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Introduction
Taking Stock and New Directions

Russ Castronovo and Robert S. Levine

At the close of the first full decade of the American Republic, US novelist Charles Brockden Brown asserted in his introductory remarks to *Edgar Huntly* (1799) that it behooved the American writer to address "new springs of action, and new motives to curiosity." He went on to make an exceptionalist claim that all facets of life in the new nation – ranging from the psychological to the geographical – "differ essentially from those which exist in Europe." For that reason, he asserted, American writing should differ from what came before. It should be "new."[1] Echoes of Brown's call for newness can be seen in manifesto-like statements from a pantheon of US writers, ranging from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Ezra Pound, whose modernist insistence that the writer should "Make It New" can be understood as being solidly in the American grain. Pound may have thought of himself as an iconoclast, but American writers have declared themselves to be original, fresh, innovative – in a word, "new" – so often that the gesture can seem fairly routine.[2]

For at least the past 100 years, Americanist literary criticism has similarly emphasized the new, in part because the academic study of American literature *was* new in the first few decades of the twentieth century. The British novelist D. H. Lawrence, who could lay claim to be one of the founders of US literary studies, used the word "new" over 125 times in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), asserting right from the start of his lively discussion of figures who had previously been ignored or viewed as children's writers: "There is a new voice in the old American classics. The world has declined to hear it, and has blabbed about children's stories." Lawrence's book went hand in hand with a key development in US universities: the move from philological to a more nation-based literary study that allowed for the introduction, during the 1920s and 1930s, of courses in American literature, and even the creation of a scholarly journal – *American Literature* – which started up in 1929. In the spirit of Charles Brockden Brown, scholars and teachers, and the journal

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itself, emphasized the newness – the essential difference – of American literature with respect to British and other European literatures. In a book that many regard as both the culmination of the invention of American literary study and a spur to additional work in the field, F. O. Matthiessen asserted in the introduction to his seminal *American Renaissance* (1941) that the period that saw the emergence of Emerson and Herman Melville, among others, was a "new epoch."[3] As he conceived it, Matthiessen's "American Renaissance" was not a time of rebirth, as with the English Renaissance, but of the birth of what came to be studied for quite a while as a distinctively new American literature.

As many have noted, Matthiessen's 1941 book had virtually nothing to say about women and minority writers. In response to Matthiessen and other foundational Americanists such as R. W. B. Lewis and Henry Nash Smith, another "new" American literature began to emerge during the 1970s and 1980s in response to the Civil Rights Movement and Black Arts Movement and such feminist recovery projects as the Rutgers American Women Writers series.[4] A more multicultural and feminist American literary canon was codified with the publication of the first edition of *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1989). Around this time the New Historicism of the 1980s, with its Michel Foucault-inspired emphasis on the implication of literature – especially Shakespearean drama – in cultural formations of power, inspired a major movement in American literary studies of the 1990s: the "New Americanists." Spearheaded by Donald E. Pease, who had a book series of that name at Duke University Press, the New Americanists in books and journal articles focused on literature's implications in such cultural formations as Manifest Destiny, racial capitalism, and imperialism.[5] All the while it is worth remembering, as Susan Gillman notes, that invocations of the "new" often can align with the sorts of exceptionalist thinking that facilitate the imaginaries of empire.[6] Nevertheless, if *The New Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* had appeared in the year 2000, there would have been a collective sense in the field that what was "new" in American literary studies was the New Historicism and the New Americanists. And our volume would have reflected that.[7]

We begin with this brief overview of the "new" in order to assert what our book is not. *The New Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* does not offer a single or collective vision of a new American literature studies for our present moment. Instead, it does something that we believe is more useful for scholars and teachers working in the field of nineteenth-century US literary studies: take stock of critical developments over the

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past twenty years and, in eclectic fashion, present a wide range of new approaches, some of which draw on the "old," such as Claudia Stokes's essay on Washington Irving and the sketch tradition, and some on the "new" that is not so new anymore. What we can say about the New Americanists and other developments in the field of the late twentieth century is that these critical and intellectual formations presented themselves as something of a rupture or break with older models of scholarship that were seen to be too tightly held in thrall to the purities of the text, the straightforwardness of chronology, or the presumed coherence of individual identity. Inevitably, the sheen of a new approach dulls over time and, for a while, newer models of Americanist criticism, not unlike consumer goods everywhere, take their place. Just as surely, though, the familiarization of the new speaks to the widespread adoption and utility of these methodological perspectives. The "oppositional common sense" that Pease claimed for the New Americanists has become simply common sense, at least in some critical circles.[8]

