Examining the literature of slavery and race before the Civil War, Maurice Lee demonstrates for the first time exactly how the slavery crisis became a crisis of philosophy that exposed the breakdown of national consensus and the limits of rational authority. Poe, Stowe, Douglass, Melville, and Emerson were among the antebellum authors who tried – and failed – to find rational solutions to the slavery conflict. Unable to mediate the slavery controversy as the nation moved toward war, their writings form an uneasy transition between the confident rationalism of the American Enlightenment and the more skeptical thought of the pragmatists. Lee draws on antebellum moral philosophy, political theory, and metaphysics, bringing a fresh perspective to the literature of slavery – one that synthesizes cultural studies and intellectual history to argue that romantic, sentimental, and black Atlantic writers all struggled with modernity when facing the slavery crisis.

MAURICE LEE is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Missouri. His work has appeared in American Literature, PMLA, ESQ, and African American Review.
CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Editor
Ross Posnock, New York University

Founding editor
Albert Gelpi, Stanford University

Advisory board
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 Kentucky
Walter Benn Michaels, University of Illinois, Chicago
Kenneth Warren, University of Chicago

Recent books in this series
148 Maurice S. Lee Slavery, Philosophy, and American Literature, 1830–1860
147 Cindy Weinstein Family, Kinship and Sympathy in Nineteenth-Century American Literature
146 Elizabeth Hewitt Correspondence and American Literature, 1770–1865
145 Anna Brickhouse Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere
144 Eliza Richards Gender and the Poetics of Reception in Poe’s Circle
143 Jennie A. Kassanoff Edith Wharton and the Politics of Race
142 John McWilliams New England’s Crises and Cultural Memory: Literature, Politics, History, Religion, 1620–1860
141 Susan M. Griffin Anti-Catholicism and Nineteenth-Century Fiction
140 Robert E. Abrams Landscape and Ideology in American Renaissance Literature
To Marisa and Nico
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Absolute Poe</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 “Lord, it’s so hard to be good”: affect and agency in Stowe</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Taking care of the philosophy: Douglass’s commonsense</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Melville and the state of war</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Toward a transcendental politics: Emerson’s second thoughts</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: An unfinished and not unhappy ending</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgments

At the end of one of his standup routines, Steve Martin says, “I want to thank each and every one of you for coming by. Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you . . .” I feel a similarly overwhelming and more serious sense of gratitude for the skill, generosity, and good cheer so many have contributed to this book. Martha Banta, Barbara Packer, Eric Sundquist, and Richard Yarborough helped shape my understanding of nineteenth-century American literature. Luke Bresky, Joanna Brooks, Kris Fresonke, Bill Handley, Greg Jackson, Karen Keely, Meredith Newman, and Mark Quigley shared classes, suggestions, and support. Frances Dickey, Mark Gallagher, Noah Heringman, Andrew Hoberek, Patricia Okker, Tom Quirk, Kristin Schwain, Paul Stasi, and Jeff Williams provided comments on various chapters and are most excellent colleagues. John Evelev and Samuel Otter went beyond the call of duty in sharpening my thinking and prose. Fellowships from the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Missouri helped me along the way. So, too, did an NEH summer institute, led by Russell Goodman and graced by an array of enthusiastic Emersonians. Responses from readers at the Cambridge University Press greatly improved what follows. Many thanks to Ray Ryan and Ross Posnock for their editorial support, as well as to American Literature, which published two sections from this book. With undiminished pleasure, my gratitude goes out to Michael Colacurcio, whose wisdom, irony, and faith first inspired this project and helped to bring it to light. Thank you, Mom, for reading to me as a child. Thank you, Andrew, for setting a good example. Thank you, Grandma, for keeping things in perspective. Thanks to friends who have indulged my interests and idiosyncrasies. Finally, thank you Marisa; “Forever – is composed of Nows –.”