

Serial Politics in Antebellum America

On the Cultural Work of the City-Mystery Genre

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I

City mysteries were serialized sensational narratives about urban vice and crime that enjoyed immense popularity in the decades before the American Civil War. During the antebellum era, novels such as George Lippard's *The Quaker City; or, The Monks of Monk Hall: A Romance of Philadelphia Life, Mystery, and Crime* (1844–45); Ned Buntline's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1847–48; published under Buntline's real name, Edward Zane Carroll Judson); and George Thompson's *City Crimes, or, Life in New York and Boston* (1849), all fascinated a broad readership and became bestsellers in a rapidly expanding print market. These novels offered prime reading entertainment for mass audiences, but at a time of heightened controversy over the fate of the nation, they also served as a medium for political agitation. As I will argue in this chapter, they produced as well as capitalized on a powerful nexus of serial entertainment and political engagement. This chapter thus aims to make sense of the serial politics performed by these narratives within the broader field of American culture. How did American city-mystery novels utilize the affordances of serial fiction to entertain *and* politicize their readers?

What kind of agency did these novels exert in the formation of early American popular culture? And what role did they play in antebellum politics?¹

Though I will focus on the city mysteries' cultural work in antebellum America, it is vital to acknowledge the genre's transatlantic origins to understand the serial thrust of these narratives. The first city mystery was Eugène Sue's feuilleton novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (*The Mysteries of Paris*), serialized in the Parisian daily *Journal des Débats* between June 1842 and October 1843. *Les Mystères de Paris* spawned a large number of mysteries across national borders: more than one hundred novels set in places such as Paris, London, Berlin, Hamburg, Vienna, Amsterdam, Brussels, Lisbon, Milan, Melbourne, Montreal, St. Petersburg, and a host of cities in the United States.² Inspired by Sue's success—both in terms of increasing the *Journal's* readership and in terms of the controversy generated by his politicized narrative about conflicts between the proletariat and the city's elites—American authors quickly adapted his plot, rhetoric, and character ensemble to homegrown contexts.³

Lippard's *Quaker City* was the first to do so, becoming a national bestseller (Reynolds 1995: vii). The novel utilized a sensationalist rhetoric and melodramatic plotting in its depiction of excessive sex and violence, which was intensified by the narrative's serial structure: by the incremental revelation of actions and their consequences over a period of many months and ten installments. Adding to the novel's popularity were prototypical muckraking elements that promised to expose both the brutality and the licentiousness of Philadelphia's underworld as well as the lurid crimes of the city's upper-class—its political leaders, business magnates, and clergy, with honest workers and middle-class families figuring as the victims of oppression. *Quaker City* offered readers a voyeuristic gaze at illicit scenes of sexual deviation and criminal activities, and it launched thinly disguised attacks on those in power who did not abide by the author's radical-democratic convictions and who would find themselves attacked in installment after installment.⁴

1. This essay is part of my book project within the Popular Seriality Research Unit (PSRU), "Serial Politicization: On the Cultural Work of American City Mysteries, 1844–1860."

2. Between 1844 and 1860, many texts depicted vice and crime in American cities. Erikson (2005) discusses about three hundred fictional and nonfictional works. Reynolds speaks of fifty city mysteries (1995: xiv). According to Zboray/Zboray, thirteen New England city mysteries appeared in 1844, and by 1860, sixty-four additional works had been published (2000: 457). On the genre's transnational scope, see Knight (2012); on the transnationalism of American serial fiction more generally, see Okker (2011).

3. The first American translations of *Les Mystères de Paris* appeared in 1843; see Jared Gardner's chapter in this volume.

4. On Lippard's "practice of seriality" and "his poetics in parts," see Looby (2015: 12); on Lippard's radical politics, see Reynolds (2015).

Quaker City was followed by a slew of city mysteries, including Buntline's *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* and Thompson's *City Crimes* as well as *The Mysteries and Miseries of New Orleans* (Buntline 1851); *Mysteries of Lowell* (Bradbury 1844); *The Knights of the Seal; or, The Mysteries of the Three Cities* (Duganne 1845); *Mysteries of Fitchburg* (Penchant 1844); *Mysteries of Salem* (Hargrave 1845); *Mysteries of Worcester* (Spofford 1846); and *Mysteries of San Francisco* (Myers 1853).⁵ These novels spread the action across the country from East to West, North and South, diversifying the genre through a process of regional specification while creating the sense of a national American literature that was more than the sum of its parts. Additional regional and ethnic variants appeared in the form of non-English-language mysteries, most prominently novels by German immigrant authors that were serialized in German-language newspapers, such as August Gläser's *Geheimnisse von Philadelphia* (1850), Heinrich Börnstein's *Die Geheimnisse von St. Louis* (1851), Ludwig von Reizenstein's *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans* (1854–55); Rudolph Lexow's *Amerikanische Criminal-Mysteries, oder das Leben der Verbrecher in New-York* (1854); and Emil Klauprecht's *Cincinnati, oder Geheimnisse des Westens* (1854).⁶

City mysteries were perhaps the earliest example of a Western popular literary genre in the modern sense of the term: a body of serial texts written, marketed, and read *as* serial genre texts. Werner Sollors speaks of an “international vogue in urban *Mysteries*” (2001: 104), while Michael Denning describes them as “the first genre to achieve massive success and to dominate cheap fiction” (1998: 85). They laid the foundation for the more tightly organized “fiction factories” (17) of the postbellum era, facilitating the rise of dime novel series in the second half of the nineteenth century and the emergence of film serials, radio plays, and comic books in the first half of the twentieth century. These American city-mystery novels appeared at a specific time—the antebellum era—and in a specific climate—a “culture of sensation” (Streeby

