A COMPANION TO AMERICAN CULTURAL HISTORY

Edited by
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Chapter Five

ANTEBELLUM CULTURAL HISTORY

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When I first thought about studying US cultural history, the antebellum period seemed a rather unlikely place to set up shop. In the broader sweep of American culture, these were the decades known as early or mid-“Victorian,” a period typically defined by its rigid social strictures and cast as dour precursor to the more dynamic cultural experiments of fin de siècle “modernism.” Adding to my doubts was a sense that much of the previous scholarship on antebellum culture seemed oddly out of sync with the era’s great social, economic, and political upheavals. The decades before the Civil War were among the most volatile in the nation’s history. Yet many key sources of that volatility— from northern emancipation to the anti-slavery crusade, the rise of the metropolis to the rapid expansion of market capitalism— appeared to fall within the methodological bailiwick of other historical subfields and modes of questioning.

Twenty years later, antebellum cultural history looks like another place entirely. The long-running caricatures of Victorian priggery have given way to a more nuanced understanding of middle-class cultural formation. The older emphasis on white social elites has been challenged by path-breaking studies of workers, women, immigrants, and African Americans. The antebellum period itself has been reconceptualized as a wellspring of the modern rather than its opposite or antipode. And the range of cultural forms generating scholarly attention has expanded to include a far more diverse mix of vernacular, commercial, and transnational sources.

Similarly dramatic has been the collective impact of all this methodological stretching. From the rise of “class cultures” and “racial formations” during the 1980s, to current debates about the “market revolution” and “empire,” antebellum cultural historians have frequently set new research agendas for the discipline as a whole. And this is to say nothing of the many fruitful cross-pollinations across disciplines. Since the inauguration of the American Studies Association’s John Hope Franklin book prize in 1987, roughly half of the winners have addressed antebellum topics, often venturing into historical terrain (such as the commerce of slavery) previously understood as well outside the boundaries of “cultural” analysis. During the same period, new cohorts of scholars conversant in transatlantic cultural studies have returned to many of the foundational forms of antebellum commercial entertainment (such as
blackface minstrelsy), dramatically transforming our understanding of what a rigorous, interdisciplinary history of “the popular” might entail.

My larger purpose here, however, goes beyond subdisciplinary boosterism. More productively, I want to consider some of the reasons for the antebellum period’s gravitational pull on US cultural historians over the past quarter-century. Why have so many recent culturalists (myself included) found themselves drawn to these well-traveled decades before the Civil War? How has the proliferation of new scholarship dislodged and complicated previous master narratives? Where might we look for the next waves of innovation?

Beyond Victorianism

One good place to begin addressing these questions is with the gradual erosion of “Victorian America” as a central organizing concept. As late as the mid-1980s, many leading scholars continued to invoke this concept (and its more explicitly ideological counterpart, American Victorianism) with all of the collective confidence and presumed legibility that well-established paradigms typically provide. Victorian, in this formulation, referred to a number of things. On a very basic level, it defined a particular nexus of social identities – white, Protestant, bourgeois, Anglo-American – although the most sophisticated studies were quick to point out important wrinkles within the larger patterns (such as the growing impact of German-American immigration after 1850). At the same time, “Victorian” offered a convenient shorthand for a complex series of historical processes understood as generative for the larger culture: the spread of Protestant evangelicalism following the Second Great Awakening; the emergence of separate spheres for bourgeois men and women; the promotion of an urban–industrial work ethic specifically tailored to the burgeoning market economy; and the rigorous cultivation of moral self-discipline (as, for example, in the various reform campaigns against prostitution, alcohol, and “low theatricals”).

In all of these different respects, Victorian America served as a kind of master trope for mid-nineteenth-century cultural history, simultaneously signifying a period, a demographic amalgam, and a dominant set of values. For scholars working on later periods, moreover, Victorian culture provided a useful historical foil, conjuring with a single catchphrase the broader range of taboos, anxieties, and repressions against which subsequent modernist movements were said to have both defined themselves and decisively battled. How, then, are we to explain the striking absence of this trope/catchphrase in current US cultural history scholarship, the present volume being one obvious example?

