Spectacular Fictions

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Nancy Bentley’s *Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920* begins by describing a staged train wreck in the aptly named town of Crush, Texas, in 1896. For a small price, spectators could watch as two trains collided, an example of the kind of mass cultural entertainment that Bentley views as foundational to the work of high-culture luminaries like William Dean Howells and Edith Wharton, as well as to the literature of Native Americans, African Americans, and regionalists. While a substantial portion of the material in this study appeared in modified form in volume 3 of the *Cambridge History of American Literature* (2005), Bentley has expanded her argument and made some significant additions. This work provides a rich, multifaceted examination of how the competition between high literary texts and mass cultural products profoundly revised the shape of the American public sphere, as well as the future of arts and letters.

While brief mention is made of particular political events, such as Reconstruction, female suffrage, and World War I, it is the history and form of representation, broadly defined, that serve as the primary subject of this study. Newspapers, tabloids, novels and stories, Wild West shows and circuses, theater, books, tabloids, museums, and cinema are just some of the cultural modes that make an
appearance here. Premised on the
notion that mass and literary cul-
tures are inseparable, Bentley situ-
ates her argument as a break from
previous scholarship that has de-
scribed this relationship as purely
oppositional (e.g., Amy Kaplan’s
The Social Construction of American
Realism [1988]) or dialectical (e.g.,
Bill Brown’s The Material Uncon-
scious: American Amusement, Ste-
phen Crane, and the Economies of
Play [1996]). For Bentley, such
influential studies have not ac-
counted for the variety of social
positions in this cultural nexus. In
her effort to consider a more di-
verse set of writers and readers,
Bentley focuses on four key modes
of cultural production: literary
realism, African American belle-
tristic writing, Native American
scholarly writing, and American
pragmatism, “all of which share an
attraction to the powers of secular,
analytic reason but which together
display markedly uneven, synco-
pated, or broken connections be-
tween aesthetic reflection and
liberal ideas of public reason” (14).

It is this attention to reason and
reflection that lies at the heart of
Bentley’s argument. Though she
does examine the ways in which
mass and literary cultures borrow
from each other thematically, her
primary interest is in the ways in
which rival cultural forms employ
and endorse overlapping habits of
mind and sensibilities. The emer-
gent emphasis on observation is
the basis for the first chapter, “Lit-
erature and the Museum Idea,” in
which Bentley addresses the late-
nineteenth-century commitment
to “the right kind of observer,”
who “confronts and understands
selected objects—within the walls
of the museum or without” (23).
Edith Wharton’s Lawrence Selden
exemplifies such a figure, as he
stands at a critical remove from so-
ciety, ostensibly holding himself
apart from the intricacies of the so-
cial world while still existing very
much within it. As Bentley notes,
the detached observer, like the au-
thor in his secluded study, emerges
out of the rapidly shifting social
terrain to cultivate his privacy,
which would not exist without a
chaotic modern world from which
to seek refuge.

In the most sustained and devel-
oped chapters, Bentley offers a
theory of realism, which she sees
neither as a mode of supervision
nor as a vehicle for turning poverty
into art but rather as a museum
that teaches social discernment to
the masses while simultaneously
perpetuating social hierarchies; it
is critical practice itself, intended
as cultural pedagogy to uplift
citizenry at large. She writes,
“[R]ealist works recognize that
mass culture was remaking the or-
der of the real,” an observation that
offers one explanation for the pre-
ponderance of journalists and the-
ater scenes in realist fiction (81).
These references to alternative
modes of representation shore up
the epistemological authority of re-
alism, which is not merely a career opportunity or a political reaction to social chaos but a “communications revolution that meant the bourgeois public sphere had not collapsed so much as multiplied and mutated into an unfamiliar field of competing publics” (73).

