A Companion to
American Literature and Culture
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Edited by Paul Lauter
To my grandchildren
And their companions
Who might, one day,
Draw sustenance from this book
Contents

List of Contributors xi

Introduction 1
Paul Lauter

Part A Genealogies of American Literary Study 7
1 The Emergence of the Literatures of the United States 9
   Emory Elliott
2 Politics, Sentiment, and Literature in Nineteenth-Century America 26
   John Carlos Rowe
3 Making It New: Constructions of Modernism 40
   Carla Kaplan
4 Academicizing “American Literature” 57
   Elizabeth Renker
5 Cold War and Culture War 72
   Christopher Newfield
6 Re-Historicizing Literature 96
   T.V. Reed
7 Multiculturalism and Forging New Canons 110
   Shelley Streeby

Part B Writers and Issues 123
8 Indigenous Oral Traditions of North America, Then and Now 125
   Lisa Brooks (Abenaki)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The New Worlds and the Old: Transatlantic Politics of Conversion</td>
<td>143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Susan Castillo and Ivy Schweitzer</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Unspeakable Fears: Politics and Style in the Enlightenment</td>
<td>160</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Frank Shuffelton</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Slave Narrative and Captivity Narrative: American Genres</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gordon M. Sayre</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>The Early Republic: Forms and Readers</td>
<td>192</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Trish Loughran</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>“Indians” Constructed and Speaking</td>
<td>206</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Scott Richard Lyons</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Sentiment and Style</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tara Penny</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Transcendental Politics</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Paul Lauter</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Melville, Whitman, and the Tribulations of Democracy</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Betsy Erkkila</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Emily Dickinson and Her Peers</td>
<td>284</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Paula Bernat Bennett</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Race and Literary Politics</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Frances Smith Foster and Cassandra Jackson</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>American Regionalism</td>
<td>328</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Susan K. Harris</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Magazines and Fictions</td>
<td>339</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Ellen Gruber Garvey</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Realism and Victorian Protestantism in African American Literature</td>
<td>354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Phillip M. Richards</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>The Maturation of American Fictions</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Gary Scharnhorst</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Making It New: Constructions of Modernisms</td>
<td>377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Heinz Ickstadt</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Wests, Westerns, Westerners</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Martha Viebmann</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>The Early Modern Writers of the US South</td>
<td>410</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>John Lowe</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Author(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Writers on the Left</td>
<td>Alan Wald</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>From Objectivism to the Haight</td>
<td>Charles Molesworth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>New Aestheticisms: the Artfulness of Art</td>
<td>Stephen Burt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Drama in American Culture</td>
<td>Brenda Murphy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Constructions of “Ethnicity” and “Diasporas”</td>
<td>Aviva Taubenfeld</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31</td>
<td>Narrating Terror and Trauma: Racial Formations and “Homeland Security” in Ethnic American Literature</td>
<td>Shirley Geok-lin Lim</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>32</td>
<td>Feminisms and Literatures</td>
<td>Deborah S. Rosenfelt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>33</td>
<td>Blackness/Whiteness</td>
<td>James Smethurst</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Borderlands: Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and Hybridity</td>
<td>Ana María Manzanaí and Jesús Betito Sánchez</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35</td>
<td>Literature-and-Environment Studies and the Influence of the Environmental Justice Movement</td>
<td>Joni Adamson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature</td>
<td>David Bergman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature</td>
<td>Arnold Krupat and Michael A. Elliott</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State</td>
<td>Donald Pease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Afterword</td>
<td>Paul Lauter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Index</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. 26 Writers on the Left
2. 27 From Objectivism to the Haight
3. 28 New Aestheticisms: the Artfulness of Art
4. 29 Drama in American Culture
5. 30 Constructions of “Ethnicity” and “Diasporas”
6. 31 Narrating Terror and Trauma: Racial Formations and “Homeland Security” in Ethnic American Literature
7. 32 Feminisms and Literatures
8. 33 Blackness/Whiteness
9. 34 Borderlands: Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and Hybridity
10. 35 Literature-and-Environment Studies and the Influence of the Environmental Justice Movement
11. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
12. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
13. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
14. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
15. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
16. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
17. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
18. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
19. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
20. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
21. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
22. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
23. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
24. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
25. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
26. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
27. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
28. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
29. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
30. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
31. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
32. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
33. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
34. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
35. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
36. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
37. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
38. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
39. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
40. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
41. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
42. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
43. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
44. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
45. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
46. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
47. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
48. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
49. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
50. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
51. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
52. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
53. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
54. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
55. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
56. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
57. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
58. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
59. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
60. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
61. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
62. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
63. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
64. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
65. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
66. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
67. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
68. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
69. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
70. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
71. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
72. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
73. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
74. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
75. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
76. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
77. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
78. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
79. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
80. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
81. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
82. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
83. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
84. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
85. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
86. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
87. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
88. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
89. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
90. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
91. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
92. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
93. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
94. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
95. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
96. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
97. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
98. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
99. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
100. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State