5. As Thompson's *City Crimes* indicates, not all city mystery novels replicated the “mystery”-title formula. Once the formula had been applied to a city, authors came up with titles that announced genre affiliation but promised variation of the popular theme. Authors like Bradbury, Buntline, Lippard, and Thompson also wrote sequels that called for new titles. *City Crimes* foregrounds the genre-typical focus on urban crime and (like Duganne's *Knights of the Seal*) extends the exposure of criminal networks beyond a single city. Hargrave was the only female city-mystery writer—indicating a gendered division between the sentimentalist fiction of female writers (e.g., Susan Warner, E. D. E. N. Southworth, Harriet Beecher Stowe) and male-dominated sensationalist literature (Streeby 2002: 32–33). The genre nonetheless negotiated notions of femininity and masculinity. I have found no African American authors, but many texts dealt with racial issues (see Helwig 2006 and Ostrowski 2006).

6. On German American *Geheimnisromane*, see Herminghouse 1985; Schuchalter 2011; and Stein 2014b, 2016.

2002)—in which the national reach of bestsellers began to impart substantial political prowess to fiction writing and novel reading.⁷ Most famously, Harriet Beecher Stowe's controversial antislavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was initially serialized in the abolitionist newspaper *The National Era* (1851–52), generated a whole industry of pro- and anti-Tom productions, providing Americans with a set of characters, scenes, and sentiments through which they could process different responses to the slave system.⁸

In this time and climate, the city mysteries pursued objectives that were fundamentally at odds: entertaining antebellum readers with sensational stories but also moving them toward political action by exposing the failures of urban elites and calling on public institutions to reform. In *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*, for instance, Ned Buntline directly addresses mayor William Frederick Havemeyer, the Chief of Police George W. Matsell, the magistrates of the city council, and “Benevolent Associations” like the New York Hospital, criticizing the recent spike in crime, poverty, and prostitution and urging readers to demand social and political change while dramatizing this critique through his character constellation, plot development, and rhetoric. Denning thus speaks of a “paradoxical union of sensational fiction and radical politics” (1998: 87). If we want to gain a deeper sense of the genre and its texts as literary “agents of cultural formation” (Tompkins 1985: xvii) that shaped antebellum culture, we must reconstruct the breadth and diversity of the genre and read individual texts as part of a larger conversation among city-mystery authors, their narratives, and their readers. In order to do so, we must consider the city mysteries as serially produced, serially published, and serially read popular narratives whose impact on antebellum culture was not confined to their ability to propose political positions and dramatize the plight of the powerless but extended to a specific serial-political dynamic of production and reception.

II

Before I turn to the city mysteries and the politics of the genre, clarifications concerning the key concepts of my analysis—cultural work, popular seriality, serial politics—are in order. In her study of late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, Jane Tompkins suggests that a primary function of popular

7. For Streeby, “culture of sensation” designates a literary sphere of “low” popular narratives as well as a “wider spectrum of popular arts and practices that includes journalism, music, blackface minstrelsy, and other forms of popular theater” (2002: 27).

8. On the cultural productivity of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, see Meer (2005).

literature was “to redefine the social order,” to “articulat[e] and propos[e] solutions for the problems that shape [their] particular historical moment.” As “instruments of cultural self-definition,” novels such as *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* or Susan Warner’s *The Wide, Wide World* (1850) “have designs upon their audiences, [. . .] wanting to make people think and act in a particular way” by “providing men and women with a means of ordering the world they inhabited” (1985: xi, xvi, xi, xiii).⁹ Shifting from textual exegesis to a broader perspective on the cultural effects of narratives, Tompkins proposes: “Rather than asking, ‘what does this text mean?’ or, ‘how does it work?’, I ask, ‘what kind of work is this novel trying to do?’” (1985: 38). Instead of interpreting stock figures and genre formulas as evidence of banal production and consumption, studying the cultural work of popular narratives thus means to read stereotypes and formulas as part of an ongoing conversation among authors, texts, and audiences in a marketplace of political ideas and media networks (1985: 38, 95–95).

City-mystery novels had sensational designs on their readers even though they presented “a ‘low’ kind of literature in relation to [the] more middlebrow popular sentimentalism” of Stowe and Warner (Streeby 2002: 27). As Buntline exclaims at the beginning of his narrative: “I wish to lay before you all the vice of the city [. . .] so that you and the good and philanthropic may see where to apply the healing balm, I wish to show where and how our young men are led away and ruined in the glittering gambling palaces, now many a poor, now wretched and degraded female, has been driven into the paths of infamy, when one kind word and one helping hand would have saved her” (1848: I.7).

