establishments (Ashford 5) “we” are exposed to germs in unprecedented volume. “A cook or waiter in a public eating place or a clerk in a confectionery or delicatessen, when suffering from one of these infections, may do incalculable harm to the general public,” said Ashford. “...One will do well to consider the risk, particularly when the handlers are sniffing or sneezing over their task” (5).

Contrast this with *Physical Culture*’s tone and style: an article by a regular contributor, health-advocate-doctor Sir Arbuthnot Lane begins with a very straightforward address: “That middle age is one of the difficult and dangerous corners in life’s race is a popular belief not

without some basis in scientific fact” (Lane 18). Here is present none of the wryness, no sense of having amusingly overheard “the common people,” that we heard in Fishbein’s text,<sup>24</sup> although certainly he suggests that this is a popular belief, and hence widely discussed. But more common in *Physical Culture* was to frame the health information in story form: “Jane was horribly conscious of her hands. It was impossible for her to concentrate on the cards or to remember the cautions given by her bridge teacher. Instead of thinking about spades and hearts, her mind kept focusing itself upon hangnails and chapping,” begins an article about hand and arm grooming (Cummings 46). Short sentences, straightforward information (although it would be considered “quackery” by the *Hygeia* staff), a sense of urgency all characterize *Physical Culture*’s style, even when the information is packed into biographical or confessional or story form.

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<sup>24</sup> Both Fishbein and Macfadden so tightly controlled copy in their publications – and so clearly defined the tone and style that would distinguish the magazines, that we can talk about the tone as “Fishbein’s” or “Macfadden’s” as well as, or rather than, that of the individual authors. Again, the reading practices for magazines must be set apart from the ways we read monographs or stand-alone texts: magazines exist and define themselves in serial and create their own context as well as standing in the many external contextual relations in which they may be situated.



Figure 13: Note also the high production values for a mid-magazine story: the high-resolution photography, thoughtful and visually interesting layout.

The work of *Physical Culture* was not to protect the body from disease or infection; on the contrary, *Physical Culture* advocates claimed that a natural resistance to such elements was one of the results of following their practices. And their practices begin and end at the body and its treatment by its possessor, as opposed to intervention from an external authority or contamination by dangerous inferiors. What is particularly interesting here is the role the text plays as a hinge between reading subjects and power relations. Whereas in *Physical Culture* the message of the articles, together and separately, is that the subject can change his life by changing his body, in *Hygeia* the message is that the body requires care and protection, and that doctors are as critical to maintaining health in the well person as restoring health to the sick.

*Hygeia's* format progressed through a series of layout styles in a single issue: stories got shorter, and typefaces smaller, as one progressed from the front of the magazine to the back. Feature pieces were laid out in two columns with photos for about the first two thirds of the

pages, and then smaller pieces began to appear, one per column, on subsequent pages. By the back of the magazine, blurbs two or three inches long appear three abreast on a number of pages.

A casual kind of race discourse peppers through *Hygeia*: one caption under a photograph from November 1927 reads, “Jap Babies Examined at Tokyo Baby Show” (50); again, this might contrast sharply with Macfadden’s photo in 1934 of “a shapely and attractive P.C. girl from the Orient, Miss Muriel Juna-Young” whose photograph is in among a number of “cheesecake” photos of pretty girls – objectified, yes, but in a manner decidedly less dehumanized than the anonymous “Jap babies” and their mothers; and, in fact, not really “Othered” or racialized at all. She is not an “Oriental girl,” after all; she is “a P.C. girl” who comes from the Orient (39). In 1930, this is a startling departure from ordinary depictions of non-white people in American publications.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Deeper in the decade, after war had begun and Macfadden was seeking political office, he stooped to race-baiting quite notoriously, calling for internment of the Japanese well before FDR and threatening readers with the evaluation that the Japanese were “pound for pound the strongest men alive.” Macfadden is not innocent of racism, eugenic brutality, or militarism; much the contrary. But the power relations in his constructions are very different from those in “mainline” eugenics or mainstream PMC thought.



**Figure 14: The PC girl and “Jap Babies:” the two magazines showing their colors on issues of race.**

Whereas Macfadden wanted his address to be universal, to include non-white models from time to time, and to draw on real or mythical “traditions” for some of his cures and information, African-Americans are noticeably absent from the pages of *Physical Culture*. It is worth noting that uplift is very different from the kind of metamorphic transformation talked about in *Physical Culture* or other self-improvement texts for two reasons. First, uplift in the “Lift Every Voice” tradition is about a collective movement upwards – “Lifting As We Climb,” the motto of the NACW (National Association of Colored Women), could have been the motto of the movement more generally. Whereas in other contexts the idea of superior people rising naturally to the top was offered as a means to naturalize class difference, for W.E.B. DuBois and others, the notion of a “talented tenth” created a kind of moral obligation among the gifted or fortunate of the race. So whereas self-improvement is a profoundly solitary act, uplift is rooted in community identity and community responsibility.

Second, (we're following Pendergast here, in his brilliant reading of African American magazines) because of the judgments levied against African Americans, when the notion of self-improvement, as opposed to social uplift, appears, it reads more as instantiation of old stereotypes than as a means to change. This discourse begins from the notion that African Americans are primitive, backward, lazy, and dirty, and then presumes to offer some guidance as to how one might address these failings. Pendergast astutely points out that offers in a white-audience magazine for treating body odor, for hard work as the foundation of success – read very differently in an African American context. There is so much discourse about African American unfitness in dominant culture that what reads in other contexts as a conversion - salvation narrative is simply damning. Likewise, fear of the Black man's body was so pervasive in American culture at this time (Ku Klux Klan membership peaked in 1920, and lynchings were horrifyingly commonplace) that the idea of improved muscular development would not be helpful in efforts at assimilation. What was seen as powerful and dynamic in the body of a white man<sup>26</sup> would be threatening when expressed on the body of a Black man (Pendergast 125).

In a *Hygeia* article entitled “The Baby's Book of Rights,” rights and responsibilities are conferred on the child itself and a number of other players in its arena: baby, mother, doctor, father, nurse, landlord – in that order! – with the assumption that the child will have a nurse in residence, a doctor on call and the wherewithal to receive medical supervision “weekly, if fed a diet designed for a calf rather than a child” (11). The assumption of access and ability to pay for

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<sup>26</sup> It is notable that many of the icons of male bodybuilding – including Charles Atlas and Bob Hoffman – are white ethnics, whose racial category was at this time very much a matter of debate. Still and all, “European but not quite white” was not semiotically equivalent with African American – for the purpose of this, or any other discourse at the time.

such exhaustive prophylactic care are almost as extraordinary as the ranking of the doctor in a position superior to that of the father in the child's life. ("The father's role is to provide support for the baby, and to talk about it... he is entitled to two meals and lunches, but not to sleep.")



Figure 15: Hygeia article, "The Baby's Book of Rights"

One article in *Hygeia* illustrates this issue of agency and racialization more clearly than any other single piece, I think. It's from the back section entitled, "Plain Facts About Health and Disease," a collection of shorter articles posted one after another, without illustration or very much space between the two columns of text. In this way, eight articles are reproduced in close succession over four pages, separated only by a double space and an indented heading. The third such article in this issue is entitled, "The Growth of the Slum Child" (42-43), and at a column and a half, is the longest of the collection. It is purportedly a review of a study, of which neither the title nor the publication is mentioned, by Paton and Findlay – progenitors of the "Glasgow School" of nutrition theory, distinguished by conservative science and Malthusian policies of minimal intervention on behalf of the poor (Smith 223). The *Hygeia* review opens,

unaccountably, with a quote from a German anthropologist called “Zellner” which states that “the child of poor parents... is characteristically broad; the child of well-to-do parents is characteristically tall.” From here the article explains that the Paton and Findlay study sought to explain why children from the city are relatively small and less vigorous than their rural peers. “Many preconceived ideas had to be abandoned,” as the study progressed, says the article, including the notion that “slum children” grew more slowly or were undernourished. Prenatal health, environmental challenge, and paucity of fresh food had each been ruled out as causes of the disparity, and even breast feeding was found not to be statistically significant (although, interestingly, it is purported elsewhere in the magazine as a “right” of an infant to receive proper nutrition through breast feeding). Rather,

As far as this study has shown, only two factors seem definitely to affect the stature of the slum bred child: heredity and efficiency of the mother. Small parents tend to beget small children, and it is possible that the smaller, machine-tending adult of the industrial center represents a type that is better adapted to city life and its tasks. Inhabitants of cities are being recruited less and less from the country, and a type of inhabitant born, bred and permanently dwelling in cities may be developing (42).

In this version – again, under the imprimatur of professionalized, scientific medicine – habit, or habitus (written here as “efficiency of the mother”) is of only passing interest, as opposed to the racialization of class in the notion of a developing race suited to machines – a singularly Lamarckian idea, really. In this narrative, inhumane or oppressive conditions do not limit subjects so much as create in them a useful adaptation, beneficial to society as a whole and determinative of life course – to a shocking degree. In racializing class, *Hygeia* argued for the legitimation of caste.

While Macfadden's magazines had ten times the circulation than Fishbein's, the AMA imprimatur on the cover of *Hygeia* imbued it with the legitimacy of the sciences and the prestige of the doctor such that it had tremendous cachet. I feel comfortable standing this straw man in the place of dominant discourse even though its circulation numbers were so much smaller, inasmuch as the legitimacy that its association with the medical profession conferred upon the magazine was tremendous – but the efforts and interests at the time of medical professionals to create and hold a monopoly on health knowledge was so profound that it seems reasonable to aver that it would be highly unlikely that the medical community would take great ideological risks in its publication, beyond those necessary to meet its own goals.

*Hygeia* here stands as a foil against which we can see more clearly not only the ideological work *Physical Culture* is trying to do, but the degree to which this is a departure from the dominant discourse of its political moment. There are a series of social/cultural threads we can trace through this moment: the rise of the AMA was paralleled with a rise in “health faddism” and experimentation; eugenics were reaching a peak both in popular discourse and in US law; immigration and in-migration were at a peak; and shifts in the mode of production were changing where and how people lived as, increasingly, the US became an urban and suburban nation. Whereas Macfadden published the magazine in one form or another from 1899 until well into the 1950s, the 1920s and 1930s were really “its moment,” the point at which its circulation was shockingly high, its subsidiary magazines made an empire of Macfadden Publications, and its architect was a widely recognized, if not universally loved, public figure.

### 3.4 BERNARR MACFADDEN

At four o'clock in the afternoon, the "World's Healthiest Man and Woman" show is coming to its finale: after an hour of acrobatics and calisthenics, audience challenges and local contests, young Mary Macfadden climbs a ladder to a platform seven feet above the stage. If she is not beautiful, certainly she is the picture of radiant health: At nineteen she is all curves and roses, thick hair and light movement. She had won first prize in one of Macfadden's numberless beauty contests, and had also won the impresario's heart: they were married in her native English countryside and toured England doing shows and selling exercise devices for months afterward.

England was easier for Macfadden, not only because its ideas of acceptable performance seem to have been more flexible, but because there was no personal acrimony with the authorities, as there was for him in New York. The fitness shows Macfadden had organized in the US in the first years of the twentieth century were a constant challenge: he sold out the Madison Square Garden over and over, but his shows were regularly challenged and sometimes closed down for "obscenity." Macfadden insisted that there was nothing prurient in his intent, and that only the foulest mind could see obscenity in the healthy human form. Comstock, frankly horrified by the sight of scantily clad women performing calisthenics before crowds of cheering spectators, disagreed (Ernst 42).

When Macfadden had first come to England in the 1890s as a strongman/showman, Eugen Sandow was taking the country by storm. Offstage Sandow purported to be a gentleman (though of mysterious parentage) and carried himself with the greatest dignity; on stage he was a monster of a man, lifting unthinkable weights, including members of the audience, and posing nearly nude for admiring audiences to see – and sometimes even to touch (Chapman 125). His

combination of decorum and exhibitionism had won Sandow a comfortable spot in the public milieu, and with his precedent comfortably in place Macfadden's shows were legible to the public in a context apart from the pornographic.

There was no question that Macfadden was not Sandow – although he adopted (some might say, stole) many of Sandow's methods, from the advantageous use of lighting to the publication of a periodical showcasing his ideas (*Sandow's Magazine of Physical Culture and British Sport* was a short-lived but inspiring little publication, initiating the year before Macfadden's *Physical Culture*). Still, Macfadden was more a circus performer than the mysterious demi-prince Sandow seemed to present. It might have been Macfadden's stocky frame, a vestige of early malnutrition that no amount of exercise could undo. More likely it was the brashness of his manner, as he boasted of his accomplishments and dared the audience to fight him, to outdo him, to show themselves half the man he was. It might also have been Macfadden's endless, righteous didacticism: every moment he was on stage was a teaching opportunity, and while no one in his audience could match his great strength everyone in the audience could be more than he or she was right now, with the willingness to eat properly, train properly, push themselves, improve. Between classical poses, he was half burlesque emcee and half martinet. At four in the afternoon, he was shouting at his audience while laying prone on the floor beneath his young bride on the tall platform. On Bernarr's cue she stepped into the air, landing with both feet square on his abdomen. He leapt to his feet as soon as she was safely clear of him, and they bowed deeply together to the cheering crowd (Ernst 55).

Macfadden's early years had been a long struggle for survival. The tale has been told and retold by Macfadden himself and his numerous biographers. His unfit parents dissolved their untenable marriage (like Bernarr and Mary, they were more than twenty years apart in age) when

Bernarr was small. He was staying with his mother at her parents' house when he was vaccinated for smallpox in what was, at the time, the usual way: a small cut was made in the boy's arm, and a scab from a sufferer's smallpox lesion was inserted. Little Bernard<sup>27</sup> developed septic shock and was bedridden for months – an uncommon but not unheard-of complication of this vaguely ghastly method of immunization. What happened subsequently was as traumatic as the illness. By the time Bernarr recovered, the little family seems to have overstayed its welcome. He was sent away to “the cheapest boarding school his mother could find,” and his sisters were farmed out to family members (Adams 9). He was briefly reunited with his mother some time later, but the family was never reconstituted. Where Fishbein remembered his first sighting of a sinister local quack looming “in a long black cloak with silver buttons” (Fishbein 2), Macfadden's first encounter with a medical doctor was far more auspicious.

