

*Review Essay*

## **Sin, Murder, Adultery, and More: Narratives of Transgression in Nineteenth-Century America**

**Ann Schofield**

Books reviewed in this essay:

THE MURDER OF HELEN JEWETT: The Life and Death of a Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century New York. By Patricia Cline Cohen. New York: Alfred Knopf. 1998.

TRIALS OF INTIMACY: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal. By Richard Wightman Fox. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1999.

MURDER MOST FOUL: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination. By Karen Halttunen. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1998.

CRIMINAL CONVERSATIONS: Sentimentality and Nineteenth-Century Stories of Adultery. By Laura Hanft Korobkin. New York: Columbia University Press. 1998.

FROTH AND SCUM: Truth, Beauty, Goodness, and the Ax Murder in America's First Mass Medium. By Andie Tucker. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1994.

Why do we who travel the straight and narrow find crime so fascinating? Why does the seemingly endless production of murder mysteries enjoy a limitless readership? Is it possible to pass through a supermarket checkout line without glancing at tabloid headlines announcing the marital woes of America's rich and famous? And, if it's possible to answer those questions for the general public with the human desire for titillation or the challenge of a knotty puzzle, then why have scholars in increasing numbers turned toward crime as an explanatory vehicle for American culture, both past and present?

Patricia Cline Cohen, Andie Tucker, Karen Halttunen, Laura Hanft Korobkin and Richard W. Fox mean to demonstrate neither the timelessness of social transgressions nor that hackneyed cliché that violence is a marker of American culture. In historically specific ways each tries to find the warp and woof of narrative cloth that structures stories about murder or adultery in nineteenth-century America. They try to determine the cultural work done by these narratives and then try to show how narratives of murder and adultery linked such competing cultural institutions as the church, the law, and the press. As America became American in the nineteenth century through seismic economic and social change, a struggle for cultural authority ensued—the clergy displaced by lawyers, tabloids shouldering aside respectable journalists, each with their own standards of truth, each meeting the demands of a growing constituency.

Taken together these books are situated at a critical interpretive axis of American studies. It is easy to imagine that in some Planet of the Apes future as learned antipode historians comb archives of their *Homo sapiens* ancestors that their perusal of scholarly journals from the late-twentieth century will lead them to label our own times The Age of Narrative. The ur-text for the age, one assumes, is Hayden White's 1981 article, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality."<sup>1</sup>

Ranking in a foundational way with Joan Scott's "Gender as a Useful Category of Analysis", E.P. Thompson's history of the English working class, and Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*,<sup>2</sup> White's essay drew the attention of historians in particular to the now seemingly obvious insight that the narratives scholars write, indeed the narratives through which we all experience and interpret social relations, are socially constructed. White trumpets the inextricable link of narrative to culture: "[T]o raise the question of the nature of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture." Narrative, a "panglobal fact of culture" gives meaning to experience.

White's insight reverberated throughout the intellectual climate of the 1980s. It linked history to the linguistic turn occurring in the humanities in general and suggested to social historians a new direction through which to pursue questions about power and class. If we were to understand narratives, then ask who shapes those narratives, we would arrive at a more profound understanding of how power is organized in ostensibly democratic states. The cultural work done by narratives—establishing cultural authority, defining class identity, making

constructions of gender, race, and class appear rooted in nature—becomes the glue holding contentious and diverse societies together.

Respectability infused most cultural narratives in nineteenth-century America. Although workers and non-whites could aspire to respectability (indeed, the working class had its own codes of respectability), respectability was fundamentally a story of middle-class morals, behavior, and appearance. To be cast (or to cast oneself) in a story of respectability insured social acceptance and made the individual one with the culture. Narratives of the self-made man, of sentimental domesticity, of the “confidence man and painted lady” were all endowed with cultural force by a component of respectability. By the century’s end, tropes of respectability affected patterns of consumption and domestic decor; to invest an item with respectability—be it a piano, mourning clothing, hats, or parlors—guaranteed its desire by the middle class or by those aspiring to that status.

