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The Dime Novel

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter focuses on American dime novels published in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It examines the dime novel as an historically specific but unruly body of popular culture that reflects the social changes, conflicts, and potentials of the period. The chapter tackles this unruliness by discussing the dime novel's genres and content, the conditions of its production, and the practices of reading and interpreting it. It also considers the dime novel's transnational character and how it was influenced by—and asserted its influence upon—sensationalist fiction written in languages such as Yiddish, Spanish, German, and French not only by immigrants to the United States but also by authors throughout Europe and the Americas. Finally, it describes the American dime novel's depictions of race, class, sex, and violence that reflect its nature as a world literature.

Keywords: dime novel, popular culture, genres, reading, sensationalist fiction, immigrants, race, class, violence, world literature

As soon as the word “genre” is sounded, as soon as it is heard, as soon as one attempts to conceive it, a limit is drawn. And when a limit is established, norms and interdictions are not far behind ... [But] what if there were, lodged within the heart of the law [of genre] itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination?

—Jacques Derrida, “The Law of Genre” (1980, 56–57)

This similarity of plots, together with the absence of an international copyright agreement until 1891, made for a kind of “world literature” as sensational novels were translated back and forth from English, French, German and Yiddish, translated not to be faithful to the “original,” but ... to be adapted to local names, geography and customs.

—Michael Denning, *Mechanic Accents*:

Dime Novels and Working-Class Culture in America (1998 [1987], 37)

The cleanest and most systematic way of describing the classic US dime novel would be this: it was a genre of melodramatic literature, akin to but more sensationalist and affordable than the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century, that began in northeastern US publishing centers in 1860, spread to other parts of the country, and thrived until the 1910s; it was made up of a number of subgenres, such as the dime Western, the mysteries of the city, detective tales, and tales of romance; and its decline led to the rise of related genres such as pulp fiction, noir fiction, and the modern Western. The problem with this account is that it too hastily cleans up the messy origins, unruly development, and fitful legacy of the genre.

Dime novels, nickel novels, story-papers, pamphlet novels, novelettes, red-backs, yellow-backs, yellow-covered literature, paper-covered literature, railroad literature, broadsheets, libraries of adventure, cheap libraries, working-girl stories, adventure stories, domestic romances, Western tales, pulps, trash ... The sheer number of monikers used during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to name the genre addressed by this essay suggests that as soon as we attempt to conceive “the dime (p.274) novel,” we encounter “a law of impurity or a principle of contamination,” to borrow terms Jacques Derrida uses in my first epigraph. Indeed, it was not until well after the genre’s heyday had passed that “dime novel” effectively eclipsed other monikers like those listed above, such that today “dime novel” is often used broadly as a name for sensational literature in general. The term “dime novel” itself began simply as a brand name used by the Beadle and Company publishing house for their series of cheap, paper-covered works of sensationalist fiction measuring about four inches by six inches and running barely over one hundred pages. Yet even the often cited origin of the term—the first volume of Beadle’s series, *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter* by Ann S. Stephens (1860)—was a modified reprint of a tale published well before “dime novel” even existed as a popular expression: a short story called “The Jockey Cap,” first published in April 1836 by the *Portland Magazine* and then expanded as a serial in a story-paper called *Ladies’ Companion: A Monthly Magazine* during February, March, and April of 1839. The literature we have come to call the dime novel, then, ought to be understood less as a coherent genre with an enumerable set of formal features and more as an historically specific but *unruly* body of popular culture that indexes the social

conflicts, transformations, and potentials of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

This unruliness was expressed in a number of ways, four of which I will discuss in this essay. First, as a *genre* the dime novel developed out of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century serialized fiction that drew wide audiences in Europe and early America. Not only were many dime novels reprints of those earlier, serialized fictions, but also US publishers pirated European popular fiction as it was published, just as Europeans pirated US popular fiction (on serialized fictions and piracy, see Chapter 2 of this volume). Even texts that were not pirated usually drew their narratives from the most exciting and shocking newspaper stories of the day. From its origins in the nineteenth century through its decline in the 1910s, then, the dime novel was something of a stolen literature. What is more, as we will see, these illicit and unruly cultural flows ran north and south, throughout the Americas, as much as east and west. All this traffic in sensational culture produced texts that both conformed to *and* transgressed generic “norms and interdictions.”

Second, the *conditions of production* of these texts were—like other early industrial capitalist ventures—at once cutthroat, chaotic, and highly regimented. The dime novel enterprise was spurred by technological revolutions in printing; organized by sharp divisions of labor; driven by publishers’ insistence on speed and quantity; and forced into cycles of bust and boom by fluctuating postal rates as well as regular global and national economic crises. Those booms and busts led to periodic disorganizations and reorganizations of the literature’s production, distribution, and consumption processes and, coextensively, of the very shape of the genre itself.

Third, the *practices of reading* these texts did not conform to the images usually associated with nineteenth-century bourgeois culture: families gathered around a living-room fireplace listening to uplifting literary recitations, or an individual with **(p.275)** leisure time huddled close to a candle or gaslight, poring over sentimental stories of adventure, tragedy, and hope. Rather, thanks to mass circulation, the rise of lending libraries, and relatively high literacy rates resulting from burgeoning, compulsory mass education, poor and working people avidly consumed these “Books for the Million!” (as *Beadle’s Dime Novels* series loudly proclaimed on its covers) not only in their homes, but also in workplaces, in public spaces, and en route from place to place. What is more, reading sensational fiction has long been an ideological flashpoint that set bourgeois culture against popular culture. The dime novel was decried throughout the nineteenth century and romanticized in the twentieth.

