

Introduction
*A Question of Time: American Literature from Colonial
Encounter to Contemporary Fiction*
Cindy Weinstein

A Question of Time began with a question: what might we learn about American literature when multiple approaches to time are brought to bear on the field? The hypothesis explored in this volume, shared by other scholars whose works will be engaged with in this introduction and throughout the essays that follow, is that American literature, from its beginnings to the present, might provide a particularly rich set of texts to examine in this regard. After all, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* features a breakdown, by hours, of Franklin's day as he strives for greater efficiency and productivity; Washington Irving famously lamented the fact that, unlike Europe, America had no past that its authors could draw on for inspiration; James Fenimore Cooper complained, "There are no annals for the historian"; slave narratives constitutively occupy the hybrid temporality (both free and not free) of a fugitive slave; and Quentin Compson begins his section of Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* with a quotation from his father about giving Quentin "the mausoleum of all hope and desire" that finds its visual equivalent, I think, in the art object created by Man Ray – another famous Philadelphian, born Emmanuel Radnitsky – that provides this book with its cover.¹

Another title that engages the question of time assumes pride of place in this list of books: F. O. Matthiessen's *American Renaissance*, the foundational work of literary criticism that most critics agree established the field of American literature. Matthiessen argues that the "devotion to the possibilities of democracy" evident in the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, and Walt Whitman links these authors and functions as the source for their literary accomplishments. For Matthiessen, their works inhabit and attest to a temporal state of possibility; their belief in the future greatness of America secures their greatness as American writers.

Perhaps we should not be surprised, then, that the magisterial opening chapter of *American Renaissance* is called "In the Optative Mood."

The optative mood is a grammatical mood with a complex temporality. In its adjectival form, it expresses a wish or a desire, which has within its very structure a fundamental discontent with the present. The simultaneity of multiple temporalities discussed in all of the essays in *A Question of Time* has its precursor in the optative framework deployed by Matthiessen and before him, as we shall see, Emerson. The optimism underlying the optative competes with a nagging sense that all is not well. Indeed, one need not look far to understand how “the optative mood” might have resonated with Matthiessen, whose *American Renaissance* was published in 1941. In yearning for a more hopeful time, he imagined the possibility of a renaissance of the renaissance and found it in the “imaginative vitality” of the literature produced during “the half-decade of 1850–55.” About Emerson, whose *Representative Men*, written in 1850, begins that list of great works, Matthiessen writes, “[Emerson] wrote no masterpiece, but his service to the development of our literature was enormous in that he made the first full examination of its potentialities.” Without Emerson, Matthiessen argues, these other books, for example, *Moby-Dick* and *The Scarlet Letter*, would not have been written. Nor would *American Renaissance*. Matthiessen’s own argument about the potentiality of American authors to be inspired by the potentialities of American democracy derives from his reading of Emerson, who also occupied “the optative mood.”²

Thus, it makes a great deal of sense that Matthiessen borrows the phrase – “in the optative mood” – from Emerson himself. In “The Transcendentalist,” he writes, “Our American literature and spiritual history are, we confess, in the optative mood.” Emerson characterizes the transcendentalist as ceaselessly calling attention to an “unconcealed dissatisfaction – [that] expose[s] our poverty and the insignificance of man to man” and “pay[s] you only this one compliment, of insatiable expectation” (96). The transcendentalist, and of course Emerson, knows of what he speaks as he distills the essence of “the optative mood.” On the one hand lies the “unconcealed dissatisfaction” with the present and, on the other hand, the “insatiable expectation” of the future (94). The transcendentalist is no different than other Americans except insofar as the poles of discontent and hopefulness are further apart. Emerson looks around and sees that “every voice is raised for a new road or another statue or a subscription of stock,” which will lighten the load of one’s present unhappiness and move one closer, or so it feels for a short while, to a happy future. In contrast stands the transcendentalist, who “accuses the whole world” and “declares all to be unfit to be his companions” (94) or believes

Introduction: A Question of Time

3

in a “Saturnalia or excess of Faith” (92). One might say that what sets the transcendentalist apart is that his optative mood is moodier than most.

