

Introduction

In the mid-1980s, during an excursion to Harvard Square, I visited my favorite used bookstore and stumbled across a first edition of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. Published in two volumes in 1856, *Dred*, I was later to learn, was Stowe's second antislavery novel. At the time I hadn't heard of the novel, and I suspect the owners of the used bookstore were similarly in the dark about Stowe's post-*Uncle Tom's Cabin* career, for the two pristine volumes (which I've long since marked up) were priced at ten dollars, which was cheap even back then.

I bought the books, and when I returned to Maryland I put them in my "to-read" pile and for a while didn't give them a second thought. But a few years later, while doing research on Frederick Douglass for a book on temperance and nineteenth-century American literature, I found amidst Douglass's temperance writings in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* a number of columns celebrating *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I had been taught that black writers were always at odds with – or "signifying" on – white writers, so I was intrigued by Douglass's enthusiastic response to a novel that James Baldwin and other twentieth-century African American writers so disdained.¹ While reading Douglass's newspaper on microfilm, I also found a number of letters and essays by Martin Delany, who had unflattering things to say about Stowe and Douglass. Who was Martin Delany? And would *Dred* help me to better understand the relationships among Douglass, Stowe, and Delany?

I finally cracked open my volumes of *Dred* and immediately noticed how different the novel was from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, particularly in its conception of race. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Stowe, working as a romantic racist, presents dark-skinned blacks as domestic and nonviolent, but in *Dred* the eponymous dark-skinned revolutionary hero is prepared to kill for black freedom. In her second antislavery novel, Stowe also turns against the African colonizationist ending of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Instead, she

2 Race, Transnationalism, and American Literary Studies

depicts fugitive slaves who choose to emigrate to Canada or escape to New York City, where they find a new home. Did Stowe, a subscriber to *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, conceive of her second antislavery novel partly in response to the criticism of the colonizationist ending of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* voiced by Delany and Douglass in that newspaper? And did Delany's serialized novel of black revolutionary conspiracy, *Blake* (1859, 1861–62), set in the United States, Canada, Africa, and Cuba, emerge partly in response to his reading of Stowe's antislavery novels, which, while mainly set in the United States, had sections set in Africa and Canada? My attempt to answer the questions that emerged from buying a used copy of a Stowe novel soon led to the abandonment of my temperance project and the decision to begin a new one that addressed, among other things, race and transnationalism in Douglass, Delany, and Stowe.²

I rehearse this narrative of the scholarly journey to my second book, *Martin Delany, Frederick Douglass, and the Politics of Representative Identity* (1997), as a way of considering the dramatic changes that took place in the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies from the mid-1980s to the 1990s. These changes had a decisive impact on my research agenda and those of many other Americanists. To be sure, as I discuss in Chapter 1, significant work on race and American literary studies had been published before the 1980s, and the field had changed as a result of the Civil Rights and women's movements (which had a role in revitalizing Stowe studies).³ But even with the increased interest in race and gender, many of us were still working to reproduce the literary-nationalist exceptionalism that helped to create the field of American literature studies in the first place. Perhaps I'm overstating the influence of F. O. Matthiessen-inflected antebellum American literary studies, but the fact is that graduate education in nineteenth-century American literature during the 1970s and early 1980s meant reading Matthiessen, Richard Chase, R. W. B. Lewis, Leo Marx, and many others (all very much worth our continued attention) who did their major work well before the 1970s. My own first book, *Conspiracy and Romance* (1989), which I began in the late 1970s, certainly addressed race and transnationalism by examining Charles Brockden Brown, James Fenimore Cooper, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville in relation to such discursive contexts as international freemasonry, European revolutions of the 1830s, transatlantic socialism, and slave revolts at sea.⁴ But the book was inspired by a desire to revise and enlarge Chase's notion of the American romance, not to dislodge and move beyond it. My debt to Chase's *The American Novel and Its Tradition* (1957) remained central to my initial ambition to follow up with a book on temperance and

Introduction

3

nineteenth-century American literature. But as critics in the field began to ask new questions, I did, too.