Finally, and perhaps most spectacularly to today’s readers, the *content* of these novels was, to say the least, unruly. Full of scenes of violence, cross-dressing, miscegenation, crime, sex, and other underworldly activities taking place along

frontiers, across national borders, and in the grimmest corners of America's immigrant-filled cities, dime novels show us how far sensational fiction strayed from the related but more genteel realm of popular, sentimental fiction. The dime novels are still great reads, and still cry out for contemporary interpretation, because they continue to unsettle presumptions and test taboos we share with the nineteenth- and twentieth-century reading masses.

Throughout this essay I will also pay particular attention to one feature of this putative genre that has been relatively neglected in contemporary scholarship: its transnational character. In my second epigraph, Michael Denning's classic 1987 study *Mechanic Accents* aptly refers to the dime novel as "a kind of 'world literature.'" The US dime novel was continually influenced by, and asserted its influence upon, sensationalist fiction written in Yiddish, Spanish, German, and French, among other languages, by immigrants to the United States as well as writers throughout Europe and the Americas. Denning's worldliness manifests figuratively, too, in the US dimes' frank and shocking depictions of race, class, sex, and violence that broached multiple borders and taboos.

My hope is that, by the end of this essay, the convenience of the genre's name will have become as flimsy and frayed as the cheap paper on which this unruly literature was printed, and as untrustworthy as the absurd and ingenious disguises so often donned by the novels' most memorable and scandalous characters.

Genre(s) of the Dime Novel

The dime novel was not invented tout court in 1860 by plucky, enterprising US publishers or by a handful of savvy American authors with their fingers on the pulse of the American people. Which is to say, the emergence of this genre confounds rather than confirms enduring nationalist myths about American culture's exceptionalism and autochthony. The eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century serialized fiction out of which the classic dime novel developed—and from which it often liberally **(p.276)** borrowed—was a transnational, multigeneric, and multilingual phenomenon, as was the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dime novel itself.

Seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe and the American colonies were awash in sensational broadsides and pamphlets about crime, particularly confessional narratives by and about criminals sent to the gallows. At the same time, so-called captivity narratives about white settlers kidnapped by Indians enthralled the reading public on both sides of the Atlantic. These profitable genres presaged the nineteenth-century boom in sensational literature. Notably, in the early 1800s French newspapers started publishing inserts or supplements of simple folded sheets of paper printed on both sides called *feuilleton*, which offered true crime and fictional tales as well as analysis of important news items, cultural criticism, and social gossip. In short order, this form of publication

spread throughout Europe and the Americas. As an index of this popularity, the term *feuilleton* was widely adopted in England, but was used to refer more specifically to a serialized work of fiction. (Indeed, the term is still used today among French speakers to mean what in Spanish is called a *telenovela* and in English a soap opera.)

During the 1830s, this sort of serialized fiction was quickly expanded from the supplement format, and publications devoted primarily to publishing serialized fiction sprung up throughout the Atlantic world, going by names such as “story-papers,” “the penny-press,” and “weeklies.” Relatedly, in the United States, the popular “police gazettes” catered to “true tales” of crime and justice. Through the 1850s New Orleans had a lively *feuilleton* or story-paper culture in its numerous French-language newspapers as well as popular fiction serialized in Spanish-language papers, while dime novel scholars long ago established that American cities in the northeast had multilingual papers that serialized original and pirated fiction in Italian, Yiddish, and German. Although many of these serials offered genteel fiction that catered to people with means, other less expensive papers presented more sensationalist tales that were extremely popular among the poor and working classes. Indeed, the story-papers would continue to thrive alongside the classic dime novel into the twentieth century, contaminating the dime’s generic purity by continually feeding it plotlines and characters.

Expanding on the success of the *feuilleton* and story-papers, during the late 1830s and throughout the 1840s and 1850s European and American publishers began publishing longer stories in fewer, stand-alone installments and, eventually, in complete editions under one paper cover. One of the most popular genres of such early fiction was the “mysteries of the city,” which offered tales of the crime and justice, poverty and luxury, scandal and debauchery that readers liked to imagine filled the period’s ever-growing urban centers. Most famous among these texts was Eugène Sue’s *Les Mystères de Paris*, which began as a serial published by the conservative Paris paper *Le Journal des Débats* from 1842 to 1843. A popular sensation—and a huge money-maker for the paper despite the antagonism between its politics and Sue’s socialism—the serials were quickly gathered and published in book form by 1843, (p.277) and in less than ten years sold over sixty thousand copies. *Les Mystères de Paris* was immediately translated into multiple languages and republished throughout Europe and the United States. Celebrated by many socialists of the day for its exposé of the ravages of capitalism, and rigorously critiqued by Karl Marx in *The Holy Family* (1844) for the limits of that very exposé, *Les Mystères de Paris* revealed a vast market for the consumption of socially conscious, gritty urban fiction at a time when urban masses throughout Europe and the Americas were organizing and agitating for radical social transformation.

