A Republic of Laughter: Marietta Holley and the Production of Women's Public Humour in the Late-Nineteenth-Century United States

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Abstract:
In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Marietta Holley enjoyed massive success as one of the most popular American humourists. Known as "the female Mark Twain" (Curry xiii). Holley blended dialect and regional humour into a new, democratic and transformative genre that challenged conventional representations of women's emotional life and their relation to public and political spaces. In this paper, I define the genre of humour writing Holley helped to fashion, "women's public humour," and situate it in relation to political and social notions of the public, especially those fractured along gender lines, that were of key interest to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century U.S. humour industry.

1 In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Marietta Holley enjoyed massive success as one of the most popular American humourists. Known as "the female Mark Twain" (Curry xiii). Holley blended dialect and regional humour into a new, democratic and transformative genre that challenged conventional representations of women's emotional life and their relation to public and political spaces. Although Holley is often criticized for profiting from damaging gender stereotypes – or alternatively praised for combating these stereotypes through reversal – her engagement with such forms of representation in fact marks her participation in a democratic, popular discourse that articulated affective practice to performative participation in a nation perceived as a massive public fractured by gender. Stereotypes were, in this often misunderstood genre, instruments for imagining gender in relation to contested, emerging forms of identity that situated democratic subjectivities in relation to the nation. Holley's lucrative and popular writing sought to fashion a place for women in the forms of emotional and political life that were key to the forms of national and political life that were becoming crucial to the nation in the nineteenth century.

2 In this paper, I will define the new genre of humour writing Holley helped to fashion, and situate it in relation to political and social notions of the public that were of key interest to humour writers in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century U.S. humour industry. Holley's most popular books were written in the voice of Samantha, who often identified herself ironically as "Josiah Allen's Wife." The humor of such identification was two-fold: Holley was saying that such humility on the part of women writing in the public sphere was hopelessly old-fashioned, and was also pointing to the ridiculous nature of abstract hierarchical gender distinctions (since Josiah was much smaller, weaker, and ignorant than

Samantha). Such ironic humility also contrasted with Samantha's very modern mobility: many of her books were written about her travels to fairs and events of national significance held across the country. Novels such as *Samantha at the World's Fair, Samantha Rastles the Woman Questions*, and *Samantha at the St. Louis Exposition* sutured popular events and popular stereotypes to expression and mobility, marking new possibilities for women, emotionally and politically, in a historical moment characterized by radical transformations in democratic government and democratic subjectivity. This moment, however, was also characterized by radical contradictions that always mark transformation, in modernity, as a process of conflict rather than consensus. For instance, though Holley's fictional character traveled extensively, Holley herself rarely left her home, and almost never visited the fairs and expositions she described. Moreover, her status as "the female Mark Twain" indexes the overdetermined position of women writers at the turn of the century; always the subordinate, "female" equivalent of another writer, women humorists received praise and success, but were still positioned unequally in a public space fractured by gender.

Marietta Holley and Women's Public Humour

3 Women's humour writing in the late-nineteenth-century United States was political in multiple ways, each characterized by struggles articulated to women's prescribed place in hierarchies linked to gender and capital. Implicitly, women's writing itself was a threat to these hierarchies that worked to establish a position of dominance for men in relation to forms of economic, social, intellectual, and political power. Specifically, women's humour writing worked to situate women as contributors to forms of power that were newly forming with the emergence of mass culture.

4 What is often forgotten in accounts of women's humour writing at the time is the implicit struggle for power (inherent in such publishing) within the expansion of the humour industry, which, like other cultural industries, was expanding as mass culture took shape. Humour writing for profit in the United States was always an activity with a double significance; it functioned as an effort to secure capital and as an effort to direct one dimension of a public discourse working through the contradictions of nineteenth-century democratic government.[1] Women humour writers challenged boundaries established by patriarchal interests, and inevitably brought to light deep contradictions between patriarchy and democracy. Consequently, women's humour writing, which was always in its own

[1] One might add a third dimension to humour's significance at the time, since it can also function as what Alenka Zupancic calls "an internal condition of all ideology" (4).

specific way liminal, almost always took up political issues explicitly, such as suffrage and labour, operating as it did in a very different context from men's humour writing, which was not under the same burden to justify itself and to explain its own contradictions.

