



“ALL-ELECTRIC” NARRATIVES: TIME-SAVING APPLIANCES AND DOMESTICITY IN AMERICAN LITERATURE, 1945–2020

by Rachele Dini
(A Book Review)



In “Wakeful Dreams,” the first chapter of *What Art Is* (2013), American philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto argues that Andy Warhol’s art is about ordinariness. Warhol viewed the ordinary world “as aesthetically beautiful” and admired the things that his Abstract Expressionist colleagues ignored. “Andy,” writes Danto, “loved the surfaces of daily life, the nutritiousness and predictability of can-

ned goods, the poetics of the commonplace” (43). The various cartons that he fabricated for his legendary show at the Stable Gallery in 1964—Brillo, Kellogg’s, Del Monte, Heinz, and so on—represented less a criticism of industrial society, in its seriality and sameness, and more an endorsement, the endorsement, and this is Danto’s point, “one might expect from someone born into poverty and who might therefore be in love with the warmth of a kitchen in which all the new products were used” (43). Others, in postwar America, became attuned to domesticity and its promise of plenty, and Warhol’s cartons, like the wallpaper of William Morris, attempt to redeem the ugliness (and scarcity) of ordinary life rather than celebrate it. But the vision of plenty does not stop at canned foods; it extends to include the products stored in the new electrical appliances that filled

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the American home and contributed to the aura of domestic warmth coveted by Danto's Warhol. After reading Rachele Dini's *"All-Electric" Narratives: Time-Saving Appliances and Domesticity in American Literature, 1945–2020*, one might take another look at Warhol's *Icebox* (oil on canvas, 1961): the neatly ordered rows of foods project the promise of a reassuring abundance, but the name "icebox" sounds a nostalgic note. As we learn from Dini, the word "refrigerator" was already in use in 1934, as shown by one of several illustrations included in the volume, an advertisement in the *Saturday Evening Post* announcing "a New Style Sensation in Electric refrigerators." But William Carlos Williams preferred the name "icebox" in his 1934 poem "This Is Just To Say" (1934), where it "appears a calculated move intended to convey the speed of change at a time of intense modernization. It self-consciously gestures to the convulsive effects of industrial modernity on language and the poet's own struggle to keep pace with them" (58). Warhol's use of the archaic name for "refrigerator" in 1961 joins him to his literary predecessor in the pursuit of an actively reparative backward gaze that exceeds any reduction of the text (or image) to either a denunciation or a celebration of industrial capitalism.

Dini turns her attention to the phenomenon of electrification and the meaning of time-saving electrical appliances in American life and politics. She focuses on objects like refrigerators, toasters, vacuum cleaners, irons, and so on to shed light on "the racialized, gendered, and classist narratives long used to promote the 'all-electric' home and its gadgets" (2). Throughout, she concentrates on literature's dealings with those narratives. Her topic is American literature's engagement with electrical appliances from the post-war period to our day. As for the aims of the volume, it treats time-saving appliances and domestic electrification more broadly as a synecdoche of the domestic and international construction of post-war America, examining the literary responses to this politics. The author is interested in how electricity "intersects with the literary response to the last century's shifting understandings of home, gender, race, and class" (7). Her analysis intends to unveil the limits of technology and its potential "to exploit, oppress, and perpetuate nationalistic and imperialistic ideals" (3).

Dini swims in an out of an admirably vast array of texts by post-war and contemporary writers—from Jack Kerouac and William Burroughs to John Cheever and William Yates, from Marge Piercy and Marilyn French to the Black American fiction of Ralph Ellison, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and American Caribbean writer Paule Marshall, among others, from Kurt Vonnegut and Don De Lillo to science fiction and the postmillennial fiction of Joan Didion, David Wojnarowicz, A. M. Homes, Charles H. Johnson, Catherynne M. Valente, and Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore. Her discussions demonstrate literature's powerful role in affirming a particular vision of American identity at home and abroad. In this regard, Dini makes explicit that domestic appliances are like so many fossils of a mythic and unitary image of America. Her objects of inquiry, therefore, constitute fertile ground for the analysis of US representation and cultural politics, a fact illustrated by the book's opening anecdote about Donald Trump's berating of the "worthless" new dishwashers and his appeal, at a campaign rally in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in January 2020, to his supporters to "remember the dishwasher" (1). In the rhetoric of the forty-fifth President of the United States, the domestic object buttresses what Dini calls "this fascist promise of a return to a previous imperial splendor" (2).