Most city mysteries were serialized in periodicals or published as pamphlet series and later reprinted as books; they created a genre by reiterating its sensationalist title formula—*Mysteries of . . .*—and adapting character types, storylines, as well as narrative modes to new contexts of production and reception. Examples of character types are aristocratic or otherwise noble savior figures, ruthless rakes, female victims of sexual exploitation, wanton adulteresses, abominable Catholic priests, and human freaks of nature. Plot developments often revolve around heinous acts of seduction and rape, religious hypocrisy, as well as the exploitation of the working poor through moneyed city elites, while prominent narrative modes include sensationalism, sentimentalism, melodrama, and gothic horror. If popular narratives employ characters as “things to think with” (Tompkins 1985: 119) and use plots and modes as means to shape and organize social affects, then the city mysteries

9. Compare Fluck (1997: 18–20) on literature’s ability to simulate the emotional experience of an unrealized imaginary and thus articulate certain options for social and political action (*Artikulationseffekt*).

clearly did not “flatten the complexities of existence” (1985: 96) in antebellum America. Indeed, they added complexity to this existence by inviting readers to empathize with storylines that claimed to recreate the urban world inhabited by their readers and conjured up in the narratives through frequent references to specific neighborhoods, streets, and establishments.

Since Tompkins does not account for the serial production and reception of popular novels, it is necessary to connect the concept of cultural work with a notion of popular seriality—that is, with an understanding of popular serial narratives as mass-addressed and explicitly commercial types of cultural production that thrive on a dialectic of schematization and variation, and standardization and innovation. Highly conducive to narrative proliferation, such series tend to generate ever new mechanisms to manage their own diversification (including generic and paratextual structures).¹⁰ In the antebellum era, I argue, popular seriality first reached a national scale, and serial storytelling established itself as a founding principle of modern popular culture.¹¹ Two assumptions ground this notion of popular seriality. First, as ongoing productions that thrive in capitalist economies because they can constantly defer final closure, popular serial narratives are shaped by processes of recursivity that cut across established distinctions between production and reception (Kelleter 2012). In order to grasp the affective and evocative power of Ludwig von Reizenstein’s *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans*, for instance, we must reinsert it into the dialogue about the nation’s racial and sexual politics into which it intervenes in a concrete historical moment and within a specific media landscape. Relevant contexts include the controversy over the Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854), which triggered a vitriolic attack from Reizenstein against the politicians in Congress who betrayed the founding ideals of the Republic by voting for the act; the city’s recovery from a devastating yellow fever epidemic in 1853, which underscored Reizenstein’s depiction of the disease as retribution for the sins of slavery; and the prominence of taboo violations (e.g., interracial sex, homosexuality) that generated publicity by inciting negative reviews from a rival newspaper.¹²

10. On popular seriality, see Kelleter 2012 and chapter 1 in this volume. On the serial dialectic of repetition (or schematization) and variation, see Eco 1990. On paratexts, parodies, and genre construction as culturally productive mechanisms of serial management, see Stein 2012, 2013, and 2014a.

11. Antebellum print publications began to reach mass audiences across regions, classes, genders, and ethnicities. Industrialization and urbanization shaped a “recreational economy” in which reading was a central activity (Stewart 2011: 4). On the foundational role of eighteenth-century magazines, see Gardner 2012a.

12. Reizenstein’s novel was serialized in the *Louisiana Staats-Zeitung* (January 1853–March 1854); the rival paper was the *Deutsche Zeitung* (see Rowan 2002 and Stein 2014b). In Stein

Moreover, the processes of transatlantic adaptation and regional diversification that propelled the serial evolution of the genre complicate any clear distinction between production and reception. Lippard, Buntline, Osgood Bradbury, A. J. H. Duganne, and Joseph Holt Ingraham were readers of Sue's novels as well as of each other's works; Reizenstein positioned his novel within the genre by tracing a development from Sue via Buntline to German American writers like Börnstein and Klauprecht in a statement to the reader that opens *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans*.¹³ Lippard cited from a review of *Quaker City* when he reserialized the novel in his *Quaker City Weekly* journal in 1849: "[Lippard is t]he Eugene [sic] Sue of America, possessing graphic powers, which even excel those of the great French novelist." On the back pages of the original *Quaker City* installments, he even claimed that his novel had "commenced long before 'Mysteries of Paris' appeared," although he acknowledged that it "bears the same relation to Philadelphia that the 'Mysteries' do to Paris" (quoted in Ehrlich 1972: 50, 56). What we find here are two central practices of popular serial storytelling: (1) a practice of outdoing, by which every addition, be it an individual installment of an ongoing narrative or an entirely new series competing against another series, tries to tell the same basic story by increasing, heightening, or intensifying previous versions (Jahn-Sudmann/Kelleter 2012); and (2) a contravening practice of authorization, by which discourses of authorial originality and genre awareness legitimize new narratives (Kelleter/Stein 2012; Stein 2014a). *Quaker City* inscribes itself into the serial genealogy of the city-mystery genre, posing as a transatlantic continuation of Sue's initial series by claiming that it does for Philadelphia what *Les Mystères de Paris* did for Paris. Yet Lippard is careful to preclude any sense of merely copying Sue's formulas by suggesting the (temporal) primacy of his own work. In a capitalist economy, where products must be both dependable (at least as good as the last product) and newly pleasurable (ideally more satisfying than competing products), Lippard promotes himself as the "American" Sue, a more entertaining and relevant version of the French feuilleton novelist.

The second assumption is that popular series are active agents within larger networks of culture.¹⁴ Just as they must not be approached as self-contained works, they must not be isolated from the realm of practices from which they emerge and which they impact as well. In this context, it is important to note

2014b, I discuss S. H. Lützen's review and Reizenstein's response, published in the following installment of *Die Geheimnisse von New Orleans*, as a paratextual discourse that exemplifies the ability of serial narratives to react to, as well as intervene in, their reception.

