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Review of *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary*

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experiment cannot, in my view, be simply written off; if Wald admires the U.S. leftists, he should not so readily dismiss the global movement with which they identified.

Third, I differ with Wald's characterization of the Afro-Cosmopolitans' project as "semi-autonomous," as well as with his judgment that their portraits of "interracial partnership" were "semi-utopian." Both "utopia" and "autonomy" are post-Marxist terms that lack applicability to the historical materialist paradigm to which the writers subscribed. While black nationalism and multiracialism surely existed in tension in the work of such writers as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Attaway, I read such texts as Wright's "Blueprint for Negro Writing" or Hughes's many bright-red poems as unambiguously envisioning proletarian internationalism as the highest form of revolutionary consciousness.

These points aside, Alan Wald's book is unquestionably a landmark work of scholarship. By critically reconfiguring the past, Wald may yet help to bring into being that future time from which mid-twentieth-century radicals—and their descendants in our own day—have been exiled.

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Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary.

Edited by Scott E. Casper, Joanne D. Chaison, and Jeffrey D. Groves. (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, in association with the American Antiquarian Society and the Library of Congress's Center for the Book. 2002. Pp. ix, 461. \$70.00 cloth; \$24.95 paper.)

Perhaps the best place to begin a review of this excellent new book is where the editors themselves begin in their preface, by defining what the book is not. Namely, it is not "a reader that merely reprint[s] scholarly essays" on the history of the book (that niche has recently been filled by *The Book History Reader* [2002] from Routledge), nor is it "a definitive history of the book and print culture in North America" (Cambridge University Press and the American Antiquarian Society aim to fill that niche with the multi-volume *History of the Book in America*, currently in progress). Rather, *Perspectives on American*

Book History is a classroom text that gathers together “‘artifacts,’ primary texts and images that encourage discussion and interpretation, as well as . . . short commentary essays that model ways in which those artifacts can be used.” While the overall arc of the book is chronological, each chapter presents materials under a thematic rubric that spans decades or even a century, with chronological overlap between chapters (“The Book Trade Transformed,” “Antebellum Reading Prescribed and Described,” and “Publishing an Emergent ‘American’ Literature,” for instance, cross and re-cross the mid-nineteenth century). A different scholar is responsible for each chapter. Each chapter begins with a brief opening statement of about two paragraphs, which is followed by documents or excerpts from documents (prefaced only very briefly and presented without footnotes), an interpretive essay of several pages that refers back to some of the documents, and a bibliography and suggestions for further reading.

Most of the artifacts will delight and instruct professors and students alike, providing a yeasty stew of voices, images, and perspectives on all aspects of the “communications circuit” (Robert Darnton’s phrase) in “America” (“America” here designating primarily the United States and its antecedents). Authors bemoan their economic plight, readers comment acerbically on what they read, ministers warn against the morally debilitating effects of fiction, publishers puff their own enterprise, journeymen printers critique the reorganization of the publishing industry, newsboys plead for gratuities, librarians cajole patrons, periodical editors criticize readers and each other, and leftist activists subvert the corporate-controlled print media. Some verbal artifacts are transcribed, other verbal and visual artifacts are presented as black-and-white photo-reproductions, and the book is supplemented with a CD-ROM providing access to color reproductions of still more artifacts.

The book begins with Puritan New England, and the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materials likewise reflect the concentration of population in that region and its dominant position in publishing (and the book as a whole testifies to the ongoing influence of a New England institution, the American Antiquarian Society, in American book history studies). *Perspectives* does, however, range far beyond New England. Susan S. Williams’s chapter, “Publishing an Emergent ‘American’ Literature,” is loosely structured around the example of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the publishing worlds of New York and Boston, but Jen A. Huntley-Smith’s chapter focuses on the West, and Alice Fahs (in a chapter that follows in focus and argument her book

The Imagined Civil War [2001]) considers both “Northern and Southern Worlds of Print.” Likewise, most chapters go well beyond the often male-dominated, usually white, elite world of high culture to include male and female authors, readers, editors, publishers, and print trade workers of different races and classes. Ann Fabian, for instance, examines late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century “Laboring Classes, New Readers, and Print Cultures,” and Ellen Gruber Garvey’s chapter, “Out of the Mainstream and into the Streets,” intelligently brings together print subcultures as disparate as Harriet Monroe’s *Poetry Magazine* and 1960s underground newspapers that subscribed to the Liberation News Service. The scholarly approaches of the interpretive essays are as diverse as the primary sources.

But perhaps the best way to convey the scope and organization of this text is through an analogy: the freshman composition reader. Although *Perspectives* goes beyond such readers in sophistication, presenting materials and commentary more suitable to upper-division undergraduates or graduate students than to raw beginners, it nevertheless shares both the strengths and weaknesses of “freshman comp” readers. By collecting and interpreting a wide variety of materials in a single volume, *Perspectives* makes the history of the book in America easily teachable, as it has not been before without heroic labors of photocopying by the instructor. Like most composition readers, *Perspectives* rightly aims to engage students in a process rather than simply presenting knowledge as a product, an aim reflected in the placement of interpretive essays *after* the artifacts they interpret. However, the presentation of artifacts shares two problems with freshman composition readers: documents are often heavily excerpted (in one case, only a single, brief paragraph is reproduced from a nineteenth-century diary), and while questions of interpretation are seemingly left open, one sometimes gets the sense that a chapter editor knows what the “right” answer is and is steering students in that direction. As volume editor Jeffrey D. Groves rightly cautions in his chapter “The Book Trade Transformed,” the texts he presents “have rhetorical features that must be addressed alongside the ‘facts’ extracted from those texts.” Especially for many of the earlier materials, however, it is hard to imagine a student, except for perhaps a specialist graduate student, who could actually decode those rhetorical features. For instance, in Jill Lepore’s chapter, “Literacy and Reading in Puritan New England,” nearly three pages are devoted to a land deed in the Massachusetts language, including a photo-reproduction of the original manuscript, a transcription in Massachusetts, and a translation from Massachusetts to English. In her subsequent commentary, Lepore

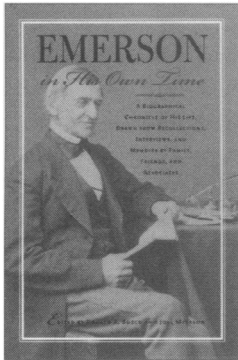
briefly and masterfully explains the place of both English and Native American literacies in seventeenth-century New England—but is there really anything a student could *do* with the land deed as a rhetorical document?

These criticisms are not meant to discourage professors from adopting the book as a classroom text; indeed, one might find it useful to analyze the anthology's own rhetorical features in the classroom alongside those of the artifacts it presents. And even scholars who have no plans to teach a course on the history of the book will find *Perspectives on American Book History* an enormously useful resource. The suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter and Joanne Chaison's annotated bibliography are, by themselves, worth the price of admission.

Melissa J. Homestead, an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Oklahoma, has published several essays on women's authorship in nineteenth-century America. Her essay "Every Body Sees the Theft": Fanny Fern and Literary Proprietorship in Antebellum America" appeared in the June 2001 issue of the *QUARTERLY*.

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