The best moments, however, are those when the author's research helps us to enter a text from a different direction. For example, when we can brood on Dini's reading of William Carlos Williams's icebox in "This Is Just To Say" and fast-forward to the mood of Warhol's own refrigerator. Or when we are made to re-open Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* to notice the rusty hinge of an icebox—an icebox, not a refrigerator—that "conjures an image of an old, perhaps second-hand, device far removed from the gleaming electrically powered items that featured in 1930s ads and films—and far removed from the sheen of the white woman's kitchen in which Claudia's mother works" (149). The archaic name of the appliance points to a reparative possibility, away from the mesh of class and race conflicts, that is otherwise foreclosed in Morrison's text. Or when Dini assists us in re-opening another classic, Paule Marshall's "To Da-duh, in Memoriam" (1983), where the author recalls visiting her native

Barbados in 1937, when she was eight, and telling her grandmother all about the “refrigerators, radios, gas stoves, elevators, trolley cars, wringer washing machines. .. toasters, [and] electric lights” in the United States” (145). The divide between the child and Daduh, signaled by the appliance, calls to mind Marshall’s manifesto “From the Poets in the Kitchen” (1983), where “the warm safety of the kitchen” (Marshall 24) promises to repair the inner divide or double loyalty experienced by many women of color and eloquently articulated by writers like Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, the editors of the pioneering anthology *This Bridge Called my Back* (first edition 1982, second edition 1983).

Assisted by Dini’s research, we can enter the texts of Jack Kerouac from a different direction. Kerouac and the Beats were “to reappropriate Walt Whitman’s vision of electricity as a metaphor for collectivism, fraternity, and embodied democracy” (70). But when Dini closely examines Kerouac’s fascination with the refrigerator *face-en-face* with the commercial advertisements of the period, her reading “throws into relief the indebtedness of Kerouac’s aesthetic to the very same media landscape he claimed to oppose” (78). Some of these unexpected connections might invite further inquiry into the “time-saving” quality of these electrical appliances: what kind of idea of time and temporality might these time-saving objects conjure? What kind of intervention on time and representation might they wish to make?

Most of the times, American writing seems to present the appliances of the all-electric American home as distillations of racial and ethnic inequality, of gender inequality, or of the failed promises of postwar consumer capitalism. A white enamel stove “taunts” the speaker of Langston Hughes’s poem “Deferred” (29); while time-saving appliances remain inscrutable for many first-generation immigrants, as shown in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *A Woman Warrior* (30). In Marge Piercy’s texts, and in other feminist writers like Kate Millet, time-saving appliances are “embodiments of congealed labor” and an allegory for gender equality as when, in Piercy’s *Going Down Fast*, the use of the archaic word “icebox” suggests “a symbiotic relationship” between language and the archaic expectation expressed by one of the male characters requesting his lover that

she make him a sandwich from “[a]nything out of the icebox” (Piercy qtd. in Dini 129).

At times, Dini’s discussion opts for well-trodden meanings of the writerly class divide, as certain American names emerge to lead opposing camps: on one side, Tillie Olsen, for whom the iron and board become emblems of the limited opportunities for working-class women, and, on the opposite camp, Gertrude Stein, who is reported to have vented her enthusiasm for the Sunbeam Mix Master (1939–1945) in the anecdote about her partner Toklas “murmuring [Mix Master] in her dreams” (qtd. in Dini 21). The volume, however, is a welcome addition to the field of Literary Objects Study. The lavish illustrations, mostly commercial ads, may present the “good life” as a universal right, but the reader finds out that literary representations of electrical appliances tell a different story. The author draws on the resources of cultural studies, the cross-pollination of Marxist approaches and queer phenomenology, Actor-Network Theory and New Materialism, design history, and feminist social history to remedy the broader neglect of the domestic sphere by literary criticism.

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