
Mary Louise Kete. *Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and Middle-Class Identity in Nineteenth-Century America*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000. 280p.

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Mary Louise Kete's bold critical work, *Sentimental Collaborations*, offers a radically new historicist methodology. The book's unique project is to develop a new poetics through an analysis of a collection of poetry written by a small and, as Kete notes, a most emphatically "ordinary" community of nineteenth-century New Englanders. Indeed, although Kete includes extensive analysis of writers such as Sigourney, Longfellow, Stowe, and Twain, a significant portion of the text is a publication of *Harriet Gould's Book*. This is a text in which Harriet Gould and her extended family in Vermont wrote poems to one another as gifts that, Kete argues, constituted a middle-class culture that dealt with mourning and loss through sentiment. Billed as an appendix, it still feels like part of the main body of the work, inviting us to read it. It is a fascinating move, one that perhaps honors this poetry as the real stuff. That is, there is no patronizing "recovery" work here; Kete is not suggesting that we read *Harriet Gould's Book* merely for its historical or cultural value. Certainly Kete's argument offers plenty of historical and cultural analysis, but her work expands into aesthetic evaluation as well. There is a poetics lurking here. Kete is careful to point out in the first paragraph of her preface that these poems themselves came to her as a gift from her mother-in-law; while at first both women regarded the writing with studied cynicism, they eventually found they were moved by these sentimental poems. Such a moment gives way to Kete's investigation of the "utopian aspects of sentimentality," and it isolates sentimental poetry's capacity to reach out to its readers. It also rather self-consciously points to a fairly random selection of writers and how and why these "gifts" might suggest a new way to read nineteenth-century poetry. The first three chapters of *Sentimental Collaborations* present close readings of poems from *Harriet Gould's Book*, and Kete eschews the approach of the new historical apologist who assesses the text's cultural work outside aesthetic evaluations of a text's essential literary worth. Rather, Kete reads these poems as constitutive of what she calls a "sentimental poetics." Her methodology insists upon an organic link between aesthetic and cultural values; in true new historical form, Kete suggests that cultural value might be the origin of aesthetic value, but she avoids making a case for these poems as valuable merely on the grounds that they are ideologically interesting. *Sentimental Collaborations* therefore contributes an exciting

aesthetic as well as historical appreciation for a new poetics constructed by ordinary American writers.

Thus begins a compelling understanding of the overlooked importance of poetic sentimentality in American Romanticism. “Sentimental poetics” arises out of sentimental collaboration, operating, according to Kete, as an economy of sympathy — the exchange and circulation of affection — in the formation of community. Part I of *Sentimental Collaborations*, “The ‘Language Which May Never Be Forgot,’” reads the economy of sympathy in *Harriet Gould’s Book* to show how sentimentality is used to protect community from the skepticism produced by grief and loss. Parents grieving over dead children dangerously approach misanthropy; the circulation of poetry about loss, and tokens of the dead, such as locks of hair and photographs, operate against misanthropy. Similar to other scholars working in American literature, such as Gillian Brown in *Domestic Individualism*, Kete arrives at the notion that American individualism and sentimentality are co-incidental ideologies; the “collaborative individual” of Kete’s work is constructed through a community’s reaction against death. Relying on apostrophe and the lyric, sentimental poetry solicits formations of bonds between writer and reader, between living and dead, which restore community. Out of such rhetorical devices evolves a thesis about the “corporate subjectivity” of a sentimental culture whose main thematic interests are home and family. In *Harriet Gould’s Book* and elsewhere, the context for these interests is mourning, and Kete concludes that the social act of mourning creates an alternative reading of the American self, not as a liberal possessive individual, but as a collaborative individual whose sentimental bonds define identity.

Consequently, in Part II, “Sentimental Collaborations: Mourning and the American Self,” Kete then turns to more familiar works, partly in order to investigate the importance of the collaborative self in prose works such as Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and Phelps’ *The Gates Ajar*. She also observes the operations of sentimental poetics in the works of Sigourney and Longfellow. In this section, Kete considers the way in which the seemingly conservative practices of sentimentality, designed to maintain the status quo, employ sometimes radical strategies. Such strategies ultimately theorize a community in which any marginalized person might claim to be an American.

In Part III, “The Competition of Sentimentalized Nationalisms,” Kete expands her reading of Sigourney and Longfellow as poets constructing an American self ensconced in community, a self whose individuality is dependent upon its relation to others, an individual who is, as Kete puts it, “possessive, because possessed.” She also moves into a short discussion of the political dimensions of her argument,

reading texts such as Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer* and Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* to contextualize the sentimental American self as a model of identity available to all persons residing in American territories. This contextual work might be expanded, as in Part III Kete draws an overly tidy distinction between sentimental and Enlightenment ideologies with claims such as "[it is] the discourse of sentiment, that succeeds, where the discourse of reason had failed, to define America."

In Part IV she examines the evolution of sentimentality into a new age of cynicism. "Mourning Sentimentality in Reconstruction-Era America: Mark Twain's Nostalgic Realism" considers an aesthetic borne out of sentimentality but wary of its origins. In her discussion of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* and *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, Kete argues that novels like Twain's posit the danger of sentimentality, as it threatens to destroy any sense of individual identity and to betray its utopian aspirations when manipulated as corrupt political language.

Kete observes early on in *Sentimental Collaborations* that the utopian American self achieves unity with others through two fundamental behaviors: "it loves and it shops." In her Epilogue, "Converting Loss to Profit: Collaborations of Sentiment and Speculation," Kete (a bit too briefly, I think) gestures towards an understanding of the American self at a comfortable if problematic intersection between sentimentality and capitalism. Earlier on, in her Introduction, Kete offers an ingenious reading of Al Gore's use of sentimentality as a vice-president seeking to bond with ordinary Americans; more discussion of the operations of capital as constitutive of community (the setting for Gore's tale of family trauma a mall parking lot) might be especially powerful. Like sentimentality, speculation invests the individual in an economic social sphere; shopping might parallel loving as a collaborative move into community. This is an intriguing idea, and although it begs for a bit more to be said, especially in connection with an evolving definition of sentimentality in capitalist America, Kete's point remains a strong one.

A unique and well-written work, *Sentimental Collaborations* contributes most importantly to the study of nineteenth-century American poetry with its methodology. Additionally, Kete's insight into the poetry of these ordinary Vermontians, and into the aesthetic values of what might constitute a class of people whose ambition is ordinariness, is striking and innovative, and offers great excitement to those in the field. *Sentimental Collaborations* belongs on the reading list of anyone interested in new ideas about poetry and American culture, as well as anyone interested in dynamic approaches to literary study.