Grave social transgressions like murder and adultery represented a tear in the fabric of respectability, a tear that could only be mended by re-weaving the narrative or weaving a new piece of narrative cloth. Murder and adultery (at least when involving the socially prominent) found their way into the courts and the newspapers. Once there, they generated stories that could reaffirm cherished ideologies, offer a nucleus for class solidarity or, with a more apparent effect, decide the outcome of a trial. Take, for example, the almost certain murderess who walked free from an 1841 courtroom. As Karen Halttunen tells us, “it may have proved more important for the jury to contain the larger ideological danger posed by acknowledging that a respectable woman could be a killer, than to convict a flesh-and-blood woman of murder” (155). Like Lizzie Borden, who presumably wielded her ax a half century later, the passion required for homicide was simply incompatible with the lack of passion marking a respectable woman. In other words, gender, when incorporated into a respectability narrative, determined legal outcomes.

If homicide lay outside the bounds of respectable nineteenth-century womanly behavior, so too did the sexual assertiveness required to initiate adultery. The tort of “criminal conversation,” that allowed a wronged husband to sue his wife’s lover for property damages, rested on legal definitions of marriage and cultural notions of women’s passivity. As Laura Korobkin writes “the tort’s operative concepts of gender were contained in a particular legal ‘story,’ the conflict between past and present could be resolved narratively, by changing the plot, valence, and vocabulary of the story that appellate law told about what husbands and wives owed to each other. Because law speaks through stories, it can appropriate new literary kinds of stories about marriage and use them to rewrite the legally binding parameters of spousal obligation” (17-18). Change could happen, in other words, when new stories could be told (which indeed happened by the end of the century when the incompatibility of the tort and the actual lived experience of marriage and adultery became apparent).

Respectability's narrative power came in part from its transvestite ability to dress in male or female garb. Knowing that, lawyers wrapped the mantle of respectability tightly around Richard Robinson, the accused killer of prostitute Helen Jewett in 1836. Patricia Cline Cohen notes that "[E]mphasizing Robinson's respectability accomplished two things. First, as shorthand for his class position, it also conveyed assumptions about his moral character. And second, it highlighted the mystery of the crime (and thus sold papers), because of the presumed incongruity of a person of reputable character committing a murder" (204).

Rarely defined yet frequently used as adjective or noun, respectability narrative(s) "policed" society on behalf of culture. Yet, as is clear in these examples, respectability could protect men and women accused of murder as effectively as it could silence women accused of adultery. While the presumed murderers Lizzie Borden and Richard Robinson walked free, once the *New York Times* branded the presumed adulteress Elizabeth Tilton "degraded and worthless," Richard Fox tells us that label would "permanently destroy her reputation, and with it her claim to middle-class respectability" (91).

But the ability of narrative to determine legal outcomes, reinforce ideologies, and define reputations could not do its complicated and critical cultural work without the changing practice of reading in nineteenth-century America. Literate Americans (and by mid-century this included most of white America) devoured tabloids, novels, crime pamphlets, printed sermons, and trial transcripts. The technology of high-speed presses and the convenient absence of copyright laws, for example, meant that British novels (especially works of the wildly popular Charles Dickens) found an enthusiastic American readership almost as soon as an English one. Reading became a hallmark of the middle class. In Andie Tucker's words, reading became "a direct way of gaining authoritative instruction in the rules, boundaries and practices of their class" (123). As important as the didactic value of reading, the symbolism of "what they could afford to read, what they had time to read, what they had the taste to read" was equally important. Sentimental novels, a source of sin and dissipation a few decades earlier, became by the nineteenth century "practical textbooks to the art of being middle class" (123). That the murdered prostitute Helen Jewett read Byron (indeed, a lithograph in her room further testified to her unbridled Romantic nature) and Robinson, her lover and supposed murderer, read of the quintessential German romantic figure Kaspter Houser held meaning for their contemporaries.

