
Let no one expect a history of the press or of print culture from Trish Loughran’s *The Republic in Print,* subtitle to the contrary. Tremendous work and deep reflection went into this case-study of a few key texts, their true message and dissemination between 1770 and the 1850s. Historians will find real insights and rewards here, but what an ordeal they will find the reading!

A specialist in American literature and material culture, Loughran has an appreciation not only for what words say, but for their hidden meanings, and how readers can glean them. These skills, *The Republic in Print* makes clear, are essential for our grasp of how deeply Americans felt a sense of nationhood. She makes the good point that in a world of dirt roads and spacious distances, no national reading public was possible. Not even *Common Sense* was black and white and read all over, whatever its admirers claimed. Audiences were local. They thought parochially. Even some of the most nationalist works, like Royall Tyler’s play *The Contrast,* played to and for Yorkers and Yankees who might not identify themselves much farther than the Battery and Braintree. Still, distance did not keep Americans from thinking nationally. They were more able to imagine what nationhood meant because they could define it in so many ways. Between the Constitution’s federal structure and the transportation revolution, new identities came into being. Abolitionists reached a national audience and helped redefine Americans by region. By the 1850s, northerners had a national impact and felt under a national threat, from laws that brought the enforcement of slavery into their own households and onto the Boston streets. Thus the very nationalist institutions that allowed a shared legal and material culture raised a sectionalism that undermined the old nationalism.

These are radical challenges to what some historians assume about the nationalizing force of the print culture. Or they would be, if case studies told the whole story. But can the whole story be addressed by studying a handful of maps, a few pamphlets mostly written before 1790, and the writings, narratives, and novels of a small corps of antislavery reformers after 1825? Print culture took in too much else and was much more widely spread, including weekly and daily newspapers, magazines, lithographs on assorted topics, broadsides, and even the *Congressional Globe.* Selectivity, however necessary,
can sometimes obscure what was really going on. For example, John Trumbull’s painting of the signers qualifies as print culture in Loughran’s account, but newspapers (as opposed to abolitionist journals) do not. Such a concentration of attention is not just odd, it may well arrive at the wrong answer to the larger question of how local affiliations gave way to sectional and national ones, on what terms, and on what conditions. A person could see America in nationalist terms in some ways, in sectional terms in other ways, and local in still other ways, all at the same time.

So has Loughran got the story right? Perhaps in some respects, but the perspective is troubling. Putting the ratification of the Constitution in the wrong year is not all that important, but making the past fit the world its inhabitants thought they were living in matters rather more. Here, Loughran offers notions that are, perhaps, disputable. Historians of the Revolution might take issue with the assertion that Washington was “making the iconic gesture of crossing the Delaware in 1776” (229). He was not making a gesture at all: unaware that Leutze would paint a picture of his crossing some seventy years later; Washington thought it the best way to reach the enemy at Trenton. Other questionable interpretations abound: Was print culture really “the special scapegoat” of the 1830s (345)? Did the Dred Scott decision really say that slaveholders could move their human property in and out of any free state? Did the Kansas-Nebraska Act really erase “the Mason-Dixon line as the legal boundary between free and slave states”? Was “the state line” “the central problem of the mid-nineteenth century” (368)?

Most readers will find the book a hard slog, and even pedants may write “ack!” in many a margin. Take several examples: “Indeed, one might argue that the Declaration of Independence is such a cherished artifact in popular culture precisely because it restores us rhetorically to the promise of actuality, with little discrepancy between signs (or signings) and the things signified”(164). The Constitution’s notion of power was “a seemingly new, terrifying experiment in . . . biopower—the coercion of individual bodies by an abstract and all-encompassing power that circulates routinely and omnivorously through the microspaces of everyday life” (244). Benjamin Lundy’s writings “reveal the stakes of antislavery’s shift from a serial spatial imaginary expressed as temporal gradualism to one reorganized around immediatism and a sense of spatial simultaneity” (321). Only in scholarly writing can an “environment” “collect and construct actual people” and land, as well as buildings (246). Lingo matters. In some academic disciplines, language just one degree short of impenetrable becomes proof of a book’s insight. But
casual readers will weary quickly from words like “telos” and “topoi,” balk at references to maps as showing “the artificiality of such pseudo-mimetic techniques” and shy from a survey described as “a captivating signpost on the roadway of American modernity”—which for any signpost goes far beyond the call of duty (235). Prose like this is no fun. All but hard-core professionals will grumble that whatever point is being made, it had better be good. For this reader, at least, no point could possibly be good enough.

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