As *Les Mystères de Paris* struck a chord with readers, clones such as F. Thiele's *Die Geheimnisse von Berlin* [*The Mysteries of Berlin*] (1845) and George W. M. Reynolds's *The Mysteries of London* (1844) soon appeared. In the United States, the "mysteries of the city" genre was adapted to local contexts and conjunctures: Osgood Bradbury published his *Mysteries of Lowell* in 1844, and Ned Buntline (whose real name was Edward Zane Carroll Judson) made one of his earliest attempts at sensational fiction with *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* in 1848. George Lippard, who along with Buntline would become one of the most prolific and well known of US dime novelists, made a splash in 1845 with *The Quaker City, or the Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime*. Reminding us that nineteenth-century circuits of popular culture ran both east and west, *The Quaker City* was immediately pirated in Germany and England, appearing in Leipzig under translator Friedrich Gerstäcker's name as *Die Quakerstadt und ihre Geheimnisse* [*The Quaker City and its Mysteries*] (1846) and in London under Lippard's own name as *Dora Livingstone, the Adulteress; or, the Quaker City* (1848). As Denning and David S. Reynolds have importantly added, German immigrants to America even wrote their own, German-language "mysteries" in the United States, such as the messianic antislavery tale *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans* [*The Mysteries of New Orleans*] by Baron Ludwig von Reizenstein and Emil Klauprecht's *Cincinnati; oder, Geheimnisse des Westens* [*Cincinnati; or, Mysteries of the West*] (1854).

Klauprecht's novel in particular underscores that this early period of cheap, sensational US fiction was by no means devoted exclusively to eastern urban themes. Mid-nineteenth-century Cincinnati was a crossroads between northern and southern, eastern and Western, as well as rural and urban North America, and thus was the perfect setting for Klauprecht to stage an "impure" hybrid between the "mysteries of the city" genre and another extremely popular genre of sensational fiction in the United States: the dime western or frontier novel. The latter proliferated after the 1860s, and provided many of the plot structures and themes that thrived in twentieth-century westerns both on the page and, eventually, the silver screen and television. Dime Westerns drew on centuries of fascination with, and advocacy of, white settler colonialism in North America, particularly on genres such as Indian captivity narratives, travel narratives, and historical romances like Sir Walter Scott's *Waverley* (1814) and James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales* of the 1820s and '30s. **(p.278)**

Alongside the "mysteries of the city" and the dime Western, we can place another extremely popular—if today less well remembered—genre of the early dime novel, one that surely influenced texts like *Cincinnati*: the US-Mexico War novelette. Thanks to advances in dispatch technology, war correspondents on or near the front lines of the 1846–48 US-Mexico War were able to send reports to their papers' offices in major US urban centers in a matter of days. Such was the appetite among US readers for news of the war that a handful of the period's

most entrepreneurial publishers rushed to produce scores of inexpensive, paper-covered, one-hundred-page novels full of the nationalistic exploits of a heroic US military against “savage” and “rapacious” Mexicans. For critics today, US–Mexico War fiction reorients our understanding of the streams of sensationalist culture from the familiar east-west or Europe–United States flow to a south-north flow.

In addition to these immediate predecessors to the classic dimes, from the late 1830s through the 1850s there appeared a number of sensationalist literary works that have long escaped the attention of critics and that defy generic classification. In fact, contemporary literary historians are still discovering these long-lost gems, suggesting that we have more work to do to flesh out this period of sensational fiction, work that will further contaminate the clean story of the classic dime. For instance, Kristin Silva Gruesz has brought our attention to Victor Séjour, a French-speaking Creole who at nineteen left his native New Orleans for Paris, where he wrote and published *Le Mulâtre* [*The Mulatto*] (1837), an antislavery and antiracist tale of race-mixing set in prerevolutionary Haiti. Rather than being American, Haitian, or French, Séjour’s sensational novel is thoroughly transnational, participating *in* without belonging *to* particular national literatures.

When Ann S. Stephens’s *Malaeska, the Indian Wife of the White Hunter* was published in 1860 as the first volume of *Beadle’s Dime Novels* series, then, it did not so much bring the dime novel genre into existence as it began an especially popular and lucrative chapter in the longer story of the genre I have briefly sketched above. After moving from Buffalo to New York City in 1859, the brothers Irwin and Erastus Beadle immediately began churning out an entire suite of cheap advice books priced at one dime: as they announced loudly on their covers, *Beadle’s Dime Book of Dreams: their Romance and Mystery*; *Beadle’s Dime Song Book*; *Beadle’s Dime Cook Book*; *Beadle’s Dime Book of Beauty*. As Bill Brown observes, when “the standard working-class wage amounted to six dollars a week,” the dimes fit into the means of their audience much better than the one to two dollars a work of sentimental fiction typically cost (1997, 20). Other American publishers such as George Munro, Norman L. Munro, Frank Tousey, Francis Scott Street, and Francis Schubael Smith soon jumped into the successful wake of Beadle’s dime enterprise.

