

A Review of
The Spectacle of Death: Populist Literary Responses to American Capital Cases

By
Rachel Brushett

Book: *The Spectacle of Death: Populist Literary Responses to American Capital Cases*

Author: Kristin Boudreau

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As the title suggest, Kristin Boudreau's *The Spectacle of Death: Populist Literary Responses to American Capital Cases* focuses on the reactions of the literary world to various, well-known capital cases through the years. In the text, Boudreau artfully traces the response of populist writers to the cases of the Fall River murder, Chicago's Haymarket bombing, the lynching of Leo Frank, and the case of Emmett Till. Boudreau also included chapters detailing the history of execution literature, the modern day campaign against capital punishment, as well as chapters on the cases of death row inmates Gary Gilmore and Karla Faye Tucker.

Boudreau opens *The Spectacle of Death* with a chapter about the early narratives surrounding crime and capital punishment, discussing specifically the history of execution literature. Since literature became available to the masses in the colonial era, scholars have acknowledged that execution literature is particularly powerful as it combines the public spectacle of execution with the influence popular literature. Populist literature in particular is an incredibly powerful form of media as it is able to reach people in the community in a way that mainstream media, namely newspapers, cannot. Populist literature has long been considered to have the power to incite potentially destructive emotions. Historically, the threat posed by execution literature is the danger in allowing public sentiment to become too sympathetic, possibly eliciting feelings of fellowship rather than fear. This is a dangerous occurrence as the court of public opinion often believes differently than the court of law and can often be more powerful. The dangers of misplaced sympathies are demonstrated in Boudreau's description of the case of John Young, executed in 1797 for the murder of a police officer. Post conviction, Young penned a series of hymns and narratives which allowed him to ultimately gain the support of the community. His writings struck a chord with public sentiment, making his eventual execution a potential threat to the prevailing social order. While the need for justice has to be balanced with public sentiments, the author contends that existing execution literature can be used to examine the community's feelings regarding capital cases. The reaction of the public reflects the public opinion, a factor that needs to be carefully monitored in order to maintain the practice of public executions.

Following the introductory chapter, Boudreau writes about the case of the Fall River murder. In December 1832, the body of Sarah Maria Cornell, a pregnant factory mill worker, was discovered hanging from a stake in a farm near the factory. The death was initially ruled a suicide and she was buried shortly after. While initially ruled a suicide, the citizens of the small factory community were dissatisfied with that decision and, following a series of town meetings, the case was reopened for investigation. Following a brief investigation, Reverend Ephraim

Avery, a married minister from a nearby town who was widely suspected to be the father of Cornell's unborn child, was charged with her murder. A lengthy trial subsequently occurred and Avery was ultimately acquitted of Cornell's murder. Avery's acquittal caused an outbreak of public indignation and both Avery and the court system were vilified by the public. The passionate literary response to Cornell's murder and Avery's subsequent conviction was driven largely by the fact that the community members thought of Cornell as "one of their own", someone worthy of their concern and compassion. The case caused a significant amount of outrage since Sarah Cornell, a young, hardworking, Christian girl simply trying to make a living to help support her family typified many of the residents of Fall River. In response to his acquittal, local media sources and local writers penned plays, editorials, and critiques of Avery, the trial, and the Methodist Church for supporting Avery and funding his defense. While Avery was acquitted by a court of law, he was ultimately convicted by a jury of his peers in the court of public opinion. The ruling of the court of public opinion proved to be more powerful than the verdict of the court, and was highly detrimental not only for Reverend Avery but also for the Methodist Church. Reverend Avery was both banished from his position as a preacher and also from public life. The Methodist Church was also viewed with high levels of suspicion for many years to follow.

Boudreau follows the chapter on Cornell's murder with a chapter on the literary reaction to the 1886 trial of the Haymarket anarchists. The incident, a bomb explosion, occurred during a labor rally near Haymarket Square. The explosion, which occurred at the height of the labor movement, sparked an extended, nationwide riot that pitted protestors against police. Four men, well-known labor activists, were convicted of and subsequently hanged for their role in the bombing of the Chicago's Haymarket. Up to and following the execution of the Haymarket anarchists labor leaders continued to rely heavily on populist literature forms to convey their message and to gain support. The labor movement even prior to the Haymarket incident relied on the power of populist literature to educate and motivate their followers. However, the labor activist's use of populist literature was matched by opponents of the Haymarket bombers and the labor movement. Industrialists also used populist literature forms in order to vilify the behavior of the activists and to encourage the community to condemn them. Due to their significant advantage due to their financial and political power, most media coverage favored anti-labor supporters. Even though coverage of the incident was somewhat one sided, the labor party through the writings of several eloquent authors, was able to continue to publish literature, including autobiographies of each convicted anarchist, to gain support for the participants in the labor movement as well as their policies and practices.

Boudreau then writes about the lynching of Leo Frank and the case of Emmett Till and the resulting literary responses to those two events. Both of these incidents are considered to be unique in that they highlighted the existing difference between public opinion and official law. Leo Frank was convicted in 1913 of the murder of a young Georgia factory girl named Mary Phagan. Though not the first suspect to be considered, Leo Frank, the factory manager, a young Jewish man from New York, was ultimately convicted and executed for Phagan's murder. As with the case of Sarah Cornell, the case incited anger in the local community who sympathized with Phagan. The community understood that as the daughter of a poor family, Mary, though young at fourteen years old, needed to work in the factory to help support her family. The case caused uproar as the media played heavily on racial and regional prejudices. Frank was vilified

as he was both Jewish and from the North and, as the factory manager, he was considered to be wealthy, exploiting poor local southerners like Mary Phagan to make a profit. The case also gained a large amount of national interest as it highlighted the deplorable labor conditions in the South. Populist literature following this case, including both poetry and song, played heavily on southern resentment of the Reconstruction.