Whereas Fishbein experienced steadily increasing privilege as he grew, Macfadden experienced increasing hardship. He moved from farm to city, from city to farm, looking for a place to belong and a life he could sustain. It seems his health was fragile, inasmuch as he declined quickly when his environment or nutrition were inadequate. In retrospect he was able to look at each of the many circumstances in which he lived as its own education, parsing what was good for him and what detrimental. The level of instability he experienced certainly would tend to develop a keen analytical eye in a young man bent on survival. In the story as he tells it at 58, it was working in a sedentary city job “without friends or sport” (Macfadden 1928, 33) that had

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<sup>27</sup> He changed his name as he was beginning his career, under the belief that Bernarr Macfadden seemed more powerful and dynamic than Bernard McFadden. Changing the last letter changed the accenture, and thus the tenor of the whole. Years later, he persuaded his editor Oursler to relinquish the pedestrian “Charles” and refer to himself by his middle name, Fulton. Macfadden's ear for language was remarkable.

broken his health; as his biographers have it, even his relatives at the farm saw him as tubercular like his mother and expected only the worst (Hunt 6). They saw him as a weak child, sickly, with moments of health, rather than a healthy boy who experienced a bout of sudden weakness.

Whichever was the case, it was during his tenure as an office boy in St Louis that he saw a gymnasium for the first time. Gymnasiums were opening all over the Midwest as immigrants from Germany and Norway brought with them the social and salubrious practice of “working out” as a group or club, practicing calisthenic and gymnastic exercises using rings, kettle bells, Indian clubs and weights. Young and impoverished, Macfadden could not afford to join. But he did find himself a pair of dumbbells at a second-hand store, and then another, larger pair – and worked with them faithfully every morning, by an open window, until he experienced a change of health – and heart – and life. This exercise program developed into a passion, and quickly into a career.

After a few false starts at trying to open his own training studio, he took a job as athletic coach at a boys’ school where he could support himself while he acquired an education. This salvation story is crucial to Macfadden in his own self-understanding but also as the foundation of almost every other story he tells. Almost every tale in *True Story* is constructed on this formula, and his protégé Charles Atlas boiled down the fitness version into a five word formula: “I was a 98-Pound Weakling...”

The young Macfadden went back to the countryside and perfected his health with heavy doses of fresh milk and fresh air. He used his wrestling prowess to pin down a job coaching at a boys’ boarding school, and when he returned to the city he tried to make a go of it as an exercise coach – he called it “kinesitherapy,” and later “physcultopathy” – with mixed success. Meanwhile he worked at various odd jobs – including a brief but critical tenure helping out at a

print shop. He was still casting about for a way to make his passion make his fortune, but he seemed certain that somehow it would.

He was twenty-five when he visited the 1893 World Columbian Exposition in Chicago. While many were struck by the technological advances showcased at the event, the stunning architecture or the forward-thinking urban planning outlined in the shining streets of the ephemeral city, Macfadden's life was changed on the midway. The dynamic young bodybuilder had been hired to hawk some sort of exercise equipment to the passing crowds, and of course he proved to be a tremendous salesman. The Ozark boy had never before seen classical sculpture, and the plaster renderings of perfect human forms that peppered the Beaux Arts environment of The White City were a revelation. In the midst of this dazzling display it seemed that one of the statues had come to life (Adams 35).

This was no accident. Like nearly every impresario worth the name, Flo Ziegfeld had booked himself into the Exposition and needed an act that would make that event pay off in both money and notoriety. It was a risk to buy the contract of Eugen Sandow from his promoter in England, but Ziegfeld was inspired to display the strongman in a new way. Rather than simply performing bravura feats of strength, as was the norm at strongman shows, Ziegfeld put the focus on Sandow's physical beauty. Lit at sharp angles before a velvet curtain, Sandow imitated the classical poses of the statues outside the little theatre. Clad in faux-Hellenic attire, the handsome German body builder posed before a black velvet curtain: elaborately staged and carefully lit, the

strongman showed his development to great advantage (Chapman 58).<sup>28</sup> His muscles shone and rippled in the stark light as the audience was liberated into its own pleasure at the masculine form. Macfadden was transfixed.

Almost immediately Macfadden started experimenting with classical poses, having himself photographed as often as he could. Indeed, there are few Macfadden poses that do not owe a debt to Sandow, from the penchant for leopard loincloths and Roman sandals to the use of high-contrast lighting and poses lifted from classical statuary. While Sandow made a hot Victorian mess of these classical models, Macfadden in every instance appeared to be a parody of Sandow.

It would also appear that he followed Sandow's career path as closely as his methods. Moving first to New York and then to England, he took his show on the road. Shortly after the World's Fair, Macfadden created an exercise device based on "passive resistance" (it bore an uncanny resemblance to the "doorknob exerciser" of 1970s television fame). To sell his device he created a booklet of exercises and information – and from there, he was off. He began combining the spectacle of the strongman show with his skills as a barker. After a few years of modeling his physique and selling his exerciser both in the US and in England, he settled in New York and began *Physical Culture Magazine*, likewise modeled on Sandow's enterprise – in this case the short-lived *Eugen Sandow's Physical Culture*. The year was 1899; Macfadden was 31 years old.

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<sup>28</sup> Ziegfeld's acumen and showmanship shaped Sandow's presentation at the Columbian exposition and well beyond (Chapman 58). One consequence has been that body building showmanship has retained a certain Ziegfeld air, as Sandow's influence and inspiration remains.

Like his rival Fishbein, Macfadden was a brilliant observer, seeming to learn almost by osmosis. He seemed to know the zeitgeist and to pinpoint health trends, techniques and anxieties with uncanny precision. When he returned to New York in 1899 – he was ready. Macfadden created his *Physical Culture* magazine that year, aimed not solely at body building enthusiasts but at a general audience. While Sandow's magazine set a critical precedent but promptly fizzled, Macfadden's enterprise was amazingly successful. From that first issue, mostly written by its publisher under a series of pseudonyms, its following grew as strong as its author: within four years, according to its masthead figures, 100,000 copies a month were being sold. In each issue were advertisements for Macfadden's self-published books, as well as an increasing variety of patent medicines, mail-order classes, and all manner of "improvers." He entered into a period of astounding productivity, churning out fourteen books while beginning the enterprise that would make his name and his fortune (Adams 47). Macfadden was launched, and *Physical Culture*, loved and reviled, was on its way to becoming an American institution.

Over the next fifteen years he created his magazine, much of which he wrote himself, authored many books, and opened two sanitariums, a chain of restaurants, and a utopian community in central New Jersey. If ever there were a case to be made for the idea of a "human dynamo," surely Macfadden was that. His sanitariums in Danville, NY, and Chicago did very well, all things considered, although his attempt to compete with Post and Kellogg either in the rarefied air of Battle Creek, MI or in the breakfast cereal market ended badly (alas, *Strengthro* had an awful tendency to turn rancid). He staged Physical Culture Exhibitions in Madison Square Garden, arousing curiosity, among other things, from an interested public and ire from Anthony Comstock.

It might be that Macfadden's greatest skill was identifying people he could work with. Although he hired quickly and widely – moving from a one-desk operation to fifty employees within three years – he seemed to hire well. His relationship with his secretary Suzy was fodder for much talk (it is thought that the redheaded Helen Macfadden, whom he adopted shortly after his marriage to Mary, was the daughter of Suzy and Bernarr, likely conceived when he was still married to the unfortunate Marguerite), but she was a loyal and discreet assistant. If it was true that their relationship exceeded the bounds of professionalism, she never said so – and after they stopped working as closely together, she ran his operations in Chicago – quite a distance from Macfadden's New York headquarters, but still in control of significant assets.

Orr Elder, Macfadden's business manager, was with him forty years, beginning in 1904; the incomparable Fulton Oursler arrived in 1921 and stayed with Macfadden Publications until shortly after its namesake was forced out in 1941. The loyalty and competence of Macfadden's staff was remarkable, and although in some ways he was fiercely controlling of his enterprises, he would also leave at a moment's notice, confident that his managers could handle things for as long as he needed them to. Thus he was able to operate his publishing business with increasing success even as he experimented with a variety of other enterprises in varied locations across the country.

### **3.5 “HE STARTED IT!”**

It is an interesting contrast to write about two men who are so differently remembered – not only in the sense of how their remarkable legacies and interesting personalities are regarded, but also

in terms of the very different logistics by which their names survive. There are libraries named for Fishbein, medical school buildings and scholarships, and he is featured prominently on the AMA timeline. Yet there has been remarkably little written about him either as a human being or as a public figure; much of the work of putting together his story has been collage and inference. On the other hand, there are at least five biographies of Bernarr Macfadden -- and yet his name is hardly remembered beyond the academic study of popular culture. He is mentioned in many histories, biographies and other studies of America in the early twentieth century -- but almost always he is dismissed with a laugh as a kook or a buffoon or just an odd and difficult character, a sort of sideshow act -- or midway show -- existing alongside the real work and figures of the time but not really up to par, somehow, not serious enough or talented enough or *something* enough to count as a serious contributor to American culture.

And yet the contributions he made are amazing -- and certainly our culture would be different without them. The fitness magazine and confession magazine both began with him, and if he took the tabloid form to new lows, still these innovations -- the composite photo, the celebrity divorce, the gossip column -- still find audiences, still draw advertisers, and still are dismissed as beneath contempt, too corrupt to merit study.

What might be striking to us at this point in the story is the way in which, in some ways, Macfadden's story seems to parallel Fishbein's at a different class valence. Both embodied a kind of bellicose showmanship, combining shocking narcissism with boundless energy. In addition to the commonalities in their character -- or perhaps owing to them -- there were notable parallels in their life courses. For each, apprenticeship was critical to their success. Where Fishbein's secretarial skills enabled him to apprentice himself to his teachers at Rush Medical College, Macfadden's wrestling skills allowed him to find a job as a boarding school athletic

coach, where he was able to acquire an education despite his late start and inability to pay.<sup>29</sup> Each had a sort of double-career – at once behind the scenes of a growing and complex publishing enterprise and in front of a crowd, creating and enjoying notoriety. Each was, in his own way, scrappy – they seemed to enjoy, and even invite, a good fight. So it’s no surprise that they scrapped with each other. On the page and in the courtroom, before an audience and behind closed doors, Fishbein and Macfadden shared an abiding enmity so bitter it could almost be mistaken for respect.

Given that his earliest encounter with a doctor ended so badly, it is not surprising that Macfadden’s lifelong health crusade would find very little use for regular medicine. On the other hand, regular doctors who were willing to endorse the principles or practices of physical culture were more than welcome. Macfadden was always delighted to connect his work with that of better known, better educated, or better respected folk. From its very early days, *Physical Culture*, “the best paying magazine in New York” (Hale 144), courted well-known writers and health advisers. Dr. Arbuthnot Lane, a British doctor who was very much a physical culturist himself, was featured several times as a contributor and even headlined the bright cover of one of the issues we have looked at in this chapter. And yet conventional medical practice, particularly but not solely vaccination, had come in for tremendous derision over the years. These attacks, while frequent and sharp, were for the most part not personalized – they did not name particular

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<sup>2929</sup> That Macfadden was able to achieve the success he did with about three years’ education is in itself remarkable. Aside from his prodigious textual output (I cannot bring myself to use the word “literary”) his business acumen is remarkable. One would have expected at least a background in math, if not management, to build the kind of complex enterprise Macfadden Publications became.

doctors by name, or take on the kind of accusatory style on which so many magazines during *Physical Culture*'s early years were staking and making their muckraking names.

The AMA's systematic approach to "quackery," however, was very personal. Whether under the auspices of the Department of Propaganda or the Bureau of Investigation, the practice of releasing lists of names, in addition to more detailed stories, enumerating "quacks" led to a great deal of whispering that these black lists often contained the names not only of con men and poisoners, but of those who refused to pay advertising rates, back AMA policies, or support current leadership. There was no appeals process for those whose names appeared on such lists, and likely consequences included revocation of hospital privileges, loss of respect among peers and other professionals; and dramatic loss of patients. In many places, it was the case that patients of a doctor without privileges at a particular hospital could not themselves be admitted into that hospital; so the risk of staying with a disreputable doctor was extraordinary – especially for a sick person. The quackery columns in *JAMA* were popular features, and as Fishbein increased his autonomy he saw to it that these columns found their way into the mainstream press, as well. Exposés of medical fraud were good sellers – thrilling stories that evoked just the right amount of outrage without disturbing the power structure, they reinforced the selling power of "legitimate" products and practices while calling absolutely everything else into question.

In 1925, the year after he became editor at *Hygeia*, Fishbein published a book called *The Medical Follies: An Analysis of the Foibles of Some Healing Cults, including Osteopathy, Homeopathy, Chiropractic, and the Electronic Reactions of Abrams, with Essays on the Anti-Vivisectionists, Health Legislation, Physical Culture, Birth Control, and Rejuvenation*. A bestseller almost from the beginning, *Medical Follies* contained a full chapter on Bernarr Macfadden as a charlatan and a fraud, citing not only his love of the female form but the

advertising for dubious products and nostrums in *Physical Culture* as evidence that Macfadden didn't practice what he preached, didn't care about his message, and was really only in it for the money, regardless of the effects on his readers or clients.

For a monomaniac like Macfadden this was a bridge too far. Fishbein bragged in his autobiography that he never lost a lawsuit (though certainly he seems to have settled his fair share out of court, and at great expense) but the court of public opinion was a different kind of arena. At the very moment Fishbein was trying to establish a mass-media presence for The Doctor, and to position himself as its figurehead/spokesman, he poked the Macfadden beehive.

Remarkably, Macfadden did not take an ad hominem approach with his rival. Instead he began firing on all fronts. Although he had always published stories rebutting regular medicine, the stridency rose a full octave. The *Evening Graphic* referred to the AMA in headlines as the "Pus Trust," and John Spivak began an expose on the professional practices of the AMA with a cover article in *Physical Culture* entitled "The Medical Trust Has You By The Throat" (Spivak 37) This was remarkably clever, actually: rather than taking on the man, who could be redirected or replaced, Macfadden assaulted the whole public relations strategy of the organization, in an effort to force a retreat. Spivak focused on the notion of "professional courtesy" – that physicians were proscribed from testifying against one another in court, or from undermining one another's practices or diagnoses – as supportive of the reputation of the profession over its ethical or scientific commitments to best practices. That the second page of the article, featuring a vaguely horrifying photo of a surgical theatre, faces the opening page of Macfadden's "How I Keep Fit at Fifty-Eight!" is surely no accident, and the message is as clear visually as it is in the text: physical culture will keep you healthy; medical culture will make you sick. (Bealle quotes an old saw that "homeopathic patients die of their disease; allopathic patients die of their treatment.")

