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Spectacular Fictions

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FICTIONS
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Frantic Panoramas: American Literature and Mass Culture, 1870–1920
by Nancy Bentley. Philadelphia:
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2009. Pp. 376. \$59.95 cloth.

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 cultures are inseparable, Bentley situates her argument as a break from previous scholarship that has described 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 Unconscious: American Amusement, Stephen Crane, and the Economies of Play* [1996]). For Bentley, such influential studies have not accounted for the variety of social positions in this cultural nexus. In her effort to consider a more diverse set of writers and readers, Bentley focuses on four key modes of cultural production: literary realism, African American belletristic 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, syncoated, or broken connections between 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 emergent 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 society, ostensibly holding himself apart from the intricacies of the social world while still existing very much within it. As Bentley notes, the detached observer, like the author 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 developed 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 order of the real," an observation that offers one explanation for the preponderance of journalists and theater 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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