The grammatical import of the optative mood – its drive toward the future, its frustration with the present, and its elision of the past – seamlessly affixes itself to accounts of American character. Alexis de Tocqueville’s account certainly stands as one of the most influential. In a chapter from the second volume of *Democracy in America*, “Why the Americans are so restless in the Midst of their Prosperity,” he writes, “Among democratic nations, men easily attain a certain equality of condition, but they can never attain as much as they desire . . . At every moment they think they are about to grasp it, it escapes at every moment from their hold.”³ Matthiessen similarly observes about Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Melville, and Whitman: “[their] tones were sometimes optimistic, sometimes blatantly, even dangerously expansive, sometimes disillusioned, even despairing,” but “the total pattern of their achievement . . . give[s] fulfillment to the potentialities freed by the Revolution” (xv). This “equality of condition” produces the “strange melancholy,” what Ishmael would call “the ungraspable phantom of life,” that Tocqueville diagnoses at the core of American identity. The temporal category of the optative, Matthiessen argues, is what defines America (and Americans) and what enables him to claim the mid-nineteenth century as another renaissance and to establish the field of American literature.⁴

The optative mood is indeed a powerful lens through which to read American literature, even texts in which Matthiessen had or most likely would have had very little interest. In this volume, Susan Gillman’s essay reminds us that America’s optative mood manifests itself in violent acts of geographical expansion (Emerson’s “new lands”), as it also erases the past, or tries to, and even the present (the “restless[ness]” of Tocqueville’s America). This is what is meant by the phrase “manifest destiny,” coined in 1845 by John L. O’Sullivan.⁵ It literally says that destiny, or future time, is made manifest, as space. America’s temporal mood gets spatialized as the advance of time is materialized through the perpetual acquisition of more space, more territory.

In fact, the text perhaps most responsible for establishing space as the essence of the nation’s “composite nationality” actually has time as its prime mover. I am referring, of course, to Frederick Jackson Turner’s “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” a paper that he delivered on July 12, 1893 in Chicago to the American Historical Society. If Emerson provided Matthiessen with his *point d’appui* – the temporal register of the optative – other critics of American literature and culture,

such as Henry Nash Smith and R. W. B. Lewis, advanced an argument about the central role of space in the narrative of American identity. Turner's lecture might usefully be thought of as Emerson's optative mood conceived of spatially.⁶ This passage makes the point: "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities, its continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society, furnish the forces dominating American character."⁷ The spatial orientation of the frontier thesis is undeniable as Turner provocatively, at least from the point of view of a literary critic, describes his reading of America *as* a reading: "The United States lies like a huge page in the history of society. Line by line as we read this continental page from West to East we find the record of social evolution" (4). Turner suggests that we turn the page and read from "the point of view of the frontier itself" (9) and maintains that in doing so, we can understand how the fact of space "promoted the formation of a composite nationality for the American people" (9). But as profoundly informed by spatial matters as Turner's thesis is, the argument depends upon an evolutionary discourse with deep temporal roots; indigenous roots that if not yanked out by those migrating to the frontier are yanked out by Turner himself. Hence, his chilling assertion that "when American history comes to be rightly viewed it will be seen that the slavery question is an incident." Others have attended scrupulously to the temporality at the core of Turner's argument, and, in fact, there is a cottage industry among historians who have critiqued the thesis.⁸ The "perennial rebirth" that Turner celebrates requires that others die. Spatializing time means that some things, even some people, do not fit.

Several essays in *A Question of Time* call attention to how the texts they examine chafe against the constraints of conventional ways of narrating, representing, or performing time. In doing so, they work alongside and engage with the many scholars who have already contributed significantly to what is called the "temporal turn" in literary studies. Wai Chee Dimock's influential approach aims to "bring below-the-threshold data back into the field of vision" by positioning American literature in relation to world literature. The result is what she calls "deep time." My own work in *Time, Tense, and American Literature* aims to demonstrate that the depth Dimock calls for need not depend upon a rejection of the field of American literature itself (a category that is not altogether dispensed with in her critique). Dana Luciano does indeed bring "data back" by identifying in nineteenth-century America "a temporality generative of Americanness" in

Introduction: A Question of Time

5

order to explain the massive grief work that accompanied a culture determined to eradicate temporalities that were not seen as generative. Thomas Allen, for example, persuasively argues for a “temporal nationalism” specific to a number of developments in nineteenth-century American culture, including, for example, the production of clocks and the science of geology. Lloyd Pratt states, “Like any national literature, American writing has no single time to call its own.” His avowed skepticism about the category of “American writing” does not, however, mean that he fully rejects the notion of a national literature itself. Instead he discusses specific genres that “have in fact been characterized as either expressively or productively ‘American’ ones.”⁹ These are just some of the critics who make the case for the hermeneutic rewards of thinking about temporality in a national context. They support the notion that despite the many ways in which the construct of America itself has been importantly challenged and deconstructed, most effectively by Dimock, the “imagined community” that is America might nevertheless still be a valuable organizational *donnée* through which to think about time.¹⁰ The diachronic echoes that can be heard in this volume, and that Robert S. Levine points to in the afterword, confirm the interpretative value of this imagined community.

