Introduction
Transbellum American Literature

The Civil War occupies a rather strange place in the periodic imaginary of American literary studies. On the one hand, it is frequently taken to be the defining event of the nineteenth century – a cataclysm so vast and transformative that it destroys one literary period and spawns another. Much of the field is organized around the idea that because of the war's annulling force, the century must be separated into two distinct and largely asymmetrical eras: antebellum and postbellum; before and after. This view of the war is reiterated at nearly every level of the discipline: in survey courses, which frequently begin or end at 1865; in monographs, which tend to situate themselves on either side of this grand divide; in numerous anthologies, overviews, and companions; and in the training of graduate students and the hiring of faculty. On the other hand, the Civil War is also routinely marginalized in the very field that so vigorously foregrounds its influence. It often enters the curriculum only on the tail end of courses. It receives far less attention from literary critics than the eras that surround it.[1] And strange as it may seem, the war is deemphasized by the periodizing practices that are specifically designed to acknowledge its impact. Indeed, if the nineteenth century consists in a passage from the antebellum to the postbellum, then the war is essentially an antiperiod, a transition that matters only to the extent that it demarcates what precedes and follows it. The conflict that Robert Penn Warren once called "our only 'felt' history" thus functions, oftentimes, as a constitutive absence in American literary history or, at best, as the occasion for a minor literature that emerged between two great eras.[2]

The Civil War's paradoxical status – as both the structural pivot and the empty center of the nineteenth century – is part of the genealogical inheritance of our periodic terms. When "ante-bellum" and "post-bellum" entered the American vernacular in the 1860s and 1870s, the words were often hyphenated and italicized because they were linguistic imports from international law. *Ante-bellum* and *post-bellum* initially functioned

as shorthand versions of longer phrases: the *status quo ante bellum* (i.e., "the state before the war") and the *status quo post bellum* (i.e., "the state after the war"), which, in treaties between warring states, were forms of resolution wherein all the newly acquired property and territory were returned or all prewar claims of ownership were renounced.[3] *Antebellum* and *postbellum* treaties thereby promoted fictions of erasure that enabled both sides to pretend either that the war had never really happened, or that history began anew with its completion. We now enlist these terms in radically different ways – as the names for discrete, overarching epochs – but "antebellum" and "postbellum" still depend on a peculiar coupling of retrospection and effacement that enables these eras to be imagined into being only by cutting out the very terminus that makes them historically distinct.

These fraught periodic categories are problematic in other ways, too. By framing literary history as an adjunct, or corollary, of national history, they contravene recent attempts to decouple literature from the state. They also bolster terms like "the antebellum novel" and "postbellum poetry," which, despite their almost axiomatic status, are remarkably poor descriptors, often functioning as placeholders for other, less epochally-bound frameworks. And as anyone who has taught a survey course knows all too well, the bellum divide also generates a weird set of curricular challenges. If a course is cut off at the war, how does one justify including a book like Frederick Douglass's *The Life and Times* (1881/1892), which, despite being composed by an "antebellum" author, was written decades after that era concluded? What does one do with intergenerational writers, like Rebecca Harding Davis and Harriet Prescott Spofford, whose careers climaxed in the midst of the war but are not typically considered to be wartime authors? And how does one even begin to properly attend to books such as *Clotel*, which was initially published in 1853 but revised on three different occasions through 1867, or *Leaves of Grass*, which was published in 1855 but significantly rewritten by Whitman, again and again, through 1891?

There are a number of ways in which literary history can be remapped without this sharp partitioning. In recent years, scholars have shifted the field's focus toward a "long nineteenth century," which jettisons traditional microperiods in favor of an expanded scale of analysis that stretches back to the eighteenth century and into the twentieth. Other critics have eschewed the Civil War almost altogether and recast the struggle not as the defining event of the era but as merely one event among many others – an option favored by many books that focus

on nineteenth-century literature but have little to say about the Civil War. Both approaches have a great deal to recommend them: they draw attention to literary, cultural, and political phenomena that span several generations, and they reveal turning-points that have nothing to do with violence and war (a rare feat when it comes to periodization). Yet reading nineteenth-century literature either solely or primarily in terms of continuity risks overlooking the various ways in which that literature is indeed bound up with the Civil War – not in a linear or sequential fashion, as implied by the ante/postbellum divide, but bound up nonetheless.