Part of an answer can be found in the path-breaking work on women and gender that began to emerge in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s landmark essay collection, Disorderly Conduct (1985), is an important case in point. Written over the course of two decades, Disorderly Conduct straddles many of the methodological thresholds I have referenced thus far. In the opening chapter, “Hearing Women’s Words,” Smith-Rosenberg describes the volume as a work of “social history,” but then goes on to champion many of the methodological touchstones of the “new cultural history” – from linguistic analysis and close readings of “mythic constructs,” to the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault and the anthropological
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isdom about Victorian “prudery” and “domesticity” only to complicate and chal-

enge these assumptions through a series of revisionist readings. Moving through a

ide range of volunteer networks, reform organizations, and evangelical meetings,

antebellum women who fill the pages of Disorderly Conduct are never simply

lned to the domestic sphere and the activities of motherhood. Their campaigns

n “moral licentiousness,” we come to realize, were also forms of collective resist-

on sexual “double standards”; their millenarian “anti-ritualism” in Prote-

ant churches provided a strategy to “seize sacred space” from male authorities.

It was during the mid-1980s, too, that new waves of feminist historians began to

and reconceptualize the role of antebellum women as cultural laborers. In

Private Woman, Public Stage (1984), for example, Mary Kelley was among the first

to challenge the prevailing notion that the era’s most successful female authors were

ply trapped in an ideological zero-sum game: either as victims of a pervasive “cult

of domesticity” or as self-deluding peddlers of “feminine influence.” Tracking the

areers of prominent “literary domestics” such as Catherine Maria Sedgwick, Sara

arton (aka “Fanny Fern”), and Harriet Beecher Stowe, Kelley shows how these white

iddle-class women struggled to negotiate the competing demands of commercial

elebrity and personal obligation, a deeply ambivalent process which often played out

the pages of some of the era’s bestselling novels and newspaper serials.

More recently, Robert Allen’s Horrible Prettiness (1991), Faye Dudden’s Women

in the American Theater (1994), and Renee Sentilles’s Performing Menken (2003)

ave explored related questions about gender, representation, and power on the

ntebellum stage. While increasing numbers of women gained access to commercial

theaters between the 1820s and 1870s, they did so within a male-dominated mar-

ketplace that often valued bodies over words and appearance over artistry. Yet this

merging hegemony of “sexual spectacle” was far from complete. Some antebellum

ormers, like the international opera star Jenny Lind, responded by turning dom-

inant ideals of feminine virtue into mass-marketed forms of “family amusement.”

thers, like Charlotte Cushman, ventured abroad, using her novelty as an American

ress to secure a broader range of roles, including a highly successful Romeo in

breches.” Still others, like the burlesque comedian Lydia Thompson and the poet/

ress/ provocateur Adah Isaacs Menken, explicitly flaunted their sexuality in an

effort to cultivate public controversy around the very questions of what a woman can

do and say in public.

The growing body of work on antebellum masculinity has demonstrated a number

of important wrinkles, as well. One of the earliest and richest studies is Elliott Gorn’s

The Manly Art (1986), in which we discover large numbers of white-collar “sporting

men” eagerly pursuing their passion for bare-knuckle boxing as part of conventionally

ixed-class, mixed-race audiences. What Gorn helps us to see are the multiple social

nd cultural positions available within the larger rubrics of “bourgeois” and “work-

lass” masculinity, some of which gained their traction precisely by rejecting the

ody and behavioral proscriptions favored by Protestant evangelicals. In similar

shion, Ann Fabian’s innovative history of gambling, Card Sharps, Dream Books, and

ucket Shops (1990), reveals a motley assortment of urban clerks and rural gentlemen

ho regularly balked at warnings to engage in slow and steady toil, careful savings,

nd rational profit seeking. Drawing on a variety of previously neglected sources,
Fabian skillfully explicated the “negative analogue” of antebellum market discipline—those badly behaved faro dealers and policy players who spent their money in all of the “wrong ways.”

In *Honor and Slavery* (1996), Kenneth S. Greenberg extends this project of differentiating masculinities across the Mason–Dixon line. Particularly interesting is Greenberg’s suggestion that southern slaveholders and northern merchants understood the meanings and functions of self-representation in very different ways. By the 1840s, he argues, northern merchants typically viewed words and gestures as the malleable instruments of market exchange, whereas southern landowners believed that words and gestures conveyed unequivocal meanings about the moral status of the speaker. In fact, it was the ongoing refusal of southern gentlemen to search beneath the surface meanings they manipulated (refusing, for example, to focus on the inner beings of their slaves, rather than on the social status ascribed to skin color) which helped to define and consolidate their power as southern gentlemen.

