

International Conference:
Buying America:
Literature and Consumption in the 19th Century

University of Paderborn, 12-13 June 2012

Paper Abstracts:

Panel 1: Antebellum Fiction

Katja Kanzler (University of Dresden)

"Discourses of Production and Consumption in New England 'Factory Girl' Literature"

I want to talk about a little known aspect of early 19th century US literature and culture: the literary magazines published by female mill workers in the 1840s, and their texts by and about "factory girls." The *Lowell Offering* was the most famous of these magazines, attracting the most attention in its days and enjoying the longest life-span (1840-45) among these generally short-lived projects. In contradistinction from much scholarship on the *Lowell Offering*, I approach its texts not as "pathetically imitative of the ladies' magazines with which the period was so lavishly supplied" (to quote Bertha Stearn's pioneering study of working women's literary magazines), but as an effort made by writers who were marginalized by overlapping systems of gender and class to appropriate established literary themes and conventions in order to forge an affirmative subject position and to write this subject position into American culture. One well-established discourse that the texts of the *Lowell Offering* appropriate is the discourse of consumption, on which I want to focus in my talk. As I will outline, many of the magazine's texts employ a discourse of consumption to authorize the multiply marginalized subject position of the "factory girl" and to assert her cultural equality with the middle-class women on whom the period's hegemonic gender discourse bestows sole visibility as "true women." The central role that consumption plays in these narratives of the factory-girl-experience seems curious, given that their authors as well as their protagonists identify as "factory girls" – i.e., in terms of their position in processes of production. I will discuss the conspicuous absence of scenes of industrial production from the texts of the *Lowell Offering*, and explore how consumption precariously enables tropes of personhood and agency in its texts.

Nicole Schröder (University of Paderborn)

The Business of Gender and Class in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables*

The little cent-shop that Hepzibah Pyncheon opens in her ancestors' old mansion is described as an embarrassment to the family; moreover, the narrator points out that it is a feature that destroys the romantic and picturesque image one might have of the house of the seven gables itself. Indeed, it is through the shop door that all of a sudden the whole village – by way of being customers – gains access to an aristocratic space that has hitherto been closed to all but a select few. Thus, the shop – as one of the central locations of the plot – becomes a space of transition, where various classes mingle in the “business of life” and where negotiations of gender roles are instigated.

Focusing on the role that consumption has for these negotiations, I will show how Hawthorne's somewhat ambiguous stance towards the new economic structures and the changes it brought about is reflected in the attitudes and actions of the novel's different characters. The way they literally and metaphorically do business (or not) within the novel is important since it not only sheds light on the economic restructuring taking place in the United States during Hawthorne's time but also on how these changes impacted the norms and values that were prevalent in society. Particularly the role that wealth, property and charity play is significant since it reflects contemporaneous anxieties regarding changing class and gender relations as well as related economic discourses about property, inheritance laws and the abolition of slavery.

Panel 2: Gender and Consumption

Bärbel Tischleder (University of Göttingen)

"Like Adam Taking the Apple": Shopping and Sentimental Possession in Stowe and Chopin

Looking at Harriet Beecher Stowe's *House and Home Papers* (1864) and Kate Chopin's short story "A Pair of Silk Stockings" (1897), the paper explores how nineteenth-century notions of home and ideals of domesticity took shape against the backdrop of a rising consumer culture. The market place is presented as a troubling terrain that threatens to invade and disrupt the family home and the domestic order of things. In the texts of both authors, the allure of commodities proves fateful, when the female protagonists are lured into buying, thereby setting off an unexpected chain of events that throw into disarray the established economy of the self

and the home. The paper considers the affective dimensions of buying and owning in Stowe's and Chopin's stories: commodity desire and sentimental possession constitute conflicting concepts of ownership that are presented as a way of negotiating the (inner) tension between traditional ideals of women's altruism and domesticity and more fashionable forms of feminine self-expression.