Macfadden is no more impressed with homeopathy than with allopathy, but the sentiment is the same.) Although Fishbein redoubled his efforts at making a public name for himself and his organization, he dropped his personal assault on Macfadden with alacrity. After 1927 he does not mention Macfadden's name again anywhere in print, including his otherwise detailed autobiography.

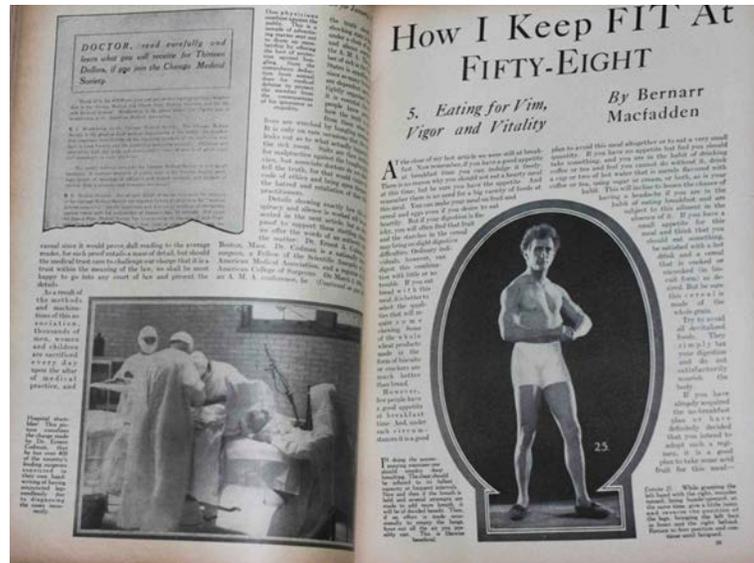


Figure 16: Physical Culture, January 1926

Although it could be said that the match ended in a draw, both combatants were nonetheless bloodied. Fishbein began to encounter increasing resistance from within the ranks of the AMA, as individual doctors and whole state organizations took issue with both the politicization and popularization of their national umbrella. Additionally, Fishbein did become the personal target of a series of writers - including Morris Bealle and Annie Nathan Hale - who

allowed him to serve as straw man for what they saw as the total corruption of the AMA into a predatory monopoly: a “trust.”<sup>30</sup>

Bernarr Macfadden hardly needed help to be labeled a kook in the eyes of many Americans, and most of the popular press. But he was a successful kook, selling millions of magazines across his vast and diversified empire. It’s probable that by 1930 he was outselling Hearst – and yet his reputation in the eyes of “respectable” Americans was still dubious (Hunt 142). He was not a guest of the Knife and Fork clubs, and although he traveled widely in support of his message, his reputation never really seemed to improve. The AMA assault included letters to local merchants that their support of a Macfadden lecture or visit would terminate their relationship with the organization; doctors who might have approved at least some of the Macfaddenite message were cowed into silence by the threat to their livelihood (Adams 133).

With the arrival of sulfa drugs in the late 1930s and antibiotics in the 1940s, “regular” medicine finally had good tools for fighting disease – and irrefutable evidence of its superiority over other kinds of healing practice. Macfadden and his wildly successful magazines remained outside “respectable society,” talking to the working class by the hundred thousand. In this manner the notion that drugless healing, prevention and wellness were “alternative” medicine was reinforced, and their position outside the mainstream was secured for the coming century.

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<sup>30</sup>After years of muckraking journalism and “trustbusting” were effectively undone by the need for efficient military production (many of the trusts “busted” in the early years of the twentieth century were reconstituted during the Great War), the notion of the trust remained as an emblem of predatory capital. For Bealle, writing in 1939, the weight of the Depression consolidated that image, and the spectre of fascism worked to conflate monopoly capital, right-wing totalitarianism, and socialism for writers with *Plain Talk* (Bealle’s publisher) and others on the right.

The fundamentals of the Macfadden message—walk more, eat whole foods, fast regularly, exercise as much as you can – these principles are now considered common sense, certainly above reproach. Although many of the more outlandish ideas in the Macfadden archive (including the Bale eye exercise program to correct myopia, pulling the hair to make it grow, etc) seemed as outlandish then as they do now, it might be worthwhile to note that Macfadden never did seem to go in much for the galvanic treatments, orgone boxes, spiritual healings, radium water, or other trumpery that was circulating at the time. The advertising he accepted for outlandish, even dangerous products was regrettable – but certainly *Physical Culture* was not the only place these products were able to advertise. And such advertising was overwhelmed and overshadowed by the far more common message in *Physical Culture* advertisements – improve and move! Improve your body, your accent, your job skills. Improve your nose, your hair, your musical ability. Move physically – exercise, develop your muscles, your wellbeing, your dynamism – and movement to another class position, or at least to greater social status within one’s social group – will follow naturally. It’s the simplicity and confidence of the Macfadden message that makes it so compelling – and so important: you can change your body, and in doing so you will change your life. But while so much of his message has been adopted by the mainstream, including regular doctors, Macfadden has remained unreconstructed as a fringe figure, a sideshow novelty.

Without question Macfadden’s own idiosyncrasies disrupted his legacy. While stunts like parachuting on his eightieth birthday, or having himself cast in bronze at sixty, might have marked him as a lovably loony visionary – indeed, Jack LaLanne was able to adopt much of the showmanship and quirky good faith of Macfadden on his best day, and turn it into an empire of his own (at 90 LaLanne quipped, “I can’t die, it would ruin my image”) (Gorman, Reuters

Online). But Macfadden's personal life was fraught with scandal; whether, as some suggest, his early experience left him deeply scarred or whether he was simply led by his libido, he certainly engaged in more than his share of dalliance with some of the finer specimens of physical culture. Four marriages, two to women half his age; nine healthy but otherwise unremarkable children, one infant death and a score of rumors about infidelities seemed to suggest that the guru of fit families was himself unfitted for the task. While he would go to great pains to pose with costumes, props and carefully arranged lighting to show his best features in photo sessions, in his daily life he was a terrible dresser, wearing shabby, ill-fitting suits; cutting holes in his hats for ventilation and often going barefoot. The chief advocate of the body beautiful looked, more days than not, like a little bum. That a man so savvy about mass media could be so oblivious to his own representation really is remarkable. Did he simply not care, or was his narcissism so profound that he could not see what he looked like to others?

In any case, Fishbein's strategy – frontal assault followed by unremitting rear-guard attacks -- certainly helped to marginalize Macfadden from respectable communities and from the doctors who might otherwise have carried a message of transformation and self-healing to at least some of their patients. While the personal stakes were high in this battle, however, the political stakes were even higher. The notion that the unfit or degenerate could be capable of transformation – that not only their immediate health but their overall status as “unfit” could be permanently altered – was not just far-fetched, it was dangerous. In parallel with the consolidation of regular medicine, a new anthropology had found its way into the popular discourse. Class divisions were being instantiated and legitimized using new tools from both science and philosophy, and these divisions were being enforced – sometimes violently – using new legal tools based in this weird science. In the next chapter, the relationship between

eugenics, social science and the relationship between the self and the body will be explored. This conversation will circle back around to our magazines – *Physical Culture* and now *Hygeia* – to see how the theories and practices constructed in the new social sciences were articulated to a public on which these theories would directly act – and how such theories connected to body practice and the idea of health.

## **4.0 BATTLE OF THE HEXIS: STRONG BODIES AND WEAK ARGUMENTS IN THE STRUGGLE FOR AGENCY**

### **4.1 REMEMBER THE MIDWAY**

The bustle of Chicago formed a handsome backdrop for the streamlined new city that rose from the wreckage of the depression to celebrate – and reignite – the growth of that “jewel of the Midwest” (Ganz 29). The 1933 World’s Fair celebrated Chicago’s centennial, and the march of scientific progress, with a stubborn optimism and a commitment to educate its visitors about the possibility – and necessity – of human improvement. In contrast to the Beaux-Arts “White City” of the 1893 exposition, this was a testament to streamline design: clean lines, neon lights, It took a triple declarative as its slogan: “Science Finds. Industry Applies. Man Conforms.” If the progress celebrated at this exposition was construed as the work of one race as contrasted with the sideshow backwardness of all others, still the improvement of “the race” was a priority for the organizers of the fair (Cogdell 85). The race imagined by the fair promoters was not only suited to machines, but improved by them.

Like *Physical Culture*, the fair was a site at which discourses of self-improvement, social control and state power came together. In *Eugenic Design*, Christina Cogdell offers a detailed description of the fair’s administration and aesthetics. She tracks the inspiration for the medical exhibits to a visit made by committee members “to Dresden to the Deutsche Hygiene Museum,

Germany's most prominent health museum, whose highly engaging, interactive exhibits consistently instilled in visitors 'the essentials about their own bodies and the relation of those bodies to the greater body politic'" (Cogdell 87).

The eugenic themes of the fair were overt, direct, and very well documented. The halls of science, medicine and biology were chockablock with visual and narrative evidence for the veracity of eugenic thought. In the exhibitions the fit and the unfit were displayed and explained for an eager audience; the sideshows and midways teemed with atavisms, mutations, and other evidence for the danger of ignoring the message. But, the Ewens point out in *Typecasting*,

When it came to ethnographic exhibitions, the distinction between science and sensationalism had completely broken down. In 1933-34, at Chicago's "century of progress" World's Fair, marvels of American industry were juxtaposed with a "darkest Africa" exhibit, purporting to offer visible evidence of the stark distinction separating savagery from civilization. Promoted as an "educational display," the attraction featured near naked "Africans" (men in g-strings, women also topless) speaking a made-up gibberish, while an actor dressed as a Great White Hunter offered narration of the cruelties these people were capable of. A few of the blacks working in "Darkest Africa" were, in fact, Africans, though they came from a community of expatriates living in New York City. The others, according to one of the showmen who organized the exhibit, "were recruited from Chicago pool halls" (Ewen 97).

We dismiss this dissonance as anomalous at our peril. Indeed, by the 1930s the language of eugenics was enjoying unprecedented popularity, but internal contradiction and rhetorical instability were not recessive traits of this discourse. On the midway, the intersections of science and spectacle might stand out as if reflected in a funhouse mirror – amplified and distorted unmistakably – but when spectators returned home, they brought the overarching message of the fair to their local Knife and Fork clubs, to their health departments and school boards. That message – that people must conform to the unbending truth of science, or progress will march

right over them – animated deep anxiety from the earliest incarnations of the Great Chain of Being through the whole of the twentieth century. But in the belly of the depression, that threat felt imminent and direct. And the anxiety it produced was deliberately amplified by the social engineers planning the fair and those driving the engine of the new mass media. This pressure was renamed “optimism.” It animated the personified Spirit of Determination, the symbol of the fair. Dressed as a goddess in winged tiara, her declaration “I Will Come” bore a sense of inevitability – as did her overshadowing of the native man behind her.



Figure 17: World's Fair promotional poster, 1933

In the midst of the exposition showcasing health and technology, a medical crisis was festering: the Congress Hotel had hastily repaired a plumbing problem in preparation for the onslaught of guests that the fair would bring. That repair was faulty, and more than a thousand people developed amoebic dysentery.<sup>31</sup> The first case was reported on June 9, shortly after the

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<sup>31</sup> Sewage leaked from a drain pipe repaired with a wooden plug into a drinking water tank shared by the venerable Congress and Auditorium hotels. The Plumber's Union averred that this was the consequence of non-

fair opened; the epidemic was announced by Herman Bundesen of the Chicago Health Department three days before the close of the fair, in November (Mayer 3). There is speculation as to when, whether and how much Morris Fishbein knew about the catastrophe taking shape in his town, but it is certain that, as in the case of the cholera epidemic more than a century previous, the enormous resources of the “regular” medical community neither recognized nor effectively responded to an epidemic quite literally under the nose of its headquarters.<sup>32</sup> In fact, because the outbreak was neither identified nor publicized quickly enough, a startling percentage of sufferers were inappropriately treated for appendicitis and died in consequence of the unnecessary surgery (Mayer 5).

Once more, at a moment of financial and civic uncertainty, a health crisis arose and regular medicine failed to respond effectively. The irony that a disease of contamination would pollute the river of progress at the World’s Fair ought not to be lost on us. But there was never better publicity for *Physical Culture* than medical failure – and so it was that a fair Macfadden could not attend was nonetheless a powerful testimony to his work.

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union plumbers cutting corners; in consequence of this catastrophe, city building codes and enforcement were reinforced along with the hotel pipes. Adding the dimension of labor discourse to this story – from the plumbing failure to the desire of hotel and health department management to blame food handlers rather than examining the hotel infrastructure – develops the story in a direction we cannot presently dare to pursue. But neither can we fail to note it here.

<sup>32</sup> The infamous Eustace Mullins stated as if it were common knowledge that a meeting took place between Fishbein and business leaders determined to keep the dysentery outbreak under wraps as long as they could. I have not been able to track down his sources. Likewise, Mayer offers his argument in refutation of those who were convinced that the timing of the announcement of the outbreak three days before the fair closed was not accidental, and suggests that the Public Health Administration report on the event was a personal attack on Bundesen by his “enemies” – but I have not found a “smoking gun” document that would corroborate either the allegations against Bundesen or Fishbein. World enough and time!

Macfadden had started his career on the Midway at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893; at the 1939 World's Fair<sup>33</sup> – just before the Macfadden empire came crashing down – Macfadden Publications purchased a pavilion of their own.<sup>34</sup> And so it seems fitting that our vaudeville archaeology should end where, in so many ways, it began. While we could tell a Horatio Alger story of Macfadden's journey from midway carney to pavilion magnate, it will be more useful for us to focus instead on the dynamic narrative exhibitions of an event determined to make people aware of their own bodies and their personal responsibility within the larger financial, political and social crises that were defining everyone's experience in 1933.