Boudreau then details the case of Emmett Till. Similarly to the case of Leo Frank, Till's case was heavily based on Southern racial politics. Emmett Till, a young black boy from Chicago visiting family in Mississippi, was brutally murdered lynched for allegedly making a pass at a white lady. Three white men were tried for Till's death, each man was ultimately of the crime. Till's case was unique in the large amount of national media attention it gained. The case gained national attention as it represented the conflict between the interests of the South in maintaining its sovereignty and the federal government's interest in Southern race relations. While the suspects were acquitted by the courts, as has historically been the case, the most important verdict came from the court of public opinion. Widespread and passionate literary protests abounded following the acquittal of the defendants. Activists still turned to populist literature forms to encourage community action and to educate the rest of the world about the racial injustices occurring in the South. Well-known Southern authors including William Faulker, Gwendolyn Brooks, James Baldwin, and Harper Lee became heavily involved in literary works detailing the case of Till and ways of Southern society. Following the acquittal of the suspects, it was evident that while most Southerners were well-versed in the nature of Southern race relations, the public was unable to justify the crime or the subsequent acquittal of the suspects.

Boudreau then details the cases of two death row inmates, Gary Gilmore and Karla Faye Tucker and the literary responses of modern society to their executions. By the 1960s, many opponents of capital punishment had come to believe that it was only a matter of time before the death penalty would be abolished. This did occur, albeit briefly, with the Supreme Court's decision to place a moratorium on executions in their ruling in the case of *Furman v. Georgia* (1972). This brief moratorium was ended in 1976 when the Supreme Court revisited the case and determined that policies and practices had changed enough that capital punishment could be practiced in a fair, impartial way. Gary Gilmore, a Utah inmate on death row for murder, was one of the first inmates to be executed following the reinstatement of capital punishment. As one of the first inmates to be executed following the moratorium, his case tested the public's willingness to enact the ultimate sanction. Gilmore's case was followed closely by the media and was featured in popular publications such as *Newsweek*, *Time* magazine, and *Playboy* in addition to becoming a film. Gilmore's case was also detailed in Norman Mailer's book *The Executioner's Song*. Mailer's book was intended to encourage public debate about both Gilmore's case and the political and social issues present in modern society, much in the same fashion as populist writings following executions. While Gilmore himself frequently expressed his desire to die, the continual focus on his story and his families insistence on exhausting all appears extended his life. The utilization of popular literature surrounding the case of Gary Gilmore as well as his apparent acceptance of his fate led to ever increasing public engagement which resulted in increased public sympathy for Gilmore.

Similarly, in the case of Karla Faye Tucker, populist literature had the effect increasing public sympathies. In 1984 Karla Faye Tucker, a longtime drug user and former prostitute, was convicted and sentenced to death in Texas for a brutal double murder. Whilst in prison, Tucker seemingly turned her life around becoming a repentant born-again Christian and marrying a Christian minister. In her dramatic life change, Tucker, nicknamed the “sweetheart of death row”, gained the support of the local community despite her crimes. Tucker’s religious conversion into a demure, Christian woman who was fully repentant for her crimes played on the sentiments of both the local Texas community and the larger national population. Tucker’s case was unique in that she garnered many allies, including many former death penalty proponents. As with Gilmore, Tucker’s case and eventually execution was heavily followed by the media. Populist literature was used rather effectively by Tucker’s supporters as they attempted to get her sentence commuted, despite the horrific nature of her crimes. While Tucker was eventually executed despite the public’s support, the case serves as an example of the power, and potential danger, of public sentiment. The public’s anger at the state of Texas’ refusal to commute Tucker’s sentence was particularly powerful in a state where executions are both plentiful and routine.

Boudreau concludes her book with a chapter on contemporary writers and musicians who using literature and art to respond to the issues surrounding capital punishment. However, in the modern era, the populist literary reaction to executions has dwindled. Since the cases of Gilmore and Tucker, there have been few cases that have garnered as much public attention. Though capital punishment is still very much a part of American society, it appears that public sympathies and media attention have waned. While there is less attention now on death penalty cases and issues, there is still a group of artists and activists who are attempting to use their work to stimulate discussion about capital punishment and potentially impact official policies on capital punishment. This group continues to use populist literature in the ways in the same way it has historically be used to respond to American capital cases, albeit on a smaller scale.

The major strength of this book is Boudreau’s ability to describe the occurrences surrounding each case and as well as the public sentiments of the time. In her descriptions, Boudreau is able to transport the reader to that time, enabling them to fully understand the details of the crime and the nuances of the literary responses. Boudreau’s writing is also artful in its ability to intertwine the literary responses to various cases across varying time periods. The literary responses highlighted in the book were well selected and fit in with the flow of the book. The book is a valuable read, particularly for those with interests in both criminal justice and literature, as it provides a unique look at the populist literary responses to capital cases, a subject not often explored. Overall, the text is engaging and very well written.

The major weakness of the book is it’s relevance to criminal justice. Overall, the book is only somewhat relevant from a criminal justice perspective. The book focuses much more heavily on the literary aspect as compared to the criminal justice aspect of each case, often making it a challenging read to those who are not well-versed in literature. While there is some discussion of capital punishment and various capital cases, the book focuses mostly on the impact of populist literature forms rather than on the criminal justice aspects of the cases. As a result, Boudreau’s book is likely less useful as a criminal justice text and would likely not be useful in most criminal justice or criminology courses. Thus the book is likely more useful as a

literature text as it does provide a fairly comprehensive review of different sorts of literary responses to social events. The book would also likely be useful in disciplines that focus on the impact of media, such as sociology or journalism.