1. 26 Writers on the Left
2. 27 From Objectivism to the Haight
3. 28 New Aestheticisms: the Artfulness of Art
4. 29 Drama in American Culture
5. 30 Constructions of “Ethnicity” and “Diasporas”
6. 31 Narrating Terror and Trauma: Racial Formations and “Homeland Security” in Ethnic American Literature
7. 32 Feminisms and Literatures
8. 33 Blackness/Whiteness
9. 34 Borderlands: Ethnicity, Multiculturalism, and Hybridity
10. 35 Literature-and-Environment Studies and the Influence of the Environmental Justice Movement
11. 36 Endowed by Their Creator: Queer American Literature
12. 37 Contemporary Native American Fiction as Resistance Literature
13. 38 From Virgin Land to Ground Zero: Interrogating the Mythological Foundations of the Master Fiction of the Homeland Security State
14. Afterword
15. Index
Joni Adamson heads the Environment and Culture Caucus of the American Studies Association and is an Associate Professor of English and Environmental Humanities at Arizona State University. She is author of American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place and coeditor of The Environmental Justice Reader. With Scott Slovic, she coedited a special issue of MELUS, Ethnicity and Ecocriticism, published in the summer of 2009. Her essays and reviews have appeared in Globalization on the Line, The American Quarterly, Teaching North American Environmental Literature, Reading the Earth, and Studies in American Indian Literatures.

David Bergman is the author of The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture and Gaiety Transfigured, which was selected as an Outstanding Academic Book of the Year. He has won a Lambda Literary award for editing Men on Men 2000 and the George Elliston Poetry Prize for Cracking the Code. He has edited the collected essays of John Ashbery (Reported Sightings) and of Edmund White (The Burning Library). His latest book is the anthology Gay American Autobiography. He teaches at Towson University.

Paula Bernat Bennett is Professor Emerita, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. She is a Bunting Institute and an AAS-NEH fellow. Among her books are Emily Dickinson: Woman Poet (1990) and Poets in the Public Sphere: The Emancipatory Project of American Women’s Poetry, 1800–1900 (2003). She has also edited Nineteenth-Century American Women Poets: An Anthology (1997) and Palace-Burner: The Selected Poetry of Sarah Piatt (2001). With Karen Kilcup and Philipp Schweighauser, she edited Teaching Nineteenth-Century American Poetry (2007) as part of the MLA Options series. She has also authored numerous articles and book chapters. Currently, she is living in Vermont and trying (to date unsuccessfully) to retire.

Stephen Burt is Associate Professor of English at Harvard University. He writes regularly on poetry and on contemporary literature for the London Review of Books, the
Boston Review, Rain Taxi, and other journals in Britain and America; his critical books include Close Calls with Nonsense: Reading New Poetry (2009) and The Forms of Youth (2007). His most recent book of poems is Parallel Play (2006).

Lisa Brooks (Abenaki) is an Assistant Professor of History and Literature and of Folklore and Mythology at Harvard University. Her book The Common Pot: The Recovery of Native Space in the Northeast focuses on the role of writing in the Native networks of the northeast. She also co-authored the collaborative volume, Reasoning Together: The Native Critics Collective and wrote the “Afterword” for American Indian Literary Nationalism. She serves on the Editorial Board of Studies in American Indian Literatures and on the Advisory Board of Gedakina, a non-profit organization focused on indigenous cultural revitalization in northern New England.

Susan Castillo is Harriet Beecher Stowe Professor of American Studies at King’s College London. Her publications include Colonial Encounters in New World Writing: Performing America, 1500–1786; The Literatures of Colonial America, coedited with Ivy Schweitzer; and American Travel and Empire, coedited with David Seed. She is a practicing literary translator, and has also published a volume of poetry, The Candlewoman’s Trade.