## 4.2 REWRITING THE BODY

Standing on the bridge between modern medicine and cultic health fads, between racial science and a radical repositioning of the body in culture, Bernarr Macfadden and his magazine called into question assumptions that underpinned not only the editorial foundations of parallel publications like *Hygiea*, but the cultural logic that naturalized larger conversations about race, humanity and the constitution of a “fit” person. These conversations were not only serving to fill

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<sup>33</sup> Not generally one to miss a party, Macfadden was distracted in 1933 by his legal separation from Mary and the failure of the *Evening Graphic*. He would certainly have fit in at this exposition, given its themes.

<sup>34</sup> The program for the Macfadden Exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair is available online at <http://www.sandowplus.co.uk/Macfadden/NYWF1939/nywf.htm>; this has just become available. So many of the materials available on fansites appear and disappear; the same search brings different results almost every time. Even with the increased access brought to us by the internet, the material underpinning this study remains frustratingly ephemeral.

the pages of print media; they were shaping practices in law and medicine that would literally determine who was fit to live, to assimilate, and to reproduce.

As these conversations took shape, *Physical Culture* saw itself as central to the discussion, but its position was decidedly unstable. Ambivalence, inconsistency and internal contradiction at first seem to suggest that the magazine was simply unsophisticated in its approach to a developing idea; on closer examination, these inconsistencies reveal themselves as sutures, places where dominant discourse and the ideals of the publication are subtly at odds and the gap between them becomes legible. As we parse these arguments and disruptions, a possibility reveals itself: that *Physical Culture* is both smarter and more radical than it first appears. In losing *Physical Culture* as an artifact, we have not simply lost a novelty publication with a kitschy fascistic veneer – rather, we have lost an important evolutionary link in popular culture from the turn of attention to the body in the late nineteenth century to the obsessive “fitness” industry of the twenty-first.

Macfadden had a remarkable sense of the zeitgeist and an ability to pull disparate discourses and positions together into a single package. It would be a mistake to call that package coherent or consistent, but then it would be a mistake to think that consistency or coherence was necessary for what he was producing, whether the production in question was an editorial, a magazine or an empire. The overarching message of *Physical Culture* is clear enough, despite the negotiations, slippages and evolutions it underwent over its fifty-year run: control of the self comes from control of the body.

Across Macfadden Publications’ widely disparate productions this message recurs. Adams quotes Cornelius Vanderbilt, scion of the “robber baron” family and journalist for *Liberty*, *Physical Culture* and other Macfadden magazines, on the distinctive tone of an

interview for a Macfadden magazine: “People like Hitler, and Stalin, Mussolini, Chiang Kai-Shek and Hirohito would smile and talk a little when asked what they ate for breakfast and what they did to keep in condition under the great strain of their important work” (168).

Indeed, the contents of breakfast - and the fasting that preceded it - were central issues in *Physical Culture*. But in addition to diet and exercise, skin care, gait, posture, accent and grammar, nose shape, bathing habits and “b.o.,” hair care and, of course, excrement were all heavily belabored subjects in *Physical Culture* articles and advertisements. The whole *Physical Culture* apparatus addressed the issues Pierre Bourdieu identified as “the bodily hexis.” In *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Bourdieu introduced the term “habitus” to describe the matrix of assumptions, dispositions and internalized norms that lead members of a society to behave in a manner consistent with their social group. Whereas habitus is the matrix of perception, appreciations and actions, “the durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations” (78) across a spectrum of behaviors, interactions and perceptions, the bodily hexis is the network of behaviors and responses through which the body is enculturated and located within a hierarchal system. “Bodily hexis is political mythology realised, em-bodied, turned into a permanent disposition, a durable manner of standing, speaking, and thereby of feeling and thinking” (94). In the smallest details of bodily care and function, carriage and use reside the most powerful articulations of our identity. And “it is because subjects do not strictly speaking know what they are doing that what they are doing has more meaning than they know” (78). The micro-practices through which class, among other things, is written on the body are also the “tells” by which class mobility is called out, limited, and mocked. Bourdieu explains,

If all societies ... set such store on the seemingly most insignificant details of *dress, bearing, physical and verbal manners*, the reason is that, treating the body as a memory, they

entrust to it in abbreviated and practical, i.e. mnemonic, form the fundamental principles of the arbitrary content of culture. The principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness, and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation, cannot even be made explicit; nothing seems more ineffable, more incommunicable, more inimitable, and therefore more precious, than the values given body, *made* body by the transubstantiation achieved by the hidden persuasion of an implicit pedagogy, capable of instilling a whole cosmology, an ethic, a metaphysic, a political philosophy, through injunctions as insignificant as ‘stand up straight’ or ‘don’t hold your knife in your left hand’ (Bourdieu 79).

Whereas this bodily hexis is generally discussed as something over which a person has little control – for Bourdieu because it is mostly unconscious, and for many of the writers in Macfadden’s time, because it was believed inborn – *Physical Culture* makes these invisible practices visible, calls attention to the ways in which these practices describe (or inscribe) character, and offers advice for remediation. The proposition that the bodily hexis could be revised was radical for a number of reasons. In part, it suggested that physiognomy was not fixed. It proposed that self-help could lead to transformation, extending to class mobility and cultural assimilation. The very traits that compose identity, in terms of body shape and carriage as well as propriety and civility, are up for discussion in *Physical Culture* in ways that scholars like David Roediger have begun to unpack only recently.

### 4.3 RESHAPING FITNESS

In *Wages of Whiteness*, Roediger talks about the ambivalences circulating around the category “white” and what it meant to “become white” in American society. Although he concurs with

Steve Martinot that part of the project of becoming white is assimilating to the more conspicuous racisms circulating in the culture, perpetuating and participating in the act of “othering,” he also recognizes issues of bodily hexis, including grooming, poise and self-presentation as expressed in the notion or appearance of “greasiness” for southern and eastern Europeans (Roediger 42). Sander Gilman tells us that even Franz Boas reported that the head shape of immigrant children differed depending on whether they were born in the old country or the new, and speculated that it took three generations to “become” American (187). This process was attributed to a mysterious racialization and evolution that was folded in under the eugenic umbrella; it might more accurately be understood as part of a movement for eugenics, which proposed that environment as much as heredity determined the fitness of the subject, but somehow the eugenics principles of reform were continually subordinated to the more pressing (and essentializing) demands of the germline.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> In staging this discussion it is difficult not to divert into a history of eugenic thought, but perhaps a brief recapitulation will be sufficient. To begin with Galton, one must revert to Darwin; to attribute eugenic thinking about the methods by which evolution progresses without citing Lamarck leaves an aporia that is not so much unusual as irresponsible. Likewise, it would be wrong to discuss “survival of the fittest” without Malthus, or Malthus without Hobbes, and so forth. The narrative is subject to endless recursion and in versions more and less thorough it has been rehearsed literally hundreds of times.

A few texts have been central to my understanding of this story, including Marouf Hasian’s *Rhetoric of Eugenic Thought*, Stefan Kuhl’s *The Nazi Connection*, Ewen and Ewen’s *Typecasting: The Art and Science of Human Inequality*, Edwin Black’s *War Against the Weak: Eugenics and America’s Campaign to Create a Master Race*, and Sander Gilman’s *Making the Body Beautiful: A Cultural History of Plastic Surgery*. The conventional genealogy goes something like this, if I may be permitted to tell it in miniature: Francis Galton, credited by the movement as the “father of eugenics,” brought the emerging science of statistics to bear on his cousin Darwin’s work, applying it to human development and shifting the notion of “fitness” from simple ability to survive and reproduce to a more general idea regarding the biological superiority of the upper classes; in the United States, the work promoted by this thinking was taken up by social scientists with an imperative not only to establish a logic of social inequality in a post-aristocratic society, but also to find a way to apply scientific thought and practice to the betterment of society. (Here we could further digress into the prevalence of eugenic thought in utopian fiction at this time (and beyond), but that must be set aside.) Two scientific developments were integral to the proliferation of eugenic thought: The 1900 rediscovery of Gregor Mendel’s work on inheritance offered not only an explanatory model but

Interestingly, Macfadden himself stubbornly resisted efforts to reform his own bodily heixis, and maintained both his brash manner and slovenly style of dress throughout his life. Whether or not stories of his own staff mistaking him for a vagrant are apocryphal, it is certainly the case that the ill-fitting suits, “ventilated” hats and bare feet in which he was given to walk the eleven miles from his suburban home to his Manhattan office did not make him look like his fellow executives. The decision to dress and carry himself as a man apart was not accidental; Macfadden was chronically situating himself as an outsider. Much of the advice in his publications was geared to a kind of self-creation he himself never practiced; or rather, the kind of self-creation he practiced differed from that of his readership, because he began and ended his

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also a graphical charting style that was to prove very powerful in the increasingly visual world of popular science. Auguste Weismann’s 1885 repudiation of Lamarck’s “soft inheritance,” purported that only that which could be transmitted via the reproductive cells could be inherited. The monopoly of the germline as the only means of trait transmission meant that reform movements – including but not limited to eugenics – were entirely without value. We have seen a coda of this particular sensation with the sequencing of the human genome in the 1990s; the notion that all characteristics, from hair color to sensibility, could be accounted for in the “germ” (or genome) is as attractive as it is problematic. The notion that the germ was the sole responsible party in shaping the man was powerful, and useful; the force of scientific effort and funding driving that idea was unprecedented.

Kathy Cooke tracks in clear and useful fashion the steady marginalization of eugenics, or scientific concern with environmental factors in improving the stock, in the years preceding WWI. She points out that the name “eugenics” didn’t really catch on, in part because it was insufficiently euphonic and in part because, for the early eugenicists, environment was not so clearly distinguished – or separated – from issues of heredity. This distinction was one of the consequences of the extinction of neo-Lamarckianism; unfortunately, so was the absolute privileging of the germ plasm over the environment. By 1915, the leading eugenics organizations and publications were all run by hard-line hereditarians, and the “reform” or euthenic agenda is pretty completely marginalized. We also see by the late teens a radical reduction in the number of times the word “eugenics” is featured on the cover of *Physical Culture* (it recurs a few times in the 1930s, and yet its presence is surprisingly rare). It would seem that the concerns of *Physical Culture* are in fact almost entirely in line with the euthenic agenda, and yet that word never appears in any of the issues of the magazine I have been able to obtain. Nor do we see articles from eugenics advocates like founder Ellen Swallow Richards, Lester Ward or Carl Seashore, even though their agendas are clearly in league. One could conjecture that Macfadden’s privileging of “ordinary language” certainly has a part in this; one might like to think that it was a consequence of distancing from eugenics language more generally. Still, it’s easier to account for the presence of a term in text than its absence. The shared interests between eugenics reformers and physical culturists are clear, and although one could hardly hope to track eugenics responsibly without reference to *Physical Culture*, it would be difficult – and unlikely -- to find the overlap we might wish to see.

career first and foremost as a showman. His hexical ambivalence, if you will, was a performance demonstrating the autonomy he had to move between worlds, between class positions, because he was so physically empowered.

The intersection of *Physical Culture* with the eugenics movement is the tangled knot at the center of this chapter, and it turns on the question of bodily hexis. In the *Physical Culture* worldview, fitness is not (solely) an inherent or inherited characteristic, but rather a quality which must be earned, stewarded and maintained, exactly like any other asset. Fitness, then, is fungible – not an essential characteristic but a commodity. Until this time, “fitness” retained its Darwinian (or more accurately, Malthusian) sense as a determinant of adequacy to survive and reproduce. In *Physical Culture*, our understanding of “fitness” begins its transformation into the term as we understand it today: health, strength, vigor and its appearance, as cultivated through exercise and attention. Interestingly, the etymology of fitness as a physical trait is not tracked in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, or any other reliable source I can find; the work of locating the transitional moment for the term itself has yet to be done.<sup>36</sup> Rather than being a fixed state determined by birth, fitness became a commodity which could be acquired or lost, earned or purchased. This was an unprecedented shift, and has not to my knowledge been marked either by

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<sup>36</sup> It appears that the work of Austrian émigré Hans Kraus and Bonnie Prudden in 1953, which established some simple tests for quantitative measurement of strength and agility and launched the President’s Council on Physical Fitness, is widely credited as the first place where “fitness” is used in this sense. But Jeffrey Montez de Oca leads us to Prudden’s own chronology, which makes mention of John Kelly (father of Grace Kelly) having been “Director of Physical Fitness” under FDR. I have yet to find information about when or how this position was created or named. Kelly took the position in 1940 (to the great chagrin of Macfadden, no doubt, who for years had been heavily lobbying the Roosevelts for a position) It seems unlikely, nonetheless, that the slippage would occur first in such a public production, or that it was a great leap in meaning rather than the outcome of a more gradual slide. In any case, while we don’t see the word “fitness” used in the current sense in *Physical Culture*, we do see the ideas behind it taking shape here: that the subject is in control of the health and condition of his body, and that body condition is the primary marker of “fit-ness” – both in the sense of vigor and in the sense of adequacy.

biographers of Macfadden or historians of fitness. That this has gone unremarked is indicative of the degree to which this archive has gone unmined, and shows another way in which *Physical Culture* operated against the grain of contemporary discourse. But we can say for certain that the “fitness” referred to in magazines like *Men’s Fitness* today has little connection to the Darwinian notion and much more to do with Macfaddenite re-appropriation of the term.

For *Physical Culture*, self-care is the key to health, longevity and success. Heredity is basically unimportant; the reward for good health is class mobility, and the price of poor self-care is unhappiness. The individual who controls his own fitness controls his own fate.

#### 4.4 COMMODIFYING HEALTH

The year 1919 was significant for Macfadden: it marked the beginning of the magazine *True Story*, and a permanent change in fortune after a long struggle with financial straitening. With five children, dozens of employees, and a variety of businesses in various states of development, he may have been more keenly aware of the “certain responsibilities” that come with wealth than its pleasures. He was fifty years old, and his success was far beyond what his humble beginnings might have suggested – but his financial position was still precarious. Macfadden’s unwavering commitment to his formula for success held firm even when it seemed pretty farfetched. But *True Story* launched in May and it was clear from the outset that it would be a goldmine (Adams 107).