5 Holley's humour writing needs to be understood, then, in a specific historical context that transformed even the most light-hearted writing into a charged confrontation with powerful social and political forces. The genre that she invented itself can only be understood in such terms. What appears strange to us about the genre, when we read it today, marks how women's place in the humour industry, and in political culture, has changed; and what appears familiar marks what has remained durable.

6 The first point to note about Holley's humour genre is precisely what made it familiar, and therefore conservative, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Her character Samantha, for instance, who dominates most of her writing, was represented through a first-person narrative that drew on established regional and dialect traditions in the U.S. humour industry. Two of the most popular humour traditions, these genres, which were indeed usually blended together, made humour out of working primarily through matters of identity. Where you were from and how you talked were understood, much as they are today, to index how you thought and, in many ways, who you were in any context that mattered. As historians of these genres have shown, the political significance of regional and dialect humour was always at least double: while such writing gave "voice" to identity groups considered marginal geographically and politically, they also generally sought to place that voice in a safe place that did not threaten the establish hierarchy of identity in the United States, or even to explain the supposed inevitability of the places occupied by these marginal identities.

7 In keeping with such generic and political conventions, Holley's character Samantha writes in a voice that is both challenging and submissive. By virtue of writing in a thick dialect, Samantha immediately positions herself as the classic "other" of regionalist writing, who may be interesting for her "surprising" wit but who is also always placed low on established hierarchies of literary and social value by virtue of her wit being precisely "surprising." In the preface to *Samantha at Saratoga, or Racin' After Fashion*, Samantha opens with a classic conversation between herself and her pathetic, but loving, husband Josiah:

> When Josiah read my dedication he said 'it wuz a shame to dedicate a book that it had took most a hull bottle of ink to write, to a lot of creeters that he wouldn't have in the back yard.
> But I explained it to him, that I didn't mean tramps with broken hats, variegated pantaloons, ventilated shirt-sleeves, and barefooted. But I meant tramps with diamond ear-ring, and cuff-buttons, and Saratoga trunks, and big accounts at their bankers.

> And he said, ‘Oh, shaw!’
> But I went on nobly, onmindful of that shaw, as female pardners have to be, if they accomplish all the talkin’ they want to.
> And sez I, ‘It duz seem sort o’ pitiful, don’t it, to think how sort o’ homeless the Americans are a getting’? How the posys that blow under the winders of Home are left to waste their sweet breaths amongst the weeds, while them that used to love’em are a climbin’ mountain tops after strange nosegays.’ (1-2)

This opening establishes in remarkably efficient fashion the conventions of Holley’s democratic humour genre, the two principle characters, and the basic nature of their relationship. Samantha speaks – and writes – in a thick, folksy dialect immediately recognizable in its diction, and even in its look on the page. She is also immediately engaging in a disagreement with her husband, who, one gathers, has no chance of winning the debate, despite Samantha’s strategic submissive positioning of herself as a “female pardner” who must put up with bad language, and mistaken thinking, from her male pardner.

8 The democratic nature of the genre is multiple. First, the conversation, though gendered and subject at least on the surface to patriarchal conventions, is in fact an actual debate that could be won by either partner. Second, it considers issues of social and political significance, rather than issues strictly limited to the domestic sphere. Third, it is specifically national in its subject matter, considering as it does the state of America and its people, a state implicitly subject to critique.