Neither the United States nor the English language, however, had a monopoly on the late nineteenth-century dime. As W. H. Bishop wrote in his 1879 *Atlantic Monthly* review of what he called “story-paper literature”: “The taste for cheap fiction is by no means confined to this country ... not a daily paper on the continent (**p.279**) of Europe, in any language, but has its scrap of a continued story, its feuilleton, in every issue” (383). Consider just a few examples of this world literature of sensation. In the 1880s, a genre of Yiddish sensational fiction called *shundromanen* thrived in eastern US cities among Jewish immigrants from

Europe and Russia. The best-known author of these shundromanen was Shomer, the pen name of Nachum Meir Shaykevitch, who trafficked in tragic tales of romance between rich and poor. Like many participants in the enterprise of sensational fiction, Shomer weathered the withering critiques of more genteel writers—in his case, especially high-culture Jewish writers—who saw his brand of sensation as debased. Around the same time, as Ronald A. Fullerton has explained, the 1870s saw a boom in “*colporteur*” or “ten Pfenning” novels in Germany. Drawing on oral traditions of folk tales recorded and published by the Grimm brothers, and taking advantage of 70 percent literacy rates as well as the *Gewerbefreiheit* or “free entry into trades” legislation established in the North German Confederation in 1869, a new generation of ambitious publishers gave the poor and working classes serial novels in affordable, eight-to-twelve-page installments that could run over two-hundred pages and were sold door-to-door (hence their name, as a colporteur was traditionally a traveling book peddler). Often repurposed French novels or retold tales of ghosts, knights, bandits, and romance, the colporteur novels were also distinguished by their violence and by their attention to the scandals of the elite.

In Mexico, serial novels (*folletines* or *novelas de entregas*) such as Justo Sierra O’Reilly’s *Un año en el hospital de San Lázaro* [*A Year in the San Lázaro Hospital*] and *La hija del judío* [*The Jew’s Daughter*] began to appear in Yucatán during the 1840s. During the 1860s, there was a miniboom of folletines published about the Caste War of Yucatán, a decades-long Maya uprising that started in 1847, such as *Los misterios de Chan Santa Cruz: Historia verdadera con episodios de novela* [*The Mysteries of Chan Santa Cruz: A True History with Novelistic Episodes*] (1864), written by leading Yucatecan creole Pantaleón Barrera under the pen name Napoleon Trebarra. Largely forgotten novels such as these were more popular than the now classic sentimental novels of the period, such as Ignacio M. Altamirano’s *Clemencia* (1869). They were also precursors to sensationalist novels like Eduardo Castrejón’s tale of sexual polyphany and policing in Porfirian Mexico, *Los cuarenta y uno: Novela crítico-social* [*The 41: A Novel of Social Criticism*] (1906), about a real-life police raid on a drag ball in Mexico City that resulted in the deportation of those arrested to the Yucatán itself.

By viewing the classic US dime novel of 1860–1910 in the context of both its transnational antecedents and its contemporaries in the world literature of sensational fiction, we confound rather than confirm enduring presumptions about the coherence of the genre, and even of the idea of genre itself. As Derrida suggests in “The Law of Genre,” the very word “genre” promises that we can determine a unique set of discernable features belonging to certain texts that are distinct from other unique sets of discernable features belonging to other texts: “If a genre is what it is ... then **(p.280)** ‘genres are not to be mixed;’ one should not mix genres, one owes it to oneself not to get mixed up in mixing genres. Or, more rigorously: genres should not intermix” (1980, 57). Yet the very

idea of genre itself oddly refuses to participate in this law of genre. That is, while the law of genre orders us to go about classifying objects within particular sets, “genre” itself is not part of any classifiable set. As the order to classify, it stands outside the law it nonetheless incites. “Genre” as such, then, has its own law, “the law of the law of genre,” the law of “participation without belonging” (59). Derrida thus challenges us: what if, like the very notion of genre itself, genres could also be said to participate without fully or finally belonging to their proper sets. What if “every text participates in one or several genres, [what if] there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging” (65). For Derrida, this suggests that *boundaries* between genres be thought instead as *folds*. Such an account of genre has, in its most far-reaching sense, “inundated and divided the borders between literature and its others” (81).

Thinking in the spirit of Derrida’s unruly folds, we might consider how the dime novel folds into other popular cultures of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Drawing on Linda Williams’s work, Shelley Streeby has remarked that sensational fiction shared with other forms of melodrama—such as blackface minstrelsy, Barnum’s freak shows, and the popular theater—an ensemble of generic conventions which “emphasizes temporal coincidences, stages moments of truth that expose villains and recognize virtue, and tries to move its audiences to experience intense feelings, such as thrill, shock, and horror” (2004, 180). Perhaps we ought to push this insight even further and notice how these features persist today in popular films, viral videos, and queer performances in *zona rosas* around the world. Were we “to get mixed up in mixing genres” in this way, we might say that what we have come to call the dime novel is, rather than a lawful set, a genre characterized by “a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy” (Derrida 1980, 59): an unruly genre, or the unruliness of genre itself.

Making Dime Novels

This unruliness manifests too in the very material practices that created sensational fiction. While many dimes were authored by individual writers, much of the industry preferred a more factory-oriented production process in which teams of workers (typically women and girls) would read newspapers, clip out exciting stories, and pass along rough outlines of plots to professional writers (often moonlighting journalists and anonymous middlebrow writers) who would draft the narrative according to strict principles such as page limits, copious scenes of sex and violence, and romantic resolutions. A number of political-economic shifts during the first half of the nineteenth century created fertile conditions for the rise of this fiction factory system. First, advances in the processes of pressing and of stereotype printing—or **(p.281)** the use of metal plates cast from molds of composed type made from materials such as papier-mâché or clay—at once drove many artisan printers out of business and created new opportunities for larger, entrepreneurial publishing houses. These

publishers both innovated their own businesses and bought up other, failing papers to which they applied new technologies and popular tastes. Second, low postal rates for newspapers helped to foster the *feuilleton* or supplement and story-paper styles. Then, when rates for mailing papers increased in 1843 and rates for books decreased in 1845, conditions favored the rise of dime novels. Third, as Denning has remarked, three global economic crises—the Panics of 1837, 1857, and 1873—were followed by sensational fiction publishing booms, suggesting that low cost enterprises fared best when higher cost enterprises (such as the traditional book and newspaper trades) struggled. Fourth, the labor market during the period was flooded with a diverse pool of urban workers—including large numbers of immigrants, children, and women—who drove down wages and created conditions ripe for mass production.