The 1980s was a time of critical ferment. I want to highlight three developments from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s that had an especially large impact on nineteenth-century American literary studies. First, the New Historicism that had become so central to early modern studies quickly migrated to American literature studies. The trajectory running from Sacvan Bercovitch's 1978 *The American Jeremiad*, one of the most influential Americanist works of the 1970s, to Walter Benn Michaels's 1987 *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, one of the most influential Americanist works of the 1980s, reveals a field that was moving away from a concern with "Americanness" (and its reproduction) in order to explore the enmeshment of literature in economic and other social and cultural discourses.⁵ The New Historicism brought scholars back to the archives to assess literature not as a transcendent category but as a discourse in a world of interconnected discourses. When I finally got around to reading *Dred*, I had no inclination to try to fit the novel into a master narrative of nineteenth-century American literature, hermetically understood. Instead, partly under the sway of the New Historicism, I was interested in reading the novel synchronically in relation to an archive of contemporaneous discourses about slavery and race. That archive included the writings of Douglass and Delany.

A second key development in the field from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s was that race theory, slavery studies, and African American studies came into their own. Especially influential were the essays on race in special issues of *Critical Inquiry* published in 1985 and 1986 and then brought out as a book, *"Race," Writing, and Difference* (1986), edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. This collection included work by Gates, Anthony Appiah, Hazel V. Carby, and Houston A. Baker Jr., critics who over the next several decades would be among the scholarly leaders in the study of race, slavery, and African American and African diasporic literature. Gates's collection had an immediate impact on the field, teaching us that "race" itself was a contested term that could and should play an important role in literary and cultural interpretation. If race, as the volume's authors contended, was a rhetorically constructed category, one of the challenges facing literary critics was to better understand how race came to inform literary production at particular historical moments. Dana D. Nelson addressed precisely these questions in *The Word in Black and White: Reading "Race" in American Literature, 1638–1867* (1992), and Eric J. Sundquist followed

4 Race, Transnationalism, and American Literary Studies

with his landmark *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (1993).⁶

Nelson's and Sundquist's books emerged not only from new developments in race theory but also from compelling work on slavery and African American literature. William Andrews's 1986 book on the slave narrative, *To Tell a Free Story*, brought African American literature more to the center of American literary studies, and slavery moved from background to foreground in many literary analyses. Drawing on developments in the New Historicism, critical race theory, and the ever more sophisticated scholarship on slavery coming out of history departments, Deborah McDowell and Arnold Rampersad's coedited book *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (1989) threw down the gauntlet and challenged Americanists of all period specializations to consider the relationship of slavery to the nation's literary history. The volume included Hortense Spillers's tour de force "Changing the Letter," which put Stowe and the contemporary writer Ishmael Reed into conversation.⁷ Taking in these critical developments as I thought about Stowe in conversation with Douglass and Delany, I began to ask why Stowe changed her views on race from the 1852 *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to the 1856 *Dred*, what were the consequences of such a shift for the form and conception of her second antislavery novel, and how her antislavery novels responded to African American writing of the period.

One way I addressed such questions was to learn about racial representation and the history of the antislavery movement through archival and secondary research. Another way was to read Stowe in relation to Douglass, Delany, and other antebellum black writers. I felt encouraged in such a comparative approach by Toni Morrison's reflections on race and American literature, which, of all of the critical work I encountered during the 1980s and early 1990s, had perhaps the greatest impact on my own scholarship. I discuss Morrison in Chapter 1, so I'll be relatively brief here. In her 1989 lecture/essay, "Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature," and her short, powerful 1992 book, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, Morrison called for a complete rethinking of the American literary tradition, starting with how scholars typically approach the canonical writings of white authors. Those writings, she argued, were "haunted" by the "dark and abiding presence" of African Americans – as slaves, free people, and writers – and thus needed to be considered differently from the ahistorical US romance tradition established by Richard Chase. For Chase, who emphasized the centrality of allegory and melodrama to the American novel, "blackness" signified something like evil or the sublime.⁸ But for

Introduction

5

Morrison, blackness in US writings had much, if not everything, to do with slavery and race, which she claimed white writers typically sought to evade, but in ways that contributed to their art. Morrison's argument was thus both political and aesthetic, for she maintained that the black presence had a shaping impact on American authors and was a crucial constituent of their writing. Among the many aspects of Morrison's work that I admired at the time, and continue to admire, was her dismantling of the idea of distinct white and black literary traditions. I also appreciated that Morrison didn't mandate a particular method for reading white and black texts together. She trusted critics to develop their own methods for doing so.