Jewett and Robinson play the principal roles in a crime, or more appropriately a narrative, that illustrates the dynamic of class identity and definitions of respectability in three of the books reviewed here: the murder in 1835 of Helen Jewett, a beautiful New York prostitute. Supposedly killed by Richard Robinson, a clerk from a respectable family in a stylish New York brothel, Jewett provided ample material from which to fashion a compelling tale. Her mutilated corpse

in a partially burned bed was the subject of multiple illustrations and engravings. Reporters investigated her cloudy history as though only knowing the “facts” of her background could give meaning to the crime. Was Jewett a cultivated girl seduced and then abandoned? Did she follow a path from servitude to seduction to prostitution? Or was she corrupt from birth, an aberration of the true womanhood ideal? The courtesan talents displayed in her letters prompt Patricia Cline Cohen to comment that Jewett knew what men wanted in the way of sexual scripts. That knowledge alone would place Jewett beyond the bounds of respectability so key to determining the narrative of the crime.

Patricia Cline Cohen’s rich, dense description of the New York where Helen Jewett met her end invites the reader to virtually walk its streets and smell its smells. Jewett met her clients in the infamous third tier of Broadway theaters and plied her trade in gilded brothels with privies in the yard out back. Were you a youthful member of the army of clerks working for banks, counting houses, and merchants or a drummer in town for a week, you could consult published guides to brothels whose pretentious red velvet draperies and provocative paintings were guaranteed to stimulate sexual fantasies in the shyest of country lads.

Like Andie Tucker and Karen Halttunen, Cohen’s interests go beyond the enigmatic Helen Jewett. The enterprising editor of the *New York Herald*, John Gordon Bennett, enters Cohen’s narrative early. She tells us, as Tucker does, of the guard’s pronouncement when admitting Bennett to the brothel where Jewett was murdered—“He is an editor—he is on public duty.” Cohen points out “Bennett’s rhetorical strategy,” which “favored a sexualized corpse over a mutilated one.” To sex he adds “the twist of class”—Robinson was a young man with respectable family origins, while the women of Thomas Street were “friendless and wretched.” The pornographic delight the story afforded readers as the veil of the brothel was drawn back again and again assured Bennett and other producers of the penny press of a limitless market for the Jewett story.

Jewett’s origins played a key role in shaping the moral sensibilities of the story. In its most flattering form, Jewett had been adopted by a judge’s family in Maine following the death of her parents. She was educated as a lady at the Cony Academy, where “orthography, Natural Philosophy and Astronomy, Drawing, a variety of needlework” and more were part of the ambitious curriculum. Her biography darkened when her seduction by a unprincipled “gentleman” greased the slippery slope towards her death in depraved circumstances.

Pamphlets and novels narrated this story in various forms but the Jewett murder played its most important cultural role in the penny or popular press. Through the national circulation of the press—accounts of the crime published in New York’s *Sun*, *Transcript*, *Herald* were reprinted in the *Natchez Daily Courier*, the *Columbus Ohio State Journal*, and hundreds of other regional papers—the Jewett murder confirmed for most rural Americans the critical moral boundary between themselves and urbanites—“the big city was evil and sordid.” Young men about to embark for the city should be forewarned that the city

was a place where “anything could happen.” So while Jewett’s claims to respectability (or at least to respectable origins) were in dispute, her killer’s identity—young man from good family alone in the city—was never questioned. Richard Robinson was the true victim.

Five years after details of Helen Jewett’s murder reinforced boundaries between city and country, another murder became a landmark battle in the moral war between America’s old elite (“whiggish, wealthy, cultivated, conservative and sure of [their] own good taste”) and the new middle class. The stakes were high—“nothing less than the social, political and cultural leadership of antebellum America,” Andie Tucker tells us, and when the smoke cleared a victor had emerged.

In 1840, as described by Tucker, John Colt was charged with hacking accountant Samuel Adams to death. From a family as respectable as Richard Robertson’s—Colt was the brother of Samuel Colt, the inventor of the revolver—Colt, like Robertson, had an unsavory past. Unlike the accused murderer of Helen Jewett, though, Colt confessed that he had murdered Adams but in self-defense rather than with premeditation. And, again unlike the exotically disreputable victim Helen Jewett, Samuel Adams epitomized respectability—a married artisan and property owner. Despite his claim of self-defense, Colt was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to hang. On the day of his scheduled execution, Colt killed himself in his prison cell—“the wretched man had managed to stab himself through the heart with a small claspknife apparently smuggled in by one of his last visitors” (106).