These contributions, though crucial to *A Question of Time*, differ from it in that more often than not they have a dominant theoretical bent that is deployed to examine a particular genre or a discrete time period. This volume does not, for the simple reason that its methodological, generic, and chronological breadth are meant to showcase and clarify the hermeneutic rewards that come with the “temporal turn.” It is also worth mentioning the heretofore scholarly focus on nineteenth-century America, especially the antebellum period, which has been fertile ground for the “temporal turn.”¹¹ And with good reason, considering that Matthiessen’s analysis is anchored in the optative mood of the mid-nineteenth century. Of course, several essays in *A Question of Time* also study the literature produced in the years before the Civil War, but with an eye toward expanding the texts that we typically rely on to understand the period and/or the ways of examining them. Thus, Christopher Looby takes up Nathaniel Beverley Tucker’s strange 1836 novel *The Partisan Leader: A Tale of the Future*, which represents a culture collectively experiencing a state of “impending” catastrophe, waiting for a war that was certain to come and waiting for the mass death that would accompany the conflict. In addition, Julia A. Stern demonstrates, through a reading of Mary Chesnut’s use of Homeric and Virgilian allusions in her Civil War diaries, the presence of a temporality that is at once specific to the nineteenth

century and temporally outside of its immediate moment by virtue of its allusive relations with epic predecessors.

Unlike other works on “the temporal turn,” *A Question of Time* also attests to the fact that the category of time preoccupies a variety of nonliterary disciplines, each with its own frameworks and methodologies. The cascade of new insights into time, whether from the fields of neuroscience, philosophy, queer theory, material culture, performance studies, or aesthetics, illuminates literary texts in striking and productive ways. As this volume demonstrates, when those disciplines enter into conversation with literature, the effects are intense and probing. One such effect is to shake up the boxes of time, as it were – the periods – into which we place texts. And if we situate them differently, if we engage in “a significant expansion of our sense of plausible chronologies,” as Catherine Gallagher recommends in her reading of time-travel films, the relation among texts gets interestingly defamiliarized.¹² One such example from *A Question of Time* would be how Native American rituals of deliberately slowing down reverberate with Don DeLillo’s critique of speed in *Cosmopolis*. The temporal heterogeneity of the sections and the volume as a whole invites readers to think about time not only in terms of events happening simultaneously, progressively, or anticipatorily, but also in terms of how time gets materialized in the textual object or how time gets theorized in a variety of genres. Indeed, because many of the readings make the case for the concatenation of temporalities in the texts they analyze, the essays in the volume have been organized not by period or genre but by shared temporal interests. As Dimock puts it, “The twists and turns on the coils of time are dizzying” (29). The design of *A Question of Time* is meant to draw the reader’s attention to those twists and turns, while also underlining recurrent patterns related to time, such as repetition, delay, velocity, and suspension.

This volume, I should note, could have taken more than one shape, but as certain themes and concerns became increasingly prominent, it became clear that they were resonating with the Man Ray image on this book’s cover. Why? The most obvious reason has to do with the fact that the object is a metronome – a visible, material, aesthetic, and sonic device that keeps track of time. Equally significant is the production and reception history of the object itself. Initially, in 1923 when Ray first created what he called “Object to Be Destroyed,” the eye on the metronome was not the eye of someone Ray knew. That changed ten years later, when Lee Miller ended her relationship with Ray. He redid the piece, replacing the original anonymous eye with a photographic reproduction of hers. Thus, Ray’s

Introduction: A Question of Time

7

metronome has a deeply personal history that makes its way into the art object, but the object itself – a metronome – also acts as a sort of zero degree of time. A metronome produces a conventional standardized sound of time in accordance with or against which a performer can produce her own temporal rhythm. The metronome, in other words, times time. One can slow down or hasten the number of beats per minute. And lastly, the remaining history behind Ray's image calls out for a theorization of time. In addition to changing the object in the aftermath of his beloved's departure, Ray changed the title. "Object to Be Destroyed" was stolen and literally destroyed by students during a Paris protest against a Dada exhibit in 1957. When Ray remade the object, yet again, he called it "Indestructible Object," purchasing about one hundred metronomes with the insurance money so that if one of his indestructible objects were destroyed, there would be another to take its place. Titles are, of course, proper nouns, but it seems worth mentioning that the new title, even if it is tongue-in-cheek, excises the verb from the original one. The new title signifies a kind of stasis that its own history undermines. The section titles in *A Question of Time* invoke this object's history. They combine verb and noun in order to foreground the processual aspects that go into understanding time: materializing, performing, timing, and theorizing.