13. I offer close readings and historical contextualization of the German American city-mystery novels by Reizenstein, Heinrich Börnstein, and Emil Klauprecht in Stein 2016.

14. For a more detailed discussion, see the first chapter in this volume and references there.

that city mysteries appeared before there was a fully professionalized culture industry. Denning discerns an “unstable economy of formulaic narratives” and “a contested terrain, a field of cultural conflict” (1998: 81, 3), while David Stewart (2011) considers the reading of literary fiction and nonfictional texts a new and widely shared cultural practice that facilitated processes of personal and national sense-making at a time of sweeping socioeconomic and political change.¹⁵ City mysteries depended on, interacted with, but also shaped a media ecology that went beyond the confines of print literature. They evoked this ecology by borrowing from stage melodrama (e.g., excessive action, moral dichotomies), blackface minstrelsy (songs, jokes, stock characters), religious performance (mock sermons), domestic novels (virtuous suffering, seduction plots, deathbed scenes), and the penny press (sensationalist rhetoric, scandal mongering).

This media ecology was a virtual vortex of American politics—a vortex in which political parties utilized popular rhetoric to further their goals, while popular entertainment latched onto political issues to mobilize large readerships.¹⁶ Emil Klauprecht’s *Cincinnati, oder Geheimnisse des Westens* foregrounds the spread of political rhetoric into serial newspaper fiction in scenes that mock the alcohol-soaked and cliché-saturated atmosphere at political gatherings among the city’s Germans, and it expresses the author’s Republican sympathies through an ongoing parody of a rival newspaper writer and editor, the comically renamed Colonel Schwappelhuber of the *Demokratische Staatstrompete von Ohio*. Significantly, the city-mystery genre and other forms of antebellum popular culture did not merely “reflect” political ideologies. Instead, they created intimate fictional worlds whose ontological and epistemological premises readers needed to share for the extended duration of periodical reading if they were to achieve the full pleasures of serial consumption. Those who invested time and money to follow Klauprecht’s novel from one installment to the next were compelled to do more than merely consume the unfolding story as a form of political commentary. They may have been seduced by the twists and turns of the series, empathizing with some characters and vilifying others and thereby affirming, perhaps even adopting, a specific spectrum of social and political positions.¹⁷ Such popular narratives were

15. Lehuu speaks of an *ephemeral period* characterized by *ephemeral publications* (2000: 25).

16. On these issues, see also Altschuler/Blumin 2000 and Maase 2010. Stewart underscores the physicality of reading, suggesting that antebellum readers ingested the writings of authors like Thompson to emerge from this experience with a new sense of self and their bodies (2008: 242).

17. In his study of antebellum reading practices, Stewart speaks of “books that seduce” (2011: 6).

political precisely in the sense that they kept readers in a permanent state of agitation, immersed in a gradually unfolding world that amassed one social wrong after another, pounding away at the reader's moral outrage. As such, they produced public excitements, rendered political emotions graspable, and thus made positions possible or impossible, for instance, by prodding readers to recognize themselves as members of distinct social groups with special grievances. Reading Lippard's *Quaker City* or Buntline's *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* meant gaining awareness of one's identity as one of many exploited working-class mechanics or as one of the many victims of urban crime. On a larger scale, as we see in texts such as *Quaker City* or *The Mysteries of New Orleans* which portray the failed politics of a single city as the harbinger of national demise, city-mystery novels enabled a national readership to recognize itself as a national readership, dramatizing what was at stake when different politicians, parties, and legislatures debated the pressing issues of the day.¹⁸

If city mysteries claimed to unveil the conspiracies of the wealthy and powerful against the poor and powerless, and if they gloated in the revelation of secret networks operating beneath the surface of respectability, then the pleasures of serial reading derived at least partly from the readers' feeling that these were allegorical texts—veiled commentaries on actual people and institutions. Lippard, for instance, speaks of “the administration of a certain Governor” in a footnote in *Quaker City* and complains in another footnote about the misappropriation of funds in connection with the founding of Girard College, implying that the corrupt actions of the United States Bank and its director Nicholas Biddle had prevented the college from being erected in time (1995: 269; and Reynolds 1995: xxxv). Reizenstein's depiction of characters like the German aristocratic immigrant Emil and the lesbian Orleana generated public speculation and controversy about who among the region's residents served as their inspiration (Rowan 2002). True, not all city mysteries emulated Lippard's sensationalist prose and melodramatic techniques; nor did all of them endorse his understanding of popular literature as a battering ram for a nationwide project of social reform.¹⁹ But as texts that placed themselves—in various ways and with different degrees of explicitness—within a serial genre of public interest, they offered their readers powerful fictions to

18. Emerson emphasizes the novel's “agency at the local level” and its efforts to reenergize “localized democracy” (2015: 104), which can be viewed as part of a local-national dialectic that depends on the serial format to perform its cultural work.