Like Helen Jewett’s murder, the Colt case became a morality tale in the pages of the penny press. Its by now familiar lesson—the perils of the city for young men—was delivered by two enterprising editors, Horace Greeley of the *New York Daily Tribune* and James Gordon Bennett of the *New York Herald*. Unlike the Jewett case, though, where the penny press delivered “whichever fundamental truths its particular audience most wanted and needed” Greeley and Bennett now struggled for a huge and influential “respectable” audience—the middle class. The choice, Tucker tell us, that readers made between the *Herald* and the *Tribune* was between “sensationalism and moralism” or, more classically, the Herculean choice between Pleasure and Virtue. Both papers, though, established their editors as key figures in the ongoing morality play that was New York and both told readers the “congenial truth” they wanted to hear. “Humbug”—defined by Tucker as “an in-joke that not everybody gets”—became part of readers choosing an identity and a community. Readers chose the “humbug” created and circulated by their favorite newspapers. For Tucker, the lesson of the Jewett case was that “every community . . . declare[s] victory for its own truth,” while the penny press constructions of the Colt case demonstrated the “easy triumph of the most inoffensive and orthodox of truths.”

Karen Haulttunen is the third author to examine the relationship between crime narratives and cultural authority in the nineteenth century. As told in *Murder*

*Most Foul: The Killer and the American Gothic Imagination*, the story of the beautiful, mutilated prostitute, along with hundreds of other stories of murder, mutilation, and mystery, “participated in a pervasive cultural idiom which treated human transgression as a dark secret lying buried beneath the deceptively serene surface of American social life”(123). Not surprisingly, Halttunen finds the literary origins of this “cultural idiom” in eighteenth-century Gothic fiction. Thus, the social and economic change amply demonstrated by Cohen and the dissemination of Jewett’s story outlined by Tucker finds a mythic resolution in Halttunen.

Spatially, of course, New York by 1836 ideally captured the Gothic sensibility—its darkness, its hidden corners, its liminality. Halttunen writes that “Gothic spacial sensibility represents an important new effort cognitively to come to term with the expanding urban world of the early nineteenth century” (124). That expansion came in part from commercial activity generated by the Erie Canal which bloated New York’s population by 1825, creating a heteroglossic cosmopolitan city of merchants, drummers, and other transient men who supported a flourishing sex trade.

Gothic sensibility captured the darker underside of this titillating world. The murder of Helen Jewett, like so many other nineteenth-century murders, “generated multiple narratives” because in a secular culture “truth was contestable, fluctuating, uncertain,” while evil was “extrinsic, inessential, and environmental in origin.” The “sacred narrative” of the execution sermon had given earlier generations of Americans the moral certainty of “one truth, God’s truth,” but only a Gothic narrative could capture the “elusiveness of evil” compatible with the social and cultural upheaval of nineteenth-century America. Nineteenth-century murders, Halttunen tells us, actually “generated multiple narratives” because in a fluid and unstable environment “truth was contestable, fluctuating, uncertain.” The uncertainty of truth created readership, identity and, of course, culture. Most important, the Gothic narrative reinforced the ideological power of the Enlightenment liberal ideal—once characterized as a “moral monster,” the murderer fell outside the notion of human nature as inherently good.

Halttunen suggests that the “deep power” of modern detective fiction is rooted in the murder narratives of the nineteenth century. “Once we realize that the cultural construction of murder-as-mystery preceded the ‘invention’ of detective fiction, the way is cleared to understanding detective fiction as a fantasized solution to the problem of moral uncertainty in the world of true crime”(131). The perpetrator of horrors like the Parkman murder—a wealthy real-estate speculator hacked to death by a noted Harvard professor—was a moral alien—a monster.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, “narrative responsibility” shifted from the “providential eye to the readers’ own.”

If the hallmark of the seventeenth-century murder narrative was the comforting certainty of evil and its rewards, than the ambiguity of its successor with its roots in Gothic fiction invited the reader to shape the narrative and assign guilt for the crime. Readers essentially became jurors. Just as talk-radio and

call-in TV constructs a capacious national, even international, jury box today, the availability of courtroom speeches through the published trial reports became a “critical form of cultural expression” in nineteenth-century America. As Halttunen writes, “the trial report made guilt problematic . . . through its narrative qualities” (98).