Morrison's work inspired Henry Wonham's edited collection, *Criticism and the Color Line: Desegregating American Literary Studies* (1996), which included Shelley Fisher Fishkin's wide-ranging essay "Interrogating 'Whiteness,' Complicating 'Blackness': Remapping American Culture." Morrison, Fishkin, and other critics of the time helped to shape my efforts to read Stowe's *Dred* through the lens of race and African American culture. Because Stowe's novel is about slavery and features black characters, it is not exactly "haunted" by blackness; it directly addresses slavery and race. But exploring cross-influences among Stowe, Douglass, and Delany allowed me to see what Morrison termed the racial "miscegenation" at the heart of American literary history. Morrison's call to read canonical white authors in relation to the African American presence eventually led to my coedited collection *Frederick Douglass and Herman Melville: Essays in Relation* (2008).⁹ Her influence can also be seen in the essays in this volume (Chapters 5, 9, and 10 in particular) that read white and black writers together in national and transnational contexts.

This discussion brings me to a third critical development from the 1980s to the early 1990s: the increasing importance of transnationalism to nineteenth-century American literary studies. Again, this development was not entirely new to this critical moment, as Americanists had long been interested in studying connections between British and American literature, though typically with an emphasis on what makes US literature distinctively different from British literature. But as slavery and race emerged as central concerns of nineteenth-century American literature studies, the British-US dyad came to seem limited. It seemed particularly limited with respect to black writers, who, because of their historical and genealogical ties to the international slave trade, inevitably had a complicated relationship to US or British nationalism. Recognizing the need for a critical paradigm that would address these complications, Paul Gilroy, in

6 Race, Transnationalism, and American Literary Studies

The Black Atlantic (1993), developed a provocative revisionary perspective on the transnational dimension of black writing, arguing that “different nationalist paradigms for thinking about cultural history fail when confronted by the intercultural and transnational formation” that he termed “the black Atlantic.” For Gilroy, the Middle Passage and the triangular slave trade demanded a new way of thinking about the place of Europe, the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean in black writing. *The Black Atlantic* vitalized African American and African diasporic studies, and it contributed, as well, to the development of oceanic studies. At the time of its publication, the book supplied fresh tools for working on Delany, to whom Gilroy devoted a major section. As he elaborated in *The Black Atlantic*, Delany doesn’t fit easily into US nationalist paradigms. His travels between the United States, Canada, Central America, England, and Africa reveal a man in motion who is perhaps best understood through transcultural, international formations. Gilroy’s insights were crucial for my reading of Delany’s *Blake* in relation to Stowe’s *Dred*, as he helped me to better understand not only Delany’s but also Stowe’s transnational orientations. His work has remained crucial to much scholarship on African diasporic studies, and it informs my discussion of the circulatory routes of Nathaniel Paul’s black nationalism in Chapter 3, below.¹⁰

Equally influential on the transnational turn in American literary studies was the publication, also in 1993, of Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease’s edited collection, *Cultures of United States Imperialism*. Gilroy forcefully linked black writing to diasporic histories which were inevitably tied to British, French, and US colonialism and imperialism. Kaplan and Pease’s collection addressed these and other contexts, stimulating new interest in US literature’s international engagements. Their collection made clear that imperialism had long been part of the national project and that the nation’s literature was often implicated. As I discuss in Chapter 9, one of the most popular stories in American literary history, Edward Everett Hale’s “The Man without a Country” (1863), was regularly adduced by Hale and others to support US imperialism and expansionism. Numerous essays in Kaplan and Pease’s collection also demonstrated how central race was to the imperialist imagination; their collection included essays on imperialism in white and black culture. *Cultures of United States Imperialism* and Kaplan’s later *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (2002) gave rise to a new emphasis on imperialism in nineteenth-century American literary studies, which has been eye-opening but at times has risked its own form of exceptionalism (the United States as *the* imperialistic nation). That said, imperialism as a topic for literary investigation soon

Introduction

7

became important to my own work in nineteenth-century American literary studies; I engage the topic in *Dislocating Race and Nation* (2008) and in several essays in this volume (see Chapters 2, 7, 8, and 9).¹¹