Emory Elliott (1942–2009), distinguished professor of English at the University of California, Riverside, passed away on March 31, 2009. The first in his family to obtain a college education (BA, Loyola College, Baltimore; PhD, University of Illinois), he went on to become director of the American studies program at Princeton University and chair of the English department. In 1989 he left Princeton to join the English Department at the University of California, Riverside as Distinguished Professor, and also served for over a decade as director of the Center for Ideas and Society there. He was appointed to the distinguished rank of University Professor by the University of California Regents in 2001. He was author of Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England (1975), Revolutionary Writers: Literature and Authority in the New Republic (1982), and The Cambridge Introduction to Early American Literature (2002). He edited Puritan Influences in American Literature (1979), the Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988), the Columbia History of the American Novel (1991), among others, and helped to found The Literary Encyclopedia on-line in 1998. He was a fellow of the National Endowment of the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Guggenheim Foundation, and the National Humanities Center, as well as president of the American Studies Association. He was an expert on Puritan writing, a distinguished literary historian, an early champion of ethnic minority writers, a strong advocate for transnationalism in American studies, an inspiring teacher, and a tireless mentor of graduate students and young faculty.

Michael A. Elliott is Professor of English and American Studies at Emory University. He has published articles on the history of ethnography, Native American literature, and public history. He is the author of The Culture Concept: Writing and Difference in the Age of Realism (University of Minnesota Press, 2002) and Custerology: The

**Betsy Erkkila** is the Henry Sanborn Noyes Professor of Literature at Northwestern University. She is the author of Mixed Bloods and Other American Crosses: Essays on American Literature and Culture; Ezra Pound: The Critical Reception; The Wicked Sisters: Women Poets, Literary History, and Discord; Breaking Bounds: Whitman and American Cultural Studies (co-editor); Whitman the Political Poet; and Walt Whitman among the French: Poet and Myth. She has been awarded fellowships by the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Humanities Center, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Fulbright Foundation.

**Frances Smith Foster** is Charles Howard Candler Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Emory University. Her recent publications include Love and Marriage in Early African America and ‘Til Death or Distance Do Us Part: Marriage and the Making of African America. She has edited and written extensively about the work of Frances Ellen Watkins Harper.

**Ellen Gruber Garvey** is the author of the forthcoming Book, Paper, Scissors: Scrapbooks Remake Print Culture and of The Adman in the Parlor: Magazines and the Gendering of Consumer Culture, and has published articles on Willa Cather as a magazine editor, the rewriting of a Mary Wilkins Freeman story, book advertising, women editors of periodicals, and recirculation in the nineteenth-century press. She is a professor of English at New Jersey City University.

**Susan K. Harris** is the Joyce and Elizabeth Hall Distinguished Professor of American Literature at the University of Kansas. Her book-length publications include Annie Adams Fields, Mary Gladstone Drew, and the Work of the Late 19th-Century Hostess (2002); The Courtship of Olivia Langdon and Mark Twain (1996); 19th-Century American Women’s Novels: Interpretive Strategies (1990); and Mark Twain’s Escape from Time: A Study of Patterns and Images (1982). In addition to numerous articles in journals and collections, she has edited Kate Douglas Wiggins’ Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (2005), Catherine Maria Sedgwick’s A New-England Tale (2003), Mark Twain’s Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (2000); Harriet Beecher Stowe’s The Minister’s Wooing (1999); and Mark Twain: Historical Romances (1994). Currently she is working on a book-length study of religion, American identity, and the annexation of the Philippines.

**Heinz Ickstadt** is Professor Emeritus of American Literature at the Kennedy Institute of North American Studies, Free University Berlin. His publications include A History of the American Novel in the Twentieth Century (Der amerikanische Roman im 20. Jh.: Transformation des Mimetischen) (1998) and essays on late nineteenth-century American literature and culture, the fiction and poetry of American modernism and postmodernism as well as on the history and theory of American Studies. Some of these were collected in Faces of Fiction: Essays on American Literature and Culture from the Jacksonian
Age to Postmodernity (2001). He also edited and coedited several books on American literature and culture, among them a bi-lingual anthology of American poetry. He was president of the German Association of American Studies from 1990 until 1993, and president of the European Association of American Studies from 1996 until 2000.

Cassandra Jackson is an Associate Professor of English at the College of New Jersey. She is the author of ‘Barriers between Us’: Interracial Sex in 19th Century American Literature (Indiana University Press, 2004). Her research and teaching focuses on nineteenth-century American fiction with special interests in African-American literature and visual culture. She is currently working on a book entitled “Violence, Visuality, and the Black Male Body.”