19. As Lippard wrote in his *Quaker City Weekly* (February 10, 1849): “a literature which does not work practically for the advancement of social reform [. . .] is just good for nothing at all” (quoted in Reynolds 1995: viii).

understand themselves as American citizens with distinct, if potentially competing, identities and urgent duties as political subjects. It is no coincidence that these political subjects then voiced their opinions on the pages of print publications like the sensationalist penny press, abolitionist papers, and cheap popular fiction. As Benedict Anderson argues, it was the serial publication of the newspaper—“one-day best-sellers” (1991: 35)—that enabled the emergence of the modern nation-state because it offered readers a recurring encounter with themselves as newspaper-reading citizens within a larger collective. But the American nation in the nineteenth century did not only rely on newspapers as media of national or regional incorporation and sense-making; it also depended on a modern popular culture in which city mysteries were among the most widely read, most controversial, and most politicizing narratives.

III

Most intriguing about the city-mystery genre is the inherent tension at its core: the radicalism of dogmatic ideologies aimed at immediate and fundamental political action (and, thus, closure), on the one hand, and the necessities of popular serial storytelling, including the establishment of divergent viewpoints, sprawling character constellations, ambiguous plot developments, and an open-ended narrative trajectory that gains traction from the very denial—or at least continuing delay—of story closure, on the other. Any series intending to bring about political change, and especially the kind of populist grassroots democratization envisioned by Lippard, had to appeal to large audiences. Yet large audiences in the American 1840s and 1850s were made up of male and female; young and old; working-class, middle-class, and upper-class; and rural and urban readers from various national backgrounds and religious affiliations.²⁰ City mysteries had to account for, and appeal to, this heterogeneity, ensuring a degree of inclusiveness that complicated any radical dogmatism. Lippard thus developed braided strains of narrative and a broad selection of characters from different social spheres, connecting them via the secret chambers of Monk Hall. Moreover, he created “two seemingly conflicting voices” that displayed the outrage of the social critic and reformer as well as the gaze of the “sensationalist quasi-pornographer who revels in [...] the very vices and depravities he professes to deplore.” *Quaker City* (but also Buntline’s *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* and Thompson’s *City*

20. The readership of some city mysteries was more localized due to limited distribution (New England mysteries) or language restrictions (German American *Geheimnisromane*).

Crimes) oscillates between “righteous indignation” toward political corruption and the cruelties of moneyed socialites against the urban poor, on the one hand, and the “ghoulish appreciation” of sex and crime in the darkest corners of American cities, on the other (Ashwill 1994: 293, 313). Rather than diminishing the political efficacy of these novels, this oscillation was actually their greatest political ploy. It politicized urban bodies, spaces, and social spheres by connecting the reader’s somatic pleasures of serial consumption with national conflicts over slavery, capitalism, and expansion.

One way in which city-mystery writers sought to manage this inherent tension was to make the serial format work to their advantage: inviting ongoing scandal and controversy, such as when George Thompson infuses *City Crimes* with repeated violations of dominant norms (for instance, Miss Fairfield’s sexual encounters with a black servant simultaneously crossing boundaries of race and class); creating charismatic authorial personas by stylizing themselves as champions of the virtuous poor and valiant exposers of political corruption in and outside of their novels; and using endless “suspense and surprise” cycles (Looby 2004: 184), cliffhangers, and action sequences to gain and maintain control over their readers’ emotions. A second way was to publish more overt political writings in weekly and monthly journals: Lippard wrote serialized novels and political essays for his *Quaker City Weekly*; Buntline published his own journal, *Ned Buntline’s Own*; and Thompson was a contributor and part-time editor of magazines such as *Venus’ Miscellany* and *The Broadway Belle*. While Lippard’s journal aimed at “social reform through the medium of popular literature” (quoted in Reynolds 1995: xvii), Thompson’s mostly pornographic writings sought to reform readers by appealing to a sexuality devoid of conventional moral constraints (Reynolds and Gladman 2002), thus extending, and indeed serializing, his depictions of sexuality from *City Crimes* into other types of publication. A third way was to become politically active beyond the realm of publishing: Lippard founded the benevolent society Brotherhood of the Union and worked as a labor organizer; Buntline joined the Know-Nothing Party; Bradbury was a Whig representative in the Maine State Legislature; and Börnstein founded the Verein freier Männer (Association of Free Men) in order to join (German) residents of St. Louis into a political bloc (Rowan 1990: xi–xii). Denning thus distinguishes between the “politics of the genre” and the “politics of its audience and authors” (1998: 86); in the case of the American city mysteries, both types of politics were integrally connected. In the antebellum years, newspapers and especially their editors were political power players with substantial clout over public opinion. For example, as the editor of *Anzeiger des Westens* and author of *Die Geheimnisse von St. Louis*, Börnstein was able to orchestrate a shift

among German Americans in the Midwest from the Democratic Party toward the new Republican Party over issues such as slavery (abolitionism), religion (anti-Catholicism), and immigration (anti-nativism).