In an 1892 article in *Publishers' Weekly*, reprinted from the *Boston Journal*, the accomplished nineteenth-century editor Edward W. Bok offered perhaps the most famous account of the dime novel's production process:

This literary factory is hidden away in one of the by-streets of New York. ... It employs over thirty people, mostly girls and women. For the most part these girls are intelligent. It is their duty to read all the daily and weekly periodicals in the land. These "exchanges" are bought by the pound from an old-junk dealer. Any unusual story of city life—mostly the misdoings of city people—is marked by these girls and turned over to one of three managers. These managers, who are men, select the best of the marked articles, and turn over such as are available to one of a corps of five women, who digest the happening given to them and transform it to a skeleton or outline for a story. This shell, if it may be so called, is then returned to the chief manager, who turns to a large address-book and adapts the skeleton to some one of the hundred or more writers entered in his book. ... Now the most remarkable part of this remarkable literary manufactory to me was that manager's address-book of authors. ... There were the names of at least twenty writers upon that book which the public would never think of associating with this class of work—men and women of good literary reputation, whose work is often encountered in some of our best magazines. ... The idea of "literary factories," if we are not mistaken, originated in Berlin immediately after the success of the translations of Sir Walter Scott's novels. [There was also] a similar institution in London. ... (231)

Bok finds "the manager's address-book of authors" the most "remarkable" aspect of the "literary manufactory" in part because the address-book foregrounds what he considers a certain class irony of the system: namely, that "men and women of good literary reputation" would deign to write trashy dime novels. However, his account actually undermines the import of the traditional, individual author by foregrounding the collective if segmented work of girls and

women. Indeed, Bok (p.282) offers us rare insight into the gendered division of labor in this industry. Clearly, as gender and labor historians have been pointing out for decades, early nineteenth-century working-class women and girls were not confined to the so-called private realm. Though the pay was low and the conditions difficult thanks to the publishers' oppressive insistence on productivity (meaning speed of output and long working hours), we ought not jump to the assumption that these women and girls were merely victimized cogs performing rote labor in a fiction machine. Mass-production workplaces have historically been sites of both exploitation and struggle, where the very collectivization that facilitates the owner's efficient extraction of surplus value from the workers *also* creates opportunities for workers to forge collective bonds and take collective action.

As Bok's article makes clear, many dime "authors" were pseudonyms for what were, in effect, writing workforces. Consequently, the dime novel's conditions of production unsettle one of the persistent features of literary culture: the principle of the author as individual creator and imaginative genius. While well-known dime authors such as Ned Buntline and George Lippard have gotten the most critical attention—perhaps in part because of the very comfort of the author-function—how much attention should we grant them over the work of the anonymous women and girls Bok goes out of his way to describe as "intelligent"? Consider a fictional author like "Bertha M. Clay," a name the New York publishers Street & Smith lifted from the *New York Weekly*, which had invented it during the 1870s as the "author" of tales it pirated from actual English author Charlotte M. Brame. Street & Smith used "Bertha M. Clay" for decades on their dime novels after Brame's own death in 1884, as Denning, William Noel, and Ralph Adimari have all explained. How might we understand the labor of authorship Street & Smith concealed beneath its authorial fiction?

The dime novel genre prompts us to theorize a diffuse form of authorship, one with only a fictive sovereign at its center, one in which the qualities usually associated with the individual writer—creativity, imagination, even genius—were dispersed among workers whom we might otherwise be tempted to think of as manual laborers without such qualities. When Bok describes the fiction factory girls and women as "intelligent," might we come to understand that intelligence as the source of the exuberant creativity and imagination that bursts forth from sensational fiction? Might we think of these girls and women as communal geniuses who focused the attention of "the Millions" on such gender transgressions as cross-dressing, on such racial taboos as interracial sex and marriage, and on the scenes of violence that typify—but are often censored from nationalistic accounts of—war and social conflict? Could it be that in the United States—the putative land of individualism par excellence—a radically collectivist practice of authorship thrived in the most unruly of popular culture genres? And not only in the United States, for as we learn from Bok's *Publishers' Weekly* essay, Berlin and London had their own writing workforces. As such, dimes can

be said to have foreshadowed subsequent collective culture industries like Hollywood. (p.283)

Reading Dime Novels

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century readers consumed their sensational fiction wherever they could: in groups, during solitary moments, at work, on the way to and from work, at home, in public places. Such mobile musing explains some of the popularity of this cultural form. Newspaper supplements, story-papers, and lightweight novels all have portability in common: they are affordable texts that can be read on the go. Anyone familiar with today's subway and bus systems knows that such reading practices are still alive and well; paperback literature, tabloid papers, and now computer tablets are ubiquitous, even viral, on public transportation in part because they are so well suited to traveling consumption.

