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Trish Loughran. *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of U.S. Nation Building, 1770-1870.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. xxv + 537 pp. $45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13908-3.

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The Materiality of Print vs. the Theory of Imagined Communities

Over the past two decades, historians and literary critics have examined the origins of American literature and American nationalism through the lens of "print culture": the ways in which the production, distribution, and consumption of printed matter helped define U.S. identity and culture from the Revolution to the Civil War. Much of the scholarship has been heavily archival, attempting to delineate the networks of circulation that connected authors, publishers, print-trades workers, and readers, and how those networks developed and changed over time. For some literary critics, particularly those who wrote in the wake of Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic* (1990), the argument has been more theoretical, showing that "printedness" itself fostered "imagined communities" (to use Benedict Anderson's term) of readers across an economically and ethnically diverse, geographically expansive new nation. In *The Republic in Print*, Trish Loughran conjoins the best of both traditions to offer a bold, fresh challenge to the imagined communities thesis of American national formation.

Before the development of steam presses, entrepreneurial publishers, canals, and railroads revolutionized the production and dissemination of printed matter in the 1830s and 1840s, according to Loughran, "there was no 'national' print culture" (p. 3). That key observation leads to her two central questions. First, if we accept Anderson's thesis, "how do we account for nation formation in the material absence of a national print culture" (p. 3)? Second, once print networks crisscrossed the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, "how do we account for the profound cultural fragmentation" that led ultimately to the Civil War (p. 3)? Loughran argues, paradoxically, that the very absence of a national print culture enabled revolutionaries in 1776 and Federalists in 1787-88 to succeed in the quest for independence and constitutional ratification. Conversely, as Americans across the geographical divide came to know one another better through shared print–as the "virtual nation" became material–they developed rising awareness of what divided them, particularly the issue of slavery.

Loughran premises the first third of the book on the absence of an American (first intercolonial, then national) print culture before 1800. Two opening examples suggest the material challenges that plagued potential interregional or nationalist projects. The journal of British postal inspector Hugh Finlay, dispatched to America to inspect the king's Post Road, reveals the difficulties of communication in 1772: correspondence delayed or waylaid, poor roads, and weak intercolonial networks. Fifteen years later, the pioneering American printer-publisher Mathew Carey encountered much the same thing when he attempted to launch the *American Museum* in 1787: for all his nationalist vision, no means existed to publish or distribute his magazine profitably. Works like Carey's, Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, and the *Federalist* essays of Publius played two roles. On the one hand, their messages and intentions were totems, "symbols of unity"–not just in their own day, but even more in their mythic identity for future generations (p. 22). On the other, "they were actual objects with limited circulations," often within local communities or among elites who shared the nationalist ideology–a history obscured by a nationalist will to imagine founding texts as emerging from popular consensus (p. 22).

As Loughran demonstrates in extensive analyses of Paine's *Common Sense* and the *Federalist* essays, it was materially impossible for America's early nationalist texts to reach a nationwide imagined community. The contents of those works appealed to such a community, sought to bring it into being, and foretold a United States in which the material conditions they envisioned would catch up to the "virtual nation" they

inhabited–but Paine's and Publius's projections of national identity were ideological and aspirational. That subsequent Americans adopted them *as* national texts–accepting Paine's inflated estimate of the circulation of *Common Sense* in 1776, or reading the *Federalist* essays in paperback editions that render them a far more coherent whole than they appeared in newspapers of 1787-88–reveals the success of the authors' aspirations more than it demonstrates national consensus among their contemporaries. Taking this argument a step further, Loughran contends that the scholarship of the past two decades that borrows from Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1989) has reinforced a teleological reading: "As a model that thrills to the Enlightenment's own metanarratives about the relationship between power and print, the public sphere merely provides theoretical cover for the Revolutionary generation's own need to abstract the Revolution into a unanimous, nonparticular, and populist event, long after the fact of founding had secured its rewards for a far more limited group" (p. 93).

Contrary to Warner's argument that the Constitution succeeded insofar as it projected a national community ("We the People"), Loughran argues that the Federalists triumphed precisely in the absence of material networks to match the universalist language. Lacking an infrastructure of transportation and communications, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton could claim that Anti-Federalists' fears of national consolidation and governmental tyranny were unfounded, at the same time they argued that a "federal" system was appropriate for a nation that was at once whole and parts, collective identity and myriad of local identities. They could deploy pseudonymity selectively, divulging their identity to some correspondents while cloaking it from others. (Warner's argument that pseudonymity distanced an author's familiar identity from the disembodied reasoning of his argument, Loughran argues, works better as an interpretation of textual ideology than as a historical statement about "local knowledge" of "who was writing what" [p. 135].) Further, the Anti-Federalists lacked any coherent network to mobilize opposition to ratification nationwide.