An all-encompassing analysis of the city mysteries would have to account for the novels' "local paratext[s]" (Looby 2004: 186), that is, their embeddedness in carrier media such as story paper, newspaper, periodical pamphlet, and bound book. These media featured editorial statements, responses from readers, reviews, critical essays, nonfiction coverage, other fictional texts, illustrations, and advertisements. Examining this material would allow us to view the city mysteries within their immediate textual, discursive, and medial universe and to read them as part of a larger discourse about the literary meanings and politics of popular fiction. *Quaker City*, for instance, uses footnotes that function as authorial asides through which Lippard annotates the narrative, often to elaborate on a plot point or make a political reference, thereby conflating the roles of narrator and author. The book version of Buntline's *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York* features an appendix that extends the series beyond the narrative into the paratextual realm by printing a selection of letters Buntline had received from readers, as well as statements by New York mayor Havemeyer, a passage from New York police law, excerpts from newspaper articles about the situation of the urban poor, statistics from the New York State Asylum, and a lengthy attack on the competing author Harrison Gray Buchanan, whose *Asmodeus of Legends of New York: Being a Complete Exposé of the Mysteries, Vices and Doings, as exhibited by the Fashionable Circles of New York* (1848) Buntline accused of plagiarism (a special case of popular seriality). Moreover, Buntline uses "prefatorials" at the beginning of each new installment to make use of, and intervene into, the public reception of his narrative, repeatedly emphasizing his political integrity ("Th[is] writer is one who can neither be bribed from his duty, or frightened from his course") and assuring readers that their investment in, and support of, the narrative is already being rewarded ("deeper gratification fills his heart when he [i.e., Buntline] knows from proofs, which cannot be doubted, that it [the novel] has been already influential in pointing the benevolent and good of our city to a field where their labors and kindnesses cannot be misplaced") (1848: II.4, III.4).

For the remainder of my argument, I will concentrate on the ways in which individual texts negotiate the tension between a moral absolutism geared toward the politicization of readers and the narrative demands of serial storytelling. As ongoing stories tied closely to their reception, serial narratives are well-equipped to involve authors and readers in political debates that are anchored in the depicted storyworld but ultimately encourage readers "to turn

outward” (Ashwill 1994: 296) to the world at large: to urban spaces “in our very midst,” such as the Bowery or Five Points, as Buntline writes in *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* (1848: I.5). We know that popular series sanction the transition from passive reading to active authorship, often turning readers into letter writers, critics, or even authors of competing stories (Lund 1993, Hayward 1997, Gardner 2012b, and Stein 2013). As a reader named Isaac N. Walter writes in a letter to Buntline appended to *The Mysteries and Miseries of New York*: “I could furnish you with several instances if you should ever desire them, that you could do well with in writing some other publication. I will furnish them if you wish.” Buntline reprints his response letter and states, “Any information which our reverend, and esteemed correspondent will send us will be thankfully received, and used” (1848: Appendix 111). Yet active readers also create challenges for serial narratives, and perhaps even greater challenges for politically radical narratives. They tend to question, undermine, attack, or parody a series’ politics, and they often make story suggestions and advocate character modifications that will complicate any rigorous politics. As we know from other popular forms of narrative—such as superhero comics (Kelleter/Stein 2012 and Stein 2013, 2014a)—successful genres generate diversity and manage sprawling significances rather than propose monolithic meanings; they must be malleable in order to survive in changing social, cultural, and political circumstances.

City-mystery writers generally emphasized the topicality of their stories by addressing specific legislation (from tariffs, corruption, and urban reform to bank regulation or the fugitive slave law) and by attacking particular politicians, parties, and elected authorities. Many writers insisted that their shocking tales of vice and crime in high places rested on a factual basis. Thompson claimed that his work was “founded on fact” and that he was writing romances of the real (2002: 310; and Looby 1993: 651); Buntline claimed that he had done extensive research that distinguished his work from fanciful novels and classified the text as “a *history* more than [. . .] a romance” (1848: I.5); Lippard’s *Quaker City* begins with an origin tale that legitimizes the story as being based on trustworthy information that Lippard had received from a recently deceased Philadelphia lawyer. Claims of verisimilitude were staples of the genre, capitalizing on the gossip factor promised by revelations about the sexual deviance; economic scheming; and hypocrisy of social, political, and religious elites. Yet such claims did not express any single politics. As Ronald J. Zboray and Mary Saracino Zboray have shown, New England mysteries by authors such as Justin Jones, Joseph Holt Ingraham, and Osgood Bradbury were not only shorter than their New York and Philadelphia counterparts; they also expressed a Whiggish politics that largely rejected the artisan

republicanism of many New York and Philadelphia mysteries and substituted Sue's aristocratic figures with "provincial types (and stereotypes)" from "crafty Yankee peddlers" to "African American fiddle players at harvest fairs, [. . .] Lowell mill operatives, and upwardly mobile clerks" (2000: 462). German American writers pursued their own local politics in cities such as St. Louis, Cincinnati, and New Orleans. In Reizenstein's *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans*, aristocratic German émigrés from the failed 1848 revolution encounter a Southern society on the brink of death and destruction, threatened by yellow fever and impending slave revolts, while the virtuous Böttcher and Steigerwald families in Börnstein's *Die Geheimnisse von St. Louis* and Klauprecht's *Cincinnati* serve as a refutation of anti-German sentiments (Stein 2016).

City mysteries frequently used paratexts to formulate these and other political objectives. Buntline's *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* addresses itself to the hypocritical and corrupt New York clergy and signals its missionary motivation in the opening "prefatorial," which announces that the narrative "will offend" readers and will "strike at vice in every garb and station." The "aim in this work [. . .] is to do good" and "lay open [the] festering sores" of political corruption Buntline claims to have witnessed during his research in the city's underworld (1848: I.6–7). The stated goal is to move readers toward philanthropy, to pummel them into rethinking social injustices and show empathy toward the exploited populace. Buntline's "pictures of real life" (1848: IV.3) emerges from the detailed portrayal of actual urban spaces and the representation of characters whose true-to-lifeness is foregrounded in the dialects, sociolects, and jargon they speak. Furthermore, *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* includes authorial asides and explicit moralizing that relate Buntline's political convictions directly to readers.

