

## BOOK REVIEW

### American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture

Reviewed by Wm. Thomas Hill\*

**BOOK REVIEWED:** Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002)

Central to Shelley Streeby's *American Sensations* is the notion that the print culture of New England down through Pennsylvania—primarily during the period of the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-48)—is reflective of the political struggles of the time over the issue of empire-building. Streeby takes issue with scholars who make a distinction between “continental expansionism” and “imperialism” throughout the rest of the world and thus relegate political and social concerns over empire-building to the end of the nineteenth-century.

Examining a whole host of examples from dime novels, cheap story-paper literature, and journalism, Streeby argues that the notions of “whiteness” reflected in much of this literature, revealed the popular thinking of the time which raised questions over who should be included in the creation of the “empire” of the United States at the time and whether or not inclusion of Mexico in particular as well as Cuba and other Hispanic countries into the United States would be healthy for the growth of the United States. That is, were there any of them that were white enough?

While she examines other authors as well, Streeby focuses primarily on specific authors like George Lippard, Ned Buntline, A.J.H. Duganne, Edward Ellis, John Rollin Ridge and others. Of each of these authors she gives fairly detailed

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and impressive readings of several of their works and shows how, as she explains it, “literary sensationalism cannot be understood in isolation from the larger culture of sensation that surrounded it” (27).

After an introduction which carefully outlines the ways in which she plans to approach the problem, Streeby wades into this complex period, first doing a careful study of George Lippard’s work leading up to and including 1848. Streeby sees Lippard as creating an industrialized literature available to all Americans and sees Lippard’s eventual goal as instigating social change through the work that he published. While we can find much of this basic material from other sources like Michael Denning’s *Mechanic Accents*, for example, Streeby goes into Lippard’s work in far greater detail and connects it to the political activities of the time.

Streeby examines the proliferation of secret societies that developed during this period to insure the continuance of the prevalent WASP mentality. She discusses Lippard’s well-known anti-clericalism. Nevertheless, while some may take issue with her implication that George Lippard was an unwitting participant in the final outcome of his own work—as she says, “Most of his writing betrays the impossibility of escaping the nightmare of capitalist industrialization and violent empire-building into a free space of egalitarian possibility” (77)—one cannot help but be impressed by the breadth of her critical examination of the material.

In her next chapter (Chapter Three), Streeby makes her most clear statement regarding the influence of “story-paper,” the working-class publications that were so popular at the time. One difficulty I have with her discussion is that her claim that “in this period, which directly preceded the late-nineteenth-century codification of a ‘homosexual’ identity in medical and legal discourses, ideas about the boundaries of sexuality were in flux” (84). To some degree this was true in the medical and legal arena, but her application on a broader public level smacks a bit too much of late twentieth-century critical concerns than of the concerns of the time. Nevertheless, whether one wishes to disagree with the relevance of her observations or not, this is in fact not her point anyway. The real point of this chapter is that a popular notion of the time, frequently expressed in “story-paper,” was that masculinized Mexican women (masculinized out of necessity because of the inability of their male counterparts to be truly masculine) needed masculine American men to make them feminine again, thus rescuing them from unnaturally feminine Mexican men. The cross-dressing that she discusses is not the cross-dressing of transvestism, but the cross-dressing of functional necessity.

In the popular literature of the time, Mexican men were seen as sexual but given to excessive emotion and non-rational behavior. They were thus perceived and portrayed in feminine terms. The cross-dressing women in these texts were warriors (on land or at sea), but they immediately change back to female dress once they are taken up by an American hero.

This discussion of the U.S.-Mexican War as a male/female dance of destined lovers continues on into the next chapter which examines the much discussed “Irish problem,” that is, the fact that most Irish were Roman Catholics many of whom joined the U.S. military to survive, not out of any particular love for or loyalty to the United States. And then a good number of those abandoned the U.S. Army and joined the Mexican Army to fight against the United States. While she does acknowledge that many switched sides for reasons other than religious ones, her focus remains on the popular literature of the time which was mostly obsessed with the possible “corruption” of the United States by unscrupulous Catholics who were believed to be covertly planning to overthrow the American government. Her examination of the literature of this period is quite exhaustive and informative.

Streeby sees Buntline as more of a cultural icon than some like Richard Slotkin for example do. As I progressed through Chapter Five of Streeby’s work, I found myself wobbling back and forth. Most of us would agree that Buntline was at least interesting and colorful. Besides being a nativist Whig, as Streeby points out, he was also a womanizer and frequent drinker (who preached abstinence). He was a traveler, a story teller, and a culture critic who changed his opinion with dizzying regularity. But Streeby (as she shows more specifically in Chapter Six) sees all of this as reflective of the uncertainty of the times. As with Lippard, Streeby sees Buntline as conflicted. While on one side, he supported U.S. involvement in Mexico and Cuba, he was revolted by the violence and the presence of the U.S. in Mexico which is “figured as an invasion rather than a righteous response to Mexican attacks on Texas and the United States” (146).

As noted above, much of the literature of the time was figured as a romance between the American as masculine and the Mexican as feminine. Streeby sees the popular literature that came out of this period as having been all too successful in shaping and reflecting the prevalent attitudes of U.S. citizens toward their Mexican neighbors. She examines the conflict between Lippard’s conservatism and his anti-clericalism, an issue that she covers in greater detail in later chapters. She shows that while Lippard was happy in both his fiction and non-fiction to

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justify American efforts in Mexico, he was still hesitant to accept the idea of non-white Mexicans (that is, Mexicans of low birth) becoming part of the United States, especially since they were (after all) mostly Roman Catholics. Irish immigrants suffered the same social (and literary) treatment. Streeby discusses some of the arguments (some of them quite acrobatic) that attempted to relegate Irish immigrants to a non-white origin. As she explains,

worries about contact with “degraded” nonwhite races or the incorporation of more foreigners and Catholics into the nation do indeed recur in much of the anti-imperialist literature that emerged from New England and other Northeastern sites during the 1840’s; the language of racial and cultural contamination is especially pervasive. (169)

Throughout Part Three of her work, she continues with her focus on the issues of empire, labor, and race and shows how the authors of later decades shaped these notions in the dime novel that was widely available and read across the continent. She discusses the Beadle dime novels. She briefly examines the Indian wars (and how they were configured as internal wars rather than international wars).

In Part Four, Streeby examines the stories and myths around Joaquin Murrieta (indeed, a task in itself), starting with John Rollin Ridge all the way up to contemporary renditions. This is especially important since much of the Mexican-American sensibility with regard to their treatment in the United States is wrapped up in the folklore that has at least included in one form or another (primarily oral stories) the Murrieta tale.

Streeby’s book ends with a brief coda on how both the Republican and Democratic Party appealed to the Hispanic vote in the 2000 election. The language of *International Race Romance*, as she calls it, has continued up to this day. The book is filled to the limit with close readings that support her position. While there will always be some who would ask for another one hundred pages, Streeby has done an admirable job, and we can only hope that her output will continue in the manner in which it has begun.