Mindful of these lessons, *The New Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies* is presented not so much as a rejection of established critical tendencies, although there are in these pages healthy doses of the impulse to move beyond the usual ways of talking about data, race, the environment, religion, and Indigeneity. It is rather an occasion to assess the various developments that have transformed the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies over the past two decades, including work in such areas as print and material culture, Black studies, Latinx studies, disability studies, gender and sexuality studies, postsecular studies, and Indigenous studies. But this book does more than take stock of where we are right now as nineteenth-century Americanists. We asked our contributors to take the occasion of their chapters not only to offer bibliographical guidance but also to map out new directions for the future of the field. Many of the contributors in the volume work with case studies – a key literary work or two – that help both to bring critical debate into focus and model fresh interpretive approaches.

It is worth noting at this point that much has happened in institutional and critical terms to revitalize the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies. The field continues to grow both in the United States and around the world, as evidenced by the formation in 2009 of a new organization: C19: The Society of Nineteenth-Century Americanists. Beginning in 2010, the Society initiated biannual meetings that typically draw hundreds of participants. It also started a new journal, *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists*, which has become a crucial

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forum for new work in the field, as well as for debate on the various directions the field might take. Moreover, during the past two decades, nineteenth-century American literary studies has to some extent become a more unified field. It used to be divided up into pre-Civil War and post-Civil War studies, but a number of critics, most notably Cody Marrs, have called attention to the artificiality of that break and have instead called for the study of American literature across the long nineteenth century (c.1790–c.1910).[9]

Our volume is indebted to the upsurge of key critical work in the field of nineteenth-century American literary studies. Across twenty distinct chapters, this volume assesses how research in disability studies, digital media studies, trans studies, environmental studies, legal humanities, translation and Americas studies, to name just a handful of the topics covered in the volume, have been actively reshaping nineteenth-century American literary studies. Given the many interpretative perspectives that our authors bring to this project, we have not sought to artificially constrain their contributions by clustering any subset of essays under a single topic. For instance, Erin Forbes's chapter on environmental studies also represents work in Black studies. Edlie Wong's interest in Black studies takes her to the Pacific, while Maria Windell's chapter on Transamerican studies starts in the Pacific Ocean but concludes in the Latinx Midwest. Ren Heintz's essay on trans and queer studies leads to a meditation on Black and Indigenous themes, just as Xine Yao's reexamination of affect studies closes with reflections on nineteenth-century Indigenous writing. Meanwhile, Kathryn Walkiewicz and Kelly Wisecup provide a trenchant critique of how nineteenth-century American literary studies often falls short when it comes to engaging with Indigenous methodologies. In ways that we hope will energize readers, we regard all of these essays as in conversation with one another.

As this brief and partial roadmap suggests, the individual chapters link up in unexpected ways, beyond what we as editors expected when we commissioned, say, an essay on the New Civil War Studies (Colleen Boggs) or on the latest work in poetry studies (Michael Cohen). Rather than limit such critical suppleness by grouping essays into sections on, say, Latinx criticism or genre studies, we simply present each chapter in alphabetical order by author. This minimalist organizational plan enables readers to make their own connections across the essays, comparing related approaches to foregrounded interpretative matrices. See, for example, Autumn Womack and Katharine Burnett, who each write about the idea of speculation, though in very different contexts. Or, to give another

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example, see how an author such as Harriet Beecher Stowe can be framed quite differently, with Gregory Laski positioning Stowe in relation to national political contexts, Gretchen Murphy in relation to national religious contexts, and Xine Yao in relation to debates on sentimentalism.

Though we are reluctant to put our contributors into critical boxes, we can identify some critical motifs that are central to this volume and help to suggest some of the overarching concerns of what we are calling the new nineteenth-century American literary studies. A number of our contributors address bodies and sexualities (see especially the essays by Altschuler, Heintz, and Yao), law, economics, and citizenship (DeLombard, Laski, and Womack), data and materialism (Hurh, Pethers, Whitley), and various issues connected to race and Indigeneity (Forbes, Lamas, Lazo, Walkiewicz and Wisecup, Wong). A key development of the past twenty years is an effort to move US literary studies away from the nation-state. The idea that the study of American literature should be isomorphic to national political boundaries and English-speaking linguistic borders has been the subject of rigorous questioning in recent books on hemispheric, transnational, and Transamerican studies.[10] A number of essays take stock of these developments and extend those interpretive energies by considering the Global South (Burnett), transpacific geographies (Wong and Windell), southern Americas connections (Lazo and Lamas), and Indigenous geographies (Walkiewicz and Wisecup). The scale and scope of analysis itself comes under investigation in Paul Hurh's work on the scalar dimensions of critique and reform. Turning to Edgar Allan Poe, he asks, in effect: What if our methods of calibrating material reality are marred by distortions and optical illusions? The propensity for critical mismeasurement is a legacy of US sentimentalism, as Yao contends, that favorably judged outpourings of emotion while devaluing performances of impassivity and unfeeling.

