

J. Michelle Coghlan, *Sensational Internationalism: The Paris Commune and the Remapping of American Memory in the Long Nineteenth Century*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2016. 228pp. \$82.39. ISBN 9781474411202.

Woody Brown*

The failure of Western neoliberalism has had many deleterious effects, of which perhaps the most terrifying has been the resurgence of fascism, ethnonationalism, chauvinism, and other hateful facets of the extreme right wing. Their reintroduction into the mainstream of political discourse, however, has effectively reinvigorated a leftism that had grown docile during the impatient years of relative domestic stability in the West. J. Michelle Coghlan's *Sensational Internationalism: The Paris Commune and the Remapping of American Memory in the Long Nineteenth Century* could not have arrived at a better time. The book, which won the 2017 Arthur Miller Institute First Book Prize, deftly connects the memory of the Paris Commune and the profound effects it had on contemporary American literary and political discourse with the transatlantic state of affairs after Occupy Wall Street, Brexit, and the election of Trump.

Coghlan begins with explicit reference to “recent events—in particular, scenes from Zuccotti park in the fall of 2011,” in order to approach the Paris Commune of 1871, a revolutionary government that was established by radical socialists following the fall of Paris during the Franco-Prussian War (1). Though the relation between the two events might not seem self-evident, Coghlan's research explores the curiously potent specter of the Paris Commune in leftist discourse and activism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While she reads literary texts like the work of Henry James, she also analyzes popular fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (e.g. Edward King's *Under the Red Flag*, G. A. Henty's *A Woman of the Commune*, and *The Werewolf of Paris* by Guy Endore) and other forms of cultural production such as plays, periodical poems, tableaux vivants, and cycloramas. Coghlan's decision to broaden the scope of her investigation in this manner has produced an account of the reverberating impacts of the Paris Commune that is exhaustive, informative, and

* Woody Brown, PhD candidate, Department of English, State University of New York at Buffalo, United States (woodrowb@buffalo.edu).

compelling.

The first chapter, “Framing the Pétroleuse: Postbellum Poetry and the Visual Culture of Gender Panic,” examines the unprecedented destabilization of gender roles presented by “the figure of the female petroleum-thrower or pétroleuse laying waste to the city” (24). Beginning with the comparison of Verena Tarrant in James’s *The Bostonians* to “some feminine firebrand of Paris revolutions, erect on a barricade,” Coghlan explores the myriad cultural forms the pétroleuse took in America and across the Atlantic. The association of the pétroleuse with suffragists was swift: “[T]his figure so often haunted that of the suffragist in the late nineteenth-century American imaginary: the danger that a woman on a platform *might be* a woman on a barricade, for both during the 1871 uprising and in the wake of the Commune’s fall, Americans encountered unsettling images of female Communards marching across the pages of illustrated periodicals” (24). The examples Coghlan finds of this both convince the reader overwhelmingly that the pétroleuse functioned in American life as a terrible threat of the collapse of domestic life.

In the second chapter, “Becoming Americans in Paris: The Commune as Frontier in Turn-of-the-Century Adventure Fiction,” Coghlan turns her focus to fin-de-siècle boys’ fiction in order to show that the Paris Commune remained a potent scene in the American imaginary even after the failure of the Great Railroad Strike of 1877. Novel’s like Henty’s *A Woman of the Commune*, Robert W. Chambers’s *The Red Republic: A Romance of the Commune*, Eugene Savadge’s *The American in Paris: A Biographical Novel of the Franco-Prussian War, the Siege and Commune of Paris from an American Stand-point*, and others show that, as Coghlan writes, “the US literary resurgence of interest in the Commune was one of particular intensity,” and that the “unlikely afterlife of the Paris Commune in American fiction of the 1890s” produced numerous texts that “[showcase] a strikingly similar imperial template for re-emplotting Paris” (53). Coghlan’s extensive reading of *Under the Red Flag* is particularly compelling, as is her commitment to challenging received notions of literary value. It is precisely these received notions that have, in her view, helped to perpetrate a misunderstanding of the transnational afterlife of the Paris Commune.

The third chapter, “Radical Calendars: The Commune Rising in Postbellum Internationalism,” focuses on the celebrations of the Commune that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These were,

Coghlan argues, holidays that stood outside the confines of national affiliation and which therefore provided radicals in the US an opportunity to “live by and through a radical calendar whose sense of alternate time and subversive affiliation provided the grounds for extra-national feeling as an embodied practice of radical memory-making” (84). The syntax of that sentence is complex, and Coghlan’s prose in general can be as well. That occasionally presents an obstacle to the reader who might be searching for clarity, but Coghlan’s methodical presentation of evidence more than compensates for the sometimes obscure summary portions of the text. In chapter four, Coghlan takes a novel approach to Henry James’s “fascination with this Paris in ruins” by focusing on the senses that are often excluded from historical and literary analysis, mostly notably taste (106). Coghlan, who recently edited a special issue of *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* called “Tasting Modernism,” has an exciting interest in the ways we preserve and revisit memories that fall outside the confines of traditional academic analysis. In this case, that method rewards the reader with a rich, full-bodied portrait of the sensory and affective experiences of Americans grappling with Paris *en ruines*.

Sensational Internationalism ends with a turn to radical pulp and theater alongside Endore’s *The Werewolf of Paris*, a novel that retells the Franco-Prussian War through the lens of horror. This chapter, “Restaging Horror: Insurgent Memories of the Commune in the 1930s,” along with the epilogue, “Barricades Revisited—The Commune on Campus from FSM to SDS,” successfully bring the focus of Coghlan’s project up to the state of leftism today. These chapters and the rest of *Sensational Internationalism* significantly expand our understanding of the role that the Paris Commune has played and continues to play in American political discourse. Taking the Commune seriously, in all its varied aspects, has rarely been more important.