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Introduction
The System of US Literature, 1851–1877

Cody Marrs

Every era is momentous in its own way, but some eras are more momentous than others. Between 1851 and 1877, the USA underwent a Civil War of epic proportions, resulting in more than 750,000 deaths, the destruction of slavery, and the formation of a multiracial democracy. Yet these events merely hint at the multitude of changes that rocked American society in this period, affecting everything from the definition of citizenship to literacy rates and mourning rituals.[1]

This whirlwind of change transformed American literature. In this era, print media expanded in ways that were unimaginable only a few generations ago. New genres emerged (like the Western dime novel), and old ones returned with vigor (like the lyric).[2] Styles, aesthetic standards, literary careers, literary networks – even the concept of "literature" itself – were reworked, sometimes in fundamental ways. A few examples: in 1851, Ralph Waldo Emerson was the most famous writer in America; Walt Whitman was still building houses; and Emily Dickinson had not yet written a single poem. By the turn of the 1880s, Emerson was dead (along with Nathaniel Hawthorne, William Lloyd Garrison, Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, and Washington Irving); Frederick Douglass had become a full-fledged American citizen and author of three autobiographies; Henry James had written more than half a dozen novels; and many of the writers who would eventually make waves in the twentieth century – like Gertrude Stein, W. E. B. DuBois, and Robert Frost – had already been born.

This change did not happen all at once, nor did it occur in lockstep fashion. In volumes such as this, it is tempting to present literary history as easy to map and easy to understand. But literary history tends to be quite circuitous.[3] Authors take surprising turns, genres morph in unexpected ways, and sometimes books seem to come out of nowhere: there are simply too many twists, outliers, and happy accidents for American literary history to be anything other than an eclectic story about an ever-changing,

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ever-evolving culture. This is undoubtedly the case when it comes to this particular era of American literature, which is marked by multiple, overlapping transitions. By "transition," I mean a passage from one state to another. Derived from the Latin term *transitiō* (i.e., "the action of going across or past, . . . of crossing over to the other side"), a transition involves either a change in the forms and conditions of literature's production or a shift in literature's conception, consumption, or distribution.[4]

Several such crossovers occur in American literature between 1851 and 1877. This volume addresses four transitions that collectively define this period of literary history:

(1) **Careers:** A career is best understood as the arc of an author's output. Careers unfold across time as writers adapt their style and perspective to a fluctuating set of circumstances, many of which are beyond their control – publishing opportunities (or lack thereof), political movements, changes in literary taste, etc. Each career is thus personal and impersonal, and it derives from a series of contingent encounters between a writer and the world-at-large.[5] In other words, each career is the result of numerous transitions, both individual and cultural, that collectively forge an author's oeuvre, and it is only by studying careers that we can properly understand how and why writers respond to various texts, events, and ideas.

The chapters in Part I examine some of the major career transitions in this era. Chapter 1 retraces the birth and development of Emily Dickinson's poetry, elucidating her movement between letters and poems. Chapter 2 follows Frederick Douglass before, during, and after emancipation, assessing how the dismantlement of slavery influences his understanding of peace and justice. Chapter 3 considers the remarkable career of Augusta Jane Evans. Though she is often remembered as a one (or two) hit wonder, Evans published nine ambitious novels between 1855 and 1907, novels that she saw as "vehicles of female intellectual ambition." Chapter 4 reflects on the transbellum career of Herman Melville, tracking the massive change in Melville's writing that takes place between *Moby-Dick* (1851) and *Clarel* (1876). Chapter 5 assesses the life and writings of John Rollin Ridge. Popularly known as the author of the first Native novel written in English, Ridge experimented with numerous styles, genres, and formats, which enabled him to think in complicated ways about questions of race. Chapter 6 provides a fresh perspective on Walt Whitman, reconstructing how and why Whitman sought to become

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a conduit for other voices, often through a carefully calibrated "assimilation and redeployment" of print media. Chapter 7 documents a different way to understand careers by tracing the history of anonymous authorship in this era, revealing a "transition away from anonymity" in the post–Civil War years.