In many ways, though, the most fundamental challenges to the master narratives of American Victorianism can be found in Karen Halttunen’s *Confidence Men and Painted Women* (1982) and John Kasson’s *Rudeness and Civility* (1991), two widely influential histories of antebellum manners. In retrospect, one of the most striking features of both studies is their agile use of primary sources long understood as the cultural bedrock of bourgeois “respectability”: etiquette books and conduct manuals, fashion advice and children’s literature, city guides and parlor magazines. But whereas previous scholars had presented these didactic texts as transparent expressions of Victorian “hypocrisy” and “social control,” Halttunen and Kasson read them in relation to a broader semiotic crisis, one in which the antebellum quest for fixed and legible forms of personal character grew out of the new perceptual challenges of anonymous urban crowds, rapid demographic mobility, and increasingly speculative forms of commerce.

On a very basic level, this line of argument offered a more dynamic set of explanations for the ideological origins of social and moral self-discipline. Suddenly, those pious souls of Sabbath school fame began to look like active improvisers in the swirl and flux of modernization (rather than a one-dimensional rearguard, anxiously holding back the floodgates). Also notable were Halttunen’s and Kasson’s rigorous efforts to connect the day-to-day rituals of social respectability to a more particular segment within the antebellum bourgeoisie: namely, the “new middle class,” which began to take shape in northeastern cities during the 1820s and 1830s. In stark contrast to previous studies, which had mostly shrunk over the behavioral ticks of an undifferentiated Victorian “social elite,” Halttunen and Kasson helped us to see the deeper significance and functional value of these ritualized behaviors for the larger process of urban middle-class self-making.

**From Class Cultures and Racial Formations to Multietnic Histories**

Ultimately, this shift in conceptual emphasis from Victorian to new middle class was more than a simple matter of demographic fine-tuning. One might argue, in fact, that most of the books I have described thus far were part of a broader
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historiographical effort to supplant the conceptual monolith of American Victorianism with a more capacious series of “class cultures.” It was during this very same period, moreover, that growing numbers of US historians began to explore the expressive forms, vernacular styles, and consumption habits of antebellum workers, particularly in the newly industrializing metropolises of the northeast. Initially, at least, the cultural components of these localized labor studies were relatively modest. Thus, we find a half-dozen pages on blackface minstrelsy, volunteer fire companies, and the Bowery Theater in Sean Wilentz’s influential history of New York City artisans, Chants Democratic (1984); or a somewhat deeper exegesis of working women’s uses of Five Points dance halls in Christine Stansell’s City of Women (1986); or a final chapter on Bowery fashion, slang, and humor in Richard Stott’s Workers in the Metropolis (1990).

More recent scholarship has complicated and enriched these early portraits in a number of different ways. Consider, for example, the methodological trajectory of Paul Johnson, whose most recent study, Sam Patch, The Famous Jumper (2003), explores the fascinating career of a Rhode Island mill worker-cum-waterfall daredevil. In Johnson’s first book, A Shopkeeper’s Millennium (1978), as in many of the best quantitative social and labor histories from the 1970s, someone with Patch’s vocational profile would have barely registered as an individual subject. And more likely than not, he would have found himself operating within rigidly hegemonic “structures” of social, economic, and technological discipline.

In Sam Patch, by contrast, Johnson places his protagonist’s daredevilry at the very center of analysis, reading each death-defying leap as a kind of oppositional performance art through which we can glimpse the struggles of thousands of anonymous mill workers who left behind no written records. This shift in analytical emphasis, it is important to note, should not be understood as a one-way movement away from the questions first posed by A Shopkeeper’s Millennium. Again and again, Johnson skillfully juxtaposes Patch’s drunken bravado with the disciplinary projects championed by bourgeois property owners and moral reformers; indeed, it is precisely in defiance of the latter’s “rational amusements” and “languages of progress” that Patch’s public acts accrue their deeper significance. More accurately, then, Sam Patch employs the conceptual tools of cultural history (thick description, discourse analysis, close attention to visual imagery, etc.) to expand what can be known about the localized impacts of the Industrial Revolution, as well as the day-to-day forms of resistance devised by antebellum workers caught in its vortex.