This book argues for a different periodization, by looking at the Civil War as a multilinear upheaval. As an event within literary history, the war manifests not as a discrete instance of overturning but as a rupture with a stunning array of trajectories, genealogies, and afterlives. The Civil War's complex periodicity is especially evident when we read authors who not only survived the war but also wrote voluminously for decades after it. I focus on four of these writers: Walt Whitman, Frederick Douglass, Herman Melville, and Emily Dickinson. Although they are usually read as antebellum figures, these authors wrote through the Civil War and through most of the rest of the nineteenth century, often by ciphering their postwar experiences through their wartime impressions and prewar ideals. Their writings are therefore chiefly legible, I shall argue, as part of a *transbellum* literature that stretches (as the etymology implies) across and beyond the war itself.

By "transbellum," I refer to three different phenomena, which both individually and collectively index the Civil War's periodic fluidity. First, transbellum names the ways in which these writers' careers extend from the "antebellum" period, across the Civil War, and into the "postbellum" era, thereby bridging the very epochs into which American literary history tends to be segmented. It is, in this sense, a marker of this literature's multiperiodicity. Second, transbellum refers to a shared tendency to repeatedly return to the Civil War as a literary, historical, and philosophical subject long after it officially concluded. As such, it draws attention to just how continuous the war's discontinuity was as it unfolded across the century as an unresolved imaginative struggle. And, third, transbellum designates the myriad ways in which these writers recast the historicity of that conflict, often in terms that differ, quite radically, from our tendency to confine it to the period from 1861 to 1865.

Retiming the Civil War

The following pages approach the Civil War as a nonsynchronous upheaval – as a boundary, in short, that is much blurrier, and more heterogeneously constituted, than has often been assumed.[4] I begin, in Chapter 1, with Walt Whitman, who became enamored with Hegel's philosophy of history in the wake of the war. After reading Hegel (whom he declared to be the only philosopher "fit for America"), Whitman made substantial changes to *Leaves of Grass* and *Drum-Taps*, experimenting with new syntactic forms and methods of poetic organization.[5] These changes, I argue, enable Whitman to engage in rich and provocative ways with the defining struggles of the late nineteenth century, especially the conflicts between workers and capitalists in the 1870s and 1880s. Chapter 2 examines the transbellum writings of America's most famous former slave, Frederick Douglass. According to Douglass, the Abolition War (as he preferred to call it) was but a moment, or phase, in a much longer "irrepressible conflict" between freedom and unfreedom.[6] To test that idea out, he turns to theories of perpetual motion, histories of revolution, and philosophies of progress. His later speeches, essays, and autobiographies accordingly refer to a broad range of events – from sixteenth-century religious battles to nineteenth-century scientific discoveries – but they all shore up a single supposition, which he wrested from the war: that history, like everything else in this world, is immanently revisable.

Chapter 3 focuses on Herman Melville, who construes the war as part of a long cycle of internecine conflict. As Melville represents it in *Battle-Pieces* (1866), *Clarel* (1876), and *Timoleon* (1891), the Civil War repeats events that have already been repeated many times before in Europe and the Holy Land. *Battle-Pieces* elucidates this historical pattern by connecting the Civil War's defining moments – such as the draft riots of 1863 and the fights between ironclads – to ancient Roman rebellions, medieval French revolts, and other analogous instances of civil strife; while *Clarel* and *Timoleon* loosen and expand this pattern by locating similar civil wars in the earth, in the world's religions, and in the very structure of the cosmos. The war's historicity then recedes almost entirely in Chapter 4, which considers the poems that Emily Dickinson wrote from the 1860s through the 1880s. Dickinson represents the conflict as a vast undoing that is unmoored from chronology itself. Many of her poems are shot through with moments of erasure because, for her, such fading away is the Civil War's defining temporality. Unlike these other transbellum

writers, Dickinson figures the conflict as a repealing of history – as an annulment that can certainly be felt, but never adequately remembered because it exceeds all of our earthly chronometrics.