*Physical Culture* had been an immediate success when it launched in 1899, and Macfadden was quick to create a number of related businesses and investments that mostly did surprisingly well. His financial rise had been as rapid as it was ephemeral – not as a result of poor business practices, but of having sunk everything into the Comstock battle. That fight, over the question of whether his materials on venereal disease constituted “obscenity,” was one he ultimately lost, along with a great deal of money and a number of side-businesses. It’s worth noting that over the course of that suit, from the first charges in 1905 to its resolution (not in Macfadden’s favor) in 1912, venereal disease – and sex education more generally – had become increasingly normalized as topics of conversation both within the periodical press and in a wide array of self-help and advice manuals associated with the eugenics movement. Again, Macfadden’s role in a sizable cultural shift has been underplayed, or overlooked – but is certainly deserving of acknowledgment. His willingness to take enormous risks either for a business idea or for a principle meant that he experienced success and failure repeatedly across his long career. The result was both innovation and ridicule, by turns. In 1919, Macfadden was fifty years old, and it looked like he was going to be a rich man once more.

The October, 1919 *Physical Culture* issue bears cover art that is very much “of its time:” an idealized young man, nude except for a gold-clasped cape, holds a world in his hands – a half sphere crowded with men engaged in various activities, including romance and fatherhood, beneath which is the headline “Your Health Creates Your World.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The artist of this and the July 1919 issue shown in Chapter One is Clifton Brown. He did a number of *Physical Culture* covers around this time, but I can find no information about him in the catalogs or annals of illustrators.

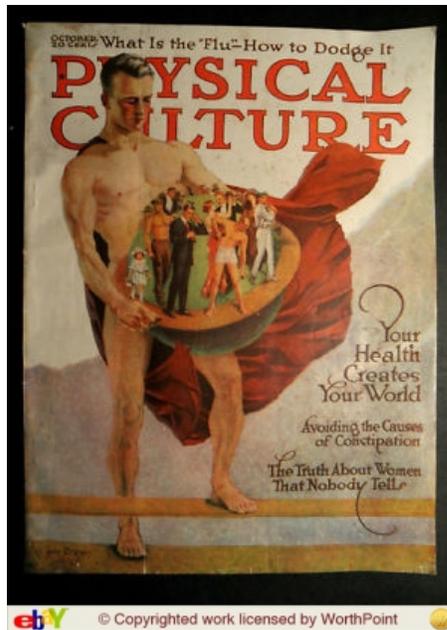


Figure 18: Physical Culture, October 1919

The editorial section of this issue includes four brief essays by Macfadden. Were this available elsewhere I would excerpt it, but because this copy of the magazine is not archived anywhere that I know of, I am including here the entirety of the second essay, “Fight For Health and Happiness,” in which Bernarr Macfadden makes precisely this argument: that health, like wealth, is an asset that may be earned, inherited or lost; and that the self-made man will be fundamentally more responsible with this asset than the heir, for he will know its value.

The good things in life do not come to us without effort. We are able to appreciate them only when they represent a reward for hard work. When years of striving enable us to taste the fruits of victory, the experience is keenly appreciated.

Money represents one of our most desirable objects, but it must be earned to be appreciated. Inherited wealth is not prized at its true value. It comes without effort.

Wealth brings certain responsibilities. If we possess unearned wealth we are rarely able to recognize or to intelligently assume these responsibilities. If it is only the money which we earn through diligent effort that brings the joys and delights associated with true success.

Life's most resplendent gift, Health, offers no exception to this rule. Many of us come into health as an inheritance. Consequently, we are unable to appreciate it. We cannot recognize its extraordinary value.

But when we lose it! Then indeed does it assume its real importance. When you have lost your health and have to work for it, your position is similar to that of the man who struggles for a long period to secure wealth. He appreciates it, and usually knows how to take care of it. He is able to assume the associated responsibilities.

When you acquire health, after a prolonged period of hard work, the intensity of the struggle makes a life-long impression upon you.

A certain amount of the fighting spirit is essential in every sphere of life. No matter what your ambitions may be, whether you are struggling for wealth or for health, the fighting spirit can materially increase your chances of reward.

To attain health you must fight for it.

To keep health you must fight for it.

In fact, life itself, to be retained for a prolonged period, must be protected by the fighting spirit. If you give up easily in the effort to protect your life, your chances of retaining it to a good old age are greatly lessened.

Not only must you love life, but you must be ready to strive with might and main to retain it, to contend to retain it, to the extreme limit of your vital resources.

The value of this fighting spirit applies with equal emphasis when you are desirous of retaining the extraordinary powers of resplendent health. You should be fully alive to your very finger tips. You should be keenly awake to the possibilities of life. This is the sort of health you should possess. If you have been in ill health and have gone through the strenuous work essential to building superior vitality, do not imagine that your work is done. Every day of your life you have the task before you of maintaining this vital vigor. Your habits of life must be such as to ensure those daily efforts which are required in living up to the necessary ideals.

To keep health of the right kind, you must, therefore, be a fighter. You must be ready and willing at all times to fight for your rights; and your rights in this instance are evidenced in the possession of a body which is throbbing with the vital force of health. You should be satisfied with nothing less than this, and when you find yourself backsliding, when you are inclined to be lax and slip into a lazy life of ease, then you will need the fighting spirit. It has been said that man is his own worst enemy, that he does himself more harm than can his worst enemy, through failing

to recognize and to avoid the deteriorating influences which everywhere sap the vitality and vigor of the race.

If you want to grow to your full height mentally as well as physically, guide your daily habits in a manner to ensure you the possession of the throbbing vital forces of the life supreme (13).

Positing self-making as a physical process as well as a financial or social one was remarkable. And the contrast it provided to other ideas about the relationship between physicality and selfhood made it virtually impossible to ignore the Calvinist overtones in eugenic philosophy, if it may be called that: predestination, election, the inability for an individual to bring about their own redemption seem central to both ideologies, and this notion that the course for a man's life is set before he begins to live served to naturalize social position even as it undermined old aristocracies. It is unusual, as well, for a text which does not usually engage directly in economic discourse to openly devalue inherited wealth. The cherished value of middle-class achievement was projected onto the body; whereas the bulk of eugenic texts suggested that the fitness or unfitness of an individual was inherent, and frequently coincident with and evidence of class identity, in *Physical Culture* the acquisition of fitness was a central part of the project of self-making.

To consider health as a fungible asset has a variety of implications. First, as Macfadden makes clear, it is earned and has value. Second, it is a commodity: health is a thing apart, not (just) a condition reflective of inherent or innate qualities. It may even be argued that for Macfadden and his advertisers, health as commodity may be purchased – although, the publisher reminded his readers, effort would still be required. Third, health once acquired must be maintained – it is not a stable condition, or a state equivalent to class or caste as in prevailing systems of thought. The naturally healthy person was not only not superior to the one who

struggled to find health; he was comparable to the spoiled rich kid who would inevitably squander the fortune with which he was graced. (A gesture at the rhetoric of the 2012 US presidential election is obligatory here.)

Read against his biography, “Fight For Health and Happiness” makes perfect sense. Macfadden, whose personal politics were a mixed bag of idealism and resentment, was repelled by socialism but had a great love and affinity for “the fellow who works for a wage.” He made his fortune building a readership among the working class, and enjoyed spitting in the eye of “respectability.” Read into the context of the time, it’s a more interesting piece – again reminding us that Macfadden’s personal story in every sense runs counter to prevailing ideas of success and “fit-ness.” But those dominant ideas gradually find their way into the magazine, and what to make of them remains an open question.

#### **4.5 WHAT WAS HE THINKING?**

The conversations in which *Physical Culture* intervened had been ongoing for decades before the magazine emerged. Again and again through the years, *Physical Culture* reported on or responded to thought-formations from the larger culture; in its effort to engage as many celebrities and “big-name” authors as it could, it sometimes published articles that seemed out of sync with the basic Macfadden message about whole foods, fasting, walking and fresh air as the answers to nearly every modern ill. Macfadden was a living testimonial to his philosophy; as such, he often used photos of himself on the cover of the magazine or as illustrations for its stories and instructions. But beyond the beefcake and narcissism, his agenda, if not always

coherent, was certainly consistent – and reached more homes than any other individual’s program for living at the time.

Macfadden had very particular ideas about the body, not limited to its care and feeding. The place of the body in culture, and the ways in which bodies might be regarded by others are equally of interest to him, and the relationship between the body and the State emerge from this miasm in ways that articulate troubling and intriguing insight into its cultural moment. Each of the magazines and newspapers he published served as a vehicle for his physical culture message; hence, he kept a close eye on editorial policy and content, and wrote frequent editorials and columns for many of his publications.

Bernarr Macfadden has been called, by turns, a quack, a huckster, an impresario, and a publishing giant. He has been seen as narcissistic, even delusional; evangelical in his beliefs and shameless in pursuit of a buck. But he has yet to be accused of being a theorist. In *Weakness is a Crime*, the 1990 biography of Macfadden, Robert Ernst attributed to Macfadden’s lack of formal schooling both unsystematic thought and sloppy language. Ernst wrote,

Whatever the topic, whether or not he knew much about it, the physical culturist never hesitated to dispense advice. His editorials often meandered through swamps of murky generalization and his reasoning was unsophisticated, but he was usually consistent in his point of view. Readers of the *Graphic* did not take to high-sounding words, and he recommended simple language. In “To the Cemetery With Dead Languages,” written after Yale dropped its Latin requirement [in the *Graphic* 9 June 1931], he explained that the proper way to write effective English was to study the shades and meanings of commonly used words and avoid those that would drive an ordinary person to a dictionary (Ernst 102).

Macfadden may have been as far ahead of his time in his views about rhetoric as he was in his understanding of “health food.” Macfadden explains in the introduction to his *Physical*

*Culture Cookbook* that his book “is going to be written in the United States English. It isn’t even going to be in scientific cookery English, but just common folks’ English. I realize that in doing this very democratic American thing, I am in danger of losing good will” (Macfadden 7). Whether or not his style was edifying, it was certainly not unself-conscious, and it was without question successful. Macfadden owned at least thirty magazines and half a dozen daily newspapers, including the *New York Evening Graphic*, America’s Ur-Tabloid. In a feat of tremendous publishing machismo, Ernst noted, he was publishing ten magazines and ten newspapers at once. In 1935, his total circulation was 7,335,000 – exceeding that of Crowell or Hearst (Ernst 88). Of this we can be certain: people read the stuff. The ongoing success of his publications attests to the notion that this unsophisticated style was persuasive to readers. In this “unsophisticated” voice, Macfadden was able to reach literally millions of people – and, presumably, to persuade at least some of them.

In 1921, Fulton Oursler came to Macfadden Publications, and in 1922 he took the helm as editor in chief. Under his auspices the Macfadden brand thrived. Mostly the consensus seems to be that Oursler professionalized the company, bringing in more “legitimate” magazines like *Liberty*, overhauling layouts, and generally creating an environment more in sync with similar enterprises. Adams chuckles about Oursler’s insistence on smoking in the office (Adams 116), and points out that Oursler’s home office was much more a headquarters for him than the Physical Culture building, where Macfadden’s hijinks seemed perpetually to upend the order of the day (179). Even for a reader like Adams, who really seems to appreciate Macfadden’s idiosyncrasy, Oursler’s middle-class affability and irreverence still read as more competent, and less likely to make strategic ideological errors than his brash and burly boss.

During the early years of Oursler's tenure, the marriage between Bernarr and Mary Macfadden was becoming intolerable, and in her memoir, *Dumbbells and Carrot Strips*,<sup>38</sup> Mary blamed Oursler for just about everything that went wrong in both the Macfadden empire and the Macfadden family. What was his doing and what Macfadden's? Not only as regards big decisions like the creation, acquisition or selling of publications, but in questions of editorial content and policy, the answers are unclear. There is not very much documentation available regarding the internal workings of Macfadden Publications, and biographers have drawn their own conclusions.

Was it Oursler or Macfadden who hired German sympathizer Sylvester Viereck to advise on *Liberty*? Was it Oursler or Macfadden who chose to highlight Albert Wiggam and the eugenic question in *Physical Culture*? Again, it's hard to say. Adams builds on earlier arguments that Macfadden's political ambitions softened *Physical Culture's* approach and methods when in the 1930s the magazine seems to swing away from cheesecake and toward issues of family health. There is no question that Macfadden was running for something – anything, really; he was desperate for a public position, whether by election or appointment, and was bitterly disappointed by each rebuff – but if he were self-conscious about content, he might have turned his attention to the scandalous *Daily Graphic*, or eased up a bit on his war with the medical doctors. Reading him as pulling his punches misses the fundamental issue of his character: he was no more likely to compromise his views than to eat a Baby Ruth.

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<sup>38</sup> Having left Macfadden Publications for Hearst some years earlier, former *Daily Graphic* editor Emile Gauvreau assisted Mary with her tell-all memoir. His years at Macfadden Publications left him with a great deal of inside information – and a whopping resentment. Which of these might be credited with some of the more outrageous claims in the memoir is unclear, and hence I don't cite this book at all. The Ernst biography draws heavily on this source, to its detriment I think.

As we have seen in the previous chapter, Macfadden was not one to back away from a fight. His direct attacks on the truth claims of mainstream medicine did not just set him at odds with the medical community; there were profound financial consequences and it is arguable that the repercussions for his reputation have lasted into the present. If his response to the eugenics movement were simple opposition, we would see that in his texts and in the content of the magazine. But in fact the relationship of Macfadden to eugenics is profoundly ambivalent, and I think more complicated than his biographers have allowed.

Even as Macfadden argued for an idea of health that ran entirely contrary to the eugenicist rhetoric of the time, his concern for “the vitality and vigor of the race” sounds eerily familiar. Whether we hear echoes in this language of Theodore Roosevelt or Margaret Sanger, we know that this line of thought, and this kind of rhetorical formation, was endemic in the early twentieth century. Macfadden claimed to read nothing he did not write himself, but the presence of eugenicist discourse not only in the magazine as a whole but in his own editorials would indicate otherwise; we can hear him wrestling with dissonant language as he tried to reconcile his message with that of the social movement with which he shared some affinity.

I would argue that the magazine changed because Macfadden changed, and that this change makes it clear that he was as much a product of his environment at the end of his career as at the beginning. Although the fundamentals of his message are stable—eat well, fast regularly, exercise religiously – his endless willingness to experiment with diets, body practices and larger ideas, and his practice of weighing in on issues of the day, created the conditions for an evolution of its own.