Carla Kaplan is Davis Distinguished Professor of American Literature at Northeastern University, and Founding Director of the Northeastern University Humanities Center. Her books include The Erotics of Talk: Women’s Writing and Feminist Paradigms (1996), Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters (2002), and most recently Miss Anne in Harlem: The White Women of the Black Renaissance (forthcoming HarperCollins). She has been awarded a New York Public Library Cullman Center fellowship (2006–7), a Guggenheim fellowship (2007–8), and a W. E. B. Du Bois Institute Research Fellowship (2007–8).

Among Arnold Krupat’s many books, the most recent is All that Remains: Varieties of Indigenous Expression (2009). His essay, “That the People Might Live: Notes Toward a Study of Native American Elegy” will appear in the forthcoming Oxford Handbook of Elegy, and he is currently completing a book-length study of Native American elegiac expression. He is the editor for Native American literatures for the Norton Anthology of American Literature, and teaches literature in the Global Studies Faculty Group at Sarah Lawrence College.

Paul Lauter, Trinity College (Hartford) is Allan K. and Gwendolyn Miles Smith Professor of Literature at Trinity College (Hartford). He is general editor of the Heath Anthology of American Literature, now in its sixth edition (Cengage). His most recent books are From Walden Pond to Jurassic Park (Duke), an edition of Thoreau’s Walden and “Civil Disobedience” (Cengage), and Canons and Contexts (Oxford). He has been given the Jay Hubbell medal for lifetime achievement in American literature and the Bode-Pearson award for lifetime achievement in American Studies. He has served as president of the American Studies Association (USA). He also was active in the civil rights, peace and feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s, working for the American Friends Service Committee, the US Servicemen’s Fund, and The Feminist Press.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim (PhD Brandeis University; Professor of English, University of California, Santa Barbara) has published two critical studies, and edited/coedited Reading the Literatures of Asian America; Approaches to Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior; Transnational Asia Pacific; Power, Race and Gender in Academe, and Sites and Transits, special issues of Ariel, Tulsa Studies, Studies in the Literary Imagination, and Concentric, and five anthologies (The Forbidden Stitch received the 1990 American Book Award). Recognized as a creative writer, she won the Commonwealth Poetry Prize.
She has published six volumes of poetry, three short story collections, a memoir (*Among the White Moon Faces*, American Book Award winner), and three novels. She received the 2002 UCSB Faculty Research Lecture Award and was Chair Professor at the University of Hong Kong from 1999 until 2001.

**Trish Loughran** is Associate Professor of English at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Her most recent book is *The Republic in Print: Print Culture in the Age of US Nation-Building 1770–1870* (NY: Columbia University Press, 2007). She is currently working on two other projects: “Franklin’s Fins: Bodies, Travel, and Print Culture, 1590–1800” and “Utopia: American Futures from Reformation to Reconstruction.”

**John Lowe** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature, and Director of the Program in Louisiana and Caribbean Studies at Louisiana State University. He is author of *Jump at the Sun: Zora Neale Hurston’s Cosmic Comedy* (Illinois, 1994), editor of *Approaches to Teaching Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God and Other Works* (MLA, forthcoming); *Louisiana Culture: From the Colonial Era to Katrina* (LSU, 2008); *Conversations with Ernest Gaines* (Mississippi, 1995); *Bridging Southern Cultures: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (LSU, 2005); and coeditor of *The Future of Southern Letters* (Oxford, 1996). His most recent book is *Faulkner’s Fraternal Fury*, a study of birth order and sibling rivalry (forthcoming, LSU). He is currently completing *Calypso Magnolia: The Caribbean Side of the South*, for which he has been awarded Fellowships from the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the Louisiana State Board of Regents, and the National Endowment for the Humanities.

**Scott Richard Lyons** (Leech Lake Ojibwe) is Assistant Professor of English at Syracuse University, New York. He has lectured widely. His first book, *X-marks: Native Signatures of Assent* (Minnesota), examines the potentials and present uses of so-called “non-traditional” ideas, technologies, and concepts by Natives engaging colonization and its aftermath. Lyons is also an essayist and public commentator on Indian issues, having recently published a personal essay about Vine Deloria, Jr. in the popular collection *Sovereign Bones: New Native American Writing* (Nation Books), a reflection on Lewis Henry Morgan in *A New Literary History of America* (Harvard), and commentaries on a wide range of subjects in *Indian Country Today*.