In 1993, Gilroy, along with Kaplan and Pease, suggested the potential of transnational American studies for developing new frames of analysis in larger geographical contexts. That potential was highlighted by Carolyn Porter's provocative review-essay of 1994, "What We Know That We Don't Know: Remapping American Literary Studies," which addressed José David Saldívar's *The Dialectics of Our America* (1991) and other works on the literatures of the Americas. Stirred by the hemispheric vision central to such scholarship, Porter declared that it was imperative for Americanists to "rupture the nationalist myths" in order to create a "field reconstellated by a historical politics of location."¹² There was a flurry of work from the mid-1990s into the twenty-first century that reconceived American literary studies in relation to the Americas, Europe, and Africa.¹³ Certainly one of the significant consequences of the transnational turn for Americanists, who had long thought of US literature mainly in relation to the nation-state, has been a rethinking of scale. Porter's essay, for instance, celebrated and further prompted work on hemispheric studies; my coedited *Hemispheric American Studies* (2008) owed much to Porter's instigations. Hemispheric studies, transatlanticism, globalization, and concerns about the planet (which I take up in Chapter 4 of this volume), along with the recent interest in temporality, provided new critical frames for Americanists,¹⁴ while raising some nagging questions: What about the local? And what happens when US literary studies is reframed in relation to larger geographical contexts? Does the United States remain at the center, and, if so, have we really moved beyond exceptionalism?

Given the sometimes excessive enthusiasm for transnational approaches,¹⁵ it is not surprising that skeptics have recently emerged to tell us that transnational American literary studies continues to do what American literary studies has always done: assume or advance US exceptionalism. For instance, in an acerbic essay titled "On the Redundancy of 'Transnational American Studies,'" Jared Hickman asserts that the very term "transnational American studies" "is a logically incoherent formulation" because the idea of American nationality at the nation's founding, according to Thomas Paine and others, was precisely its status as "the first trans-nation." Thus Hickman maintains that "American studies' transnational turn is not merely mimetic of contemporary US hegemony but a profound and predictable return to the very wellspring of American exceptionalism – the Enlightenment localization of the universal in America." Equally acerbic is Winfried Fluck, who asserts that the "forms of

8 Race, Transnationalism, and American Literary Studies

transnationalism that are currently dominant in American studies are not a new beginning.” Thus he questions what many see as one of the more positive developments of transnational study: the field’s fuller engagement with African American and other minority writings. Convinced that current modes of such engagement are symptomatic of “the American rhetoric of consensus,” Fluck concludes that the new transnationalism ultimately perpetuates the old way of doing American literary studies. As he chidingly puts it: “What American revisionists do not want to acknowledge . . . is the crucial role ethnicity and minorities have played in redefining and thereby reviving American exceptionalism.”¹⁶

How odd that efforts to broaden American literary studies could be seen as falling into the exceptionalist trap! As I sketched out at the beginning of this introduction, American literary studies from the 1940s to the early 1980s was all too often about reproducing the terms of the field as established by mid-century Americanists, and at least one of those terms was an American distinctiveness that had virtually nothing to do with racial diversity and the history of slavery. Taking a longer view of the *practice* of American literary studies, which for most of the twentieth century had nothing to do with a Paine-like devotion to the trans-nation, I would suggest that newly prevalent forms of transnational analysis (hemispheric, transatlantic, diasporic, global) have done precisely what Carolyn Porter called for in 1994: helped us to become more aware of what we know we don’t know about nineteenth-century American literature. In this sense, transnationalism is at least in part about epistemology. As Yogita Goyal has recently remarked, “[T]here is nothing intrinsically radical or complicit about a transnational turn”; instead, it offers “an occasion for examination and critique.”¹⁷ In this formulation, transnationalism is less a specific method than a heuristic that presses us to continue the work of trying to understand the nation in all of its complexity, at least in part by exploring intertwined histories of slavery, race, and the nation from a variety of locations and perspectives.

Recent critical work has played a large role in these revisionary analyses. But as I suggest in all of the chapters of *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies*, nineteenth-century writers themselves bring various national and transnational perspectives to their work. Attending to their perspectives allows us to see more clearly the complexity of their approaches to race and nation, for their vision was invariably *not* hermetically national. Cooper, Hawthorne, Nathaniel Paul, Melville, María Amparo Ruiz de Burton, and a number of other nineteenth-century authors looked well beyond the nation or considered the

Introduction

9

nation in sometimes overlapping geographical contexts. Even as I draw on a range of critical approaches, I emphasize the need to take fuller account of nineteenth-century authors' representational strategies and insights. We still have much to learn about nineteenth-century American literary history, and one of our most neglected resources, I argue in the book's opening chapter, are the canonical authors themselves.