#### 4.6 THE INSULT THAT MADE A MAN

Concomitant with the rise of the magazine industry, as both Thomas Pendergast and Michael Kimmel have demonstrated, was the rise of the “self-made man” whose creation and presentation was quite the media-driven affair. Self-presentation became increasingly important in the transition Pendergast describes from “character-” to “personality-”driven men’s culture (126). Yet a personality like Macfadden’s was practically a photographic negative of that presumed to bring or inhabit “success.” Personality in this understanding is defined almost entirely by its bodily hexis, from the tilt of the hat to the firmness of the handshake. The degree to which nearly all magazines at the turn of the century were offering guidance on the production and presentation of the self was Pendergast’s object of investigation; the degree to which this work on the self was guided and generated by anxiety was Kimmel’s.

Michael Kimmel described the experience of *Manhood In America*, in the book bearing the same name, as “a relentless test” (ix), and suggested that a defining quality of masculinity is that it is always liable to be called into question. If, as Kimmel suggests, masculinity is a state or quality which must endlessly be proven or earned, the result is endless contestation. Manhood, says, Kimmel, “is less about the drive for domination and more about the fear of others dominating us, having power or control over us.... And men have been afraid of not measuring up to some vaguely defined notions of what it means to be a man” (6). If anxiety was a driving force in the shaping of masculinity at this time, the premonitory headline on early *Physical Culture* magazines hailed this anxiety with a startling directness.

“Weakness Is A Crime - Don’t Be A Criminal,” it cautioned. Later issues also averred that “Sickness Is A Sin – Don’t Be A Sinner.” Neither of these headlines ran on every issue, but they appeared regularly and recurred at irregular intervals over the life of the magazine, serving as a sort of recurrent reminder of the fundamental principle of the magazine: that people are responsible for their own condition, and that taking control of their bodies is not only possible but essential to any kind of success.

These powerful exhortations are a direct challenge to the reader – and an insult, if the reader was perhaps not feeling so well. The directions inside the magazine, supplemented by specific instructions from the dozens of books Macfadden published and the products supplied by his advertisers, would guide the reader not only to health and strength, but away from criminality and sin. *Physical Culture* wasn’t just about looking good, or even feeling good: it was about *being* good. And the virtue available to the practitioner of physical culture would determine not only how he lived, but how he would be experienced by others as well.

The cover slogans were at once an accusation and a dare, and prefigured the cartoons featured in the advertisements of Charles Atlas. Atlas was a protégé of Macfadden, who discontinued his “Beautiful Body” contest after twice awarding the prize to the young immigrant (born Angelo Siciliano), he was as perfect a man as Macfadden ever expected to see. Atlas advertised his “Dynamic Tension” exercise system in an iconic six-panel cartoon in which a scrawny young man, humiliated at the beach by a bully kicking sand, rebuilds his body and reclaims both his dignity and The Girl. The “I was a ninety-eight pound weakling” banner and the endlessly repeating story of “The Insult that Made a Man Out of Mac” was drawn and redrawn, with small variations, over most of the twentieth century; beginning in *Physical*

*Culture*, the ad was ubiquitous in magazines and comic books for decades. Atlas “did not pitch health or larger arms,” explained historian Joseph Gustaitis. “He sold manhood” (Gustaitis 17).

The cartoon operates at a remove from Macfadden’s confrontational tone. The reader is hailed to identify with the scrawny victim, but is not directly called names like “criminal” or “sinner.” The Atlas story is compassionate rather than accusatory, but likewise suggests that the reader is able to shift his position and thereby alter his experience, his relation to power, and his relation to the girl – which is to say, his own sexuality — and his relationship to the signifiers activating his desire. The cartoon illustrates what *Physical Culture* articulates: that the relationship between a subject and his own body occurs within power relations over which he has more control than he thinks.

It could be argued (indeed it has been, many times) that the shift of the worker’s gaze toward the self was a quietist shift, a means by which he was distracted or diverted from seeing or addressing “the real problems” of social inequality, exploitation, and oppression. But it could also be said that the shift to the inward gaze was a response to, and perhaps acknowledgement of, his powerlessness within those larger structures. Were there to be any hope of change in the circumstances of his existence, it seemed more likely that such change would come from altering the condition of the commodity he had in play in the marketplace than by addressing the marketplace itself. The inverted gaze was about survival. And survival, in a culture phobic of failure, is coded as “success.”

Kimmel quotes Henry Adams’ description of life in the “crowded ‘banker’s world’ ” of late nineteenth century proletarianization, where one was “both less valuable and more competitive than before.” A man in this world knew what that meant:

He was for sale, in the open market. So were many of his friends. All the world knew it, and they knew too that they were cheap; to be bought at the price of a mechanic.... The young man was required to impose himself, by the usual business methods, as a necessity on his elders, in order to compel them to buy him as an investment (Kimmel 84).

How the young man might best impose himself was a question that launched a thousand books – probably more, if we were to count carefully, or to extend our inventory beyond the “long early twentieth century.” Indeed, from the late nineteenth century to the present this question has persisted. And while it has never disappeared completely, its presence seems to increase when the labor market falters. But it drives a challenging psychic move for the reader, one which makes the work of *Physical Culture* and texts like it particularly interesting for students of culture or of subjectivity. The reader is asked to perform simultaneous tasks: to read the text as a student, and to apply it by looking at himself “objectively” – which is to say, from outside himself. He is asked to alienate himself from himself in order to “read” himself both as a text and as a commodity on the open market, and then to act on that self in ways that might shift its value. The idea of value here is neither the abstracted sense of “goodness” nor the very concrete sense of “use value” (ie., learning a new skill or trade). Rather, the reader is taught to understand the self as one among many similar commodities, and to re-package that self as a more enticing product, either for his elders to buy “as an investment” or for his peers to buy as an asset which might, in turn, increase their own market value. Gender plays a role here, but this disarticulation of the self is not exclusive to one gender. Jane Austen certainly captured a sense of what it meant for women to be commodities on the marriage market a century previous; but now this objectification and commodification had extended into professional and social circles across the economic and geographic map. More accurately, this transubstantiation of person into

product had become overt, a matter for all individuals from shopgirls to executives to take into consideration with every move and every purchase. Reading himself as a text, and then acting on himself as a site of labor, he reconstitutes himself as a commodity. This splitting of the self in order to recognize oneself as a commodity not only among other people but among other commodities marks a deeper level of alienation, a psychic shift into a mode of being that is entirely performative, unmoored – in other words, modern.<sup>39</sup>

#### 4.7 IT'S ALL ABOUT EU

Eugenics discourse suggests that some parts of the self are irreducible and quantifiable<sup>40</sup> – that there are measurable indications of who (or what) someone *is*, whether these indicators point to “facts” of race, inherent ability, intelligence or feeble-mindedness. In the borderlands between eugenics, phrenology and the physiognomic studies of early anthropology lay hundreds of studies of brainpan size, foot shape, genital configuration and family history, as scientists sought to identify what, exactly, about people was irreducible, and to prove that physical signs could be markers for ostensibly invisible traits, including but not limited to intelligence, criminality and

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<sup>39</sup> The performative self is that to which Pendergast and Kimmel are referring when they talk about the shift to “personality” from “character” at the turn of the century: the self-made man is above all *made, constructed* – and this according to parameters that are constructed by the market in which he hopes to succeed. That the construction is supposed to look effortless, as if the subject was always already whatever the market asked him to be, echoes the “instant permanence” of the Knife and Fork communities, and is underscored by the snarky tone in the Veblen article from *Vanity Fair* that we read in Chapter One.

<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it could be argued that this too is a response to alienation – that the irreducible truth of a self being searched for in the endless weighing and measuring was a response to the loss of the notion of the soul as essence.

sexual promiscuity. Truly, enough cannot be said of the epistemological importance of the trope of evolution in the nineteenth century; as radical change reshaped social, political and economic landscapes. Unprecedented cultural contact and exposure occurred in day-to-day life; technologies including photography and halftone printing brought the Other to a burgeoning readership. Fascination with the natural and social world opened avenues of inquiry into human origins and development and ultimately the direction of the material world: and origin stories about the world or its occupants are always propelled by anxieties as to where it is going. As the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth, the ideas and ideologies coalescing around eugenics served to concretize categories of class, race and national identity which might otherwise have been so porous as to give way altogether.

During the years *Physical Culture* was in circulation, bodies were central to a series of conversations – about race, but also about the well-being of both the person and the state. Ultimately, each of these conversations was about control. Over the course of the nineteenth century, economic and technological transition, industrialization, urbanization, political transitions and war led to unprecedented levels of migration within and across national borders. As community composition changed, so did the sense of what created and defined community. In the United States in particular, new towns and neighborhoods strove for a sense of permanence and emerging middle classes, professional and otherwise, sought explanations for their good fortune that could serve to cement it into place. The body became the discursive center for political movements as well as for a series of new sciences, including anthropology, sociology and eugenics, that shaped cultural understandings of humanity and identity. During “the long early twentieth century,” these conversations turned to the negative in fascinating ways. Large questions of evolution, race and wellness or body care devolved into obsessions with syphilis,

degeneration, and race suicide; in many of the texts that approached physicality from a eugenic perspective, the body had become a site of danger and loss.

Eugenics advocates were also concerned with the weak and sick committing the ultimate crime against humanity through the reproduction of their substandard “kind.” The admonitions against reproducing congenitally ill or feeble-minded people were a focus of eugenic research and publicity from early in the movement’s history; Joseph LeConte explained in 1891 that “if we are to have race improvement at all, the dreadful law of destruction of the weak and infirm must with Spartan firmness be carried out voluntarily and deliberately” (Hasian 20). Although LeConte argued for more temperate measures, he could not disregard the ruthless logic set forth by orthodox eugenics from Francis Galton forward.

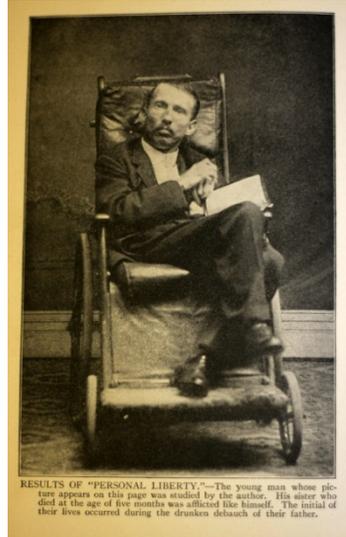
Henry Goddard’s landmark study, the 1912 *Kallikak Family*, purported to trace two lines of descent from a single patriarch, a Revolutionary War soldier. It is worth noting that the family is described as having born with the nation; the genesis point in Goddard’s narrative having occurred during the revolution cannot have been accidental. The gentleman in question had a brief dalliance during the war with a nameless barmaid, but later married a respectable woman from a good family. The son born of that wartime tryst was the first in a long line of morons, criminals and alcoholics; the other side of the family was virtually without stain, despite a marked proclivity for drink. This excessive thirst was tempered by the moderating features of good family and good blood, but among the bastard family not only alcoholism but sexual immorality, prostitution, crime and feeble-mindedness abounded; hundreds of criminals, costing society thousands of dollars and measureless heartache, were the result of this moment of weakness suffered by an otherwise hale young man. Once the feeble-minded germ was set in motion, it was unstoppable. Goddard had conceded some uncertainty as to whether

feble-mindedness was itself a heritable trait, but the Kallikak family pedigree seemed to him incontrovertible proof. (“Feble-mindedness” was measurable on the Binet scale if a subject were available to be tested, but able caseworkers were able to suss out the condition even when the sufferer was not available to be tested or questioned in person. The “moron” was a more interesting case, able to pass as normal but subtly feble-minded. This condition seemed particularly to strike pretty but dull girls, who would be at great risk of promiscuity and intemperance as a result.) At the end of the Kallikak story, Goddard makes a powerful case for sterilization, suggesting not only that it was not more uncomfortable than “the pulling of a tooth” but that the mathematical odds of sterilization robbing the world of a “normal” person were much less than the chances of its preventing numerous feble-minded souls from poisoning society with their immoral behavior and mindless fecundity.

In the same year that Goddard’s Kallikaks were making waves, reform minister TW Shannon published a thick volume of advice and admonition in the “Knowledge and Purity” series by Mullikin Press. *Self Knowledge* is marked on the cover as a companion to *Know Thyself*, but inside, it was subtitled “Guide to Sex Instruction and Facts of Life for All Ages,” and at 629 pages it teems with instruction, including the proper relations between members of a family, how to teach “social purity and sex facts” to a boy or to a girl, and in the seventh section, “Heredity: Vital Facts for the Married and Marriageable.” These vital facts are illustrated with a series of photographs illustrating a progression: this is a wild strawberry, it tells us, “Nature gave us this” - and shows the picture of a weedy little fruit. On the facing page, “a strawberry under cultivation- Good Heredity and Environment Produced This.” Bursting from the page, the plump and glossy berry seems lit from within. “This is a wild rose – nature gave us this,” explains the caption under the next photograph, this time of a little flower, and on the next page, an

“American Beauty rose, good heredity and environment produced this.” On the next page is livestock: a champion bull, a prize pig. And on the facing page, writhing in his wheelchair – a syphilitic child. “Results of ‘Personal Liberty’ – This young man whose picture appears on this page was studied by the author. His sister who died at the age of five months was afflicted like himself. The initial of their lives occurred during the drunken debauch of their father” (sic).





**Figure 19: Six photo visual argument from Self Knowledge, pp 398-403**

This is striking for a number of reasons. Shannon’s book was popular, part of a series on “purity and knowledge” that found a receptive audience at its time. This basic message could be illustrated by any one of a thousand proliferating texts on “the facts of life” that were emerging at the turn of the century. The popularity of that perspective in 1913 really cannot be overstated. And the progression shown so vividly in the photographs – that attention to breeding improves all things, and that we neglect to apply it to our own species at our peril – was rapidly becoming common sense.

This basic message of the importance of good breeding could have been illustrated by any one of a thousand texts on “the facts of life” that were proliferating at the turn of the century. What is particularly compelling about this series of illustrations is that the enemy of good breeding is represented as syphilis.