**Ana Maria Manzanas** is Associate professor of American Literature and Culture at the University of Salamanca, Spain. Her publications include *Uncertain Mirrors: Magical Realisms in US Ethnic Literatures* (Rodopi 2009) and *Intercultural Mediations: Mimesis and Hybridity in American Literatures* (LIT Verlag 2003), with Jesús Benito, and editions of essays such as *Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands* (Rodopi, 2002), *The Dynamics of the Threshold: Essays on Liminal Negotiations* (The Gateway Press, 2006), and *Border Transits: Literature and Culture across the Line* (Rodopi, 2007). With Jesús Benito she is general editor of the Rodopi Series “Critical Approaches to Ethnic American Literature.”

**Charles Molesworth** is the author of *The Fierce Embrace: A Study of Contemporary American Poetry* (1979) and *Marianne Moore: A Literary Life* (1990), as well as monographs
Contributors

on Donald Barthelme and Gary Snyder. In addition to having served as the Modern Period editor of the *Heath Anthology of American Literature*, his reviews and essays, chiefly on modern literature, have appeared in various places, from *Partisan Review* and *Raritan* to the *New York Times* and *The Nation*. He has published two books of poetry, and currently writes a regular column on the visual arts for *Salmagundi*. He co-authored *Alain Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher*, which appeared in 2009. In the spring of 2006 he was the Daimler-Chrysler Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin.


**Christopher Newfield** is a Professor in the English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He received his PhD in American literature from Cornell University in 1988. His central interests include American culture after 1830, with particular attention to fiction since 1940; race; sexuality; affect; crime; California; and corporate culture. He is currently at work on two projects: *The Empowerment Wars*, which explores the literature, management theory, and everyday life of cubicle dwellers in corporate America; and *Starting Up, Starting Over*, an eyewitness account of the underside of the “New Economy” in Southern California.


**Tara Penry** is Associate Professor of English at Boise State University, where she coedits the Western Writers Series, a collection of introductory monographs on the
American literary West. Her essays have appeared in *American Literary Realism*, *Western American Literature*, and elsewhere.

**T.V. Reed** is Buchanan Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at Washington State University, USA. His areas of research and teaching include interdisciplinary cultural theory; popular culture; digital diversity; environmental justice cultural studies; and culture in social movements. His most recent book *The Art of Protest: Culture and Activism from the Civil Rights Movement to the Streets of Seattle* (University Minnesota Press, 2005) was nominated for the John Hope Franklin prize. He is also the author of *Fifteen Jugglers, Five Believers: Literary Politics and the Poetics of Social Movements* (University of California Press, 1992). He has two books in process, one on 1930s' radical novelist Robert Cantwell, the other an introduction to critical digital culture studies. He also maintains one of the most visited websites on the study of popular culture: www.wsu.edu/~amerstu/pop/tvrguide.html. Reed was elected in 2006 to the National Council of the American Studies Association. He has been a Mellon Fellow at Wesleyan University, a Fulbright Senior Lecturer at the Freie Universitat in Berlin, Germany, a Scholar in Residence at the Center for Cultural Studies at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and a Visiting Lecturer at Yunnan University in China and ICU in Tokyo, Japan.

**Elizabeth Renker** is the author of *The Origins of American Literature Studies: An Institutional History* (Cambridge, 2007); *Strike Through the Mask: Herman Melville and the Scene of Writing* (Johns Hopkins, 1996); the introduction to the Signet classic edition of *Moby-Dick* (1998); and an array of essays on Herman Melville, Sarah Piatt, the history of American poetry, and the history of higher education. Recipient of two awards for distinguished teaching, she is Professor of English at Ohio State University.

**Phillip Richards** is a professor in the Department of English at Colgate University. He is the author of the monograph, *Black Heart: the Moral Life of Recent African American Letters*, and several articles on early black literature. He is currently completing a literary history of early African-American literature. He has been a research/teaching Fulbright fellow in Gabon and a fellow at the National Humanities Center. He has received grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Ford Foundation, and the Mellon Foundation. He is also a journalist who has written literary criticism, critiques of university education in America and Africa, and autobiographical explorations of his own academic experience. His literary work has appeared in *Massachusetts Review*, *American Scholar*, *Harper's Magazine*, *Dissent*, *Commentary*, and *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. His literary work has been frequently republished.

**Deborah Silverton Rosenfelt** is Professor of Women's Studies and Director of the Curriculum Transformation Project at the University of Maryland, College Park. Her publications include *Encompassing Gender* (coedited with Mary M. Lay and Janice Monk, 2002); *Tell Me a Riddle* (Tillie Olsen) (1995); *Feminist Criticism and Social Change* (coedited with Judith Lowder Newton, 1986), *Teaching Women's Literature From a Regional Perspective* (coedited with Lenore Hoffman, 1982); *Salt of the Earth* (critical study with
screenplay by Michael Wilson, 1978), and essays on women’s literature and women’s studies.