9 Beyond these straightforward democratic qualities, however, the passage also captures the contradictions that accompanied political thought in the late-nineteenth-century United States, and it is especially these contradictions that drive the humour, the drama, and the action throughout most of Samantha’s adventures. The apparently innocuous discussion is precisely about the political implications of mobility and capital for Americans and for their sense of place at home and in the world. Here, Samantha playfully, but also critically, figures middle-to-upper-class Americans as tramps, who have been transformed into homeless people precisely by taking part in new forms of mass mobility provided by emerging travel and tourist industries (Holley here is also taking part in the humour sub-genre that Mark Twain famously engaged in much of his early travel humour writing). Class, nation and home are all being refigured by these new forms of mobility, and Samantha is trying to work through the implications of these new practices by playfully reversing the identity of the wealthy by figuring them as tramps without a home, though they are still “American.”

10 This theme also plays into the political contradiction for the United States as a kind of democracy that was also a kind of empire, and a kind of democracy that also figured women consistently as incomplete citizens. Amy Kaplan’s theorization and historicization of what she

calls the "manifest domesticity" of nineteenth-century, gendered, public and private discourse is relevant here. Kaplan puts forward the concept to question "how the ideology of separate spheres contributed to creating an American empire [and] how the concept of domesticity made the nation into home at a time when its geopolitical border were expanding rapidly through violent confrontations," arguing that "domesticity is a mobile and often unstable discourse that can expand or contract the boundaries of home and nation" (Kaplan 26). Holley's preface, and the genre she writes in, clearly participates in precisely this form of political practice. The key point to note here is that the generic conventions she deploys are gendered according to the specific historical moment in which she writes, and bound up with the contradictions of the politics of the time.

11 The fact that Holley writes in a humour genre, and in a historically and politically located humour industry, adds some new dimensions to Kaplan's influential theory of manifest domesticity. For Kaplan,

> [t]he notion of domestic policy makes sense only when distinguished from foreign policy, and, uncoupled from the foreign, national issues are never labeled domestic. The concept of foreign policy depends on the idea of the nation as a domestic space imbued with a sense of at-homeness, in contrast to an external world perceived as alien and threatening. Reciprocally, a sense of the foreign is necessary to erect the boundaries that enclose the nation as home. Domesticity, furthermore, refers not to a static condition, but to a process of domestication, which entails conquering and taming the wild, the natural, and the alien. 'Domestic' in this sense is related to the imperial project of civilizing, and the conditions of domesticity often become markers that distinguish civilization from savagery. Domestication implies that the home contains within itself those wild or foreign elements that must be tame; domesticity monitors the borders between the civilized and the savage as it regulates the traces of savagery within its purview." (Kaplan *The Anarchy of Empire* 25-26)

Samantha's opening worry about the loss of home for wealthy Americans participating in emerging modes of mobility wrestles with the problems of the relationship between empire, nation, "away" and "home" that Kaplan identifies as key points of conflict for the period. As a humourist, however, rather than a specifically political, historical, or travel writer, Holley's intervention opens up new forms of worry and new forms of conflict. Samantha's position in this discourse is intimately bound up in her identity as a rural, working-to-middle-class woman who challenges standard identity roles as a writer and as a humourist, but who also accepts those roles through communicating in dialect and regionalist conventions. Her worry is humourous partly for its incongruity; what business does such a woman have concerning herself with such matters? And it is humourous, too, because of the incongruity that obtains in a supposed democracy where everyone should be able to participate in any discourse without raising any kind of incongruity at all.

12 What should be clear in the discussion so far is that Holley was writing, through Samantha, in a special kind of humourous genre that is specifically gendered and public, what I call a kind of women's public humour. The public-ness of the humour is both trivial and substantial. Simply publishing is inherently a public act – though even this trivial point is loaded with all of the significance for women at the time, when doing anything public in a social context was understood through a gendered distinction between the public and private spheres. More substantially, Holley was participating in a public, political debate in an effort to transform that debate and the social and political conditions that positioned women as inferior to men.