Other recent studies have focused on the construction of working-class racial identities. That antebellum workers frequently engaged in acts of racial discrimination had, of course, been acknowledged by previous social and labor historians. During the first half of the nineteenth century, white urban workers across the northeast increasingly excluded newly emancipated African Americans from entire professions and neighborhoods. And Irish-American workers, in particular, frequently vented their frustrations at the expense of black businesses, churches, and homes. Less clear was the specific relation between such forms of racial hostility and the manifold impacts of market capitalism. Nor had previous studies explained the specific ideological process by which large numbers of manual laborers came to define themselves as “white.”

It was to these complex questions about working-class “racial formation” that Alexander Saxton’s Rise and Fall of the White Republic (1990) and David Roediger’s
Wages of Whiteness (1991) addressed themselves. Particularly influential was their use of linguistic analysis to track the shifting racial and economic identifications embedded in the era’s dominant labor categories (“hirelings” and “slaves,” or “masters” and “servants”). By reading such categories as both mutable and continuously interwoven with contemporary changes in industrial production, immigration, and party politics, Saxton and Roediger made it far easier to see that white workers actually had racial identities of a specific historical vintage. Their innovative modes of questioning, moreover, made it increasingly difficult to treat race and class as wholly separate issues. Today, in fact, most cultural historians would describe all identity categories (race, class, gender, sexuality) as chronologically contingent and mutually constituted.

This leads to what is arguably the single most important development in recent scholarship: namely, the ongoing effort to construct a more pluralistic and racially inclusive portrait of antebellum culture. Early signs of this effort can be found in a series of path-breaking histories of antebellum slavery, including Lawrence Levine’s Black Culture and Black Consciousness (1977), Albert Raboteau’s Slave Religion (1978), Charles Joyner’s Down by the Riverside (1984), Deborah Gray White’s Ar’n’t I a Woman? (1985), and Sterling Stuckey’s Slave Culture (1987). In many ways, Black Culture and Black Consciousness stands out in this stellar body of work, for it taught an entire generation of scholars how to read long-neglected vernacular forms such as spirituals, jokes, and animal tales as meaningful historical evidence. Initiated during the mid-1960s (as Levine was actively involved in the Civil Rights movement), Black Culture and Black Consciousness is a politically charged “history from below” which restless seeks out new ways of conceptualizing subaltern thought, identity, and resistance. “Black culture,” in Levine’s innovative formulation, is less a strict aesthetic category than a dialectical, multilayered “process.” As the epic story unfolds, we come to see how the vernacular cultural expressions of African Americans were at once shaped by unique historical experiences and struggles, interwoven with the cultural life of other social groups; and continuously engaged in the broader battle to remake American society.

Over the past quarter-century, much of the best new scholarship has not only embraced this expansive, pluralistic vision of antebellum culture, but also worked to correct some of its lingering blind spots. Some, like Sterling Stuckey’s Going Through the Storm (1994), Shane White and Graham White’s Styllin’ (1998), Shane White’s Stories of Freedom in Black New York (2002), and Leslie Harris’s In the Shadow of Slavery (2003), have explored the less familiar histories of post-emancipation community building and cultural politics initiated by African Americans in the antebellum North. Others, such as Frances Smith Foster’s Written by Herself (1993), Carla Peterson’s “Doors of the Word” (1995), and Nell Irvin Painter’s Sojourner Truth: A Life, A Symbol (1996), have addressed the specific contributions of black women writers and lecturers in the struggles around suffrage and anti-slavery. Still others, such as Ramon Gutierrez’s When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away (1991), John Kuo-Wei Tchen’s New York before Chinatown (1999), and Susan Johnson’s Roaring Camp (2000), have pushed beyond the black/white binary to demonstrate the complex patterns of multiethnic cultural exchange and conflict that regularly emerged in southwestern colonial outposts, northeastern port cities, and California mining camps. In all of these different respects, the larger entity we now call antebellum culture looks far more syncetic, dynamic, and contested than it did when I first
thought about becoming a professional historian. Indeed, one would be hard-pressed to find any chronological subfield that has been more productively stretched and complicated by the cultural turn in late twentieth-century historiography.