The chapters that follow take a variety of approaches to race and transnationalism and have been shaped in part by the critical developments that I've been describing. Most of the chapters draw on previously published essays, which have been significantly revised, updated, and in some cases expanded in order to respond to issues that have come up since their initial publication. For instance, Chapter 8, on "antebellum Rome" and *The Marble Faun*, a version of which was first published in 1990, contains new material on transatlanticism and race, and from beginning to end addresses post-1990s criticism on Hawthorne. Because most of the chapters emerged from essays published over a long period of time, the book does not seek to develop one large (overdetermined) argument. Winfried Fluck, in the same essay warning Americanist revisionists about the danger of reviving American exceptionalism, remarks on the value of monographs on American literary history in which the "organizing principles seem to rest on primarily practical considerations and remain, theoretically speaking, relatively arbitrary."¹⁸ In some respects, *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* is that sort of book. It's "practical" insofar as it addresses critical problems staked out less in this introduction than in each chapter's opening interpretive frame. The book can be regarded as a selective guide to conversations about race, transnationalism, and American literary studies over the past few decades, as well as a critical work on these topics. Or it may be best to view it as a casebook, by which I mean that each chapter poses a critical question and then attempts to model ways of building an argument from literary and historical evidence.

As heterogeneous or even "arbitrary" as these chapters may seem, several key issues provide a through-line to the volume: interracialism, tensions between nationalism and transnationalism (or the local and the global), book history, literary form, the complicated and shifting nature of race, and the importance of close reading. An interest in authorial agency or intention may be unfashionable, but I emphasize authorial perspectives in many of the chapters, whether I'm analyzing Cooper's views on race and empire (Chapter 2) or slave narrators' efforts to situate themselves in relation to an American revolutionary

10 Race, Transnationalism, and American Literary Studies

tradition (Chapter 5). The writers I discuss in this book typically know what they're doing; they have a deep understanding of their culture, and they have much to teach readers about the nineteenth century and beyond.¹⁹ At this point it is hardly revolutionary to say that Melville can illuminate the topics of race and transnationalism, but it is somewhat revolutionary to say the same about Cooper (as I do in Chapters 1 and 2). Nathaniel Paul helped to establish the terms of black nationalism (Chapter 3); Poe and Hawthorne anticipated some of our current concerns about climate change (Chapter 4); William Wells Brown examined connections between race and corporeality (Chapter 6); Melville engaged transnational aesthetics in his "minor" novel *Israel Potter* (Chapter 7); Hawthorne, as I've said, addressed transatlanticism in ways that anticipate today's critical interest in the subject (Chapter 8); and Edward Everett Hale and Sutton Griggs explored interconnections among citizenship, race, nation, and the oceanic (Chapter 9).

I begin *Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* with a theoretical chapter on Toni Morrison, race, canonicity, authorial knowledge, and reading. The issues raised in that chapter recur throughout the book, and in effect frame the volume. The subsequent chapters are arranged in a loose chronological order based on the publication dates of the works under consideration. At a critical moment in which chronology, periodization, and historical contextualization are under suspicion,²⁰ I continue to see value in literary-historical analyses that take account of continuities and differences and tell stories over time. Perhaps the most compelling story that unfolds across the ten chapters that follow is of the nation's failure over one hundred years to live up to its egalitarian revolutionary ideals. This is a story told in various ways by white and black writers alike, by such figures as Paul, writers of slave narratives, Brown, Melville, and Griggs. There are apprehensions running from Cooper to Hale about the contingency and vulnerability of the nation, and even about the end of humankind (see Chapter 4). The book also tells a story about geographical scale, but that particular story doesn't have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Still, it's worth noting that all of the authors discussed in this volume, however local their concerns, looked beyond the nation in their writings. Mid-twentieth-century critics of US literature may have developed an exceptionalist vision of that literature, but it's difficult to find a corresponding exceptionalism in most nineteenth-century US writers.

Race, Transnationalism, and Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies concludes with a chapter on Douglass in fiction from Stowe to James McBride, and thus takes us full circle from my opening reflections