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*A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an
American Public After the Revolution.*

By Carolyn Eastman.

Reviewed by Laura Mielke

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Carolyn Eastman, *A Nation of Speechifiers: Making an American Public after the Revolution* (2009), xi + 290 (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, £xx.xx /\$37.50).

Carolyn Eastman's meticulously researched, deeply engaging book traces the development of a U.S. public sphere through oratory and print--media which, as Jay Fliegelman, Sandra Gustafson, and others have shown, were inextricably linked in early America. *A Nation of Speechifiers* dismantles not only the dichotomy of oral and textual communication but also such hackneyed historical concepts as the firm division between public and private spheres and women's exclusion from the former in early America; the inextricability of public formation and nation formation; and a technology-enabled increase of participation by 'non-elites' in the nineteenth-century U.S. public sphere. Attending to period definitions of the public as well as Habermasian formulations, Eastman locates in the 1810s a sea change in the U.S. public sphere, declaring that by the 1830s a consensual rhetoric had been succeeded by a proliferation of oppositional styles.

Part one of the book (chapters 1-3) situates the formation of a U.S. public sphere in the 'elocutionary revolution' (namely the 1780s through the 1810s). A marvelous opening chapter describes post-Revolution elocutionary education in the northeast, summarizing the content of popular textbooks and what we know about their use in the classroom. The treatment of exhibition days in particular illustrates non-elites' participation in a public that was decentralized yet unified by elocutionary rules. Here Eastman establishes her argument that the 1810s saw a shift in elocutionary training toward patriotism and the worship of national orator-heroes, designed to transform critical auditors into attentive, compliant citizens.

Chapters two and three revise traditional narratives of women's and American Indians' contribution to the early U.S. public. Until the 1810s, argues Eastman, a common elocutionary education for girls and boys and the positive reception of girls' participation in school exhibitions suggests that women were vocal public participants. Even as standards of female propriety tightened in the early nineteenth century, schoolgirls employed gender norms to their rhetorical advantage in speeches given and published. Eastman connects the ubiquity of noble, eloquent American Indians in school books to a broader understanding of the relationship between oral and print media in early America. She also traces a shift in representations of Native orators: until the 1810s, the Euro-American schoolchild's public performance of Native speeches (authentic and fabricated) encouraged emulation of American Indians and awareness of colonial injustices; however, in the 1820s and 1830s, the Native orators of school books and the broader print culture transformed from virtuous models to dying objects of sympathy, implicitly justifying Indian removal policy. (Unfortunately, here Eastman is too quick to dismiss such portraits as simply 'sentimental' [105], neglecting scholarly accounts of the sentimental mode's diverse political applications in the antebellum period.)

Part two of the book turns from the northeastern schoolroom to the city proper, focusing on contests over public participation as manifested in young men's debating societies (chapter 4), journeymen printers' typographical societies (chapter 5), and Frances Wright's first U.S. lecture tour (chapter 6). Thanks to Eastman's careful archival work and lucid prose, these chapters draw in the reader in with vivid accounts of non-elites who understood their public displays of cultivated speech and writing as essential to the perpetuation of the republic. And this is where

my only significant criticism of the book (other than its inattention to elocutionary cultures outside the northeast region) comes in. The transformation of U.S. public(s) in the 1810s that Eastman describes appears to be already underway in the mid-1790s as previously Francophile journeymen printers shifted to apolitical commentary after the American backlash against the Reign of Terror, and it appears to be still going on in the late 1820s as Frances Wright prompted newspaper editors to confront the threat of women's access to the lectern. In other words, the complex histories Eastman includes in part two challenge--in fascinating ways--the historical timeline of part one. This prompts the reader to scrutinize any conclusion about the altered public culture of the 1830s. Eastman, not unlike Fliegelman before her, concludes almost wistfully that the promise of a consensual, non-hierarchical U.S. public had evaporated by the 1830s.

And yet, Eastman emphasizes in the conclusion that she does not wish to romanticize the post-Revolutionary period, and indeed that she hopes to undermine the romantic notions of earlier accounts that 'imply that the material and technological changes in American life gave the disenfranchised greater access to public participation' in the first half of the nineteenth century (212). She most certainly succeeds. *A Nation of Speechifiers* provides an illuminating account of how elocutionary practices, written as well as oral, and the non-elites who employed them were essential to the formation and evolution of a U.S. public.

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