The specific narrative qualities Halttunen refers to resonated with cultural changes. By the nineteenth century, pain was no longer seen as punishment for sin in Western culture but could, indeed should, elicit sympathy from the cultivated individual. The dead body, no longer a natural part of life, took on a repulsive quality. Taken together, this shift in attitude meant torture and the public display of dead criminals, for example, no longer had a place in public life. Conversely, though, cultural disapproval meant pornographic delight. The pleasure of the Gothic narrative came in part from its ability to subsume images of a half-charred Helen Jewett, a dismembered George Parkman, and the violence inherent in any murder within an acceptable cultural narrative. Reading the Gothic narrative, Halttunen tells us, “helped enforce the rising levels of repression demanded by the growing humanitarian sanctions against violent impulses and actions” (82).

Gender, at least in the nineteenth-century courtroom, offered a seemingly implacable defense against charges of murder, especially if coupled with a respectable reputation. The role of the passionless, moral, subservient woman formed a cornerstone of domestic ideology. As I have written elsewhere, Lizzie Borden’s status as a respectable woman and, as importantly, her presentation of self as such, was largely responsible for her acquittal of the ax murder of her father and step-mother.<sup>4</sup> Earlier in the century Lucretia Chapman, Hannah Kinney, and other women with homicidal tendencies proved as well that it was “more important for the jury to contain the larger ideological danger posed by acknowledging that a respectable woman could be a killer, than to convict a flesh-and-blood woman of murder” (155).

Adultery as well as murder threatened the powerful cultural tropes of sentimental domesticity in nineteenth-century America. Murder, of course, violated natural law while adultery, like marriage itself, rested on a legal construction. Narratives of adultery, the “real-life” rather than the fictional, were constructed in civil rather than criminal court. But, like murder cases, these narratives could then be embellished, reconstructed, and interpreted in the quality and penny press alike, thus guaranteeing their consumption by a wide range of Americans. And, also like celebrated murder cases, adulterous triangles formed the skeleton of novels, often long after the event, insuring their dissemination and ongoing role in culture.

Laura Hanft Korobkin and Richard Wightman Fox mine the scandalous Beecher-Tilton trial of 1875 from the perspectives of literary critic and historian, respectively. In 1875, Theodore Tilton accused Henry Ward Beecher, brother to Harriet and Catherine and the nation’s pre-eminent Protestant clergyman, of



committing adultery with Tilton's wife Elizabeth. After six months, several thousand pages of testimony, and a hung jury, all that seems clear—at least in Korobkin's analysis—is the sentimental construction of the case by both sides (and may the most sentimental win, Korobkin implies). Like other cases related in Korobkin's book, it is the interaction of “gender, genre, law, and story” that convey the meaning of the case for American culture at the end of the nineteenth century. More often than not, it is the “suggestive equality between the stories people tell in court and the stories their listeners already know” that carries the day in court. Like Helen Jewett (and the many cases described by Karen Halttunen) the “narrative subjects” that concern Korobkin are gender and sexuality. To these she adds marriage—the respectable institution violated by adultery.

As in the tales of murder told by Tucker, Cohen and Halttunen, passions run high in Korobkin's study of nineteenth-century stories of adultery. Korobkin's thesis is similar to that trio of historians, though: while justice may be blind, her scales are far from impervious to determinations made by culture. Given the theses of Tucker, Cohen, and Halttunen, it is not surprising to learn that who has social power shapes legal outcomes. Korobkin's argument operates at a less obvious level, though. She contends that the very forms and conventions of sentimental discourse that marked much of nineteenth-century American culture offered compelling possibilities for successful outcomes in nineteenth-century adultery cases.