As we will discover, the Civil War was an ongoing imaginative conflict across much of the nineteenth century. Or more accurately: it was a struggle that had to be continuously *re*imagined, and that is precisely what these authors did by folding the war into a raucous variety of literary timescapes. Despite the patent heterogeneity of these transbellum works – from Douglass's lectures about William of Orange to Dickinson's later poems about "Dimpled War[s]" and "finished Faces" – they each attempt to do the impossible: to secure a cogent temporality for this long, chaotic upheaval.[7] This book thereby extends the work of such scholars as Faith Barrett, Kathleen Diffley, Randall Fuller, Coleman Hutchison, Shirley Samuels, and Julia Stern, who have made a strong case for reading Civil War literature as an essential part of, rather than a violent departure from, the development of nineteenth-century United States culture.[8] In the following pages, I make that same argument from a different perspective by looking at the Civil War's transbellum influence on these purportedly antebellum writers, who try to track the war's almost untrackable history long after the fall of Richmond. And by doing so, these authors provide us with a number of rich, alternative timelines through which the war itself can be reread and replotted.

These writers' sustained efforts to figure the war underscore one of the foremost insights of recent Americanist scholarship: that literature's irregular temporalities tend to disrupt the timeframes of the clock and the nation. As several critics have demonstrated, the standardization of time in the nineteenth century – which made temporality increasingly homogeneous and measurable – was accompanied by a literature that, instead of merely archiving that transformation, actively troubled it. To account for literature's nonstandard temporalities, scholars have fashioned a robust set of interpretive models. Wai Chee Dimock has argued for a hermeneutic of deep time that is attuned to literature's "irregular duration[s] and extension[s]." Elizabeth Freeman has shown us how queer time emerged, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as a kind of "arrhythmia" between "sacred, static 'women's' time and [the] secularized, progressive, nominally male national-historical time." Still other critics have examined the pluridimensionality of literature's "vehement passions"; the material and textual creation of "heterogeneous temporal cultures"; and the feeling body's ability to provide an "alternative mechanism for the collection of time."[9]

The following pages both expand on and depart from this scholarship on temporality. On the one hand, *Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Long Civil War* extends many of the principal claims that have emerged out of this work: that time was a crucial modality of nineteenth-century political struggles; that literature played an important role in the imaginative construction of this chronopolitics; and that the temporalities enacted in literature tend to be remarkably diverse in their composition and movement. These writers' responses to the Long Civil War, we shall see, are both fueled by and structured around an abiding interest in the politics of time. They each figure that struggle in very different ways – as a revolution, or counterrevolution, or historical erasure – but they all present the war as an event that outstrips the discrete, four-year span with which it is often associated. And to understand how the war eclipses its official chronology, I turn to a different and frequently overlooked archive for thinking about time, politics, and periodicity in the nineteenth century: the less canonical works of highly canonical writers.

This author-centered focus, however, also distinguishes this book from many of its temporally-oriented companions. In studies of nineteenth-century time and literature, the analytical object is almost always a material culture, social practice, or literary genre, the defining temporalities of which point toward broader epistemic shifts in national or subnational identity. In studies of periodization (and its limits), critics often scale out, as it were, in order to reveal vast new swaths of historical time and loosened hermeneutic frameworks. These approaches have reorganized the field and yielded a stunning array of insights. Nonetheless, construing literature's temporalities primarily as evidence of discursive formations that have little to do with individual writers risks losing sight of the temporalities that hinge on the idea of authorship: the patterns that emerge across a writer's works; the timescapes that an author actively – and sometimes quite self-reflexively – assembles out of a culture's materials; and the transformations to a writer's worldview that can begin with something as simple as reading a book, or as complicated as witnessing a war. These more authorial temporalities do not require a full-scale retrieval of biography, but they do oblige us to think more rigorously about the applicability of some of this criticism's key terms – such as scaling and timing – to considerations of individual writers, and about the resources that disciplinary forms of inquiry might, in turn, bring to bear on areas of scholarship that are frequently framed as interdisciplinary, or even antidisciplinary. These chapters are designed to address these concerns by looking afresh at the later works of these four transbellum authors.