Jesús Benito Sánchez teaches American literature at the University of Valladolid, Spain. His research centers mostly on so-called Ethnic American Literatures, a field he approaches through a comparative, intercultural focus. Such a comparative approach is visible in publications he has coauthored and/or coedited with Ana Maria Manzanas, such as Uncertain Mirrors (Rodopi 2009), Intercultural Mediations (Lit Verlag, 2003), Literature and Ethnicity in the Cultural Borderlands (Rodopi, 2002) and Narratives of Resistance (Cuenca, 1999), among others.

Gordon Sayre is Professor of English at the University of Oregon. He is the author of The Indian Chief as Tragic Hero: Native Resistance and the Literatures of America, from Moctezuma to Tecumseh (Chapel Hill, 2005), editor of American Captivity Narratives (Boston, 2000), and coeditor of Dumont de Montigny: Regards sur le Monde Atlantique, 1715–1747 (Sillery, Quebec, 2008).

Gary Scharnhorst is Distinguished Professor of English at the University of New Mexico, editor of American Literary Realism, and editor in alternating years of American Literary Scholarship. He is also the author or editor of over 30 books.

Ivy Schweitzer is Professor of English and Chair of the Women’s and Gender Studies Program at Dartmouth College. Her fields are early American literature, women’s literature, gender and cultural studies. She is the author of The Work of Self-Representation: Lyric Poetry in Colonial New England, and Perfecting Friendship: Politics and Affiliation in Early American Literature, a member of the editorial board of the Heath Anthology of American Literature, and coeditor of The Literatures of Colonial America: An Anthology and Companion to The Literatures of Colonial America. Current projects include a website of digitized eighteenth-century letters, a study of prison and performance, and a book of poetry.

Frank Shuffelton is Professor of English and American Literature Emeritus at the University of Rochester. He is the author of Thomas Hooker, 1586–1647, Thomas Jefferson


Shelley Streeby, University of California, San Diego Shelley Streeby is Associate Professor in the Literature Department at the University of California, San Diego. She is the author of American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture (University of California Press, American Crossroads Series, 2002), which received the American Studies Association’s 2003 Lora Romero First Book Publication Prize. She is also coeditor (with Jesse Alemán) of Empire and the Literature of Sensation: An Anthology of Nineteenth-Century Popular Fiction (Rutgers University Press, Multi-Ethnic Literatures of the Americas Series, 2007). She is currently working on a book on transnational movements in US literature and visual culture from 1886, the year of the Haymarket riot in Chicago, through 1927, the year that Marcus Garvey was deported.

Aviva Taubenfeld is an Assistant Professor of Literature at Purchase College, State University of New York. She is the author of Rough Writing: Ethnic Authorship in Theodore Roosevelt’s America (NYU, 2008).

Martha Viehmann earned a PhD in American Studies from Yale and teaches English at Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio. She has published articles on Mary Austin and Mourning Dove and is currently writing about Pauline Johnson, a Mohawk writer and performer from Six Nations in Ontario.

Alan Wald is H. Chandler Davis Collegiate Professor of English Literature and American Culture at the University of Michigan. He recently completed a three-volume history of the US Literary Left with the University of North Carolina Press: Exiles from a Future Time (2002), Trinity of Passion (2007), and American Night (forthcoming).
Introduction

Paul Lauter

The name of this book is *A Blackwell’s Companion to American Literature and Culture*. That has an innocent enough sound. But each of these words, as well as the phrase “American literature,” opens into ambiguous corridors of history and culture. “Companion,” to begin with, suggests something different from “guide” or “usher,” much less “encyclopedia” or “dictionary.” The latter proposes a kind of comprehensiveness that we do not claim, nor would we, like a literary Frommer’s, direct our readers to the American “monuments of unaging intellect,” though a fair number do appear in these pages. A “companion” accompanies or shares with us, in something of a familiar way, our excursions around the varied landscapes of US culture. Every companion’s way of sharing will be different, likewise, the approaches to their subjects of the chapters in this book. There are probably as many ways of talking about American literature as there are talkers – very likely more. These chapters illustrate that creative variety. The objective of the Companion, then, is not to provide an encyclopedic listing of all the authors and literary phenomena comprehended by the term “American literature.” Rather, it is to offer readers a set of related, perhaps occasionally dissonant, perspectives on the subject that, taken together, will enable richer, more varied, more comprehensive readings of the wealth of texts produced in and around what is now the United States.