Korobkin demonstrates that the sentimental narrative that culturally held sway in nineteenth-century America shaped and gave legitimacy to stories of adultery told by male lawyers and the men they represented in criminal conversation cases. The tort of criminal conversation allowed husbands to sue their wives' lovers for damages. According to Korobkin, Elizabeth Tilton sat as silently as Helen Jewett's corpse throughout the trial featuring her husband as plaintiff and Henry Ward Beecher as defendant. Her letters were read, her character analyzed, and both plaintiff and defendant strove to create an image of her that would best serve their case. Korobkin needs not “invoke” theorists like Eve Sedgwick, Rene Girard, Claude Levi-Strauss and Gayle Rubin for us to believe in the homosocial effect created by a woman's silence in such a triangle. As she more elegantly expresses it, “two men attain intimacy through the complex sharing of a woman who, as the object of their exchange, is denied subjectivity.”

Criminal conversation, the civil tort of adultery, structures Korobkin's argument. Criminal conversation was rooted in the powerful “legal fiction” that wives were the property of husbands. Thus, through adultery one man violated the property of another and so was liable for damages. Because women conventionally were silent in court, adulterous wives and their behavior were constructed by attorneys and others. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, as women became increasingly emancipated, this “fiction” of woman as property seemed increasingly, well, fictional. The solution, Korobkin tells us, happened

“narratively”—that is altering the “plot, valence, and vocabulary.” Enter the erotically autonomous wife.

Wives bringing civil adultery suits against their husbands’ mistresses radically re-wrote the law’s story of marriage. By putting a man’s voice in a woman’s body—at least by the rhetorical conventions of the law—the husband became sexually passive. One effect of this rhetorical cross-dressing was to undermine the ability of the sentimental narrative to affect legal outcomes.

For Richard Fox, the Beecher-Tilton scandal is less a venue for discussion of the law than for an analysis of religion and sexuality as the twentieth century approached. By contrast with Korobkin’s sketch of female passivity and its legal consequences, in Fox’s account, Elizabeth Tilton becomes very active indeed. She testifies before an Investigating Committee of Plymouth Church, she writes hundreds of letters, and it is she who packs up and moves out of the Tilton’s Brooklyn home, never to move back. Three years after the inconclusive end to the trial Elizabeth talks to the press, issuing a statement that indeed she did have an affair with Henry Ward Beecher or in her words, “the lie I had lived so well the last four years had become intolerable to me.”

Despite Elizabeth’s activity, though, Fox’s account is still the story of Theodore Tilton and his beloved friend and mentor, Henry Ward Beecher. A fevered blurb for Fox’s book notes this tale of the “irrecoverable intimacy of two men and the woman they both loved.” Well, perhaps. What Fox has given us is proof positive that same-sex intimacy was indeed differently constructed among the American middle class in the nineteenth century than in our own (in some ways more strictly sex-segregated) times. Maintaining that intimacy through visiting and daily letter writing required a set of values and control of time unavailable to, say, the parade of nameless Irish domestics who maintained both the Beecher and Tilton households. If Carroll Smith-Rosenberg established a canonical notion of the “female world of love and ritual,”<sup>5</sup> then Fox describes an almost parallel situation for Victorian men through his depiction of the Theodore Tilton-Henry Ward Beecher friendship.

Religion played a key role in creating and maintaining that intimacy. Religion, a powerful thematic in American culture, has given us the figure of the hypocritical clergyman from Arthur Dimsdale to Elmer Gentry. Should Henry Ward Beecher join their ranks? Several decades ago, historian Ann Douglas excoriated Beecher and his generation of Protestant clergymen for “feminizing” American religion.<sup>6</sup> Fox, in his depiction of “Romantic Christianity,” catches the intensity of religious rhetoric and sensibility that enabled the Beecher-Tilton triangle. He (more so than Korobkin) makes clear the deep religiosity of Beecher and the Tiltons, whatever, to our eyes, strange form it took. In our own time when professions of spirituality have virtually dropped out of public discourse and public expression morality have been co-opted by the right, it may be difficult to grasp how mainstream, at least among the white middle class, these attitudes were.