13 Below I will discuss some of Holley's rhetorical strategies for participating in, and transforming, public debate, through humourous writing that advocated for women's suffrage. First, however, it is important to identify and discuss Samantha's carefully chosen political position of "megumness," or mediumness. Samantha consistently argues that though she is political, and seeking changes in U.S. society and politics in the interests of "female pardners" or "wimmen," she is not a radical. This position functioned rhetorically in two ways, as a humourous incongruity (Samantha was in many ways clearly a radical) and to demonstrate her liberal democratic political credentials (liberal democracy since the eighteenth century has usually identified itself as the not-radical political position occupying space between more "extreme" forms of political organization). Jane Curry has argued that Holley and Samantha actually participated in a conservative politics:

> Like the suffragists of the 1890s, Holley was optimistic about what female suffrage could accomplish, and she was essentially conservative in ideology. The argument that women who vote would be better wives certainly implies no radical change in sex roles. Though she considered herself "megum" in all things, Samantha was rejecting only the frivolous, overdone, and sentimental characteristics of the genteel tradition. The morality and conservatism were still hers. Like the suffragists, who were primarily white, middle-class Anglo-Saxon Protestants, she encouraged social reform, not social revolution. The basic structure of society was not attacked, merely women's lack of representation in it. (11-12)

Although Curry is correct in many ways to say that Holley was conservative ideologically, it is incorrect to claim, broadly, that Holley's notion of women's suffrage is not radical. Like Holley, many women's suffragists argued that suffrage would not change established gender hiearchies, but this was always either a naïve argument or, more often, a carefully considered, disingenuous position taken rhetorically to push through new suffrage legislation. Although expanding suffrage is no radical assault on parliamentary democracy, which it may be argued is inherently conservative and patriarchal, still, within the context of the late-

nineteenth-century political situation in the United States, women's suffrage necessarily meant a significant change in gender roles, since it granted women increased participation in the public sphere. This is why securing women's suffrage was a major goal for what would have been called "conservative" elements at the time, even as it was viciously attacked by other conservative interests.

14 Curry's error underscores the value of thinking through Holley's writing and politics in generic terms as women's public humour. The issue is not only that such terms guarantee a historical specificity when gauging the relationship between gender, humour, and politics. More to the point, seeing women's humour in such terms grants us the opportunity to appreciate the multiple dimensions in which women's political and popular writing seeks to transform social relations. Simply by writing humour for profit within the humour industry, Holley was taking part in a form of affective, or emotional, labour emerging with mass culture that was typically figured as masculine (though this had been challenged many times throughout the nineteenth century by sentimental women writers, like Harriet Beecher Stowe, and humor writers, like Fanny Fern).[2] The act itself, then, was transformative even in its economic dimension. By writing a politically charged humour, often focused on specific issues like race or suffrage, Holley was taking part in a major public debate. Also, by writing about less overtly political issues such as home and mobility, issues typically considered of traditional "feminine" interest by virtue of their relationship to the private sphere, Holley was participating in the manifest domesticity that was intimately bound up with the nation and with empire. And finally, by grafting together familiar literary genres, such as regional and dialect humour, Holley was leading the transformation of a recognized, popular, and profitable genre.

15 In *Samantha on the Woman Question* the themes of mobility, politics, and women's rights (which were bound to gendered issues of labour, ownership, and freedom) come together in a particularly important, and particularly significant, encounter Samantha has with a senator. Here, Samantha travels to Washington, D.C., in order to secure justice and improved living conditions for a friend, Serepta, who suffers in material and social ways due

[2] Holley's writing can also be understood historically through the emergence of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call "affective labour," or what Arlie Russell Hoschild calls "emotional labour." Although it is usually argued that such labour became increasingly dominant later in the twentieth-century, it is clear that such labour was already of great significance to the public sphere, and to mass culture, in the late nineteenth century. For analyses of affective labour and its relation to the public in a U.S. and global context, see, among the many works available today on affect and emotion, Ann Cvetkovich *An Archive of Feeling*, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, Arlie Russell Hoschild *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*, Eva Illouz *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*, and Daniel M. Gross *The Secret History of Emotion: From Aristotle's Rhetoric to Modern Brain Science*.

to patriarchal citizenship laws. The senator parrots political clichés that were used to justify the distinction between the public and the private that was itself used to justify women's lower status as citizens in the United States. For instance, after hearing some of Samantha's position, the senator says "'I would love to oblige Serepta…. because she belongs to such a lovely sect [sex]. Wimmen are the loveliest, most angelic creatures that ever walked the earth; they are perfect, flawless, like snow and roses" (85).