With that context in mind, the first part, "Materializing Time," consists of three essays in which the texts being discussed have publishing histories that inform the multiple temporalities at work in their stories. Christopher Looby's "The Sense of Impending" focuses on *The Partisan Leader: A Tale of the Future*, a relatively unknown novel by Nathaniel Beverley Tucker that was pseudonymously published in 1836 with a false title-page date of 1856. Told retrospectively, it imagines Virginia's successful secession from the Union in 1849. The novel was reprinted in New York in 1861 and in Virginia a year later. Whereas the cover of the New York edition framed the novel as evidence of secessionist conspiracy, the cover of the 1862 edition celebrated it as "glorious prophecy." Using Reinhart Koselleck's notion of the "semantics of historical time," Looby traces the fascinating ways in which Tucker's novel instantiates a temporal state of "impending." In her essay, "Mary Chesnut's Epic Time," Julie A. Stern considers the editions of Mary Chesnut's Civil War writings, which she began writing in the early 1860s, revised in the late 1870s, and more fully developed in the early 1880s. That extended composition history maps onto a similarly elongated publishing history, with very different versions appearing in 1905, 1949, and 1981. Using C. Vann Woodward's edition as her guide, Stern demonstrates how Chesnut at once produces "an extrachronological

kind of thinking in the revised narrative” that encompasses her lived experiences during and after the Civil War, combined with her literary understanding of them as profoundly epochal. Derrick R. Spires’s essay, “I read my Mission as ‘twere a book’: Temporality and Form in the Early African American Serial Sketch Tradition,” makes a significant contribution to this first part by examining how the very notion of installments over time replicates the marronage experience of both uncertainty and possibility. Like Looby’s interest in “impending,” Spires points to the “sketchy not yet” quality of the sketch, which often characterizes the content of the sketch, as well as its form, as readers wait for the next installment, which is not quite yet.

Essays in the second part, “Performing Time,” focus on particular spaces – Salem courthouses, Native American councils, an eighteenth-century pageant known as “The Mischianza,” and Shaker dance halls – in order to examine the theatricalization of time. In “At the Time of that Look: The Problems with Simultaneity in the Testimony at Salem,” Nan Goodman explores the legal and interpretive difficulties that emerged when causal arguments about the effects of witchcraft were accompanied by in-court demonstrations of witchcraft. Whereas the causal claims depended upon a temporal pattern of sequence – this caused that; this preceded that – the performances had a temporality based on simultaneity, making it impossible to determine who was the witch and who wasn’t. In another example of competing temporal regimes, Angela Calcaterra’s “Bad Timing: Indigenous Reception and American Literary Style” reconsiders critiques of James Fenimore Cooper’s style and plot from the point of view of Native American ceremonies, in which pause and delay played a significant role in their encounters. Her reading of the timing through which information gets withheld and shared in these encounters explains much of what has perplexed generations of Cooper critics. Cooper appears yet again in Jonathan Elmer’s “André, Theatricality, and the Time of Revolution,” and, like Calcaterra, Elmer aims to explain the sense of “attenuation” in Cooper’s *The Spy: A Tale of the Neutral Ground*. Or the fact that nothing seems to happen. Elmer argues that the spatial and temporal sensibilities of the novel are informed by the Mischianza, a revolutionary era performance that transgressively played with temporal and spatial fixities only to neutralize them, as it were, in time and in space. The last essay in this part, “Shakers, Not Movers: The Physiopolitics of Shaker Dance,” charts the painful neutralization of those whose sense of time seems “rhythmically awry.” Using Henri Lefebvre’s idea of “rhythmanalysis,” wherein bodies are instruments (metronomes, no less),

Introduction: A Question of Time

9

Elizabeth Freeman examines how the bodies of Shakers internalized and expressed cultural rhythms that were improperly aligned with temporal norms. For example, their Shaker dance initially seemed problematic on the grounds that it was chaotic and dangerous, not unlike Native American and African rhythmic expressions. Later, when the dance was reconceived to be more orderly, it was stigmatized on the grounds that it was deathlike and monotonous, making all bodies lifeless and making female ones unfertile or queer.