Half a century ago, the boundaries designated by “literature” – to continue with that key term of our title – seemed reasonably clear: poetry, drama, fiction, and “literary” essays by certain, though by no means all, writers, in the main male and white. The single most influential book of American literary history, F.O. Matthiessen’s *American Renaissance* (1941), focused entirely on work by five writers: Emerson, Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, and Whitman. They defined what constituted “literature.” Later, that graduate student bible of the mid-twentieth century, *Literary History of the United States* (1948), edited by Robert Spiller et al., contained even in its somewhat revised third edition (1963) separate chapters that effectively defined how the American in the “American literary canon” had been and was constituted, written by Edwards,
Franklin, Irving, Cooper, Poe, the “big five” Matthiessen had designated, Longfellow, Holmes, and Lowell together, Lanier and Dickinson together, Twain and James. A count of the pages listed in the index in which various writers appear in the *Literary History of the United States* tells a tale not only of changes in taste and canon from then to now, but also of how the term “American” might be understood. There were no mentions of Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Piatt, Frederick Douglass, or Frances Harper; one each of W.E.B. Du Bois, Claude McKay, and Louisa May Alcott, two for Mary Wilkins Freeman, Charles Chesnutt, and Zora Neale Hurston; and three each for Anne Bradstreet, William Bradford, and Lydia Sigourney. By way of comparison, Spiller lists nine index entries for William Vaughan Moody, 12 for Bronson Alcott, 13 for Thomas Bailey Aldrich (he of that “Bad Boy” story), 15 for J.P. Kennedy, 17 for Philip Freneau, 19 for H.L. Mencken, and 30 for William Cullen Bryant. I mention these numbers not to criticize the Spiller *Literary History*; far from it, though I do have to admit that I myself teach only the last writer (Bryant) mentioned in that second list and all of those in the first (Gilman, Piatt, Douglass, and the others). Still, that *Literary History* was remarkably inclusive for its time and in its way. But the numbers do help clarify how we have defined — capaciously — the category “American” and therefore what is and is not to be found in the book you now have in hand.

In the years intervening between that *Literary History* and our “Companion,” writers unheard of in the halls of graduate study of the 1950s have come into prominence, or at least into view. In addition, forms of writing — from slave narratives to the blues, from occasional poetry to abolitionist tracts — have come to be analyzed, commented upon, and studied in literature seminars. Thus the definitions of “literature” as a dimension of culture are now less foreclosed and more open to negotiation and change. To take one particular example, this “Companion” examines much more extensively than has been the case in other surveys the variety of texts created by Native Americans. We have done so not only for their inherent interest but also because, as chapters in this Companion indicate, the historical trajectories and forms of Indian creativity are in significant ways distinctive and cannot easily be fitted into the usual Euro-American critical paradigms. For instance, Native American literature displays important connections between early tribal oral and later written texts and fundamental linkages between cultural expression and national or tribal survival. In this and a number of other ways, this Companion is designed to explore authors and texts that have, perhaps, not always received adequate attention in times past.

From another point of view, however, this extension of authors and texts reflects the changes that have reshaped what we call “American literature” in profound and positive ways. I recently read a set of proposals for fellowships to study and write about subjects in American literature submitted to a federal agency. Of these 30-something proposals, about eight focused on the work of white men, four on white women, eight on black writers, two on Native Americans, three on Latinos and Latinas, two on Asian Americans, and two on “others.” But this multicultural distribution only begins to suggest how American literature has changed since *Literary History* and *American Renaissance*. The subjects themselves are wonderfully different: black life and culture
on the Gulf coast, passing, obesity, writing “outside” the book, memoirs about Indian boarding school experience, politics and form in Objectivist poetry, among other things. This range suggests that the terrain we identify as “American literature” is vast – and changing. A book like this Companion is inevitably something of a snapshot of that expanding world, taken at a particular moment and from a rapidly moving vehicle.

Not surprisingly, our approach to authors and texts emphasizes historical and social contexts together with literary connections, per se. Obviously, many of our contributors have been influenced by New Historicism and American Studies approaches to the study of culture. More important, perhaps, we think it is a function of a “Companion” to point to significant features of the landscape in which literary texts are being engaged. For while a poem or story may be said, formally, to speak itself, it also speaks from, and to, particular cultural moments not transparently available in the text itself. Which is one of the places a Companion comes in.