Eva Boesenberg (HU Berlin)

"Sex and the City – Gender and Consumption in late Nineteenth Century Fiction"

My paper discusses late nineteenth century reconfigurations of gender in urban spaces of consumption, particularly department stores, theatres, and bars. Novels such as *Sister Carrie* and *The Sport of the Gods* deconstruct the hegemonic "ideology of separate spheres" as their protagonists turn the supposedly familial labor of representation into full-fledged careers that reduce or even terminate their financial dependence on male providers. In *Sister Carrie* and *The Custom of the Country*, increased female self-determination involves a sexualization of consumption; commodity fetishism takes precedence over erotic attraction to men. Undine Spragg even practices a form of "rotary consumption" by divorcing unsatisfactory husbands with an eye towards wedding a partner possessed of superior financial or cultural capital. Yet, the female characters transcend their role as objects at best in an ambiguous manner, since their ability to consume is premised on their performance as attractive spectacles for the male gaze.

Panel 3: Writing the Slave Trade

Alexandra Ganser (FAU Erlangen-Nürnberg)

Piratical Consumption and the Black Atlantic Critique of the Slave Economy in the mid-19th Century

In transatlantic piracy narratives of the late 17th and early 18th centuries, piracy was used as a trope to articulate the economic desires of an emergent European middle class of colonial adventurers. Spectacles of consumption, abundance, and waste in Alexander Olivier Exquemelin's *Buccaneers of America* (engl. 1684) or Captain Charles Johnson's *General History of the Robberies and Murders of the Most Notorious Pyrates* (1724), for example, depict former sailors from the poorest strata of the Euro-American Atlantic social world as they turn

into “gentlemen of fortune,” whose credo was “a merry life and a short one” and who divided their booty in equal shares. While these narratives are informed by an economic utopianism in the sense of envisioning an egalitarian socio-economic order in which excessive consumption reigned, their sensationalist discourse of limitless expenditure was unable to veil the two crucial hauntings of European colonialism: the “specter of slavery” and “the phantom of luxury” (David Shields). In the mid-19th century, black Atlantic narratives responded to the slavery crisis and voiced a critique of the triangular trade by turning the trope of the pirate as a figure of excessive consumption on its head. Using black pirates as figures of resistance to an exploitative system of enslavement and to the spectacle of colonial commodities, texts like M.M. Philip’s novel *Emmanuel Appadocca* (1854) brought to light the nexus of insatiable material desire and its conditions of production: slavery. As I will argue in my paper, by appropriating the figure of the pirate in this way, the consumption of commodities produced by slave labor itself was delegitimized as these narratives evoked a conjuncture of piracy and slavery that had been introduced in the 18th century and was to be continued during the Civil War.

Christoph Ribbat (University of Paderborn)

"Splendid Mammoth Pictorial Tour": James Presley Ball and African American Literary History

In a 1999 essay, art historian Colin Westerbeck discounts the work of 19th century African American photographer James Presley Ball by citing the clichéd poses and the fictions of leisured lives that Ball's portraits of black Americans frequently constructed. This paper takes a different view of James Presley Ball as photographer, abolitionist writer, and entrepreneur, calling for a reconsideration of his oeuvre as a significant narrative emerging from 19th century African American consumer culture. Discussing his images and texts in the framework of recent African American literary history, my presentation focuses on the productive use of photographic and textual fictions and nonfictions in Ball's work. Kevin Young's 2012 *The Gray Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* seems particularly relevant to this project. Following Young, my paper argues, we should be able to re-conceptualize the art of counterfeiting – and James Presley Ball's photographs – in the context of consumer culture.

Panel 4: Consumption and the Public Sphere

Klara-Stephanie Szlezák (University of Regensburg)

“Consuming the Sages of Concord: The Origins of American Literary Tourism in Concord, MA”

Literature and consumption in 19th-century America touch upon each other in myriad ways. Investigating consumption as the subject of literature, on the one hand, and literature as the object of consumption, on the other hand, opens up a broad range of interrelated issues leading into more profound complexes. The ways literature was consumed throughout the 19th century grew more intricate when literature was no longer only consumable in texts (in books and magazine stories, but also in reviews) but also in a spatial dimension: the second half of the 19th century saw the birth of American literary tourism. An increasing interest in the private lives of authors and the settings in which some of best known works of literature were produced fueled the movements of people—readers turned tourists—to writers’ homes, resulting in a cultural practice that would spread the continent. This paper will trace the beginnings of a phenomenon that is now “a major asset of heritage tourism” (Hendrix 2)* to Concord, MA, where early “pilgrims” searched out the houses of the Alcotts, of Hawthorne, and of Emerson. It will be explored how Concord’s growing reputation as the American “literary mecca” stimulated the demand for visitable literature, initiating various forms of commodification that turned literature, literary personages, and literary sites into tourist destinations and consumer goods. Literature could not only be consumed through reading, but through traveling, gazing, and purchasing souvenirs, which added a pronouncedly performative dimension to literary consumption and paved the way for hybrid forms of education and entertainment.