The essays in the next part, “Timing Time,” cover several genres, including short stories, poetry, novels, and graphic novels, each zeroing in on a specific aspect of the work that functions as a kind of textual metronome, registering the complexities involved in timing time. In “And *Per Se* And: Time and Tempo in ‘The Masque of the Red Death,’” Geoffrey Sanborn identifies Poe’s relentless use of the word “and,” which functions bimodally in Poe’s works. On the one hand, the “anding” in “The Masque of the Red Death” invokes the certainty of death (it is only a matter of time until the “and” makes its way into Prince Prospero’s final chamber) and, on the other hand, “anding” conjoins and creates the potential for the “rhythmical creation of beauty.” In Marta Figlerowicz’s “The Late Forever: Queer Temporality in the Poems of Frank Bidart, D. A. Powell, and Richard Siken,” the challenge of timing time is represented not by a specific word but rather by a repeated experience, a queer experience that has been categorized as different (from a heteronormative point of view) but need not and perhaps should not be. The poems’ temporal distortions take the form of hallucinations, insomniac fantasies, and fairy tales, which come up against the predictable “rhythm of repeated desires.” They simultaneously revel in unique time frames and insist on the ordinary temporality, the “queer everydayness,” of the relations being described. The arrhythmia of the traffic jam in *Cosmopolis* provides the departure point for Mark Goble’s consideration of time as velocity in “DeLillo, Slowing Down.” Although the jam instantiates time in slow motion, that deceleration keeps company with the acceleration of time (capital moves so quickly that words, such as “zeptoseconds” or “yoctoseconds,” [92] need to be invented) upon which currency trader Eric Packer, the novel’s protagonist, depends. Goble describes DeLillo’s fiction as a “peculiar mix of frenzy and inertia” that informs its style and content, relates to modernist conceptions of time, and imbues his understanding of time as trauma post-9/11. Unlike the other essays in “Timing Time,” Stefanie Sobelle analyzes a text in which just about everything in it, including illustrations, registers the complexities of timing time. There is

a living room whose space reflects change over time, a clock whose hands eventually disappear, a hologram of a watch, and proliferating dates that cover millennia. “Rhyming Times: The Architecture of Progressive Time and Simultaneity in Richard McGuire’s *Here*” considers how this graphic novel unsettles the genre’s requirement of seriality by telling its story out of sequence. Sobelle argues that *Here*’s critique of linearity and privileging of simultaneity “challenges its readers to feel uneasy,” and perhaps like the “and” in Poe, also “invites readers to rebuild some sense of connection in an imaginative space of possibility.”

Although theoretical frameworks about time inform all of the essays in this volume, the ones in the final part, “Theorizing Time,” are especially explicit about their theoretical orientations, which include neurobiology, media studies, comparativism, deconstruction, and aesthetics. In “Toning Time: Specious Presence and the Jamesian Sentence,” Jesse Matz shows how Henry James’s sentences appropriately function as the foundation for theories, both past and present, about the specious present because “the infamous Jamesian sentence was itself such a technology.” These theories include William James’s idea that the present is actually made of multiple temporalities, cognitive psychologists who attempt to understand “the neurophenomenology of time consciousness,” media theorists who see the velocity of network culture as a model for the mind, or art historians who do not. Susan Gillman’s “Mediterraneans of the Americas: Going Anti-Imperial, Comparatively” broadly argues for the importance of a hemispheric approach to the study of the Americas. More specifically, she deploys a comparative, postcolonial framework through which to analyze a set of noncanonical novels written in New York during the 1940s and 1950s about American history. The transnational point of view in texts by Jamaican-born W. Adolphe Roberts and Mississippian James Street leads to a temporal and spatial (and even linguistic) destabilizing of certain cultural touchstones. Instead of Margaret Mitchell taking center stage, Jose Martí does. Instead of Plessy v. Ferguson being the most significant event in the 1890s, the Spanish American War and the Cuban War for Independence come into view as crucial temporal markers. Dorothy J. Hale’s essay, “Faulkner’s *Light in August* and New Theories of Novelistic Time,” takes as its departure point the presence of Faulkner in both Fredric Jameson’s *The Antinomies of Realism* and Jacques Rancière’s *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*. Hale examines their theoretical positions regarding the novel’s dialectic of narrative and affective time. For the Marxist-oriented Jameson, the dialectic succumbs to a corrosive temporality stuck in an unending self-conscious present. Rancière’s aesthetic