Theorizing the Popular

Thus far, much of my discussion has focused on problems of identity – those core questions of race, class, gender, and sexuality that have long shaped our prevailing portraits of antebellum culture. In actual fact, though, such identity questions are but one important piece of a much larger puzzle. Saxton and Roediger, for example, were key innovators in explicating the rise of working-class whiteness, but their studies also fueled important new debates about the origins of blackface minstrelsy, one of the era’s most pervasive forms of popular culture. Similarly, studies such as Thern’s *New York before Chinatown* and White’s *Stories of Freedom in Black New York* can be read on at least two different levels: both as powerful chronicles of subaltern struggle against the era’s dominant racial ideologies, and as innovative histories of rapidly expanding entertainment industries which did much to produce and disseminate the ideologies. It is to these complex questions of popular cultural production and consumption that I now want to turn.


This rich body of scholarship has pointed to a number of broader conclusions. First and foremost, it has taught us that “the popular” was a thoroughly mutable category, never simply intrinsic to any particular cultural form. In some cases, this categorization grew out of carefully choreographed promotional campaigns designed to pitch elite artistry (such as Jenny Lind’s opera singing) to a broader socioeconomic spectrum. In others, it reflected a specific performance location, ticket price, gender dynamic, or managerial policy (such as the decision to sell alcohol). In still others, it was a function of sales and distribution, which, in turn, became the very basis of a product’s market identity (as, for example, when antebellum publishers advertised Sara Parton’s *Fanny Fern* novels as “popular” on the basis of thousands of advance orders).
This leads to a second basic conclusion about the complex relationship between vernacular expression and capitalist expansion. The point here is not simply that vernacular forms such as songs, dances, fables, and jokes were becoming commercial products for non-localized markets—a process which had been underway for at least two centuries. Rather, what seems to have been new in the 1830s and 1840s were the increasingly self-conscious efforts of individual artists and managers to make vernacular authenticity a central feature of their cultural productions and marketing campaigns. P. T. Barnum, for example, spent much of the early 1840s promoting a young Irish-American street dancer named John Diamond as one of the Five Points’ leading practitioners of “breakdowns” and “double shuffles.” Similarly, F. S. Chanfrau, a New York actor, writer, and stage manager with working-class roots, scored one of the biggest theatrical sensations of the late 1840s by playing the character “Mose,” a good-hearted but tough-as-nails “B’hoi,” very much like the brash young men he had known growing up in the Bowery.

The historical rub here is that Diamond and Chanfrau really were from the old neighborhoods, a fact that makes it difficult to describe their performances as straightforward “appropriations” or “co-optations” of working-class vernaculars. Yet it would be equally misleading to ignore the ongoing impacts of their efforts to sell these vernaculars across ever-expanding market segments, a complex process which pushed the dance steps and theatrical gestures from street to stage and back again. Right from the start, Diamond and Chanfrau addressed themselves to urban publics far broader than their earlier working-class social milieus. And in ways both big and small, they adapted their performances to the shifting tastes, politics, and prejudices of each new public they encountered. What their careers help to illustrate, then, is not simply the movement of antebellum cultural products from vernacular seedbeds to larger regional and national markets, but also the production of “the popular” as an increasingly self-conscious and profitable promotional strategy.

A third key conclusion involves the transnational scope of antebellum popular culture. For many years, the broader circulatory patterns of the era’s entertainment products were hard to see, a function both of US historians’ long-running tendency to favor the nation state as their primary contextual rubric and an equally entrenched master narrative of US “dependency” on European art, literature, and music before the 1850s. Three recent document collections have offered a more complete picture. In Dale Cockrell’s Excelsior: Journals of the Hutchinson Family Singers (1989) we discover that the antebellum era’s most acclaimed evangelical singing group was also the most peripatetic cultural production, covering hundreds of different venues on both sides of the Atlantic. Much like the recent groundswell of excellent work on religious publishing (such as Nathan O. Hatch’s The Democratization of American Christianity [1989], R. Laurence Moore’s Selling God [1994], David Morgan’s Protestants and Pictures [1999], and David Paul Nord’s Faith in Reading [2004]), Cockrell demonstrates that the moral proscriptions against antebellum “theatricals” were far from absolute. More accurately, Protestant reformers created their own forms of cultural commerce, both to compete with the secular mainstream and to provide an innovative vehicle for their numerous missionary projects.