Canons and Periods

Many other writers, texts, and movements could easily be described as transbellum. Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) became such a cultural sensation before the Civil War, wrote for more than 30 years after the conflict, producing seven more novels, a book of poems, and a study of women in "sacred history." Those lions of prewar literature, the Transcendentalists, also wrote prolifically after 1865. In the wake of the war, Amos Bronson Alcott penned two books of philosophy, two volumes of poetry, and a biography; Ralph Waldo Emerson issued two more essay collections and a book of poems; and Emerson's former-associate-turned-apostate, Orestes Brownson, published so widely that when his articles were anthologized in the 1880s, it required twenty volumes to contain them.

One finds that same unyielding production among many African American writers. After the fall of the Confederacy, Martin Delany followed up his earlier antislavery writings with pamphlets for the newly freed slaves, a work of antiracist ethnography, and essays on Reconstruction. William Wells Brown not only continued to revise *Clotel*; he also wrote three books on African American history and a series of sketches about late-nineteenth-century Southern society. And slave narratives, despite their longstanding status as an antebellum genre, continued to be composed and revised into the twentieth century. In fact, more than ninety slave narratives were printed after emancipation.[10]

There is also a markedly transbellum trajectory for other types of Civil War literature. From the 1860s onward, journals and magazines throughout the United States published hundreds of fictional stories about the Civil War – more than 300 by Kathleen Diffley's count – by writers both well known (such as Louisa May Alcott and Silas Weir Mitchell) and obscure (such as Ellen Leonard and J.O. Culver). Many of the songs sung by soldiers and civilians alike continued to be sung for decades afterwards, at once shaping and preserving the conflict in Americans' cultural memory. Many Union and Confederate veterans also penned accounts of their experiences in the late nineteenth century. Memoirists included well-known generals such as Ulysses S. Grant and James Longstreet, as well as infamous captains (John Singleton Mosby), blockade runners (William Watson), bushwackers (Samuel S. Hildebrand), reefers (James Morris Morgan), spies (Allan Pinkerton), and confused privates (Mark Twain).[11] That collective attempt to create a usable and readable past for the struggle also generated a stunning array of other texts, including – though hardly

limited to – pictorial records, newspapers compendiums, day-by-day chronicles, popular histories, regional histories, state histories, regimental histories, encyclopedias, anthologies, almanacs, and biographies.[12]

Rather than examining this broad range of transbellum literature, I focus on the long careers of just four writers. I do so for a few related reasons. First of all, Whitman, Douglass, Melville, and Dickinson are among the most canonical of "antebellum" authors, and I think that this matters. Not because their writings are inherently better (although some of them are indeed unusually rich and intricate), but because their canonical status both shapes and is shaped by the narratives that critics use to frame the periods to which they belong. The very conceptual salience of such terms as antebellum and postbellum hinges in no small part on their identification with a particular set of authors; hence the difficulty of thinking about the British Renaissance without Shakespeare, or the Victorian period without Dickens. Such terms are also, as Marshall Brown notes, "relational" categories: instead of naming a particular zeitgeist like the nomenclature of movements (for example, "Imagism," or "Naturalism"), they denominate a transition, a before-and-after that grants each category its semantic and historical content.[13] In studies of nineteenth-century American literature and culture, these two tendencies – the condensing of an entire period into certain authors and the narrativized reading of a period – are often fused. The passage from antebellum to postbellum has long been framed as a story of generational succession: Hawthorne gives way to James; Melville to Twain; and so forth. This story has many different versions – for example, as a narrative about generic displacement, or the collapse of idealism, or the modernization of copyright law – but there is an abiding authorial dimension in many of these accounts.

Jonathan Arac offers a particularly compelling version of this succession story in his book, *The Emergence of American Literary Narrative* (2005). Arac rigorously traces the evolution of prose forms in the United States prior to the Civil War, arguing that almost all of the era's narratives, both major and minor, can be grouped into four generic categories: personal, local, national, and literary. The first three categories emerged as competing efforts to find a narrative structure capable of articulating the fragile, heterogeneous structures of belonging in the prewar United States. National narratives, such as James Fenimore Cooper's "Leatherstocking Tales" (1827–41) and George Bancroft's *History of the Colonization of the United States* (1841) "told the story of the nation's colonial beginnings and looked forward to its future as a model for the world," while local narratives, such as the tales of