Perhaps a surprise of the volume is the close attention that our contributors pay to aesthetics. Then again, aesthetics itself has received renewed attention in American literary studies and elsewhere over the past twenty years. Catalyzing works in this regard were the 2002 volume *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* and the 2004 special issue of *American Literature* on "Aesthetics and the End(s) of Cultural Studies."[11] More recently, two monographs in Melville studies – Geoffrey Sanborn's *The Value of Herman Melville* (2018) and Cody Marrs's *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies* (2023) – have turned attention back to questions of style, form, and affect in a writer who, since the 1970s, has regularly been read in relation to the politics of the 1850s.[12] (For a very different,

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though complementary, perspective on aesthetics in African American writing at the turn of the century, see Autumn Womack's *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930*.)[13] Virtually all of our contributors engage issues of aesthetics, whether addressing the craft of Frances Harper's poetry (Boggs), Willliam Cullen Bryant's efforts at creating a great *Iliad* in English (Cohen), Charles Chesnutt's fiction of metamorphoses (Forbes), Louisa May Alcott's intertwined playfulness and morality in *Little Women* (Murphy), or Washington Irving's artful use of the sketch to counter the social mobility of the novel (Stokes). We are even asked to consider the artistry of textbooks (Lamas).

The case study method of close textual analysis characteristic of many of the essays may seem "old," but these analyses are simply one part of essays both reporting on and engaging newer critical contexts and frames. In contrast to more traditional scholarship that remains widely practiced and eminently useful, the goal of these chapters is not necessarily to offer a new reading of text *x* or author *y*. Instead, the case study in almost every chapter here works in relation to the critical taking stock of the field and efforts to suggest ideas for new directions. It is our hope that the chapters' mix of bibliographic resources, critical thinking, and textual analysis – as provocations and not the final word – will help to stimulate new work in the field in addition to new teaching approaches. As the array of texts and methods assembled here suggests, the nineteenth century, as Walt Whitman might put it, contains multitudes.

Notes

1 Charles Brockden Brown, *Edgar Huntly: or, Memoirs of a Sleep-Walker* (New York: Penguin Books, 1988), 3.
2 Pound first made this statement in 1928. For a discussion of Pound in a larger transnational and transhistorical context, see Michael North, *Novelty: A History of the New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013).
3 F. O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968 [1941]), ix. On the break from philology and the rise of the study of American literature in US universities, see Elizabeth Renker, *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
4 As part of their series, Rutgers University Press published such works as Catharine Sedgwick's 1827 *Hope Leslie* (1987), Fanny Fern's 1855 *Ruth Hall* (1986), E. D. E. N. Southworth's 1859 *The Hidden Hand* (1988), and Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1869 *Oldtown Folks* (1987).

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5 Perhaps the most influential work in the New Americanists series was *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993). Though not in the New Americanists series, see also Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

6 Susan Gillman, "The New, Newest Thing: Have American Studies Gone Imperial?" *American Literary History* 17.1 (2005): 196–214.

7 Prominent Americanist titles that appeared in the University of California Press's book series "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics" include Gillian Brown's *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (1992) and Walter Benn Michaels's *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (1988).

8 Donald E. Pease, "9/11: When Was 'American Studies after the New Americanists'?" *boundary 2* 33.3 (2006): 79. See also Pease's essays from the early 1990s on the methods and approaches of the New Americanists: "New Americanists: Revisionist Interventions into the Canon" *boundary 2* 17.1 (1990): 1–37 and "New Americanists 2: National Identities and Postnational Narratives" *boundary 2* 19.1 (1992): 1–13. For a retrospective critique of the New Americanists, see Johannes Voelz, *Transcendental Resistance: The New Americanists and Emerson's Challenge* (Hanover: Dartmouth University Press, 2010).

