
As the paper codex is becoming increasingly supplemented, if not yet entirely replaced, by digitally mediated textuality, Jonathan Senchyne redirects our attention to the specific sense of materiality that writers and readers experienced as characteristic of literary communication until the late nineteenth century. Rather than focusing on print or publication history as such, however, his monograph The Intimacy of Paper in Early and Nineteenth-Century American Literature sheds light on something that even book historians have often tended to pass over in silence: the reliance of print on paper, the inconspicuous matter on which letters become visible. Over the past fifteen years, several studies have begun to tackle the subject of paper from a range of different perspectives, among them Kevin McLaughlin’s Paperwork: Fiction and Mass Mediacy in the Paper Age (2005), Lisa Gitelman’s Paper Knowledge: Toward a Media History of Documents (2014), or Maryanne Dever’s Paper, Materiality and the Archived Page (2019). What makes Senchyne’s contribution both distinctive and important is his literary-historical approach to reading paper in relation to the nature of its production.

Mainly concerned with American literature and culture from the colonial period to the end of the Civil War, the book looks at the literary imaginary of the “rag paper period” (5), a timeframe during which paper was not yet made from wood-based pulp but from recycled pieces of cloth. Senchyne demonstrates that it was the natural-cultural life-cycle of rag paper (from flax to linen, from clothing to rags, from paper to the print artefact) that allowed writers and readers before the wood pulp revolution of the 1860s to entertain the idea of a special kind of “intimacy” with the print products they were handling. Instead of associating the history of an increasingly expansive paper manufacturing with disenchantment or alienation, Senchyne’s study convincingly suggests that paper and its metamorphoses managed to create a lasting fascination with the “sensory intensities” and haptic “presence effects” (3) of the page well into the nineteenth century (and beyond, as the brief conclusion illustrates). The book’s introduction develops this argument against the larger background of discourses such as material textuality and critical bibliography to propose an approach situated at the
intersection of literary criticism, book history, and cultural studies. Readers may find that the analogical method of reading that The Intimacy of Paper brings to bear upon “the literature of the rag paper period” (14) - the correspondences it constructs between “paper and persons” (127) in terms of politics, gender, and race – can be more compelling in some cases than in others.

The approach is perhaps most fruitfully applied in the first chapter. Senchyne here considers paper as an agent of collective cohesion and a key factor in the process of nation building, illustrating this reading with case studies from the American Revolution and the Civil War. The chapter critically revisits classic theories of the relationship between print and the public sphere (Jürgen Habermas, Benedict Anderson, Michael Warner) by emphasizing that the social and political effects of print hinged on the availability of paper and thus on the rag-collecting collaboration of reading as well as non-reading citizens. Chronologically prior to the printing and circulation of newspapers or novels, it was the material immediacy of paper itself that could be imagined “as a concrete manifestation of the body politic” (34). The book’s second chapter is somewhat less persuasive in its efforts to cast poets such as Anne Bradstreet and Lydia Sigourney as “theorists of gender and the materiality of the public sphere” (72) who advanced “a feminist argument about their gendered exclusion” (30) from the field of cultural production. The chapter develops an intriguing thesis about the relationship between rag paper, domestic labour, and female authorship, but on the whole it seems that this reading requires the primary texts to do too much conceptual heavy lifting.

Chapters three and four of the book focus on the half-century between 1817 and 1867, the heyday of machine-made rag paper, a period whose shift from manual to industrialized production made writers ask “questions about the mass mixing of rags and the mediation of raggy intimacy at very large scales” (106). Following a brief but revealing section on the paper-themed reflections of Henry David Thoreau, the third chapter offers a reading of Herman Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) and his correspondence with Nathaniel Hawthorne to reconstruct the role of paper in a mid-century “erotics of friendship, love, and communication” (111). Rag paper and its human associations are once again described as a carrier of intimacy and a medium of collective experience, but here they more comprehensively gesture towards a “queer relationality of bodies, texts, and
archives” (123) that creates links between paper and its industrial producers, authorial users, and readerly consumers.

Where the earlier sections of the book are concerned with questions of nationhood, gender, and labour, the final chapter of The Intimacy of Paper turns towards the nexus between print and race, engaging questions that are also partly touched upon in Senchyne and Brigitte Fielder’s recent edited volume Against a Sharp White Background: Infrastructures of African American Print (University of Wisconsin Press, 2019). Reading a wide range of print products, from rag advertisements and children’s literature to African-American writer William Wells Brown’s novel Clotel; or, The President’s Daughter (1853) and the engravings included in its first edition, chapter four discusses how paper in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America became a material as well as a metaphorical space in which conceptions of identity, propriety, and value were being negotiated.

The Intimacy of Paper will be of interest to scholars working in early and nineteenth-century American literature, but its larger argument about “the role of paper in making meaning” (6) will also appeal to a wider audience in the fields of book history, print culture, and beyond. The book is at its best when drawing on a rich body of textual and material evidence to develop imaginative arguments about the legibility of paper as more than a mere substrate for print.

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