(2) **Networks:** Although the term is often associated with modern technology (computer networks, social networks, and so forth), networks play a vital role in American literary history. From a literary-historical perspective, a "network" is a web of cultural exchange that influences the production and/or reception of literature.[6] Such networks can be small and unofficial – for example, when like-minded authors form a group (the Concord Club, the Metaphysical Club, etc.). But literary networks can also be large and heterogenous. Literary genres, movements, and print cultures cohere through networks that tie individual writers to broader cultural practices, systems, and institutions.

Part II surveys the literary networks that formed between 1851 and 1877. Chapter 8 examines the era's newspapers and periodicals, which spread at an unprecedented rate and altered the media landscape. Chapter 9 explores the hemispheric dimensions of American culture and discloses the relationship between slavery, colonialism, and writing across the Americas. Chapter 10 takes us from land to sea, chronicling the intercultural networks that emerged in and around the ocean, a "diffuse, decentered, and stateless" realm that profoundly influenced American writing. Chapters 11 and 12 provide a different view on literary networks by reassessing two of the era's major genres, Romanticism and Realism. Chapter 11 looks at the connection between American, British, and German Romanticisms, which trafficked in similar philosophies of nature, ideas about the self, and the power of the imagination. Chapter 12 tracks the rise and spread of Realism as an institutional as well as a literary movement, emphasizing its link to another network: higher education.

(3) **Exchanges:** An "exchange" is a bilateral relationship between literature and another field or endeavor. In this era, many writers viewed literature as intertwined with a variety of other arts and sciences, from painting to economics. To better apprehend the world, many authors drew upon other disciplines, and this led to a great deal of textual, intellectual, and cultural cross-fertilization. The literary history of 1851–1877 is a history of cross-talk, revision, and experimentation.

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Part III considers several such exchanges. Chapter 13 looks at the interaction between philosophy and literature, identifying three important types of "philosophico-literary thinking" in this period. Chapter 14 examines the relationship between literature and science, which became increasingly intertangled in these years. Chapter 15 focuses on the environment, a subject of shared interest for writers as well as early ecologists who viewed nature in similar ways before the rise of modern academic disciplines. Chapter 16 turns our attention to the economy, chronicling the convergent rise of market capitalism and the emergence of Literature with a capital "L," a coevolution that seeded modern understandings of literature as imaginative rather than merely commercial.

(4) **The Long Civil War:** The Civil War and the ensuing effort to create a multiracial democracy – an effort known as "Reconstruction" – was nothing short of a revolution.[7] But it is difficult to say when that revolution began or when it concluded. There are some official dates, of course: the battles lasted from 1861 (if you discount the Kansas–Missouri Border War of 1851–1859) to 1865, and Reconstruction lasted roughly from 1863 (i.e., the Emancipation Proclamation) to 1877 (i.e., the removal of federal troops from the South). Nonetheless, given the multitude of changes brought about by these events, it is best to view this era as a single ongoing period of struggle over race, slavery, and freedom, a "Long" Civil War that remade American society.[8]

Part IV analyzes the literary and cultural dimensions of this protracted conflict. Chapter 17 assesses the social divisions that erupted long before the Southern States seceded from the Union, divisions that are quite evident in the literature of the 1850s. Chapters 18 and 19 examine the literary cultures of the North and the South, respectively. In Chapter 18, we discover that although Northern literature often revolved around the promise of national unity, it was remarkably diverse in terms of rhetoric, ideology, and sentiment, and tended to feature "renegade feelings of ambivalence, loss, melancholy, and anxiety about what the Civil War had wrought." Southern literature was no less heterogeneous. Chapter 19 redraws the boundaries of Confederate writing, revealing María Ruiz de Burton's *Who Would Have Thought It?* (1872) to be a keen example of the ways in which the South – as well as the Civil War more broadly – exceeds its standard definitions. Chapter 20 surveys the political, literary, and cultural resonances of

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Reconstruction, providing a wide-ranging analysis of Reconstruction writing as well as a helpful guide to how it should be taught and studied. Finally, Chapter 21 examines the global dimensions of the American Civil War, focusing on the connections between the USA and Europe across the nineteenth century.