At once heritable and contagious, syphilis begged a set of questions regarding reproduction, transmission of sin, and heritability more generally. Syphilis had all the markings of fire-and-brimstone wages of sin, visited on the miscreant and generations to come. And that

might have been enough to make it useful in the rhetorical stylings of the reformers – but there were more reasons we see it foregrounded at this moment.

In *Making the Body Beautiful*, Sander Gilman's history of plastic surgery, the nose is, well, central. The deformed nose, flattened, eaten away, was an indicator of syphilis that was, he tells us, recognizable to the lay population almost from the emergence of the disease in the late fifteenth century. The "syphilitic nose," he tells us,

would take an ever larger place in European culture as the preeminent symbol of all that was unclean, inferior and undesirable. As the nineteenth century wore on, and European culture continued to extract the profits of colonization, the symbolic locus of the too-small nose became inextricably associated with race (Gilman 84).

The syphilitic nose served as a bridge, if you will, or metonym for the link between foreignness and disease.

As a consequence of promiscuity, syphilis in polite society was assumed to be the provenance of men: middle class men, to be more precise, who philandered with "loose women" of the lower classes. At a moment when class hostility was particularly high, syphilis seemed illustrative of a very important point: the lower classes were dangerous, filthy, polluted. It was very possible that even a brief encounter could leave one "ruined." As a metonym for class anxiety, it served to underscore the terrible dangers presented by the immigrant as well as the newly urbanized, industrialized labor force – many of whom turned to prostitution as a means to supplement the meager wages of factory or retail work.

Although the disease was present across classes, it was seen as belonging, in some important ways, to the poor. The report accompanying the British Contagious Diseases Act of 1866 declared that "sufferers of any contagious disease are dangerous members of society,"

requiring restraint (and interestingly prefiguring the *Physical Culture* exhortation, “Weakness is a Crime, Don’t be a Criminal”). Syphilis was not a class-limited disease, but it would nonetheless require class-limited solutions, including the incarceration of the syphilitic poor. At the same time, however, the report suggested that addressing the syphilis problem “aims at the improvement of a numerous and degraded class.”

It was clear that the carrier of syphilis was “unfit” to reproduce, although he often did. His “carelessness” had physical, emotional – and financial – consequences for all involved, and for society as a whole. But the syphilitic was certainly not the only person “unfit” to procreate. The syphilitic was a strange case, actually: at once emblematic and unspeakable, his was the incontrovertible photograph – but his was also a case in which the condition of unfitness was acquired, rather than (simply) inherited.

In 1905, the syphilis germ was isolated. It was a breakthrough in what we now call epidemiology, and led to development and marketing of a series of real and “quack” treatments for the treatment of the disease, culminating in the development of antibiotics in the 1940s. From the moment the isolation of the germ was publicized, renewed scientific interest in syphilis brought an increase in discussion of what had been a taboo subject.

Syphilis evoked a particular kind of horror – and corresponding moral imperative. Although Macfadden was censured for publishing a sensational story on venereal disease, in reality his piece was one of many at the time; gradually it became more acceptable to have

“frank discussions” about the scourge.<sup>41</sup> It is certainly arguable that Macfadden paved the way for TW Shannon, for better and worse.

We don't, I think, sufficiently credit syphilis with its impact on American culture and sign systems.<sup>42</sup> But this germ, passed in sin, capable of long periods of dormancy, slow destruction – and heritability – is crucial to understanding representations circulating around questions of morality and pollution. We can extrapolate out into a wide variety of cultural terror-stories of degeneration that syphilis becomes a model by which fears of racial and cultural contamination are understood – degenerative, progressive heritable contagion becomes the unspoken “dog whistle” narrative invoked in larger discourses of integration, immigration, and miscegenation.

While *Physical Culture* was absolutely germinated and grown in this rich soil, its relationship to eugenic discourse is weirdly fraught. It seems at once to stand as a part of the larger conversation and to offer a powerful counternarrative, at once supporting the conclusions and undermining the premises of the dominant discourse. The complicated nature of this relationship has been lost on many readers of *Physical Culture* in the years since its demise; in fact, when I first began this dissertation, I believed the magazine to stand in unflinching support of eugenic policies, fascist politics and a right-wing vision of America built around the idealized male body. I could not have been more wrong – not only about the relationship between the magazine and eugenics but about the relationship between eugenics and the politics of the day.

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<sup>41</sup> The preponderance of devices aimed at fixing the “pug” nose formed a central subject for Gilman – and a ready source of advertising for Macfadden.

<sup>42</sup> It may be that some of the research on the cultural tropes and narratives of AIDS allow us to read backwards across the history of syphilis to better understand the fear engendered by this persistent and terrifying disease.

Eugenics came, over the course of the long early twentieth century, to find its way into nearly every conversation about progress, success or improvement. Across the political spectrum and an array of professional and aesthetic fields, eugenic discourse shaped the conversation and the perceptions that drove it. No one has demonstrated this more ably than Cogdell, who opens her *Eugenic Design* with the observation that

Eugenics appealed to capitalists and socialists, political conservatives and radicals, fascists and anarchists, feminists and social conservatives. Supporters included members of a wide variety of ethnic groups all over the world, including not only self-proclaimed “Nordics” in Europe, the US and Canada, but also Jews, African Americans, Mexicans, Brazilians, Russians, Indians, the Japanese, and many others (xi).

The discourse about eugenics had changed radically in response to two discoveries. When Auguste Weisman disproved Lamarck’s theory of acquired characteristics in 1883, reform eugenics lost ground to Malthusian thinking. For example, Cogdell tells us that

Upon realization of the impact of Weismann’s discovery, in the early 1890s biologist Joseph Le Conte of Berkeley lamented that reformers’ “schemes of education, intellectual and moral,” which were “glorified by the hope that the race is also thereby gradually elevated,” were all for naught. Although he was revolted by the alternative, he logically deduced that if “selection of the fittest” were “the only method available,” then “to have race-improvement at all the dreadful law of destruction of the weak and helpless must with Spartan firmness be carried out voluntarily and deliberately” (18).

To a great degree, eugenic discourse (like the discourse of masculinity, in Kimmel’s construction, whiteness in Roediger’s, and strength in Montez de Oca’s) was driven by anxiety. The pressures of industrialization, migration, and reconstruction were at play, and they certainly have much to do with the sense of crisis that seems so pervasive at this time. A sense of urgency

or emergency pervades much of the writing of the moment, from influential texts like Nordau's *Degeneration* to ephemeral articles and speeches which warned of all sorts of impending catastrophe for the species or, more often, "the race." Absent this sense of emergency, the necessity of "Spartan firmness" to address this threat would not have been so clear. Increasingly, eugenic discourse turned the evolutionary idea on its head, using the same language and methodology to make a case for degeneration as a clear and present threat to individuals and the nation alike. Whether "the race" referred to an ethnic, national or species identity is not only unclear; it varied sometimes from moment to moment. But fear for the welfare of "the race" drove much of the discourse on health and wellness, and much of what happened in and around the science of eugenics.

The second discovery fuelling this acceleration of the discourse was the work of Gregor Mendel, rediscovered in 1900 and almost immediately taken up by those concerned with the science of heredity. Mendelian genetics drove the charting fervor of the teens and twenties, as the scientists and social workers of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory and others sought to establish patterns, identifying dominant and recessive traits in pedigrees for all sorts of characteristics, including hair and eye color, feeble-mindedness, alcoholism, nose shape and criminality. The degree to which unsavory characteristics were both marked as genetic traits and correlated with poverty served as proof to many writers that the conditions of the poor were of their own making, and immune to the efforts of reformers. Thus, Henry Goddard explains,

no amount of work in the slums or removing the slums from our cities will ever be successful until we take care of those who make the slums what they are... if all the slums were removed tomorrow... we would still have slums in a week's time... (Goddard 71).

Tracking the “powerful ancestral line” through generations good and bad seemed to Goddard and his peers incontrovertible proof that Mendelian genetics could be applied to social science, and that character traits were both attributable to genetic cause and responsible for inequality. Again – this was not “fringe thinking;” as the twentieth century took shape, it moved from being mainstream to being utterly, well, natural.

#### 4.8 HAVING A FIT

When *Physical Culture* directly engaged this conversation, the result was a mess. One issue of the magazine serves to point this up most clearly, advocating and undercutting the same message by turns. The issue was noticeably inconsistent in its quality as in its message, and in its slippage I think we can see clearly the ways in which *Physical Culture* struggled to wrap itself around a discourse with which it almost agreed. By 1934 the magazine was just past its zenith; circulation was still in the hundreds of thousands but was beginning to wane. The cover price had been dropped to fifteen cents, bringing it in line with the high-circulation “slicks” whose income derived from advertising rather than cover price; but advertising in *Physical Culture* was on the wane, as well. We still see many full-page display ads, and the margins are packed – but the big name, big corporate ads were less in evidence than five years earlier. Smaller, odder products were taking up more “prime real estate,” and we can nearly see the sweat on the upper lip of Orr Elder, the business manager, struggling to do more with less. The cover art is visibly shoddy and one has the sense throughout of a publication working hard to keep up appearances.



Figure 20: *Physical Culture*, June 1934.

Making space for dense cover text while keeping the composition coherent and visually interesting would be a challenge for any artist, and those enlisted to paint covers for *Physical Culture* included some of the leading illustrators of the day. In June 1934, veteran magazine artist Walter Ratterman had the honor; his works had graced the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Today's Magazine*, among others. Ratterman's subject is a woman in a bathing suit, sitting with a beach ball on a large, flowered pillow, apparently suspended in midair. His approach to this task seems hasty, somehow; the smiling girl in the middle of the page has clearly been cut out of some other illustration and pasted in the middle of the flat, color-blocked field. She wears high heels but has a beach ball with her, and her rosy glow and toothy smile suggest that she might have been playing in the sun just a moment ago. Her head bumps the masthead at the upper left; one foot dangles, sandaled, at the lower right, making her figure a nearly perfect diagonal from upper left to lower right. Behind her knee, some purple shading persists from the previous composition in which she figured. The overall effect is simultaneously

expensive and cheap, as the saturated dyes and artist signature are belied by the shoddy cut-out appearance of the figure. Her yellow swimsuit nearly matches the masthead, which on this occasion reads *Physical Culture: The Personal Problem Magazine*.

“I wish I was going to Thornton's dance, but I will be out of town. Who is he going to invite? If all are as busy as me, he will only have a small party....”

**He thinks he is speaking Correct English!**  
**Can you find his FIVE mistakes?**

IF YOU were introduced, to an attractive prosperous-looking man or woman who constantly made crude mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, what would you think? You could not *help* thinking that this person was sadly lacking in education; you would feel that he or she belonged on a lower social level.

And yet, unless you have made the correctness of your own speech a *habit*, you never can be sure that you are not unconsciously making errors which may cause others to lower their estimates of your education and refinement.

You may not make such glaring errors as *isn't*, *you see*, and *between you and I*, but perhaps you commit other mistakes which offend the ears of those who know, and cause them to judge you unfairly.

Perhaps you sometimes use *who* for *whom*, or *would* for *should*. Are you always sure whether to spell words with one or two "c's" or "m's" or "r's" or with "ei" or "ie"? Do you ever say, "I did it already" or "He don't mean what he says"?

**What Can You Do?**

For many years Sherwin Cody studied the problem of creating the habit of using good English. He found that under old methods rules are memorized, but correct habits are not formed. Soon the rules themselves are forgotten. The new Sherwin Cody method provides, on the contrary, for the formation of correct habits by constantly calling attention only to the mistakes you make—and then showing you the right way, so that correct English soon becomes "second nature." Already over 90,000 people have used this method with the most marked results.

**FREE—Book on English**

A new book explaining Mr. Cody's invention is ready. If you are ever embarrassed by mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, pronunciation, or if your vocabulary is limited, this new free book will prove a revelation to you. Send the coupon on a letter or postal card for it now. SHERWIN CODY SCHOOL OF ENGLISH, 86 Searle Building, Rochester, N. Y.

Figure 21: Sherwin Cody ad

In so many ways, this is consistent with the visual experience of *Physical Culture*. High production values within the photo arrays have made the magazine a hit with collectors; by the 1920s, sophisticated layouts with grisaille illustrations – more and more highlighted with splashes of color – and stunning cover art ought to have made the magazine noteworthy among historians of visual culture. But the beauty and lushness of the layout was too often marred with shoddy finishing, amateur photographs, or content that simply could not be redeemed by visuality into an overall composition worth remarking.

If we consider the text of the many advertisements in the magazine as speaking to real anxieties of the reader, we begin to build an interesting picture. This slippage in production values of the magazine might mirror the struggle the *Physical Culture* reader could be imagined to face. On page 11 of the same issue, the Sherwin Cody School of English has a sidebar ad running the length of the page. The first quarter is a cartoon photograph: A man in a tuxedo is speaking to a pretty but unsmiling woman. The text balloon over his head reads, in very large type, “I wish I was going

to Thornton's dance, but I will be out of town. Who is he going to invite? If all are as busy as me, he will only have a small party..." Beneath this scene of unfolding tragedy, the copy reads, "He thinks he is speaking Correct English! Can you find his five mistakes?" It continues in smaller print, "If YOU were introduced to an attractive, prosperous-looking man or woman who constantly made crude mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, what would you think? You could not help thinking that this person was sadly lacking in education; you would feel that he or she belonged on a lower social class" (sic). The advertisement continues in this vein to the bottom of the page, where readers are invited to send in a coupon for a free booklet to begin the Sherwin Cody course of study.

Advertisements for chewing gum, deodorant soap, and toothpaste all speak to this precise anxiety – that social class will be "given away" by poor habits of carriage and grooming. There are a number of ads as well that call upon different anxieties – that one is too fat, too thin, underdeveloped, lacking drive or pep, suffering from "nerves" or exhaustion – but I would argue that this is a quite different matter: that these deficiencies might mark one as "unfit" but not necessarily as "unclassed," or betrayed by minute signs as out of one's social place.

This anxiety is a far cry from earlier issues of *Physical Culture*, which addressed unfitness as a crime or a sin rather than a "personal problem." Even the articles advertised on that pastiche cover speak to "problems" rather than solutions: "Misunderstanding: Is This True Marriage Story Your Own Case?" "Sorry I've Been a Good Boy: A New Basis of Conduct" and the more usual "The Valves of Your Heart" are the headlines in black, running down the right side of the cover. In the left corner, tucked under the pillow on which the bathing beauty levitates, a larger title leaps in white from the dark blue side of the page: "Should we breed or STERILIZE DEFECTIVES? By Albert Edward Wiggam."