W. T. Lhamon, Jr.’s rich collection of early blackface “plays, lyrics, and street prose,” Jump Jim Crow (2003), paints a similarly transnational picture, showing for the first time that T. D. Rice (the key American innovator) was a major star in Britain
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by the mid-1830s – seven years before the first formalized “minstrel show” in New York City. In stark contrast to earlier studies of antebellum minstrelsy, which had generally confined their analyses to particular US cities or even neighborhoods, Lhamon points to a disturbing but crucial fact: namely, that blackface was the United States’ first major cultural export. By the 1840s and 1850s, dozens of American minstrel troupes were “Jumping Jim Crow” in leading European theaters and music halls.

My own Colosal P. T. Barnum Reader (2005) documents the remarkable scope and complexity of the Great Yankee Showman’s transnational projects. During the mid-1830s, Barnum had conducted his tours in a manner hardly distinguishable from his eighteenth-century forbears. Often traveling by horse-drawn wagon across the countryside – and living largely hand-to-mouth – Barnum’s mode of production barely traversed the threshold of modern market relations. Less than a decade later, however, Barnum had amassed enough capital in lower Manhattan’s burgeoning amusement markets to launch a series of foreign tours which extended across England, Scotland, Ireland, France, Spain, Belgium, Holland, and Cuba. Over the next four decades, Barnum imported and exported dozens of different acts, from the juvenile singing group known as the Bateman Children, to his massive three-ring circus venture with James A. Bailey, which traveled to Britain on a fleet of steamships. By the time of his death in 1891, Barnum’s show business empire included a staff of thousands; separate publicity, advertising, and acquisitions departments; corporate mergers every few years; capital assets valued at over $10 million; and brand recognition across much of the globe.

A final point involves the complex power dynamics at work in such commercial enterprises. That popular culture itself has often functioned as an arena for social struggle is hardly news – indeed, it would be difficult to find any major study over the past quarter-century that has not explored this question in one way or another. What the best new work has offered, rather, are a series of fresh insights about patterns of domination and resistance in antebellum cultural forms specifically understood as national or transnational industries. In American Sensations (2002), for example, Shelley Streeby demonstrates that the newspaper serials and dime novels of early pulp luminaries such as George Lippard and E. Z. C. Judson (aka “Ned Buntline”) were, in fact, highly politicized cultural productions which spoke to their increasingly national readerships through languages of “empire.” By tracking these antebellum texts in relation to major political developments such as Indian Removal and the US–Mexican War, Streeby enables us to see the longer ideological trajectory of conquest and territorial expansion, a process which both preceded and helped to shape the rise of US imperialism in the Pacific.

Similarly, Tchen’s New York before Chinatown demonstrates the rather surprising fact that widespread discourses of “commercial orientalism” actually preceded the arrival of significant numbers of Chinese immigrants in New York City, a pattern which forced antebellum performers such as Afong Moy (the “Chinese Lady”) and Chang and Eng Bunker (the “Siamese Twins”) to construct their self-representations in opposition to already pervasive public assumptions about Chinese difference. What Tchen helps to clarify, in this regard, is the emergence of a distinctly modern mode of minority cultural struggle, one in which the performers’ efforts to achieve visibility, profits, and mobility were continuously interwoven with battles over representational
control. Cross-cultural struggles over the terms and meanings of racial/ethnic difference were well under way before the Civil War.

Speculating on the Future

Where might we look for the next waves of innovation? Even today, it seems relatively clear that the transnational turn in antebellum cultural history has become something more than a momentary correction of older patterns of American "exceptionalism," a conclusion only reinforced by recent publications such as Joseph Roach's *Cities of the Dead* (1996), Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker's *Many-Headed Hydra* (2001), Sarah Meier's *Uncle Tom Mania* (2005), and Daphne Brooks's * Bodies in Dissent* (2006). Less clear is the question of whether future transnational histories will continue to operate primarily within "circumatlantic" contexts and frameworks.

One broader lesson of the first wave of studies, it seems to me, is that antebellum markets mattered — not simply as economic engines driving the movement of bodies, goods, and aesthetic forms across borders, but also, simultaneously, as the very networks through which transnational counter-publics and oppositional ideas frequently took shape. Once we focus our attention on the international flow of cultural capital, however, even hemispheres begin to look rather small. Literary texts, songs, dance moves, and performance companies circulating through the Atlantic world often found their way to San Francisco, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Calcutta, Sydney, and Auckland by the 1850s and 1860s. The number of "port cities" supporting US cultural exports quickly proliferated.