16 But he is humourously unprepared for Samantha, who, though marked by her rural-regionalism, her femininity, and her dialect, as inferior to the senator, has in fact been participating in political marches, and political debate, for a long time. After Samantha rejects the angelic feminine stereotype, and false references to the manly character of her husband, the senator notes:

> "'Ah, your husband! Yes, wimmen should have husbands instead of rights. They do not need rights; they need freedom from all cares and sufferin'. Sweet lovely beings! let them have husbands to lift them above all earthly cares and trials! Oh! Angels of our homes,' sez he, liftin' his eyes to the heavens and kinder shettin' 'em, some as if he wuz goin' into a spazzum. 'Fly around, ye angels, in your native hants; mingle not with rings and vile laws, flee away, flee above them!'" (85-6).

In the immanent structure of the narrative, the senator's position is ridiculous for its simple errors; neither Serepta nor Samantha are angels, and Josiah is a weak and foolish, if devoted, man who has no real understanding of politics or the world. But as a confrontation between Samantha and an urban, powerful man, the passage is significant for its generic qualities as women's public humour. The senator's larger error is to either parrot, or to actually believe, the oppressive clichés of the dominant, patriarchal, and stereotypical understanding of women's identity.

17 Samantha's reply underscores, with ferocity, the political nature of the senator's errors:

> Cease instantly, or my sickness will increase, for such talk is like thoroughwort or lobelia to my moral and mental stomach. You know and I know that these angelic tender bein's, half-clothed, fill our streets on icy midnights, huntin' up drunken husbands and fathers and sons. They are driven to death and to moral ruin by the miserable want liquor drinkin' entails. They are starved, they are froze, they are beaten, they are made childless and hopeless by drunken husbands killin' their own flesh and blood…. If men really believed all they say about wimmen, and I think some on 'em do in a dreamy sentimental way – If wimmen are angels, give'em the rights of angels. Who ever hearn of a angel foldin' up her wing and goin' to the poor-house or jail through the fault of somebody else?.... You ort to keep the angels from bein' tormented and bruised and killed, etc." (87-9)

Significantly, Samantha's voice seeks to take away the voice of the senator. Here, Samantha is not only securing a voice for women in the public sphere, but also trying to shut up the voice of an elected, masculine official. Moreover, she does it not with flowery language – and here is the great transformative virtue of Holley's genre – but with an ugly dialect that *matches* the ugly details she lists to make her political point. Her rural identity, her dialect, and her gender cross boundaries of publicness by virtue of resisting change (Samantha would lose all her subversive power, and humour, if she became urbanized and genteel), and it is their contrast to urban, dominant rules of publicness that reveal the contradictions inherent to the gendered, political and public culture of the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Modern Contradictions: Mobility, Gender, and the Nation

18 One of the contradictions that runs deep through Holley's writing about Samantha is the diametrically opposed mobility of the character and the author. While Samantha travels to fair after fair, and meeting after meeting, Holley rarely left her home, gathering details for her accounts by reading guide books and other forms of documentation produced by and for the events. The temptation is to read this contradiction as a biographical curiosity and hypocrisy, or simply as a mark of individual conservatism that contrasts with individual radicalism; the differences between Holley and Samantha seem to point, on the surface, back to Samantha's declared "megumness" and what Curry claims is Holley's basic conservatism. But investigating the truth of the contradiction reveals much about women's public humour at the time, and the gendered nature of writing, humour and mobility in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century United States.