A chapter on the relationship between mass culture and Native culture (which did not appear in the Cambridge History) best exemplifies Bentley’s stated aim of examining “the uneven, conflicted intersection of the bourgeois public sphere with the emergent publics.” Departing from those scholars that conceive of mass culture as imperialist, operating in accordance with the logic of white nationalism, Bentley takes a more nuanced view of the intersection of Native literary culture and commercial spectacle. Focusing especially on the literature of Charles Eastman, Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkala-Sa), and Geronimo, she argues that a “generative tension” gave rise to “literary orature,” which exploits the rift between dominant and Native culture as a means of expression and critique (175). Without a diplomatic public, Native writers channeled the energies of mass culture into the service of their own analysis and expression. In particular, Bentley considers the politics of Wild West shows, asking whether participation in such commercial spectacles functions as a retreat from, or a mode of participation in, modern life. Ultimately, she argues that such performative modes of expression (which she terms “forms of Native publicity”) “represent an effort at postdiplomatic expressivity, an attempt at world building that looked to the mass communicability of Native styles and signifiers as the materials for securing greater recognition and protection for Native societies” (179).

A subsequent chapter on African American writing raises some of the same issues as the chapter on Native publics, as black writers and culture makers inhabited a similar double bind that both rewarded and punished participation in the culture industry, a dilemma lucidly expressed in the poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Too much exposure could result in exploitation and derision, while the refusal to participate could be read as a rejection of modernity and a relinquishing of the associated powers of print and performative expression. Charles Chestnutt’s conflicted relation to realism demonstrates the paradoxical demands placed upon African American writers. Though he believed in literature as a vehicle for civic participation, his brand of realism—infused with anger and called “bitter” by William Dean Howells—was considered not quite detached and objective enough to qualify as high realism. Chestnutt’s career exemplifies the way African American writers often found the generic imperatives of realism too limiting, leading some, like Sutton
Griggs and Pauline Hopkins, to infuse it with science and fantasy as a means of making fiction suitable to their purposes.

In the final chapters, Bentley returns to the crash with which she opened the book. She demonstrates how mobility and velocity structure the plots and characters in Wharton’s fiction, and, finally, she turns to the work of American social thinkers, such as William James, W. E. B. Du Bois, Henry Adams, and John Dewey, who register the neurological impact of commercial culture on American mental life in texts that leave readers disoriented and shocked as they manifest the cognitive disjunctions made commonplace by mass culture. American pragmatists, she argues, may be the first theorists of mass culture and of its effect on the embodied self.

This study emphasizes the competition between simultaneously emerging cultural languages (high and low, literary and physical, public and private) and their combined impact on American mental life and social experience. Bentley’s incisive take on the increasingly blurry boundary between high literature and commercial culture grounds the formation of such distinctions in an impressive archive of historical material and literary texts. A more extended consideration of naturalism would also have fit in nicely here. Theodore Dreiser and Frank Norris, for example, are not mentioned, and their work explicitly relies upon popular scientific discourse to describe commodity culture, as well as to develop character. The exclusion of many naturalists from the sanctified realm of high literary culture begs the question of whether certain types of engagement with mass culture irrevocably tainted some fiction in the eyes of the dominant literary establishment.

Yet, the scope of Bentley’s undertaking is impressive. Indeed, the voluminous range of subject matter leaves one wondering how to define mass culture, the somewhat slippery term that she deploys to encompass the technological, commercial, and aesthetic productions that ushered in modernity. Furthermore, if, as Bentley notes, “high culture only became high through its hostile intimacy with the low,” what did contemporary mass culture make of its snobby sibling? Was mass culture similarly influenced and preoccupied with high culture, or did this exchange only operate one way?

For the most part, the broad interpretation of mass culture works for Bentley because it allows her to discuss transatlantic travel, science, technology, and emergent and residual print cultures. However, at times, the text’s density and expansive range leaves one wishing it were more streamlined, more focused. Still, perhaps the project’s vastness ultimately underscores Bentley’s point. As she demon-
strates, literary culture in the wake of the Civil War and before the rise of modernism was influenced by everything; far from emerging out of the vacuum of an insulated drawing room, canonical realists, regionalists, and African American and Native writers were all inspired by and engaged with the same disorienting and rapid currents of change.

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