Buntline's prefatorials speak of his novel's "unexampled and heart-cheering success" as well as the "unexpected and unparalleled patronage" it received from readers, but also of threats and anonymous letters attacking its politics. They paint Buntline as a fearless agitator, who exclaims, "We cannot be bought" (1848: II.4). More important than the author's popularity and financial success, the prefatorials state, is his gratitude that his writing has motivated philanthropic acts and encouraged readers to fight the betrayal of republican values by capitalist greed. In addition, Buntline claims to have sent copies of his narrative to the mayor and police of New York, threatening to publicize the names of those who neglect their republican duties: "We have to stand *alone* in this warfare," he writes in populist terms and then promotes his political independence: "We have no political prejudices, and belong to no party," but "[we will] give all the little influence which we may possess" (1848: Appendix 101). His ultimate aim is to change urban politics through the evocative power

of serial storytelling. It is not enough to identify the city's political evildoers on only one occasion. Only if the accusations are presented again and again will the narrative acquire sufficient force to convince readers that they must fulfill their republican duty by voting the delinquents out of office.

We must, however, be careful to distinguish such promotional rhetoric from the actual political effects that Buntline's and other city mysteries may have had (or not). Writing about Thompson's *The House Breaker; or, The Mysteries of Crime* (1848), Looby maintains that such novels enact a serial dialectic of pleasurable entertainment and political enagement that was not necessarily progressive or even revolutionary. Thompson does not "confront [. . .] systemic injustices of the social world" but "attend[s] obsessively to spectacular excesses that evoke in readers a futile moral indignation, class resentment, and scandalized voyeurism" (1993: 653). It would be mistaken, then, to read city mysteries simply as subversive texts that undermined the foundation of American society and mobilized readers against local and national governments. They could be affirmative of bourgeois values precisely because they denounced the violation of these values and enabled readers to exhaust their political frustrations in the act of reading. Moreover, Buntline ends his attack on the exploitation of the working poor in *Mysteries and Miseries of New York* with a list of characters who will reappear in the sequel *B'hoys of New York* (1850) and with a statement about another upcoming narrative, *G'hals of New York* (1850). Thus, the commercial interests of a celebrity author seem to override the novel's anticapitalist theme.

Achieving literary fame and attracting a broad range of readers also meant competing for audience attention. As active participants in a larger field of commercial media, city mysteries sought to win readers by capitalizing on their own specific mediality. They were relatively cheap, could be materially owned (and thus reread, collected, and treasured) and perused in the private confines of the home. Spreading out consumption across many months and even years, inserting regular gaps in the narrative that left time for reflection, speculation, and anticipation, they created a particularly intimate relationship between author, reader, and text.²¹ Yet antebellum readers sensed that they were part of a readership that extended beyond their immediate social environment and constituted an interpretive community whose consumption of serial texts was structured by shared rhythms of reading, waiting, and often actively responding to the ongoing narrative (Okker 2003: 10, 15–16). In addition, city mysteries exulted in the crossing of social and geographic boundaries, taking their readers on slumming tours into the seedy sections of the city

21. Compare Smith on "the intimacy of serialized publication" (1995: 71).

and lifting the veil (or bedsheet) from the illicit sexual pleasures of the rich and famous as well as exposing the depravities of degenerate men, seductive adulteresses, lewd prostitutes, and freakish creatures. The voyeuristic pleasures offered by such material enabled audiences to experience erotic stimulation through vicarious participation in outré behavior, allowing them to imaginatively transgress boundaries of race, gender, sexuality, and class (often all at once) at a time when these boundaries were coming under increasing pressure.

City mysteries sought to curb the challenges of competing print publications by absorbing much of their rhetoric and some of their style, often adding a satirical slant, ironic commentary, or caricature in order to establish themselves as the superior form. As Reynolds suggests, Lippard's *Quaker City* not only parodies the sensationalist press, but it was "itself a kind of massive penny paper" (1995: xxv), reporting on the most shocking criminal endeavors and indecencies with righteous indignation. In addition, city mysteries utilized intertextual and intermedial references to align themselves with the racial, sexual, economic, and religious politics of the popular theater. One chapter of *Quaker City* begins with the words "We open this scene with a picture" (1995: 281), and many scenes in this and other novels mimic theatrical tableaux. Depictions of melodramatic heroines and "fallen women" further weave these narratives into the intermedial fabric of the times, while *Quaker City* is filled with racially ambiguous characters—Devil-Bug's two black helpers, Glow-worm and Musquito, but also the cunning servant Endymion—that owe much to blackface minstrelsy. The novel also includes scenes of exuberant dancing and singing, references to the black dancer Juba, and to Jim Crow entertainment; and it also features black dialect.²² In addition to this minstrel discourse, graphic illustrations placed city mysteries within the increasingly visual politics of antebellum culture.