19 Almost all of Samantha's books engage, even in their titles, issues of mobility; this is one of the most striking qualities of women's public humour as a distinct genre. *Samantha in Europe, Samantha at the Centennial, Samantha at the St. Louis Exposition, Samantha at the [Chicago] World's Fair, Samantha at Coney Island and a Thousand Other Islands, Samantha at Saratoga,* and *Samantha Among the Brethren*, among others, speak directly to Samantha's exciting and, by the generalized standards of women's place in the public sphere at the time, challenging will to move about the nation outside of her home and private sphere. These are accompanied by titles that register a concomitant political mobility, such as *Samantha on the Woman Question, Samantha on the Race Problem,* and *Samantha on Children's Rights*. Clearly, such titles were designed to sell books within a humour industry that sought to secure profit by participating in timely events and issues of national significance. Holley's books

could sell as humour books, as travel books, as political books, and as women's books. They could even sell as gift-books and as "perennial" or timeless records of the fairs and events Samantha attended.[3] Even the genre itself, then, was characterized by its own kind of generic mobility, crossing almost as many boundaries as possible within the popular book industry in order to sell the maximum number of copies.

20 The financial interests that motivated much of the genre, it is important to note, do not separate or contradict the democratic qualities of Holley's writing, but rather mark just how much democracy at the time was contradictorily caught up in capital. If the fact that this democratic and politically transformative genre was bound to capital is contradictory, it is not only a contradiction of the genre but a contradiction of democracy at the time, and a contradiction worth exploring. The significance of Holley's writing as an instance of the humour industry at the time is precisely that women's public writing was as bound up with the interests of capital in the emerging mass culture of the time as men's writing, even though dominant representations of women's participation in public life, including those circulated by women's political movements (such as suffrage), might emphasize the "purity" or "angelic" dimension of women's participation in the public.[4]

21 The democratic qualities of Holley's writing, and women's public humour, then, register in multiple political and social dimensions. The very fact of Holley's participation in writing for money marks a transgressive (though by no means news) participation in traditionally masculine dimensions of public activity. Moreover, as Mark Simpson notes in *Trafficking Subjects: The Politics of Mobility in Nineteenth-Century America*, Samantha's material mobility (as opposed to her social or political mobility) also marks a certain potentially transformative challenge. Simpson writes, in his discussion of forms of "fugitive mobility:"

> At stake is an understanding that, in Lora Romero's words, 'divides the world into (on the one hand) a public and masculine sphere of abstract rights and (on the other hand) a private and feminine sphere of affective bonds,' and that typically associates masculinity with motion and femininity with stasis." (76)

[3] A contemporary advertisement for Samantha at the World's Fair, held by the Downs collection at the Winterthur library in Delaware, brags that "no home library should be without a copy," claiming collector status for the book and implying a probably exaggerated literary and historical significance for the text.

[4] See Margaret Finnegan's *Selling Suffrage* for a rigorous account of the relationship between capital, mass culture, and women's politics in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. For reasons of space, I have not provided a detailed theorization of the public in this paper. Important texts in the field, for my understanding of the public, include Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, and the critical, feminist reply to Habermas of Nancy Fraser in "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy." Of interest generally, but also specifically for issues relating to the United States, are Michael Warner's *Publics and Counterpublics* and Mike Hill and Warren Montag's collection *Masses, Classes, and the Public Sphere.*

Samantha's life is marked by a complicated interplay of (sometimes only mildly) transgressive public mobility and "conservative" private stasis. She travels again and again to places and events of popular national significance and expounds upon them in an exaggerated, humourously opinionated voice, a voice that contrasts incongruously (and again humourously) with her stable home life.