Reading practices are not just practical affairs, however; they are also highly charged ideological scenes. One can glean a hint of that charge in Bok's description of the "literary factory" I discussed above. Elaborating on his surprise at seeing in the manager's address-book authors "which the public would never think of associating with this class of work," Bok relates this exchange: " 'Not such a bad list of authors, is it?' laughingly said the 'manager,' as he noted my look of astonishment. I was compelled to confess it was not" (231). Bok's assumption about "the public's" sense of the class distinctions among types of literature, his "look of astonishment" at the address-book's authors, and his reluctant if quasi-penitent acknowledgment of the manager's boast together convey the deep disdain with which many among the elite and middle-classes regarded dime novels. Indeed, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, while the masses avidly consumed dimes on the go, the vast majority of the published discussions of sensationalist fiction amounted to relentless criticism of its power to debase and degrade its readers.

Perhaps the most spectacular manifestation of such criticism was the vigorous censorship campaign of Anthony Comstock and his Society for the Suppression of Vice, founded in 1873. While the 1873 Comstock Law is most remembered for its criminalization of the mailing of contraceptive materials, it was also aimed at literature regarded as immoral, and sensational fiction was a prime example (on the Comstock laws and censorship, see chapter 3 of this volume). Anxieties about the dime novel's potential to subvert social norms shaped struggles over the creation of public libraries; over literacy and the expansion of compulsory public education; and over efforts to alleviate poverty by "reforming" the morality of the poor. While most elite critics blamed this popular literature for an array of social ills, a few others did defend it. Yet even those defenses were typically tinged with reluctance, if not outright embarrassment. As W. H. Bishop haltingly concluded in the remarkably detailed and sympathetic review of story-paper literature he published in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1879: "The story-papers,

then ... are not an unmixed evil" (393). Presaging Derrida's "law of the law of genre," Bishop suggests that dime novels indeed get mixed up in mixing their presumptive purity, be it pure evil or pure good. **(p.284)**

A striking scene from a novel I mentioned above—Emil Klauprecht's genre-mixing *Cincinnati; or, Mysteries of the West*—offers insight into the wider social import of these anxieties over the value of popular culture. During a social gathering of visiting European elites and homegrown white American settler-colonists, a "sweet," "charming," and "enchanted" performance of Beethoven's "Adelaide" by the beautiful German singer Johanna immediately puts the audience of American "pork aristocrats" to sleep. When Johanna deftly switches to a rousing rendition of "Yankee Doodle," one of the aroused Americans roars with approval: "'Splendid! Magnificent!' old Zacharias cried when Johanna was finished and all the gentlemen clapped their approval so that the walls shook. 'Our Yankee Doodle beats all of Beethoven, Mozart and other whatsits from the field with bells. Such a lamenting tone is good for church and camp meetings, but I myself prefer a healthy *nigger*-song.'" In the debate that follows between those at the party who prefer the European masters of high culture and those who, like Zacharias, extol popular American music, one of the novel's protagonists, Mr. Filson, challenges the old Westerner with a critical genealogy of sorts:

It is national pride ... which swells your spirit with the playing of this song. Yankee Doodle is our Marseillaise, it helps drive away our enemies and thus these crude sounds of Basque Gypsies is a harmony which excites the ear of a patriot. ... Yes, sir, the melody came from Spain to Cuba and Mexico, and from there we have derived our national hymn. We're very involved in taking over foreign melodies. You would be amazed if you traveled in Germany to hear all the tunes which here accompany the texts of our church hymns being used in student hangouts and the lowest bars as drinking songs and dirty ditties. (bk. 3, ch. 13)

Mr. Filson's intervention undercuts Zacharias's rough and racist brand of nationalism with a cosmopolitan attention to transnational flows of culture, as well as a hint of anti-imperialism: "We're very involved in taking over foreign melodies." Crucially, Mr. Filson emphasizes a south-north flow of culture—the tune for Yankee Doodle came from Spain through Cuba and Mexico to the United States—rather than a Eurocentric flow from east to west, or an American exceptionalist flow from the United States to the rest of the world. However, Filson's elitist preference for the European masters, which becomes even more pronounced as this chapter unfolds, ultimately amplifies old Zacharias's easy racism by turning his idea of "a healthy *nigger*-song"—a song whose black authors Zacharias disdains even as he happily appropriates their culture—into

“crude sounds” and “dirty ditties” that have no place in culture’s proper parlor rooms.

That Mr. Filson delivers his elitist, anti-imperial racism in the midst of Klauprecht’s own “dirty ditty” dime novel only complicates *Cincinnati*’s representation of the relationships among racism, nationalism, imperialism, and the high/low culture divide. Part “mystery of the city,” part “dime Western,” with liberal borrowings from themes raised by the US-Mexico War novelettes and even Cooper’s *Leatherstocking* (p.285) *Tales, Cincinnati* at once practices sensational fiction’s unruly potential for generic contamination; dramatizes the nineteenth-century debate over the dime’s impure influence on its readers; and self-consciously foregrounds its own powerful if popular cultural status. It shows both how the anti-imperial politics of Mr. Filson fit easily with an elitist cultural racism, and how the racist nationalism of Zacharias presupposes cultural imperialism.