These transitions both create and sustain the system of US literature from 1851 to 1877. By "system," I mean a complex assemblage made of numerous interlinking parts.[9] To be sure, literature differs in significant ways from other systems, but given the scale and complexity of American literary history from 1851 to 1877 – a history that involves multiple genres, a wide range of writers, editors, and publishers, extensive print networks, multiple regions, dialects, and aesthetics – we must view it as a system in order to grasp the large-scale changes and cultural linkages that collectively make this literary era cohere. This is a literature that depends on, and indeed is coextensive with, a multitude of relationships – for example, between writers and their books, writers and their editors, periodicals and their readers – all of which are in transition.

It is fitting that scholarship about this literary era has turned out to be just as dynamic as its subject. Over the past few decades, American literary studies has experienced countless shifts and turns that have generated new methods, subfields, and movements. One need only glance at the panoply of terms that circulate in the field to get a sense of this scholarly upheaval and intellectual movement: posthumanism, postnationalism, postsecularism, the New Americanists, the New Southern Studies.[10] This whirlwind of critical activity has been a boon for American literary and cultural studies, and it is a testament, as Hester Blum notes, to "the field's strength," which lies in "its constant, mobile reinvention, its drive to regenerate and extend without fracture or dissolution."[11]

Yet the sheer variety of so-called interventions can be disorienting. So let us zoom out and take stock of where we are right now, in the scholarly milieu of the 2020s. Recent and ongoing scholarship has collectively redefined each term in the phrase *American literary history*. What used to simply be called "American" literature is now understood to be a collection of transnational, hemispheric, and regional formations that are only loosely or partly bound to the nation-state. This means that American literature involves writing in a variety of different languages, cultures, and locations, from Spanish, French, and Creole literature produced in the circum-Caribbean to immigrant and bilingual literature produced in the United States. "Literature" has similarly stretched beyond its earlier definition. It

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now includes a diverse array of texts, practices, and performances, which run the gamut from the public to the private to everything in between. Finally, literary "history" is best understood as a story with many plots, a narrative of continual and overlapping change. Sometimes it is a story about creation, but more frequently it is a story about reinvention. And that is perhaps the most important through-line for all of these changes in the field: they help us reimagine American literary history to be just as protean as the idea of America itself.

These scholarly approaches play an important role in this volume. For example, Chapter 10 ("Oceanic Literature") provides an expansive and elastic view of where American literature originates, while Chapter 13 ("Literature and/as Philosophy") shows us how entangled literature tends to be with philosophical modes of thinking. This volume therefore provides many entry points for students as well as scholars. One can read individual chapters in order to learn more about a particular author, method, or subfield. But I also recommend reading some of the chapters alongside one another. The sections create natural pairings for chapters that mutually illuminate one another and are best understood as clusters – that is, related meditations on a shared set of interests or concerns. The chapters in Part I, for example, offer very different accounts of very different authors, but they collectively present a panoramic view of the common pressures and patterns that defined literary careers in this era. And there are other pairings throughout the volume. Chapters 11 ("Romanticism") and 15 ("Literature and/as Ecology") comprise a kind of scholarly diptych, developing contiguous accounts of the relationship between literary and scientific inquiry into the order of nature. Similarly, Chapters 7 ("Anonymous") and 8 ("Newspapers and Periodicals") reveal a symbiotic relationship that formed in this era between authors and periodicals, which deeply influenced the evolving definition and practice of authorship.

The chapters also reveal contrasts and differences. The aforementioned chapter on "Anonymous," for example, simultaneously fits and doesn't fit alongside the other entries in Part I, leading to a vital question: to what extent is authorship a function of public discourse versus the outgrowth of an individual artistic consciousness? To my mind, one of the major purposes of this volume (as well as this series) is to explore the field in all of its multiplicity, which involves noting the scholarly trends as well as the areas of ongoing disagreement. There are several subjects of collective deliberation that will define the field in coming decades, propelling research and teaching alike. One of the most pressing concerns has to do

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with the balance between historicism and presentism. Does literary scholarship inevitably reflect contemporary issues and perspectives, or is it best understood as an exercise in historical understanding that requires viewing the past as a "foreign country"?[12] Currently, there is little consensus. Likewise, a great deal depends on what scholars decide to do – pedagogically, conceptually, and aesthetically – with the various archives that have been uncovered. In recent years, scholars have unearthed a cornucopia of texts that had been previously overlooked, unpublished, or privately written – anonymously published novels, memoirs by slaves, poems that come from unexpected places and in unexpected venues – and these texts, in turn, have enabled scholars to remap and reimagine the field of American literary studies. However, as Maurice Lee points out, there is now a "superabundance of data and documents," and this state of "textual excess" generates a number of questions, such as: What are the aesthetic qualities of these archives? And where might literary studies go in the wake of the archive?