22 For though the public life she participates in is full of the modern wonders of world fairs, and the democratic excitement of political contests and debates, her private life is a relative rock of stability, much like Holley's own writing career registers in tension with her intensely immobile home life. Josiah and Samantha fight and disagree, but at the end of the day they always love each other and their emotional family life, we can be certain, will always remain essentially the same. Even her nominal status as "Josiah Allen's Wife," which often graces the title of Holley's books as the name of the author, registers this dual relationship to public, democratic mobility and private, familial stasis. The arch-patriarchal name, already somewhat outdated by the time Holley was writing, signifies in multiple ways. First, it is humourous insofar as it is old fashioned, a quality that plays incongruously off of the many ways in which Holley's women's public humour genre is characterized by so many of the hallmarks of modernity. Second, it is humourous insofar as its piety is clearly ironic; the loud, opinionated, politicized Samantha is not so demure or naïve as to truly assume such a subservient role to old-fashioned patriarchy. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the name, which is essentially a kind of double pseudonym (operating as a playful pseudonym for Samantha and a real pseudonym for Holley), sets up one extreme of subservience to patriarchy against another extreme of commitment to feminism that is supposed to situate Samantha right in the middle, in the ambiguous liberal space of "megumness" that captures the inconsistencies of idealized liberal democratic subjectivity in the nineteenth-century United States.

23 The rhetorical position of megumness, as it relates to women's public humour, must be understood historically in terms of the bonds that obtained between publicness, emotional life, and gender at the time. Glenn Hendler explains in *Public Sentiments: Structures of Feeling in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* that novels conducted multiple forms of cultural and political work that intersected with dominant and subversive models of emotional life at the time. He argues "that nineteenth-century American writers, critics, and other cultural arbiters operated under the assumption that novels had public implications…. and that they embedded these assumptions into their novels" (22). In generic terms, such writers often

participated, directly or indirectly, in the sentimental discourse that was popular throughout the century. He explains,

> [t]he novel was thus not just part of an institution of the public sphere, providing an occasion for 'rational-critical discussion' [a formulation made popular by Habermas in his classic discussion of the public sphere], it was also an instrument of subject formation, producing, through acts of identification, a publicly oriented form of subjectivity. This conjunction of the psychic and the public, the emotional and the political, is what I have been referring to as the sentimental politics of affect. (22)

Hendler's articulation of the role of the novel in the period is borne out by my analysis of Holley's writing of women's public humour, except that, while Holley does indeed participate in sentimental discourse, she primarily draws on humour over sentiment, producing a slightly different "politics of affect" from that discussed by Hendler. Moreover, because she writes in the first person through the character of Samantha, her books not only function as instruments of subject formation, but also as fictional *instances* of such formation

24 One discussion in *Samantha at the World's Fair,* which takes place prior to her trip, engages diverse political positions through the humourous, down-home dialect-driven dialogue of Samantha, and her common-sense, megum, and yet somehow radical, political engagement with serious social issues. A self-made millionaire relative of her husband's, "Elnathan Allen, Esquire" visits the couple's home, and promotes for his child elements of a fresh-air health cure fad popular at the time. Having put his daughter up in a very expensive hotel, he proceeds to brag, somewhat hypocritically, about how good she is to the poor. The hypocrisy is doubled, however, when we discover that he owns tenements houses in "the very lowest part of the city…. Miserable old rotten affairs, down in stiflin' alleys, and courts, breeders of disease, and crime, and death" (28). Samantha's thoughts on the matter are extremely critical, though still couched, somewhat, in the generous language of megumness:

> And while he wuz talkin' to such great length, and with such a satisfied and comfortable look onto his face, about the vital necessities of pure air and beautiful surroundin's, in order to make children well and happy, my thoughts kept a-roamin', and I couldn't help it. Down from the lovely spot where [his daughter] wuz, down, down, into the dretful places that [Samantha's friend] Barzelia had told me about. Where squalor, crime, and disease, and death walked hand in hand, gatherin' new victims at every step, and where the children wuz a-droppin' down in the poisinous air like dead leaves in swamp. (29)

The passage is a classic example of Samantha's approach to political and social issues, and a fine example of how women's public humour also engaged sentimental discourse and contemporary politics. Holley consistently represents Samantha's "thoughts;" indeed, Samantha always thinks before she speaks. Her thoughts, however, are not only rational and

critical, but also joined to emotions; this is emphasized through aesthetic terminology such as "lovely" and "dretful," and by figurative language and melodramatic imagery, such as "death walked hand in hand." Samantha's thoughts may be only "roaming," but such self-characterization by Samantha of her own position should be familiar by now: "roaming" is a humble way to figure her thoughts, even as it brings into view the gendered, modern mobility she participates in. Only here such mobility is democratic not in a material, traveling sense, but in an intellectual, political, and manifestly public sense.