9 Cody Marrs, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

10 See, for example, Anna Brickhouse, *Transamerican Literary Relations and the Nineteenth-Century Public Sphere* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); *Look Away: The U.S. South in New World Studies*, ed. Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); *Transatlantic Literary Studies: A Reader,* ed. Susan Manning and Andrew Taylor (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007); Colleen G. Boggs, *Transnationalism and American Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2007); *Hemispheric American Studies*, ed. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008); Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); and, more recently, Susan Gillman, *American Mediterraneans: A Study in Geography, History, and Race* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).
Scholarship interrogating national literary boundaries followed up on earlier critical excavations of American national narratives. In this vein, see Lauren Berlant, *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991) and Eric Sundquist, *To Wake the Nations: Race in the Making of American Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

11 *Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Emory Elliott, Louis Freitas Caton, and Jeffrey Rhyme (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); "Aesthetics and the End(s) of Cultural Studies," a special issue of *American Literature* 76.3

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(2004), ed. Christopher Castiglia and Russ Castronovo. See also *American Literature's Aesthetic Dimensions*, ed. Cindy Weinstein and Christopher Looby (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

12 Geoffrey Sanborn, *The Value of Herman Melville* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Cody Marrs, *Melville, Beauty, and American Literary Studies: An Aesthetics in All Things* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

13 Autumn Womack, *The Matter of Black Living: The Aesthetic Experiment of Racial Data, 1880–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023).

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CHAPTER 1

Harriet Wilson's Lessons
Disability and Nineteenth-Century American Literature

Sari Altschuler

Although the disability rights movement grew out of the mid twentieth-century civil rights movement, disability too long lagged behind race, gender, sexuality, and class as "another other," in Cathy Kudlick's influential framing.[1] Some of this neglect is likely due to ableism, both implicit and historical. Mental and/or physical disability too often continues to be deemed disqualifying for social and political participation, and, in the extreme, for life itself. Historically, disability served as, in David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder's terms, a "master trope of human disqualification," used to undermine and invalidate women, racial and ethnic minorities, children, and older adults' claims for equal treatment and rights, which, in turn, has often led such groups to repudiate disability.[2] In scholarly contexts, however, disability has likely lagged in part because of the nature of the category itself: Disability is at once a more heterogenous and a more broadly inclusive sociopolitical category than the other others. It includes people with diabetes, traumatic brain injury, and Down syndrome, as well as blind, deaf, and autistic people. And, we will all become disabled if we live long enough.

This chapter reexamines the too-long delayed entry of disability as a category of analysis for literary studies, and the central role the nineteenth century has to play in the imaginary of the field. From initial framings of Emerson as the shepherd of liberal individualism to the linguistic emergence of the term "norm," antebellum culture has long been figured as the crucible in which the modern, stigmatized category of disability took shape. Despite the centrality of nineteenth-century American literature from the outset, such analyses were not generally undertaken as interventions in nineteenth-century literary studies. Often, in seeking to make big

I would particularly like to thank the members of the two graduate seminars I taught at Northeastern on "Literature and Disability Studies" and "Disability and Citizenship" in fall 2018 and spring 2021 with whom I discussed Wilson's text.

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and *necessary* claims about the emergence of an identity category, early scholarship relied too much on schematized descriptions of a complicated period, and Foucauldian accounts of history that poorly fit US contexts.

In the past ten years, as nineteenth-century Americanists have turned their attention to disability as an analytical category for their own field, they have used and developed new tools and modes of analysis to map a much more complex disability landscape. In this chapter, I turn to Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859) to ask what a fictionalized autobiography written from the experience of a disabled Black woman can show us about the complexity and limitations of our critical understandings of disability in the period. Whereas we have been trained to look for disability in nineteenth-century American literature as represented flatly and relegated to the margins, Wilson keeps disability at the center of her narrative. Such a reading employs the method of *historical cripistemology* – that is, it begins from the experiences and knowledge of disabled people in the past, here, Harriet Wilson's – to reframe our understanding of literature and culture. In *Our Nig*, Wilson uses her own experience to break with familiar Black and white forms for narrating disability in the antebellum period. Taking up *Our Nig* from this perspective demonstrates how careful attention to disability in nineteenth-century American literature and culture – particularly literature written by disabled people – can help us recover the broader scope and greater variety of disability representation in the period, as well as its import for helping us reenvision how we read literature in the period more broadly.

Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Foundations of Disability Studies in the Humanities

Perhaps surprisingly to critics of the period who consider disability a recent category of analysis, disability studies scholars have been writing about nineteenth-century America since disability studies in the humanities began. In fact, the very first books introducing disability to literary studies focused on the origins of modern, stigmatizing, and medicalized notions of disability in the period.

In Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's pathbreaking book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture* (1997), for example, antebellum writers play a central role: Hawthorne and Melville offer archetypal examples of disabled figures, while Emerson models the opposite – the origins of a paradigm predicated on individual, able-bodied autonomy.[3] "If Hawthorne's Chillingworth made many

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