It also seems clear that antebellum cultural historians will continue to operate in the vanguard of a much broader effort to stretch and enrich our understanding of capitalist expansion. This effort, I would emphasize, is about as old as the cultural turn itself. From sweeping, multigenerational studies of consumer culture and advertising, such as Richard Bushman's *Refinement of America* (1992) and Jackson Lears's *Fables of Abundance* (1994), to more focused histories of particular consumer groups and economic discourses, such as Michael Zakim's *Ready-Made Democracy* (2003) and Scott Sandage's *Born Losers* (2005), antebellum cultural historians have long explored the manifold ways in which antebellum market expansion played out at the levels of identity, fashion, values, and even epistemology.

Yet we have engaged these fundamental questions with an equally diverse mix of analytical strategies. Some have focused on market-driven changes in the production and distribution of particular cultural forms (as in Denning's and Streeby's discussions of early dime novels, or Nord's analysis of the American Bible Society). Others have examined market expansion as a causal motor driving key shifts in antebellum race, class, and gender relations (as in Halltunen's and Kasson's studies of middle-class respectability, or Saxton's and Roediger's treatments of working-class whiteness). Still others have sought to explain the ideological impacts of market exchange through close readings of particular social types, moral thresholds, and cultural practices (as in Fabian's examination of gambling, or my own explorations of Barnum's freaks). Especially helpful in recent scholarship has been the growing effort to integrate the larger process of capitalist development (what we now often characterize as the "market revolution") with more subtle changes in language, perception, identity, and
social ritual (issues often bundled together as “market relations”). A powerful case in point is Walter Johnson’s recent history of the “antebellum slave market,” *Soul by Soul* (1999), which quite deliberately casts its subject in ambiguous terms: both as a localized New Orleans institution on which large numbers of slaves and slaveholders left their individual marks, and as an even larger system of commodity exchange, which impacted upon countless facets of identity, consciousness, and social experience. In all of these different respects, Johnson’s study provides a useful model for historians seeking to reconnect “the social” and “the cultural,” “macro-history” and “micro-history,” “material conditions” and “patterns of discourse.” What Johnson helps us to imagine is a more nearly complete history of antebellum slavery, a history neither disembodied by the numbing blur of statistical categories, nor set apart from the brutal commerce which inevitably constrained individual acts of will and agency.

Finally, I suspect that cultural historians will have much more to say in the future about the wide variety of antebellum individuals who explicitly chose to position themselves outside of, or in opposition to, the era’s dominant moral, social, and political orders. The potential stakes (and dangers) of such willful iconoclasm can be glimpsed more clearly in a number of recent studies. In Martha Hodes’s *White Women, Black Men* (1997) and Jonathan Ned Katz’s *Love Stories* (2001), for example, we enter into the barely visible social worlds inhabited by so-called “allegamist-s” and “sodomites,” whose most intimate choices about love, sex, and friendship were routinely condemned as moral “abominations.” Similarly, in Patricia Cline Cohen’s *The Murder of Helen Jewett* (1998), Helen Lefkowitz Horowitz’s *Rereading Sex* (2002), and Jackson Lears’s *Something for Nothing* (2003), we begin to appreciate why the “sporting men” who populated antebellum boxing arenas, race tracks, and gambling dens were often perceived as such a fundamental threat. At once within the white-collar professions and gleefully defiant of their ideological strictures, the antebellum sporting fraternity embodied a possibility almost unthinkable in national reform circles: namely, that large numbers of cash-carrying white men would demonstrate little interest in the normative doctrines of domestic virtue, moral self-discipline, and strict racial segregation.

Moving through a very different range of antebellum institutions, Paul Goodman’s *Of One Blood* (1998) and John Stauffer’s *Black Hearts of Men* (2002) illuminate long-neglected social relationships and political alliances that took shape across the color line. On a very basic level, these books help us to think beyond the conceptual monolith of antebellum “whiteness,” demonstrating a multiplicity of racial identities and sympathies articulated by anti-slavery artisans, farmers, and philanthropists. At the same time, Goodman and Stauffer help us to imagine a more richly textured history of the origins of racial equality, a history that inevitably included political conventions, courtrooms, and abolitionist newspapers, but also fleeting acts of grassroots collaboration and localized sociability. It is to these more quotidian forms of interracial exchange that future studies promise to address themselves.

**REFERENCES**