The second part of the book, "The Nation in Fragments," dissects the relationship between national identity and local and regional differences in the late 1780s, through analysis of selected cultural texts. Federalists sought to theorize and then construct a material nation, a process Loughran terms "metrobuilding" for its emphasis on political and economic capital cities. This impulse extended beyond the political "Federalists" to such cultural entrepreneurs as the painter John Trumbull and the cartographer Christopher Colles. Other writers depicted the more fractured nature of the United States as it still was. Royall Tyler's play *The Contrast* (1787), which scholars have interpreted as an exemplar of early attempts to distinguish American from British culture and (more recently) as a window into class and gender tensions, looks different to Loughran. In her analysis, "the contrast of the title is not about America and Britain at all but about local varieties of 1780s Americans, who identify themselves first as members of towns, states, and (when traveling) regions and only secondarily as the proud nationals we postconstitutionalists have retroactively asked them to be" (p. 179). William Hill Brown's *The Power of Sympathy* (1789), often billed as the first American novel, has enjoyed a similar resurgence of scholarly interest since the 1980s. Here, too, Loughran eschews the familiar tropes of class and gender in favor of region and place. With Brown's epistolary style marking characters' travels and dislocations, *The Power of Sympathy* expressed ambivalence about the extended Republic.

The book's final section, "The Overextended Republic," explores how the material print networks that joined places and sections in the 1830s and 1840s ultimately contributed to the crisis of the Union. These chapters focus on the transformation of antislavery publishing "as a set of circulating material practices that comprehended, for a time, the entire scene of antebellum cultural production, shadowing and foreshadowing the more mainstream culture industry that was developing all around it" (p. 307). The early nineteenth-century antislavery societies, predominantly local or state based, reflected a view of slavery as geographically specific to the locations where masters and slaves lived. The growth of the domestic slave trade exposed the locally based solutions of gradual abolition as inadequate and helped give rise to the immediatist movement. Loughran uses the case of Benjamin Lundy, printer-publisher of the early *Genius of Universal Emancipation*, to exemplify the earlier mode of abolitionist print culture: Lundy traveled around the nation peddling and preaching to readers fixed in their local communities. By the time he died in 1839, the circulation of goods and people had become less itinerant, more rationalized, and more centralized–a development embodied by the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS). Where Lundy had tried to "inhabit, on the ground, the same kind of polycentrically conceived field of debate characteristic of the preindustrial relations of production," the AASS "must be understood as something more

structurally akin to federalism itself–a vast superstructure that sought to draw its energies from people on the ground and then to control that energy by channeling it back through a fixed center" (p. 327). "Federalism with train tracks," writes Loughran, is "more properly called nationalism," and abolitionists capitalized on the transformation (p. 328).

The result, paradoxically, was a national print culture that accentuated Americans' sectional divide. In the 1850s, such literary writers as Harriet Beecher Stowe and William Wells Brown and such former slaves as Solomon Northup revealed at once the increasing integration of the nation and the gulf that separated the slave South from the free North. These authors' narratives, as well as the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, highlighted the mobility of persons across state and regional boundaries and the need for national law to adjudicate the resulting disputes. Personal identity came to be defined less by one's lifelong geographical roots than by "the entire circumference of one's potential travels" (p. 411). Books themselves traversed distances that would have astonished the Federalists of 1787, although Northup's *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) also revealed the limits of communication to and from the rural South (and thus the implicit backwardness of that region). By the eve of the Civil War, the very material structures that drew Americans together helped split the nation.

Such a brief summary does scant justice to the richness of Loughran's research and especially her textual analysis. Each chapter assembles an "archive" of sources for close examination, ranging from well-known political texts and literary works to more obscure works, such as the British postal inspector's journal, Colles's cartographic projects, and Lundy's abolitionist newspaper and memoir. The chapter on *Common Sense* is a tour de force, interweaving "material history, cultural theory, close reading, critical biography, and social history" to place Paine and his work in multiple contexts of authorship, publishing, and reception (p. 37). Loughran's close readings of individual texts, both written and visual, are invariably insightful. (I have taught Tyler's *The Contrast* many times, but thanks to Loughran it will look different the next time my students encounter it.)

If there is any reason to quibble with *The Republic in Print*, it is that the book and many of its chapters read like the post rider's overstuffed portmanteau. Averaging nearly seventy pages, often with seven or eight sections, the chapters juxtapose texts and readings against one another more often than they develop an argument from one reading to the next. The result is frequent repetition of arguments, often couched in literary-critical terms. The book as a whole steers in several directions. Its first two-thirds, roughly three hundred pages, concentrate densely on the fifteen years from 1776 to 1790 and build a sustained argument for the efficacy of an underdeveloped national infrastructure in the ideological development of federalism. By comparison, the last third seems a highly selective overview of the subsequent seven decades. A few examples from abolitionist print culture and a handful of literary works of the 1850s seem like thin evidence for the argument that nationalized networks fomented national division, even if the argument is plausible. In the final chapter, the focus on print culture gives way entirely to textual readings; we learn little of the material production and distribution of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) (an often-told story, as Loughran rightly notes) and *Twelve Years a Slave* (a far less familiar tale).

Near the end of the book, Loughran writes that a nation must always be "a material history of space, things, and people" (p. 439). Ambitious, provocative, and challenging, *The Republic in Print* works best when it keeps that material history at the forefront.

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