While the leading nature of the question almost drives it to parody, in fact the author is entirely in earnest. But one wonders what place such a question might have in a magazine devoted to rehabilitation. I wish the answer were absolutely clear. But it is very difficult to get an ideological “bead” on this issue in particular or the magazine more generally – and the harder we try, the more deeply imbricated we find it to be both in its moment and in the various strands of political and scientific thought that created it.

The article in question appears early in the magazine, and continues for three full pages before it relinquishes the valuable turf up front and continues, seemingly interminably, in the back of the magazine, where its narrow columns are flanked by ads for Rosicrucian spirituality, electrolysis, and suspensories.<sup>43</sup> This practice of breaking a story up into fragments, scattering them throughout the magazine, and using them to draw readers to smaller advertisers, had been standard practice in the “big” magazines for thirty years, and is used now as one trait that distinguishes “slicks” from “pulp” in the evaluation of old magazines. Macfadden Publications had numerous magazines in both categories by 1934, and the decision to design and market *Physical Culture* as a slick was deliberate and ongoing – the magazine developed with the market in format as well as content. But the message and the packaging were not a tidy fit; just as we see the cut-and-paste marks in the recycled cover art, messages are mixed and contradictory in form and in content.

As in nearly every issue, Macfadden had the first word. In this case, however, that word was oddly incoherent. His editorial was titled “Body Developing Recreation – A Cure For

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<sup>43</sup> Suspensories are hernia supports varying in complexity from simple strap to baroque contraption.

Crime.” He began with a bold declarative: “Criminals are all abnormal--” which he immediately hedged, “—there are but few exceptions.” Most criminals, he suggested, are on “dope, to deaden the physical effects” of either crime or their pre-existing physical defects; they run in gangs, because they lack individual courage; and mostly they were neglected or poorly raised.<sup>44</sup> He went on to suggest that programs engaging young men in activity and encouraging physical development would keep them out of trouble: citing both the New York Superintendent of Schools and the state prison warden, he avers that crime is the result of too much idleness and “aimless leisure,” and that boys who are actively interested in athletics are never involved in violent crime. “Activity is the law of life,” he says, and embarks on a digression about the dangers of the life of the mind. He closes with this non sequitur: “If we owned a cat or dog, or any domestic animal, that was deformed and misshapen as is the average “human,” it would not be considered worth keeping and death would end its earthly pilgrimage” (4).

The slippage in this editorial is fascinating. He opened with the mainstream eugenics position that criminals are abnormal, and then went on to undermine that thesis in important ways. It is almost possible to argue that he was making a euthenics argument: that changing environment would change outcome for these boys, and that all they really needed to prevent their tragic “abnormality” was an athletic program. But then the reversion to the idea that the deformed or misshapen probably should be put down like dogs would seem to bring us back to the position of the harshest hereditarian eugenicists. Is it possible for one to subscribe to these most stringent parts of the eugenic program without buying into the rest of the package? I think

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<sup>44</sup> Again we must note that Macfadden himself was both neglected and poorly raised.

so, and I think this is how Macfadden threads the needle on this issue: it seems that he does support strict limits on the reproduction of the unfit, but he defines the term much more narrowly than do most of the social scientists. Many of the traits Goddard, Wiggam and their cohort see as evidence of unfitness – including illness, weakness, dullness and poverty – are conditions Macfadden saw as treatable. But reproduction prior to rehabilitation would have been irresponsible: indeed, Adams cites a letter Macfadden writes to his daughter, ruing for exactly this reason her failure to take on a fitness program before her marriage (Adams 174).

Moving from that editorial to the Edward Wiggam feature article, “Should we Breed or Sterilize Defectives?” creates a sense of dissonance; the articles don’t fit together ideologically, nor do they cohere stylistically. And although Wiggam is arguing strenuously for sterilization, the illustration in the middle of the article of a Kewpie-style baby standing before a judge visually undermines the premise by bringing the poignancy of its implications to the fore: babies on trial? Shall they be sentenced to death? The magazine seems to parody its own lead article.



Figure 22: Physical Culture June 1934, p18

In researching the luminaries of Cold Spring Harbor, Christina Cogdell discovered a letter in which Wiggam spoke of the work he did in popularizing eugenics for a mass audience. “Wiggam... hated this ‘distasteful’ work [of] broadcasting the message to a group he considered to be the ‘tares’ of society. ...An article that “reaches a few thousands,” he wrote, “influences the world more vastly than a style that will reach millions in the long run”... At the same time, Wiggam considered his own popular writing, which targeted a very broad audience, to be “extremely distasteful to me and ‘defective’ in style,” and at times he felt his efforts to “try to push the frontier a little further” by reaching out to “a stupid and unappreciative public” were “mere dawdling” in view of all the important eugenic problems yet to be studied (Cogdell 76).

The lead article in the issue, then, seems to have been disliked by both its author and its editors – and yet to belong at the center of the conversation, and to have been highlighted on the cover. While the article didn’t really add anything new to the argument that “defectives,” including criminals and the feebleminded, should be identified and sterilized, it rambled on for many pages, painfully reiterating its argument.

The story that follows the lead is a purported confessional from a man who had himself sterilized. While the context might suggest that we would be hearing from a man who understood the importance of removing himself from the gene pool, in fact the author recounted that he had a large and happy family, and that the vasectomy allowed him to continue to enjoy his relationship with his wife free from the anxiety that the family might grow beyond its bounds. In other words, the article recommended vasectomy as a family planning tool, not as a means of limiting defectives.

Although the cover of the issue suggested that the contents would uniformly support prevailing arguments about eugenics principles and practices, the contents subverted that argument through incoherence, instability and a touch of gentle parody. *Physical Culture* located itself at the center of an argument it could not reconcile, and the ways in which it failed to affirm or refute the ideas with which it engaged reveals its own ambivalence both about and within that discourse. I strongly suspect (though of course I cannot prove) that this is an ambivalence of which the editors, and Macfadden himself, were unaware.

So what was the work of *Physical Culture* magazine in this context? I would argue that it was working against the grain of the larger conversation about eugenics, making the case for personal recovery and agency in a world that believed in neither. In contrast to the contradictory arguments put forth by the social Darwinists that fitness (to reproduce) was exemplified by social position, but that the unfit were reproducing at double the rate of the fit and threatening the wellbeing of the species, *Physical Culture* insisted that fitness was a trait better acquired than inherited, and that the capacity to change one's status as "fit" or "unfit" was within the reach of nearly every man and woman. This was a radical move, disrupting not only a scientific consensus but a political one, which was increasingly coalescing around the need to contain the encroachments of the unfit and feebleminded by any means – including but not limited to containment, sterilization and extermination.

Against the notion that "Science Finds, Technology Applies, [and] Man Conforms," *Physical Culture* argued powerfully that science must be questioned, technology appropriated, and that man may choose to conform or excel, if he is willing to do the work. Although it grew increasingly confused as the discourse of eugenics became more powerful, *Physical Culture* held steady to the position that the individual was able to control his own fitness, and thereby his own

fate. In this context, and in contrast to the eugenics narratives around it, *Physical Culture* represented not a cautionary tale but a conversion narrative. Believing the *Physical Culture* story, and practicing its principles to the best of one's ability, would result in transformation: the sick be made whole; the criminal, upright; the unfit, fit. And that transformative power was radical: it changed the situation, and the subject, from the root, enabling a full rewrite of the story – and the outcome – for the reader. In countless stories of rescue, reinvention and transformation, the reader was instructed in how to turn himself around. In the *Physical Culture* narrative, biology is not destiny – but self-care is.

The conversion narrative embodied in *Physical Culture* contravened even the “reform” eugenic argument that environment and genetics were cofactors in outcome – because according to *Physical Culture*, even the offspring of unfit parents raised in unfit circumstances (like Macfadden himself) could remake himself into the picture of health. The idea that “fitness” could be an acquirable trait was an idea so radical as to be almost unthinkable at the time Macfadden proposed it; at this point, the notion that “fitness” would be a birth trait and not a reflection of life habits is almost equally unimaginable. It has been easy to lose the depth and significance of Macfadden's contribution because the shift to his way of thinking – or at least, his way of talking about the body - has been so complete.

## 5.0 ENCORE

If this were fiction, we might want to invent a dramatic closing scene: say, Macfadden at 84, parachuting into Paris from an airplane, then parading by police boat down the Seine as happy crowds crowed, “Bravo Macfadden!” But this is not fiction. I regret to inform the reader that this actually happened (Adams 221) – and that it happened just days after the collapse of his fourth marriage, and that it immediately preceded his total financial, physical and emotional collapse. Macfadden would not want to have been remembered at his ignominious end; we should at least dignify him by closing his story a little early, seeing him for the last time old but unbowed, stubbornly clinging to his joy, hurtling through the Parisian sky.

Macfadden’s biography has been written and rewritten. But *Physical Culture*, the magazine that put the man on the map, has barely been read at all. In fact, the archive of health and fitness magazines more generally has gone regrettably untheorized. What they disclose, when we are willing to read them seriously, is the manner and degree to which our relationship to our bodies is, and has been, performative. Gender, class, and race are enacted in and through bodily hexis, and identity is instantiated in the ways in which these performative elements coincide. The barrel-chested little man falling through the air wasn’t simply performing skydiving; his performance of masculinity, of entrepreneurship and of healthy aging set him apart as it set a new standard for the celebrity athlete.

*Physical Culture, Hygeia* and the magazines of their oeuvre offer us images and narratives of the body in culture that reveal vital information about the relationship of the body to the narratives it inhabits, including beauty, politics, relationality, success and class. And this dissertation has gestured at all of these, even as it feels here at the end that we have barely scratched the surface. It is tempting to write a conclusion that amounts to a catalog of regret: what this dissertation touched on but didn't elaborate, what it might have done, were there world enough and time, what the workplan ought to be from here, were this a beginning rather than an end.

A gesture in that direction is irresistible: the Fishbein story is tempting enough, but the etymological pursuit of "fitness" holds its own attraction. Earlier versions of this dissertation focused much more heavily on eugenics and the American fascist movement, and I still wish there were a place in this version for more of that material. But this is a conclusion, not an apologia. Leaving these loose ends to hang, we return to the version of the story we have actually told, to the dissertation we are actually, finally, concluding.

Seeing *Physical Culture* through three different lenses – through the story of the magazines that surrounded it, the health discourse that overdetermined its readership, and the eugenics narrative in and against which its message of agency was shaped – the object comes into focus as richer and denser than might initially have been suspected. As a site for work in critical theory, body theory, performance theory and material history the archive remains a site for study – and for assembly. My collection of *Physical Culture* will now go to Ball State University to be scanned into their online database, and I hope that access to original issues will continue to grow. But in this study, ways of reading are proposed and demonstrated, and these readings begin to uncover what Cary Nelson called the "acts of cultural intervention" (181)

performed by the text – both as a site at which ideology coalesced and at which it was challenged or undermined.

The reading of a magazine as a whole text also draws on and elaborates Barthes' notion of the author as “born simultaneously with the text,” constructed by it as much as s/he constructs; in magazine writing more than perhaps any other kind, the idea of the author is not only displaced or decentered but simply misleading. The magazine “story” is constructed in a process involving writers, editors, advertisers, and contributing readers, and is read not as a standalone piece but contextually with the stories, ads and graphics that surround it within the magazine – and with the other magazines among which each issue stands. The removal of the author, Barthes tells us, “utterly transforms the modern text” (145), and the magazine is as modern a form as perhaps there can be: symbiotic with the business that produced it, dependent on technology and tariff structures, as well as the advancement of the commodity form in and through advertising, the magazine is a material object that disavows its materiality in the constant movement of the subscription form, the notion that there is always another before and after this one, identical to it and yet new in its content, simultaneously uniform and unique.

Magazines are not read singly or imagined outside the ongoing conversations that comprise the market in which they operate; the stories within them are parts within parts, like gears in a motor inside a machine. Indeed, it could be said after all this talk of “a race suited to machines,” that magazines are a machine medium, an endlessly moving flywheel within the larger mechanisms of production and consumption.

*Physical Culture*, a magazine derived from a movement about movement, is distinct from the other gears and wheels in the machine in its direct engagement with the structures that produce it: in making conscious and concrete the processes by which class mobility is made

possible, it lays bare the means by which class is articulated and instantiated. The performative rhetoric of the text calls out the performative nature of action in culture, the gestural and hexical language of identity.

The character who poses as the author of this text is a caricature of the Author as such: neither intellectually capable of producing this text in full nor physically located at the typewriter or notepad at which the individual pieces were generated, the idiosyncratic Macfadden still occupies the position of “author” for most people who write about the magazine. Neither Milo Hastings, the nutrition editor for decades, nor Carl Williams nor Fulton Oursler, who were ostensibly editors-in-chief, is understood as responsible for the text in the way Macfadden is.

If it is true that Macfadden produced *Physical Culture*, it can be no less true that *Physical Culture* produced Macfadden: not only in terms of creating the material success around which his life was constructed, but as the textual backdrop against which his life has read and understood. Indeed, there would be no interest in his life had he not created the astonishingly successful publishing empire that still bears his name. The text, “made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation” (Fabian 48), constitutes its author through acts of reflexivity and transitivity – not only does the text act as a mirror (quite literally, inasmuch as it is littered with photos of its Svengali) but properties of the text are attributed to its author, and properties of the author, in turn, are ascribed to the text. The man and his magazine are forever linked, forever falling into obscurity, and forever changing the ways we understand our bodies as operant within systems of health and of capital.

The magazine folds. The strongman gets old and dies. The dissertation ends. All that is solid melts into air. And at the end we are left not with a static image or a single thesis, but with

a multiplicity: the magazine and the man with whom it was so closely identified dance before us like figures on a vaudeville stage, mocking us with the apparent simplicity of their act, inviting us – demanding, actually – that we read not for the simple answer or the single message but for the complexities, gaps, sutures in the text and the culture that produced it. Reading *Physical Culture* as a serious artifact teaches us that in literary study, as in life, the only unfit text is the one over which we have insufficiently exercised.

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