25 After thinking, always Samantha's second step (the firs step is conversation), in engaging public discourse, Samantha engages Elnathan in critical discussion, and receives initially the traditional, patriarchal response to women's thinking: laughter.

> I kep a-thinking' of this, and finally I tackled Elnathan about it, and he laughed, Elnathan did, and begun to talk about the swarms and herds of useless criminal humanity a-cumberin' the ground, and he threw a lot of statisticks at me. But they didn't hit me. Good land! I wuzn't afraid on'em, nor I didn't care anything about 'em, and I gin him to understand that I didn't.
> And in the cause of duty I kep on a-tacklin' him about them housen of hisen, and advisin' him to tear 'em down, and build wholesome ones, and in the place of the worst ones, to help make some little open breathin' places for the poor creeters down there, with a green tree now and then. (29)

After some more debate, and some more "statisticks," Elnathan, rather than taking Samantha's argument seriously,

> kinder laughed agin, and assumed something of a jokelar air – such as men will when they are a-talkin' to wimmen – dretful exasperating, too – and sez he - 'You are a Philosopher, Cousin Samantha, and you must know such housen as you are a-talkin' about are advantageous in one way, if nin no other – they help to reduce the surplus population. If it wuzn't for such places, and for the electric wires, and bomb cranks, and accidents, etc., the world would git too full to stand up in.' (30)

This is too much for Samantha to take, and she proceeds to the fourth step in her form of public discourse, a political speech. Explicitly indignant, and calling on Elnathan to "come down on the level of humanity and human brotherhood," Samantha asks Elnathan a classic democratic question in response to the administrative language of stastistics, which, in modernity, have always held a contradictory relationship to the public practice of rational-critical debate. She asks him to imagine himself having been born into such a tenement, where he too might be figured by a privileged, wealthy landlord as a problem of "surplus population." But Elnathan is unmoved.

26 What does ultimately move Elnathan is the illness of his daughter. After visiting his tenements, she becomes ill from the conditions and from the shock of witnessing those conditions. Samantha imagines that the sick girl dreams, in her illness, of a better world that is

a little more radical than one that might be expected from a woman who figures herself as megum:

> She might have pictured in her dreams the drama that is ever bein' enacted on the pages of history – of the sorely oppressed masses turnin' on the oppressors, and driving' them, with themselves, out to ruin…. [and pictured] When co-operative business would equalize wealth to a greater degree – when the government would control the great enterprises, needed by all, but addin' riches to but few – when comfort would nourish self-respect, and starved vice retreat before the dawnin' light of happiness. (43)

Shocked by his daughter's illness, Elnathan changes and does what he can to see this kind of world emerge: "He said it wuz a vision" (44).

27 The incident captures the key elements of women's public humour that I have identified in this paper, and that mark the genre as participating transformatively and performatively in the politics of affect discussed by Hendler. Samantha's dialect, personality, and gender contrast humourously, and politically, with the serious issues she engages critically. Her observations track the emotional politics of rational-critical debate, noting with informed insight and indignation the patriarchal function of laughter in democratic political debates that were always gendered in multiple ways. However, even as Samantha crosses gender boundaries between the public and the private, she still follows the generic script of sentimentality, in which people are transformed politically not so much through thought and debate as through emotional insight and even trauma. Subject formation, here, is figured also as subject transformation, and this is the basic, though often most invisible, function, purpose, and insight of women's public humour in the late-nineteenth-century United States. Holley's commitment to the generic qualities of women's public humour inevitably kept her characters locked in dominant forms of political patriarchy, but her public, emotional, literary, and political labour also broke fresh ground for women's expression in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century United States.

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