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Review of *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting* and *Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*

Melissa Homestead
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, mhomestead2@Unl.edu

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***American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting, 1834–1853*. By Meredith L. McGill. Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press. 2002. viii, 364 pp. $39.95.**

***Forgotten Readers: Recovering the Lost History of African American Literary Societies*. By Elizabeth McHenry. Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press. 2002. xiv, 423 pp. Paper, $18.95.**

Both these volumes demonstrate the exciting potential, as well as the pitfalls, of applying history-of-the-book methodologies to American literary history in ways that complicate traditional author-centered paradigms. In *American Literature and the Culture of Reprinting*, Meredith McGill focuses on the logic that drove publishers, legislators, and readers to resist an author-driven copyright law for much of the nineteenth century, brilliantly overturning pieties about the "failure" of the law to do justice to authors and analyzing "unauthorized" reprinting as a system functional on its own terms, rather than criticizing it as dysfunctional in contrast to the later proprietary system imagined as perfectly functional. Elizabeth McHenry's *Forgotten Readers* recovers free African American readers (primarily in the North) who participated in literary societies as both readers and producers of texts, challenging models of African American literary history that find origins in the "stolen" literacy of slaves in the South and in the slave narrative as a genre.

McGill's study begins with her gaze turned firmly away from the traditional materials of literary history, examining in her first two chapters *Wheaton v. Peters*, the first Supreme Court copyright decision, and petitions to Congress from publishers and workers in the book trades arguing against international copyright. In meticulously researched and richly detailed readings, McGill persuasively argues that the "culture of reprinting" that structured the antebellum literary market reflected both a "republican understanding of print as public property" and a Jacksonian valuation of "local over national authority," a valuation that McGill links to the Jacksonian refusal to interfere with the "local" matter of slavery (14). Rather than a disorganized preview of the eventual nationalization of print, McGill finds an exuberant reprint culture that is both regional and transatlantic.

After laying this groundwork, McGill turns to canonical authors and texts to demonstrate how market conditions were reflected at the level of literary (and particularly narrative) form. Thus, McGill reads the puzzling narrative form of Charles Dickens's *American Notes for General Circulation* as registering the disorderliness of a nation "in the grips of a states' rights federalism." (Dickens was a prominent critic of American copyright law and its "failure" to protect the rights of British authors [122].) McGill devotes two chapters to Edgar Allan Poe. The first focuses on the "unauthorized" circulation of Poe's texts through reprinting (in which she rewrites the standard account of Poe as a "victim" of reprinting practices, finding him "both subject to and seek[ing] to benefit from the peculiar structure of the market" [150]), and

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the second focuses on Poe's vexed relationship to the literary nationalism of the Young America movement and to questions of originality and plagiarism. McGill closes with a chapter on Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*, a novel produced for national distribution in a newly centralized and hierarchized literary market, which she reads as both calling up and disavowing the circulation of Hawthorne's tales and sketches in an earlier disaggregated reprint market. Early in the book, McGill apologizes for and rationalizes her focus on canonical authors on pragmatic and theoretical grounds, and she repeatedly disavows critical models that valorize authorial "mastery." However, it is difficult not to find McGill effectively reinstating such notions of authorial mastery in a study that culminates with a thirty-page close reading of a hypercanonical novel by a hypercanonical author, no matter how revisionist and deeply contextualized.

McHenry's book covers a far greater period of time, beginning with the early nineteenth century and ending with the early twentieth (with an epilogue looking forward to Oprah's Book Club). McHenry's far-ranging survey includes figures familiar to literary history (David Walker, Maria Stewart, Sarah Forten, Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Jean Toomer, Georgia Douglass Johnson), as well as unfamiliar, and sometimes nameless, black readers. In her introduction, McHenry emphasizes the ways her project complicates standard accounts of African American literary history in the antebellum period, claiming that Northern free blacks self-consciously engaged in the "literary work" of reading and writing to demonstrate their capacity to be full citizens of the new republic, both to themselves and to the politically empowered white majority. However, I am not convinced that McHenry has actually "recovered" the "lost" readers from this period, as she claims. Instead, she attempts to deduce the activities of readers and chart change and progress over time from tenuous evidence. In her second chapter, the primary evidence supporting her developmental narrative of African American literacy is the contents of several black-owned and -edited periodicals intended for an African American audience, even though each periodical was published for a relatively brief period and those brief periods were spread intermittently over the course of several decades. From the content of these periodicals, McHenry claims to reconstruct the development of an evolving and increasingly sophisticated African American readership. In analyzing periodical content and form, she interprets many ordinary periodical practices (publishing oddly assorted paragraphs on miscellaneous subjects, advising readers to preserve periodical issues as if they constituted a valuable "library" for later reference, drawing attention to particular pieces as original contributions) as evidence of an extraordinary and self-conscious editorial construction of a literate and literary African American community. Certainly, ordinary practices can take on extraordinary significance in the context of a minority community under siege, but how much can a fifteen-page analysis of Frederick Douglass's editorial policies in the various incarnations of

his weekly papers really tell us about the sophistication of African American readers (other than Douglass himself)?

When McHenry reaches the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, her recovery rests on firmer ground, namely, print and manuscript accounts of the activities of literary societies. Here we find the classic debate between Washington and DuBois concretely and richly resituated through the audiences of the Bethel Historical and Literary Association in Washington, D.C. and the Boston Literary and Historical Association; African American club women discussing and analyzing the relative merits of literary texts from Shakespeare to Mark Twain to E. D. E. N. Southworth; and Toomer and Johnson participating in an African American literary culture located in Washington, D.C.—not in Harlem.

Melissa J. Homestead, University of Oklahoma

Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page. By George Bornstein. New York: Cambridge Univ. Press. 2001. xii, 185 pp. $55.00.

Becoming Marianne Moore: The Early Poems, 1907–1924. Ed. Robin G. Schulze. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press. 2002. xviii, 504 pp. $50.00.

George Bornstein's absorbing book offsets critical accusations that modernist aesthetics cultivated indifference, if not hostility, to libertarian politics. Bornstein blames those accusations on latter-day protocols of editing and reading that sever modernist works from what he calls their "bibliographic codes." The codes, constituted by the works' original material matrix, are conveyed by a "politics of the page": politically communicative aspects of typography, sequential arrangement, and illustration, combined with the influence of editors and publishers who produced "the page" along with the writer. If we restore modernist works to their bibliographic codes, Bornstein contends, we can definitively determine their libertarian meanings. He points out, for example, that the publication of Marianne Moore's "The Fish" in Dora Marsden's the *Egoist*, a journal opposed to the Great War, illuminates an antiwar intention in the poem's "submerged warlike imagery." When H.D. and Bryher republished "The Fish" in their unauthorized edition of Moore's *Poems* (1921), they tore the poem out of its first context, representing it "as more an aesthetic than political object" (95). Moore herself reassigned the poem a political aura in *Observations* (1924) by placing it "on the same page opening as another wartime poem" in which military reinforcements are compared to fish. Then, unfortunately for Moore's yoking of politics and aesthetics, T. S. Eliot arranged Moore's *Selected Poems* in 1935 and placed "The Fish" where it might be read as a "highly wrought formal object . . . self-reflexive rather than socially reflective" (99). Bornstein's "material modernism" (his address to bibliographical codes) reverses such formalism, recovering "socially reflective" aspects of many works that have come to appear merely self-reflexive.