A further word needs to be said about the title, for the phrase “American literature” is, like the content, itself highly contested, and for good reason. After all, the United States forms only one part of the Americas, and appropriating the term “American” to describe the literatures of this nation constitutes something of an imperial move. On the other hand, “United States literature” does not fully comprehend our subject, since it extends backward in time to before there was a “United States”; one could argue that Spiller’s use of the phrase represents something about the editors’ thinking about colonial and early Native American texts. Likewise, our subject is not necessarily constrained by the boundaries of what now constitutes the USA. So no one phrase will quite do. I have chosen to stay with the phrase that is most commonplace in course catalogues, syllabi, and anthologies, acknowledging its inescapable difficulties.

The three sections of this book offer distinctive if overlapping paradigms for thinking about “American literature.” Part A, titled “Genealogies of American Literary Study,” chapters 1 through 7, has to do with the ways in which American literature, as a cultural phenomenon, an historical force, and an academic subject, has been constructed and studied in differing moments and by different groups of people. It presents chapters focused on the study of literature and culture in North America, ways of thinking about the literature of writers’ own times, and how that has changed in time. It also offers genealogies of key terms in the study of American literature – like multiculturalism, sentimentality, modernism – as well as frameworks for that study – like the academy and the cold war. Part B, “Writers and Issues,” chapters 8 through 29, perhaps somewhat more traditionally, looks mainly at the literary production of individual authors and at groups of writers and literary movements, artists who interacted with and often influenced one another. Part C, “Contemporary Theories and Practices,” chapters 29 through 38, focuses on the ways current theoretical debates take shape from contemporary forms of creative expression and in turn are molded by such writing.

But there is more at stake here than the configuration of this particular book. The question remaining to be addressed is whether a volume like this will prove to be
among the last of a disappearing species. Will American literature continue to be a viable category of analysis and study? Or will it gradually flow out, one more vivid stream, into a globalized cultural sea? Will tomorrow’s American writers seek their historical connections, their text milieu, in cultures outside this country’s national borders more, perhaps, than within them? Will critics increasingly see literature as a product of international cultural exchanges that call into question the national boundaries implicit in the name “American literature”? The dissolution of borders is, as we know well, quite advanced when it comes to the flow of goods and capital. Borders are of decreasing relevance in art forms like music and film. If this shift from a national to a global culture proves dominant, so the argument runs, then what is being written (composed, performed, filmed) in the United States today might most usefully be approached less in terms of its connections to nineteenth- and twentieth-century US texts and more in terms of connections to Latin-American, Asian, European and African phenomena. To be sure, there will always be histories of literature in the United States and its various indigenous and colonial predecessors. But will such histories continue to occupy significant curricular space in schools and colleges, be embedded in large anthologies designed to serve such courses, be examined in volumes like this one – and be of persisting interest to students, critics and writers?

The arguments pushing toward a newly globalized paradigm for American literary study are powerful and have had significant impact on the field we continue to designate as “American studies.” Literary scholars have begun to read back into the past a much more international view of US culture, perceiving Concord, for example, not as an isolated New England backwater but as a hub of international exchanges. I have myself suggested that the multicultural paradigm that has characterized American literary study in recent decades is being replaced by a new globalized paradigm that I have called “immigration shock.” More than ever we have come to see literature as a powerful force piercing boundaries, linking human experiences, and opening worlds of beauty and pain that had been hidden from us. And we perceive the world – to use Peter Sellars’ wonderful phrasing of it – not as corporations do, “everyone the same, but not equal,” but as the arts do: “everyone equal, but not the same.”

All the same, as I think the chapters in this book demonstrate, the study of American literature as a discrete field remains full of life and imagination. It is not so much that nationalism is unlikely to fade away any time soon, or that borders are and will likely remain regions of conflict. It is, rather, that the study of the various literatures spoken and written within the boundaries of what is now the United States continues to engage the creative energies of scholars and students across the globe. The dynamism of this particular cultural moment is deeply inflected by the globalizing processes to which I have alluded. But the quality and interest of American texts, from Melville to Morrison and from Zuni to Ashberry, remains undiminished, in significant measure because the literatures of this America illuminate as nothing else has done the aspirations, the contradictions, the dangers and possibilities of this society. And very little, as we end this first decade of the twenty-first century, seems more important than comprehending the creativity and hazards of the United States. That, it seems to me,
is what these chapters illustrate, drawing upon our past but remaining open to the changes that are, as we work, reconstructing the house of American literature.

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Paul Lauter

NOTES


Part A
Genealogies of American
Literary Study