Such considerations will drive scholarship and teaching in the coming years, and they will determine the future shape of the field. At this point, it is impossible to know where these questions might lead – that is the point of scholarly research, after all – but one thing is certain: literary studies will continue to draw from and respond to the dynamism of this literary era. Transitions play a crucial role not only in the past but in our understanding of it. Indeed, there is no better time to return to this momentous era than in our own momentous present.

Notes

1 Based on an analysis of changes in the Census, J. David Hacker estimates that the war likely resulted in somewhere between 752,000 and 851,000 soldier deaths. Civilian deaths push the total number of dead much higher. See Hacker, "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," *Civil War History* 57, no. 4 (December 2011): 307–348. On changes to American mourning rituals, see Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2009), especially 137–153. The sheer scale of transformation during this era is aptly captured by Eric Foner's phrase, "America's unfinished revolution": this period involved nothing less than a remaking of American society, and in many respects that revolution continues to unfold. Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper, 1988).

2 Christine Bold chronicles the rise of the Western dime novel in *Selling the Wild West: Popular Western Fiction, 1860 to 1960* (Bloomington: Indiana

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University Press, 1987). On the resurgence of the lyric – or, more accurately, the consolidation and stabilization of the lyric form – in the late nineteenth century, see Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013) and Elissa Zellinger, *Lyrical Strains: Liberalism and Women's Poetry in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020). Stephanie Burt also provides an excellent overview of the history and concept of the lyric in her essay, "What Is This Thing Called Lyric?," *Modern Philology* 113, no. 3 (February 2016): 422–440.

3 For a more sustained analysis of the shape of American literary history, see the essays in Cody Marrs and Christopher Hager, *The Timelines of American Literature* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019).

4 Oxford English Dictionary: www.oed.com/.

5 Unfortunately, there is currently no guide to or analysis of what we might call "career studies." But there are numerous excellent examples of such studies, each of which explores the nature and shape of a particular literary career. I particularly recommend Nina Baym's *The Shape of Hawthorne's Career* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976) and Edgar Dryden, *Monumental Melville: The Formation of a Literary Career* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004).

6 According to Niklas Luhmann, a social or cultural system is a distinct "form" of actions or relations that cannot be understood apart from the environment out of which it grows. Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory* (Cambridge; Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

7 Foner frames Reconstruction in this way in his aforementioned study, but viewing Reconstruction as a revolution really begins with W. E. B. Du Bois, who, in *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1992), presents emancipation (and the resistance to emancipation) as part of a long struggle that stretches back to slavery itself.

8 For a more comprehensive account of the literary and cultural history of the Long Civil War, see Cody Marrs, *Not Even Past: The Stories We Keep Telling about the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020).

9 Here I draw on Luhmann's aforementioned definition, and more loosely on Bruno Latour's development of actor-network theory, which emphasizes patterns and relationships, and Immanuel Wallerstein's model of world-systems that stretch beyond traditional boundaries. See Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), and Wallerstein, "World-Systems Analysis," *in Social Theory Today*, ed. Anthony Giddens (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1987), 309–324.

10 To mention only a few such examples: Jared Hickman and Peter Coviello, eds., "Introduction: After the Postsecular," *American Literature* 86, no. 4 (December 2014): 645–654, Cristin Ellis, *Antebellum Posthuman: Race and Materiality in the Mid-Nineteenth Century* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), and Jennifer L. Fleissner, "After the New Americanists: The

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Progress of Romance and the Romance of Progress in American Literary Studies," in *A Companion to American Literary Studies*, eds. Caroline F. Levander and Robert S. Levine (New York: Wiley, 2011), 173–192. Book series reflect this trend as well, as seen in Cambridge University Press's "The New ______ Studies" (e.g., *The New Melville Studies*, *The New Hemingway Studies*, *The New Emily Dickinson Studies*) and the University of Georgia Press's "The New Southern Studies."

11 Blum, "Introduction: Academic Positioning Systems," in *Turns of Event: Nineteenth-Century American Literary Studies in Motion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 3.

12 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

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