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Despoina Feleki

- 1 *US Popular Print Culture 1860-1920* is the sixth volume in *The Oxford History of Popular Print Culture* series. Edited by Christine Bold, it records as well as critically and historically assesses the most important aspects of popular print culture, spanning from Antebellum America until World War I. This great publishing endeavor follows an encyclopedic approach, without proposing one encompassing cultural theory on which to ground all these essays about the popular. It accepts that “popular culture” implies culture produced for the people by its people, but also takes into account corporatized profit because of the commodification tendencies at work. Culture is proposed not only as the body of published printed and visual artifacts, but also as a way of life, including the circulated ideas which make meaning in the social and individual lives of the people. In contrast to the earlier common belief that popular reading was mainly connected with people’s lowest nature and had the power to seduce, since the 1860s popular print culture has expressed people’s beliefs and has assisted in the expression of subjectivity in a fast-developing world and a capitalizing publishing industry.

2

The volume considers the long-term influences of popular print production on social and cultural attitudes and underscores the enmeshing of the popular with the literary. Most interesting: all contributors distance themselves from classifications of cultural production into “high” and “low,” but attempt to take a critical look at cultural standardization and stratification processes. The essays come as a blow to established ideas about the murky divide between highbrow and lowbrow culture, and help elucidate the processes towards the

formation and accreditation of middlebrow literature. The volume prioritizes the investigation of print origins and chronologically follows the technologies that have affected production and distribution trends. The essays coordinate technological and social determinants with reader reactions and practices and assess their effects on narrative fiction, literacy, journalism, and advertising of that era. They scrutinize the relations of these factors to wider print culture and its extensions into visual arts, photography, and other media (oral expression, performance, and moving pictures). Examining the most significant moments in popular print production between 1860-1920, they relate print not only to words but to images and typography as well. They look into popular genres, such as westerns, Buffalo Bill stories, dime and nickel novels, comic strips and early motion pictures as well as newspapers and periodicals, bringing to light authorial, industrial, and advertizing intentions which have escaped prior scholarly attention. On this exciting exploration of the treasures of popular print culture, rich archival details are secured, coming from bibliographers, literary, cultural, social historians, journalists, photographers, film, media, and commercial scholars.

3

The volume is divided in three parts. Emphasis is laid on print networks but the discussion opens up to include individual authors and other media. The essayists make many references to important scholarly works of the time—for example, Richard Broadhead's *Cultures of Letters: Scenes of Reading and Writing in Nineteenth-Century America* (1993) provides valuable information about the relation between literariness and a stratified reading public—which establish a dialogue between popular and canonical literature in the creation of middlebrow. Historical and social developments (subscription publishing, department stores, nickelodeons etc.) justify the growth of production and consumption, elucidate the distinction between quality and cheap publishing, while authorship opens up to class, race, gender, and region. In many essays, Mark Twain poses as the quintessential authorial celebrity of the time, while other eminent writers, such as Gertrude Stein, are referred to as exemplars of popularity and influence. As the development of new print forms and narrative formulas is documented, the writers offer examples of diverse print forms from advice manuals to popular print, and are engaged in an effort to reconstruct and explain reading practices of the time. Soon the new directions in the "popular" are revealed and justify their contributions to the formation of the early American—and, gradually, of the international (an international network established between the American, the European, and the Asian continent) — middlebrow.

4

Part I constitutes the core of the volume. Media specific investigations emphasize technological developments, each essay shedding light on different aspects of the writing and publishing business. The essays in this part frequently test their extensions into visual cultures and modernism. They trace the dynamic nature of publishing in a

changing world of consumerism and advertising, when production choices oscillate between mass production and niche marketing, standardization and experimentation. Chapter 1 offers archival photographs from newspapers of the time and shares some important titles of old magazine editions. It marks the beginning of the flourishing of subscription publishing and advertising in the 1870s that increases consumption. The writers Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray discuss the interests of different industries at play. Incredible information comes to light about court cases concerning authorial issues and rights. They offer the details about the competitions between important printing houses (Scribner, Harper, Pulitzer). Cultural determinants are investigated as well, such as the opening of department stores and the mushrooming of cultural consumption through monthly magazines (*Ladies Home Journal* and *Cosmopolitan*), “congealing a national middle-class culture” (32). The following chapter provides information regarding the reading consumption of the first narrative fictions in the 1860s onwards (*Little women*), specified by gender and class, and opens up a window to the reading habits and literary potentials of people, especially women of that time. The essay reveals the new possibilities for women’s social subjectivity, the awakening of their sexuality, and their emancipation. The new female-oriented genres become the means for women’s self-definition and provide the material for performances on stage, melodramas, and films of the early twentieth century. The article also sheds light on the literary, cultural, and social aspect of story-papers, with Herman Melville and Nathaniel Hawthorne, among many acknowledged writers who borrowed their themes. The reader is given important publication information about dime novels in the following chapter, which stresses the importance of typography in publication potentials, the use of illustration and the introduction of color.

