

MICHAEL MILLNER, *Fever Reading: Affect and Reading Badly in the Early American Public Sphere* (Durham, NH: U of New Hampshire P), 2012. xxii+188 pp.

It is perhaps not surprising that the last two decades have seen a renaissance of public sphere criticism. After all, in these unstable times, the idea of a realm dedicated to disinterested conversation and rational deliberation holds a kind of redemptive promise. Here individuals can occupy a space beholden to neither state nor private interests, in which participatory democracy plays out principally through what Nancy Fraser calls “the medium of talk.”

Even as recent studies celebrate the public sphere, however, they have also been sharply critical of its limitations. Despite its claims to universality, participation in the public sphere has historically rested with white propertied men. And while “talk” has been its acclaimed component, public sphere engagement has been enacted principally through the disembodied medium of print. In this way, it has systematically excluded those individuals who lacked both access to print culture and the means for claiming an abstract universality—that is women and people of color. In more recent years, scholars have complicated these notions of an exclusive unified realm of white men by pointing to the presence of subaltern or counterpublics and by examining the ways that performance, affect, and voice have all contributed to the creation of the public sphere.

Michael Millner’s *Fever Reading* is a recent and welcome addition to this latter scholarship. Lucidly argued and elegantly written, *Fever Reading* makes a case for a public sphere of embodiment and emotion, what Millner occasionally calls “a public sensorium.” But rather than seeing this as an alternative to the realm of discursive communication and rational judgment, Millner sees embodiment as enabling precisely the kinds of critical practices—reflection, evaluation, judgment—that public sphere proponents embrace.

To make this argument, Millner focuses on the phenomenon of “bad reading”—reading that is fevered, addictive, distracted, overly absorbing, and so forth. This is precisely the kind of reading that cultural custodians (both in the early American period and today) posit as detrimental because it “dissolve[s] critical distance and undercut[s] the possibility of reflection—elements thought essential to a

proper public sphere and good citizenship.” But Millner argues that the opposite is true—that bad reading practices are, in fact, “critical, reflective, and essential to modern democracy...” (xiii).

Millner’s counter-intuitive claims rest on the idea that the emotions generated in bad reading are important diagnostic tools, ways of evaluating the surrounding environment. Borrowing from research in the experimental sciences and particularly the work of William Reddy, Millner posits that emotional reactions allow readers to navigate complex situations and texts, to try out particular responses and then alter these based on internal reactions and new stimuli. In this way, emotions are exploratory; they encourage readers to experiment and reflect on their reactions to reading. They thus accomplish some of the same critical-evaluative work of public sphere deliberation.

Millner offers this cognitive science perspective as an alternative to most literary criticism, which posits readerly emotion only in ideological terms—as a way of legitimating certain conventions such as romantic love or of registering opposition to oppressive institutional systems like slavery, for example. Seeing text-generated emotion as a form of evaluation and critical thinking, however, allows one to exit the constrained field of a book’s politics. Emotions connect readers to the world of the text so that they can evaluate and participate in that world more fully. In so doing, emotions inform the critical-reflective capacities necessary to information gathering and exchange in the public sphere.

Millner spells out these ideas in an introduction and two chapters that, while generally convincing, can occasionally feel strained. More satisfying (at least to this reader) is the second half of Millner’s study where he examines bad reading in the context of three archives—pornography, scandal literature, and religious tracts. In his chapter on scandalous reading, for example, Millner posits that scandals seduce largely through their pledge of revelation; we read, that is, for the promise of truth and subsequently of agency—the hope of righting injustice. Newspapers—with their stipulations of objectivity—are key components in this fantasy, but they are also responsible for drumming up the very scandal they purport to uncover. As Millner points out, scandal, in the nineteenth century, is above all a readerly phenomenon. The shame it refer-

ences is not face-to-face, but rather mediated by print and discussed by an abstract anonymous audience. In this way, “scandal became understood as an event that the public sphere plays a role in creating” (98).

But the public sphere not only creates scandal, it also constitutes the latter’s preoccupation; for in the nineteenth century, the focus of scandal was institutions as much as it was people. “Disclosures,” rather than “confessions,” became the operative word, suggesting that the most important revelations were civic rather than personal, laying bear networks, associations, and systems (112). This was symptomatic of an increasing obscurity in nineteenth-century America, a sense that individuals were caught up with abstract governmental and economic formations. In this context, scandal literature’s preoccupation with truth and revelation is understandable

And yet, Millner argues, this literature was geared more towards trust than it was towards truth. In particular, it hinged on the production of what Millner (citing Niklas Luhmann) calls “system trust”—a trust in anonymous networks and distant corporate bodies. To the extent that scandal literature thematized issues of trust and distrust, it helped readers navigate modernity, teaching them not so much to trust complex bureaucratic systems themselves, but rather to trust their own capacities for negotiating these systems. As Millner puts it, “the function of scandal discourse... is best understood as establishing the emotional dynamic of trust as a way of addressing complexity, of assessing risk and, eventually, of

taking action when one cannot know whether trust... is justified... What scandal communicates is not truth per se, but information about how the trust system works” (117). Thus, even as readers find themselves engaged by the titillations of scandal literature, they also learn crucial lessons about questioning institutions in the public realm.

Millner’s surprising claim—that scandal and other types of sensational and affectively engaging reading material contribute to participatory democracy rather than detracting from it—is sustained throughout his three case studies. Affective responses to reading, he argues consistently, ought not to be dismissed as private and idiosyncratic, but rather celebrated as diagnostic, evaluative, and critical—the very stuff of public sphere deliberation. Indeed, in his chapter on religious texts, Millner takes these claims even farther. Not only did religious readers of the 1840s use their emotional responses to participate in rational deliberation about prayer and ritual, but they also transformed the nature of that rational deliberation, supplementing it with the “something more” of embodied affect and faith. In this way, critique and judgment are revealed as limited, in desperate need of the unaccountable, of feeling and fervor. Millner’s book works in similar fashion. By demonstrating the many ways emotion is fundamental to a reading experience that participates in rational secular debate, he forces readers to see what’s missing in normative accounts of the public sphere.

Colorado

Gillian Silverman