The often volatile, nineteenth-century debates over the supposed immorality of sensational fiction gave way, in the twentieth century, to a certain romanticization of the genre. As if confident that the genre’s heyday had passed, critics spent less time worrying about the dime’s dangers and more time extolling the scene of reading dimes as exemplary of a lost age of communal innocence when there were still frontiers to explore and urban mysteries to uncover. The political and cultural transformations that accompanied this shift in part explain it. The massification of literature that produced the dimes spread to other forms of culture in the early twentieth century—including the rise of the popular music industry in the 1910s, the dawn of radio in the 1920s and of television in the late 1940s—each of which was met with the anxiety associated with the heyday of sensational fiction. Among critics, reading quite suddenly became a more generalized, organic, and wholesome pursuit, one that could be contrasted favorably to newer forms of popular culture.

It was during this period that the term “dime novel” came to the fore as a generalized name for all such fiction, and much of the volatility of the genre was forgotten. The dimes’ most shocking and unsettling aspects—such as the racial and sexually violent scenes of war from the United States-Mexico novelettes, or the raw class struggles depicted in the “Molly Maguire” series—were replaced in the critical imagination by the more family-oriented tales of humor and sports typical of the Munro’s *Fireside Companion* series, the romance of dime Westerns, or the bucolic and wholesome images characteristic of the story-papers and dimes directed at young readers.

An important index of this revisionist history of the dime novel is the effort by a handful of twentieth-century literary historians to create archives of what were then scattered and rapidly deteriorating texts. By emphasizing Western, urban detective, and children’s dimes from the 1860s-1910s rather than foreign

language dimes from the 1850s, for instance, these historians artificially shaped the genre. These early archives, in turn, led the first wave of mid-twentieth-century critics to focus on what turned out to be a too-narrow segment of the genre. The nucleus of Stanford University's archive of sensational fiction came from Oakland postal inspector P. J. Moran's collection of thousands of story-papers and dimes for boys. The University of Minnesota's archive was seeded by George Hess, who focused his collection efforts on Beadle's novels. And the famous O'Brien collection of Beadle's novels—gathered by Frank O'Brien, donated to the New York Public Library, and sold to the Huntington Library in the 1920s—gave focus to Albert Johannsen's important history of "The House of Beadle" as well as Henry Nash Smith's seminal work on dime Westerns, both of which were published in 1950. **(p.286)**

Thanks to more recent recovery efforts, critics have been able to sketch a fuller picture not only of the dime novel, but also of the wider field of sensational fiction and popular culture into which the classic dime fits. Consequently, both the practices *of* and the ideological struggles *over* reading this literature during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries now appear to us in a fuller and more complex—which is to say a more contaminated and impure—light.

Interpreting Dime Novels

As contemporary readers, our interpretations of sensational fiction are exercises in both literary and historical analysis, because the texts we interpret are indices of their period's unruly social and political struggles. This unruliness is expressed by dime novels in their relentlessly exuberant focus on scandalous content. To present a finer-grained feel for the hermeneutics of this content, I'll offer brief interpretations of two scenes from two remarkable dime novels separated by fifty-six years.

As I mentioned above, the 1840s and 1850s saw a boom in one of the earliest forms of the dime novel: the US-Mexico War "novelette." One of the most violent and salacious of these texts is Charles E. Averill's *The Secret Service Ship: or, the Fall of San Juan D'Ulloa* (1848), though we must remember that Averill's nominal authorship is haunted by the workforce of women and girls Bok described as "intelligent." Set in 1846 during the US siege of Veracruz, *The Secret Service Ship* centers on the relationship between a US naval officer called Rogers and the "radiant" daughter of a Mexican general, Isora la Vega. As the novelette opens, Rogers saves Isora from rape at the hands of a Mexican officer with a "black heart," General Ampudia (ch. 1). Soon thereafter, however, Mexicans "ruffians" working for Ampudia capture Rogers, cast him into a cell, and tie him to a bizarre "death-couch" that sways "from side to side," emits a narcotic odor, and plays "wild and ravishing" music—all of which somehow puts Rogers to sleep, although he eventually escapes (chs. 6, 8). Isora turns out to have a cross-dressing alter ego, Lorenzo Larasca, who leads a band of honorable Mexican fighters against both the US invasion and the corrupt Mexican military,

particularly Ampudia. Though he is heroic and honorable throughout, and he eventually marries Isora, midshipman Rogers is never quite in control of the sensational events that unfold around him. Indeed, one gets the impression that even the most innocent and good-hearted American can get caught up in a war that is difficult to justify and whose sides—Mexican and American, just and unjust, male and female—are constantly bleeding into each other, often quite literally. *The Secret Service Ship* thus offers both a panegyric to American heroism and an index of the ambivalence with which many Americans viewed this war.