5

Chapter 4 makes an important contribution to the work as it gives an insight into the publishing business and the enactment of copyright. It describes the first major blow to regular book trade that comes from reprint libraries, which deliver to the public pirated texts and important European literary works. Pirating puts pressure on publishers who have to re-evaluate the cost and editions of books, and Lydia Cushman Schurman comments on the need for an international copyright law. This discussion continues with Graham Law and Norimasa Morita, who consider domestic publishing industry in relation to foreign publishing customs and laws. They reflect on the oppositional policies between British and American book publishing, the expansion of international distribution of popular U.S. print material and its introduction into Eastern Asia.

6

The development of the newspaper writing style and format, the technological developments that enabled faster production and delivery methods, the inclusion of photography that helped the emergence of yellow journalism, and the contribution of advertising, information

politics, and entertainment, which forged new American ethics and a novel need for consumption, are all the subject matter of chapter 5. The writer oftentimes builds bridges with the literary tradition (for instance, through the example of Twain, who epitomizes fictional and factual writing while working for his brother's publishing house) and notes the close connection between journalism and realist writing. Chapter 6 marks another major turning point in the early publishing era: the magazine revolution before the radio and TV. It sheds light on the history of the magazine with publications existing even today (*Atlantic Monthly*, *Scribner's*, *Harper's Magazines*), which allow progressive ideas to be voiced and contribute to the sharpening of a new national culture. Gradually, the genres of literary journalism and photojournalism appear with emphasis on visuality. Labor press aims to cover issues of the laborers. Scientific and professional issues as well as everyday matter are included, helping to build the American identity. Examples of editions for colored people are also provided. The next chapter emphasizes the gradual sophistication of advertising techniques of brand marketing, facilitating further consumer mentality. It provides examples of early advertising ploys merging with poetry. As Gary Nelson and Mike Chasar state, thousands of different advertising poems exist but not a single library collection offers a comprehensive archive. Chapter 8 draws attention to postcard culture in America, in which no consistent scholarly interest has been expressed before. Mark Simpson interestingly suggests that postcards are not only reduced to the image they bear, but also production and circulation processes are to be taken into consideration in order to explain them as evidence of social and cultural events. He discusses photography as ontological and geopolitical repositioning of the subject matter, subjectivity, subjection, and self-possession in bourgeois American society, issues taken up again in Part III.

7

Early media convergence soon becomes evident. Richard Abel and Amy Rodgers build the bridges from print to orality and performance. Early motion pictures as a new narrative form are determined by the developments in popular print, in performance shows, such as vaudevilles, and the creation of nickelodeons, with rich subject matter inspired by fairy tales, actualities, newsfilms, dime novels, and comic strips. In the early twentieth century, the demand for regular production of motion pictures appears, accompanied by early advertisements of films and comic films. Picture stories in magazines also appear as linguistic supplements to film stories. Motion picture magazines help legitimate this popular genre and create a mainly female fan culture. Therefore, the first fandom practices are recorded with fans being given a voice through contests. The discussions stress the interdependence of the two industries and contribute to our reappraisal of the present entertainment industry. The writers also inform us of the gaps in research and of the need for consistent investigations that will reveal the intricacies between these industries.

8

Part II also instigates an exciting read. Here the perspective changes: developments in print production are filtered through the prism of the people as both producers and audiences. The essays are organized around different genres, modes, patterns, and formulas, and look into narratives in political and religious pieces of writing, popular westerns, and science fiction. Special publications for masculine and female readership, cheap story papers, dime novels, as well as self-generated autobiographies reveal the reading habits and concerns of the working class, including men, women, and young audiences. Print becomes the perfect medium for the spreading of religious faith, while juvenile print secures some space in the publication arena. Finally, popular poetry is discussed as a multimedia event (in newspapers, advertisements, broadsides, annuals, schoolbooks, and anthologies), the surface of which scholars have not begun to scratch.