Like the Jewett case forty years earlier, the Beecher-Tilton scandal hinged upon a respectability narrative and draws us, as it did a contemporary readership, to flash points of cultural change and social tension. In the case of Beecher-Tilton, questions concerning moral authority, the nature of marriage, the characteristics of the urban middle class, the meaning of religious community all come to the fore. Henry Ward Beecher—that towering, thundering, yes, charismatic; apostle of a kinder, gentler Christianity—was not only respectable; he set the standards for respectability. His reputed fall from grace (and by extension the Tiltons' as well) called into question the cultural authority of the Protestant clergy and mortally wounded a long line that led back to the Puritan divines. The significance of the case, again as with the Jewett case, isn't whodunit or what was done and when but rather how the story was constructed, how it was told and what effect it had.

If asked to recommend one of these fine books for you to take to a desert island, I'd be hard pressed to choose between *The Murder of Helen Jewett* and *The Trials of Intimacy*. In part that may be my own disciplinary bias—an American studies colleague recently noted with some sadness recently that I'd never be more than “just a historian” despite twenty years in the liberating embrace of an American studies program. In part, it may be that these books have the narrative advantage of plumbing the depths of one case unburdened by theoretical jargon and comparisons. Quite simply, they offer the old-fashioned pleasure of a good read. But, equally as importantly, Cohen and Fox explicitly, implicitly, and consistently do what Fox commits himself to early on in *The Trials of Intimacy*. As he writes, “The most basic facts of the Beecher-Tilton Scandal, and of the loving that preceded it, are not to be searched for *in* the stories. . . . [T]hey *are* the stories” (9). And that, of course, is the claim that the study of narrative makes for understanding American (or any other) culture.

Taken together, these books make a case for a national culture interpreting particularly high profile legal cases like Jewett and Beecher-Tilton, for the centrality of the city (especially New York) in cultural discourse, and for the power of narrative. Of course, the Jewett, Colt, Beecher-Tilton, and hundreds of other cases *happened*, but their meaning is in how the story is narrated or constructed, where it's told and what public response is. It's in how it captures the *Zeitgeist* and how it shapes class identities. These books and their subjects take us deep inside the American middle class and explain how it was formed by lived experience, gender relations, and the experience of change. As richly, though, as these books explain the complicated nature of the middle class, it is important also to reflect on their silences—race, the regions of the South and West, immigration, and the working-class experience. Surely Haltunen is aware of the South's “strange fruit” even as she tells us of “growing humanitarian sanctions against violent impulses and actions.” The books under review testify themselves to the power of a culturally constructed narrative. Once the subject becomes the American middle class in the nineteenth century, African-Americans,

immigrants, the West, and a host of other corners of the American experience drop from view. If one's source material consists of trial transcripts, crime pamphlets, the penny press, and a reading public, those who don't read aren't subjects. The question, then, hovering over these books, as in all American studies scholarship, is the ancient and probably unanswerable one, who is this new man [*sic*], this American?

### Notes

Thanks to my friends George Cotkin, Peter Mancall, and Barry Shank for their generous and helpful reading of a previous version of this essay.

1. Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in W. J. T. Mitchel, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 23. For a review of narrative in literary studies see Bruce Robbins, "Death and Vocation: Narrativizing Narrative Theory" *PMLA*, v.107, n. 1 (January 1992): 38-50.

2. Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1988; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1964; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Tr. By Alan Sheridan. New York: Pantheon Books, 1977.

3. See also Simon Schama, *Dead Certainties (Unwarranted Speculations)* (Knopf: New York, 1991) for a more detailed analysis of the Parkman murder.

4. Ann Schofield, "Lizzie Borden Took an Ax: History, Feminism, and American Culture," *American Studies* v. 34 n.1 (Spring 1993): 91-103 and "Constructing Lizzie Borden: History, Feminism, and American Culture" *Australian Cultural History* n. 12 (June 1993): 1-13.

5. Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 2(Autumn 1975): 1-29.

6. Ann Douglas, *The Feminization of American Culture* (Knopf: New York, 1977). For a review of Fox's book focusing on Beecher as a religious leader see Robert A. Orsi, "Listening to the Past: Beecher and the Tiltons in the Juncture Between History and Ethnography," review of Richard Wightman Fox, *Trials of Intimacy: Love and Loss in the Beecher-Tilton Scandal*, *Intellectual History Newsletter*, 23 (2001): 100-114..