Washington Irving and Edgar Allan Poe, and personal narratives (for example, Richard Henry Dana's *Two Years Before the Mast*, Herman Melville's *Typee*, and Frederick Douglass's 1845 *Narrative*) provided alternative accounts of experience that often elided the nation and forged other visions of connection. When the more explicitly literary works – *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) are Arac's chief examples – appeared in the early 1850s, they effectively remixed these earlier forms into a new narrative genre, one that created a "world elsewhere" yet remained engaged with the world itself, and thus seemed to "not only differ from but [. . .] also to transcend and, implicitly, to criticize [. . .] common life."[14]

Arac's account admirably marshals disparate strains of literary history into a cogent narrative about narrative. What I want to bring attention to, however, is the end, which is foreshadowed in the book's chronological frame: 1820–60. This pattern of prose development was evidently completely undone by the Civil War. The latter "sanctified" the state by transferring "the prestige that had previously been reserved for 'Union' and the 'People' " to the state. This transformation, Arac argues, "debilitated" literary writers such as Hawthorne and Melville and "inhibited literary narrative" itself, thereby giving rise to a new narrative dispensation epitomized by Twain and Parkman:

> Faced with the "convulsive action" of the Civil War, [. . .] Hawthorne could no longer effectively commit himself to this faith in romance as progress without agency, which had made possible the independent worlds of his literary narratives [. . .] but it did not prevent all new narratives. The greatest talent to emerge during the war was Mark Twain. His first books clearly link him to the traditions of local and personal narratives: *The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County and Other Sketches* (1867), *Innocents Abroad* (1869), and *Roughing It* (1872), which the preface characterizes as "merely a personal narrative." During the war, Francis Parkman recovered from his nearly two decades of debility and renewed his national narrative [. . .] Over the last decades of the century, until his death in 1893, he completed his series on "France and England in North America," to which *The Conspiracy of Pontiac* had formed a proleptic coda.[15]

What interests me about this claim is the connection – quite explicit here – between the Civil War's impact and the succession of authorship that accompanies it. The transition from literary narrative in the 1850s to new local and national narratives after 1865 is not just generic but authorial: Hawthorne and Melville recede just as Twain emerges and Parkman resuscitates his historical project.

This claim is actually a very old one. Versions of it appear in a number of combinations across twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism (although, curiously, Twain is often taken up by critics as the postbellum writer *par excellence*). Here is Norman Foerster, writing in 1928:

> [The Civil War] destroyed New England as completely as it did the South. Two aristocracies simultaneously fell into ruins. Following it there flooded into the East a second wave of Western vulgarity, a new humor, a new literary form – the native type of short story – a new realism that scorned Europe and the East [. . .] The era of Mark Twain had dawned. Literature began to spring from life, from the people, from the spirit of the epoch.

Edmund Wilson, in 1962:

> [After 1865,] the whole style of prose-writing changes. In the field of prose fiction before the war, the American writers, both North and South, had a verbose untidy [style . . .] Hawthorne and Melville and Poe [. . .] always embroidered, or, perhaps better, coagulated, their fancies in a peculiar clogged and viscous prose [. . .] But a change in American style takes place in the middle of the century. The plethora of words is reduced; the pace becomes firmer and quicker; the language becomes more what was later called "efficient," more what was still later called "functional."

Martha Banta, in 1988:

> Considered in terms of its most noted writers, the change in American literature between the earlier and later halves of the nineteenth century is strongly marked. With the deaths or retirements from authorship of the generation of Hawthorne, Melville, Emerson, and Poe in the 1850s and 1860s, then the emergence, just after the Civil War, of such new figures as Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Mark Twain, American literature undergoes one of the most thoroughgoing changes of the guard in its entire history.

Louis Menand, in 2001:

> The Civil War swept away the slave civilization of the South, but it swept away almost the whole intellectual culture of the North along with it. It took nearly half a century for the United States to develop a culture to replace it, to find a set of ideas, and a way of thinking, that would help people cope with the conditions of modern life. That struggle [. . .] runs through the lives of [. . .] Oliver Wendell Holmes, William James, Charles S. Peirce, and John Dewey. These people [. . .] were more responsible than any other group for moving American thought into the modern world.