9

Chapter 12 deals with woman's suffrage print culture (pamphlets, petitions, and women's rights periodicals). As very little attention has been paid to it so far, the article paves the way for further scholarly research with examples of publications produced by women for women and devoted to woman's suffrage and to issues of divorce, prostitution, and reproductive rights. In their sensational suffrage stories, women writers raise public awareness, they speak against male suppression, their social role, mobilizing other women to become members in women's rights communities. The article sheds light on other popular artcrafts (songs, poems, and nursery rhymes) as well as new print formats (banners, retail bags, and billboard posters) used in the struggle for women's suffrage struggle. Most important, rather than consider women as text, Mary Chapman and Victoria Lamont see women as writers and not only as consumers of text.

10

Chapter 15 detects the dominant formula of western fiction and how it developed in relation to other narrative versions of frontier narratives, taking into consideration certain complexities and contradictions within the dime genre, regarding gender, race, class, and empire issues. Narratives about the battle between the white and the "savage" Indians, the Mexicans and the outlaws are regarded as a way to sustain racial and gender hierarchies. In dime novels, Buffalo Bill Cody becomes the national image through which the American frontier myth is communicated. Since the frontier is regarded as "a place of cross-racial hybridity" (319), it facilitates the reconsideration of class, gender, and empire boundaries. Christine Bold reports Richard White suggesting an interesting intersection between William F. Cody's narrations of the frontier and Frederick Jackson Turner's proposition of the frontier as the "meeting point between savagery and civilization" (qtd. in Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" 325).

11

Chapter 16 considers humor as another popular practice, the object of a profitable business employed to increase newspaper and product profits, and not only as a cultural reaction to social order. Blackface minstrelsy, the genre that flourished in print, in jokes, in humorous representations of blacks, and in live shows is intended to celebrate the supremacy of whites. Also, humor appears in illustrated form, in comic strips as a medium for political satire and in political campaigns, configuring what visual culture is today. Twain again poses as one of the most successful humorists of the time, pioneering in the humor industry through submissions to magazines, newspapers, books, editorial work. The discussion smoothly passes on to sensationalism, an ignored writing mode, considered to be aiming at bodily pleasures, and associated with horror and pornography, sex and violence. It is taken as one of the repercussions of alienation, urbanization as well as spatial and social insecurity. While ante-bellum popular sensational reading was compared to uncontrolled hunger and dangerous appetites, post-bellum it becomes the power and evil of yellow journalism. Early sci fi narratives are seen as awkward expressions of the Americans to mechanization and its effects on social structures. The article marks the efflorescence of utopian novels dealing with different aspects of social reform, the new place of women and men, and the questioning of social institutions (like marriage). David Seed discusses depictions of American cities of great technological progress facing the eminent fear of destruction, and provides other literary examples, such as Twain's satire (through his time-travel and interplanetary travel), and Jack London's spiritual sojourns and inner world narratives, which all express the Americans' need to voice their anxious concerns about the future of a fast-growing nation.

12

In Part III, the perspective changes again. It elaborates on the narrative media used by larger groups (African, Native Indian, and Mexican American) in order to examine the complexities of race issues and the way these become part of the printed medium's narrative. It crosses American borders and places the American nation within an international web of political and economic interests at a time of increasing unrest. The debate about the link between regionalism and American imperialism is raised as the printed matter gradually becomes borderless when employed for different ends.

13

Chapter 20 discusses the power of popular print in the creation of a new conception of Indians away from the savage through the example of the Hampton school experiment, which entailed teaching teachers to educate both African and Indian Americans. The newspaper becomes a powerful tool to educate Southern workers but it also assists in educational and political intentions. Stories of the good civilizing the evil monopolize in an attempt to succeed assimilation. The following chapter continues with the investigation of the reading practices and habits of the

black community; it examines the way African American writers manipulate the periodical press as an alternative means of promoting and publishing their work when denied entrance into mainstream book trade by the Whites. It records their contributions to American book trade by helping to raise “race pride and community-building” (439). The next study takes into consideration the boom in Spanish-speaking publishing in the 1920s and 30s due to the technological advancements of the railroad that contributed to the expansion of the distribution of print publications. It deals with the *crónica*, a literary genre that presents a short satirical sketch of urban life in the US and in comparison to Mexico. Kirsten Silva Gruesz pinpoints directions for further reading across regional studies and detects fertile ground for investigations into bilingualism, biliteracy, marketing, and bilingual advertising. She underlines the gaps in the history of Mexican/American literature and sees potential in the digitization of print material to further demonstrate the dynamics of print culture. As the perspective opens up, chapter 23 hopes to uncover a potential amnesia of anti-Chinese racist behavior. John Kuo Wei Tchen investigates the origins of the “yellow claw” icon, and its reproduction for the creation of a popular culture of fear across both sides of the Atlantic in the English-speaking world. He presents how cheap pulp fiction has been used as propaganda against the Chinese intrusion and provides many examples of the power of the image in political posters and magazine cover.

