The theme of inequality has often dominated academic criticism, which has been concerned with identifying, analyzing, and demystifying various regimes of power and the illicit hierarchies upon which they are built. Studies of the United States in the nineteenth century have followed this trend in focusing on slavery, women’s writing, and working-class activism. Kerry Larson advocates the importance of looking instead at equality as a central theme, viewing it not as an endangered ideal to strive for and protect but as an imagined social reality in its own right, one with far-reaching consequences. In this original study, he reads the literature of the pre-Civil War United States against Tocqueville’s theories of equality. *Imagining Equality* tests these theories in the work of a broad array of authors and genres, both canonical and non-canonical, and in doing so discovers important new themes in Stowe, Hawthorne, Douglass, and Alcott.

Kerry Larson is Professor of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He is the author of *Whitman’s Drama of Consensus* (1988) and of several articles on American literature and culture.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE
AND CULTURE

Editor
Ross Posnock, Columbia University

Founding editor
Albert Gelpi, Stanford University

Advisory board
Alfred Bendixen, Texas A&M University
Sacvan Bercovitch, Harvard University
Ronald Bush, St. John’s College, University of Oxford
Wai Chee Dimock, Yale University
Albert Gelpi, Stanford University
Gordon Hutner, University of Illinois, Urbana–Champaign
Walter Benn Michaels, University of Illinois, Chicago
Kenneth Warren, University of Chicago

Recent books in this series

156. KERRY LARSON
Imagining Equality in Nineteenth-Century American Literature

155. ANITA PATTERSON
Race, American Literature and Transnational Modernism

154. ELIZABETH RENKER
The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History

153. THEO DAVIS
Formalism, Experience, and the Making of American Literature in the Nineteenth Century

152. JOAN RICHARDSON
A Natural History of Pragmatism: The Fact of Feeling from Jonathan Edwards to Gertrude Stein

151. EZRA F. TAWIL
The Making of Racial Sentiment: Slavery and the Birth of the Frontier Romance

150. ARTHUR RISS
Race, Slavery, and Liberalism in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
IMAGINING EQUALITY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN LITERATURE

KERRY LARSON
To Matthew
# Contents

**Acknowledgements**  
*page viii*

*Introduction*  
1

**PART I  BY NATURE EQUAL**  
1  *Indestructible equality*  
13  
2  *Inequality in theory*  
39

**PART II  THE MANY IN THE ONE**  
3  *The precise spirit of the average mass*  
75  
4  *Comparatively speaking*  
107

**PART III  EQUAL BUT SEPARATE**  
5  *Transcending friendships*  
143  
6  *The common condition*  
168

*Notes*  
183

*Index*  
209
Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal to many different friends and colleagues and I am grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge them here. For their response to early versions of the project as it was beginning to take shape, I would like to thank Sharon Cameron, Marjorie Levinson, Richard Poirier, and Rei Terada. Their support and advice came at a critical time. Jonathan Auerbach, Don Pease, and Xiomara Santamarina pressed me to clarify certain terms and key presuppositions in my argument, while Adela Pinch helped me think through a number of issues addressed in Part II. For their feedback on various portions of the manuscript I am grateful to Sandra Gunning, Mark Maslan, Jim McIntosh, Eliza Richards, and Michael Szalay. Gregg Crane read everything I could get to him, and was an unerring source of good judgment and uncommon sense. Ross Posnock’s interest in the project helped buoy its author and expedite its completion.

Portions of the manuscript were read at the University of Paris, Oxford University, Dartmouth College, and the University of Michigan. My thanks to the organizers of the individual conferences and the patient audiences. My thanks as well to Blackwell Publishing and Nineteenth-Century Literature for their permission to reprint portions of articles that appear in Chapters Three and Five.

Without the patience, humor, and absolute confidence of my wife, Lisa, this book would not have been written. Her love and support have enriched my life beyond measure. Finally, I dedicate this work to my son, Matthew, in gratitude and in love.