Simone Knewitz (University of Bonn)

Conspicuous Consumption, Class Consciousness, and Constructions of the Public Sphere: Mass Culture in William Dean Howells’s Realist Novels

Late nineteenth-century Victorian culture has often figured as an age of excess in the critical imagination, reflecting the new “culture of abundance” (Susman) emerging with the rise of industrial capitalism, the department store, and consumer credit. In contradistinction to this, scholars of literary realism have proposed that authors like Henry James and William Dean

* Hendrix, Harald. “Writers’ Houses as Media of Expression and Remembrance: From Self-Fashioning to Cultural Memory.” *Writers’ Houses and the Making of Memory*. Ed. Harald Hendrix. New York: Routledge, 2008. 1-11. Print.

Howells eschewed the consumer culture of the age, projecting alternate visions of a democratic civil society. More recent criticism has begun to complicate this understanding of literary realism, having become newly aware that these literary texts are also complicit with and even constitutive of contemporary mass culture.

Focusing on examples from Howells's best-known novels *A Modern Instance* (1882), *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885), and *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), my talk will explore representations of the new consumer culture in Howells's work. Reading these novels in the context of the social and economic developments of the time, I argue that instances of "conspicuous consumption"—a category first introduced by Howells's contemporary Thorstein Veblen—are important for Howells's negotiations of class issues and his representations of an emerging new public sphere.

Panel 5: Twain, James, and the Travel Business

Art Redding (York University, Toronto)

Mark Twain, American Tourism, and the Emergence of Mass Culture.

Describing his own work, Mark Twain comments that "I have never tried in even one single instance, to help cultivate the cultivated classes. I was not equipped for it, either by native gifts or training. And I never had any ambition in that direction, but always hunted for bigger game—the masses." Twain's literary career is co-extensive with—and codependent on—the inauguration of mass tourism, an industry he both endorses and skewers in his second published book, the immensely popular *The Innocents Abroad* (1869), which recounts the 1867 voyage of the Quaker City to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land and in which the persona of "Mark Twain" emerges, almost fully-formed. Twain, who was to write five travel books over the course of his career, turned to travel writing whenever he was in need of finances. As with popular literature, mass tourism was, from the very beginnings of the package tour, disparaged for its populist appeal. As an ambivalent promoter of both popular literature and middle-class tourism, Twain's ironic narratives negotiate these tensions perfectly, on the one hand gently lampooning the figure of the "ugly American," while at the same time bathetically skewering the pretensions of "culture" and satirizing the sacramental allure of the exotic. As Patricia Jasen points out in her study of literature and the formation of a tourist industry in Ontario, "tourists, unlike most settlers, gloried in the sense of something alien, such as a wilderness that could be enjoyed physically and imaginatively, and then left behind" (25) — the experience of tourism, in fact, is

very much like that of reading a book. My claim, then, is that mass literature and mass tourism developed mutually, concomitant with the emergence of culture industries marketing themselves to the newly leisured middle-classes. Assessing Twain's travel writing with an eye to its tacit, if satiric, solicitation of middlebrow audiences and paying particular attention to the development of American tourism in the Niagara region, this talk highlights the mutual interdependence of mass literature and mass tourism within the broader spectrum of a newly minted American popular culture.

William Merrill Decker (Oklahoma State University)

Consuming Europe: Daisy Miller and the Package Tour

This paper will examine Henry James's 1878 novella *Daisy Miller* in the context of post-Civil War industrial tourism and the vogue of newly affluent American families embarking on a high-end retail version of the traditional European Grand Tour. While I will focus on the Millers as conspicuous travel-product consumers, I will also consider the ways in which James, as an emergent author marking "the international theme" as his stock-in-trade, engages his 1878 audience as current or aspiring consumers of luxury travel and the fantasy that such travel incites.