14

The following chapters deal with the newspaper press as a transatlantic business, a reciprocal game of exchanging information, technologies, and staff, and affecting transatlantic politics. From investigative journalism, the writers record the development of yellow and social journalism. As periodical press flourishes and accepts stories from the Civil War, it becomes a tool for US imperialism and the rule of the English or Saxo race to advocate the supremacy of the British empire. The war between Southerners and Northerners takes shape in newspapers as well and helps establish the rhetoric of “whiteness,” contrasted to the black, Indian, Southern European, Irish, Jew, Mexican, and Asian race. Will Kaufman gives information about weekly and monthly newspapers and magazines as well as travel narratives by foreign observers; he also provides examples of northern and southern periodical press with verses sang for battle with common issues, such as a sense of bitterness for the present, a nostalgia for the antebellum past, and the hope for reunion. What is more, the publications of pictorial histories by isolated photographers, memoirs of participants, civilian accounts, and their musings reveal the psychological strains of the civilians.

15

Christopher P. Wilson investigates the way urban criminality in the 1870s (as a consequence of the Civil War, urban movement, city congestion, and unemployment) had repercussions on journalism that began depicting moral decay and social corruption. The *National Police*

Gazette is an example of “an unclassifiable hybrid of newsweekly and magazine, story paper and photo-tabloid,” [offering] “a panorama of nearly every kind of crime” (559). It employs dramatic coverage and displays human immorality with a satirical or even tragic effect. Its lavish details in the woodcuts visualize violence in a graphic depiction of the crime scene. In the next chapter, Keith Gandal presents Jacob Riis’s depiction of the psychological devastation of slum life, and class trauma in his photojournalistic reports. The intertwining of popular print and visual culture becomes clear in the article. Despite criminals’ lack in individuality, Riis’s psychological rather than philosophical explanation for their tendency to crime is regarded as a breakthrough. His photographs pose as objective “records of an encounter” (575) with his camera as a class denominator, creating the slumming visual mode, with the poor as photographic objects and not as the subjects in the photos.

16

The conclusive article rounds off the multiple discussions that the volume initiates and the manifold issues that it raises. It reasserts all the previous hypotheses expressed by the writers about how popular print and especially periodical fiction from the 1860s to the 1920s affected readership and helped create capitalist, gender, and racial ideologies. Charles Johanningsmeier asks for enhanced historical research skills and an interdisciplinary approach in order to understand how readers read back then. He reminds us of the need to study both linguistic and bibliographic information of a text, its typography and all the extra textual information in conjunction with the contents of the whole page and the periodical.

17

The value of the volume lies in its wealth of factual reports about publications, publishers, writers, and readers. As the essays trace the fast development of printing, paper making, and other technologies (telegraph, kinoscope) that spawned popular genres, the volume constitutes a valuable guide and source book for researchers and students of popular culture who want to look deeper into the expressions of peoples and the socio-technological conditions that generated them. The essays do not draw on theories about popular authorship and readership, about “lonely authors” and “implied readers” with only the educated audiences of the period in mind. Although ideas about authorship, derivative of the technological and social affordances of each era, have already been expressed in various scholarly studies, the volume does not record any consistent works on readership. Though most would associate “fandom” with popular media of the present, it is surprising to find out that fan practices became possible much earlier as the medium of print managed to give voice not only to the elite and to the literary world but also to minority groups. Last but not least, in the investigations included in the volume, readers of popular texts are not only taken as objects but also as subjects acquiring voice and agency, as equal contributors in a budding popular print production. The two appendices at the end of the volume point to the different topics that can still be

addressed and the many more questions that can be raised. Suffice it to say that the diverse topics discussed and the rich bibliographies provided constitute evidence of the great wealth of American literary and popular production and hope to explore what “American” means both at a national and at an international scale.

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