IV

While the city-mystery genre began in France and spread throughout Europe, it was especially productive in the United States. Here, it fell on fertile ground, filling a cultural void with stories about rapidly growing cities that mystified urban dwellers of different classes, ethnicities, genders, and religions at a time when American society was changing more rapidly and more fundamentally than its European counterparts. If we follow Kelleter's (2002) view of

22. For a recent rereading of *Quaker City*'s racial politics, see Altschuler (2015).

the United States as an unlikely and implausibly diversified (multicultural, multireligious, and multiregional) society whose political stability has always hinged on the ability of media and narratives to incorporate citizens procedurally where they can no longer be incorporated dogmatically, then it is no surprise that the antebellum era saw the emergence of a popular serial genre dealing with some of the most pressing political questions of the day: black slavery in the South vs. worker's rights in the North, gender relations, class conflicts, religious cleavages, social reform, westward expansion, and manifest destiny. For the expanding United States, the project of a national culture—James Madison's extended republic of the *Federalist Papers*—depended on the ability of people and institutions to communicate with and about themselves. If modern media had a role to play in the construction, negotiation, and maintenance of the nation as an "imagined community" (Anderson 1991), their task was to organize a diversifying population into a self-aware body politic. That the city mysteries did so in part by playing the game of body politics—by depicting human bodies of all shapes, sizes, and colors and by relishing in fantasies of body violation (rape, incest, torture, murder)—underscores their relevance for a national popular culture. Devising an unconventional politics of the body and utilizing an extreme rhetoric of affect (sentimentalism, sensationalism, melodrama; Stewart 2011: 3) that was intensified through serial delivery and consumption, the city mysteries embodied a society that was indeed trying to come to grips with massive strains on the assumed integrity of its national body.²³

As serialized narratives, city mysteries offered readers the repeated return to a known storyworld with familiar characters and an increasingly intimate narrative voice at a time when the actual world seemed more and more ephemeral. The daunting city is transformed here into a recognizable place, but this is also a fictional space loaded with controversial social and political significances: a space where few can be trusted and where treachery, seduction, and financial ruin are always just one plot turn away. This type of seriality—tenuous at best, since things could always change and readers were compelled to bridge temporal intervals between issues—promised shared pleasure and comfort in times of economic crisis, social unrest, and political turmoil. Ultimately, it performed its cultural work through practicing the nation itself as an open-ended serial narrative, involving readers in politicized processes of local, regional, and national meaning-making. Yet such imagined collectivization was a double-edged sword. What drew readers together into a community

23. On the nexus of literary body politics and the expanding national body politic, see Streeby 2002: 27–28.

of consumers of sensational stories also fed into an emotionalized political discourse that pitted proponents of different visions for the nation's future against each other and that climaxed, less than two decades after the genre's appearance in the United States, in the Civil War. Several city mysteries register the looming failure of national politics to achieve sectional reconciliation by failing to provide narrative closure. Lippard's *Quaker City* and Reizenstein's *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans* cannot provide viable solutions for the violations of republican values they have amassed over the course of several hundred pages, and both end in apocalyptic scenarios of ultimate retribution. The serial form, with its demand for ever more drastic depictions of evil acts, moral debauchery, and political corruption, thus determines the political solutions—or rather the lack thereof—imagined by these novels (Fluck 1997: 143). Lippard's Philadelphia has been ravaged by so much corruption, violence, and abuse of power that, in a particularly dismal dream sequence, it appears as a modern-day Sodom far beyond repair. *Die Geheimnisse von New-Orleans* kills off most of its central characters, who are murdered or taken by yellow fever as punishment for their support of the slave system, and the novel imagines two possible futures for the American nation that will each prove destructive. One is a violent slave revolt that will massacre the nation's white population, and the other is a secret lesbian society that may function as a bastion of true love but will ultimately fail to secure the survival of the republic (Stein 2014b).

Quaker City, like so many popular series, is also a meta-reflexive text, formulating its own theory of seriality. Early on, Gus Lorrimer, Lippard's stereotypical rake, exclaims in a drunken reverie: "Every thing fleeting and nothing stable, every thing shifting and changing, and nothing substantial! A bundle of hopes and fears, deceits and confidences, joys and miseries, strapped to a fellow's back like Pedlar's wares" (1995: 23). Lorrimer is referring to the instability of antebellum urban life, but his words also reveal the novel's conflicted self-understanding as a serial commodity. In the antebellum era, popular serial literature offered authors and readers an uncertain footing, but a footing nonetheless: a set of authorial and readerly practices that may always be *in medias res* ("fleeting," "[un]stable," "shifting," "changing," "[in]substantial") and always subject to change—because every new installment or every new generic variation must do things differently, even if only slightly so—but nonetheless ongoing and hence potentially pleasurable and self-reinforcing. Lorrimer's ambiguous sentiments ("hopes and fears, deceits and confidences, joys and miseries") describe modern urban experience in terms that evoke the serial dialectic of seductive promise and addictive curse: on the one hand, better and better stories, increasing aesthetic pleasures; on the other hand, the need to invest more and more time, money, and emotions in the consumption of a

serial text that may never provide a gratifying sense of closure (“strapped to a fellow’s back”). In such an uncertain state, all that is left to do is purchase more entertainment and enjoy the ephemeral gratification it offers. In the case of Lippard, a prime peddler of literary wares even though he professed to abhor “heartless monopoly and godless capital” (*New York: Its Upper Ten and Lower Million* [1970: 165]), this type of self-destructive consumption threatened to outmatch the political thrust of his fiction. If readers really enjoyed his novel “till the last nerve loses its delicacy of sense,” then there was little hope that they would join the struggle for social reform and political change. For the development of American popular culture, however, this type of consumption was anything but destructive. While the political impact of the city mysteries waned with the onset of the Civil War, the narrative forms and literary practices they initiated remain effective to this day.

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