Two of the most vivid characters of the novel are Ampudia's evil deputies, Juana and Geronimo, whom the novel calls "twin Patagonians." As Geronimo describes himself and his sister: "the Cannibal blood of Patagonia flows in our veins! we are, (p.287) both she and I, of the race of giants,—the race which scorns connection with the poor pigmy populace of the world, and loves to feast upon the paltry mannikins' blood and revel in their misery!" (ch. 21). Rogers and Isora eventually kill Juana and Geronimo, overcoming the latter's uncivilized and reckless violence with their own, putatively refined violence learned from their respective national armed forces. Condensed into the sensational figures of Juana and Geronimo are a host of mid-nineteenth-century antagonisms over race, nation, gender, and empire. For instance, the novel was written during and set within the first period of popular interest and enthusiasm over archeology in the Americas. In 1841 and 1843, John Lloyd Stephens published his *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas and Yucatan* and *Incidents of Travel in Yucatan*, which were multivolume travel narratives and archeological reports complete with meticulously imagined etchings of Mayan ruins Stephens had "discovered." The popular and critical success of these narratives shows that Americans were eager to hear tales of what Stephens represented as a vanished empire, one characterized by great power and great violence. Readers also learned from Stephens of the degeneracy of the descendants of that great civilization, the nineteenth-century Maya who, he claimed, did not appreciate the value of the ruins in their midst and who could barely take care of their own quotidian needs. Of course, these were the very Maya who did much of the labor of "discovery" for Stephens, and with whom he negotiated for control of Mayan ruins and artifacts, and from whom he stole antiquities that still reside in US museums. Indeed, in 1847 Americans also began reading newspaper accounts of a massive uprising of those very Yucatec Maya against the creole population of the Yucatán peninsula during what would come to be called the Caste War. In *The Secret Service Ship's* "twin Patagonians," then, one finds a condensation of assumptions and anxieties about native peoples in the Americas, assumptions and anxieties that would fuel US imperialism for decades to come. At once degenerate and powerful, violent and crafty, the figures of Juana and Geronimo allow the novel to differentiate an abject, extra-national native population both from Rogers's US whiteness and Isora's Mexican "fairness." As became clear

during the US Congress's debate over, and ultimate rejection of, President Polk's 1848 proposal to annex the Yucatán, Americans were largely confused about the racial identity of Mexicans: were they Spanish, Indian, white, or black, many congressmen wondered quite explicitly. Bloodthirsty figures like Juana and Geronimo work to clarify this confusion by marking "fair" Mexican and white US nationals off from the Indians in their midst.

In 1904, *Dr. Quartz II, at Bay; or, A Man of Iron Nerve* was published in the December 3 issue of the *New Nick Carter Weekly*. The character of New York detective Nick Carter had been first created in 1887 for three novels nominally authored by John R. Coryell and published by Street & Smith in their *New York Weekly*. In the 1890s, the detective reappeared for a number of stories and novels that ran serially, and in the twentieth-century Carter popped up in the theater, movies, comics, and radio dramas. Hard-boiled and driven by a passionate and practical desire to defeat (p.288) crime, Carter is always smarter than his fellow police officers and always more resourceful than his criminal antagonists. In *Dr. Quartz II*, readers find Carter locked in a battle of wits with a brilliant, serial-killing villain who turns out to be the brother of Carter's dead nemesis, the original Dr. Quartz. Just as the two Dr. Quartzes echo Averill's "twin Patagonians," *Dr. Quartz II* has its own version of *The Secret Service Ship's* narcotic, band-music-playing couch: a chair in Dr. Quartz's house in which Carter fatally sits, only to be pierced by needles embedded in the armrests, needles "tipped with the most delicate poison" that renders him unconscious, but from which Carter eventually recovers in time to hatch a plan to defeat the evil doctor (ch. 5). Unlike the confusingly described and deafeningly loud narcotic couch, however, Dr. Quartz's chair is rendered with mechanical precision, its soporific effect surgically and silently achieved. And unlike the raw and savage violence of the "twin Patagonians," Dr. Quartz's madness is a scientific genius he consciously abstracts from morality. As the doctor himself explains, "I am wedded to science, my dear Carter, and the most interesting of all sciences is the study of humanity itself"—a "study" he intends to conduct by performing vivisections on humans in a special laboratory he plans to set up on an "island in the Pacific" (ch. 6). Finally, unlike the "refined" violence with which Rogers and Isora defeat Juana and Geronimo, Carter couples his own psychological knowledge of Dr. Quartz's fatal flaw, his egoism, with a crafty, crime-fighting intelligence that is more practical than the doctor's elaborate evil, and that never loses track of morality. *Dr. Quartz II* thus offers its readers the promise of clear moral lines between good and evil and the hope that Carter's American know-how will control the excesses of Dr. Quartz's cold, scientific rationality—all this, in the midst of an early twentieth century replete with vigorous debates over the risks and possibilities of science itself.

In each novel, the hermeneutics of sensation function at once to blur and to reinforce presupposed distinctions. In *The Secret Service Ship*, the boundary between Mexicans and Americans is breached by the relationship between

Rogers and Isora, and yet that very breach is made possible by the production of a common Indian enemy. Isora's cross-dressing breaches norms of masculinity and femininity, yet that breach is sealed by her ultimate marriage to Rogers. In *Dr. Quartz II*, scientific reason is shown to hold both evil and just potential, in the form of the doctor's medical knowledge and Carter's knowledge of psychology and logic. Only Carter's ability to exercise a clear and practical moral vision holds reason back from its criminal potential.

Perhaps it is here that we can make our final use of Derrida's suggestion that "every text participates in one or several genres, [that] there is no genreless text; there is always a genre and genres, yet such participation never amounts to belonging" (1980, 65). For in the dime novel's sensational excesses and its long, genre-mixing history, we encounter the thrillingly equivocal practice of boundary drawing and boundary busting, a practice that continues to offer readers a certain experience of participation without belonging.